

## Meles unveiled

**Tom Burgis**

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*A smooth operator and consummate diplomat, he was hailed in the west as one of Africa's democratic messiahs. But as Ethiopia's prime minister scoops the fourth "bad democracy" award, Tom Burgis asks if Meles Zenawi was ever anything but an autocrat.*

The ranks of cameras documenting the closing flesh-pressing of last month's progressive leaders' summit in Hammanskraal, South Africa, on 11-12 February captured a telling gap. Tony Blair, British premier and first among the current generation of cluster-bomb-toting "progressives", edged his chair away from that of Meles Zenawi, his Ethiopian counterpart and, until he started butchering protesters and dispatching dissidents to the clink, one of the crop of African leaders styled by the west as the blighted continent's messiahs. We cannot know whether, stranded by a defunct plane, Blair reached for the prime-ministerial Blackberry after the press conference and cast an irritated vote for his former commissioner for Africa. If he did, he was among the thousands who made Meles the runaway winner of our fourth Bad Democracy award.

Where did it all go wrong? Was not the urbane, literate Meles, Masters-educated freedom fighter turned pioneer of African democracy, a visionary in the mould of Mandela, the man who, shoulder to shoulder with his similarly enlightened colleagues in Tanzania, Uganda, South Africa and Nigeria, would finally deliver unto Africans the means to guide their own fate? One Human Rights Watch researcher recently returned

from a trip to Ethiopia suspects that it may never really have been going right.

When Legesse Zenawi (also known as Legesse Gebru, Legesse Zenawi, Gebru Zenawi, Wedi Gebru, though he prefers "Meles") swept into Addis Ababa in 1991, Ethiopians weary of the savagery of the Mengistu dictatorship and seventeen years of internecine war glimpsed the light at the end of their blood-spattered, famished tunnel. Meles, at the head of a guerrilla coalition, set about recasting the country according to a model that analysts describe as "linguistic" or "ethnic feudalism". Power, the justification went, would devolve from the centralised cadres of Mengistu Haile Mariam's *Derg* to federal and local councils.

This is, of course, exactly what a great many countries are up to in one way or another. But Meles's system goes rather beyond allowing pompous entrepreneurs to co-opt themselves onto the boards of local bee-keeping associations. The structure of the *kebele*, sub-regional governments in rural townships, is a legacy of the *Derg*'s Soviet-style system. In the Oromia province, the claws of control sink even deeper: groups of six or so households are formed into *gotts*, which report to the umbrella *garee*, which in turn feeds information

back to the *kebele*. A splendid idea, we might say – real local representation, devolution, communities wresting power from the bureaucratic octopus. Alas, the octopus is not so easily dispossessed, and the structure is routinely used by Meles's lackeys in the countryside to monitor and suppress dissent, ossify patronage and milk farmers of their labour.

The Human Rights Watch researcher, who, understandably, wants to remain anonymous, said the team found Ethiopia governed through "patterns of repression".

"My feeling is that it's much worse even than what we reported. Access to food aid is politically restricted. The (governing) EPRDF has puppets in every area. One of our big concerns is that the World Bank, IMF and bilateral donors have suspended direct budget support but are channelling those funds instead to regional bodies, which are often even worse. The rural regional governments are the agents of daily control. It's obvious when people are being shot in the street (in Addis Ababa). But the donors have very little knowledge of what's happening in the rural areas."

If Meles's nationalistic posturing over the border dispute with Eritrea raised eyebrows in the diplomatic community into which he had ingratiated himself, it was the brazen thuggery that followed the May 2005 elections that left observers aghast. "In Ethiopia, everyone is scared – the people, the government", said the researcher. "The level of paranoia is astounding; the fear is tangible. And the election debacle has taken away the veil."

Those who know Ethiopia say Meles and his circle have been stung by that classic trait of despots: a blind faith in their own boundless popularity. A fortnight before the poll, it began to dawn on the government and the opposition Coalition for Unity and Democracy (CUD) alike that the unthinkable might happen – the voters might defy the octopus and elect the ramshackle band of intellectuals and academics who had balked at Meles' tightening hold on power. One observer suggests that the opposition could have stapled a rosette to a penguin and it would have won. The realisation came too late for effective gerrymandering, and the elections were relatively fair.

All ten of Addis Ababa's seats fell to the CUD, as did scores in other major cities, though Meles clung to most of the rural vote. Then the backlash began. The

government flatly ignored the result. At least eighty people were shot dead when troops quashed massive demonstrations. Human-rights groups now estimate that tens of thousands of political prisoners may be in custody, many condemned to the horrors of the Dedesa camp. 129 defendants – among them newly elected opposition politicians, journalists and charity workers – now face a ludicrous rap sheet that includes a charge of genocide and could conceivably face the death penalty. Their trial opened on 24 February.

One seasoned analyst suggests that what has been exposed in Ethiopia is the myth held by western governments, aid agencies and media of the "new breed" of African democrats. "Meles is simply an authoritarian. The idea of the 'new breed' is nonsense concocted by journalists and Addis Ababa's attaches.

The west is naïve and has no interest in African politics."

With that realisation comes the unsettling reminder that democracy can be two things – a system by which to legitimise power, or a system by which power is legitimate. To the casual eye, the two may look similar, encompassing votes, speeches, newspapers and suchlike.

It is only in crisis that the difference between programmes of genuine democratic reform and regimes run through pogroms, punch-ups and plutocracy dressed up as something that fits donors' good governance guidelines becomes apparent. Some say Meles's ransacking of his country's trembling infrastructure has set Ethiopian democracy back by over a decade.

And here, seamless as ever, we segue into the new crop of political ne'er-do-wells. If we are to settle for democracy, warts and all, we are bound to accept its victors, much in the same way that free speech is only free speech if people are allowed to say things we might find unpleasant. Thus it is that Israel's foreign minister (honoured as Bad Democracy's first female candidate) and the Danish *imam* who trotted off to stir slander and violence with a clutch of phoney cartoons make the list. Also in evidence is Barrick Gold, the Canadian gold giant whose megalomania has now extended to relocating glaciers, Nepal's barmy King Gyanendra, and his near neighbour, the prickly president of Kazakhstan. Joining them on the podium is Yoweri Museveni, another African leader who is proving once again that few things are cheaper than rhetoric.

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*Tom Burgis is a freelance reporter. During a year in South America, he descended Bolivian mines and became acquainted with the continent's charming police. At the Santiago Times, he followed the pursuit of Augusto Pinochet by the families of his victims. He has written for the Guardian, the Daily Mirror, the New Statesman, the Daily Telegraph, the Big Issue and Red Pepper, among others, and was, during its brief existence, chief reporter at the London Line. He has exposed skulduggery in Iraq, Zimbabwe, Westminster and Bethnal Green, investigated the plight of asylum seekers, child prisoners, Aids victims and gypsies, covered countless protests and the G8 summit at Gleneagles, and grilled glamour models on climate change.*

*He has written for [openDemocracy's](#) debates on protest and globalisation, and presides over the Bad Democracy Awards with an iron hand.*

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