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Post-Meles Hegemony in the Horn of Africa

Meles Zenawi's social and economic policies kept Ethiopia at the forefront of regional security dynamics. Yet, as Magnus Taylor argues, a host of demographic, economic and environmental challenges may now compromise Ethiopia's status as a local power.

By Magnus Taylor for ISN

On 20th August 2012 the Ethiopian government announced the death of Prime Minister Meles Zenawi. Meles had been leader of Ethiopia since 1991 after his Tigrayan People's Liberation Front (TPLF) unseated the *Derg* regime of Haile Mariam Mengistu. Since his death, tributes for Meles have been tempered by more sober commentary. Former US Ambassador to Ethiopia [David Shinn](#), for example, labelled Meles' legacy a "kind of a mixed bag" – successful in meeting development targets, but less so in allowing an open society and plural political system. He did, however, have a distinct and clearly articulated idea of how he wanted the country to develop after the civil war, and created sufficiently competent institutions to prevent, [as some of the more excitable commentators predicted](#), the collapse of the regime following his death.

Alex de Waal - long-time analyst of the Horn of Africa - [recalls](#) how, on coming to power, Meles stated that his government should be considered a success if all Ethiopians were able to eat three meals a day, "All his national policies were framed around the conquest of poverty" says de Waal, an ambitious statement to make bearing in mind Ethiopia's 'biblical famine' of the mid-1980s. But Meles's political ambitions extended way beyond poverty reduction to safeguarding Ethiopia's role of hegemon at the center of the historically unstable Horn of Africa region.

Writ Runs Large

The ascent of Meles Zenawi to the leadership of the country as head of the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) signalled the beginning of a period of unprecedented (although not uninterrupted) stability and economic growth. The EPRDF is a coalition of four political parties of regional origin – OPDO (Oromo), ANDM (Amhara), SEPDF ('Southern' peoples) and the still dominant TPLF (Tigrayans). The political plurality of the party is also represented by the vaunted federal nature of the country, in which political power is theoretically devolved to 9 separate states. There remains, however, a strong centralising impulse from the Federal Government. [As Meles said in May 2012](#) "unlike all previous governments, our writ runs in every village. That has never happened in the history of Ethiopia. The state was distant, irrelevant." Whilst this was achieved in part through widespread investment and infrastructural development, it also came with tight political control of the population. In the 2010 General Election the EPRDF won 98 percent of the vote.

Since the late 1990s, Ethiopia's most problematic regions - Benishangul Gumuz, Gambella, Afar and Somali - have been administered directly by Addis Ababa. It is no coincidence that these regions are remote and, in the case of Somali and Afar, are the sites of genuine security concerns. The Somali region has, since the mid 1980s, been the home of the rebel group the Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF). The ONLF fought ([and a splinter group continues to fight](#)) for the ethnically Somali Ogaden region of Ethiopia to be granted autonomy. Whilst this has always been a particularly unlikely prospect, it became even more unthinkable in 2007 when oil and gas reserves were discovered in the Ogaden desert.

Chatham House's [Jason Mosley](#) regards the plight of the Ogaden region as typical of Addis Ababa's exploitation of key economic resources, and the political marginalization of local populations in the country's peripheries. It could also be attributed to the fear of contagion from the collapsed Somali state next door. State failure in Somalia dates from approximately the same time Meles came to power in Ethiopia and has provided a constant challenge to regional policy.

Ties that Bind

According to [Sally Healey](#) (also of Chatham House), the Horn of Africa functions as a regional security complex, a community of states in which the security of any one country is intimately connected to the security of all the others. Ethiopia is currently the most powerful state in the region with the biggest population, an economy growing at between 7 and 10 percent per year since 2000 and a battle hardened military that is able (and willing) to pursue foreign policy aims beyond the country's borders. Meles was also a far-sited international diplomat providing troops, and bringing his own personal aptitude for mediation to bear [during negotiations between North and South Sudan](#). Most recently this was evident with the deployment of Ethiopian soldiers in the disputed region of Abyei, claimed by both North and South Sudan, which threatened to turn border skirmishes and proxy support of rebel groups into all out war.

Meles, and the corps of politicians and diplomats around him, understood the importance of trans-national security in a region where conflicts have traditionally spread across frontiers, and proxy wars are fought within the territory of neighbouring states. Accordingly, Addis Ababa's policies now aim to increasingly bind the security complex of the Horn of Africa together with Ethiopia as the hegemon. For example, Ethiopia has great potential as a producer of hydro-electric power through the damming of the Blue Nile. This has produced sensitive relations with the downstream countries, Sudan and Egypt, whose agricultural economies rely greatly on the maintenance of an uninterrupted flow. This is also the case with Kenya, where Ethiopia's plans for a series of dams in the Omo river valley have required careful diplomacy following Kenyan fears that the development would deplete the waters in Lake Turkana.

Nairobi's concerns over the damming project reflects that in the Horn of Africa control over a country's peripheries requires strategic thinking on porous borders, sea ports (Ethiopia is landlocked, and uses Djibouti for access) and ethnic populations where communities exist on both sides of a nominal frontier. For Ethiopia, this is most apparent along its eastern border with Somalia. As [previously discussed](#), Ethiopia has developed an assertive Somalia policy that has included multiple Western-backed interventions to combat the spread of radical Islamist groups and piracy. Such fears are not without justification and, [as Jeffrey Gettleman writes](#) for *The New York Times*, Meles "paint[ed] Ethiopia, a country with a long and storied Christian history, as being on the front lines against Islamist extremism."

Borderline Issues

Somalia has also been the location of a new proxy war between Ethiopia and Eritrea. In response to

Asmara's funding of Al-Shabaab, Addis Ababa's Somalia policies became increasingly concerned with disrupting the growth of the movement. Indeed, the latter-day success of Ethiopia's counter-insurgency strategy was illustrated by a statement from Al Shabaab's [spokesperson Sheikh Ali Mohamud Rage](#) who claimed that "Ethiopia is sure to collapse" as result of the death of Meles. A vain hope, indeed, as the regional security complex is well illustrated in Somalia, where troops from Kenya, and an African Union force comprised of Ugandans and Burundians, have made significant gains since 2011 when Al-Shabaab was forced out of the capital, Mogadishu. Moreover, Somalia has also shown recent progress by electing its first parliament in 20 years along with [a new, and well-respected President.](#)

Future relations between Ethiopia and Eritrea - which have remained somewhat static since the end of the border war in 2000 - will depend on which figures within the EPRDF control policy towards the neighbor. Whilst Meles carried a certain amount of personal baggage - having been the a former ally of Eritrean leader Isaias Afwerki during the war against the Derg, only to fall out after over control of a thin strip of land bordering the 2 countries - he was a moderating influence within the Tigrayan elite on the Eritrean question, and remained a pragmatic politician to the end.

Michael Woldemarian, [an academic who writes about Ethiopian-Eritrean relations](#), recently informed Security Watch that the new Prime Minister, Hailemariam Desalegn (a Southerner), is unlikely to advocate the same policies towards Eritrea as Meles. Not only does the TPLF remain the dominant group within the EPRDF, historically it has been hawkish towards Eritrea. Earlier this year Ethiopian forces also crossed into Eritrean territory to attack military installations it claimed had been used as bases [to abduct European tourists](#) visiting the remote Afar region of Ethiopia. Addis Ababa also claimed that the gunmen were trained and armed by the Eritrean military. Eritrea offered no military response, and is regarded as something of a pariah state in the region, and increasingly isolated diplomatically.

An Ethiopian Spring?

In the last 20 years, Ethiopia developed from a warring state unable to feed itself, to a stabilising influence within a turbulent neighbourhood. However, former Africa editor of *The Economist*, [Richard Dowden](#), writes how a worried US diplomat told him that the US suffered from 'Mubarak syndrome' with regards to the Meles regime. "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." The regime changes which followed the Arab Spring in the Middle East and North Africa demonstrated how politically restrictive regimes can store up problems for governments that are unable to provide economic opportunities for their younger citizens.

The average age of the Ethiopian population is just 17 and the country has an inflation rate which reached 32 percent in February 2012 - high food prices (a key driver of political disaffection in developing countries) reflect this. In short, Ethiopia - a complex and politically heterogeneous country - displays some of the characteristics that toppled the regimes in Egypt, Libya and Tunisia. While Meles built an effective machine for regulating his own country and relations with neighbors, it may be the demographic and economic challenges that pose the greatest difficulties for the continuation of Ethiopia's regional hegemony.

For additional reading on this topic please see:

[Ethiopia After Meles](#)
[Rules of the Range](#)

[Water Scarcity and Food Security along the Nile](#)

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Editor's note:

Magnus Taylor is the Editor of [African Arguments](#) for the Royal African Society.

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