

THE FARCE OF A PARDON

By Hama Tuma

In Meles Zenawi's version of history (with a small h, please note) every turn and event always plays out as a farce though the diminutive tyrant is no comedian in the normal sense of the term. No Marx here, sorry. Meles was a Stalinist and never a Marxist and cannot be blamed for repeating the comedy, the farce.

Meles does not rival Bush in giving us gems of Bushism but he does, to his credit or discredit, try. Take his recent statement that the released CUD party leaders cannot regain the parliamentary seats they had won in the last election after "boycotting the parliament for two years". Where were these alleged boycotters for the last two years? In the prison of Kaliti where Meles had thrown them! How can they boycott when their very right to be free had been boycotted and they had to suffer in Kaliti? The tyrant enjoys such statements as his aversion to fact and decency has for long been known. We did cross the border but we never invaded Somalia was what he said at one time. We killed many peaceful demonstrators because our riot police had no training and rubber bullets, he had said at another time. He can declare the Sahara is a rice paddy and Fogera a mountain gorge. What we call in Ethiopia a man who has washed his eyes with salt and lies outright. The tendency to play out history as a farce maybe a symptom for some particular malady which, I admit, I do not know the name. No doubt though, it is a malady. Meles Zenawi is sick and that is no joke.

The "pardon" charade was played with seriousness in the State Department of America and in Ethiopia especially by the regime. To start out, the fact is that the ruling front lost the May 2005 election to an Opposition that owed its success not much for its capacity or democratic credentials but for the intense hatred of the people for the Meles gang. And, the gang was and is a gang, it does not know fair play, respects no niceties, is a Mafia that does the Saturday Massacre every day of the week, with no principles whatsoever other than doing whatever it takes for survival. Meles ordered his troops, federal police and sharpshooters to kill protesters (more than 200 were killed) and stayed in power illegally (as happens in Africa most of the time). It proceeded to round up more than 50,000 people, sent them to labour camps (more than 30,000 are still there), and then put in prison most of the Opposition leaders and independent journalists. All were charged with crimes of genocide, treason, inciting rebellion and, to add to the farce, many in exile who had never set foot in the country were also accused of the same crimes. How can you commit genocide in Addis Ababa from far away Washington DC? Is the era of remote controlled genocide in? A Meles Zenawi contribution to this field for sure.

What transpired in the theatrical farce directed by Meles is the fact that the prisoners who were not part of any killing or crime other than being victims were told that they were the criminals and asked to seek pardon. The pressure was varied, family, foreign, local, whatever. Times have changed and the field was open to an intellectual with Israeli roots who has little notion of politics but is very aware of who pays the piper. This particular professor parades in Ethiopian traditional (?) clothing (ethnic kitsch in New York?) and encourages those who assume from this that he loves Ethiopia and her poor people. There was even a famous sportsman who surprisingly seems to have suddenly turned political, criticised the opposition and asked the detained to kneel and

beg. How and why did the prisoners sign the humiliating letter asking for pardon from the very criminal regime itself? One of the pardoned leaders has said that they did so under duress. Others have resisted more duress and died resisting. Yet, I may have seen some prisons here and there but having never been to Kaliti I cannot argue against those who claim the dismal prison can get you very down and despondent. Most of the mediators had close links with the sold out Inter Africa Group and by implication we can imagine who was the self declared Big Power pulling the string from behind. But, the interesting aspect of the farce lies elsewhere. How can a killer ask the victims to apologize? Is this Chutzpah? Dirkina in Amharic? The tyrant has a penchant for penning apology letters that he forces upon prisoners to sign. The monk, Aba Gebre Meskel was forced to sign one. Abera Yemane Ab and his colleagues were also pressurized to sign another but in the end it did not help Abera who is still purging a 25 years harsh and unfair prison sentence. At another time, the EPRP was also asked to sign an affidavit renouncing violence and luckily the members of this organization were quick to denounce such a request and to refuse shaming and dirtying their own History. Is Meles being nice and considerate by saving the prisoner the hassle of composing their own apology letters? The letter signed by those who allegedly demanded pardon this time is by itself a ridiculous piece. The regime killed the protesters and how can the Opposition leaders who lost their militants make themselves responsible for the brutal killing? Did they order the regime's soldiers to shoot? Are the victims guilty for being in the eyesight of the sharp shooters? For intercepting the bullets intended to kill them? Are the leaders guilty for winning an election? Or for being so much gullible as to imagine that the ruling front will give up power peacefully if defeated? Or, for putting their trust not in their people but in cheating foreigners?

Many people make the mistake of assuming that repression comes cheap. Big time error. Repression is costly to the regime, the victims have just to suffer or die. Be it even a bread a day per prisoner (and the prisoners are in their thousands) it costs money. Bullets are not free or cheap and that was why the previous regime made the kin of victims pay the bullet price. If some victim was obdurate enough to require five or more bullets to die then it is just too bad for the kin who have to pay for the bullets used to kill him or her. Ethiopians are poor, they starve, they have a lot of pain and it is not only "anarchists" who went out looking for death. Many otherwise sane people will intercept a bullet not intended for them. Suicidal impulses, the suffering is that bad. Making their relatives pay for the intercepted bullet is only fair--after all the victims just die. They incur no expenses at all unlike the regime that has to field killers and pay for bullets imported from Russia and China. The Meles regime is stingy and corrupt and incompetent and as we all know wanton violence is the last refuge of incompetent people. Hence, the longstanding practice of crude violence by the TPLF of Meles. The legal Opposition that contested the election committed a "crime" of "naivety" in believing that the violent regime will peacefully accept the outcome of the elections. Did they imagine Meles would just handover the key to the gates of the palace and go live in his father's birth place in Adwa or in the Cayman Islands? Could very well be. But it really does not matter now. The main point is that these fellows of the Opposition cannot escape "guilt" for putting the demonstrators in the path of the bullets fired by sharpshooters on top of buildings. If the demonstrators were not there, who would have killed them? Did Meles put them there? Seen from this perspective, the insistence by Meles that the guilty ones are not those who ordered or did the killings acquires some sense. It is all a matter of perspective. That the killer is asked for pardon thus becomes plausible and the pardon charade tries to escape being a farce. As some of the opposition

leaders were accusing the EPRP for provoking the brutal violence of the former military regime (Red Terror and all) maybe all this could be seen, if we want to be cruel, as poetic justice.

No one has told me who elected these so-called "shimagiles" or elders (some are neither old nor experienced) just as no one has informed anyone on how the electoral commission board's new members got selected by Meles in the first place. It can all be in the need to know basis. Limited rights, restricted democracy. What did these elders ask from Meles other than the onerous task of pardoning his victims? Nothing. For a hardliner Weyane (and Meles is one), the word pardon is itself painful and that must be why the whole process took long, the tyrant had to sleep over it and his kat chewing habits do not encourage much sleep. The victims had to be humiliated and the so-called elders helped in actualising this. They pressurised, misinformed, and transmitted threats, etc to make the prisoners pliable. The American embassy, a den of experts from Langley, also lent a hand. Experience aplenty from Abu Ghraib to Guantanamo. How to Humiliate the Opposition 101. The menace of long term incarceration and even death was dangled like the sword of Damocles and the aged prisoners with frail health harassed. Meles did want to punish his victims but unable to kill or keep them in prison for years he took the next best choice--to kill them without killing them. No need for martyrs. Maybe killing has become boring and Meles is finding ways of murder without the victim actually dying. Something to follow closely.

For those who do not know the ruling cabal it would be proper to remind them of its practice during its existence as a guerrilla force. It used to force the captured soldiers of the government to broadcast over its radio how much they now admire and like the Front and how good they have been treated. The Meles gang imagined that many people would believe this ridiculous propaganda. What choice did the prisoners have other than praising their captors just to stay alive? But, the problem with tyrants and dictators is that they end up believing their own lies and cheap propaganda. Former dictator Mengistu ended up believing what his trembling minions said about him and he imagined himself brilliant, an economist, an agronomist, a war strategist and what have you. Many African dictators believe that they are The Sun of the Nation, The Supreme Combatant, The Iron Willed Commander, The Brilliant Brain of the Nation and so on., Meles Zenawi talks street smart and when his hirelings equate this with intelligence he goes off track and imagines only he has the solution to the problems of the world thanks to his Open University degree. That is why he blabbers without an end, kills us with clichés both in English and Amharic and believes that his incredible lies do pass as gems of truth. In the same vein, letters of apology written by him and handed over to the prisoners to sign are, in his mind, enough to convince the world that the victims are indeed the guilty ones. And then he gloats over this Pyrrhic victory, plays the incident up in his mass media and expects the people to be crushed and subdued. The logic of the brute is not expected to make sense.

Apparently, Meles would win if the farce leads to consequences in which pseudo elders would play the same trick on others too and if the released opposition leaders go on to commit the same mistakes again. Unpardonable by the people, but a piece of cake for the regime. The criminal cannot pardon the victim but this does not apply in the twisted mind of the present rulers and tormentors of Ethiopia. Dissidence is a crime. The regime is there to kill and stamp out any opposition. If the opposition fails to understand this, then it deserves the punishment meted out to it. Please do not intercept the bullets

fired at you. You may die but your kin will suffer for it. And worse of all, they may have to ask pardon for ever being related to you in the first place. And worse of all, the apology letter will be drafted by none other than the murderous tyrant himself. Bad enough to make you turn in your grave, a bad farce but who said that we are all Marxists and believe that History does not repeat itself always only as a farce?