



## **Demise of Ethiopia's Strongman: Domestic and Regional Anxieties**

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On 2 September 2012 thousands of people gathered at a public square in Addis Ababa to pay their last respects to Ethiopia's longest serving Prime Minister, Meles Zenawi, who died at the age of 57. Dozens of foreign leaders and dignitaries, including at least 20 African presidents, were present at the funeral. His death created a power vacuum that has not only plunged the nation into a period of uncertainty, but also generated regional and international anxieties.

Meles Zenawi was a dominant figure in Africa's political landscape. He was a committed leader who took the development of his country and the region very seriously. In his 21 years of rule after ousting Mengistu Haile Mariam, his administration had been able to lift the country from the ruins of civil war and transformed it into one of Africa's fastest growing economies, with an annual average growth rate of 11 percent since 2004. As a skilled and effective negotiator, he picked and chose foreign allies and forged strategic partnerships that suited Ethiopia best. On security matters, he was close to the US, but he was not, as many alleged, under the US control. On economic affairs, he courted China and followed the model of Chinese state capitalism. The anxiety is whether the new leadership in Ethiopia will be able to deal with international actors with same dexterity. Analysts say that there is no clear leader groomed to succeed him. There is also anxiety about the stability and cohesion of the fragile ethnically diverse nation.

Ethiopia's deputy Prime Minister, Hailemariam Desalegn, who will take over as interim Prime Minister, is not seen as a powerful figure. Unless the leader, which the ruling party decides upon shows the same tactical flair of Zenawi it is easy to predict that small rebellions can surface. However, analysts say that in the short to medium term any large-scale political upheaval is highly unlikely, partly because the country has strong institutions and parliament system in place.

In the regional sphere, his death certainly has implications for the peace and stability of the region. His death comes at a very critical juncture when in its eastern side Somalia is going through a political transition from anarchy towards Statehood and in its western border a stand-off between South Sudan and Sudan is witnessing some positive development. Meles was one of the few African leaders who had a deep understanding of the difficult relations between South Sudan and Sudan and being friend to both the countries, he played a major role in peacemaking. Whether the new leadership of Ethiopia will continue to play the similar role will depend upon interests of Ethiopia after Meles, and how domestic politics shape up.

As far as Somalia is concerned, Ethiopia's interest in the country will continue as there is a large Somali population currently living in the Ogaden region. To stabilize Somalia, however, the key focus of international actors will likely shift to Eritrea, which is accused of supporting Al Shabab militants. Ironically, Meles Zenawi's death also provides an opportunity for international actors such as the US and the European powers to engage for reconciliation of the two countries.

However, with Meles Zenawi's death, the US and other western powers have certainly lost a strong ally in the region in their war against terror. There is no leader in the region who commands similar respect and international clout. Analysts say his death may slow international efforts to end conflict in the region. At the continental level, within the African Union, Zenawi's absence will also be felt as he has been a key presence in multilateral negotiations.

India too will deeply miss Zenawi, as he not only had a special affection for India, but he was always in the forefront to facilitate India's footprints in the African soil. That Addis Ababa was the venue for the India-Africa summit in 2011, speaks volumes about India's intense

engagement with Ethiopia under Meles. India rose to become the second largest investor (\$5 billion), particularly in areas like agriculture, infrastructure and technology during his period. India immensely contributed to capacity building and human resource development in Ethiopia. Indian teachers have taught generations of Ethiopians while Indian Army has been involved in training Ethiopian Army personnel. As mentioned earlier, since there will be no policy shifts in Ethiopia in the short and long term, there is unlikely to be any change in India's engagement in various sectors in Ethiopia. Regionally, India considers Ethiopia as a stabilizing force. In future, will Ethiopia remain the same or the domestic challenges will make it more inward driven remains to be seen. Like Ethiopia, India also has stakes in the region. India would like the new leadership in Ethiopia to play a proactive role in the promotion of peace and stability in the region.

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