

After Meles: The Fate of South Sudan and Sudan Future Relations

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As the people of Ethiopia, the continent and the world at large will pay the last tribute and farewell to the Prime Minister Meles next Sunday on 2nd September 2012 in Addis, the implications of his death will start to unfold. There is no doubt that the death of Prime Minister Meles will have serious consequences for the future relations between South Sudan and Sudan. Meles was one of the few African leaders who had a deep understanding of the bumpy and turmoil relations between South Sudan and Sudan and that ended up in bitter divorce. The new breed of African leaders who championed the liberation struggle of their people came to appreciate the struggle of the people of the South for justice, dignity and freedom.

In particular Meles and President Afawarki of Eritrea who spent sometimes in Sudan during their liberation struggle witnessed the status of the people of the South in the united Sudan. Both of them described that the status of Ethiopian and Eritrean refugees in the Sudan was even better than that of Southerners in their own country. In 1991 after the fall of Mengistu who was the closest ally to the SPLM, the new leadership of Ethiopia adopted a strategic approach to build good relation with the SPLM rather than confronting it.

Although people may differ in assessing the legacy of Meles, the people of the South in particular would always remember him as leader who distinctively contributed in the birth of their new nation. Also the people of the South would remember him as a leader who stood well with them during the difficult times of their struggle. Although the South did not prominently appear when the body of the Prime Minister Meles arrived to Addis, the government in Juba and for the first time in its short history declared three days national mourning and lowered its flag in recognition of the role Meles played in the birth of their nation.

In fact one would say that Meles reminded most people of the South of their late Leader Dr John as they both shared the rare trait of visionary leadership in Africa. In some of his meetings with President Salva that I was privileged to attend, I was amazed by his intelligence, knowledge, analytical ability, meticulous focus and far sightedness. In one of these meetings, I was impressed by his articulation of how to combat poverty in Ethiopia by focusing on rural infrastructure as basis of economic growth and low-cost housing scheme as means of creating employment and availing the poor with critical economic assets for breaking the cycle of poverty.

I had few chances of meeting him individually and I was shocked by the level of his knowledge about the details of the CPA, particularly the problem of Abyei. He was clear that the issue of Abyei may not need a referendum as that would be a waste of resources for an outcome that is very clear as the Ngok Dinka will logically vote to join the South. He was also having a specific housing scheme for Abyei to avail low-cost and affordable housing for the people of Abyei area as a way of compensating them for the repetitive loss of their assets. I had a chance also of meeting him during the 5th International Conference on Federalism that he hosted in Addis in December 2010 under the theme of "Equality and Unity in Diversity for Development". As I participated with a paper on the experience of Sudan on decentralization and having the honour of reading out the resolutions of the conference, I was struck by his articulation of the Ethiopian unique ethnic federal democratic system as the basis for unity, peace building, good governance, and equitable and sustainable development.

In Khartoum, the death of Prime Minister Meles was mourned differently. Although no national mourning was announced, all the public media and press gave in-depth coverage of his legacy and his role in developing special relations between Ethiopia and Sudan. The relations between Khartoum and Addis started deteriorating after the assassination attempt in Addis on President Mubarak, the former Egyptian President. By the time President Bashir became isolated regionally and international over atrocities committed in Darfur, Prime Minister Meles kept special and personal relations with President Bashir. In fact Meles was the only friend left for President Bashir in the region and continent. Meles was the only leader in Africa who attempted to see some positive aspects of the tainted image of Sudan. Certainly, the regime in Khartoum is mourning for losing the only leader who used to listen to them and moderated their extreme positions to the continent and the world. With the death of Meles, the regime in Khartoum will be in short supply of African leaders who would play the role played by Meles.

Probably one would say that Meles took a high political risk in associating himself with President Bashir who is seen as a real liability to his own people, the region and continent. In recent years, Meles started to recognize that his investment in good relations with Bashir was not yielding fruits, particularly after his invasion of Abyei and his act of forcing the people of Southern Kordofan and Blue Nile states to go back to war. Also the recent Islamic voices in Ethiopia that call for establishment of Islamic state in Ethiopia had angered the people of Ethiopia. Sudan and other Islamic countries are alleged to have hidden hands in orchestrating and supporting such agenda of political Islam in Ethiopia and even across the continent. For sure Prime Minister Meles during his last days might have regretted the way President Bashir let him down in his pursuit

of sustaining peace in Sudan as well as building good relations between South and Sudan.

There is no doubt that Meles was the only leader in the continent who had good relations with South and Sudan even during the difficult times when the two countries were at the brink of large scale war. Definitely South and Sudan will remain key strategic neighbours to Ethiopia. The way the new leadership of Ethiopia will continue to play the special role played by Meles in keeping good relations with both South and Sudan will depend on the new strategic interests of Ethiopia after Meles. The fact that the Deputy Minister was not confirmed immediately as the new Prime Minister shows that there are still serious political discussions within the ruling party. The confirmation of the current Deputy Prime Minister will be a litmus test to the commitment of the ruling party, the Ethiopian People's Democratic Revolutionary Front (EPDRF), to its policy of the unity in diversity under the ethnic federal system. Despite the ethnic politics of the big ethnic groups (Oromo, Amhara and Tigray), one expects that EPDRF will eventually convince these big ethnic groups to confirm the current Deputy Prime Minister who hails from a small ethnic Wolayta group as the new Prime Minister and to be assisted possibly by competent deputies from these big ethnic groups.

If the EPDRF confirms the Deputy Prime Minister as the new leader then Ethiopia will set another good example of smooth succession in Africa but it will also provide a rare precedence of a civilian to become the Commander-in-Chief of the liberation army. With the confirmation of Mr Hailemariam Desalegn as Prime Minister, EPDRF would make a practical sense of its commitment to its principle of unity in diversity within the ethnic federal system and that will make Ethiopia even stronger and more united. With Hailemariam as a new leader, there are opportunities that EPDRF will consolidate its achievements and work towards creating more political space and freedom of expression with the aim of making Ethiopia more democratic and prosperous. Also there are opportunities that the new leadership in Ethiopia will build new relations on a new basis with its neighbours, particularly Sudan and South Sudan.

With new leadership in Ethiopia, the South will have even stronger relations with Ethiopia as such relations have gone beyond relations between leaders to people-to-people relations. President Salva will certainly be the closest African leader to the new leadership in Ethiopia and South will be on the top of the strategic friends of Ethiopia. The regime in Khartoum may have difficulty in relating easily to the new leadership of Ethiopia and the special relations that prevailed between Bashir and Meles may not continue in the same level and flavor.

The EPDRF as the ruling party in Ethiopia may revisit seriously its relation with the National Congress Party, the ruling party in Sudan, in the light of the alarming political Islam voices in Ethiopia. One may expect that the relations between Ethiopia and Sudan may deteriorate to the level that Sudan may revisit not only its position towards the mediating role played by Ethiopia between Sudan and South but also its membership in IGAD. This may force Sudan to seriously take the African Union Roadmap and the UN Security Council Resolution 2046 as the only opportunity for normalizing and strengthening its relation with the South as the only potential friend available in the region.

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