

The Diatribe on “African Renaissance”

by A. Ali

I am one of those who believe that it is always supportive of the democratic process to engage governments and their leaders in a debate and discussion on issues that matter a great deal to the day-to-day life of the ordinary person. After reading Meless Zenawi's paper on African development and renaissance, I felt that he deserves not only a thorough reply but also good education. I had to struggle against myself before I did this. Does this person deserve a reply after all what he has done to the people of Ethiopia who protested against the stealing of the 2005 election results? Yes, it is important to expose his pretence and hypocrisy.

Let me start by a simple logic; does Meless have the moral high-ground to come out and write about Africa's development and renaissance? I answer in the negative for two reasons. In less than a year, Meless's troops committed the cruelest crimes against the people of Ethiopia, crimes that had only parallels with the Red terror of Mengistu H. Mariam. As one foreign development worker told me right after the November massacres in Addis Ababa, “I am sure that when Meless sees himself in the mirror these days, he must be seeing Mengistu!” A head of government who presided over the most shameful act of stealing an election result and locking up its opponents on fabricated charges and later committing the most atrocious crimes against ordinary people who expressed dissent in one of the five most impoverished and undeveloped countries in the world, Meless has definitely no moral high-ground to talk about how the continent should develop. For the last fifteen years he has been trying to do that on a misguided policy only to throw the country into the abyss. Secondly, what does he know about Africa? From his state visits? Where in Africa has he ever lived except for a brief stay in Sudan in his guerrilla days? Has he ever done any research, survey or any kind of study for that matter? The answer is no. These are important questions mainly because he poses as an intellectual and academic and suggests recipes for development.

Alternative? Meless dismisses the neo-liberal ideology/paradigm for Africa's development, it doesn't work he says. Fine, I am not a neo-liberal advocate either. But, when a person who poses as an African thinker and dismisses the dominant paradigm on development, that person must come up with the alternative paradigm. He has to be clear in his mind as to what paradigm or system should replace neo-liberalism. What is it that Meless is suggesting in terms of a paradigm or ideology? It is not a must that he has to cling to any. He can construct his own, well and good but he has to present a well-constructed outlook or theory. Meless doesn't have any. The various elements he suggests that fall within a policy of category are all hotchpotch when put together.

Indeed, the most formidable ideology or paradigm, if you like, to dislodge the neo-liberal ideology has been Marxism. But, Marxism was completely turned upside down by the very people who espoused to be disciples of Marx but practiced the worst form of dictatorship when in power (Lenin, Stalin, Mao, Hoxha, etc...). With the dissolution of the USSR and Eastern Europe as an ideological camp, the end of the Cold War followed and the onslaught on Marxism was intensified as a “dead” ideology and so on. The debate on Marxism has not ended with the Western propaganda though attacking Marxism has now become fashionable by everyone. One thing, however, that should be clear is that the deconstruction of the neo-liberal paradigm cannot start with the Leninist or Stalinist schools. If that is what Meless is trying to do, then it is a failure from the start. Secondly, he cannot do that with Western money. In a nutshell, Meles is not providing any alternative.

Meless' Problem: Undoubtedly, Meless has a problem of his own making. It is an image problem. Up until the last elections, the EPRDF successfully masqueraded as a regime on transition to democracy while following a policy of high-handedness internally. The targets of the masquerade have been Western donors mainly West European as the US knew about him very well. This policy which, Siegfried Pausewang correctly described as a two-track policy, aimed at fooling Western donors on the one hand but maintaining a repressive system clamping down

against opposition and critics. If anything, the 2005 elections brought this pretension, this masquerade to an end as the EPRDF came out in panic in its true colours. With the massacres committed against civilian protesters in June and November, stealing the elections and going into verbal attacks against EU election observer team, Meless finally came out in his true colours: a cruel dictator. The image he had been building on pretense for fifteen years went into shambles. Even the Jara company, the Norwegian company that made business with his regime, could not resurrect that his image when it awarded him with a big prize. His one time friend, Tony Blair, gave him a cold shoulder at a meeting in Johannesburg. Now, after crushing the opposition and silencing the civic unrest, Meless is now back in a vain attempt to build his image. Now, he has to pose as an African thinker; a “great thinker” of development and macro-economics as the artist De Bono once painted him. Thanks to this paper that he scribbled about African renaissance, we can clearly see that Meless is far from being a thinker. He is still pretending; what a nerve! As we will show later, he is not even clear on very fundamental concepts. Now, let’s now go to making a surgery of Meless’ diatribe.

On social development: if there is anything that is completely muddled in Meless’ paper is what he thinks about development and social development in particular. What does Meless understand by development? When both TPLF and EPLF came to power in 1991, Meless and Issayas seriously believed that they would bring development very quickly. Meless promised the Ethiopian people that they would start eating three meals a day. Issayas promised to transform Eritrea to A Singapore of Africa. It has never been clear what the basis for their forecast was; it was obvious that all what was needed according to them was determination and dedication. Meless’ largely peasant cadres (TPLF and EPRDF) didn’t take them long to trail behind the Derg’s officials and end up as corrupt as anyone in African governance circles. Fourteen years later, the Ethiopian people who were forced to eat less than they used to in 1991 gave their historical verdict through the 2005 elections: Meless and EPRDF have to go!!

What should the concept and practice of development constitute today in the second millennium? This is the crux of the matter as far as Ethiopia and other poor countries are concerned. In the Ethiopian context development should mean a change for the better, an incremental change in quality of life and the regaining of its capabilities on the part of society, the very capabilities that it was deprived for centuries. In concrete terms this means that society must be crowned with social change where the resurrection of its political, social and economic capabilities plays a central role in influencing the changes. These changes must be political in the first place: meaning absolute freedom for society at large and organized groups to participate in the development and democratization processes and where the role of the state as the sole actor and agent of development comes to an end. Once freedom prevails, people’s creativity will prevail and that is where the chance for development and economic growth emerges. The Ethiopian peoples have always been excluded from these processes: development and democratization. There have always been nannies (the three post-war governments) who sideline them in order to “take care of them”. Only when this role of a nanny comes to an end that the possibility for popular participation emerges as the sure guarantee for development.

Development should not necessarily and immediately connote industrialization. In fact, in this epoch when environmental degradation causing climatic changes which in turn exacerbate poverty and under-development, development’s incremental advantages must be reviewed. What should development’s incremental changes in the concrete conditions of Ethiopia be: assuring basic needs such as food security, health care, education, equality of women, environmental preservation, population control, and so on. The qualitatively incremental change must be fundamentally political, i.e. full political freedom both for society as a whole and individuals. The qualitative changes, first of all, should drastically reverse the hegemonic role of the ruling party (any ruling party for that matter), crown the individual Ethiopian with all the political freedom he/she deserves to make political choices, set up a state structure to ensure these freedoms (such as independent election commission, etc...), provide space for civic groups/organizations for participation and the freedom of political parties to freely operate an contest for political power. These should constitute social development in the historical context that Ethiopia is in now.

Now, what does Meless understand by development? This is not clear in his paper. Instead, he seems to suggest what social-development is. He equates social development with something what he calls "social capital accumulation" (we will be confronted with many of such weird terms that he is manufacturing in his paper) and tries to convince us that social development is all about creating norms, values and so on. Be that as it may, but what in hell does this "social capital accumulation mean"? This is eclectic as it lumps a qualitative category, i.e. social, and a quantitative one, i.e. capital, within the perception of accumulation. Accumulation is fundamentally quantitative and no social, i.e. qualitative, category can be accumulated. One can only *build* social capital, but can only *accumulate* capital. "Social capital accumulation" is eclectic through and through and doesn't mean anything.

The theoretical inaccuracy of the term *social capital accumulation* aside, Meless is also saying something here. According to him, it is only the state that plays a critical role in this hotchpotch that he calls "social and capital accumulation". Because it is the state that plays the critical role, the accumulation he is talking about cannot be played by private individuals and that it must have a *social* character [sic!]. Hence he has to manufacture this term. Now, if we take the essence of his argument, he is trying to highlight that without the state playing a central role, no development can occur. Had he been borne in Albania under Hoxha, we could have concluded that he is saying this because of his own personal experience. But, what does the experience of Ethiopia show? All the three post-war governments played a central role considering themselves as the sole development actors excluding society completely. Meless' own government has been doing this for over sixteen years now. From the experience of Ethiopia alone, without citing any other example, we can conclude that Ethiopia is made to be poor because society has always been excluded from the development and democratization processes and because the governments believed that they had to be the central actors. Meless has not moved an inch away from the positions of both Haile Selassie and Mengistu in this respect. And above all, what is new in this? Meless is not telling us anything new in substance. Only eclectic phrases are introduced to mean nothing at the end. However, we can't afford not to relate this obsession on the central role of the state with the Leninist-Stalinist vanguard notion. The 'crafty' Meless only put it in different words, but again, only to fool his Western donors, if he could.

Role of the State: Meless is consistent when it comes to the role of the state. The Meless that we know from his guerrilla days as Enver Hoxha's disciple and now as prime minister is the same. He hasn't changed a bit when it comes to the role of the state. As Stalinist (as Hoxha's student) he has always held that the state must be the vanguard of society, dominating society under the guise of "guiding" society and penetrating society to the grassroots for the purpose of control. The state should not let society alone. One has only to go to Tigray and witness the role of the state there to affirm Meless' perception. The people of Tigray are controlled and muzzled totally with no independent participation and freedom. During the 2005 elections, Tigray was not a region for contest; no opposition party could (except Lidetu's) contest there. In an openly flagrant violation of the laws of the country and in a style of Sicilian Mafiosi, Meless' cadres broke up opposition meetings. Now, what is central here is the nature of the role of the state vis a vis society. Indeed, the role of the state is always defined vis a vis society for the state was in the first place created to control society.

Through time, we know that the role of the state changed particularly with the emergence of the nation-state in Europe that commensurate with freedom and democracy. The changing role of the state was not a gift of the European monarchy to society. First of all, it was hard won due to the struggle of the oppressed for centuries. Secondly, it was necessitated by a historical conjuncture that emerged with industrialization; the absolutist state simply could not facilitate the social and political conditions that the industrial revolution deemed necessary. We also know that European development was brought about mainly due to this changing role of the state that recognized freedom and democracy as crucial vehicles of development. In principle therefore, the option towards negating freedom and democracy is essentially anti-developmental. This is fundamental no matter what Meless' diatribe tells us.

The Stalinist and absolutist Meless, have been arguing for over fourteen years both with donors and civic groups in Ethiopia, that freedom and democracy are not crucial preconditions for development though not explicitly so. He has always argued that his government's priority is focusing on food security and so on and argued that democracy is not his priority at the time. Unfortunately, that dragged on for over sixteen years now and the time for recognizing democracy as priority seems never to arrive. At last, in his reflection about development and renaissance in Africa, Meless came out openly and informs us what he seriously believes. He attempts to mock at the insistence for a democratic state as a quest for "the night watchman state". He meant: a state that acts as a night watchman. Now, the weirdly phrasing of this term aside, what Meless is in a nutshell saying is the state should not stand for freedom and democracy and watch what society is doing. He insists that the state must 'guide' society and not simply watch when the unruly society messes around. Stalinists never understand that society is more creative than the state and that society is capable of managing itself. In other words, there is always the mistrust in their minds when it comes to what society is freely doing. The irony is, however, when they fought for power they eulogized society to the sky as heroes, wise, and as in the case of the Tigrean people, gold tested with fire. Once they are in power, society is looked upon and untrustworthy. It must be subject to spoon-feeding and control. It is no longer wise and heroic. No, it must be 'guided' by the nose. This time the wise is the state; not just the state at that but the head of state that passed as a demi-god: Stalin in USSR, Mao in China, Hoxha in Albania, Kim Il Sung in Korea and now Meless in Ethiopia. Unfortunately, when all these demi-gods managed to bring out books that fooled millions and million the world over, poor Meless' diatribe is so poorly constructed and ended up as nothing but a hotch-potch!

On the Developmental State: The idea of a developmental state surfaced since the mid-90s when the famous Spanish sociologist, Manuel Castels, coined the term to describe the four tigers, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore and South Korea. Earlier on however, an interesting discourse and literature emerged within the development community, on issues of development and the role of the state. One of the top theoreticians in this field is the Indian Nobel laureate, Amartya Sen who brought out the role of the Indian state of Kerala in development as what is later considered as a developmental state. While Castels focused at economic categories, policies and successes Sen focused on the role of freedom in generating social development. Castels' is economic reductionist and only holds true to the four tigers, an experience that may not be applicable to many poor countries. But, Sen's is more plausible as a recipe for social development. Now, what at the center of all this is what a developmental state is and what its role should be.

A developmental state is that state whose primary focus is social development, that gears all its policies towards generating development and that does everything that encourages development without being held prisoner by any perception or theory. A developmental state first of all starts with recognition of freedom and democracy to society at large and to the individual citizen, advances the interests of society/country in the first place. It recognizes the role the market and market forces (the business community) can play in development while at the same time ensuring the social and economic security of the nation. It sets accountability of the state at the center of the rule of the game as far as governance goes. No political monopoly, no perpetual rule by one party. The citizen is empowered to control the state, and has a say in the fate of his country.

Now, let's come back to Meless' diatribe and examine what he tells us about the developmental state. By now, we can expect that he would definitely opt for an economic reductionist definition of a developmental state and certainly will later inform us that his regime is a developmental state. He has been arguing all along that development for him is all economic and that the problem of developing countries is their incapability to solve these economic problems. To solve these problems what all African countries need is an 'activist state' (let's leave the inaccuracy of this term aside for the moment). The problem of development is economic but the solution is an 'activist state'. In this sense, Meless argues, that development is political first social and economic second. But, what is political according to him is in as far as having an 'activist state' is concerned, but not inclusive of the role of society, freedom and democracy. His central thesis in

this regard is having a political set up that is conducive to accelerated development that sets the ball of development rolling. If that is really the core of the problem of development, what else has he been doing in Ethiopia for the last fifteen years? How come he didn't come up with the required 'political set-up', the 'activist state'? What was holding him?

Now, in the discussion on a developmental state a discussion on democracy will be unavoidable. At this stage, I have to ask the reader to be a little more patient as Meless becomes more unthinking and less knowledgeable on the question of democracy. (What else could he be anyway?) As we all know there can be no democracy when the state is not accountable to society as the state draws its legitimacy through accountability. This is crucial for any governance that considers itself democratic. But not Meless. He thinks that a developmental state should not waste time in legitimizing its rule!! Not only that. According to him, introducing democracy, however little, will retard development!! If democracy is considered important, he says, he would not mind letting it go even if it means a reduction of growth. He also tells us that a 'successful developmental state' should not be bogged down with the time frame of an election cycle because no development can be recorded within a given election period! If politicians are bogged down with this circus called election, they cannot think beyond elections. The reader can clearly guess where Meless is heading at. The 'developmental state' will have to be undemocratic in order to stay in power long enough to carry out successful development. No doubt that the neo-fascist Juan Peron (Argentina) is reviving under the pen of his Ethiopian counterpart, Meless Zenawi.

Conclusion: Meless came up with a 51 page diatribe that one need to write a book to refute it all. However, we have to admire Meless Zenawi for one thing: for being able and having the patience to write such huge rubbish. I have only focused on the gist of his thesis which has been the principal detrimental factor for our country's development. As we have seen at the end we have a regime in Ethiopia, which openly and unashamedly argues for a repressive system, which is contrary to its own Constitution. Reading this paper, what the regime did after the 2005 election should not come as a surprise.

What is more important as a matter of conclusion is the subject of strategy of change and how the regime of Meless should come to an end. This is extremely important if we all want social change in our country that shall generate development. It is not enough to chastise and denounce the EPRDF regime. What is extremely important is *knowing* this regime. As the Chinese say, know your enemy and you can fight one thousand battles. In a strategy of change, it is extremely important to know the nature and thinking of the EPRDF. Meless' paper is an important breakthrough for us all in this respect. We can clearly see the thinking behind the façade of revolutionary democracy. Meless openly and unashamedly tells us that as a 'developmental state' he will opt to be undemocratic and will not waste his time on elections. How to generate a social change under such regime must be a subject of discussion by all Ethiopians. Here in Ethiopia, we have no illusion about the EPRDF. It has to go! But the question is: HOW?