

When the “whole” orders, the “part” must obey – so they say!

by
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The first time I heard Prime Minister Meles Zenawi responding to the question as to when he was planning to step down as the head of government was well over four years ago. It was on CNN in a brief exclusive interview he gave to one Richard Quest. Certainly it was immediately after EPRDF was announced winner of the 2005 election, and that was a sure ticket for Meles to remain in office by virtue of his having been chairman of the Front. The prime minister then said something like he would rather his third term was his last.

After that that same question would be repeated several times by journalists, foreign and local alike, in what seemed a media mantra. Apparently, the journalists who raised it never had the same object in mind taking the issue with the prime minister. While it cannot be denied that the issue of succession to senior public offices should always draw the attention of the media as matter of interest about which the citizenry need to be informed, it's nevertheless important that all factors be considered from the local point of view and realities on the ground duly examined and analyzed so as to arrive at an accurate, objective and comprehensive insight into what have actually been in the pipeline. Any piece of media communication that follows from such an effort is sure to help the general audience get a fair estimate as to what to expect on or during any relevant upcoming event or period of time.

The ways the issue of succession within the EPRDF-led government have been taken up and circulated among interest groups, however, left much to be desired.

All eyes on the mantle!

True to his word, Prime Minister Meles Zenawi has submitted his letter of resignation to his party. He did it several months before the upcoming 4th-round of general parliamentary elections due in May, 2010. And, we've soon learned that the party, having accepted Meles' tender for retirement, however, instructed him to remain chairman of the front for one more electoral term. This means, if EPRDF wins the 2010 elections, Meles will have remained in office as prime minister for a fourth term. It's important here to help the international community understand the general legal and procedural framework within which succession to appointees holding higher public offices takes place under normal circumstances in this country.

For the purpose of this writing, which sets out to try and narrow some gaps in how this issue has been perceived of – for there clearly have been tendencies from some quarters of making what is an established state of affairs, hazy – it is well to look at it from two viewpoints. Firstly, electoral contest in Ethiopia is predominantly among political parties, which view for clinching majority seats in the 547-seat federal parliament. This means a runner-up for seats in the

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House of Peoples' Representatives can have the prospect of holding the rein of executive power only if it is a party and only if that party has a license to operate on constituencies that spread across more regional states than one. This automatically precludes independent candidates and/or parties registered as regionally-based the possibility that they should have the required degree of leverage. And, come the time for elections and according to voting outcomes, the party that is announced victor is at liberty – by dint of the mandate given it by the electorate to rule – to name the prime minister. Emphasis on 'name' because not all political parties to date in this country have a clear-cut policy and procedure that point to who the persons anointed for the highest office are prior to any election event.

Except EPRDF! For we know that the leader of the front is – without exception – the one pre-ordained by his/her party for the office. Far too superior as it has proved itself to be – and signs cannot be clearer that it will remain so for quite some time – in terms of organizational strength, of having elaborately drawn-up national agenda, of consistency in adherence to intra-party codes etc., the ruling party also has a prolific – though less talked about until recently – plan of succession on a grand scale and in a manner signifying continuity of party leadership as a whole through a generational chain like no other party seem to even have cared thinking about, leave alone doing. Hence, in what can be described as a strategic move, this plan of succession by the ruling party should be looked at as being history in the making.

Relevant practice within the opposition bloc stands in sharp contrast to that of the ruling party. New faces are rare, if any, to find within the oppositions' leadership. UDJ and AEUP supply a typical example in this regard.

Isn't it a mock of irony – or call it a burlesque game of politics, if you like – that these represent some of the most vocal quarters where much of the rhetoric that made it seem as though a few – or one man, as some would dare to allege – had all the say in the workings of the ruling party? Nobody could ever be able to substantiate this blunt assertion, though. Such an unwarranted claim seemed to have emanated from two thinly veiled motives. On the one hand, it is an attempt to sow the seed of grievance or suspicion among the rank and file so that a major dent would be created in the party's normal functioning. On the other hand, it is a move to erode the party's popular support by trying to make people believe that without those few at the top, the front would be no more. Not so!

Secondly, the front evidently views the issue of succession as a strategic goal and an all-time activity; not as a one-time, one-shot affair. Such a work of huge significance would not be implemented without a meticulous plan and a realistic timetable, as officials of the front would tell you. And, it is being approached in a comprehensive manner along three tiers: lower-, middle- and top-level leadership. According to the front, this endeavor cannot in any way be informed or dictated from without.

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Most importantly, it's consistent with the very ideology EPRDF pursues that when the "whole" orders, the "part" must obey. A seasoned statesman of international stature as he is, even our prime minister Meles Zenawi had to obey when ordered by his front.

