

## Ethiopia After Meles

### I. OVERVIEW

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 epicentre 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 centralised, 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 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.

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 stabilise either the country or region.

Ethiopia's political system and society have grown increasingly unstable largely because the TPLF has become increasingly repressive, while failing to implement the policy of ethnic federalism it devised over twenty years ago to accommodate the land's varied ethnic identities. The result has been greater political centralisation, with concomitant ethnicisation of grievances. The closure of political space has removed any legitimate means for people to channel those grievances. The government has encroached on social expression and curbed journalists, non-governmental organisations and religious freedoms. The cumulative effect is growing popular discontent, as well as radicalisation along religious and ethnic lines. Meles adroitly navigated a number of internal crises and kept TPLF fac-

tions under his tight control. Without him, however, the weaknesses of the regime he built will be more starkly exposed.

The transition will likely be an all-TPLF affair, even if masked beneath the constitution, the umbrella of the EPRDF and the prompt elevation of the deputy prime minister, Hailemariam Desalegn, to acting head of government. Given the opacity of the inner workings of the government and army, it is impossible to say exactly what it will look like and who will end up in charge. Nonetheless, any likely outcome suggests a much weaker government, a more influential security apparatus and endangered internal stability. The political opposition, largely forced into exile by Meles, will remain too fragmented and feeble to play a considerable role, unless brought on board in an internationally-brokered process. The weakened Tigrayan elite, confronted with the nation's ethnic and religious cleavages, will be forced to rely on greater repression if it is to maintain power and control over other ethnic elites. Ethno-religious divisions and social unrest are likely to present genuine threats to the state's long-term stability and cohesion.

The regional implications will be enormous. Increasing internal instability could threaten the viability of Ethiopia's military interventions in Somalia and Sudan, exacerbate tensions with Eritrea, and, more broadly, put in question its role as the West's key regional counter-terrorism ally. Should religious or ethnic radicalisation grow, it could well spill across borders and link with other armed radical Islamic groups.

The international community, particularly Ethiopia's core allies, the U.S., UK and European Union (EU), should accordingly seek to play a significant role in preparing for and shaping the transition, by:

- ❑ tying political, military and development assistance to the opening of political space and an end to repressive measures;
- ❑ encouraging the post-Meles leadership to produce a clear roadmap, including transparent mechanisms within the TPLF and the EPRDF for apportioning the party and Front power Meles held and within parliament to lead to an all-inclusive, peaceful transition, resulting in free and fair elections within a fixed time; and

- helping to revive the political opposition's ability to represent its constituencies, in both Ethiopia and the diaspora.

## II. AN INVISIBLE ILLNESS

In June 2012, rumours that Meles Zenawi was seriously ill ran rampant through Ethiopian communities across the world.<sup>1</sup> At the G20 summit on 17 June in Los Cabos, Mexico, he had appeared pale and thin, sparking speculation that prompted a government spokesperson to issue a statement five days later that, “the Prime Minister is in good health, to my knowledge”, and “the Prime Minister is carrying out his duties properly”. However, on 26 June, when Ethiopian television aired footage of Meles receiving Somalia President Sheikh Sharif Sheikh Ahmed, his weight loss was so apparent that it unleashed a new round of stories and worries.<sup>2</sup>

Meles's absence drew international attention when parliament extended its session beyond 7 July – the scheduled start of its three-month recess. Many observers concluded that ill health had prevented him from attending to defend the budget bill, a task he has traditionally performed since 1991.<sup>3</sup> Subsequently, he missed the anniversary celebrations of South Sudan's independence, on 9 July, and then, most importantly, failed to attend the African Union (AU) summit in Addis Ababa. On 14 July Senegalese President Macky Sall opened that meeting on his behalf and for the first time officially disclosed his sickness to the general public. Ethiopian authorities dissembled, reluctantly confirming Meles was receiving medical treatment but providing scant and sometimes contradictory details. Some officials spoke of “exhaustion”; one said, “he is not in a critical

state. He is in good condition”, another that “there is no undesirable eventuality regarding his health. I am 100 per cent sure that he's recovering health-wise, and he will be back to his official duty in a number of days”.<sup>4</sup>

The failure of authorities to respond adequately to the rumours only strengthened them, and finally, on 19 July, his close aid and government spokesman, Bereket Simon, explained to journalists that the prime minister was taking “sick leave” but remained in charge of the government while dealing with an unspecified illness. Bereket added he was “in a good and stable condition”, denied the illness was brain cancer and said Meles would resume work as soon as he recuperated. However, a founding TPLF member and veteran liberation fighter, Sebhat Nega, contradicted this account, stating that while he was convalescing, “legislatively it is the parliament [in charge] and executive it is the deputy prime minister”, adding, “the system does not depend on one person”.<sup>5</sup>

In reality, Ethiopia's political system has no institutional mechanism to manage a handover of executive responsibilities or provide clear lines of communications between the government and the people. The authorities refused to confirm who was in control while Meles was ill, and even now that Deputy Prime Minister Hailemariam is acting head of government (chair of the Council of Ministers), there is reason to believe there is no agreement on a succession plan, whether formal or informal.<sup>6</sup> Since 1991, the political system has revolved around Meles; without its centre of gravity, the Federal Democratic Republic risks growing instability.

<sup>1</sup> Ethiopia has a history of concealing a leader's incapacitation and death, and there had been rumours, never confirmed, of Meles's poor health in the past, but he was never out of sight for a long period. On 30 July 2012, a satellite TV journalist claimed Crisis Group had confirmed Meles's death. The following day, Crisis Group put out a statement saying it “has no direct knowledge about the state of health of Ethiopian Prime Minister Meles Zenawi. Crisis Group has never commented on Mr Zenawi's health or his fate, and is not in a position to speculate about it. Crisis Group categorically denies any media claims to the contrary”. “Ethiopia: Crisis Group Denies Media Reports about PM's Fate”, Brussels, 31 July 2012.

<sup>2</sup> “Ethiopia: Meles Zenawi at G20 Summit in Los Cabos”, Mexico in Pictures, [www.nazret.com](http://www.nazret.com), 19 June 2012. “PM Meles Zenawi's health: how critical could it be?”, Danielberhane's Blog, <http://danielberhane.wordpress.com>, 15 July 2012. “PM Meles Zenawi's health: a new wave of rumor hits the web”, Danielberhane's Blog, <http://danielberhane.wordpress.com>, 19 July 2012.

<sup>3</sup> “The fine line”, *Addis Fortune*, 29 July 2012.

<sup>4</sup> “Meles Zenawi no-show at African Union summit”, Associated Press, 16 July 2012. “PM Meles is not attending this meeting for health reason – Senegalese President, Macky Sall”, *Aramba Times*, 15 July 2012; Tesfalem Waldyes, “The burden of executive power”, *Addis Fortune*, 15 July 2012. “Ethiopian PM in critical state in Brussels”, Agence France-Presse, 18 July 2012; James Butty, “Ethiopian PM undergoing treatment in Europe” Voice of America (VOA), 19 July 2012.

<sup>5</sup> “Ethiopian PM Meles on ‘sick leave’”, VOA, 19 July 2012; “Ethiopia – English – PM Meles Zenawi Health – One of TPLF Founders Sebhat Nega on VOA”, audio, YouTube, 19 July 2012.

<sup>6</sup> Hailemariam Desalegn, a Wolayta from the Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples Region and its former president, was seen as one of Meles's most loyal servants. His ethnicity is considered an advantage, because it is a minority in a multi-ethnic region and, most importantly, not from the numerically dominant Oromo or Amhara.

### III. A POLITICAL SYSTEM CENTRED ON MELES ZENAWI

Meles's absolutely pivotal role developed during the armed struggle to overthrow the Derg – the military regime of Colonel Mengistu Haile Mariam that ruled from 1974 to 1991 – when he was a core member of the TPLF, an ethno-Marxist guerrilla movement founded in the northern Tigray region. By 1989 he chaired both the TPLF and the EPRDF, the umbrella-party for a number of ethno-national fronts created to rule after it toppled the Derg.<sup>7</sup> In 1991, Meles was appointed president of the transitional government and remained chairman of the TPLF and EPRDF. Following a new constitution in 1994 and a new government established the next year, he took over the powerful post of prime minister, created alongside a ceremonial president.<sup>8</sup>

The EPRDF is formally committed to a “stable multiparty democratic system”; “to build a free market economy”; and to answer the “national question” through ethnic federalism.<sup>9</sup> The constitution enshrined protections for political freedoms, human rights and liberal democracy and was widely regarded as innovative and democratic. It restructured the multi-ethnic country into a federation of nine ethnic-based regional states that promised to recognise existing differences, allow their articulation at the central level and thereby limit ethnic discontent.<sup>10</sup> The aspira-

tions of “nationalities” were recognised, including the right of self-determination.<sup>11</sup>

These formal commitments were incompatible with the culture of the TPLF, which, from its start, has been guided by Marxist-Leninist political practices.<sup>12</sup> Its founders considered themselves best able to understand the needs of the populace.<sup>13</sup> Its ideological and organisational methods led to a “small, highly centralised ... leadership”, obsessed with secrecy. The TPLF remained the centre of political decision-making in the EPRDF and kept the principles and discourses of its guerrilla years.<sup>14</sup> This includes Leninist “democratic centralism”, in which the executive and central committees make all major political decisions, then transmit orders to junior officials and administrators. “Revolutionary democracy” that advocates capitalism and free market is promoted, but at the same time state and party retain iron control through five-year development plans. At the top of this political system, until 20 August 2012, sat Meles, its creator.

Expectations were high in the early years of the EPRDF. Ethiopians, exhausted after years of hardship, sought peace, reconciliation and development. Meles was seen as part of a new “African renaissance”, leaders breaking from the post-colonial order, and his rhetoric was welcomed by the West.<sup>15</sup> Nonetheless, one of the TPLF's first acts was to

<sup>7</sup> The EPRDF is an alliance of four political organisations created in 1989: the Tigrayan Peoples' Liberation Front (TPLF), the Oromo Peoples' Democratic Organization (OPDO), the Amhara National Democratic Movement (ANDM) and the South Ethiopian Peoples' Democratic Front (SEPDF).

<sup>8</sup> Ethiopia's ceremonial president and head of state is the 88-year-old Oromo Girma Woldegiorgis, who in 2001 succeeded Negasso Gidada. Girma was re-elected in 2007 and rumoured dead in March 2012. He is not a power factor and will not play any role in the transition.

<sup>9</sup> “EPRDF program”, 2005, at [www.eprdf.org](http://www.eprdf.org). “Ethiopian minister on objective of revolutionary democracy”, *People's Daily*, 13 August 2001. Crisis Group Africa Report N° 153, *Ethiopia: Ethnic Federalism and its Discontents*, 4 September 2009, pp. 4-5.

<sup>10</sup> Under the regimes of Emperor Haile Selassie and Mengistu Haile Mariam, Ethiopia was ruled according to different but highly centralised models. Local authorities had little power, and ethnic groups' rights were denied in favour of a rigid Amhara rule. The ethnically highly diverse population includes more than 77 tribes with distinct languages. According to the 2007 census, the Oromo are 34.5 per cent, the Amhara 26.9 per cent, the Somali 6.2 per cent and the Tigrayan 6.1 per cent of the population. Other groups are much smaller, some as few as 10,000 members. Religiously, the population is mainly divided between the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, 44.3 per cent; Muslims, 33.9 per cent; and Protestants, 18.6 per cent. “Summary and Statistical Report of the 2007 Population and Housing Census”, [www.csa.gov.et/pdf/Cen2007\\_firstdraft.pdf](http://www.csa.gov.et/pdf/Cen2007_firstdraft.pdf). Some question the religious census and believe the Muslim population

may be larger. Crisis Group analyst's interviews in another capacity, Addis Ababa, 2007-2008.

<sup>11</sup> The concept of ethnicity was ideologically grounded in Marxist-Leninist tradition and led to the creation of five regional states dominated by a single group (Tigray, Afar, Amhara, Oromia, Somali) and four without a dominant ethnic group (Benishangul-Gumuz, Southern Nations, Gambella and Harar).

<sup>12</sup> For more, see Crisis Group Report, *Ethiopia: Ethnic Federalism and its Discontents*, op. cit., p. 6.

<sup>13</sup> In this briefing, EPRDF is used to refer to decisions taken on behalf of the government. TPLF is used when referring to the real power within the government or to inner circle politics. The TPLF's original objective was an independent Tigray republic. In the 1980s it amended its program to become an Ethiopian national liberation movement, allied with similar insurgencies across the land. Aregawi Berhe, *A Political History of the Tigray People's Liberation Front. Revolt, Ideology and Mobilization in Ethiopia 1975-1991* (Los Angeles, 2009).

<sup>14</sup> Gebru Tareke, *Ethiopia: Power and protest. Peasant revolts in the Twentieth century* (Lawrenceville, 1996), p. 218. Secrecy and ultra-centralised decision-making led to creation of the secret Marxist-Leninist League of Tigray (Malalit) within the TPLF during the liberation struggle. It was led by Meles and further contributed to paranoia and internal rivalries within the front. Aregawi Berhe, “The Origins of the Tigray People's Liberation Front”, *African Affairs*, vol. 103, no. 413 (2004), pp. 569-592; and Crisis Group Report, *Ethiopia: Ethnic Federalism and its Discontents*, op. cit., p. 6.

<sup>15</sup> Then-South African Deputy President Thabo Mbeki popularly defined the post-Cold War period of transformation as an

replace in the transitional government several genuine ethnic fronts that had fought against Mengistu and had strong constituencies in their tribal bases with EPRDF ethnic parties on which it could rely to guarantee its predominance. While repression and intimidation of political foes began, the opposition was too divided and feeble to pose any real threat for more than a decade.<sup>16</sup> This gave Meles the space and time to build the foundations of a de facto one-party system, its apparatus fused with the state's behind the façade of national, regional and local administrations.

The war with Eritrea (1998-2000) eroded support for the EPRDF and Meles.<sup>17</sup> In March 2001 his TPLF leadership was challenged by other senior members and war veterans, who accused him of being soft on Eritrea and undermining Tigrayan nationalism. Meles purged them for "Bonapartism". The way the leadership was perceived within the Front changed dramatically, as Meles continued to eliminate all relevant critics.<sup>18</sup> Ethiopians' expectations for genuine democratisation were dashed, and many began to perceive ethnic federalism as a TPLF tactic to sow divisions so as to facilitate its own ethnic-based, minority rule. Devolution was seen as a means to co-opt servile, often corrupt, elites from other ethnicities while Tigrayan

elites were the main beneficiaries, increasing their economic and political power.<sup>19</sup> Nonetheless, Meles presented himself to the international community as a wise leader, committed to development and economic growth and a natural partner in efforts to achieve regional stability and counter terrorism, and Ethiopia became one of Africa's biggest aid and investment recipients.<sup>20</sup>

Internal discontent coalesced during the 2005 general elections when, for the first time, the opposition united on a vague political platform to challenge the ruling party. At the same time, the EPRDF opened political space to demonstrate its democratic credentials and ensure the flow of aid. It was convinced rural voters (more than 80 per cent of the population) would reject the opposition, either because they had benefitted from the government's development policies or feared reprisal. This was a dramatic miscalculation. Urban elites and many rural citizens voted against it in the hope of a "new era of democracy".<sup>21</sup>

International observers witnessed extensive rigging and called the elections below international standards. Despite this, the opposition won 172 of 547 seats in the lower house and control of the Addis Ababa city council.<sup>22</sup> It claimed the EPRDF had cheated it of a national victory and contested the results. Quickly organised urban demonstrations

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"African renaissance". See his address to the Corporate Council on Africa, 19-22 April 1997 in the U.S., [www.dfa.gov.za/docs/speeches/1998/mbek0419.htm](http://www.dfa.gov.za/docs/speeches/1998/mbek0419.htm). In March 1998, U.S. President Bill Clinton visited Africa and praised this new generation. It is often assumed that he was referring to Yoweri Museveni (Uganda), Isaias Afewerki (Eritrea) and Paul Kagame (Rwanda), in addition to Meles. See Marina Ottaway, "Think Again: Africa", Carnegie Endowment, spring 1999.

<sup>16</sup> Most of the replacements were abruptly created before Mengistu's fall and had little local support. The junior partners who were forced out, especially the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) and the Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF), restarted their insurgencies, this time against the EPRDF. Their struggle has not yet found a political settlement. The idea an opposition could take power through the ballot box was regarded as treasonous. Siegfried Pausewang, "Aborted or nascent democracy? Structural reasons for the failure of democratisation in Ethiopia", in G. M. Sorbo and S. Pausewang (eds.), *Prospects for peace, security and human rights in Africa's Horn* (Bergen, 2004), p. 135.

<sup>17</sup> See Crisis Group Africa Reports N°68, *Ethiopia and Eritrea, War or Peace?*, 24 September 2003; N°101, *Ethiopia and Eritrea: Preventing War*, 22 December 2005; N°141, *Beyond the Fragile Peace between Ethiopia and Eritrea: Averting a New War*, 17 June 2008; and Africa Briefing N°48 *Ethiopia and Eritrea: Stopping the slide to War*, 5 November 2007; also Tekeste Negash and Kjetil Tronvoll, *Brothers at War: Making Sense of the Eritrean-Ethiopian War* (London, 2000).

<sup>18</sup> Some hardliners, believing Ethiopia was winning, wanted to re-annex Eritrea. "Bonapartism", is a Marxist term for counter-revolutionary attitude. Crisis Group Report, *Ethiopia: Ethnic Federalism and Its Discontents*, op. cit., p. 6. René Lefort, "Ethiopia after Meles", OpenDemocracy ([www.opendemocracy.net](http://www.opendemocracy.net)), 8 August 2011; Crisis Group interview, July 2012.

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<sup>19</sup> Crisis Group analyst's field notes and interviews in another capacity, Ethiopia, 2003-2011.

<sup>20</sup> Western security concerns aligned with Ethiopia's national security interests in Somalia. The first Ethiopian National Defence Force (ENDF) incursions there occurred in 1996, against the radical Islamist group Al Ittihad Al Islami, which wanted to unite the Somali region of Ethiopia to Somalia. Since then, Ethiopia has played a major role in fighting political Islam in the region. For analysis of its recent activity, see Crisis Group Africa Briefings N°74, *Somalia's Divided Islamists*, 18 May 2010; N°45, *Somalia: The Tough Part Is Ahead*, 26 January 2007; and Africa Reports N°95, *Counter-Terrorism in Somalia: Losing Hearts and Minds?*, 11 July 2005; and N°45, *Somalia: Countering Terrorism in a Failed State*, 23 May 2002. In 2010, Ethiopia received \$3.529 billion in Overseas Development Aid (ODA), the most in Africa. "Aid statistics, recipient aid at a glance – Ethiopia", OECD, January 2012. Aid comes not only from Western donors; China and other countries provide assistance for specific development projects. Additionally, in 2011 it received \$4.4 billion in foreign direct investment, up from \$1.3 billion in 2001. "UN Conference on Trade and Development Statistics", <http://unctadstat.unctad.org/TableViewer/tableView.aspx>.

<sup>21</sup> Crisis Group, analyst's field observations in another capacity, Addis Ababa, January-May 2005.

<sup>22</sup> Crisis Group analyst's field observations in another capacity, May-June 2005. "Ethiopia National Elections", The Carter Center Observation Mission 2005, final report; "Ethiopia Legislative Elections 2005", EU Election Observation Mission, final report, 2005. Crisis Group Report, *Ethiopia: Ethnic Federalism and Its Discontents*, op. cit., pp. 8-10.

turned violent. The government called the protests an attempt to overthrow the elected government and cracked down, killing at least 193, arresting more than 20,000 and detaining more than 70 opposition leaders, human rights activists and journalists who were charged with treason.<sup>23</sup>

Subsequently, the EDPRF became more repressive. Authoritarianism was given a veneer of legitimacy through laws that – under the guise of national security – the parliament passed between 2007 and 2009 to stifle dissent and ensure against any interference in government affairs.<sup>24</sup> Any political matter became an issue of “national interest” and critics potential terrorists. The EPRDF ostensibly won 99.6 per cent of the vote in the 2010 elections, the blatant manipulation of which sent a clear message that the opposition would pay the price for what happened in 2005, and the EPRDF would not accept any scrutiny of its rule.<sup>25</sup>

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.<sup>26</sup> 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.<sup>27</sup> 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 replacement to emerge.

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.<sup>28</sup> Despite overstated economic growth,<sup>29</sup> and promised federalism and democratisation, discontent is growing with the EPRDF’s ethnic politics, rigid grip on power and perceived corruption.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Crisis Group analyst’s field observations in another capacity, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, June–November 2005. On 6 November 2005, leaders of the opposition Coalition for Unity and Democracy (CUD, known in Ethiopia as Qinijit) called for further demonstrations and a boycott of the ruling party’s activities, and were imprisoned alongside critical journalists and human rights activists. The Supreme Court sentenced them to life imprisonment. After lengthy mediation by the international community and Ethiopian elders, they were pardoned by the government and released in July 2007.

<sup>24</sup> A draconian Press Law was passed in July 2008, a Civil Society Organisations (CSO) Law in January 2009 and an Antiterrorism Law in July 2009. “New Ethiopian press law draws criticism”, Reuters, 2 July 2008; “Ethiopian parliament adopts repressive new NGO law”, Amnesty International, 8 January 2009; and “Ethiopia: Stop Using Anti-Terror Law to Stifle Peaceful Dissent”, Human Rights Watch, 21 November 2011.

<sup>25</sup> “Hundred ways of putting pressure”, Human Rights Watch, 24 March 2010; “Ethiopia: Government Repression Undermines poll”, 24 May 2010; “Ethiopia election marred by intimidation, say rights group”, Associated Press, 25 May 2010; Crisis Group analyst’s observation in another capacity, May 2010. See also “Breaking News: Meles criticizes EU observers for mixing their political outlooks with facts”, Addis Neger online, 26 May 2010; and Barry Malone and David Clarke, “Ethiopia’s Meles urges recognition of poll win”, Reuters, 25 May 2010.

<sup>26</sup> “Ethiopia’s Meles says preparing to step down – report”, Reuters, 23 June 2009. Crisis Group analyst’s interviews in another capacity, Addis Ababa, 2010. The nine-member TPLF executive committee, the real core of power, includes Meles Zenawi, Tsegay Berhe, Abay Woldu, Abadi Zemo, Tewodros Hagos, Tewodros Adhanom, Debretsion Gebre-Mikael, Beyene Mikru and Azeb Mesfin. The central committee additionally

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includes Seyoum Mesfin, Abay Tsehaye, Fetlework Gebre-Egziabher, Arkebe Equbay, Roman Gebre-Selassie, Nega Berhe, Desta Bezabih, Abay Nebso, Gobeze Wolde-Aregay, Kiros Bitew, Mikael Abreha, Yitbarek Ameha, Alem Gebre-Wahd, Dr Addisalem Balema, Teklewoyni Assefa, Berhane Kidane-Mariam, Niguse Gebre, Hadish Zenebe, Getachew Belay, Berhane Gebre-Kirstos, Tirfu Kidane-Mariam, Tewolde Gebre-Tsadikan, Hishe Lemma, Kidusan Nega, Essayas Wolde-Giorgis, Tilahun Tarek, Zeray Asgedom, Meseret Gebre-Mariam, Mengisteab Wolde-Kidan, Getachew Assefa, Daniel Assefa, Tesfalem Yehdego, Gebre-Meskel Tarek, Tewolde Berhe, Sahlelassie Teka, and Eyassu Tesfay. All members of the two committees will be important in any succession plan, and the new leader will emerge from them.

<sup>27</sup> Jawar Mohammed, “Meles Zenawi and OPDO Relations Enter A New Phase”, <http://dhummuugaa.wordpress.com>, 16 March 2011. The EPRDF sought to implement generational renovation by promoting figures not in the liberation struggle, most prominently current acting head of government Hailemariam. William Davison, “A new breed of leaders shall come to receive the baton: Bereket Simon”, Bloomberg, 19 July 2012.

<sup>28</sup> “It’s Mubarak syndrome . . . . We only talked to Mubarak about Egypt’s role in the region, never about what was happening inside Egypt. It’s the same with Ethiopia”, unnamed U.S. diplomat quoted in Richard Dowden, “How Meles Rules Ethiopia”, African Arguments ([www.africanarguments.org](http://www.africanarguments.org)), 21 May 2012. Officials were aware Meles’s autocratic policies could destabilise the country but were unwilling to risk losing his cooperation on counter-terrorism. Crisis Group interview, U.S. government official, Washington DC, 20 August 2012.

<sup>29</sup> See Section IV.B below.

<sup>30</sup> Abdi Tsegaye, “Ethiopia: Corruption could undermine nation’s development goals – Sebhat Nega”, *Addis Fortune*, 26 February 2012; Tesfa-Alem Tekle, “Ethiopia: Thousands of government officials register their assets”, *Sudan Tribune*, 30

## IV. THE STATE OF THE NATION

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.<sup>31</sup>

### A. UNFULFILLED FEDERALISM, RISING ETHNIC AND RELIGIOUS DISCONTENT

To preserve its power, the EPRDF abandoned any meaningful implementation of federalism and, behind the façade of devolution, adopted a highly centralised system that has exacerbated identity-based conflicts.<sup>32</sup> Exclusion and disfranchisement have provided fertile ground for ethnic and religious radicalisation, already evident in some lowland regions, where the ruling party exploits resources without local consent. The TPLF's ethnicisation of politics has neither empowered local societies nor dampened conflict, "but rather increased competition among groups that vie over land and natural resources, as well as administrative boundaries and government budgets".<sup>33</sup>

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March 2011; Wondwossen Mezlekia, "The case of alleged fraud and corruption at Ethiopia Commodity Exchange", *nazret.com*, 21 March 2012. In a survey, 48 per cent of Ethiopians report having paid a bribe to service providers in the last twelve months. "Daily Lives and Corruption: Public Opinion in East Africa", Transparency international, 2012, p. 13.

<sup>31</sup> For example, William Davison, "Ethiopia's terror conviction of journalist raises doubts on free speech", *The Christian Science Monitor*, 27 June 2012; "UN rights chief [Navi Pillay] 'seriously alarmed' by intimidation of journalists in Ethiopia", UN News Centre, 18 July 2012.

<sup>32</sup> Crisis Group Report, *Ethiopia: Ethnic Federalism and Its Discontents*, op. cit.; analyst's field observation in another capacity, 2003-2012.

<sup>33</sup> In Gambella, the population violently opposes policies of land leasing and forced relocation of villages to free areas for foreign investments. After clashing with the army, scores of Anuak civilians sought refuge in South Sudan. There is also tension in Oromia and the Omo Valley, where the government has allegedly relocated people to lease land. "Waiting Here for Death: Forced Displacement and 'Villagization' in Ethiopia's Gambella Region", Human Rights Watch, 17 January 2012. In Ogaden, the ONLF is fighting a low-level insurgency, exacerbated after forcible relocations to allow oil and gas exploration

The case of the main ethnic group, the Oromo, exemplifies the deep dissatisfaction. The TPLF eliminated or defeated all the parties with genuine constituencies in the community, both those with an armed secessionist agenda and those that acted within constitutional limits. The assertion is that the parties in the EPRDF properly address their expectations, but most Oromo maintain these have been co-opted, deeply corrupted and will not challenge the TPLF's central role or truly represent their ethnic or regional constituencies. Similar dissatisfaction is widespread, and is particularly high in the peripheries, such as Ogaden, Gambella and Benishangul-Gumuz. Resentment has recently intensified even in Tigray, where parts of the population feel the TPLF is composed of faraway elites no longer representing their communal interests and interested only in making money and investing it in the capital or abroad.<sup>34</sup>

In a religiously diverse and traditionally tolerant country, tensions are mounting between the government and the large Muslim community.<sup>35</sup> Informal Muslim committees have protested perceived interference in religious affairs, claiming the government imposes the beliefs of al-Ahbash, an Islamic sect created by an Ethiopian-Lebanese imam and considered pro-Western because of its opposition to Salafism, at the expense of traditional Sufi-inspired movements. The authorities sought to link their demonstrations to Islamic extremism and terrorism, and Meles exacerbated matters by accusing the protestors of "peddling ideologies of intolerance". That what started as a simple demand for religious independence has become a much broader protest against repressive tendencies was evident when Christians joined the demonstrations in solidarity.<sup>36</sup>

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by foreign companies. Army and paramilitary forces loyal to Ogaden regional President Abdi Iyle have been accused of a terror campaign against alleged rebel supporters. "Collective Punishment: War Crimes and Crimes against Humanity in the Ogaden Area of Ethiopia's Somali Regional State", Human Rights Watch, June 2008; Crisis Group analyst's interviews in another capacity, Gode, 2006-2007, Dadaab, Kenya, 2010. Crisis Group Report, *Ethnic Federalism and Its Discontents*, p. i.

<sup>34</sup> Crisis Group, analyst's field notes and interviews in another capacity, Oromiya, Ogaden, Amhara Region, 2003-2012. Arena Tigray, an ethnic opposition party within the TPLF region, was created by ex-TPLF members (including Gebru Asrat, former executive committee member and Tigray president). With other ex-senior figures, like former Defence Minister Seye Abaha, Arena collects dissenting voices in Tigray despite repression. Crisis Group, analyst's field notes and interviews, Mekelle, Adigrat, Adwa, Axum, Ethiopia, 2010.

<sup>35</sup> According to the 2007 census, 33.9 per cent of the population is Muslim. "Summary and Statistical Report", op. cit. Observers say the government deliberately undercounted Muslims. Crisis Group analyst's interviews in another capacity, Ethiopia, 2007-2008.

<sup>36</sup> In a speech to parliament, Meles claimed Salafis had formed clandestine al-Qaeda cells in the south and said, "we are ob-

## B. UNEVEN ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AND CORRUPTION

Ethiopia's much praised economic development is not as robust or cost-free as Meles would have wanted or the international community believes. The ambitious five-year "Growth and Transformation Plan" launched after 2010 elections was meant to realise widely-claimed but suspect double-digit increases.<sup>37</sup> In an effort to attract foreign investment, over four million fertile hectares were leased at low prices, accompanied by reported forceful eviction of indigenous inhabitants, to international companies and foreigners to produce food, flowers and bio-fuel for export. Rights groups condemned this as inconsistent with the government's stated aim of achieving food security.<sup>38</sup> Rather

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serving tell-tale signs of extremism. We should nip this scourge in the bud". Aaron Maasho, "Ethiopian Muslims protest 'interference'", Reuters, 10 May 2012. In May, the government announced deportation of two Arabs accused of inciting violence. It alleged the men had flown in the previous day to disseminate jihad materials on jihad and make inflammatory statements in Anwar Mosque. "Ethiopia expels 2 Arabs amid tension with Muslims", Associated Press, 5 May 2012. A court ruled on 17 May that eleven people, including a Kenyan, would be charged with plotting terrorist bombings. The government claimed the group's aim was to overthrow it and establish an Islamic state. Aaron Maasho, "Eleven face trial over Ethiopia bomb plot", Reuters, 18 May 2012. William Davison, "Will Ethiopian crackdown stir Islamist backlash?", *The Christian Science Monitor*, 27 July 2012; Crisis Group interview, July 2012.

<sup>37</sup> The plan foresees GDP growth of 11 to 15 per cent per year between 2010 and 2015, at a total cost estimated around \$75 billion. It offers vast investment opportunities, mainly in industry and agriculture, in areas chosen by the government and under its supervision, and promises to develop roads, rail, electricity and telecoms. It is available at [www.ethiopians.com/Ethiopia\\_GTP\\_2015.pdf](http://www.ethiopians.com/Ethiopia_GTP_2015.pdf). The IMF said 7.5 per cent was a more realistic 2010 growth estimate than the government's 11.4 per cent. In 2011, it forecast about 6 per cent for 2012. Former World Bank Ethiopia director Kenichi Ohashi questioned the state's massive investment in development projects, suggesting a focus on private investment and education might be wiser. "World Bank, IMF Fault Ethiopia's Economic & Development Policies", VOA, 8 June 2011. According to the World Bank, "though Ethiopia made progress in tackling the 2008-2011 macroeconomic challenges, the recent surge of inflation depicts the country's vulnerable macroeconomic condition ... inflation ... more than doubled reaching 36 per cent in February 2012 ... food inflation increased from 13 per cent to 47 per cent", [www.worldbank.org/en/country/ethiopia/overview](http://www.worldbank.org/en/country/ethiopia/overview).

<sup>38</sup> Crisis Group analyst's field notes and interviews in another capacity, Ethiopia, 2008; René Lefort, "The great Ethiopian land-grab: feudalism, leninism, neo-capitalism ... plus ça change", OpenDemocracy ([www.opendemocracy.net](http://www.opendemocracy.net)), 31 December 2011; Stefano Liberti, *Land Grabbing* (Rome, 2011); and "Waiting Here for Death: Forced Displacement and 'Villagization' in Ethiopia's Gambella Region", Human Rights Watch, 17 January 2012.

than to increase domestic access to electric power, critics claim dams are being built to export it and gain hard currency and geopolitical influence, without apparent concern for environmental and social impacts.<sup>39</sup> Meles dismissed criticism, and added he did not "believe in ... bedtime stories and contrived arguments linking economic growth with democracy".<sup>40</sup>

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.<sup>41</sup> 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.

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<sup>39</sup> The widely publicised Great Renaissance Dam has reportedly created issues with Egypt because it may reduce the Nile's flow. Victoria Eastwood and Nima Elbagir, "Ethiopia powers on with controversial dam project", CNN, 8 June 2012; "A dam nuisance. Egypt and Ethiopia quarrel over water", *The Economist*, 20 April 2011; "What Cost Ethiopia's Dam Boom", International Rivers, February 2008; "Blue Nile Blues", *Africa Confidential*, 27 May 2011. There are also concerns about Gibe III, a large dam under construction in the Omo Valley. According to the government, it is needed to duplicate power-generating capacity and increase economic dynamism. However, environmental and rights groups have accused the government of displacing inhabitants, and there are major concerns for its effect on the Omo River and valley, with repercussions up to Lake Turkana in Kenya. "A Commentary on the Environmental, Socioeconomic and Human Rights Impacts of the Proposed Gibe III Hydrodam in the Lower Omo River Basin of Southwest Ethiopia", African Resources Working Group, January 2009; David Turton, "Africa: Concerns about Gibe III Dam", Pambazuka News, 2 February 2012. Chinese investors have also expressed concern. At the World Economic Forum in Addis Ababa, 9-11 May 2012, Gao Xiqing of the China Investment Forum warned Meles: "Do not necessarily do what we did". Policies of "sheer economic growth" should be avoided. "We now suffer pollution and an unequal distribution of wealth and opportunities". Richard Dowden, "How Meles Rules Ethiopia", op. cit.

<sup>40</sup> "Africa: Development or Democracy, Which Comes First?". Meles spoke on a panel on African leadership at the 22nd World Economic Forum, Addis Ababa, 9-11 May 2012, *Sheba Post*, 15 May 2012.

<sup>41</sup> Crisis Group analyst's field notes and interviews in another capacity, Ethiopia, 2011-2012.

The immediate consequence of these policies – coupled with high food and commodity prices – is social deterioration. The difference between rich and poor has increased; annual inflation is in the 30 per cent range, squeezing the fragile middle class and decimating the poor. Social mobility for most is nearly impossible.<sup>42</sup> Schools are under direct control of the ruling party, with educational and career opportunities connected to loyalty to the EPRDF. Universities produce an increasing number of locally-educated youth whose only remaining dream is emigration, by any means. The only new beneficiaries are a small group of locals and returnees, rarely well-educated, who are totally dependent on the ruling party and prey on the economy and country at large. Corruption and small-scale, often violent criminality is of increasing concern, a classic symptom of social and economic malaise.<sup>43</sup>

## V. TRANSITION: A TPLF AFFAIR

Mechanisms for succession in the 1994 constitution are not clear. Articles 72-75 treat executive powers. Article 72 vests “the highest executive powers” in “the Prime Minister and the Council of Ministers”. It also states, “unless otherwise provided in this Constitution the term of office of the Prime Minister is for the duration of the mandate of the Council of People’s Representative”, that is, five years. While Article 75 states that the deputy prime minister may “[a]ct on behalf of the Prime Minister in his absence”, it also provides that in such circumstances he

remains “responsible to the Prime Minister”. His role is not otherwise constitutionally endowed with executive power (beyond membership of the Council of Ministers), so this article does not constitute a succession mechanism.

On a strict reading of the constitution, executive responsibility in event of the prime minister’s death is with the Council of Ministers until the end of parliament’s mandate,<sup>44</sup> at which point the new parliament chooses a new prime minister. Members of the Council of Ministers include the prime minister, deputy prime minister, federal ministers and other federal officials as determined by law. The deputy prime minister has no specific role in it.<sup>45</sup>

The lack of guidance is by design. The constitution was drafted so as not to constrain the ruling party. The wording of Article 75 ensures that a non-Tigrayan deputy prime minister, necessary to preserve the image of ethnic balance, would not automatically be promoted once Meles was dead, thereby endangering the Tigrayan elite. A likely explanation for the government’s handling of questions about his health is that there was no agreement on who would become prime minister and chairman of both the TPLF and the EPRDF if the prime minister died. With Meles’s death a power-vacuum opens, and as TPLF factions jostle for position, the rules of engagement appear uncertain.

It was rumoured that Meles was grooming Deputy Prime Minister Hailemariam before his death,<sup>46</sup> others pointed to members of his inner circle, including Tewdros Adhanom, Berhane Gebrekristos, Arquebe Equbay or Abay Woldu. It is believed his wife, Azeb Mesfin, would like to succeed her husband or play a major role in the political future, but without Meles she probably has little chance.<sup>47</sup>

<sup>42</sup> Crisis Group, analyst’s field observation in another capacity, Ethiopia, 2003-2012. William Davison, “Ethiopia’s annual inflation rate falls to 35.9% in December”, Bloomberg, 9 January 2012. The cost of staple food like *teff* increased five times in a few months; fuel prices rise continuously. Seble Teweldebirhan, “Skyrocketing cost of living testing many Ethiopians”, www.ezega.com, 7 October 2011.

<sup>43</sup> Crisis Group analyst’s field notes and interviews in another capacity, Ethiopia, 2003-2012. “Higher education in Ethiopia on death row”, www.debirhan.com, 23 June 2012. While for years corruption was seen as solely an option for the highest political and administrative echelon, it is now apparent in all levels of the administration. For example, civil servants routinely solicit bribes in return for official documents such as a driving license or an ID. Crisis Group analyst’s observations in another capacity, Ethiopia, 2003-2012. While there have been some government efforts to curb corruption, they have come under criticism and proven insufficient. Abdi Tsegaye, “Ethiopia: Corruption could undermine nation’s development goals”, op. cit.; Tesfa-Alem Tekle, “Ethiopia: Thousands of government officials register their assets”, op. cit.; Wondwossen Mezlekia, “The case of alleged fraud and corruption”, op. cit. In a survey, as noted above, 48 per cent of Ethiopians report having paid a bribe to service providers in the last twelve months. “Daily Lives and Corruption”, Transparency international, op. cit., p. 13.

<sup>44</sup> Article 72.

<sup>45</sup> Article 76

<sup>46</sup> On Hailemariam, see fn. 6 above.

<sup>47</sup> Tewdros Adhanom is health minister and TPLF executive committee member, a medical doctor with a PhD from the University of Nottingham, considered very close to Meles and apparently well regarded by the U.S. There are concerns in the TPLF about his ability to run the country, and he was not a liberation fighter. Crisis Group, interview, July 2012. Berhane Gebrekristos has always been a main actor, very close to Meles and discreet. Considered the TPLF spokesperson abroad during and after the guerrilla war, he was ambassador to the U.S. and is now deputy foreign minister, and, many say, runs the ministry. He is also a central committee member. Crisis Group interview, July 2012. Meles appointed Arkebe Oqubay mayor of Addis Ababa (2003-2005), after which he was state minister of works and public services; he is now an adviser and central committee member. Since he is not in parliament, he cannot constitutionally be prime minister. Abay Woldu is president of Tigray Region since 2010, TPLF deputy chairman and executive committee member. His wife, Tirfu Kidane-Mariam, is an influential central committee member. He is not considered



Since alliances are probably in no more than an early stage, it is not possible to predict who will prevail. However, none of the above appears to possess the gravitas and acumen to gain the support of all TPLF factions or even its old guard, represented by Sebhat Nega and Abay Tsehaye.<sup>48</sup> This highlights the risk of an intra-TPLF power-struggle and increases the prospect senior Tigrayans in the military (ENDF) and National Intelligence and Security Service (ENISS) could become the real arbiters.

The prevailing faction would need the security apparatus's support. It is not possible to know whom it will back, whether it will find common ground. Surely, it will play a more prominent political role. Its increased influence might

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powerful enough to take power by some TPLF observers. Crisis Group interview, July 2012. For years Azeb Mesfin was simply first lady, pursuing her education and business career. She was elected to parliament in 2005, promoted in 2010 to the executive committee and won a fight to demote Sebhat Nega, a senior old guard figure. She is also deputy head of the Endowment Fund for the Rehabilitation of Tigray (EFFORT), led by Abadi Zemu, who replaced Sebhat Nega. A Tigrayan holding company set up to invest money raised by the TPLF during the guerrilla war, EFFORT controls companies valued at some \$125 million. Crisis Group analyst's interviews in another capacity, Addis Ababa, 2011. While there have been corruption allegations against Azeb, she has denied them. "Audit me if you like", First Lady Azeb Mesfin", Danielberhane's Blog (<http://danielberhane.wordpress.com>), 4 March 2011.

<sup>48</sup> Sebhat Nega, born 1934, is a founder of the TPLF and the Marxist Leninist League of Tigray and a hardline Tigrayan nationalist. His original stand against Mengistu was that the country should be broken up into ethnic states, and he may still not necessarily support unity at any cost. TPLF head 1979-1989, he was replaced by Meles at its Third Congress. Since then, he has been at the periphery but remains respected. John Young, *Peasant Revolution in Ethiopia: The Tigray's People Liberation Front 1975-1991* (Cambridge, 1997). He was the EPRDF's economic department chairman, a major supporter of Meles during the war with Eritrea and its aftermath and helped Meles retain the TPLF's leadership during the 2001 internal crisis by persuading his sister, Kidusan Nega, and her husband, Tsegaye Berhe (central committee members initially opposed to him). In 2012, he publicly raised concerns about corruption (but stopped short of calling for investigation in the prime minister's family), one-man rule and Meles's "dominant party" concept. Abdi Tsegaye, "Ethiopia: Corruption could undermine nation's development goals – Sebhat Nega", op. cit.; Crisis Group analyst's field notes and interviews in another capacity, Ethiopia, 2003-2012. Abay Tsehaye is another founding member of the TPLF and the Marxist Leninist League of Tigray. An ex-federal affairs minister, he is a member of the TPLF central committee and in 2010 was appointed by Meles director general of the Sugar Corporation with ministerial rank. Demoted after the 2010 elections in the generational renewal Meles imposed, he could be at the forefront of any old-guard refusal to accept a new generation leader. Crisis Group analyst's field notes in another capacity, Ethiopia, 2003-2012.

result in a more hawkish regional attitude, especially toward Eritrea. Meles worked hard to ensure it was completely obedient to him, but his successor should not take its loyalty for granted.<sup>49</sup>

## A. SUCCESSION SCENARIOS

Ethiopian authorities announced on 21 August that Deputy Prime Minister Hailemariam is acting head of government.<sup>50</sup> However, this seems a temporary emergency solution. The lack of an obvious true successor remains the main issue and opens three possible scenarios for post-Meles Ethiopia. The first is an agreement within the TPLF to appoint a non-Tigrayan prime minister. It might be so motivated to give the appearance of a broad base and that Meles's promised opening was underway. Hailemariam – loyal and already part of the inner circle – could be confirmed and may prove the best choice even in the long run. For many, however, this would be window-dressing, designed to placate potential critics, while the Tigrayan TPLF elite keep real power.<sup>51</sup> The true leader would almost certainly be Meles's successor as EPRDF and TPLF chairman. Also relevant would be the process by which this individual gained the chairmanships. If it involved a long factional struggle rather than consensus, the party's resilience might be seriously damaged, leaving more room for the security apparatus to be the real power.

In a second scenario, a Tigrayan TPLF member would eventually become prime minister and TPLF and EPRDF chairman with broad consensus, including among army and intelligence power brokers. The most likely candidates in this eventuality appear to be Berhane Gebrekristos and Tewdros Adhanom. However, Crisis Group was told the old guard, led by Sebhat Nega, is lobbying against both, as are influential security personalities such as Army Chief of Staff General Samora Younus, Northern front commander General Seare Mekonnen and ENISS head Getachew Assefa. While this scenario holds the greatest potential for a stable, TPLF-managed transition, identifying a figure palatable to the many power centres may prove

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<sup>49</sup> The majority of the senior ENDF and ENISS ranks are ethnic Tigrayan or Agew (an ethnic group in Tigray and Eritrea). The "retirement" of some 120 generals and colonels left over from the guerrilla war in late 2011-early 2012 was part of Meles's control effort. Kirubel Tadesse, "Ethiopian military retires 13 generals, 300 senior officers", *The Capital*, 26 December 2011.

<sup>50</sup> "... will, in accordance with the... Constitution, continue to carry out the responsibilities of heading the Council of Ministers". "Statement from the Council of Ministers of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia".

<sup>51</sup> Crisis Group interview, July 2012.

impossible.<sup>52</sup> The party's reluctance to reveal leadership arrangements during Meles's long illness suggests the difficulty.

A third possible scenario is that different TPLF members will in the end be selected as prime minister and party chairman. The questions would then be the balance of influence between them and the sustainability of the arrangement, including whether divided power in a regime crafted for one-man rule could make for a stable alliance among TPLF factions. The security apparatus would be even more crucial to guarantee the arrangement worked, perhaps to the point of it becoming the real power behind the scenes or openly taking control. But if divisions emerge within it, the security apparatus might be unable either to accept a civilian ruler or nominate one of its own.<sup>53</sup>

In all scenarios, the ruling party will need to reconcile its decision with the constitution, or at least give the impression of doing so. This might be by obtaining an interpretation of Article 75 from the Constitutional Court and having it approved by the Federal Council pursuant to Article 83.<sup>54</sup> It is likely that, given the court's lack of independence, any opinion would be informed by the TPLF's political agenda. Alternatively, a perceived internal or external threat might be used to justify imposition of martial law.

## B. THE REPERCUSSIONS OF A WEAKENED REGIME

In any scenario, the successor or joint successors will be weaker than Meles. In the short run, stability will depend upon TPLF capacity to reach consensus among its factions and an agreement with senior security figures. However, fissures would likely grow during the transition. The regime has traditionally relied heavily on repression to suppress criticism and popular discontent. Weaker without Meles, it may have little choice but to further restrict political space and rely on repressive tactics to preserve its authority.

Signs of government nervousness are already evident. During Meles's illness, the security apparatus dealt especially brutally with Muslim protests. The police entered mosques, injuring and killing worshippers and detaining leaders. The last remaining Amharic private weekly, *Feteh*,

was banned after trying to report on the illness and the Muslim protests. There was apprehension among the ruling elite that mass demonstrations to express grievances could occur.<sup>55</sup> Were that to happen and the army be required to quell them, the obedience of its lower ranks – mainly Oromo or Amhara, not Tigrayan – would be a major question.

It will be difficult for any new leadership to address fundamental grievances within the current political framework, especially in the absence of any meaningful domestic political opposition. Resentments would likely continue to be turned into ethnic and religious channels, thus undermining stability and, in the worst case of civil war, even survival of a multi-ethnic, multi-faith state. In a country divided between Christians and Muslims, the risk that unanswered social and political complaints might find their breaking point along religious lines is real.<sup>56</sup>

Nor would the implications of a weak, unstable Ethiopia be limited to the country itself. A weakened regime facing significant internal pressure – such as an escalation of the Muslim protests – might be tempted to resume the conflict with Eritrea to divert attention from domestic troubles.<sup>57</sup> In the first part of 2012, Ethiopia made a number of military incursions, and tensions between the neighbours mounted. Conversely, Eritrea might seek to exploit unrest in Ethiopia both to regain territories awarded it by the Ethiopia and Eritrea Border Commission (EEBC) and to take revenge on the TPLF. If direct confrontation was unfeasible for its weakened military, Asmara might more actively support rebel groups in Ethiopia for the same objectives.<sup>58</sup>

To prevent or repress ethnic or religious unrest, Ethiopia might have to withdraw troops from operations in Somalia and Sudan. Should discontent expressed on a religious basis lead to Islamic radicalisation of the Oromo and Og-

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<sup>52</sup> Crisis Group interview, July 2012. Samora, Seare and Getachew are from Tigray. Getachew is also a TPLF executive committee member and a very close Meles aid, though there are rumours of his dissatisfaction with some Meles decisions, including the apparent decision that Getachew's deputy, Esayas Woldegiorgis, is to run the security service.

<sup>53</sup> Crisis Group interview, July 2012.

<sup>54</sup> Article 85 provides that the Constitutional Court has 30 days to render a decision in any case brought to it.

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<sup>55</sup> Crisis Group interviews, July 2012; William Davison, "Ethiopian police clash with Muslims before AU summit meeting", Bloomberg, 14 July 2012; Aaron Maasho, "Ethiopia mosque sit-ins see deaths, arrests: protesters", Reuters, 15 July 2012; "Ethiopia: Locking up Fete newspaper's edition", Danielberhane's Blog (<http://danielberhane.wordpress.com>), 27 July 2012.

<sup>56</sup> Crisis Group interview, July 2012. Moreover, if the TPLF is fundamentally threatened and seeks to keep power by any means, it might return to its original ethnic platform, call for Tigrayan independence, move most of the army to Tigray and unilaterally implement the self-determination enshrined in the 1994 constitution. In a worst case, such ethnicisation of the struggle inside Ethiopia might trigger similar attempts elsewhere in the Horn of Africa.

<sup>57</sup> Crisis Group interview, July 2012.

<sup>58</sup> In the contingency postulated in fn. 55 above, that under heavy domestic pressure the TPLF might conceivably implement Tigrayan independence, a new war with Eritrea might seem attractive in order to gain access to the sea and make Tigray a viable state.

adeni communities (respectively the country's first and third biggest), such groups might form links with similar movements in the region, as the ONLF did with radicals in Somalia.<sup>59</sup>

## VI. PREVENTING THE SPREAD OF INSTABILITY

Much as other authoritarian regimes in the region, Ethiopia is struggling with rising discontent, linked to both economic hardship and simmering political grievances.<sup>60</sup> Without Meles, this could lead to growing unrest and the spread of armed insurgencies. To prevent this, the government should open up political space, allow the political opposition a greater role and prepare for free and fair elections within a few years.

### A. OPENING POLITICAL SPACE AND RESCINDING REPRESSIVE LAWS

The draconian legislation in place after the 2005 elections severely weakened political opposition and a fragile but growing civil society, forcing them out of the political arena and either to remain mute or move their leadership into exile, thereby losing political relevance. The innovative constitution is constantly bypassed by laws, edicts and practices that openly contravene it.<sup>61</sup> The government wants the population to be an unaware, uninformed witness of its decisions. After Meles's death, it is likely that Ethiopia can manage a smooth transition only if political, social and cultural space is reopened. The first step should be to replace Meles with the constitution as the epicentre of the political system. The anti-terrorism, press and civil society organisation (CSO) laws would need to be rescinded or radically amended, a new parliament elected and judicial independence guaranteed. Political prisoners should be released and exiled opposition members allowed back. These fundamental steps could help avoid instability and permit the peaceful channelling of grievances, greatly reducing ethnic or religious radicalisation.

### B. REANIMATING A DIASPORA OPPOSITION ON LIFE SUPPORT

The diaspora opposition has been feeble and divided, incapable of producing a common platform or posing a meaningful challenge to the regime. However, it was reanimated by news of Meles's illness and inserted itself into the debate, in order to better position itself in any transition. Opposition forces may now be able to agree on a basic platform calling for an all-inclusive transitional process leading to free and fair elections in a couple of years. Such an arrangement should include all political forces – inside and outside the country, armed and unarmed – that endorse a non-violent process to achieve an inclusive, democratically-elected regime.<sup>62</sup>

An agreement between the ruling party and opposition – conceivable only with some international mediation – would need to include a series of fundamental reforms, including release of all political prisoners and the repeal or radical amendment of repressive legislation, leading to opening of political space and preparation for elections and thus avoiding radicalisation of the opposition. However, there are no signs that any figure within the EPRDF, and particularly in the TPLF, is willing to champion the idea.<sup>63</sup> In that case, the questions whether the diaspora could play any role and how remain open. At the moment, it seems to count, in the event of Meles's departure, on support from major international actors, mainly the U.S. and EU. Should this not be forthcoming, the possibility would remain of mass demonstrations or armed rebellion inside Ethiopia, though in the short term, no political forces seem to have the capacity to pose a real threat to the TPLF leadership.<sup>64</sup>

### C. THE ROLE OF THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY

The international community supported the regime, and Meles played Western and Eastern actors alike well, deploying a targeted narrative for each. Washington and London in particular found him a trusted ally for countering terrorism in the Horn of Africa and a partner who boosted economic growth, pleased the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund and made progress toward the Millennium Development Goals. While rights organisations have accused the ruling party of using aid money to suppress political dissent and consolidate its power, do-

<sup>59</sup> Crisis Group interview, August 2012.

<sup>60</sup> There is similar discontent in Eritrea, Uganda and Sudan. Crisis Group Africa Report N°158, *Uganda: No Resolution to Growing Tensions*, 5 April 2012.

<sup>61</sup> Legislations passed between 2007-2009 and other edicts controlling the media and NGOs flout rights enshrined in the constitution.

<sup>62</sup> Crisis Group interview, July 2012.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> Crisis Group interview, July 2012.

nors have at times downplayed the allegations or turned a blind eye.<sup>65</sup>

Washington, Brussels and London have publicly raised concerns in 2012 on the pervasive use of the anti-terrorism law, but criticism has not been backed by penalties or been strong enough to change Addis Ababa's course.<sup>66</sup> If a weaker regime exposed the full extent of the country's fragilities, however, a resolute push might be more effective. Sustaining such a regime and turning a blind eye to its rights record, even if it secured short-term benefits, would increase legitimate grievances that could fuel armed rebellion and radicalisation of ethnic and religious groups (notably the Muslim minority), leading to an internal crisis with regional repercussions.

More constructively and prudently, the U.S., EU and UK might develop a common position on continued, but conditional support that links political, military and development aid to an immediate return to constitutionalism, improvement of democratic and human rights practices and a clear roadmap. The latter should include transparent mechanisms within the TPLF and the EPRDF for apportioning the party and Front power Meles held and within parliament to remove repressive laws and open space so political opponents can return, leading to free and fair elections within a fixed time.

## VII. CONCLUSION

For more than two decades, Prime Minister Meles Zenawi managed Ethiopia's political, ethnic and religious divides and adroitly kept the TFPL and EPRDF factions under tight control by concentrating power, gradually closing political space and stifling any dissent. His death poses serious risks to the ruling party's tenure. Deprived of its epicentre, the regime will find it very difficult to create a new centre of gravity. In the short-term, a TPLF-dominated transition will produce a weaker regime that probably will have to rely increasingly on repression to manage growing unrest.

The international community ignored and to some degree supported the authoritarian tendencies. It preferred short-term security to long-term stability and turned a blind eye to growing dissatisfaction that in the absence of political space is being channeled along ethnic and religious lines, potentially radicalising society. In the post-Meles era, it needs instead to push the ruling party to revive the rights and freedoms of the 1994 constitution and promote inclusive reforms as the only way to ensure internal and regional stability, as well as durable development.

**Nairobi/Brussels, 22 August 2012**

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<sup>65</sup> China gives relatively little direct foreign aid, but by 2009, its direct investment had reached \$900 million. The EU, U.S, UK, and Germany are the largest bilateral donors. The World Bank and donor nations cancelled direct budgetary support after the 2005 disputed elections, providing protection of basic services (PBS) instead. Funds are distributed to five sectors, water, education, health, roads and agriculture, in a block grant to the federal government that then passes it to the local administrations (*woredas*), supposedly without touching them itself. The World Bank says the program is free from political capture and directly helps people in need, but it appears the central government does influence allocations. See also "Development Without Freedom", Human Rights Watch, October 2010, pp. 23-32; "Ethiopia: Donor Aid Supports Repression", Human Rights Watch, 19 October 2010; "Aid Management and Utilisation in Ethiopia – A study in response to allegations of distortion in donor-supported development programmes", Development Assistance Group (DAG) Ethiopia, July 2010; "Social protection: safety nets for the vulnerable", World Bank, no date, [http://siteresources.worldbank.org/AFRICAEXT/Resources/sp\\_education\\_select\\_brochure.pdf](http://siteresources.worldbank.org/AFRICAEXT/Resources/sp_education_select_brochure.pdf).

<sup>66</sup> "Minister for Africa raises concerns over harsh sentencing under Ethiopia Anti-Terrorism laws", UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office, 18 July 2012; "EU HR Ashton followed closely recent trials under the Ethiopian Anti-Terrorism Proclamation", EU, 13 July 2012; "US 'concerned' over Ethiopian journalist's sentence", Agence France-Presse, 14 July 2012.

APPENDIX A  
 MAP OF HORN OF AFRICA



## APPENDIX B

### CRISIS GROUP REPORTS AND BRIEFINGS ON AFRICA SINCE 2009

#### Central Africa

*Chad: Powder Keg in the East*, Africa Report N°149, 15 April 2009 (also available in French).

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