Imperialist powers mourn death of Ethiopia's Meles Zenawi

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The state funeral of Ethiopian prime minister Meles Zenawi on Sunday in the capital, Addis Ababa, underscores the highly unstable character of political relations in Africa.

Meles's death was shrouded in mystery. Absent from public life since mid-June, amid rumours of ill health, he died in Brussels, aged 57, on August 20 after an undisclosed illness.

The first state funeral in Ethiopia for more than 80 years was attended by at least 20 African leaders and senior officials from the United States, the European Union, the United Nations and China, and Susan Rice, the US ambassador to the UN. Rice praised Meles saying that he "transformed from guerrilla to a statesman. His untimely death will remain a big loss to Africa and the world."

Among the African leaders present were President Goodluck Jonathan of Nigeria along with former Nigerian presidents, President Yoweri Musaveni of Uganda, President Paul Kagame of Rwanda, current South Africa president Jacob Zuma and Thabo Mbeki, a former president of South Africa.

The funeral also brought together two bitter enemies, Presidents Omar Al-Bashir of Sudan and Salva Kirr of South Sudan.

Boni Yayi, president of Benin and the African Union, praised Meles's role in the Horn of Africa, saying that he "was a force...on which the African Union depended in these last 10 years".

Prominent international figures, including Microsoft Chairman Bill Gates, were also at the funeral.

The turnout was matched by tributes in the media, while the cameras focused on the grief displayed by Ethiopians on the streets.

The attention paid to Meles appears out of all proportion to the actual political and economic significance of Ethiopia, a poor country lacking in oil and other valuable natural resources. But the leaders, particularly of the Western powers, were paying their respects to a valuable political asset who for 21 years had served as their tool.

The Horn of Africa is an arena of intense great power rivalry for the control of oil reserves in neighbouring countries and the sea route through the narrow Bab al-Mandeb straits, through which much of Europe's oil passes. The US and its European allies are engaged in a ferocious struggle with China for control of the region's oil resources.

Meles supported the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 and was a major ally in the "war on terror", promoting himself as a bulwark against Islamic militancy, sending his army—one of the largest and best armed in Africa—into Somalia between 2006 and 2009 and then again in 2011 to fight the Islamic Court Union, al-Shabaab and other Islamic militants. US spy drones operate from Gode in southern Ethiopia. Meles provided most of the troops for the UN peacekeeping force in Sudan's Abyei province. He also played a key role in Liberia and Uganda.

In return, Ethiopia became the biggest aid recipient in Africa, with $1 billion of the $4 billion coming from the US. Aid accounts for one third of the state budget. Latterly, he avoided dependence upon Western aid by turning to China to finance infrastructure development.

In 1998, then-US President Bill Clinton heralded Meles as one of the new "African renaissance" leaders.

There is also no doubt an element of admiration for an autocrat who ruled virtually single-handed and survived at the top for 21 years through a mixture of ruthlessness and cunning.

Meles was representative of the venal African bourgeoisie—a privileged layer on which imperialism

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has relied over the last 60 years to defend its interests. He came to power after a long guerrilla war that overthrew the Moscow-backed regime of Mengistu Haile Mariam, who had ruled since 1974.

Since 1991, the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), which Meles headed, ruled in a coalition with the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), promising freedom, democracy and federalism in a country with 87 ethnic groups, two main religious groups and numerous sects.

He ended the decades-long civil war with Eritrea, agreeing to Eritrea's secession in 1993. Fighting erupted between 1998 and 2000 over the exact delineation of the borders at a cost of more than 100,000 lives. With Meles refusing to honour the finding of an independent commission that ruled in favour of Eritrea, sporadic fighting continues. Eritrea sponsors rebels inside Ethiopia and relations between the countries remain hostile. Meles was instrumental in getting the UN to label Eritrea a rogue state and impose sanctions against it in 2009.

Meles engineered one-party rule in Ethiopia, over which he dominated, favouring some ethnic groups and regions at the expense of others, clamping down on dissent, forcing oppositionists into exile, and riding roughshod over human rights. Ethiopia is considered one of Africa's most repressive governments.

The 2005 elections were subject to widespread rigging and saw the opposition winning just 23 seats, sparking mass protests. Meles's regime responded by launching the biggest crackdown seen in Africa since South Africa's 1986 state of emergency, killing 200 protesters and beating up and jailing some 50,000 oppositionists, a number of whom were tried for treason.

He staged-managed the 2010 elections so effectively that his EPRDF coalition won 99.6 percent of the vote, leading to further protests. He arrested more than 100 oppositionists and charged more than 10 journalists under a 2009 anti-terror law. He appointed around himself a small corrupt clique, took all the important decisions, and refused to allow a successor to emerge.

There is great concern that the new leader, Haile-Mariam Dessaleng, Meles's deputy and a virtual unknown, will struggle to hold the various factions together within the ruling coalition in the north, which has led Ethiopia since 1991, leading to even greater repression and instability. Elections are due in 2015.

Ethiopia's neighbours, Sudan, South Sudan and Somalia, where Meles deployed Ethiopian troops on behalf of the US, are even less stable. Both Sudan and South Sudan were involved in armed clashes earlier this year and face insurgents at home, while a bitter civil war has engulfed Somalia. Across the Red Sea, Yemen faces insurgencies.

Ethiopia faces deepening economic woes, growing social polarisation and political instability. But the same could be said of virtually every country represented at Zenawi's funeral. Despite Ethiopia's much vaunted economic growth of about 9 percent a year, its development is neither robust nor even.

In an effort to attract foreign investment for food and bio-fuel production for export, more than 4 million hectares of fertile land were leased out to international corporations on the cheap, after evicting the indigenous farmers. Dams and power and transport infrastructure are being built for the benefit of big business, not local people, and threaten damaging environmental consequences. The immediate impact has been soaring inflation, now around 30 percent a year, devastating the lives of the poor. Schools and jobs are dependent on ties to the ruling EPRDF.

The overwhelming majority of Ethiopia's 87 million people live on less than US$1,000 a year, suffering dreadful poverty. Corruption and criminality are rife.

The imperialist powers and their local proxies fear the eruption of widespread social and political opposition to the continuing rule of the hated EPRDF now that their local policeman is gone.

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