



# **Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa after Meles**

**Brussels, 15 October 2012**

**Observatoire de l'Afrique - rapport Africa Briefing**

**by Jean-Christophe Hoste**

## The Legacy

- Former Prime Minister of Ethiopia Meles Zenawi has been officially announced dead on 20th of August 2012. Since 1991, when he was appointed president of the transitional government, he has been at the epicentre of power in his country. Before that, in 1989, he was appointed as chairman of the TPLF and EPRDF and was, in that role, of paramount importance in the removal of the regime of his predecessor Colonel Mengistu. In 1994 the transitional government passed a new constitution, making Meles Zenawi Prime Minister with the function of president becoming largely ceremonial.
- Zenawi's leadership of the TPLF/EPRDF was challenged after the end of the 1998-2000 war with Eritrea. Fellow-veterans accused him of being too soft on Eritrea and undermining Tigrayan nationalism. From 2001 onwards after having purged the ranks of the TPLF, the collegial rule, the internal dialogue and the policy of ethnic federalism were set aside and Zenawi became even more the personification of power in Ethiopia. The new political leadership had no constituency of its own and was dependent on Meles Zenawi for their political survival. That leadership paired with a well-structured system of oppression. Elections in 2005 were followed by violently repressed riots in Addis – underlining the lack of political space and equally demonstrating to the ruling party the undesirable risks attached to any further opening of that space. The regime was especially averse to foreign meddling and interference resulting in the 2008 Press bill and CSO law

followed by the 2009 antiterrorism law. The Press bill was intended to uphold constitutional protections against censorship, prohibit pre-trial detention of journalists, and recognise the rights of journalists to form professional associations. A number of its provisions, like the right to impound any print publication deemed a threat to public order or national security, allowed the government to restrict the independent media, while leaving intact existing repressive statutes that fall well short of international standards. CSO law that inhibited NGO's with more than 10% external funding to address questions deemed of political importance by the government. The antiterrorism law with its broad and vague definition of terrorism gave the government even more power to intervene in the name of national security. In 2010 the EPRDF won the elections with 99.6% of the votes and Meles continued as Prime Minister.

- Especially in the course of the past decade, Meles played an increasingly prominent role on the African and international scene. His personality and political relations with the U.S., the EU and emerging powers kept the international community on board in relation to Ethiopia's development. He was a prominent partner in the fight against terrorism for the U.S., received large amounts of aid money from foreign donors for Ethiopia's efforts to achieve the MDG's, making Ethiopia the biggest aid receiver in Africa. On the African level he was an important figure at the AU, as chairman of the African Group in international negotiations. He had the reputation of being a man "who

could get things done”. He also attracted a lot of direct investments in infrastructure for Ethiopia. The Chinese even build and donated the new AU headquarters. He was a driving force behind big development initiatives, including the Renaissance Dam that was pushed ahead despite the absence of a new Nile basin agreement. And the clear Egyptian concern. Regional development projects of this kind have the potential to change the power relations in the region.

- Meles Zenawi had announced to be preparing a transition for the next elections in 2015, but his premature death prohibited the unfolding of this potential new strategy.. The transition poses an institutional challenge, as it was not foreseen in the constitution. Notwithstanding the initial hesitation surrounding the deputy Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn within the EPRDF and its main political actor the TPLF, he has been appointed by the EPRDF as their new chairman during the EPRDF congress on 15 and 16 September 2012. This paved the way for his selection as the new Prime Minister of Ethiopia, a move approved by the Parliament on 21 September 2012. Hailemariam’s deputy Demeke Mekonnen, Minister of Education during the last Meles’ cabinet and chairman of the Amhara ethnic party within the EPRDF, the ANDM, has also been confirmed and replaced Hailemariam as deputy Prime Minister. The formal – constitutional order therefore seems to be restored efficiently, despite the clear lack of a transitional procedure within the Constitution. The question as to the equilibrium between the different constituent

components of the EPRDF and the position of the security actors and business interests remains to be answered. This move represents an attempt to return to the era of collegial rule within the party. The question whether this collegial leadership will prove viable still remains unknown. The answer will be determined by the oligarchy currently leading behind the scenes. If they are generally supportive, it may be sustainable, but certain members may also be waiting for the right moment to emerge from the pack and become Ethiopia’s new strongman.

- The security forces are an element that has to be taken into account in finding a new equilibrium. Before his death Meles Zenawi appointed a new group of officers reinforcing the strong hold of the Tigre on the upper ranks of the security forces, while the lower ranks mostly consist of Oromo and Amhara. A new group of generals have been appointed after Meles’ passing, apparently a decision he took before his death. The vast majority of the latest promoted officials are Tigre as well. These forces play an important role nationally - and in the absence of Meles may inform Ethiopian attitude regionally. The way security forces dealt with the recent Muslim protests illustrated the nervousness of the regime, and that the new leadership has no intention to change its repressive tactics of the past.

Scenario’s for the future and their regional implications

- **The status quo scenario** – Assuming new Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn has fully

taken over the Premiership's responsibilities - the key regional issues remain the same: the containment of Eritrea, remaining on good terms with the two Sudans and managing the Ethiopian involvement in Somalia. The recent and unexpected landslide victory of Hassan Sheikh Mohamud against Sharif Sheikh Ahmed in Somalia is a new development, as he represents a potential break from the status quo. Yet in order to remind everyone that nothing has truly changed, Al Shabaab attempted to assassinate Mohamud in Mogadishu, after only one day into his presidency. Hassan Sheikh is committed to re-establishing ownership of the country's security, and may look to change Ethiopia's ill-defined military presence in Western Somalia. An indefinite operation will not be sustainable in Hassan Sheikh Mohamud's vision of a post-transition Somalia. As Hassan Sheikh Mohamud currently lacks any real capacity, Ethiopia would be wise to strengthen its internal alliances to make sure that its interests are being met within new governing structures in the recently liberated areas of south-central Somalia. These elements will have to be taken into account by all parties involved in Somalia. The economic relationship with Djibouti and the economic and political relationship with Kenya are also important to Ethiopia. Kenya will be important on several fronts: first of all because of the impact of its Somalia policy for Ethiopia and secondly - not less important - that Kenya might try to claim regional leadership in the Horn of Africa.

Beyond the immediate region, at the continental and international

level, personality matters a lot - so it will be very difficult for Hailemariam to fill Meles' shoes. In Africa, South Africa had already established a power shift in its favour at the continental level and without the personal influence of Meles Zenawi its position is likely to grow stronger. Ethiopia was an important voice in the progressive group within the AU that challenged the West without putting in jeopardy the pro-Western anti-Islamist policies and the access to development funds. Meles Zenawi was also an important broker in the relationship with the emerging economies, especially China. These elements will all have to be closely observed to see how Ethiopia's position in Africa will evolve.

- **The paralysis scenario** – If the agreement reached within the party for a smooth transition in favour of Hailemariam does not end EPRDF's internal power struggles, in the short and medium term the country may become less effective in pursuing its regional policy. In this case, containing the tense relations between Ethiopia and Eritrea could become more difficult, as the new leadership will feel its survival is at stake, it may call for an external threat from Eritrea to survive its internal struggle. A weaker Ethiopia could open up options and change the game in Somalia. There would be less impact on Ethiopia's economic and political relations with Djibouti and Kenya.
- **The extended paralysis scenario** - If the ruling party in Ethiopia cannot manage the transition there is potential for a major powers

struggle involving new or emerging political forces or even the possible implosion of the EPRDF. This could profoundly effect the political relations in the region since neighbouring states would take sides in the domestic struggle and try to affect the outcome. One possibility would be a resurgence of a nationalistic approach at the level of the Ethiopian government that could re-open the Eritrea question. This could have cascading effects internally as well externally, impacting on the aspirations of other ethnic groups in Ethiopia and its relations in the wider region. An other possibility would be a deterioration of the internal alliances within the EPDRF – with the concomitant growth of religious (Muslim) grievances and ethnic tensions.

- On the regional and continental level, Kenya and or Uganda might try to take over Ethiopia's position as policeman in the region and seek to become the prime interlocutor for the international community. Maintaining current levels of investments and good relations with emerging powers could become difficult. Violent conflict would result in reduced aid and diminish the capacity of the authorities to deal with the problems they face.

#### Debate on the role of the international community

Different options for the future role of the international community were put forward and discussed. A diversion of opinions arose on the way forward with regard to the opening up of political space in Ethiopia and the way international donors should act.

#### The political process

- The international community should observe the political developments closely but refrain from taking immediate action and let the Ethiopian decision-making process take its course. The opening up of the political space in Ethiopia cannot be established through force and international agenda's but issues like the ethnic federalism should be discussed.
- Opening up political space in Ethiopia should be supported by the international community. Otherwise there are risks for internal and regional stability in the mid- long run. The international community is making a huge mistake by confusing short-term stability with mid/long term sustainability. And if Ethiopia doesn't open up, this will affect the entire region's stability.

#### International aid donors

- The international aid donors should not withdraw funds now because this would be counterproductive and have consequences for the people of Ethiopia who need that support.
- The international community should reconsider aid to Ethiopia that is not yet attributed. Continuing aid indirectly supports the continued lack of political opening in the country, because the regime clearly relies on this money for its political survival. International donors should link current and future aid to the opening up of the political space to avoid that socio-economical and ethno-political grievances end up

turning into a radicalization of  
extremist ethnic and political  
visions.