



## **Meles Zenawi: A Relection**

### **Remarks on the occasion of a conference at The Meles Foundation The African Union**

6 April 2013

To help locate Meles Zenawi's words and deeds, I will briskly address two companion ideals that he deemed of central importance to Ethiopia and the rest of Africa: embracing diversity; and his ardent advocacy of a democratic developmental state. Meles's perspective on these matters was guided by what might be called the ideal of the statesman. The ideal of the statesman is aptly captured by John Rawls, the leading political philosopher of our time, who writes: "The ideal of the statesman is suggested by the saying: the politician looks to the next election, the statesman to the next generation. It is the task of the statesman to discern [the permanent conditions and the real interests of a well-ordered society] in practice. The statesman sees deeper and further than most others and grasps what needs to be done. The statesman must get it right, or nearly so, and then hold fast from this vantage. Statesmen may have their own interests when they hold office, yet they must be selfless in their judgments and assessments of their society's fundamental interests and must not be swayed." (The Law of Peoples, p.92) Thus, what may strike us as vices - - say, high mindedness and high handedness - in a politician may well be among the defining virtues of the statesman.

In order to appreciate Meles's contribution to our effort to come to terms with our cultural diversity, we can roughly distinguish three aspects of diversity and its public significance: one having to do with the past; another concerning the present or existing value; and a third pertaining to the future. First, affirming diversity sometimes matters in our attempt to overcome past injustices, particularly injustices that were sources of bitter nationalist and class conflict, posing a threat to the very survival of a political community. Meles Zenawi and the organization to which he belonged and led fought singularly and single mindedly against an entrenched system of coercive assimilation, forcible exclusion and exploitation of millions of Ethiopians who belonged to faiths and cultural communities different from the privileged public culture. Championing the equality and freedom of Ethiopia's diverse faiths and cultures marks a revolution in the country's modern history. As Christopher Clapham rightly remarks: "The overthrow of the military in 1991 amounted to more than the collapse of a particular regime. It effectively marked the failure of a project, dating back to Menelik's accession in 1889, of creating a modern and centralized state around a Showan core." (P.Woodward and M.Forsyth, Conflict and



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Peace in the Horn of Africa, p.37.) Beyond rectifying grave past injustices, sealing the fate of the project was a matter of great practical urgency. Victorious popular movements that mobilized and organized against military tyranny with a firm sense of national identity were not prepared to entrust their fate to a political arrangement that did not fully recognize the equality and freedom of their respective communities. In the absence of an entitlement to enter and to exit the political community freely, many were prepared to go their own way. To honor the entitlement, in turn, necessitated the provision of self-rule for each cultural community and fair representation in the governance of the shared political community. Recognizing the values, beliefs and histories of those engaged in the making of the new Ethiopia suggests that federative arrangements were inescapable for the survival and viability of an Ethiopian political community. To cite Rawls again: "It is the task of the statesman to struggle against the potential lack of affinity among different peoples and try to heal its causes insofar as they derive from past domestic institutional injustice, and from the hostility among social classes inherited through their common history and antagonisms." (p.112) My claim is that both in the victorious struggle mounted against military tyranny and in the making of Ethiopia's bold new constitution, Meles Zenawi has admirably discharged this task of statesmanship.

Although upholding diversity constitutionally may do away with structural injustices stemming from coercive suppression and exploitation of cultural communities, injustice owing to an ethos of cultural inequality may persist. For instance, racism notoriously outlives the abolition of legal and institutional systems of racial discrimination. In order to overcome the ethos of cultural inequality and to cultivate close affinity among Ethiopia's diverse cultural communities, the constitution provides the basis for cooperation in an inclusive community, cooperation that yields mutual benefits to all, and gives precedence to the interests of those historically most disadvantaged. In consequence, we owe to Meles Zenawi a sense of solidarity among the peoples of Ethiopia, which is supplanting the attitudes of resentment and hostility that were pervasive features of our dark past.

Diversity, secondly, matters on account of what the late Jerry Cohen characterized as a defense of existing value. (G.A.Cohen, *Finding One self in the Other*, pp143-174.) If people genuinely value their particular cultures and their distinctive national or cultural identities, it is not enough to settle for the realist idea that it would be difficult to undo the collective self-conception of a cultural community once that is an existing and entrenched fact. Rather, the point is that the value of what exists deserves to be respected and preserved even if more overall value could be attained through its control or sacrifice. Jerry Cohen also notes that respect toward already existing value is hospitable to diversity "because much variety reflects accident." This case for diversity does not



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imply that cultures and cultural identities are, or should be, somehow fixed. Cultures and cultural identities as well as their constitutive values may well change; indeed, it may even be, as some have argued, that change is necessary for cultural survival. I believe it was evident that Meles Zenawi took palpable pride in an inclusive Ethiopian political community, where Ethiopia's diverse cultural communities and identities enjoyed public presence and value. It is a testament to his evident delight in Ethiopia's diversity that upon his untimely death virtually every cultural community claimed him as one of its own.

Finally, the public recognition of diversity and its empowerment may be essential to realize public values and practices such as democracy, material betterment and equality in unfavorable or non-ideal circumstances, which John Rawls characterizes as "conditions of societies whose historical, social and economic circumstances make their achieving a well-ordered regime, whether liberal or decent, difficult or impossible." (p.5) It is important to see if a public culture and institutions upholding diversity help to mitigate unfavorable conditions - - say, poverty, limited reach of education, deep cultural cleavages, a history of sharp class divisions, the absence of an abiding culture of peace and tolerance, an immature tradition of open and robust public discussion and deliberation, a dearth of political organizations, organized interest groups, and vibrant free associations for the effective pursuit of the ideals of democracy and social justice.

Just how does diversity and its institutional expression in federalism serve wider aspirations for democracy and social justice? In a setting where competitive politics, an independent judiciary, a zealous press are still in their infancy, the devolution of power to regions with robust rights of self-rule serves as a significant check on the abuse of state power. These same unfavorable circumstances together with dire poverty inhibit the effective practice of representative government. Still, the expressive, associational and deliberative rights of a democracy can be effectively exercised in the public spaces opened by regional self-rule. Ordinary citizens using their own languages and electing their own authorities can participate in the public life of their own community. They can make choices and decisions on the provision of important public services: the courts, schools, health care and development schemes. With a commitment to share a political community and an economy, they can pool their resources in a spirit of solidarity to fight poverty in ways that accord priority to the least advantaged communities and citizens. With the success of the collective fight against poverty and for equality, the sense of a shared fate and the spirit of solidarity would be strengthened over time.

Marked advances in material betterment would encourage other forms of diversity to flourish. With the growth of urban populations, greater access to quality education, a vigorous free press



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and public fora, moral pluralism as well as diversity in conceptions of the common good would emerge. The result would be values and associations that cross the bounds of cultural diversity. Thus as cultural diversity and its institutional arrangements succeed in helping us to overcome unfavorable conditions for a free public life, cultural diversity may itself be the agent for the diminishment of its own importance. Put differently, cultural diversity may prove to be a self-effacing public ideal. The principled pursuit of self-effacing public ideals itself at- tests to visionary statesmanship.

Let me now turn briefly to another companion self-effacing public ideal championed by Meles Zenawi and, once again, compelled by highly unfavorable conditions for free institutions and social justice: the democratic developmental state. Again John Rawls says: “[societies burdened by unfavorable conditions]

. . . lack the political and cultural traditions, the human capital and know-how, and, often the material and technological resources needed to be well-ordered.” (p106) The gravity of these and similar burdens in Ethiopia carried great weight in Meles Zenawi’s thought and action. He was convinced that enduring peace or the very possibility of a viable political community was unthinkable without swift development and a clean break with hunger and chronic poverty. In the absence of development, democracy cannot be more than a selection of ruling elites through competitive elections, where national resources would be regularly deployed for patronage by the rivals. And the liberties possibly protected under such a democracy cannot be meaningfully exercised by the many languishing in poverty and living in the shadow of hunger.

Meles resolutely rejected the prevalent prescription that the fragile, predatory African state should beat a retreat from the economy in favor of the ascendance of the market. He argued that in a poor agricultural economy such as ours the market is a woefully inadequate instrument for the creation of a dynamic capitalist economy. In an economy with few areas of clear comparative advantage, economic agents would be drawn to activities that secure returns without adding value. The state would have to play an active role to steer economic agents toward activities that enhance productivity and value. The state would also be a major player in sectors such as banking, telecommunication and energy, which are susceptible to monopolistic or speculative practices. In addition, the state must be the major agent of public goods and services such as modern roads, education, health care, telecommunication, energy in ways that reliably extend their reach to a large rural population. Moreover, major engines of growth and value creation - - say, technological innovation - - are not easy to discover or to disseminate if left to the vicissitudes of the market. Above all, a strong, active state is essential to muster the political will, consensus and continuity



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indispensable for a long-term, trans- formative developmental strategy. With this, there would be the possibility of an internalized ethic of growth and trans- formation shared by public officials and the bulk of the population to turn the aspiration of development into an ongoing national undertaking. The state together with an economically and politically mobilized and organized peasantry with access to education, information and technology would transform the agrarian sector. A sizeable rise in agricultural output can, over time, support industrialization. Such growth would defeat dire poverty and raise the lives of the bulk of the population to meaningful opportunities for worthwhile lives and genuine choices for the effective exercise of rights and freedoms.