

Ethiopian Tyrant Should Not Be Lionized

By [Thor Halvorssen](#) and Alex Gladstein

With the dust beginning to settle on yesterday's death of Meles Zenawi—ruler of Ethiopia since 1991—Western leaders have been quick to lavish praise on his legacy. A darling of the national security and international development industries, Zenawi was [applauded](#) for cooperating with the U.S. government on counter-terrorism and for spurring economic growth in Ethiopia—an impoverished, land-locked African nation of 85 million people. In truth, democratic leaders who praise Zenawi do a huge injustice to the struggle for human rights and individual dignity in Ethiopia.



Meles Zenawi at the World Economic Forum summit in Addis Ababa in May 2012 (Photo: WEF)

U.S. Ambassador Susan Rice said Zenawi “[leaves behind an indelible legacy of major contributions to Ethiopia, Africa, and the world.](#)” Gordon Brown called Zenawi’s demise “a tragedy for the Ethiopian people,” while [David Cameron](#) remembered him as an “inspirational spokesman for Africa.” [Bill Gates](#) tweeted that he “[was a visionary leader who brought real benefits to Ethiopia’s poor.](#)” Abdul Mohammed and Alex de Waal took to the [New York Times](#) op-ed pages today in perhaps the most [unspeakably sycophantic eulogy](#) of Zenawi, declaring that the dictator’s death “deprives Ethiopia — and Africa as a whole — of an exceptional leader.”

For years, the diminutive Zenawi had been a fixture on the Davos circuit, charming Western leaders with statistics of human development and business expansion. Under his control, Ethiopia’s average annual GDP growth rate more than doubled to a gaudy [8.8 percent over the past decade](#), and trade and investment with the West boomed. He worked with the U.S. to capture terrorists—even invading Somalia to help oust an Islamist government—in return netting roughly [a billion dollars a year](#) in American aid. Ethiopia had been to hell and back in the 1970s

and 1980s with famine, war, and genocide. For someone who came to power as a freedom fighter and liberator, who gave one of the poorest countries on earth China-esque economic growth, and who became a key ally of the U.S., what was not to like?

First off, many of the rosy development statistics given out by the Ethiopian government [are simply fraudulent](#); independent sources still rank Ethiopia at the very bottom of [poverty](#) indexes. Second, what genuine economic and public health transformations Zenawi did bring to Ethiopia were achieved with a [top-down model](#) that mirrored the statist command he implemented over all other aspects of Ethiopian life.

Zenawi built a totalitarian state, guided by Marxist-Leninism, complete with a [cult of personality](#) and zero tolerance for dissent. Like Saddam Hussein or Bashar al-Assad, he filled the country's top political and economic positions with men from his own Tigray ethnicity. When elections did occur, he won them with Saddam-like numbers, most recently, [99 percent of the vote](#). Civil society organizations [were harassed into submission or banned](#). His [government only allowed one](#) television station, *one* radio station, *one* internet-service provider, *one* telecom, *one* national daily, and *one* English daily—all churning out government propaganda. Zenawi used this information hegemony to heavily censor news available to Ethiopians, taking special delight in preventing them from hearing news from exile groups outside the country.

Zenawi's critics were jailed, killed or chased out of the country: in fact, more journalists were exiled from Ethiopia in the last decade than [any other country on earth](#). Let's restate that: Zenawi kicked out more journalists than any other tyrant on the planet, thereby monopolizing control over information. His favorite tactic was labeling dissidents as terrorists. Journalists [risked up to 20 years in prison](#) if they even reported about opposition groups classified by the government as terrorists. The most emblematic case is that of [Eskinder Nega](#), a PEN-award-winning author sentenced to 18 years in prison this July for questioning the government's new anti-terrorism laws.

Many in the West like to credit Zenawi with "[keeping Ethiopia together](#)" despite ethnic differences, war, famine and regional instability. Dissidents, however, maintain that Zenawi was [always at war with his own people](#). When towns and villages rose up against Zenawi's military regime, they were [put down brutally](#). There was, and still is, a climate of fear. With 85 million Ethiopians suffering under his thrall, Meles Zenawi constructed one of history's most depraved states in terms of numerical human suffering.

So why is this monster being celebrated? Some, like Bill Gates and Ambassador Rice, choose to remain blind to Zenawi's systemic human rights abuses. He was, undoubtedly, charming. Others, perhaps more worryingly, excuse his tyranny for his development and economic acumen. *Foreign Policy*'s managing editor illustrated this point of view while tweeting that "[Meles Zenawi was a dictator but was better for his country than many democratically elected leaders.](#)"

This kind of mentality is a dangerous one. *There is no such thing as a benign dictator*. Only those with a fascist mindset—who want to cut corners, who complain how messy and inefficient democracy can be, and who overlook two thousand years of political history—can believe in this chimera. From Cuba to [Kazakhstan](#), the story is the same.

For instance, Pinochet took Chile from being a run-of-the-mill right-wing statist dictatorship to an economic success story with the same liberalization principles that the Chinese tyranny has employed to transform itself into a world power. Is the Pinochet-Beijing model of a police state with economic freedom, attempted by Zenawi for Ethiopia, an acceptable one in this day and age? The *New York Review of Books* reminds us that this sort of ideology brought Ethiopia “[appalling cruelty in the name of social progress](#).” Anyone stating that they “like” the economic results from the Pinochet-Beijing model must accept thousands of tortured and disappeared in Chile and tens of *millions* dead in China (and 8 million political prisoners [languishing in the Laogai](#) as of today). Perhaps those admiring a strongman can accept such a condition with a John Rawls-type [veil of ignorance](#) without knowing what it is like to live under a dictatorship. It is easy to tolerate torture and disappearances if it isn’t happening to your daughter, your brother, your mother, or you.

Those in the West heaping praise on Zenawi—all living in societies that suffered so much to achieve individual liberty—are engaging in dramatic hypocrisy by praising this thug. Would Bill Gates live in a country that denies people basic political freedoms? Whose government arrests and kills its critics en masse? Would he trade places with an Ethiopian university student who believes in free expression and whose stance will lead to certain prison and possible execution?

Any arguments that Zenawi was mellowing (after 21 years in power!) are false. The past few years saw new sweeping “anti-terrorism” laws and [stronger Internet censorship](#). In 2005, Ethiopia even saw its own [Tiananmen Square](#). That year, Zenawi decided to hold freer elections, but the opposition won a record number of parliamentary seats, including all those in the capital, Addis Ababa. Throngs took to the streets to celebrate. In response, Zenawi [lashed out brutally](#), arresting the opposition’s entire leadership and sentencing them to life in prison for treason; shuttering five newspapers and imprisoning their editors; murdering 193 protestors, injuring 800, and arbitrarily jailing 40,000 other men, women, and teenagers in a show of raw tyranny. According to *The Telegraph*’s David Blair, who was [reporting from the scene](#), “a crackdown on this scale has not been seen in Africa for 20 years and the repression exceeds anything by President Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe for the past decade at least. Apartheid-era South Africa’s onslaught against the black townships in the 1980s provides the only recent comparison.”

Source: Forbes Magazine