

## **The dynamics of the Ethiopian politics: Exercising the soft power**

**Abebe Aynete**

**Senior Researcher, EIIPD**

Currently, in the Ethiopian political arena many things attributed as the legacy of late Prime Minister Melese Zenawi. It is also believed to be part of the country history and remained to be continued. Similarly many things urge to be changed. Among the legacy of the late prime Minister is his soft power exercise. He served extensive communication ability and his massive exposure to the external world as a tool to exercise his soft power. While he is communicating and dealing on the national interest issues he goes into very detail to check whether his counterpart has understood his bottom line of interest. This helped him to influence internally and external audience. The late prime Minister experience tells us that effective communication can be one tool for exercising the soft power.

In this regard his instruments were media and informal state networks such as G8, G20 etc. He served the forums for his purpose. To forward his vision, to explain his position and created opportunity for others to understand the reality and influenced as well. In addition, the Ethiopian foreign policy benchmark is soft power. The points of references of the policy are speedy economic development, democratization and peace. He served the foreign policy as a strategy to communicate the external world. This was because foreign policy is the major mirror to maintain relations and to exercises soft power. That is the reason behind that influence many foreign policy analysts to consider the policy as a benchmark.

Many think tanks also consider foreign policy as a window to look into a given country strategy to predict the policies, and issues that the leader might rely upon to help craft their approach to the outside world. However, this does not reflect the reality on the ground in Ethiopia even during the late Prime Minister Leadership and today. There are major drawbacks in exercising soft power as a strategy.

The Ethiopia government is not communicative in general. This is still remaining as a serious problem. The government is not exciting in communicating through both media and by diplomatic relation tools to the outside world. It seems very reluctant to act proactively and to use media and policy tools to position it and to be transparent. For instance, while the late Prime Minister Meles was not attending the anniversary celebrations of the South Sudan's independence on 9 July 2012, and then, most importantly, failed to attend the African Union (AU) summit in Addis Ababa on 14 July 2012, his health condition was not revealed by the relevant government authorities. His being sick for the first time was officially disclosed by the Senegalese President Macky Sall. Many assumed the Ethiopian authority had not have done that it were not disclose by the Senegalese president. Even after wards, the Ethiopian authorities were reluctant to confirming Meles was receiving medical treatment in abroad.

Following the late Prime Minister death, speculation was confusing. The speculation was that the system in Ethiopia was almost entirely dependent on Meles and his absence would lead the country into power crisis. In this regard many even failed to recognize the existence and the role of democratic institutions in the country. The other argument was that the country would face leadership vacuum or crisis. However, in practice the country faced less leadership vacuum or incompetency or is not apparent. Providing scant attention to such speculation may reflect lack of effective communication.

Why the government is reluctant to communicate all concerned issues in timely manner and become shortfall to influence public opinion internally and externally? What will be the effect of the shortfalls in communicating?. Internally, Lack of timely communication to the general public will lead to conclude that the government is not transparent and responsive. It also will minimize trust on respective institutions such as media and other relevant office. Externally, it essentially reflects that the deficiency of institutional functions in the country.

### **Why is soft power significant?**

Soft power is the ability to shape the preferences of others to want what you want. Traditionally, soft power is associated with intangible resource such as culture or ideology. Political scientist Joseph S. Nye defines soft power as a means to success in world politics. The soft power is attractiveness of certain aspects of country's culture, its social practice and norms ,as well as its product, form "power resources" which enhance its ability to get others to do what it would like to do voluntarily and out of conviction-possibly without even actually asking them.

Soft power crates attraction. Ethiopia has many attractive attributes. These are successful mediation between the republic of the Sudan and the republic of the South Sudan, spokesman of the Africa, being among the top ten troop contributors for the UN peacekeeping missions etc. However, attraction alone is doesn't imply power. The attractiveness has to be utilized for better image building of the country. In this regard the country has untapped resources that would serve for creating positive image and attracting others. Among others its fast economic development, maintain internal and regional peace and stability, multiculturalism, federalism, constitutionalism, religion tolerance and tourist attractions etc. Therefore, talking about soft power is about developing strategy on how to use the Ethiopian resources and other positive aspects that may shape Ethiopia's image internationally. Having those resources do not necessarily lead to get support for Ethiopia. It needs exhaustive effort to use effectively.

When it comes to the western countries the major resource they use as a tool for soft power are different from us. Their major sources for soft power are their Hollywood films, literatures, science and technologies and coca cola etc. It is therefore, necessary to turn international respect into influence. Acquiring something attractive is not enough. It needs to be displayed as a soft power. It needs to be offered as resources that allow others to be influenced so that it serves as a tool to achieve goal.

The other most important source for soft power is legitimacy. Citizens only subject themselves to state's monopoly of forces if they consider the state is legitimate. The sister of legitimacy is trust. Maintain and nourishing trust in Ethiopia both at home and abroad is an important requirement for ensuring the power bases. We have not been succeeded in building trust among ourselves and particularly with regard to Diaspora.

Foreign policy is also source for soft power. The foreign policy enables the country to get what she went through attraction rather than coercion or payment and which can be cultivated through relations with allies, economic assistance, and cultural exchange. The Ethiopia foreign policy encourages working for the mutual benefits. In this regard the Soft power is not only limited to the capacity to influence, or even to manipulate public opinion in a target country. It also includes a well developed idea of a partnership with mutual benefit in the near and long term. In other words soft power convinces but does not force others to want what it wants because of clear advantages for both sides ,and soft powers tend to use the most transparent and democratic measures to build their credibility in this regard.

As the Ethiopia's policy and strategy on Foreign Affairs and National Security States that rapid development is considered as a guarantee for national survival. Rapid development that benefits the people was apparent to avoid chaos and disintegration in Ethiopia. In line with this basic principle Ethiopia register rapid economic development. The success of the Ethiopian economic development is placed Ethiopia as" rising giant "in the region. Not only the fast economic development made the country rising powerful but more than this its being a model for agriculture based fast economic development, maintaining internal peace, stability as well as regional and the Green resilient economy policy. This policy is major source for soft power. While some falter, Ethiopia's rising power in the region seem to grow, at least when measured economically. Why is some falter to accept Ethiopia's fast development in all aspects in the region and look for loophole rather than understanding and reading the big picture and development in the country?. It is due to lack of our effective communication.

### **Leadership style: Change or continuity**

Ethiopia inherited a huge military, economic and political legacy of Meles, the late Prime Minister. At the time its external image seemed to be even more important than the Meles leadership. This should consider as an additional asset in order rebuilding its attractiveness.

Why western country powerful in terms of soft power?Major reason for that is they have better access to public opinion through well developed soft power channels such as policy research think tanks, international NGOs and media outlets. The limitation on the Ethiopia side is that it does not have strong policy research think tank and international NGOs. The other problem is that the Ethiopian government is not strategically organized to use these tools as additional means to propagate its interest and sometimes reluctant to counter balance negative reports that portray the country image negatively.

Ethiopia needs to position itself as a power house in the region. For instance the political and economic principles of the country are based on the democratic developmental state. This is also one resource that will serve as a benchmark for others. The democratic developmental state ideology is the Ethiopia's response to the neoliberal ideology. It developed own vision of democracy and development and criticizing neoliberals and tries to impose agrarian democracy and democratic developmental state.

Ethiopian government claims its democratic developmental government state type is home grown and different from Asian type of developmental state. In this respect Ethiopia introduced homegrown ideology which is working to strengthen the society to control political authority. This ideology disfavors western liberal democracy. In Ethiopia encouraging multi party system and conducting national dialogue is very important and will serve as a major source for soft power exercise. But effective communication and other resources that will serves as a soft power tool still remained the untapped and needs to be used to influence the outside world.