

Ethiopia-the quiet before the storm. By Yilma Bekele

It has been forty-eight days since we saw or heard from Meles Zenawi. Some are convinced the tyrant is dead while the regime insists he is recovering, on vacation or just hanging out, depending on Ato Bereket's mood of the day. Whatever the reason his absence has stirred different responses from his subjects.

The whole idea of a leader of a country disappearing into thin air is a purely Ethiopian phenomenon. The head of state just don't leave his post without notice. In most countries he can't even catch cold without informing the press. The position is too important to be left vacant even for a few hours. Who is supposed to give guidance and leadership if a crisis happens. A crisis normally does not occur with adequate notice that is why it is called an emergency. For someone to give orders he/she better have the necessary authority invested in them.

All countries anticipate such scenario and have the solution built into the system to avoid unnecessary power grab contention between the different branches of government. The current uncertainty regarding the order of succession in Ethiopia shows the issue was not addressed during the design of the current Constitution. It is obvious this is not a matter of simple oversight by the architects of the system. They are definitely not that stupid. It is left unanswered due to the nature of the system that was put in place. Ato Meles and partners deliberately left the issue open because resolving such question would have made their life miserable.

Ato Meles used the issue of succession as a brilliant reward to tangle to who ever he favored at that particular moment. At one time the position belonged to the Amharas or was rumored to favor the Oromos then offered to any of the minority group currently in vogue. Committing such post on paper would have been a death sentence to the occupier of that position. All others close to the throne would have given up any hope of upward mobility and intensified either building up their own faction or doubled on the looting. Ato Meles would have lost a huge leverage to keep all sycophants in line.

It looks like Ato Meles was taken ill without adequate notice. He never thought the end was close. He was only in his late fifties and the brain tumor situation was a cause for concern but not an emergency. I believe his humiliation in Washington DC pushed him over the edge. His whole system was jarred causing a cascading effect that he was unable to recover from. He has always been shielded from confrontational situation due to the fact that he made sure he dealt with adversaries from overwhelming power arrayed behind him. He did not even take a walk in his garden without a phalanx of security around him. He did not even trust his own shadow. He was a very fearful person or a coward to be precise and he used fear and terror as a tool. He understood the power of fear from personal experience.

Forty-eight days into his disappearing act and what are the Ethiopians doing? As docile as ever, the subjects are very quiet. The Ethiopian capacity to self-police is legendary. In fact they are so proud of it they chastise all those that try to rock the boat. The regime without its head understands this state of mind. How in the world can you respect someone that has no self-respect so to speak of?

The regime has been trotting out officials, those close to officials and self-declared spokes persons and puppet talking heads to fill the air with trash talk. All you got to give an Ethiopian is a few

intelligent sounding lines and they are happy to fill the rest. Here in the Diaspora every coffee house is full of talking heads getting drunk listening to their own voice. Ask them to be part of the solution silence is their response.

Ato Meles's contempt to his subjects is legendary. His lieutenants currently working on his behalf seems to have inherited this useful trait. They have no qualms even in not announcing the whereabouts of the dictator. The reason for his absence is not even felt to be important enough to be disclosed. Ato Bereket is heard to speculate different reasons depending what day of the week it is. He is resting due to job fatigue, he is recovering from illness, he is on vacation or it is none of any body's business has been the explanation given to his docile subjects.

Who is in charge is a good question. According to Aboy Sebhat, a non elected person but rumored to be mentor and close fatherly figure of the tyrant there is no need to have a leader present and accounted for. The system in place is adequate enough to function like a well-oiled machine. I love this explanation. It is a break through in human politics and system of governance. The same people that came up with Revolutionary Democracy have now presented us with a system that requires no leader or head of state. Brilliant is all that comes to mind. It has been working like a charm for forty-eight days now and at the moment there is no reason to think why it should not go on for a little longer.

In the absence of the head of state the Parliament has managed to pass a budget, the security has dealt with the question of freedom by the Moslem community in its usual harsh manner, the international agencies have continued to grant loans and aid in the usual manner and the citizen has accepted the status quo.

So far so good but is there any danger of this life without a head of state coming to a point where Aboy Sehat's theory might not be able to address a situation? For our sake let us hope not but I feel it is always good to prepare for all eventualities. We are in this situation due to the fact that Ato Meles forgot he was human and being taken ill or dying is part of our programming. He put all his eggs in one basket. Of course we should have known better since we knew Ato Meles never has the interest of our country in mind and to be fair never pretended to care for anything else other than himself. As I write this I am sure where ever he is either sitting for a game of chess with Gadaffi or Kim Jung or laying on beach in beautiful Puerto Rico with a glass of Pena Colada, he must be grinning from ear to ear satisfied with what he left behind.

So what could go wrong? A national emergency is one. Let us say for the sake of argument President Isaiyas decides to take over Zele Ambesa, who is going to give the order to the military to march north? You can't have a committee declare war. A spokes man is not really the person to come on television and mobilize the population. The Ethiopian people will laugh if Ato Bereket or Shimeles Kemal show up TV and declare war. They just don't have that look of a belligerent dictator. Would the Generals take order from Council of Ministers? Would the population rally around nameless individuals?

How about another kind of emergency? Let us say the Moslem and Christian community coordinates their quest for freedom and march in all the big cities? Who is going to authorize the riot police to confront the freedom seekers? The last time this happened Ato Meles as the head of state declared state of emergency and sent his Agazi force and gave the order to shoot. Who is

authorized to declare state of emergency and would the soldier have to obey such order? Can a committee give the order to shoot?

In both emergency scenarios the military seems to play a central role to bring stability and order, what is to prevent the Generals from taking matters into their hands and moving into the palace? Why serve a few un-elected pompous usurpers? Why share the power pie when you can keep the whole thing to yourself? In fact they might even reap some credit by throwing all the TPLF politburo members into Kaliti. That is what is called killing two birds with one stone.

How about if this situation of no head of state goes for a few more months, would those who are governing at the moment get used to this situation and try to make it permanent? We have no idea if Ato Meles is dead or alive, how about if he is alive? Would the committee decide to kill him since his return would destabilize the comfortable situation they have created? Is Ato Meles willing to go into the sunset quietly or does he have a backup plan of his own?

All these questions are currently unanswered and I am sure a few more are bound to rear their ugly head. The question to ask at the moment is are we so docile that the ninety four percent are going to sit on the side while the six percent are trying to figure out how best to screw us for another twenty years?

The current situation is not sustainable. What is going to happen is not really clear to all concerned. The TPLF or the new TPLF that has been rebuilt by Ato Meles since he expelled his buddies is not something that is resting on solid ground. It is an amalgamation of sycophants and weak individuals that were willing to serve the dictator as long as there was enough to loot. His absence changes the equation. We have to admit he was good at reading the international situation and securing all kinds of handouts, loans and grants. Foreign donors are going to sit on the sidelines and wait till the dust settles. The greedy Diaspora that has been financing the regime is not able to continue at the old pace due to the economic situation in the west.

Already inflation is spiraling and dollar reserve is getting very low. The TPLF new millionaires and their supporters are entering a panic stage which means that they will sell all assets, hoard all cash and trip each other while trying to exit. The slowing of the economy will bring what is known as social unrest. The committee of heads of state is not familiar on how to deal with such situation. The only blue print left by Ato Meles is use of force at any and all situations. Compromise, give and take, negotiation is not part of the vocabulary for the last twenty years. One man can do that. He is the face of the regime and an old culture like ours is familiar with 'strong man' rule. But a committee is different. No one listens to a committee. A committee does not have one voice. Looking at the current members of that committee no one stands out that exudes leadership. Starting with Aboy Sebait, Abay Woldu, Berket Semeon, Arkebe, Mesfin Seyoum, Berhane or Queen Azeb do not have the making of a leader. Background workers yes but definitely not leadership material.

As for the ninety-four percent this is the best time to present our demands so the committee can entertain some of our questions. The need for a new Constitution, the formation of a caretaker government, the freezing of all EFFORT assets, the prohibition of moving money out of the country, the release of all prisoners that are in jail using the so called terrorism charge, the immediate abolition of the Communication department, lifting the prohibition of the free press should be in the forefront of our demands. If we do not ask how would they know? If we do not protect our interest who would?

