

Meles Zenawi with BBC's Stephen Sacker of Hard Talk

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Ethiopia is one of the poorest countries on earth. But in recent years western leaders have come to see it as a beacon of hope. A country dragging itself out of poverty by being served by better governors. But they regressed down. Parliamentary elections in May are a subject of hot dispute, and anti government protesters were shot dead, and now many Ethiopians fear for the future of their country. My guest today in his office just down this road is Ethiopia's prime minister.

HT - Prime Minister Meles Zenawi, welcome to Hard Talk.

Meles - Thank you.

HT - The Ethiopian elections took place on May the 15th. All these weeks later, there is no result, and the country is deeply divided. What went wrong?

Meles - Well what went wrong was we took a calculated risk from the very beginning. Much of the opposition had muted views as to what it wants to achieve through these elections clear from day one. Which is to carry out what they called Rose or Orange Revolution patterned along the lines of Ukraine and Georgia.

HT - Which is a peaceful democratic revolution. Which is their right as an opposition?

Meles - I'd have thought differently. Democratic elections are there to be decided by the outcome of the elections rather than by street demonstrations to subvert the will of the people freely expressed through elections.

HT - But without... too much details, isn't that precisely what we saw in Ukraine? That was a big dispute about the first election. So the election had to be conducted again. In the end, all sides agreed that was democratic.

Meles - What happened in Ukraine is quite different from what happened in Ethiopia. As you probably know, all international observers, without exception, said that the election process in Ethiopia was free, fair and transparent by any standard.

HT - No, no! They didn't, prime minister. With due respect, they didn't say that. The Carter Center, for example, from the United States, said there was much to welcome about this election, they said it was freer and fairer than Ethiopian elections in the past. But they also said, and I quote, "There was evidence that ballot boxes have been

removed improperly, or were improperly secured, and party agents were excluded from the count. They also confirmed cases of intimidation and harassment, and said, "National elections Board officials were slow to respond or failed to provide any information."

Meles - Well, the overall assessment of both the Carter Center and the European Union said that the elections up to the polling day were free, fair and transparent.

HT - "Up to the polling day!" But not including the count?

Meles - Now when it comes to the counting, the opposition parties, which had all along challenged the free polling day process also, all the opposition groups, had been claiming that the pre-polling day processes, which was certified to be free and fair by international observers, were alleged to have been unfair and unfree. Having said that...

HT - Just...I have to... Well...

Meles - Let me finish...

HT - I've to...to a certain extent, the EU observers mission expressed, just two days after the vote, expressed, and I quote: **"Serious concern over the threats and intimidations of opposition parties, including isolated cases of murder."**

Meles - The point I am trying to make is that there is a pattern of crying wolf as far as the opposition is concerned. They did that before the election day, this was disproved by international observers, as soon as the elections were over here in Addis, the leader of the opposition told your service, the BBC, that the elections in Addis had been rigged and that they would not accept the elections in Addis. A few hours later, this very leader of the opposition discovered that they had made a clean sweep of the seats in Addis, and changed tact, and said, "Oh, oh, it is not Addis which has been rigged. It's places outside of Addis. Now we said 'OK. If that's your allegation, let's have the most transparent investigation into all allegations of electoral malpractice. Let's have the international observers. Do the observation of the investigations. Contrary to normal practice, initially the European observers said 'this not the normal practice, and we do not have a mandate.' We insisted that they stay on, and observe the investigations. Now one would have thought because we have put in place a completely transparent process of investigating allegations, people would wait for the results of the investigations.

HT - But the opposition parties are absolutely convinced that the preliminary results simply do not reflect reality. We spoke today to the opposition coalition group in the CUD today that Senior Coordinator Isaac Kifle said, "29 million people voted, and 26 million people said "No to you, the prime minister." The did exit polling. They have no doubt whatsoever that the preliminary results were rigged.

Meles - Well, you see, that is why we have judges, that is why we have observers, that is why we have investigations. If the outcome of the elections were to be

determined by opinions of the contestants, we could say exactly the same thing about the opposition. And that would not lead us anywhere. What would lead us somewhere is for all of us to wait for the impartial investigation to be observed by international observers.

HT - Well, let's talk about that. Impartial investigation as you call it, it's basically being conducted by the National Electoral Board of Ethiopia. Isn't it?

Meles - Yes.

HT - Now, why did the National Electoral Board throw out the complaints of vote-rigging made in around 160 constituencies without even examining them?

Meles - You see, that's where you are making the mistake.

HT - Am I wrong?

Meles - Yes, you are wrong. You are wrong because international observers, all the parties got together, and decided on criteria for screening the allegations.

HT - But the opposition doesn't agree all the 160 constituencies...

Meles - No, they agree the criteria for selecting the frivolous from the non-frivolous, and on the basis of the criteria agreed by all sides, they threw out some allegations...

HT - Patiently the opposition disagrees with the way the criteria were applied.

Meles - If they disagreed with the way the criteria were applied, they have a process of redress, and that is a hearing, they have a right to a hearing, and this hearing will be conducted again in the presence of international observers.

HT - Let me ask you a simple question. Who presented the names of members of the election board to the House of Representatives' approval?

Meles - The National Election Board, the current board, was appointed over a decade ago, during the transitional period, and at that period, at that time, the president submitted the names to the parliament. Now if we were to appoint new election board members, it would be the prime minister, which would put the names to the parliament.

HT - Where were you at that particular time?

Meles - I was the president of the Transitional Government.

HT - You were the president?

Meles - Yes.

HT - So you still put forward the names?

Meles - Yes I did.

HT - Well, I think perhaps that's the point I am trying to get to. You put forward all the names of the people who are on the Electoral Board?

Meles - Uhm!

HT - And you now expect the opposition to believe this Board would be entirely impartial?

Meles - Well, I suppose the opposition parties in France expect their Minister of Interior to be impartial in elections and I suppose it is very similar in your country?

HT - But I suppose in most countries it would be unusual for one man to be in power for so long, and would control all the appointments for so long?

Meles - This is my second term, and I...

HT - You just told me you were the president the Interim Transitional authority before?

Meles - Yeah, the Transitional Period.

HT - So in essence, you have been in power for 14 years.

Meles - Is that unheard of in Europe?

HT - You controlled all of these appointments, you are now demanding that your country regards this Electoral Board as absolutely impartial. And I'm asking you whether you are surprised that the opposition does not have confidence in this Board?

Meles - Well you see the opposition does not have confidence in the constitution and the constitutional process as a whole, and they said so. And they said they are going to change the constitution by unconstitutional means. They did not mean words, they said so in public. In most countries such people would be behind bars.

HT - Given the divisiveness, given the problems Ethiopia now has, why does you simply call a new national election?

Meles - That is for the National Election Board to decide. I do not have the right to call new elections at my whim.

HT - You think it would be a good idea at this point given what has happened?

Meles - What?

HT - New election?

Meles - Probably it's a good idea, but that is beyond...I don't have the power.

HT - I think it's important to clarify your thinking, your thinking at the moment might be a good idea to have a new election.

Meles - From the point of view of the EPRDF, it might be a very good idea because of many of the protested votes would have been addressed, and we would have had many more seats than we currently have.

HT - Let me turn to the political climate after the vote on May 15th. Why did you introduce emergency regulations very soon afterwards which essentially banned public protests, demonstrations in this country?

Meles - Well, emergency regulations and banning demonstrations for a month are not exactly identical...

HT - It has been extended, isn't it?

Meles - Yes it has been extended.

HT - Well now to the end of July?

Meles - Yeah, the reason for that is because of what I told you earlier that the opposition had made its views abundantly clear.

HT - What do you mean by that?

Meles - Because they had claimed they would use election process to carry out civil disobedience programs culminating in a change of power by unconstitutional means

HT - You are telling me the opposition leadership were calling for an anti-democratic revolution before the campaign is even finished?

Meles - A year before the elections started, one year before the election started.

HT - In that case why did you not arrest them? Because I imagine

Meles - We could have done that. That is what I was trying to tell you early on...we took a calculated risk. We said these unconstitutional maneuvers by the opposition are better challenged by democratic political processes...

HT - I think it's fair to say by the 6th of June it was clear that some people in this country were desperately unhappy with the way events were unfolding out to the election. They wanted to protest. Why didn't you let anybody protest at all in the streets?

Meles - As I said earlier, the opposition parties had been making threats of insurrections, and we felt it would be wise to let tempers cool off, and therefore we banned demonstrations for a month and that, for your information, none of our development partners complained about that.

HT - On the 8th of June, while police in Addis were faced with a large crowd, many of them students, what orders had you given the security forces?

Meles - Stop insurrection.

HT - Simple as that?

Meles - Yeah.

HT - Is that an adequate order, given slightly more nuances without how they should deal with children, young people, who might throw stones at them?

Meles - Well, you see, policemen are trained to control crowd...I do not presume to be an expert in crowd control and give instructions how policemen should do their job.

HT - You are the prime minister. You are the leader of the country. The police had tear gas, they had water canon, the protesters had some stones, apparently. Why did the police need to open fire?

Meles - I'm told that they could not restrain the demonstrators with tear gas, or water canon or even shooting in the air.

HT - Do you believe that?

Meles - Well, that is what has been reported to me until and unless an independent investigation proves otherwise, I have to believe it.

HT - So you believe that a group largely of students...

Meles - Not so students; 80 percent of the detainees were unemployed youth.

HT - Youth?

Meles - Yeah.

HT - They did not have a single gun amongst them?

Meles - I have not heard of any guns here.

HT - No guns at all?

Meles - Uhm.

HT - Even the police are not claiming they had guns?

Meles - Uhm.

HT - In your view, they still, the police had to open fire and kill we now believe to be around three dozen people?

Meles - I'm telling you that the police felt that the masses of the unemployed youth was coming at them, it was threatening to overpower them, they shot in the air, even that did not restrain them apparently because the opposition have the people if they push a bit, the police and the army would crack.

HT - So here we have, in your view, hundreds of riot police with the whole uniforms on, who could have been overpowered by a bunch of youth throwing stones?

Meles - Well, if it's a bunch of youth in terms of tens and hundreds, it would be unthinkable. If you are thinking of in terms of thousands or tens of thousands in narrow streets in the Mercato, and given the fact that we had three or four years earlier, riots in the same place, which resulted in many deaths, and burnings of shops, and all the establishments of that type, perhaps the police had reason to feel that they are being overpowered by these unemployed youth in their thousands.

HT - Amnesty International condemned what happened as "excessive and indiscriminate use of force." They said that international standards are clear, security forces can only resort to the lethal use of fire arms when it's strictly necessary to protect life. Do you agree with the standard?

Meles - Yes.

HT - So will you apologize to the families of those who lost their lives?

Meles - If it's proved that there was excessive use of force, yes.

HT - But you will not say here that you are sorry for what happened?

Meles - I'm sorry that people died but until an independent investigation is carried out, I'm not going to have a kangaroo court to judge the policemen. There has to be an independent investigation before I make the decision that there has been an excessive use of force.

HT - Your information minister, Bereket Simon, went further, and he said the alternative to the crackdown we saw that day was: "Strife between different nationalities of Ethiopia might have made the Rwandan genocide look like child's play." Did he clear that statement with you?

Meles - He doesn't clear his statement with me but whatever the superlatives there, I believe [pause]

HT - Superlatives?

Meles - Whatever the superlatives there, I believe that the risk of strife in Ethiopia was quite clear. And we've to put down an insurrection. It is the right and obligation of every government to do so. Whether there has been excess use of force is something that remains to be determined by an independent investigation.

HT - When will you publish the findings of the independent investigation?

Meles - As soon as the investigation is completed.

HT - And how independent is it?

Meles - Well, in the past we've had independent investigations. And they have come up with results that we do not like.

HT - Who is running this one?

Meles - We will make the announcement when we are ready for it.

HT - What do you mean? Even you haven't started it?

Meles - We are studying the possibilities in identifying the personalities

HT - What message does that send to the Ethiopian people? You haven't even selected the people to begin investigation? This happened on June 8th?

Meles - We take our time, we study our case, and we make the decisions when we are ready.

HT - On June 11th you said (with the Reuters) the election in its aftermath: "Is an indication that our democracy is maturing."

Meles - Yes.

HT - What does it mean?

Meles - It means that the Ethiopian people decided to express their opposition and support through the free process of election.

HT - But 36 people have just been gunned down in the streets of Addis Ababa. How could that be a sign that democracy in this country is maturing?

Meles - The fact that 26 people have died ...

HT - I think it is well over 30.

Meles - That is your contention. My facts simply suggest that it is 26. The fact, well, I am not going to quarrel whether it is 36 or 26; even one person is one to many. In any

case, the fact that people have died is regrettable but the fact that we have had a free, fair and transparent election is incontestable. The fact that people have had their say is incontestable. And the fact that all allegations of electoral malpractice are being investigated in a transparent fashion is incontestable. And these are signs of maturity that I'm proud of.

HT - Tony Blair called you; didn't he? ...After these events. What did he say to you?

Meles - He said that he was distressed that there was loss of life, and he hoped that we would exercise restraint in the use of force to stop riots.

HT - He had announced through his minister that Britain was suspending 20 million pounds of aid to Ethiopia. What did you think of that?

Meles - Well that's the prerogative of the minister; isn't it?

HT - What do you think of that?

Meles - I felt it was uncalled for.

HT - Do you like the way he used aid in that way? Did it convey any political message to you?

Meles - I don't. Because I felt it was not a major reaction.

HT - Do you think it was a warning, a bigger warning to you about your political behavior?

Meles - Well we will democratize in Ethiopia not to please Tony Blair or anybody else; we will democratize in Ethiopia because it is good for us.

HT - Let me talk about your agenda now. Let us assume that the preliminary results of this elections, which gave you a victory are upheld, you're prime minister again. Will you serve four five-year terms, if that is the case?

Meles - That is up to my party to decide.

HT - What do you want to do?

Meles - I will wait and see what I want to do. It will depend on the circumstances.

HT - Actually you've decided what you wanted to do. I mean you stood for election, that you want the office?

Meles - I want the office to serve my country but I will only serve if I feel...I have value to add, I will continuously if I have value to add. If I come to the decision that I do not add any value, and then I will leave. Likewise if my party feels I don't add value, they can change the prime minister any time.

HT - Do you see some danger in a leader staying too long? Some might point to Robert Mugabe in Zimbabwe.

Meles - Well, people have to stay as long as the people want them to stay, and do so through freely-contested elections. The decision has to be that of the people in the final analysis. Now once that decision has been made, the leaders also have to make decisions as to whether they want to stay longer or not. The longevity of political leaders, in my view, depends on the quality of the democracy in the country. You've had stayed for over a decade. I don't think they became corrupt as the result of that. If people are going to be corrupt, they cannot blame the longevity as a reason for corruption. Having said that, however, more frequent changes of leaders is a safer and healthier approach.

HT - The G8 have announced major plans for debt relief, including Ethiopia. But they are tying it to the notion of good governance. Do you believe you've let your friends in the West down?

Meles - Well in the first instance if there was lack of good governance here we would have let our people down, not G8 leaders. And secondly, I do not believe we have let our people down. And therefore, I do not believe our G8 friends down.

HT - What's most important do you believe; is it debt relief? Is it more aid? Or is it fair trade?

Meles - The most important thing structurally for me is the fairer trading environment.

HT - Is that the one thing you don't get.

Meles - That appears to be the case.

HT - Do you think the G8 is serious about helping Africa?

Meles - Some are.

HT - Who?

Meles - I believe the prime minister is very serious about it.

HT - Mr Blair?

Meles - Yes.

HT - The same Mr. Blair who called you and talked about his distress of what was happening here.

Meles - Yeah, look. His decision about this holding of 20 million pounds has nothing to do with the good that he is doing in Africa through the Africa Commission. My views about his work on Africa do not depend on whether he releases money or not.

HT - The rich world wanted to believe that you, Meles Zenawi, one of the good guys in Africa, they believed you were doing your very best to deliver progress, reform, to your country. But one looks around the country today with an average life expectancy of 42, when millions and millions of people absolutely dependent on international food aid to avoid starvation, and when one does, after 14 years in power, what did you deliver for Ethiopia?

Meles - Not as much as I would have liked but much better than was the case in the previous 14 years. When we took over [power], primary school attendance rate was 19 percent. Now it's over 70 percent. I can give you all types of statistics. We have grown; economy in Ethiopia has grown on average between 4-5 percent for the past decade.

HT - But you're also telling me that if things go wrong, as they might you said, this country could slip into anarchy like Rwanda. You said that to me. Does that suggest you've established a level of stability and confidence in the future that can sustain this country?

Meles - We are not out of the woods yet. We are trying to get out of it. We've made some progress. But we are not out of the woods yet. I do not believe any African country, including South Africa, is completely free from risk of relapse ..of tragedy.

HT - Prime Minister Meles Zenwi: thank you very much.

Meles - Thank you.