

## Understanding the way great leaders live and die

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*“The reward of great men is that, long after they have died, one is not quite sure that they are dead.”*

Jules Renard

**A** lot has been said these last few days about our late Prime Minister, H.E. Ato Meles Zenawi. Expressions of condolences as well as reminiscences have come from inside and outside the country, from people who have



known him up close and from those who have only know him from a distance. The occasion has been understandably a very sad one; the country has lost a leader of incomparable potentials, who could still take the nation to further heights and bring in real benefits if he had a few more years. The global political norm being that a country's leader who dies in his fifties or thereabouts is dying too young, finding a leader of Meles's stature in context must necessarily become a great blow to that country and its

peoples. As we can learn from a worldwide roster of leaders of nations, past and present, Meles's age falls within the range in which some historical heavy weights ended their political initiation and experienced the beginning of their ascendancy. Our grief multiplies by many folds, therefore, when we dare to estimate from this reality how much more our great leader could have contributed had he lived a little longer. What a great loss we, as a nation, have come to encounter at this very moment!

And yet, this same occasion has proven to be an opportunity for sincere citizens to remember their leader's legacy and take solace in the fact that, through this man, the name Ethiopia and the identity of being an Ethiopian, have transformed and gained new meaning. This is especially relevant to the Diaspora. Many of us home-based citizens, have never had the misfortune to experience it, but shame and humiliation once led Ethiopians living abroad to deny their identity, change citizenship, and evade, as much as possible, any association with everything and everyone Ethiopian. This has gradually become eroded, and nowadays, Ethiopian citizenship is being carried along like a badge of distinction, so vividly and with unprecedented dignity, anywhere in the world. Thanks to our late Prime Minister's tenacious leadership, our country has worked its way through one of the most abusing and constrained domestic and international circumstances. These included circumstances with both artificial and natural beginnings such as famine, war and poverty. There were also other irresponsible

and shameless acts of defaming the nation by permanently associating Ethiopia and hunger in one breath. All this has now changed, and people will henceforward mingle with other peoples as none other than Ethiopians. They will always carry their heads up without shame and apprehension, because, at the back of their minds, they know that everybody knows who they are: they are the people who have begun to overcome poverty, and bring peace and stability not just to themselves, but to their neighbours as well.

Ethiopians have found out to their amazement that they have had no monopoly over Prime Minister Meles Zenawi—their love, respect, memory and now their grief over his death, are shared by millions of people elsewhere in the world. He has not been a man born to die, taking with him to the grave the grace which nature had so exceptionally and liberally endowed him with. Nor has he been one to restrict his overflowing potentials, concerns and determinations for the use of Ethiopians to whom he knew he was first and foremost accountable. He has, therefore, reached out to other peoples, especially African peoples, and stood for their peace, their rights and their benefits. He has become the champion of the underprivileged, the downtrodden and the neglected, not just in Ethiopia or, more broadly, in Africa but, through time, also almost everywhere in the world. His vision has always been so broad that he has stood up not just for the momentary gains and relief of these people, but also in such a way that these gains or relief would be sustained

in the long term. As a result, he has taken up sustaining unconditionally the health of the ecological, natural environment as a primary cause and spread it far and wide. He has always been outspoken and unrelenting in this struggle as in any other. His legacy is now quite clear and visible. For the first time in modern history, Africa has begun to speak out courageously, confidently and equally; and it has been heard, too. Among Meles's singular achievements was that he said the right thing in the right language which the world—especially the Western World—could understand clearly. No wonder Africa is so tearful, and most of the world, so sad! For Meles's death means the loss of all this.



Tearful and sad as they are, these people are expressing their emotions with the dignity and respect our late Prime Minister deserves. Prominent statesmen all over the world, some with a pedigree little given to sentimental inclinations, have said more than the norm in similar circumstances, and extended their deepest sympathy as reserved for an extraordinary hero of their own. We have even heard of, at least in one instance, that the government of a neighbouring country, that of South Sudan, publicly declared a three-day national mourning on

his behalf with some accompanying ceremonial obligations, such as the national flag flying at half-mast, put in place. State and privately-owned newspapers, magazines, TV services, and other media have joined the Ethiopian public in mourning the death of a magnificent leader.

Similar events will continue to dominate life in Ethiopia—and to some extent abroad—in the course of the near future, adding to the magnanimity of PM Meles Zenawi, his deeds and his accomplishments. Already such events have been going on for over a week and there is still no sign of relenting. In fact, the Prime Minister's death has brought about several historical first-timers already. One of the novelties is that Ethiopia is currently holding a ceremonious funeral of a national leader for the first time in about a century. Ethiopians appear to have thrown away any differences they might have, political or otherwise. Even some of those who have a different political perspective on certain issues, appreciate Meles's many legacies, and resent his eternal absence in the Ethiopian political space. Another novelty is the fact that Africa has united over the mourning of an individual country's leader as if he had been the leader of the continent.

Many things have been said and written of men and women who have passed away after contributing several times more than their fair share in the betterment of the conditions of life accustomed by their kind. To this writer, nothing appears to sound better as an expression of reality for such

people and the work they leave behind, than the message imbedded in the quotation used as an opener of this article. Physical immortality, being impossible in this earthly world of ours, and humankind's yearning for ultimate survival being as we know it, the nearest equivalent to this impossible state is to leave behind a name that is immune to the passage of time. And the greater the scope that name covers and the more widespread its impact becomes across geographical and national boundaries, the more solidly it stands against the ravages of time. To this extent, Meles Zenawi's name puts time, the consummate destroyer of people, at a historical disadvantage, because it appears that he has done more in just a few decades than a succession of average leaders could accomplish in a century. Experience has it that those great men and women who knew how to cheat time, thus have established themselves as the singular link between one generation and the next, forever alive and inspiring.

Having said much in the earlier paragraphs, and the accomplishments of Prime Minister Meles Zenawi being so many, one has to choose a manageable number to discuss him in context. And, given the time and space we have at our disposal, that number cannot exceed beyond one. Even then, it would only be by way of a highlight, and this writer would like to proceed to focus on the singular contribution the late Prime Minister has made to his people and his country, and to the world at large.

There is no doubt that the area in which Ethiopia has registered the greatest success is in the economic sector. The sector's outstanding performance, especially over the last decade, has helped the country to stand out uniquely not only across the African continent, but globally as well. Expressions like "one of the fastest growing economies in the world" have now become almost common in the media, and citizens are learning gradually to cope with this, happily but not without difficulty, as if they have now arrived at a strange, promised land and environment. Is it a dream or a reality? Can Ethiopia really be in such a state that words we thought belonged to an entirely different breed of people do possibly apply to us as well? Well, that is really something which even the better informed local intellectuals need time to digest and appreciate.

Such mixed reaction could only be the result of two circumstances. The first is probably that the Ethiopian people, having been in a socio-political and socio-economic quandary for generations, had almost given up on the possibility of change. Therefore, when change really began to come, the event caught the people unawares. Throughout the previous regimes, Ethiopians had been accustomed to repeated promises of better economic conditions in the future, but none had happened by way of a rescue from their desperate position. Instead, they had had to contend with the ever-worsening poverty, coupled with lack of peace and stability as is always the case in similar situations. Therefore, the sheer suddenness and eventual arrival of the signs, heralding the news that change is possible, and in fact,

around the corner, have been stunning enough for some.

The second circumstance is more related to the operational habits of the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) and, particularly, to the 'stuff' the late Prime Minister was made of. We have known for two decades that the EPRDF has no qualms about calling "a spade a spade". The legislations, policies, strategies and programmes that have been in the service of the country since 1991, are themselves enough evidence in this context. The Constitution's most contested component, Article 39, has no parallel in its being the most direct answer to the country's most important political issue, namely the 'self-determination' issue. According to the EPRDF, no amount of circumventing this issue would ever take us to a lasting solution, and, in all truth, it never had. The problem is that to people who grew up in a culture that has been accustomed to valuing circumventing as the ultimate virtue, such a forthright approach has always been an affront. It is the opinion of this writer that some of the opposition did come from this very stubbornness, rather than from having a better panacea to outstanding national problems. One has to concur, however, that until otherwise proven, peace has reigned in the time of Article 39 rather than during its absence.

Such honesty and forthrightness, as shown in Article 39, have also been profusely applied in social and economic sectors. We need to concur here, as well, that in

hindsight, none of the advancements we have so far witnessed in the sectors would have happened without the paradigm shift which Meles Zenawi so boldly enabled—and some of which are enshrined in our hearts. For instance, one of the most outstanding gains this writer has ever experienced by way of self-discovery and personal development, is the courage to admit that Ethiopia was desperately poor; that it was ravaged regularly by war and famine; that history is but a lesson from the past to make a better loaf of bread to feed today; that one cannot forever live in a fantasy world; that we need to break loose from both the physical and mental shackles to change and survive as a nation; and so on. I proudly owe this debt to our late Prime Minister, H.E. Meles Zenawi.

Now, coming back to the opening quotation – I contend that Meles Zenawi will always be discussed and consulted as if he were alive and kicking as always, just taking a long leave of absence from official duty. That is, he will be remembered not just for what he has done, but for what he has said as a matter of principle. As far as this writer is concerned, he has given the world a big homework on certain problems which will take probably a few years or decades to get answers to. For example, he has questioned the long-held beliefs such as the precedence of democracy over development, the validity of neo-liberal ideas to developing countries as evidenced in the current economic and financial crises in the West, and the wisdom of economic non-intervention on the part of government. Someone has to research and

get good answers for these questions, and, in time, that someone may probably make a name out of his or her discovery. And yet, there was always someone else who prompted the questions and possibly found his own answers to them, however divergent these answers might be. And that was our late Prime Minister, Ato Meles Zenawi.



It is hard to take consolation when one thinks of the many things the great leader, Meles Zenawi, has envisaged and initiated for his country, but is unable to witness their advent as his life has been cut short by an untimely death. This writer has a brief anecdote to share, by way of an attempt to such a solace, with my countrymen and women. There was this man who wanted to establish a great business enterprise which would take about twenty years to complete. By the fifteenth year, the visionary died, five years before the completion, leaving his family and friends in utter distress for not being able to witness his vision come true.

When the enterprise was finally completed, the wife of that great visionary spoke in sadness of how good it would have been for her husband to be alive, and see his great accomplishment. One of the guests present nearby, being wiser than the rest, remarked that there was no reason for the wife to be sad on that account, because, after all, her husband had already had the entire project in his vision, and thus had seen it twenty years ahead of all those present at the inauguration ceremony. This is the way of all visionaries, and that is where their immortality comes from.

*Views expressed in this article are not necessarily those of SAGE International*

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Meles Zenawi AU image: <http://www.daily-mail.co.zm/wp-content/uploads/2012/08/Meles-Zenawi.jpg>

Meles Zenawi WEF image:  
<http://theethiopianimes.files.wordpress.com/2012/08/meles-zenawi.jpg?w=640>

Meles Zenawi image:  
<http://www.abc.net.au/news/image/4213180-1x1-940x940.jpg>