

Semhal Zenawi's Interview on the Genocidal war in Tigray: Constructive Feedback

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I. Introduction

As Semhal M. Zenawi is busy working on her forthcoming book, "Dirge for the Ethiopian Left: The Undoing of a Civil Society," she deserves credit for her graciousness in sparing time to give an interview to Mehdi Labzae (the current full-time researcher in political science at the French National Centre for Scientific Research) on the genocidal war in Tigray. The format of the interviewing process (semi-structured) and Semhal's insights into the war in Tigray are indispensable.

Through her lens, Semhal attempts to distill down to and reflect on the fundamental elements that contributed to the genocidal war of Tigray from November 4, 2020, to November 3, 2022. More specifically, Semhal argues that instead of tangentially focusing on ethnonational factors, an in-depth and critical analysis of the shifts in economic policies of the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) in the 2010s generated better insight and understanding of the underlying socio-economic and political factors that precipitated, or fueled, the genocidal war of Tigray.

Semhal points out that an understanding of the fundamental causal factors that provoked the genocidal War of Tigray's needs to:

- 1) Critically map out the unfolding of Ethiopia's political economy during the middle of the 2010s.
- 2) Meticulously analyze the dogmatic fighting or polarization that ensued between advocates of the old guard of the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), who continued to advocate that sticking with multi-ethnic federalism gives self-rule, encourages shared governance, and allows each region to enjoy a proportional share of economic investment to support their development, and those who aggressively championed that, using a centralized system of government, would unify national identity and flourish Ethiopia's economic growth.
- 3) Identify the clash between the adherents of the developmental state and the proponents of the neoliberalism economic philosophy. The former proudly argued that state-controlled business planning was the key to Ethiopia's economic success in making it the economic hub of sub-Saharan Africa. In contrast, the opponents proclaimed that focusing on a market-oriented economic system was a healthy path for Ethiopia to achieve sustainable industrialization.

II. The Status of Ethiopia's Political Economy During the 2010s

After realizing that the neo-liberal economic model that was heavily practiced in Africa from 1980 to 1995 ended up causing disaster or contributed to Africa's lost decades of economic development, the late prime minister of Ethiopia, Meles Zenawi (2006), relentlessly attempted to modify the East Asian Developmental Mode and apply it to Ethiopia's situation. Thus, the Ethiopian developmental model was groomed to overcome Ethiopia's underdevelopment to prevent Ethiopia from being the poster child for war and famine that it used to be in the 1980s (Zenawi, 2006).

According to Semhal, the late Prime Minister Meles identified the following three characteristics of Ethiopia's developmental state: 1) the state's unwavering commitment to achieving accelerated growth and development; 2) the Ethiopian population's need for socialization to acquire the norms, values, and human capital needed to promote and enhance the economy; and 3) the states need to be completely autonomous (that is, having political and economic independence) from the private sector, urban constituents, and labor.

Stated differently, in 2001, Meles' government designed Ethiopia's developmental state to autonomously have complete control over the commanding heights of Ethiopia's economy (i.e., resources, banks, utilities, Ethio-telecom, etc.) In addition to endowing the Ethiopian population with human capital, Meles' government heavily invested in infrastructure and provided macroeconomic stimulation, such as tax holidays and subsidies, R&D support, and tax relief for imported capital. Furthermore, the Meles government allowed the leasing of virgin farmland by foreign investors (de Waal, August 2018).

Realizing the challenge and the stress of shifting from an agricultural to an industrial society, Meles' government allocated more than twenty percent of the country's GDP to re-engineer infrastructural services, such as roads, schools, railways, air transport, dams, and telecommunication services. An attempt was undertaken to encourage and strengthen the backward and forward linkages between agricultural and manufacturing services (see Desta, 2015).

Table 1 shows Ethiopia's GDP grew by 9.9% from 2010-16. Furthermore, by 2017, Ethiopia's GDP escalated to 10.2%. With the remarkable growth achieved during Meles and Hailemariam's era, Ethiopia became the economic engine of sub-Saharan Africa and one of the world's fastest-growing economies.

Therefore, Semhal's argument that the Tigray's genocidal war erupted because of the shrinkage of Ethiopia's economy by the middle of 2010 needs to be revised. As shown in Table 1, Ethiopia's economy waned during Prime Minister Abiy's period rather than during the Hailemariam era. During the mid-2010s, the TPLF-led EPRDF industrial policies contributed to sustained economic growth. However, as highlighted by Lavers (2023), it is possible to underline that the increase in Ethiopia's GDP during the 2010s drastically failed to deliver jobs, land, and other vital resources to the fast-growing population. During the Hailemariam period, the EPRDF's government attempted to minimize protests by younger citizens by providing in-kind subsidies, including redistributing land to the unemployed, job training programs, and a "Revolving Fund to start new jobs."

Because the government utterly failed to revamp and galvanize agricultural activities to create employment opportunities for the fast-growing younger population, Ethiopia's unemployment surged from 17% in 2010-2016 to 19% in 2019 (Table 1). Inspired by the Arab Spring of 2011, the unemployed and frustrated youth, such as the *Qeerroo* (which refers to unmarried young Oromo) and the Amhara Fano, got deeply disenchanted with the unfulfilled promises of EPRDF's developmental model.

Ethiopia faced a drastic decline in foreign investment from 2016 to 2018 (see Table 1). Also, an increase in inflation, a scourge to Ethiopia's economy, increased from 11% in 2010-2016 to 29% in 2021, contributing to increased government budget deficits. Consequently, a decline in foreign exchange reserve deposits (i.e., below the three-month minimum range) from 2010 to 2018 contributed to the growth of foreign debt.

Considering this, the ambitious young members of the Oromo People's Development Organization (OPDO)

started to fuel “anti-Tigrayan sentiment” because they angrily thought that it was the TPLF-led EPRDF government that had drastically failed to provide jobs. Semhal’s phrase “delayed adulthood throughout Ethiopia” galvanized the unemployed to march against Hailemariam’s government.

Table 1: Ethiopia’s Real GDP Growth, Inflation Rate, Unemployment Rate, Government Debt (%GDP), Broad Money (%GDP), External Debt (%GDP), and Reserves

	2010-2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Real GDP growth (%)	9.9	10.2	6.82	8.36	6.06	5.64
Inflation (%)	11.5	10.68	13.83	15.84	20.46	28.57
Unemployment (%)	17.03	16.9	19.10	16.9	19.1	21.60
GOV. debt (%GDP)	47.5	57.7	61.1	57.6	56.1	58.5
Broad money (%GDP)	27.5	31.3	33.7	32.9	31.0	31.3
External debt (%GDP)	22.9	29.1	30.8	28.5	29.2	32.7
Foreign direct investment (%GDP)	2.77	4.9	4.0	2.7	2.2	
Number of greenfield investments				32	11	7
Export growth (%)		7.7	11.8	17.7	-0.5	
Import growth (%)		-7.5	2.2	18.5	15.6	
Reserves (months of imports)	2.0	2.0	1.7	2.2	2.1	2.7

Source: International Monetary Fund, “Regional Economic Outlook: Sub-Saharan Africa.” 2020 October. The World Bank, World Development Indicators (2021).

To peacefully appease the anti-government protests that started in November 2015 and calm the political turmoil in the Amhara region, Prime Minister Hailemariam called for the Federal Defense Forces to intervene and calm the agitators. This proved to be futile. With the worsening political crisis, a drastic increase in unemployment, and out-of-control inflation, the ruling party, EPRDF, had no choice but to make changes and establish reform within the leadership (Kelecha, 2022).

III. Neoliberalism Economic Policy for Ethiopia’s Industrialization

Semhal argues that when Hailemariam became Ethiopia’s prime minister on September 21, 2012, he was adamant about changing the developmental state policy set by his mentor, the late Meles Zenawi. Given that Hailemariam was a vacillator as well as a “compromise and placeholder “who would do anything when instructed by the influential backroom figures(see Malone, May 27, 2015), he heavily depended on Dr. Arkebe Oqubay's expertise to map out Ethiopia’s economic trajectory.

When Hailemariam became prime minister, he appointed Oqubay as his chief architect of monetary policy. To use Semhal’s phrase, Oqubay served as his “right-hand and administrative facilitatory” and later was regarded as the guru of Ethiopia’s emerging Industrial Parks. Given Dr. Oqubay's towering position, he had no shame in reversing the trajectories of the developmental state policy that his former party, the TPLF, introduced.

Being a new adherent of the neo-liberal Washington Census, Oqubay distanced himself from the developmental state model. Rather, he laid the “developmental state in its coffin” and preached that Ethiopia would be rejuvenated to become Africa’s manufacturing hub. This was if it transcended beyond the developmental state model and followed the trajectory of the neo-classical, market-oriented paradigm, which states that manufacturing and the rapid expansion of diversified exports lead to sustained economic growth (2017).

The Demise of the Ethiopian Progressive Revolutionary Front

During the Hailemariam era, a highly ferocious debate sprouted among the EPRDF members to defend the status quo and argue that Ethiopia should pursue an ethnic-based federal government structure with a constitutional right that allows nationalities to secede. Others subscribed to an assimilated and integrative nation-building system

where Ethiopia would reverberate and sustainably flourish if it followed a unitary or centralized governmental structure.

Using historical data, Semhal underlines that disagreement among the EPRD members evolved when Meles introduced a general replacement, or succession, program designed to move senior officials into advisory roles—a manifestation of generational change (*metekakat*). According to Semhal, the “generational change” adopted by the EPRDF in 2010 was designed to reassign senior members of the EPRDF to be advisors or be stationed in diplomatic or corporate capacities (See also Fortin, 2015).

Attempts to implement the “generational change” somehow contributed to the fomenting of hatred among the TPLF-run EPRDF members. When the prime initiator, Meles, refused to retire, the “policymaking” function of the EPRDF started to drain. Except for a few within the Oromo People’s Democratic Organization (OPDO) and the Southern Ethiopian Peoples’ Democratic Movement (SEPDM), other members of the EPRDF failed to adhere to the optimal rotation age for succession.

When pushed out of party structures due to the “metekakat policy,” many senior members vigorously argued that “a well-entrenched capacity-building system should have been set as a prerequisite before younger members could fill high-powered roles” (Fortin, 2015). Being unhappy with Meles’ dictatorial policy, internal division was triggered among the senior members. As a compromise, some finally agreed to remain intermingled with the younger EPRDF members and work superficially as senior advisors and special envoys.

Contrary to Semhal’s assumption that the genocidal war in Tigray can barely be associated with multinationalism, the examples below indicate that the EPRDF became the battleground for bitter factional fighting, which eventually contributed to the sprouting of the genocidal war of Tigray.

Using Semhal’s phrases, “analytical laziness” or “political ineptitude” in the post-Meles era caused the EPRDF to become the battleground for bitterly fought factional struggles. Furthermore, Semhal states the EPRDF party adopted a “backroom horse-trading approach to politics. “Mass protests erupted. Fractures emerged within the ruling elite. The elites used the ethnic protest as leverage to eventually shift the balance of power in the coalition (Lavers, 2023). As shown below, the growing politicization of ethnicity fundamentally shaped the protests and conflict, which eventually contributed to the war that proliferated in the Tigray region.

- 1) The Oromo ethnic groups blamed the Tigray People’s Liberation Movement (TPLF) for obstructing the entire practice of ethnic self-determination, as given in the Ethiopian Constitution.
- 2) Using the 1995 Ethiopian Constitution as their guide, the Oromo farmers and various protestors (the *Qeerroo* movement, for one) forcefully argued that the TPLF-led EPRDF purposely designed the 2014 Addis Ababa Master Plan so that the Oromos would lose their original land. On the other hand, the Amhara activists alleged that the TPLF-led EPRDF purposely designed the 2014 Addis Ababa Master Plan to make the outer area of Addis Ababa and the Chartered City of Addis Ababa part and parcel of the Oromia Zone.
- 3) Starting with the formation of multinational ethnic federalism, the Amhara ethnic groups remained agitated. They felt the 1995 Ethiopian Constitution disenfranchised them, and they firmly argued for dismantling ethnic federalism and the re-establishment of a unitary state or the formation of a centralized system of government in Ethiopia.
- 4) Repudiating that the Amhara ethnic groups confiscated land from the southern natives during the imperial period in Ethiopia, some Amhara ethnic groups accused the TPLF-led government of initiating agricultural irredentism and actively engaging in land-grabbing policies to push out the Amhara ethnic groups from some regions, including the Mettekel, Wolqayti, and Rayazones. Using this argument as revenge, the Amhara youth movement supported forming the *Oromara* (Oromio and Amhara) alliance in 2016 to seize the existing TPLF leadership.

The various disappointing actions of the EPRDF and, more particularly, the rise of unemployed and frustrated youth caused political turmoil throughout Ethiopia's landscape, forcing the resignation of Prime Minister Hailemariam. The *Oromo* then tactfully collaborated with some PDREF members of the Southern Ethiopia People's Democratic Movement (SEPDM) to select Abiy Ahmad as Ethiopia's prime minister.

No sooner did the so-called "liberal-minded" Abiy come to power than he gradually "dismantled the development state" and ruptured Ethiopia's political landscape. As an odious scourge, Abiy intentionally and deliberately "inflicted destruction" to destroy the Tigray ethnic groups (See United Nations General Assembly resolution on Genocide, 260 A, December 9, 1948, and January 12, 1951). He 1) tightened the allocation of funds of the federal budget to the Regional State of Tigray; 2) blocked interstate highways and cut off commercial interactions of Tigray with Ethiopia's other administrative regions; 3) stood on the sidelines when swarms of desert locusts damaged crops, pastures, and livestock in the Regional State of Tigray; and 4) failed to protect the Tigrayans when government-organized criminals ransacked their properties. Before atrocities were committed in the Regional Tigray zone, more than 17,000 professionally trained Tigrayan employees of the armed forces and national security system were purged from their posts and arrested.

In violation of international law, Abiy encouraged government-owned media to use derogatory words such as "weeds," "cancer," "pests," and "daily hyenas" to dehumanize the Tigrayan ethnic groups and to train those who would go on to carry out the destruction of the people of Tigray. Paying no attention to the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, which states that starvation is a war crime (Schaack, V., February 4, 2019), Abiy resorted to sieging and choking the people of Tigray before and after warfare was evoked.

After laying the above-stated underlying genocidal techniques, Abiy tactically designed a "tripartite" alliance (See Semayawi', March 25, 2023) to fully strangulate the people of Tigray. These were:

- 1) Having been a "lapdog," or stooge, of Isaias Afework, Eritrea's president, Abiy treacherously formed a devious friendship with this egomaniacal dictator (who had an ingrained desire for revenge against the Tigray People's Liberation Front that had marshaled the Ethiopia armed forces to subdue his armed forces during the 1998-2000 Ethio-Eritrean border conflict) to annihilate the leaders of the Tigray People's Liberation Front.
- 2) Abiy promised the Amhara militants, Amhara's Fano, and residents of the Amhara National State, who felt disenfranchised by the 1995 Ethiopian Constitution, that if they joined as military allies with the Ethiopian Federal Defense Forces to dismantle the Tigray's forces, he would A) amend the Ethiopian 1995 Constitution; B) reinstate the unitary Ethiopian state; and C) return the Welkati (Setite-Humera), Raya, Metekel, and Dera areas (Kebede, May 11, 2024) that were "unlawfully" taken from the Amhara by the TPLF.

Rejecting Abiy's legitimacy, the TPLF refused to join Abiy's Prosperity Party. In September 2020, about 2.7 million Tigrayans exercised the right to choose their leaders, a political right enshrined in the 1995 Ethiopian Constitution. Unhappy about this, Abiy made the phony accusation that there was an attack on the Northern Command Federal Army by the TPLF. Consequently, claiming "law and order," Abiy galvanized the Ethiopian Federal armed forces, the Amhara militant forces, and Fano militias. Collaborating with foreign armed forces- the Eritrean and Somali armed forces, he borrowed drones from the United Arab Emirates to orchestrate the final stage of a genocidal attack and eliminate the Ethiopian Tigrayan ethnic groups.

IV. The Genocidal War on Tigray and the Pretoria Agreement

After deliberating on polarization and spreading hate messages and stereotypes to dehumanize ethnic Tigrayans, Abiy went one step further to galvanize the Ethiopian Federal armed forces, the Amhara national forces, and the fanatical Amhara militias by collaborating with Eritrea's armed and Somalia forces (it is unusual for a nation's governing regime to solicit the assistance of foreign powers to intervene and help calm domestic upheavals), and using United Arab Emirates' drones to embark on a genocidal massacre too, as said by Finland's Foreign Minister

Haavisto, “wipe out the Tigrayans for a 100 years”(Haavisto, P., June 18, 2021, and, for acts of genocide, see, Stanton, G., September 13, 2022).

To wipe out the Tigray ethnic groups, Abiy carefully instructed his National Federal Forces to deprive the Tigrayan civil population of access to lifelines such as food, water, electricity, telephone, and internet. With Abiy’s instruction, the invading army deprived the Tigrayans of water and food, killed their animals, burned their farmlands, and uprooted their fruit trees and gardens. Water tanks and pipelines were also purposely ruptured, and water reservoirs were sabotaged using poisonous chemicals to cause fear and death.

In addition to destroying several historically significant monasteries and mosques, the armed squad of Isaias Afework, Abiy’s associate, looted valuable items from hospitals, restaurants, and educational institutions. As described by Semhal, 85% of the health facilities, schools, and rural social assets were destroyed. Given this, Semhal argues that “... the Tigrayan economy now supports tens of starvation-related deaths a week. It is unclear whether the abandonment of the farmers will allow sustainable politics of any kind to emerge.”

The Amhara militias and the undisciplined Amhara Fano remained disillusioned and were convinced that Walkate, Humara, Tsegaidi, and Raya were their land. Consequently, as they crossed the Tigray region, they were embroiled in a deep skirmish with native Tigrayans. Supported by the National Federal Defense Forces, they killed, demolished, chased away, and uprooted the Tigrayans from their homelands and livelihoods and expropriated them from their productive assets and their commercial activities. Some Tigrayans scattered to other parts while others somehow settled in Sudanese refugee camps. On November 1, 2020, Abiy agreed to give Ethiopia’s al-Fashaga region to Sudan. General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, the head of Sudan’s ruling Council Sudan, would prevent border infiltration by the TPLF forces to and from Sudan.

After massacres and humanitarian crises caused the deaths of over a million Tigrayans, the genocidal war, which began in November 2020 in the Tigray Region of Ethiopia, ended on November 2, 2022. Briefly stated, the African Union, in collaboration with the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), the United Nations, and the United States, facilitated the Pretoria Agreements that subscribed to the Cessation of Hostilities Agreement (CoHA) between the Government of Ethiopia and the Tigray People’s Liberation Front (TPLF). In addition, in Nairobi (Kenya), on November 7, 2022, the Government of Ethiopia and Tigrayan military officials discussed restoring humanitarian access to the Tigray Region. In addition, they agreed on the process of Tigrayan disarmament, better known as “flexible defense,” which negotiated the withdrawal of foreign and non-ENDF forces from Tigray (Guterres, A., November 2, 2022).

Semhal's statement to the interviewer seems somewhat dubious concerning the Pretoria Agreement. Semhal stresses that, “though hidden from the public,” the Seychelles agreement, negotiated before the Pretoria peace agreement, was better. She argues that the Seychelles agreement asserted Tigray’s sovereignty better than the Cessation of Hostilities Agreement or the Pretoria Agreement. Semhal claims that she was against the composition of the negotiating team when talking about the Pretoria Peace agreement. Furthermore, she implicitly argues that, at the Pretoria Agreement, the TPLF negotiating team negotiated for its survival at the cost of abandoning the legitimacy and mandate it secured through the September 2020 elections.

Prolonging her discussion, Semhal strongly contends that Pretoria's primary function was hardly designed to save the TPLF. Instead, she strongly argues that “the humiliating terms of the Pretoria Agreement are primarily a reflection of the dire military, political, diplomatic, and humanitarian crisis Tigray faced when it was signed. “Without reservation, Semhal strongly believes that Pretoria and Nairobi are in “surrender agreements.” She says, “They overturned Tigray’s democratic will,” and she projects that “Tigray would be a textbook example of a rent-seeking political economy.”

V. Summary and Reflection

As Semhal M. Zenawi diligently works on her forthcoming book, “Dirge for the Ethiopian Left: The Undoing of a Civil Society,” she deserves recognition for graciously giving an interview regarding the Tigray genocidal war to Mehdi Labzae (the current full-time researcher in political science at the French National Centre for Scientific Research). The format of the interviewing process and Semhal’s insights about the war in Tigray are indispensable, well-documented, and worthy of reading.

Through her lens, Semhal attempts to distill down to and reflect on the fundamental elements that contributed to the genocidal war of Tigray from November 4, 2020, to November 3, 2022. According to Semhal’s analysis, the essential issues that fueled the genocidal war in Tigray were 1) the decline of Ethiopia’s economy during the 2010s, 2) the shift in the EPRDF’s economic policy from the long-established developmental State model to a coddling Neo-liberalism economic system during Hailemariam’s regime to bring about Ethiopia’s sustainable industrialization, and 3) the disputes and transverse waves that emerged among members of the Ethiopian People’s Democratic Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) during Prime Minister Hailemariam’s era.

Despite being loaded with ideological vernaculars, readers need to know that Semhal has in-depth knowledge of the literature. Though she failed to operationalize the term “genocide” and to mention the atrocities created by Isaias’s squad, Semhal’s insights into the war in Tigray are very invaluable.

Her broad contact with former Prime Minister Hailemariam, Dr. Oqubay, notable academics, and other eminent policymakers has given her the ability to ruminate on and grasp the disputes that crop up among members of the Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front.

As an associate courtier of catalogs, Semhal had an incredible chance to document and actively prepare the historical documents for the memorial park to commemorate the legacy of the late President and Prime Minister Meles Zenawi.

During the war in Tigray, Semhal was a victim of ethnic profiling that Prime Minister Abiy purposely implemented to harass and arrest Tigrayans throughout Ethiopia. Semhal was mercilessly dragged to and detained in one of Makelle’s dungeons. Even after being released from prison, Semhal was illegally and unlawfully curtailed from boarding a US-bound flight (Alberizzi, M., December 22, 2020).

Given that Semhal carefully reviewed etic information, had an emic understanding of the situation in Tigray, and objectively, albeit briefly, reflected on her father’s period, it is possible to assume that Semhal had the necessary background and enough thorough preparation to be able to depict and portray an in-depth analysis of Tigray’s war to her readers. The interviewer uses a well-designed format, which makes Salem’s interview very valuable. Given the positive and negative aspects of my review of Semhal’s interview, I would like to salute Semhal for her interview, which is worth reading.

As a caveat, I hope I have made the content of Semhal’s interview more readable by adding constructive feedback. In that case, I hope Semhal will be steered enough to use my input to revise the content of her interview and further stimulate her to correctly get the fundamental elements like comments, questions, and suggestions while writing her upcoming book “Dirge for the Ethiopian Left: The Undoing of a Civil Society.”

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