Meles's Portrait: Sketch of who He is

Although Meles was never inclined to draw attention to himself or his accomplishments, we are nonetheless obliged today to indicate how he grew to be a historic figure over the course of his short life of 57 years.

Although Meles's life and work is throughout inseparable from the struggle and politics of the organization, we shall on this bitter day focus our attention on who he is. If we look at Meles apart both from the struggle which was integral to his life and from the organization and government that he led, we might be able to capture what distinguishes him even amongst his closest comrades. In any case, the seminal achievements of the struggle, organization and government he served --- for instance, the equitable social and economic growth (nearly 10% per annum over the decade or so) without precedent in our history -- are widely recognized. Above all, the motive for our focus on the man himself is that Meles never liked either to speak or to hear about himself. "I" is perhaps the rarest word in his discourse.

How is it that one who shunned the limelight, fame, and popularity came to be such a renowned statesman, and one who won such deep acclaimed respect and affection features vividly reflected in the deep grief that has gripped the nation over his untimely death. By drawing attention to how he became who he is, it may be possible to indicate what is truly exemplary for those, especially Ethiopian and other African youth, who aspire to emulate Meles.

Meles's message to the young was "it is my wish that you will not have to experience the strife and suffering that was the lot of my generation, and that you shall enjoy a brighter future. Our struggle will not culminate in the lifetime of those who initiated it. One might say that our struggle is not a marathon but more akin to a relay race where those who ran earlier pass on the baton to those who come later." Accordingly, we shall convey to Ethiopia's youth who look up to him,

what they ought to know about who he is, together with examples of his actions, to illuminate his character. On occasion, history yields outstanding individuals, whose lives and deeds stand out and endure. Though like a shooting star, all too briefly and vividly, their impression remains imprinted in human memory. It is in this spirit that we offer Ethiopia's youth, and Meles's many admirers and followers a sketch of his life and work.

Meles the Visionary: An Inspiring Leader of Change

Since his election to the executive committee during the first congress of the TPLF held in 1979, and especially following his re-election in 1983 and subsequent membership of the politburo, Meles made important and strategic contributions to advance the armed struggle. Meles had the exceptional vision and capacity to initiate and lead change. For instance, he held that the lasting liberation of the people of Tigray needed the establishment of popular democratic rule throughout Ethiopia, and to this end he called for a popular front of all democratic forces. In 1985, a decade after the founding of the TPLF, even though the liberation front had overcome a series of formidable obstacles and secured its survival, the movement was, nonetheless, at a loss about the way forward. At this juncture Meles laid down the guiding aims of Ethiopia's revolutionary democracy: the strategies, alliances and means to extend the reach of the armed struggle by addressing the fundamental challenges of the peoples across Ethiopia. Meles successfully persuaded the TPLF to extend its support to the EPDM (now ANDM), towards the formation of an equal partner in the armed struggle. Moreover, he urged the TPLF to mobilize and assist other democratic forces. Meles boldly advocated a position never before held by any Ethiopian political organisation: that upholding the right to self-determination of the peoples of Eritrea is the only solution to the Eritrean question. Subsequently, he resolved confusion in the ranks by going public with the view that the existing Eritrean liberation movements and organizations were neither capable of guaranteeing the democratic rights of the Eritrean peoples, nor of championing the democratic aspirations of the peoples of Ethiopia. This stance -- lending support to what is

principled whilst withdrawing support where it is not merited -- became the basis of the organisation's ties to external forces.

Although Meles was committed to fundamental ideas and basic principles, he was prepared, in the spirit of pragmatism and accommodation, to find a fit between his ideas and ideals on the one hand, and the demands of national and international circumstance on the other -- all in the service of assuring the practicability of his aims. For instance, in negotiations with others, should there be a course undesirable or unacceptable to our partners, he would suggest that "we put to one side our disagreements, and cooperate and collaborate over what we are agreed upon", thereby ensuring that differences are respected, whilst mutual support and cooperation is possible.

In the early years, Meles had mastered a clear sense of the objectives of the armed struggle, a vision he enriched through his avid reading and research. By studying the successes and failures of armed struggle around the world and by gaining a clear understanding of the peculiar conditions of Ethiopia, he was able to provide decisive leadership. During the mid-1980s when the armed struggle begun to waver, Meles played a central role in mobilizing and organizing the struggle across the nation. To this day, his dedication for learning and close scrutiny of issues remains exemplary.

Another occasion when Meles's visionary leadership emerged was during 1988-89, when the armed struggle was at a crossroads. As the struggle increasingly turned into an Ethiopian movement, Meles wrote extensively to clarify difficult problems and to explore in detail the leading issues of the time: democratic resolution of the question of nationalities in Ethiopia; state power and the revolution; the land question; and the Eritrean peoples' movement for independence. Chiefly as a result of his guidance, consensus was reached among democratic forces, and the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) was formed. Soon after, the Oromo People's Democratic Movement (OPDO) was established and joined the EPRDF. Meles played a pivotal role in this period of transition in the nature and scope of the struggle.

In the meantime, he addressed matters of military doctrine and strategy. He advocated a scientific perspective on warfare, departing from the reliance on risk-taking and luck. His approach was that military conduct should always serve the political process; he championed a popular army. These were the seeds of what came later; the military is answerable to an elected political authority and serves as a loyal guardian of the constitution.

Towards the conclusion of the armed struggle, Meles envisioned three possible scenarios as to what could eventuate upon the fall of the Derg: first, the complete defeat of the Derg and its succession by a transitional government, constituted by the EPRDF and other democratic forces; second, the Derg persisting as a controlling force in Oromia and the South; third, a transitional government including both the Derg and the EPRDF. Finally, having concluded that the transition would follow upon the complete defeat of the Derg, he prepared a study to guide that transition.

Amongst the issues he focused on was how to overcome problems that arose from the uneven development of the liberation movements. He charted the way for extending the domain of the struggle to central and southern Ethiopia. He strengthened ties with forces that had fought against the Derg in these regions. After the collapse of the Derg, Meles proclaimed that the EPRDF would serve as a provisional authority for one month only. During this time, political organizations and civic associations both in and out of the country would take advantage of the opportunities offered by the fall of the Derg; this would enable all organized groups to participate, so that diverse perspectives would come into play in the formation of the transitional government. The transitional government would then last two or three years, allowing for the direct participation of the Ethiopian people in the drawing and ratifying of a democratic constitution, on the basis of which an elected democratic government would be established. At the time there were organizations and governments that asked why those who had sacrificed so much for so long would take the trouble to draw others into the transitional process. They suggested that, in any case, there were no significant forces other

than the EPRDF. Meles vehemently rejected this view. Though there was no doubt that the EPRDF army was in a position to exercise control over the entire territory. Meles held that it was pointless to control the reins of government unless we won the hearts of the people. Accordingly, Meles strongly argued that it was essential to establish a transitional government reflecting our diversity, and to prepare the ground for the free and active participation of all political forces and of all nations and nationalities in the new democratic Ethiopia in order to avoid the descent into further warfare and the catastrophic fate of Yugoslavia. By thus framing the period of transitional rule Meles laid the basis for a democratic order hospitable to the country's aspirations for economic and social transformation.

Meles charted a new course taking due account of the chief challenges facing the country, and the constraints imposed by the prevailing international situation: in the economic sphere the pursuit of equitable economic growth driven primarily by market forces, within a stable macro-economic environment; in the political sphere, pluralism and competitive party politics. Thus peace, democracy and development became the triple pillars of our survival.

Meles believed that unless we develop, Ethiopia will disintegrate under the weight of poverty; without peace, development is unthinkable; for enduring peace we must swiftly make the populace the beneficiary of development. In the absence of democracy there can be no development; democracy must rest on popular participation: not just elected officials, but hundreds of thousands from kebele to central government must take active part in self rule. To translate these ideals into practice, Meles proceeded to frame a constitution whereby Ethiopia's peoples freely join together to form a single political economy and a united democratic order.

Until the late 90s, the country had not managed to proceed beyond a slow pace of growth. Above all, Meles grew concerned about the emergence of corrupt and

rent-seeking practices within EPRDF. Speaking on this issue, Meles said that "power is a double-edged sword: it can be used either to eliminate poverty or to destroy the populace. Power should not be deployed to accumulate personal wealth or for nepotism: it must rather serve as a weapon of public service.

"EPRDF is not a place for those who seek wealth and we must take guard against the tendency to see ourselves as an emergent ruling class. Otherwise we will inevitably run into difficulties and, over time, we will collapse as an organization; the government and the country will fail irrecoverably." These and similar conclusions led to the program of renewal (tehadso).

Another illustration of Meles's visionary and transformative leadership is his dream to see that Ethiopia, in the coming decades, will begin to join the ranks of prosperous nations. He envisioned the real possibility of Ethiopia making a clean break with poverty and turn into a nation with a stable economic and democratic order. The Growth and Transformation Plan is a part of this larger vision. The plan sets out to effect Ethiopia's transition towards an industrial economy, an aim that was never before entertained in our history.

III. An ambitious leader who never settled for small results: Meles set his sights high for himself and for others.

As a reflection of his ambition, Meles was not satisfied with the pace of the progress made during the first two years of the renewal period. He wanted an expansion of rural development efforts already achieved; a rejuvenation of cities and towns; full rehabilitation of the ruling Party; and, an encouragement of the Ethiopian youth to turn them into empowered agents of the fight against poverty. He insisted on fast economic growth and warned of the dangers ahead.

Meles once offered an analogy of an avalanche cascading down a mountain. Anyone on the path of the avalanche who cannot outstrip it will perish regardless of where he may be when the avalanche hits. Similarly, unless we overcome poverty by implementing fast and sustained economic growth, the consequences would be fatal. Meles insisted on speedy and equitable economic growth. He always held out large dreams for Ethiopia; he believed that marginal improvements cannot deliver the desired results.

Meles always counseled against piecemeal endeavors and limited outcomes. He called for grand plans and large accomplishments. "Let's make optimal use of whatever support we have managed to mobilize. Let's ensure that the people always benefit, that we listen to them; let's heed their criticisms, accept what is correct and persuade them if their counsel is incorrect. We are of no use unless we serve and listen to them.''

For Meles there is no greater indignity than poverty. We should not rest in peace in a country where citizens are victims of deprivation and hunger, and where many must live without clothing or shelter. He believed it is therefore imperative to defeat poverty to honor the dignity of our citizens and to release the country from the burden of dependence.

Meles has shown a way of how the productivity and produce of our richest asset, the Ethiopian farmer, can be greatly enhanced through the appropriate and coordinated use of our resources in land and water. Moreover, he has shown that the farmer can venture beyond subsistence to produce harvests that can reach commercial markets. Finally, Meles has initiated the creation of markets supported by modern communication technology, whereby farmers find release from exploitation by middle-men.

By benchmarking best practices and fostering their spread through regular consultation with regional presidents and with senior agricultural officers, Meles promoted the quality and coordination of agrarian innovation. Through such ambitious efforts there are now millions in farming, including women farmers, who for the first time are able to enjoy two or three daily meals. Similarly, the life of pastoralists is undergoing improvement through

optimal practices of using water and animal resources. In particular, betterment of veterinary health services and delivery of animal feed as well as support for the voluntary settlement of pastoralists is beginning to show marked improvement in the previously stagnant standard of living among Ethiopia's many pastoralists.

In order to undo destitution among women and youth, in tandem with urban development and renewal, varied programs were launched to improve their livelihoods. The programs include provision for seed capital, training, space for production and sale as well as measures to ease entry into a wider market.

Meles sought to make urban centers not just places for the rich but also fit for habitation by the poor. The aim was not merely to furnish housing for the poor but to empower them through ownership of their dwellings. Development of housing was also a policy of promoting equitable growth through job creation in the housing sector.

Driven by a desire to motivate engagement of Ethiopian investors in the country's development, favorable treatment was accorded to domestic investors. This treatment has motivated Ethiopians in the Diaspora to contribute to economic growth by deploying their skills, expertise and wealth.

The renaissance is a vivid demonstration of the fact that Meles takes no satisfaction in narrow aims or modest outcomes but rather seeks what is great and encourages others to do the same. Building what would be the largest dam in Africa on the Nile was a grand ambition never before entertained, let alone undertaken. Though he had no doubts that building the dam would require vast investments that could not be met through external loans or grants, he nevertheless firmly believed that reliance on ourselves and our own resources would rekindle the public's abiding dream for growth and material betterment. His commitment to building the dam was a powerful expression of defiance against the longstanding loss of confidence in ourselves and our governments.

In thought and deed Meles's aim was not to patch up our tattered rags but rather to dress us anew. He would not settle for the mere alleviation of poverty and rescuing the poor from the worst effects of destitution; instead his quest was the utter defeat of poverty and to turn the poor into efficacious springs of wealth. His leading aspiration was not to minister to symptoms but rather to cure the ailment itself. He wanted to see the tired and neglected rise beyond the desperate struggle for survival and reach a position of leading a worthy life while contributing to the collective well-being of others.

IV. Meles favors practicable ideas.

Meles is ceaselessly studying, reading, debating and writing. His teaching of new ideas is always supported by rich research. He welcomes dissent and is ready to endorse persuasive, contrary ideas. If his own idea does not win assent, he proceeds to reexamine the issue. Meles always accords priority to ideas that would serve to realize a standing aim or objective. He does not engage in argument for its own sake: in speaking, writing or debating Meles is invariably to the point and pragmatic. He voices his views on controversial matters while explaining the difficulties he finds in opposing positions. Meles firmly believes that an idea should be defeated only with more and better ideas; he is resolutely opposed to willful imposition of ideas.

V. Meles upholds unity rooted in democratic values and the equality of nations and nationalities.

From the very start of the armed struggle, Meles was mindful of Ethiopia's diverse nationalities, cultures and faiths. Embracing our rich diversity, he strived for democratic union that recognized the identity, equality and freedom of all Ethiopian nations and nationalities. Furthermore, he was always deeply intent on showing that the farmers and pastoralists of rural Ethiopia are the bedrock of both democracy and development.

These considerations guided the direction of the armed struggle, the nature of the transitional government and the ruling principles of the constitution.

Meles succeeded in extending the scope of the armed struggle to the entire country by arguing that rulers of previous regimes, who had originated from limited parts of the country had managed to oppress the entire populous, including the citizens of the regions from which the rulers themselves heralded. In consequence, democratic forces throughout the country joined the armed struggle. Later, Meles was at the forefront of the effort to persuade the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) to join the transitional government, based on his firm belief that political pluralism and competitive party politics would bring democracy, peace and stability to Ethiopia. Meles encouraged a wide variety of political parties and organizations to join the transitional government.

Already during the armed struggle, Meles had shown respect for the principle of fair representation. For instance, in the last days of the Derg, when Meles was the chief negotiator in talks with the military regime, he insisted that the Ethiopian People's Democratic movement (EPDM), now the Amhara National Democratic Movement (ANDM), be included in the discussions on the grounds that the negotiations involved national matters. Meles belongs to all and he stood for all.

VI. Meles respects democratic values and the rule of law

Meles upholds democratic principles and the rule of law and insists on the compliance of his party and government to these values and practices. He has labored to clarify the line separating the government and the party, and to guard against the intervention of his party in government.

Meles is a democrat who welcomes political pluralism and the expression of different and conflicting ideas; he believed that the contest of ideas can be settled only through free discussion. He offers his views and arguments openly, and if he fails to win the support of the majority he is willing and prepared to carry out the prevailing decision. An example is Meles's position in respect to the Eritrean conflict: he had felt that the country should not rush into war and should turn to this option only as a last resort. The

majority, however, disagreed. Meles then proceeded to implement the majority decision.

To institute the rule of law Meles strived to strengthen the judiciary and the administration of law. During the early days of the transitional government, Meles insisted that senior officials of the military regime be brought to justice strictly through the courts. A champion of political pluralism Meles strived to guarantee that the 2005 elections would be inclusive, free and fair. Beyond his faith in the rule of law, Meles is humane and disposed to forgive: so long as individuals express regret and accept blame he is ready to show mercy. Accordingly, Meles responded positively to the requests for pardon made by opposition leaders sentenced by the courts in connection with the elections of that year. What is more, Meles encouraged the pardoned opposition leaders to reengage freely in politics.

Meles also acted in full compliance with international laws and agreements. During the Eritrean invasion he persistently relied on international law in the search for a resolution to the crisis.

VII. Meles: a man with wide ranging gifts and talents and an unquenchable desire to learn.

A settled conviction of Meles is that knowledge is a decisive weapon against poverty. From the early days of the armed struggle to the present, Meles was a passionate student of the various dimensions of politics and society. He became an imaginative student of economics and political theory, one who also closely examined past and present experiences elsewhere that had an important bearing on Ethiopia.

The breadth and depth of Meles's knowledge of Africa is impressive. African leaders and leading experts on African affairs often sought his opinion and advice. In quest of optimal approaches and means in the fight against poverty, he became a political scientist, an economist, a lawyer and a student of military science. For instance, Meles developed a searching critique of the Washington Consensus and neo-liberalism, a dominate

outlook in the West and within the leading international economic institutions. He put forward detailed and powerful arguments against neo-liberalism, particularly as a strategy of political economy for Africa and the rest of the developing world. He also advanced an alternative to neo-liberalism that aimed to achieve swift and equitable growth with a strong and stable state playing an enhanced role in the economy and popular participation in both governance and development.

To appreciate the radical shift ushered in by Meles, it is important to remember that orthodox economic thought coupled with the extreme backwardness of our country had dictated gradual and incremental economic development. Meles refused to take this path and boldly designed a new avenue to transform the economy and to move toward the extinction of poverty swiftly. His novel developmental paradigm has already yielded welcome, unexpected results; it has kindled a sense of self-confidence in the Ethiopian people and hope in a bright future for the country and for coming generations.

VIII. Meles led a life of self-sacrifice in the service of his aims and principles.

Meles fought for his beliefs with relentless dedication and determination. He cared little for personal comfort, wealth or fame. Starting at a tender age and throughout his lifetime he displayed a passionate resolve to do away with poverty. In his youth, the severe scarcity of medical care in his hometown influenced his decision to study medicine. He joined the armed struggle in order to clear the ground for mounting a fight against poverty.

Meles was of the belief that poverty is an indignity to each person and an affront to the entire community. In 1985, when a severe draught had devastated the inhabitants of Tigrai, he sadly remarked: armed struggle would be meaningless if people continue to die only for lack of agricultural know-how to produce sufficient food. He urged against rushing into war during the Eritrean invasion because he was convinced the costs that the conflict would inevitably exact are bound to drain human and material resources that could be better deployed in the war on poverty.

IX. Meles's capacity for leadership was seen beyond Ethiopia in Africa as a whole and in international fora.

Meles represented Africa, and African interests in various international fora and conferences. He argued effectively for fair prices for African commodities, for increased investment and financial flows, for payments in compensation of adverse impacts of climate change, and for fair regime of international trade. It was Meles's belief the African cause can be more effectively presented and heard in international fora if African countries were to converge on common ground on matters of concern and benefit to all. This stance has won recognition and appreciation amongst African leaders.

Meles worked hard to establish strong and harmonious ties with our neighbors. He was persuaded that relations with our neighbors should rest on a shared commitment to peace, equality, and cooperation on economic and political interests. Further, Meles has taken tangible steps—for instance joint infrastructure projects-- toward the economic integration of Ethiopia and her neighbors. He was convinced that Ethiopia's triumph over poverty is bound up with the material betterment of our neighbors. Meles has labored to strengthen African institutions; his devotion to the African Union and his efforts to enhance its capacity to advance African interests are widely recognized. Meles is tireless in the effort to bring enduring peace to Africa: he has played a pivotal role in the difficult effort to resolve recalcitrant African conflicts.

X. How did Meles become who he is?

Who Meles is has, no doubt, a great deal to do with the organization to which he belonged. Just as the organization bears the stamp of Meles's character, his character clearly manifests the traces of his organization and its guiding principles. An organization with a culture of free discussion and debate was naturally hospitable to a person disposed to advance novel ideas and perspectives.

Meles is animated by deep affection and unswerving commitment to the oppressed and dispossessed. He always places ahead the interests of the farmer and the pastoralist of rural Ethiopia. Meles is also a staunch defender of the rights of women and a champion of youth. Meles believes that the status of women is a reliable measure of democratic freedom and economic progress in a society. Meles also underscores the importance of youth and the significance of winning their hearts and harnessing their capacity to carry on the struggle to attain freedom and to defeat poverty.

The defining feature of Meles's life and character is his intense hatred of poverty. With abject poverty it is idle to hope for peace or democracy. Nor can we truly honor the freedom and dignity of the individual or the community. Today, tragically Meles is not physically amongst us. Yet as was manifest in the acclaim, respect and affection shown across the country during this time of mourning his character and work will always remain in the memory of the Ethiopian people. We are confident that students of history will rank Meles among the few outstanding world leaders who championed the cause of the wretched and downtrodden with a promising vision and tireless dedication.

We offer our deep condolences to his wife Azeb and to his children Semhal, Marda, Senay and Bereket. We also extend our condolences to members of his family, his comrades and his friends. Since we have denied you rest until the very last hour: Meles, rest in peace.