**Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn’s Confused Statements**

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On February 10, Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn of Ethiopia gave reporters access and conducted a press conference. The statements of Hailemariam are fraught with inconsistencies and telling that there is a serious leadership vacuum and lack of direction in Ethiopia. The statements lack principle, direction and strategy. The messages are inconsistent and contradictory to previous statements.

On an interview with Africa Confidential January edition, when asked what's your Eritrea policy? PM Hailemariam Desalegn said,

“Our Eritrea policy is very clear. These two peoples are very friendly; the normalizing of relations, also with the governments, should come as soon as possible. We have accepted unconditionally the rulings [on the border] and so this has to implemented but with a discussion because the implementation process needs something on the ground since it is a colonial rather than a people's boundary.” Emphasis added.

For a while, Ethiopians have been expressing anger and concern about the border issue between Ethiopia and Sudan claiming that the minority TPLF regime has unlawfully ceded huge chunks of Ethiopian territories to Sudan. The tenet of their argument is that the signatures of Meles Zenawi and Hailemariam Desaleng are unlawful, null and void based on Article 55(12) of Ethiopian constitution which demands accountability and ratification by parliament. On a recent article, “Save Ethiopia From Chopping Block”, Dr.Alemayehu G. Mariam wrote,

“It is important to understand and underscore the fact that the “agreement” Meles and Bashir “signed”, by Meles’ own description  and admission, has nothing to do with the so-called Gwen line of 1902 (“Anglo-Ethiopian Treaty of 1902” setting the “frontier between the Sudan and Ethiopia”). It also has nothing to do with any other agreements drafted or concluded by the imperial government prior to 1974, or the Derg regime between 1975 and 1991 for border demarcation or settlement. Meles’ “agreement”, by his own admission, deals exclusively with border matters and related issues beginning in 1996, when presumably the occupation of Sudanese land by Ethiopians took place under Meles’ personal watch.”

Citing Wikileaks, Dr. Al Mariam writes,

“Former TPLF Central Committee member and former Defense Minister Seeye Abraha told” American embassy officials in Addis Ababa that in a move to deal with “on-going tensions between Ethiopia and Sudan”, Meles had turned over land to the Sudan “which has cost the Amhara region a large chunk of territory” and that Meles’ regime had tried to “sweep the issue under the rug.”

It is unlikely that the views and efforts of the people of Ethiopia will ever see the daylight vis-à-vis the border agreements that Meles Zenawi or Hailemariam Desalegn signed or concluded since there is no question on the legitimacy of their positions by the international community. International agreements they signed will undoubtedly stand.

In response to those concerns Hailemariam responded,

“The historical border agreement between the two nations dates back to the time of Emperor Menelik II when the Sudan was under the protectorate of the British Empire. There should not be any confusion on the issue since the agreement that was signed then was evaluated and accepted by successive regimes that came after Menelik's. The border agreements has been accepted and endorsed by the regimes and that there could not be any new matter that his administration has to deal with. "All that is left is to implement the already demarcated and delimited border agreement. So, there are no issues with the agreement: it is binding; the only thing left is to put posts on these borders.”

Hailemariam claims that Ethiopia is committed to regional peace. Why then is his regime illegally occupying internationally delimitated border with Eritrea? Why the doublespeak? The inconsistencies however are not limited to the border issues. Hailemariam’s positions and actions in Somalia and his view of Uganda’s role on the current conflict on SS are contradictory and dangerous for regional stability and progress. When he addressed Ugandan forces in SS, citing that the problem is political, Hailemariam said,

  “We believe that all forces that were “invited” by different forces in that country have to withdraw phase by phase.”

The irony, on the same press conference, while addressing Somalia, Hailemariam claiming to have bilateral agreement with the government in Somalia tried to legitimize the presence of Ethiopian forces in Somalia. He said Ethiopia is in Somalia as AMISOM “based on the “request” of the Somali government.”

Ugandan forces are in S. Sudan based on the “invitation” of the legitimate government of S. Sudan. Why then is Hailemariam seeking or talking political solution for the civil war in South Sudan while interfering in Somalia militarily? Why not political solution in Somalia? Assuming that the government in Somalia is independent and free to request assistance freely as a nation, why deny the same right to the government in South Sudan? Hardly anyone believes that Ethiopian forces are welcome by the people of Somalia. AMISOM or not, Ethiopian forces are not welcome. To the contrary Ethiopia’s incursion into Somalia was not received well.

On a recent interview with the VOA, former U.S. Ambassador to Ethiopia David Shinn said that it is a “mistake” for Ethiopian troops to join the AMISOM force in Somalia.

Peace, security, terrorism and Al Shabab are justifications for Hailemariam to return into Somalia. The reality, however, Ethiopia’s incursions into Somalia is impediment to peace and source of great instability.

Ambassador Shinn continued, Ethiopian move could allow al-Shabab to use it as a “rallying cry to recruit new members.”

Moreover, Hailmariam’s positions are contradictory and self-serving as it regards to IGAD’s role on the current conflicts in the region. Hailemariam evoked IGAD and AU to make a case against the presence of Ugandan troops in South Sudan and ignored the role of IGAD in Somalia. Uganda is in South Sudan based on the request of the sitting government of Salva Kiir Miardet, just like Ethiopia is in Somalia based on claims of a request. Why then Hailemariam undermining IGAD’s role in Somalia?

**Hailemariam Desalegn’s Compromised Stature**

By all standards Hailemariam Desalegn is on a tenuous position on many levels for many reasons.

Firstly, he is not from the region of the minority clique ruling the country. Many consider Hailemariam as a figurehead. On the 17 Feb, The Telegraph’s reporter David Blair on his report, “Ethiopian Airlines hijacking: Why co-pilot might have taken extreme steps to leave” wrote,

“Two key “push factors” lie behind this outflow: repression and poverty. Ethiopia is a de facto one-party state, dominated by small autocratic elite. Under the previous Prime Minister, Meles Zenawi, elections were shamelessly rigged and the opposition simply closed down. Many Ethiopians believed that Meles favored his own Tigray-Tigrinya ethnic group, who comprise less than seven per cent of the population, for the most powerful and privileged positions in the land.”

Hence, PM Haileriam Desalegn is considered a transitional figurehead until the election of 2015 and likely to be replaced by another member of the TPLF to pursue Zenawi’s agendas.

Secondly, Hailemariam inherited a country with a diminished regional and international influence for many reasons: A) The US has accomplished much of what it intended in Somalia hence the role required from Ethiopia is diminished. B) George Bush’s Somalia war on terror agenda, which the minority regime exploited extensively seems to have shifted slightly as the government in Somalia is recognized by the international community.

Thirdly, the countries in the region have opposing positions and interests on many areas as recent developments in S. Sudan exposed. Additionally, these countries have demonstrated ability to compete with Ethiopia on many fronts denying Ethiopia the anchor-state-status it enjoyed unchallenged for a while thus minimized Ethiopia’s exclusive role in that regard.

Fourth, International actors such as China and Russia are playing significant roles to influence events and outcomes to favor their geostrategic interests. To be effective, China and Russia need to include all and play a balanced hand with all the nations in the region further diluting Ethiopia’s once dominant role.

**Hailemariam’s Diminished Regional Roles**

One of the strongest suits of Meles Zenawi was the fact that he managed to co-opt influence from the regional actors using any means necessary. That level of influence died with Meles for many reasons:

* The power transition took a long time to materialize. Between the times Meles was rumored sick, his death and the time it took to complete the transition creating vacuum.
* The transition was manipulated to appease US interests while the real power remained on the hands of few Tigrayans led by the then Information Minister Bereket Simon who is considered the power controlling Hailemariam.
* The regional actors are focusing on their own interests. One good example of this is the current conflict in S. Sudan and how it will likely affect the dynamics of the relations between South Sudan, Uganda and Ethiopia regarding the Nile. Hailemariam is forced to wager Ethiopia’s interests regarding the Nile in order to pursue US agendas in South Sudan. No consensus on South Sudan could lead to lack of consensus on issues of mutual importance including the Nile. Meles Zenawi was able to garner consensus and support for Ethiopia’s positions on the Nile which is hard for Hailemariam to replicate.

Furthermore, Uganda, Kenya, South Sudan, Rwanda have mutual interests independent from Ethiopia because all these countries depend on port of Mombasa in Kenya for their imports. This gives Kenya leverage and importance that Hailameariam cannot match.

Moreover, initially, with the help of the US, the regime was able to create alliances with countries in the region specifically to encircle and suffocate Eritrea to submission. At this stage, while Hailemariam desperately tries to pretend that Eritrea is isolated; the reality is Eritrea has turned the table. Eritrea has relations with Uganda, Sudan, Kenya, South Sudan and Egypt. At the current stage Hailemariam has no relation with Eritrea, Egypt, opposing positions with Uganda and South Sudan and Kenya has more interest independent from Ethiopia. In effect, Ethiopia is encircled further diminishing Hailmariam’s roles.

* Shifting US foreign policy. Recent statements by former US diplomats regarding Eritrea stirred frantic reaction. The TPLF went on a full-fledged PR campaign to attack the issues and the personalities demonstrating fear the minority regime has of losing its status that it depends on for its very survival. On a piece about Zenawi’s legacy “Ethiopia: Revelation of Zenawi’s vision for Tigray,” Robele Ababya wrote,

“When asked, in the aftermath of the 2005 election, what legal authority he had to by-pass the Parliament and declare a state of emergency, Zenawi responded by saying that, after all, the donors did not object to the action he took. His response is solid proof, among others, that the monstrous killer was subservient to the interests of the donors at the expense of the vital interests of poor Ethiopia.”

Without US support the regime cannot survive. Hence fighting to maintain the “special-relation” status with the US is a question of survival. That however is beyond the control of the US as more African nations are looking for partnership with China, Russia, India, Brazil and other countries that are more focused on economic issues that Africa desperately need. This diminished US control of African agendas further diminishing Hailemariam’s role in the region that the late Zenawi enjoyed unchallenged.

**Hailemariam Desalegn Lame Duck Personified**

In the US, a president is generally considered a lame duck at the end of his tenure or when a successor is elected. What that generally means is, during that phase, if the president is not popular his/her influence could not translate into furthering his/her agendas and naturally no coattails. In reality, however, the president’s power is intact to the point that he/she can even wage wars.

In Hailemariam’s case, however, he is a lame duck in the truest sense because in Ethiopia, power is on the hands of the few repressive Tigrayans that are vying for time until the next election. “Ethiopia is a de facto one-party state, dominated by a small autocratic elite” controlling Hailmariam’s actions and public statements.

In addition, Hailemariam has no constituency inside Ethiopia or the Diaspora. Support for Hailemariam is virtually nonexistent.

**Conclusion**

The situation in Ethiopia is unsustainable. Ethiopia is under extreme internal and external pressures that will ultimately explode abruptly. As demonstrated above, to further the interests of the super powers, the regime suppressed the people and took unnecessary antagonistic positions by becoming a pseudo-hegemon of the region.

What the press conference demonstrated is that PM Hailemariam Desalegn tried to address concerns of many stakeholders and failed. He tried to address the concerns of the people of Tigray, US interests, Somalia and regional actors. He tried to address Eritrea in a manner that satisfied TPLF and all Ethiopians and failed.

Ethiopia is on a holding pattern bracing for change on the upcoming election. The questions are many. There exists no political party to challenge the TPLF. What does the US want in this transition? Can the TPLF bring a successor from Tigray and continue the “legacy” of Meles? How would the US react to that?

In the absence of clear leadership direction these questions take on a new meaning enlarging the gap between all the publics. That means PM Hailemariam Desalegn will have to await his fate to be decided by the TPLF as the rest of Ethiopia.

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-VOA Ethiopian AMISOM Membership Scrutinized

-Ethiopia: PM's Day With the Press Yohannes Anberbir AllAfrica February 15, 2014

-Alemayehu G. Mariam Saving Ethiopia from the Chopping Block

-The Telegraph David Blair, Ethiopian Airlines hijacking: Why co-pilot might have taken extreme steps to leave 17 Feb 2014

-Africa Confidential January edition