

# **The Absence of Prime Minister Meles Zenawi**

## **And its implications**

### ***What makes the party, the government and the state to continue in the Absence of the Premier?***

It has been more than seven weeks since Prime Minister Meles Zenawi has been absent from public scene. There are many speculations about his health status, where he is and how long he will stay out of public view.

On 19 July and 01 August 2012 Government Communication Minister Bereket Simon told journalists that the Prime Minister was getting treatment abroad for the 'minor' health problem he has faced and he would be back within a few days. Mr. Bereket further said that nobody is assigned on the post of the Prime Minister either temporarily or on a permanent basis and Mr. Meles is still in charge of his activities. The Communication Minister also hinted that Prime Minister Meles Zenawi may take a lengthy leave from his activities upon the doctor's advice, as he had been working restlessly for more than three decades, since he joined the arm struggle to fight the Derg regime.

The aim of this brief piece is not to add on the speculations in the public. Rather, the intention is to explain what I think is novel in the political history of Ethiopia. For many people the Prime Minister was the only person who guarantees the proper functioning of the state, the government and the party. In the past two decades many people believed that if the head of the party was not stable or unable to govern the country, there would be a crisis that affects the government and the party.

Why did not this happen during the past five weeks or more? What held the state, government and the party together in the absence of the Prime Minister?

Were the speculations and analysis of the many people particularly in the Diaspora wrong? Is the concern of many citizens in the country ill placed?

The past many days have proved that the absence of the Head of government from the public scene does not necessarily lead to fracture in the party triggering political wrangling in the government or political crisis in the country, at least so far.

My understanding is that the existing institutions are fast maturing to act and function in the absence of the Prime Minister, contrary to traditional perception in Ethiopia, to the effect that, it is very difficult to think of a stable and peaceful Ethiopia in the absence of its leader. Though, Prime Minister Meles has not been seen in public for the last several weeks albeit that he is incharge according to Government Communication Office, we have seen neither a significant political vacuum nor stalemate of the bureaucracy so far. And I believe the main reasons for this stability and continuity in the government are rooted in the strength of the organizing principles of state power, among which the following are key factors.

**The Federal Form of Government, the party structure and the Constitution:**

Unlike the previous regimes in Ethiopia the current federal form of government has devolved accumulated power to the regional states, which are the integral parts of the country. The 1995 constitution in article eight, number one clearly stipulates that all sovereign power resides in the nations, nationalities and peoples of Ethiopia.

The ruling Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) is even a reflection of this federal system. It is an alliance of four national groups: the Oromo Peoples' Democratic Organization (OPDO), the Amhara National Democratic Movement (ANDM), the South Ethiopian Peoples' Democratic Front (SEPDF) and the Tigrayan Peoples' Liberation Front (TPLF). The most important

power in the party is in the hands of the Executive Committee (EC) which are thirty six, consisted of equal numbers of representatives of the four member parties, which are elected by the Central Committee of the respective member organizations making up the EPRDF.

Therefore, this creates, more or less a 'fair' distribution of power among EPRDF member parties that prohibits the rise of one group over the other. This also creates the absence of 'strong man' without Meles Zenawi; and other officials are only becoming responsible for their own duties and responsibilities.

And when we come to our case, Article 75 (a) and (b) of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia constitution, explicitly provides that the Deputy Prime Minister will act on behalf of the Prime Minister in the latter's absence, unless or otherwise the parliament proposed another candidate for the post. Therefore there is no confusion on the constitution regarding who will overtake leadership of the country (either temporarily or on a permanent basis) in the absence of the Head of Government. Therefore, it can be concluded that it is impossible to seize or snatch power without the constitutional order and the backing of the regional states, contrary to known traditional practice in the country.

### **Institutions of the Management of Power**

Parliament as an embodiment of sovereignty of the people, with powers and duties to determine the leadership and other components of state affairs management normal state business is on course with each part of the bureaucracy conducting its regular functions.

### **A Security and Defense Forces based on Professionalism**

It is common knowledge that armed forces take advantage of temptations to seize power, whatever pretexts present themselves. However, the EPRDF-led government seems to have organized a national defense force with a doctrine that emphasize professionalism in the defense of the state, the constitutional

order and the institutions of security for the populace. In other words, the forces of national defense are poised as deterrence to any violent, illegal or unconstitutional grab of power or any other way that disrupts the procedures established by the Constitution.

The recent handling of ethnic clashes in the Southern part of the country was a testament for the National Security and Defense Council on how such kind of institutions are acting independently without direct involvement of the Commander in Chief and the Prime Minister of the country. Thus, foreign forces who wish to undermine the country's security, like the Eritrean regime and the Islamist Somali group Alshabab have not gained any advantage out of this, and the country is continuing to be an icon of stability and peace in the war torn region of the Horn of Africa.

For your comments and queries the writer can be reached at:  
[abel.eiipd@gmail.com](mailto:abel.eiipd@gmail.com)