

AUGUST 26, 2012 10:57PM

A Farewell to Meles Zenawi



For over two hundred seventy five weeks, without missing a single week, I have written long expository commentaries on the deeds and misdeeds of the man who has been at the helm of power in Ethiopia for over two decades. Meles Zenawi has now passed on. The cause of his death remains a closely guarded state secret.

There is little I can say about what Meles has done or not done in death that I have not said in life. But his death saddens me, because as John Donne said, "Any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in Mankind. Death comes equally to us all, and makes us all equal when it comes." As a committed human rights advocate, even the death of a tyrant diminishes me because I am involved in the cause of humanity-- justice, fairness, equality, dignity, benevolence, compassion, forgiveness, honesty, integrity and magnanimity.

I bid Meles farewell not in words of lamentation or grievance but in words that record lost opportunities yet express hope, optimism and confidence in the future of Ethiopia.

Meles Zenawi was a man who had an appointment with destiny. Fate had chosen him to play a historic role in Ethiopia and beyond. He was one of the leaders of a rebel group that fought and defeated a brutal military dictatorship that had been in power for 17 years. In victory, Meles promised democracy, respect for democratic liberties and development. But as the years wore on, Meles became increasingly repressive, intolerant of criticism and in the end became as tyrannical as the tyrant he had replaced. In his last years, he created a police state reinforced by a massive security network of spies and surveillance technology. He criminalized press freedom and civil society institutions. He crushed dissent and all opposition. He spread fear and loathing that penetrated the remotest parts of the countryside. For over 21 years, Meles clutched the scepter of power in his hands and cast away the sword of justice he held when he marched into the capital from the bush in 1991. Meles was feared, disliked and demonized by his adversaries. He was loved, admired, idealized and idolized by his supporters. In the end, Meles died a man who had absolute power which had corrupted him absolutely. In his relentless pursuit of absolute power, Meles missed his appointment with destiny to become a peerless and exemplary Ethiopian leader.

But who was the Meles Zenawi we saw morphing from a promising democrat into a flagitious dictator over the past 21 years? Who was the man we accuse of human rights violations and crimes against humanity? Who was the man we blame for the stillbirth of democracy in Ethiopia and the creation of "an African police state" as CNN recently characterized it? Is he alone responsible for the suffering and woe that have befallen that poor nation? Perhaps some may be surprised to hear one of Meles' severest critics in life raising such questions in his death. But the truth must be told.

We created and nurtured Meles over the past 21 years. We were his aiders and abettors. We share responsibility in his deeds and misdeeds. "We" are the great nations who lionized and gave billions of dollars to Meles every year even as we meticulously documented his massive record of human rights violations year after year. "We" are the members of the political party that controls 99.6 percent of the seats in parliament who rubber-stamped his repressive laws that criminalized journalists and civil society organizations and made "terrorists" out of our best and brightest youth. "We" are the judges who made a travesty of justice by subverting the halls of justice into kangaroo courts. "We" are the soldiers, police and security operatives who used our guns on innocent civilians. "We" are the civil servants who stood at Meles' beck and call and did his bidding unquestioningly. "We" are the journalists for state media who covered up and justified his violations of human rights. "We" are the businessmen and women who profited from official corruption to line our pockets. "We" are the young men and women who signed up for party membership to access opportunities in a system we knew to be corrupt. "We" are Ethiopia's intellectuals who chose not to stand up to Meles or stand up for principle. "We" are the opposition party leaders who bickered, quarreled and quibbled when millions looked up to us to lead us on the shining path to democracy. "We" are the Ethiopian Diaspora who kept silent, turned a deaf ear, muted lips and blind eyes as ordinary Ethiopians were subjected to extrajudicial killings, dissidents and critics jailed and political prisoners tortured and abused. "We" are the individuals who could have said or done something when Meles did wrong but chose to remain silent. The truth must be told. None of us can wash off our hands the sins of silence, complicity and indifference over the past twenty-one years. So "We" all should be mindful that when we point an index finger at Meles, three fingers are pointing at ourselves.

Meles was an exceedingly ambitious man who understood power, but only the dark side of power. He could not come to terms with the truth that real power comes from the consent of the people and must be exercised in accordance with the principle of the rule of law. He held the power of life and death, but used it more for the latter. He was the policeman, judge, jury and executioner. He was the law, and his will was the law of the land. Meles was blinded to the fact that with great power comes great responsibility. He scorned the idea that those who hold power must temper it with compassion, justice and tolerance. But having absolute power made Meles feel absolutely invincible, indestructible, indomitable and unconquerable. He missed his appointment with destiny.

Meles could have been a peerless and exemplary leader in Ethiopia and in Africa. Many of the world's dictators in history were great leaders. Their "greatness" came from their brutal subjugation of their people. But exemplary leaders achieve greatness because they are loved, revered and cherished by their people. Their greatness comes from their openness of heart, mind and soul. Nelson Mandela is a peerless and exemplary leader embraced by the entire world even though he was in office for four years and spent much of his adult life languishing in Apartheid prisons. Today he is seen as an icon of humanity. What makes Mandela an exemplary leader is not his charisma, oratory, organizing or administrative skills. Mandela was concerned about people, not power. Mandela's first and foremost concern was dignity, the dignity of all South Africans and the dignity of all humanity. Mandela became a peerless leader because he took a single seed of love from his heart and planted in the arid soil of racial hate and watered it with goodwill, patience and tolerance. When the world wagered on a bloodbath in South Africa, in six years Mandela brought black and white South Africans together and baptized them in the holy water of truth and reconciliation. Today South Africa is a shining example of a multiracial society with its own imperfections.

Meles had an appointment with destiny to walk in Mandela's shoes and follow in his footsteps. He could have forged a strong and united Ethiopian nation. He had the chance to build bridges that connected people across ethnic lines, roads that linked hearts and minds. But he chose the path of ethnic division and fragmentation. He chose to build edifices to decorate the cities, roads that led to nowhere and dams that damned the people and gave away the land to

foreigners for pennies in the name of development and investment. Meles missed his appointment with destiny to forge a united Ethiopian nation.

Meles had an appointment with destiny to become not only a peerless and exemplary leader but also a compassionate one. He was a man with an iron will, which was also his undoing. He was quick to anger and intemperate in his disposition. He was unkind to those over whom he had total control. When he jailed Birtukan Midekssa in December 2008, he said, "there will never be an agreement with anybody to release Birtukan. Ever. Full stop. That's a dead issue." Birtukan had done nothing wrong. When he denied an incubator for the premature baby of internationally-acclaimed husband and wife journalists, Serkalem Fasil and Eskinder Nega, born in prison, he showed himself lacking in fundamental human decency. When he told American diplomats that "we will crush the opposition with all our might", he revealed himself to be a ruthless man. Whenever it was in his power to show mercy, he chose vengeance. Like Mandela, by working with his adversaries, Meles could have made them his partners and eventually his friends. He missed his appointment with destiny.

Meles had an appointment with destiny to uplift the people of Ethiopia not only materially but also in their sense of self-dignity, personal autonomy and security. Meles believed "there is no direct relationship between economic growth and democracy historically or theoretically." But there can be no sustainable development where people are denied basic rights and are forced to resort to violence, conflict and war. The essence of humanity is dignity. It is not all about filling the belly. It is true that a hungry man is an angry man, but a hungry man hungers not only for bread but also for freedom and self-dignity. The poorest of the poor and the richest of the rich crave dignity about all else, even food. Over a quarter of a century ago, a Western reporter covering the famine in Ethiopia was stunned to find out that the famine victims at a relief center did not fight over the little bit of food that was being distributed among them. He was deeply touched by the fact that the famine victims would rather die in quiet dignity than fight their fellow victims to get a piece of bread. But dignity comes in many forms: the freedom to speak, to think, to worship, to assemble, to petition for grievances, and most importantly, freedom from fear of one's government. Meles believed man can live by bread alone and single-mindedly championed and worshipped brick and mortar projects. He missed his appointment with destiny.

Meles was not a forgiving or a tolerant man. He was inclined to pardon once in a while when it was convenient, but not to forgive. He held the pardon he gave out as the Sword of Damocles over the heads of his pardonees. He always let them know that he could revoke his pardon and throw them back in jail at will. He preferred confrontation to negotiation, imposition of his will to compromise. He had a need to win all the time and played zero sum games. Meles missed his appointment with destiny.

Meles was a man who never admitted making mistakes. It did not seem to occur to him that he could admit mistakes and ask forgiveness for deeds done in error or take actions to correct mistakes. He could never bring himself to utter the phrases "I made a mistake" or "I am sorry." When asked about the deaths of some 200 protesters and wounding of nearly 800 in the aftermath of the 2005 elections, his response was numbingly bureaucratic, "I regret the deaths but these were not normal demonstrations. You don't see hand grenades thrown at normal demonstrations." As the evidence presented by Meles' own Inquiry Commission showed, none of the demonstrators were armed let alone carry grenades. Meles never explained and never said he was sorry for those deaths. I was transformed from an indifferent armchair academic into a resolute human rights advocate because of those killings.

Following the killings of hundreds of people in Gambella, Meles issued a whitewash report. He denied the occurrence of any human rights violations in the Ogaden, Afar and Oromia regions. He often showed conduct unbecoming of a statesman whenever others pointed out his mistakes. When his opponents challenged his policies, he called them "dirty", "mud dwellers", "pompous egotists" and good-for-nothing "chaff" and "husk." He humiliated and demeaned parliamentarians

who challenged him with probing questions or disagreed with him. He characterized the work of the European Union election observers in the 2010 election as “garbage”. He described the Voice of America as the voice of genocide similar to one of the infamous Rwandan radio stations in the mid-1990s. He never apologized to those he had wronged.

Meles insisted on being right all the time. He did not seem to believe that he can learn from his mistakes and failures. Meles once acknowledged he may have made a mistake. Responding to a journalist’s question about Diaspora Ethiopians protesting his overseas visits, Meles said, “We may be at fault in some way. I am sorry. That maybe we didn’t communicate well enough to those Ethiopians living abroad what is happening, what we are doing here.” He missed his appointment with destiny by failing to effectively communicate with Diaspora Ethiopians.

Meles could have been an exemplary leader if he had upheld the rule of law. He often talked about “our Constitution” and the rule of law but rarely followed either. He was the object of relentless criticism by all international human rights organizations for disregarding Ethiopia’s Constitution and international human rights treaties and conventions. Every year, the U.S. State Department Human Rights Report documented massive human rights violations as did so many other international human rights organizations. But he was dismissive of such reports. For the Meles regime, human rights organizations were “highly frustrated and self-appointed kingmaker institutions in the U.S.” bent on “tarnishing the image of the country.” He missed his appointment with destiny.

Meles was a man with a mission. He confused mission with vision. He spoke of an “Ethiopian Renaissance” and some say he “wanted to restore Ethiopia to its former glory”. But many doubted his motives and even his true allegiance to the country. In his speech on the Ethiopian millennium in 2007, he lamented the fact that “at the dawn of the new millennium, ours is one of the poorest countries in the world.” But he was reassuring: “A thousand years from now, when Ethiopians gather to welcome the fourth millennium, they shall say the eve of the third millennium was the beginning of the end of the dark ages in Ethiopia.” Sadly, many before him have been driven by the same impulse to resurrect ancient glory. They failed in Berlin and Rome over one-half century ago and more recently in Tripoli and Bagdad. Though they built roads, dams and magnificent edifices and waged war, they were all consigned to the dustbin of history.

Our Appointment With Destiny

We the living now have a new appointment with destiny. But before we keep our appointment, we must face the truth and come to terms with Meles’ legacy. The truth is that the faults and vices we ascribe to Meles are not his alone. We have been known to hunger and lust for power, to put our partisan interests above the common good, to manifest dictatorial impulses even when we are out of power, trade principle for convenience and self-interest, behave with intolerance, become condemnatory instead of conciliatory, deny making mistakes and above all find every excuse not to say, “I am sorry” when we make mistakes. We cannot right Meles’ wrongs until we acknowledge our own.

Condemning the memory of Meles as we move forward will serve no purpose. It will only continue the tradition of grievance and victimhood and culture of antagonism. Meles’ legacy should not be that he continues to rule from grave. We must learn the right lessons from his 21-year rule and move forward to heal the open wounds of fear, loathing and antagonism. There is no need to perpetuate historic hatreds. We must strive for love, wisdom and compassion towards one another. Now that Meles has passed, we can all put Mandela’s shoes, put our noses to the grind stone and together build an Ethiopia on a solid foundation of the rule of law, respect for human rights and democracy. The question we now face is clear: Will we also miss our appointment with destiny?

Beginning earlier this year, I have been writing about “Ethiopia’s inevitable transition from dictatorship to democracy”. I have outlined various scenarios on what could happen during the transition. Today the dictatorship of one man in Ethiopia is over, but dictatorship itself is alive and well. To complete the transition to democracy and make our appointment with destiny, we must take resolute steps to begin a national dialogue for reconciliation. As we prepare for this dialogue, we must make the release of all political prisoners and repeal of the oppressive “anti-terrorism and civic society” laws job number one.

On the Road to Good Governance and Democracy

I have relentlessly chronicled the deeds and misdeeds of Meles Zenawi for some years now. I had nothing personal against the man. I never knew him. But I have followed and studied his politics, actions and speeches. I have disagreed with him on practically everything because I have been tunnel-visioned on human rights. My singular cause is human rights in Ethiopia. I got involved in Ethiopian human rights following the massacre of unarmed protesters in the aftermath of the 2005 elections. I have looked at Meles’ deeds and misdeeds through the prism of human rights. I am an ardent human rights advocate and if that be a fault, I proudly embrace it.

I believe Meles had an appointment with destiny to live and die as a hero and make the whole country his tomb. His epitaph could have recorded great deeds inscribed not on granite but enshrined in the hearts of his countrymen and women. As a human rights advocate, I am pained to think of Meles’ legacy in the dark vision of the victims of the 2005 massacres, the subhuman prisons that warehouse the hundreds of thousands of political prisoners, the courts which became political tools, the subversion of the rule of law and so on.

I have sought for some signs that Meles at least believed in human rights in the abstract. I shall give him the benefit of doubt that he did. In an interview with Al Jazeera in 2007, Meles said, “I’d hope that my legacy would be one of sustained and accelerated development that would pull Ethiopia out of the massive deep poverty that it was mired in, full and total stabilization of the country, *radical improvements in terms of good governance and democracy*. I’d hope by the time I retire, we’d have made significant strides in all of those in the future.” By the time of his death in 2012, the “radical improvements in terms of good governance and democracy” had seen a radical regression into tyranny and despotism. The “future” Meles spoke of is now. We should all work collectively to implement his aspirations for “radical improvements in terms of good governance and democracy” now. This is Meles’ legacy his surviving officials should acknowledge openly and work with others to implement as the ultimate tribute to Meles’ leadership. The “radical improvement in good governance and democracy” begins with the release of all political prisoners, repeal of antiterrorism and civil society and other oppressive laws and declaration of allegiance to the rule of law. As the Ethiopian new year is just around the corner, we can all begin afresh on the road to “radical improvements in good governance and democracy”.

I wish I would have been able to deliver a eulogy that celebrated Meles’ two-decade old tenure in power; to speak of a man who was a hero in life and in death; a man for whom men, women and children flooded the streets of their own free will to express heart felt sorrow and shed tears. I wish I could have spoken of a man who made his appointment with destiny and became a peerless and exemplary leader. The greatest homage I can pay Meles in death as one of his severest critics in life is to uphold and defend his vision of “radical improvements in terms of good governance and democracy” in Ethiopia.

Meles once told a journalist that “if Ethiopians thought he [was a dictator] I would not sleep at night. But I don’t believe they do.” But I am afraid the very last words Meles heard before he fell “asleep” were the words of a young Ethiopian journalist. In response to a question on whether he ever imagined he would be in power for so long, Meles was reflective: “That was clearly not what I expected. It’s happened. I don’t regret it but I just hope that, at the end of it all, it will have been worth it.” I sincerely hope it was all worth it for him.

Let others speak of Meles as a “visionary” leader, “an African leader of major historical significance” and write his glorious hagiography. I shall bid him farewell by paraphrasing Shakespeare in Julius Caesar.

Men at some time are masters of their fates:

The fault, dear Meles, is not in our stars,

But in ourselves, that we are underlings.

And so,

Friends, Ethiopians, countrymen and women, lend me your ears;

It is time to bury Meles, not to praise him.

The evil that men do lives after them;

The good is oft interred with their bones;

So let it be with Meles.

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