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## Ethiopia After Meles: Stability for How Long?

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When Meles Zenawi, the national and ruling party leader for 21 years, died in August 2012, most observers predicted that Ethiopia would be thrown into an uncertain transition and put in great danger by destructive internal power struggles and external pressure. As the months went by, none of these things happened. Instead, the world witnessed a peaceful succession, and a calm status quo has been maintained under the new prime minister, Hailemariam Desalegn.

Numerous analyses of political developments in post-Meles Ethiopia have expressed amazement at this tranquility, particularly in the context of past state collapse and civil wars in neighboring states in the Horn of Africa region. Two questions present themselves. First, what are the reasons for the apparently smooth changeover? And second, will the stability prove long lasting—or just an intermezzo before turmoil erupts?

Successful institutionalization of the ruling party organization and strong economic growth are crucial factors to note in explaining why Meles’s death did not produce chaos. The continuation of authoritarian and centralized developmental state policies, which are hampering the realization of political and civil rights and the devolution of power under an ethnic-based federal system—coupled with the potential for a slowdown in economic growth—indicates that stability may not last long.

### SUCCESSION PLAN

When Meles died, a major concern was that power struggles within the Ethiopian People’s

Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) for the open leadership position would create obstacles to a peaceful succession. Both Meles’s personal leadership style and the multiethnic composition of the ruling party contributed to this fear. The EPRDF came to power in 1991 after toppling the Marxist military dictatorship of Mengistu Haile Mariam (1974–91). The party is a coalition of four ethnic-based movements, created and led by one of them, the Tigray People’s Liberation Front (TPLF). Despite the TPLF’s domination, the member parties have constantly feuded over who should be promoted to various positions, partly based on ethnic rivalries.

While the TPLF’s original founders played a dominant role in the EPRDF throughout the 1990s, Meles gradually managed to maneuver among the different factions to strengthen his personal power base. He became leader of the TPLF in 1989, was the interim president of Ethiopia from 1991 to 1995, and served 12 years as prime minister until his death (from natural causes) in 2012.

One of his most important maneuvers took place after an internal party schism emerged in 2001. Disagreements about ideology and how to deal with the Eritrean regime led to the expulsion of major political veterans in the EPRDF, ultimately enhancing Meles’s position as undisputed leader. Frequent reshuffles in the cabinet and in the party organization thereafter made him seem a master of factional manipulation, prompting worries about too much power being concentrated in his hands.

Long before his death, speculation regarding the absence of potential successors increased apprehensions about a potential breakdown if Meles decided to resign. After the 2010 elections, which reinforced the EPRDF’s dominance, the party took measures to promote a new breed of leaders. A number of party veterans retired, while a new generation of younger leaders represent-

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ing a balance among the various ethnic blocs was promoted. This collective leadership transition appeased some of the criticisms and concerns over succession.

Although no successor was named then, the appointment of Hailemariam, a Protestant from the traditionally marginalized south, as deputy prime minister gave hints about Ethiopia's political direction after Meles. There are reasons to believe that when the news of Meles's death was released on August 20, 2012, important individuals within the party had known for some time about his terminal medical condition. The party appeared to have planned the succession well, introducing a new national leadership well balanced in terms of ethnic representation. While the new prime minister represented the Southern Ethiopian People's Democratic Movement, the three deputy prime ministers represented each of the remaining parties in the coalition: the Amhara National Democratic Movement, the TPLF, and the Oromo People's Democratic Organization.

Party leaders did not use the transition as an opportunity to change direction. Instead, their main priority after Meles's death was to maintain the status quo. So far they appear to have succeeded. This shows that, despite rumors of intra-EPRDF struggles, the party has managed to consolidate its position, independent of personal leadership. Hailemariam, the new prime minister, is less rhetorically gifted than Meles, and lacks his predecessor's experience as a rebel leader during the country's civil war. But his hard work and technocratic approach, his undisputed loyalty to the EPRDF's program and ideology, and the fact that he represents two historically marginalized groups—evangelical Christians and the southern peripheral peoples—make him a good compromise candidate who does not threaten any of the factions within the party.

Indeed, a common complaint during Hailemariam's first year as prime minister was that he mentioned Meles's legacy in nearly every public speech. It is said that he has not managed to come up with his own policies and visions, giving the impression of a rather spiritless national leader.

## DELIVERING DEVELOPMENT

Hailemariam has faithfully carried on with the policies defined by his predecessor, and his posi-

tion is still sustained by the authority that Meles's rule embodied. But maybe most important of all, the economic growth that started under Meles has so far been maintained. This provides the crucial foundation for the support and legitimacy of the EPRDF's dominant party rule. Ethiopia has seen unprecedented growth for the past few years—the economy expanded by 8.5 percent in 2012. Many citizens have escaped poverty as a result. From a financial point of view, Ethiopia is a success story.

From a human rights perspective, the situation is different. In controversial national elections in 2005, the opposition took a third of the parliament's seats, and a government crackdown on postelection protesters led to the deaths of more than 200 people. Since then, the space for political life and discussion has been severely constricted. Following the enactment of a range of laws regulating civil society, independent media, and opposition parties, as well as a new and excessive antiterrorism law, voices outside the ruling party's immediate control can hardly be heard.

As Northwestern University's Richard Joseph suggested in the November 2011 issue of *Current History*, what really counts from the regime's perspective is not its democratic character but its capacity to project force, domestically and externally, and the

country's socioeconomic indicators. The EPRDF maintains that it provides the Ethiopian people with what they need—a developmental state and revolutionary democracy, the antithesis to neoliberalism.

The ideological thinking behind the EPRDF's developmental state can be traced to the party's Marxist-Leninist tradition and to Meles's ideas and pronouncements in office. Although he liberalized and privatized parts of the Ethiopian economy in the early 1990s, the late prime minister was a staunch critic of the neoliberal model and structural adjustment policies implemented elsewhere in the continent. In particular, Meles argued that the neoliberal paradigm failed to appreciate the problem of market failures in Africa—and hence the state's necessary role in steering economic development. EPRDF party documents and Meles himself referred to the postwar experiences of South Korea and Taiwan in stressing the need for state intervention to promote development.

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The Ethiopian Growth and Transformation Plan, covering the period from 2010 to 2015, includes ambitious development goals. In order to make Ethiopia a mid-level-income country by 2020–25, the industrial sector has to take the lead from agriculture in its contribution to the national economy. Among five industries prioritized by the plan, the state will take the lead in two capital-intensive sectors (metals and sugar) through the establishment of monopolistic government corporations.

In an effort to transform the subsistence agriculture economy, the plan clearly stipulates the government's intention to transfer three million hectares of land in lowland parts of the country to private investors. Moreover, in the urban areas the government is using small and micro enterprises to provide jobs for hundreds of thousands of unemployed youth.

### BLURRED BOUNDARIES

These developmental state policies go hand in hand with the EPRDF's own brand of popular rule, "revolutionary democracy." In this model, what is most important is not the representation but the "participation" of the people. Through mobilization of the masses by the ruling party's vanguard, a strong revolutionary leadership will lead the people to obedient participation. Around one third of the residents of an average-sized *kebele*, the lowest administrative unit, are today members of the local council controlled by the EPRDF, and are thus participating in local affairs but safely within the ruling party's control.

In addition, the party uses development teams, or what it calls "One to Five Networks," to mobilize peasants for community development projects like soil and water conservation, and also as a communication channel for party affairs, particularly during elections and for controlling dissent. In this scheme, each development team controls no more than five households. In addition to peasants, civil servants, students, and even children at elementary schools are now being organized on this basis, and are expected to meet every Wednesday and Friday.

This mobilization process has predictably blurred boundaries between the party and the state. Membership in the EPRDF facilitates gov-

ernment employment for young graduates or the promotion of civil servants to better positions. This has proved a highly efficient method, both for sustaining and enlarging the ruling party's popular base and for eroding the opposition. In the last national election, in 2010, the party won all but one seat in the parliament. The number of EPRDF members has grown from around half a million to over six million since the contested 2005 elections.

Meanwhile, the opposition parties that competed in the 2005 polls have all been split and marginalized, both by their own factionalism and by the government's deliberate shrinking of political space. The Blue Party, a recently established opposition party, has attempted to mobilize supporters. It managed to organize a rally and protests in Addis Ababa in 2013. But it is still unclear to many what this party stands for and whether it represents a genuine alternative to the EPRDF. There is even speculation that the EPRDF may be behind the party—as part of its search for a "constructive, progressive opposition."

The lack of separation between party and government affairs also means that Ethiopian bureaucrats at all levels are highly politicized, acting as agents of the ruling party. In the classical developmental states of East Asia, an independent bureaucracy—enabling technocrats to make public policies insulated from vested interests—was seen as crucial for creating sustainable economic growth. But the lack of an autonomous civil service in Ethiopia is not a concern for the EPRDF.

When I confronted an official in the national EPRDF leadership, about this in an interview in November 2012, he replied that the politicization of the bureaucracy was "by design, and not by default." He argued that the EPRDF wants party officials to play leading roles in all areas of society, including the bureaucracy. In the civil service, he said, "we [the EPRDF] go after the hard workers, struggle to make them our members, to recruit those who are willing to change." The bureaucracy, he contended, should not be isolated; it should be rooted in the masses and the party: "We cannot envisage a developmental state currently without the EPRDF, [since] there are no other parties with the comprehensive understanding like we have."

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The politicization of the bureaucracy, in combination with a strongly hierarchical political tradition and a culture of centralism in the EPRDF, may nevertheless prove detrimental to the sustainability of the Ethiopian developmental state. This combination prevents the ruling party from receiving genuine feedback from the people themselves. It therefore affords little room for correcting failing policies, curbing corruption, or promoting transparency.

In daily practice, it is likely that party concerns and loyalty come first, and concern for creating inclusive development comes second. As the journalist René Lefort has rightly pointed out, the most promising path for a rent seeker in Ethiopia is to join the party and climb the ladder within it—while the private sector, which is supposed to be the engine of growth in a developmental state, remains underdeveloped and undernourished.

## INTERNAL CONTRADICTIONS

When the EPRDF came to power in 1991, the Ethiopian government was restructured from a unitary state into a multiethnic federation through the subdivision of the national territory into nine ethnic-based regional states, the representation of these states in the national government, and the establishment of numerous ethnically defined local administration units. The transitional charter adopted in 1991 and the federal constitution that came into force in 1995 recognized the rights of self-administration, and even secession, among Ethiopia's ethnic groups.

The devolution of power to subnational units proved successful in avoiding the large-scale conflicts of the past between the central state and ethnic-based liberation movements. But as conflicts were diffused from the national to the local level, this led to a sharpening of ethnic divides and an ethnicization of local conflicts.

After major ethnic groups received legislative, executive, and judicial powers in the regional states, entirely new actors became involved in the government of their own communities, even though they all were part of the EPRDF or EPRDF-affiliated parties. This seemed an efficient way for the new power elite to get a foothold in every ethnic community in the country, but it led also to unwanted mobilization of ethnic identities among new groups in the contest for resources and power, described as “narrow nationalism” and “ethnic chauvinism” by the party leadership.

Particularly since the contested 2005 elections, when the EPRDF reoriented itself toward building a “developmental state,” ethnic self-rule has been given less emphasis, and the constitutional devolution of power has in many cases been overlooked in making way for centrally planned developmental policies, plans, and projects. The construction of large-scale hydropower dams and irrigated sugar plantations in the southern region's Lower Omo Valley without the consent of the local pastoral people, and the eviction of farmers from land given to international investors in the Gambella region, exemplify the conflicting aims of national development projects and evolution of the federal system.

Top-down development edicts are undermining the autonomy of the regional states. Rather than facilitating national integration, centralized policy making is weakening the mechanisms for accommodating ethnic and political pluralism, creating new sources of conflict in multiethnic Ethiopia.

## RISKS AHEAD

Even though Ethiopia has received almost unanimous international approval for its ability to create economic growth during the past decade, its numbers are contested and the character of the growth is disputed. Such criticisms call into question the EPRDF's claim of providing the Ethiopian people with what they need—inclusive and sustainable

From the archives  
of *Current History*...



“The internationalization of domestic issues and the permeability of sovereign (especially small and weak) states created opportunities for big power involvement in Africa on a scale and of a scope unknown even during the cold war. The Angola crisis illustrated also the expansionist mood of the Soviet Union and the timidity of the United States. It would be the height of irony if independence and non-alignment signaled more, rather than less, big power intrusion.”

W. A. E. Skurnik

“Africa and the Superpowers”

November 1976

development—and may ultimately challenge the whole rationale for maintaining a centralized revolutionary democracy and keeping the political and civil rights of liberal democracy at bay.

There are many questions regarding the scope and nature of Ethiopia's economic growth. The International Monetary Fund has argued, for instance, that the government's annual growth rates of 10 to 11 percent are overstated, and were likely closer to 7 to 8 percent from 2004 to 2010. The World Bank has expressed concern that growth has been dependent on public investment, while ruling party-affiliated businesses dominate the weak private sector. Soaring double-digit inflation, particularly on food items, and a currency devaluation that has made the birr worth much less in relation to the dollar than some years ago, have severely affected the ordinary population.

All of this has reduced the immediate benefits of growth for the majority of Ethiopians. The country still has the smallest urban sector in Africa: 17 percent of the economy, in contrast to a 34 percent average across the continent. This, together with the high inflation rates, casts doubt on the EPRDF's claim of successfully creating an urban middle class.

Meanwhile, as the Ethiopia scholar John Markakis has pointed out, the country's growth in educational facilities has not resulted in increased quality. Less than half of the secondary-level teachers are certified, high school dropout rates are still high, and many rural areas have yet to see school expansions.

While agriculture continues to provide the major items for export and also food for local

consumption, millions of Ethiopians (conservatively estimated by the Ethiopian government at 2.7 million for 2014) still depend on food aid. The country's economy remains small and vulnerable to drought. Scope for improving the agricultural sector is also limited because of land scarcity, degradation, low soil fertility, and tenure insecurity. The industrial and service sectors suffer from weak financial institutions, lack of skilled and semi-skilled human resources, poor information technology, cumbersome regulatory regimes, and scarcity of foreign exchange.

Illicit trafficking of hard currency from the country is also a growing challenge: A report by the UN Development Program shows that in 2009, these outflows of illicit money totaled \$3.26 billion, which was double the amount in each of the two previous years. Corruption is particularly endemic in land acquisition, tax and customs payments, and government procurement. Official campaigns against corruption are impeded by popular perceptions that such campaigns are used for political purposes.

These developmental challenges, in combination with the blurred division between party and state interests and the contradiction between the constitutional devolution of power and the actual centralization of development policies, raise questions about the longevity of Ethiopia's stability. They demonstrate that, although the institutionalization of the ruling party organization after Meles's death ensured the immediate survival of the Ethiopian regime, we should not confuse short-term stability and growth with long-term sustainability. ■