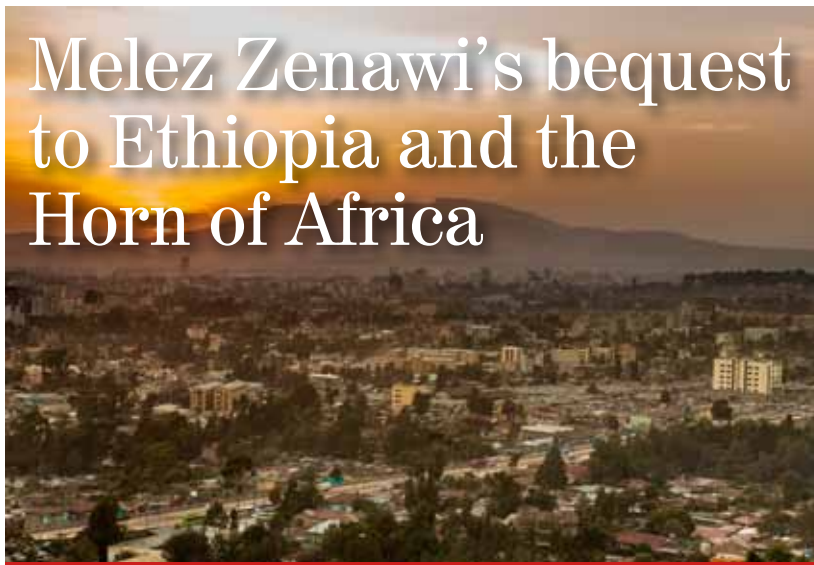


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Melez Zenawi's bequest to Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa



The promotion of fear has suffocated the entire political spectrum through its unwillingness to tolerate even a minor political opposition. By claiming to win over 95 percent of the votes in the last election, the regime has created a make-believe world where it is adored by all.

By Abdi Samatar

Any recent visitor to Ethiopia would be struck by the ubiquitous billboards commemorating the late Prime Minister's life, two months after his demise. Meles Zenawi's photo forms the backdrop to the TV screens and adorns the streets of all the major towns and villages. These sights were supplemented by the chorus of African leaders that attended the PM's funeral and who lavished praise on this "dedicated son of African soil." He was depicted as the untiring leader who toiled for the upliftment of the indigent peoples of Ethiopia and Africa. Among this choir were African presidents and prime ministers whose own policies have degraded the lives of their people. The least distinguished of these visitors were the former President and Prime Minister of Somalia whose tenure in power was marred by their total subservience to the Ethiopian regime.

One wonders if this orchestrated and well managed public love of the late Zenawi reflects the thoughts and feeling of the peoples of Ethiopia and the neighboring states where the PM's policies had the greatest footprint. Putting aside the propaganda of the Ethiopian governing party, the admiration of his cohort of political friends, and partisan Ethiopian critics, most objective analysts would agree that, unlike the visiting African leaders, Zenawi left behind a record that deserves critical scrutiny. Zenawi's legacy can be viewed through two analytical lenses: a) his domestic footprint; (b) and his regional impact.

To assess the PM's legacy we need to understand the political and economic context of Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa when Zenawi and his party, the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), came to power in 1991. First, Ethiopia had been devastated by a brutal military

dictatorship that massacred hundreds of thousands of people, which it also presided over the catastrophic famine of 1984 that devastated several regions of the country. Additionally, the military regime wasted Ethiopia's meagre and precious resources to oppress the legitimate struggle of the Eritrean people, as well as others inside Ethiopia, such as Tigray, Somali, and the Oromos, to mention a few. War, famine, and oppression were the hallmark of Ethiopia in 1990, and the regime was exhausted and had run out of ideas and energy to move the country beyond multiple calamities. Then came the last drive of the Eritrean resistance against the regime since they already controlled the entire countryside and surrounded the capital Asmara. Their ally in Ethiopia (TPLF) then pushed towards Addis Ababa and within a couple of months it became clear that the regime's days were numbered. Given the ethnic character of the TPLF it was not clear whether its takeover of the capital would induce a new civil war with the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) and other communities. Concerned about the possibility of having another failed state in the region, with all the attendant problems such as a tidal wave of refugees, the United States brokered an agreement between the regime and the TPLF. This pact allowed for a "peaceful" takeover of the capital and Mengistu's departure for exile.

The TPLF brought with it a client group of ethnic political parties, the so-called PDOs (People's Democratic Organisations), who jointly formed what became known as EPRDF. But there has never been any doubt that TPLF controlled the levers of power in the country. The junior partners of the "coalition" were supposed to provide national legitimacy for the new ethnic authority. However, the Ethiopian public largely considered the PDOs as lackeys. The independent Oromo Liberation Front, which initially joined the ruling coalition, failed to understand TPLF's militarist agenda and paid the ultimate price as the latter swiftly destroyed its military base. After this defeat OLF went underground where it has virtually become inconsequential. Establishing

the new order and consolidating the TPLF's power took nearly a decade, after which the regime turned more of its attention to other matters.

After twenty one years in power, we can emphatically state that Zenawi's regime has been a Janus-faced order. Its political rhetoric exuded democracy, peace, national harmony, and development, but behind that facade was a determined security apparatus that crushed even the most democratic attempts to challenge its authority. This rhetoric proved seductive enough for outsiders, but all indications are that it has failed to sway a majority of the population. It is these two faces of the regime that the remaining section of this brief will focus on. But I must first provide an explanatory note about the nationalist character of the regime. I can categorically state that the late Premier Zenawi was an Ethiopian nationalist, despite the claims of some of the opponents that he was building Tigray for an eventual secession, if needs be. Many critics of the TPLF regime claim that it exploited the resources of most regions in Ethiopia to develop its home province. There is a grain of truth to this assertion, but I would suggest that to be a nationalist does not exclude a regime from internally differentiating regions by privileging some over others. Most critics do not understand that there are two kinds of nationalists: Civic and sectarian nationalists.

Civic nationalists genuinely try to treat all regions and citizens alike and fairly. In contrast, sectarian nationalists protect the territorial integrity of the country but also establish a hierarchy of power which privileges certain groups and political factions. Zenawi and his regime represented the latter version of nationalism and are not alone in this regard in the developing world.

Domestic Footprint

Zenawi's group and those they invited to take part in the political conference in the early 1990s produced a constitution which nominally privileged ethnic identity. They subsequently divided the country into ethnic provinces. There is little doubt that this political architecture gave modest advantages to most ethnic groups in the country who

were the *subjects of the empire*, but such gains belied the fact that Addis Ababa remained the decisive power centre of the country. More critically, a small group of TPLF cadres and the security establishment they strategically controlled have had the final say about all the major issues. Even when the affiliates of the TPLF became senior ministers they remained pliant cadres without a backbone. I have witnessed the humiliation that comes with such status. The absence of any degree of autonomy on the part of those affiliates manifestly demonstrates that belonging to EPRDF has been like George Orwell's *Animal Farm* where "All animals are created equal but some animals are created more equal than others."

Despite cowering their partners and most of the population, Zenawi and his regime can legitimately claim several major accomplishments:

First, the regime has created a physical infrastructure for the country that is better than what was left behind by all the previous regimes combined. The road network that spans to most regions of the country can facilitate national integration and development if progressively used. Second, the number of public universities has increased substantially over the last decade and this has allowed many young Ethiopians to gain access to some form of higher education.

Third, the electrical grid of the country has been expanded and more hydroelectric dams have been built or are under construction and this has expanded the country's energy supply. Some of these dams were initiated illegally because other riparian countries that have a stake in the rivers were not consulted and no agreements were reached to satisfy all parties. Despite such illegal and unethical pre-emptions, the growth in electricity production bodes well for the country's economic growth.

Fourth, an intensive regime of mineral exploration has been put in place which could deliver dividends for the country in the long run. Fifth, Zenawi and his team have not ameliorated the population's vulnerability to famine, but fortunately the country has avoided the catastrophic famines that used to take hundreds of thousands of lives.

Finally, there has been an increase in the volume of foreign investment in the country and the rate of economic growth has been substantial despite starting from a very low base.

The regime's liabilities are also numerous but here is a sample of the major ones. First, in spite of the seemingly smooth transfer of authority to the Deputy Prime Minister, power is still wielded by individuals without legitimate institutional anchors. As such, authority in Ethiopia is extremely concentrated in two nodes that completely overlap: the TPLF core, and the security establishment. The ultimate anchor of power is the security apparatus which has been loyal to the TPLF rather than the country and the constitution. Such concentration of power has enfeebled all other institutions and has created a political culture and society deeply marooned in fear rather than genuine loyalty and respect for national institutions. The political and social consequences of this *republic of fear* are far reaching.

Second, although the economic sphere has been somewhat more liberalised, loyalty to the regime is still central to an entrepreneur's ability to succeed. In many instances, party connections are essential to start a major business, and important sectors of the economy are dominated by the party and its friends. Third, the promotion of fear has suffocated the entire political spectrum through its unwillingness to tolerate even a minor political opposition. By claiming to win over 95 percent of the votes in the last election, the regime has created a make-believe world where it is adored by all.

Fourth, in some parts of the developing world academics are not free to present their ideas/work regarding their countries' ailments, and Ethiopia appears to be the model of academic unfreedom. This has been accomplished through the elimination of tenure or long term contracts for faculty and the appointment of political loyalists to top academic positions. If a professor indulges in critical analysis of the political and development affairs of the country, there is little chance that his or her contract will be renewed. Fear is the life blood of

this system and compels productive academics to either leave the country if they can, or languish in the margins, or simply become sycophants of the regime to maintain their livelihoods. Nevertheless, there are a few courageous scholars who have stayed true to the ethos of the academy and still remain in the country against incredible odds.

Fifth, poor people dominate the landscape of Ethiopian cities and towns, and the UN has reported that over 80% of the building structures of the capital are of slum quality. Mindful of this image, the regime has embarked on urban renewal that will ultimately remove most of the poor from the city and allocate the “freed” spaces to shopping malls and investors. It intends to house the indigents removed from those areas in apartments built on the outskirts of the city without examining alternative schemes that will keep these residents in their neighbourhoods.

Finally, the collective effect of these liabilities is that public institutions in the country are beholden to the individuals in power rather than embodying national ethos. The shameless use of the security forces to retain power or intimidate the political opposition, and the culture of fear this engenders means that Premier Zenawi and his regime reinforced institutions the public fears but they have failed to create legitimacy for the post-1991 institutions. Without legitimate institutions that are autonomous from particular leaders, the country remains in danger of fully sliding into an ethnic political strife.

The Regional Impact

The “winds of change” in the Horn of Africa in 1990/1991 created opportunities which could have produced a bright future for all. Post-1991 Eritrean and Ethiopian leaders were cut from the same political cloth since they closely collaborated in the battle field to dislodge the Mengistu regime. Nevertheless, one major factor separated the two movements: one was mainly a national liberation movement while the other was primarily an ethnic liberation project. On the Eastern front, Somalia provided material and diplomatic support for the leadership

of both the Eritrean and Ethiopian liberation fronts, and the Somali people keenly followed the advances of the two fronts against Mengistu’s military while they also hoped for the fall of the Somali dictator. I remember visiting the border regions of Ethiopia and Somalia after the fall of Mengistu and Siyaad Barre where I saw the population relish their new freedoms on either side of the border. The hope was that a new and more progressive political chapter for the region was in the offing.

But the new lords of Ethiopia were steeped in a sanitised imperial orthodoxy. During the first decade in power, Zenawi and his subordinates adopted the same ethnic political logic, tested in Ethiopia’s ethnic provinces, to manipulate Somali affairs in the old Republic. The authorities in Addis Ababa made no effort to reach out to Somali civics, but instead chose warlords and sectarian political actors as their best collaborators. Once the Somali people realised Ethiopia’s new strategy of “divide and rule” old animosities resurfaced and the Ethiopian occupation of parts of the Somali Republic and its invasion of their country and capital in 2006-08 dashed the last residue of good will. Nearly all Somali civic nationalists now see Ethiopia as an enduring enemy.

In the north, the Ethiopian and Eritrean leaders who claimed to be the best of friends slowly drifted towards conflict and imposed a horrible, costly, and unnecessary war on the population. The goodwill which has been nurtured in the battlefield of liberation vanished. After a devastating war which wasted over 100,000 lives, the two regimes consented to arbitration. An international boundary commission was set and both governments guaranteed to accept the commission’s findings. Eritrea immediately embraced the findings once the commission rendered its verdict. Unfortunately Ethiopia has yet to honour its commitment as it introduced new conditions to the process and the international community has failed to enforce the commission’s ruling. Consequently and unfortunately the two countries remain in a virtual state of war.

The Verdict

There is little doubt that history will judge Premier Zenawi as one of the two major leaders in Ethiopian history. His regime will be remembered for holding Ethiopia together as one country even under the centripetal ethnic order which his regime officially introduced. Second, Ethiopian nationalists will celebrate him as the man who invaded Somalia and occupied Mogadishu. Third, his government will be highly regarded for developing the country’s physical and educational infrastructure, and for refreshingly having the ambition of becoming a developmental state. What Ethiopian democrats will not forgive is the regime’s failure to establish a political order and national institutions that have earned the loyalty and respect of the people. The conflation of the regime’s interests with the national cause and the use of the security forces to domesticate the population is not a sustainable strategy if Ethiopia is to ever evolve into a vibrant democracy. The *republic of fear* must give way to the *rule of law* to thwart a more foreboding future.

On the regional front, posterity will not be kind to the Zenawi regime as it has totally squandered the opportunity to forge a more peaceful and collaborative relations with Eritrea and Somalia given the goodwill of these two peoples. Allowing Somalis the opportunity to rebuild their government and society in a democratic fashion would have eliminated traditional hostilities between the two countries and boosted their mutuality. Further, this approach would have shifted hundreds of millions of dollars from the war machine to development which is desperately need. Instead of building on that goodwill the regime embarked on a reign of terror to destabilise Eritrea and keep Somalia in its catastrophic condition. Sadly, the attempt to impose regional tyranny will ricochet on Ethiopia and perpetuate the misery of all the peoples in the region. It is not too late to change course and anchor developments on the significant and positive elements of the last two decades, but will there be the wisdom and the will in Addis Ababa? ■