

Ethiopia's Meles Zenawi: Legacies, memories, histories

LSE's Awol Allo explores the conflicting legacy of Ethiopia's former Prime Minister Meles Zenawi.

August 20 marked the **second anniversary** of the death of Ethiopia's long-time leader, Meles Zenawi. Two years on, the Zenawi phenomenon is still as divisive as it is unsettling. For his supporters, Zenawi is a statesman and a visionary leader that represents not only the hopes and aspirations of "the new Ethiopia" but also "the African renaissance". For those who were excluded and marginalised under his rule, Zenawi is the symbolic personification of a tyrannical system that violently quashed their desire for freedom and justice. Still for others, he is a complex figure that condenses within himself the qualities of a political genius and a seasoned dictator. In the words of *The Economist*: "the man who tried to make dictatorship acceptable."

Two years on, the spectre of Zenawi hangs over the Ethiopian state. His name, his policies, and his visions still provide the cement that keeps together the ideological edifices of the Ethiopian state. His successors elevate him to a pure symbol, take pride in and identify with his legacies. The constant invocation of Zenawi by regime officials gives the impression that the entire social and political order of the state is predicated on the image and imagery of a single man. The "Meles Legacy" has become a **grand memory work** – an archive that condenses within it a great many different things for a great many different people.



Legacy and the politics of archives

Zenawi now belongs to the archives. But archives are pivotal – "great historical watchtowers" or "observation posts" from which we can access and observe the past. In archives, we see the random elements and the minute details of our identity. Archives are not just about remembering and understanding the past. In fact, at stake in every recounting of the past is not the past as such; it is the future. In his seminal essay, "Archive Fever", French philosopher Jacques Derrida **observes**, the question of the archive is "a question of the future, the question of the future itself, the question of a response, of a promise and of a responsibility for tomorrow. The archive: if we want to know what that will have meant, we will only know in times to come." To speak about Zenawi's archives, then, is not to speak about the past: It is about the future.

But archives are contested spaces: They not only conserve but also produce and reproduce. Far from being neutral voids in which facts and events are placed, archives are active agents that

participate in the production and reproduction of meaning. For every archive, there are counter-archives. For every narrative, there are counter-narratives. It is precisely for this reason that Zenawi's legacy has become such an important site of political struggle in Ethiopia today.

Zenawi's archives

As a man who played the single most important role in Ethiopia's history of the last two decades, Zenawi is a giant in that archive. When asked by **Al Jazeera's Andrew Simmons** about the legacy he leaves behind, Zenawi said, "I would like to be remembered as someone who got Ethiopia off to a good track, democratic one, [...] where Ethiopia's proverbial poverty begins to be tackled in an effective way; I would like to be remembered as someone who has started the process."

During his funeral ceremony two years ago, his successor, Hailemariam Desalegn **called him a "visionary"**, an "intellectual", and a "technocrat" who has been "working for the renaissance Ethiopia and Africa". Jacob Zuma of South Africa called him " **one of the greatest sons of the continent**" while Paul Kagame of Rwanda recognised his unreserved support in the fight to end the Rwandan genocide and praised his "**humble**", "**simple**" but "**meaningful life**". The most notable eulogy was delivered by then US Ambassador to the United Nations, Susan Rice, who depicted a rather erudite and progressive image of Zenawi. Rice spoke of "**his world-class mind**": " he wasn't just brilliant. He wasn't just a relentless negotiator and a formidable debater. He wasn't just a thirsty consumer of knowledge. He was uncommonly wise." In many ways, he has built international reputation for himself as "the voice of Africa", and the West's key ally on "the war on terror".

Whatever the truth of these eulogies, Zenawi's domestic **credentials are absolutely dismal**. For the last two decades, Ethiopia consistently ranked as one of **the most repressive states** in the world. Susan Rice's own **State Department chronicled** a consistent pattern of grave violations of human rights including torture, arbitrary killings, restrictions on freedom of the press and expression, denial of religious freedoms, and the politicised use of its notorious anti-terrorism legislation. Contradicting her own government's documented practices of torture and other grave human rights violations, Rice's eulogies slips into an agonising denial that flies in the face of the facts .

Rice exploits the grandeur of US power and its enunciating force to rework the history of repression and torture. This reworking, as the Philosopher **Michel Foucault says**, functions to "ensure that the greatness of the events or men of the past could guarantee the value of the present". However, history cannot remain reworked. As **Walter Benjamin's** messianic but sublime insight reveals: " The past carries with it a temporal index by which it is referred to redemption. There is a secret agreement between past generations and the present one. Our coming was expected on earth."

Zenawi's counter-archives

Zenawi was a paradoxical figure who embodied the traits of a brutal dictator and a politico-economic genius, both unified in one. Just before the 2010 election in which Zenawi won 99.6 percent of the seats, **Andrew Simmons sought an explanation** for these two faces: "There are . . . those who say that you have two faces, you have a face for Davos, charming, a progressive and you have another face, which is totalitarian and repressive; how do you respond to that?" Zenawi's answer was misleadingly simple: "As far as I am concerned, what you see is what you get. No two faces, just one."

Those who are deprived of the means of narrative production by Zenawi see him as a man who used his omnipotent power and his knowledge of the politico-military complex to **eliminate the very conditions** under which alternative ideas and competent political operators could emerge. It is not simply that he built a system around himself, but deliberately established himself as the only leader able to supply the cement necessary to hold together the nation's internal ruptures. He

might have helped Ethiopia achieve rocketing economic progress but this progress came at a cost of two decades of terror and repression.

The relentless memorialisation of Zenawi's legacy conceals, misrecognises, misrepresents, de-historicises, and ultimately erases the fundamental relationships of domination and inequality instituted by the order minted by Zenawi. These obsessive **commemorative practices**, i.e. events, parks, monuments, and institutions built up to remember and commemorate Zenawi have the purpose and effect of transforming everything about Zenawi into "a dazzling action" that can be appropriated by the order he founded and the sovereignty he left behind. It has the goal of transcribing his deeds into a discourse that ensures the sedimentation of these utterances into common-sense knowledge, into that which remains when everything is forgotten. This, then, is what is at stake in the struggle over the legacy of Meles Zenawi.

No doubt the darling of the West who outmanoeuvred his adversaries, Zenawi's domestic reputation is radically at odds with his international stature. In the eyes of his people, Zenawi was irredeemably authoritarian.

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