

CONFRONTING THE 21ST CENTURY: OROMO NATIONAL AGENDA
A Proposal for Action *

Submitted to the Organizing Committee at the UN and to Other Interested Oromo
Professionals

By

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* This paper written to generate new discussion regarding the future of Oromo national movement.

I. Introduction

The perennial social conflict in the Horn of Africa has taken on a new twist once again. This time, another Abyssinian power has instigated a full scale war that has engulfed the territories stretching from the Red Sea to the Indian Ocean, from the border of Sudan to the heartland of Kenya. Once again the people in the region are becoming encapsulated in a conflict that does not serve their basic interests. Additionally, the people do not have much power to curtail this new beastly power that is waging a new round of devouring conflict.

The Oromos who constitute the single nationality in the region are facing perilous fate at the dawn the 21st Century. This is a trying time for the Oromos for several reasons: First, it seems that the Abyssinian ruling class has exhausted all its options with respect to ideological justification for the existence of the decaying empire. Second, the West, led by the U.S., at long last, has awakened to the reality about Ethiopia and its new Tigrean rulers - - it has taken an extra ordinary step by sponsoring an arms embargo at the UN Security Council. It is an extra ordinary step in that there has never been such a strong public condemnation against the Ethiopian Empire by the West in the history of the relations between these two entities - -Ethiopia and the West.

The relevance of these two major events lie in the fact that they offer unparalleled opportunity for the peoples in the periphery of the Ethiopian Empire to have some traction on the mindset of Western powers relative to; 1) the inequities that have prevailed in the relationships between the core and periphery of the Ethiopian Empire, and 2) their aspirations for social justice. In one respect, Ethiopia is facing a situation to that of the encountered during the Dergue regime - - vulnerability and isolation. The

Dergue regime was not popular to the West resulting from two major factors: 1) its claim to being a Communist government, and 2) its negative policies in dealing social crisis - - more specifically, the resettlement scheme and forced villagization during the famine in the 1980's. The choice to spend millions of dollars on the elaborate celebration of its Tenth Anniversary since ceasing power from the aging Emperor in 1974 in the midst of famine further consolidated the image of a callus and cruel regime.

The regime of Meles Zenawi, in my opinion, is equally callus and cruel. My opinion is shaped by its ideology and its negative and hostile behavior in the midst of another serious famine. In terms of ideology, the regime fronted a commitment to democracy and human rights yet in practice has failed to implement these ideals and has continued to pursue policies contrary to these principles. Just like the Dergue regime, it has launched a new round of war in the midst of another potentially devastating famine.

At the same time, the Oromos and other peoples in the periphery face perilous time as several factors continue to threaten their basic interests; First, Meles Zenawi and his TPLF cohort have consolidated power both within the Ethiopian Empire and indeed, in the entire region - - the occupation of Somalia, their ability to raid Kenya and terrorize Oromos with impunity, and the new all out war against Eritrea attest to this observation. Second, the new round of famine is a serious threat to the basic needs of the peoples in the periphery. Third, the Tigrean war against Eritrea seemed to have endeared the regime of Meles Zenwai to the Amhara elite. And finally, the exploitation and destruction of the resources in Oromia and the adjacent states pose a serious threat to the quality of life in those regions.

II. Implications: In my view, the trends in the political events described have profound implications for the Oromo cause. I have argued elsewhere that the Oromos missed a great opportunity to articulate their grievances to the international arena in the 1980's when the Dergue regime was looked down upon by the West. In that analysis, I have suggested that one of the main reasons for the lack of action by the Oromos during that period is due to the distinct absence of Oromo professionals from participation in the Oromo national movement for self-determination. I would argue that Oromo participation during the 1990's was still relatively marginal in comparison to the potential. There was also a great need for concerted efforts to confront a new round of national oppression.

III. What to Be Done:

I wrote a brief essay in support of the Oromo march at the UN protesting the burning of a forest in Oromia and its surrounding states. In that essay, I suggested that the rage displayed about the violence perpetrated by Meles Zenawi's regime against the forest in the Southern part of the Ethiopian Empire, and the enthusiasm for concrete action by Oromo professionals, should give a new impetus of thinking more seriously about the challenges and opportunities the Oromo society confronts in the 21st century [1]. It is in this context that I wish to outline some steps that need to be taken for the consideration of this group, hopefully for the larger audience of Oromo professionals. Dr. Bahiru Gametchu, the Chairman of the Organizing Committee for the march at the UN, made several significant points during that historic campaign. Three resonated with me.

(1) What was achieved during that march was just a fraction of what can be done and

should be done; (2) all the Oromo people have is us; and (3) we can do it. My proposals should be linked with these insightful themes.

In my view, we need to undertake the following steps in order to better prepare the Oromo people to face the challenges and opportunities confronting the society. These steps are conceived in terms of organizations. Five major philosophical outlooks (cardinal principles) relative to Oromo national cause underpin these propositions. They are: (1) the need to create new frontiers for the Oromo national cause; (2) there is a good Oromo in every group; (3) the need to provide competence in the Oromo national movement; (4) the need to share the burden of supporting the Oromo national movement; and (5) nationalism is not based in one's genes, but one's socialization - -the relevant point is that everyone can learn and embrace the cause of the Oromo national movement [3]. However, in order to mobilize people for a national cause, strategies and competence are essential.

The Recommended Steps:

1. A Task Force:

I believe a task force is needed for the purpose of responding to immediate needs. Among such needs are making a professionally based assessment relative to the needs and potential within Oromo society. In my view, an assessment will help answer the question, "what is next?" Thus, I wish to recommend that the Organizing Committee for the march at the UN should transform itself to a task force immediately. Other interested and suitable Oromo professionals should be recruited for inclusion as members of this new task force.

I wish to strongly argue against turning OSA into a political lobbying organization. OSA is already a misused and underutilized organization. More importantly, OSA was not created for the purpose of political lobbying. Even more significantly, a scholarly association that plunges itself to political activities inevitably abdicates its primary responsibility of advancing the cause of knowledge and cultivating critical thinking. If OSA pursues these goals successfully, it will undoubtedly enhance the Oromo national cause at much deeper level.

2. Think-Tank Organization:

Several attempts have been made to form a think-tank organization for the purpose of advancing the Oromo national cause. First, in 1990, I proposed the idea, and it was supported by Drs. Mohammed Hassen and Makuria Bultcha. The idea was eventually dropped due to the fact that someone from the OLF was opposed to the concept. Essentially, at the time the OLF leadership was too logged in with the union organization (Tiboa in Europe and UNONA) in North America). Second, between 1991 and 1992 the Oromo Committee for Democracy (OCD) was created by Oromo professionals to serve as a think-tank. While the organization commenced with some successes, it soon became diverted into a different path. Third, Abraham Mosisa and I have been talking about this issue for the last two years. He has successfully formed a small cadre of Oromo professionals as a result of working with Eritreans during 1998 and 1999.

In my opinion, this is the best opportunity to create such an organization. When I have raised this issue, the common questions have been: will such organization collide with OSA? Can't OSA do the same thing? Typically, a think-tank organization is staffed

with experts in various fields of knowledge (theoretical and practical). The experts assemble information from various sources and then distill ideas that can be utilized in decision making by policy makers. In contrast, a scholarly association focuses on research, teaching, and promoting critical thinking. Such activities do not lend themselves to the need to produce practical ideas for policy makers. Collaboration between a scholarly association and a think-tank organization is, however, a possibility. The role of think-tank organization is to map out all available options; both short term and long term policy goals for the national cause.

3. Oromo Committee for Immigration & Refugees:

For the last two decades, our national experience has been shaped by immigration related and refugee status problems. At the international level, these two inseparable experiences symbolize conflict and human tragedy. They also symbolize human hope and aspirations. A successful transition from being a refugee to an immigrant status could lead to renewal and productivity. Furthermore, issues relating to refugees and immigration have been elevated to the level of foreign policy debates and conflicts in the international arena.

The relevant point here is that we, Oromos, must pay serious attention to immigration issues as well as issues affecting refugees. Oromos are being mistreated in such places as Kenya, South Africa, and the Middle East. I, thus, recommend that we form an organization that will pay attention exclusively to this twin issue - - refugees and immigration. I suggest the name for this entity to become the Oromo Committee for Immigration & Refugees (OCIR). In effect, this will be resurrecting an organization

which functioned so effectively between 1983 and 1988. OCIR was an organization member of the National Forum on Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship (National Forum). National Forum has about 120 organizational membership. To become a member of National Forum, each organization pays membership dues. National Forum gathers relevant information on policies and issues relating to immigration and refugees. Each member organization has the right to bring up issues and concerns that are important to its communities/groups. By organizing OCIR, with meager resources, we were able to go the U. S. Congress, challenge the UNHCR in public which eventually resulted in the recognition of the Oromo Relief Association (ORA). OCIR eventually collapsed as a result of relentless activities on the part of UONA who divided Oromos along regional and religious lines.

The main functions of OCIR will be: (1) To lobby relevant government agencies about the plight of Oromo refugees and the difficulty the Oromos encounter when seeking political asylum; (2) gather relevant information on a regular basis about Oromo migration - - I believe such information will serve as an important data base for present and future analysis on matters relating to the Oromo national experience; (4) to appropriately interact with regional and international agencies on policy matters relating to immigration and refugees; and finally, (5) provide professional support for Oromos who need assistance refugee and immigration matters.

4. Oromo Human Rights Council/Oromo Human Rights Watch:

I believe the time is ripe now for Oromos to form an effective organization which will solely be dedicated to the cause of human rights violations against the Oromos. The

concern for human rights has taken centre stage in the international arena. It is enshrined in the UN Charter. During the last two decades, there has been an increase in the number of organizations advocating human rights for marginalized communities and vulnerable groups. Yet, the Oromos are yet to have one effective organization that can address this critical area. It is my view that forming an organization committed to advancing human rights is important in the national cause. The human rights organization would focus on activities such as: (1) directly working with governmental and non-governmental agencies who focus on matters pertaining to human rights violations at regional and international levels; (2) collecting relevant information relative to human rights violations against Oromos at home and abroad; and (3) educating the Oromos on how to lobby for the cause of human violations.

I realize some may raise questions about the need to form such organization. They may argue that there is already an Oromo Support Group (OSG). It is true that OSG, under the leadership of Dr. Trevor Trueman, is doing an outstanding job. Also, it is true that Oromo professionals such as Dr. Demissie Girma are making significant contributions to the running of this organization. However, in my view, the Oromos need an organization that bears the name Oromo and the terms “human rights.” I wish to illustrate my point by making a reference to the efforts made by Oromo professionals in Finfine in the area of human rights: they formed Human Rights League. According to the available information, they were afraid to include the word Oromo in the name. Predictably, even that precautionary step did not spare them from the ruthless attack by state security of Emperor Meles Zenawi of Tigray, the new Emperor of Ethiopia. Ironically, Professor Mesfin Wold Mariam, the quintessential Amhara intellectual was

strategically perceptive enough to form the Ethiopian Human Rights Council (EHRC) during the early stages of the rise of Tigrean power. By doing that he was able to impose his presence and the influence of the EHRC on the Tigrean regime. In my view, Professor Mesfin and EHRC have been able to survive in the face of stiff attack from Meles and his securities, in part, as a result of his alliances with the international community early on. Indeed, Mefin was able to see the writing on the wall early on - - the new Tigrean regime would be brutal and there was need to protect the interests of the Amhara people in the Ethiopian Empire. In contrast, Oromo professionals were marching with the OLF flag on one hand and the new Charter on the other hand during those crucial months. It seems that no one was reading the writing on the wall as to the fate of the Oromo people under Tigrean rule. In my view, the creation of such an organization would reassert and reaffirm, at least symbolically, the rights of the Oromo people to embrace the internationally recognized symbolism embodied in the term, "human rights." Indeed, the principles pertaining to the idea of human rights have evolved as a way of empowering the people who have been marginalized, and deprived of their inalienable rights by the power holders in the modern state system.

In my view, OSG is an indispensable organization. I believe that OSG should be encouraged to recruit more dedicated persons like Dr. Trueman and Ms. Sue Pollack from Western societies to join this noble cause. OSG can work effectively with the proposed Oromo human rights organization. Its leaders can train Oromos on how to effectively work on issues concerning human rights violations. By forming such an organization, we will be empowering the Oromo people for self assertion in the face of mounting oppressive pressures. It must be understood that neither Dr. Trueman nor Ms.

Pollack can be everywhere and/or when an Oromo voice is needed in dealing with the issues of human rights.

IV. What Does All This Mean?

In this section, I wish to briefly address some perennial questions which come up when one proposes new ideas for the Oromo national movement.

Question 1: Will this approach not divert resources from already existing organizations such as the OLF, OSA, Oromo community organizations?

Answer: Definitely not. First, the underpinning rationale pertaining to the proposed approaches is based on the idea that Oromos need to enter into a stage of national mobilization. Second, the proposed organizations are designed to work on strategically and internationally recognized issues. The issues for action are targeted toward particular areas of expertise, populations, and agencies. One of the major drawbacks to the Oromo cause has been that the Oromo issue has not been a priority to the international community. In my view, through these means, we can make progress in transforming the attitude of the international community relative to the plight of the Oromo people. Indeed, these organizations can work with all the existing organizations, and in the process can enhance the Oromo national cause. They will help us create new frontiers.

Question 2: Wouldn't having so many organizations lead to confusion and conflict?

Answer: This type of question was raised when conflict emerged between UONA and ORANA (Oromo Relief Association in North America) erupted during the 1980's. The main problem emanated from the fact that UONA would not allow any other organization to succeed. Unfortunately, OLF leadership caved to UONA's systematic pressure, as it has done so many times over the last three decades to the detriment of the Oromo national cause. The cardinal principle in running organizations is by abiding by the by-laws of each entity, and effectively resolving differences whenever they arise. Finally, the very notion that the Oromos can not run multiple agencies is a defeatist attitude which should be addressed in some systematic way. For example, if one day Oromia gains independence is it expected to have only one agency? In my view, this is not an acceptable proposition.

Question 3: What about leadership? Can we find enough leaders who can run all these organizations smoothly and effectively?

Answer: In my view, there is a sufficient cadre of Oromo professionals who can provide leadership in all these areas. The members of the grassroots are already partaking in some form of mobilization. With adequate and appropriate training they can shoulder the bulk of these activities. It is my view that we need about 5-10 professionals to run any of these organizations.

V. **Impediments That Need to Be Addressed:**

For the Oromo national movement to succeed, certain serious problems need to be addressed. For the purpose of brevity, I will make some brief comments about such impediments. Here, it is not my intention to associate or castigate anyone or any groups with the negative elements I am about to describe. These observations are based on about two decades experience working with the Oromo cause. In any national movements there are cases where such problems interfere with the larger goals of the movements - -the only way of making the necessary corrections is by facing such problems directly.

- 1. Jealousy:** Jealousy is a psychological condition that emanates from zero-sum thinking - - such an individual automatically thinks if some one else succeeds in achieving certain goals, the former will loose more. Such a person thus engages in destructive behaviors (e.g. spreading false rumors about the more successful person and engaging in other forms of activities of sabotage). The UONA systematic war against Oromo professionals is a classic manifestation of this social phenomenon.
- 2. Shum-Shir Syndrome:** I believe that this generation of literate Oromos has been inflicted by the Abyssinian feudal political culture. The *shum-shir syndrome* is a political behavior of an individual who is of the view that activities in the sphere of the national cause should be considered in terms of his/er elevation to some higher position. When a person possessing this kind of thinking holds an office, he/she structures relationships between the self and other parties in the same system (those who are above him and those who are below him) in those terms. In my view, one of

the reasons why Oromo organizations have not performed that well is rooted in this legacy. For the Oromo society to overcome this problem, the Oromo professional class should advocate for the creation of a new political culture that blends some elements of the present Oromo cultural paradigm with some elements found in the Western paradigm.

- 3. The Emergence of Clan Warlord Political Culture:** The concept of *clan warlord* became popularized during the social crisis in Somalia after the fall of Siad Barre's regime during the early 1990's. [4] Simply conceived, the *clan warlord* phenomenon emerges when an individual mobilizes his clan and the available resources to maintain the position of power and privileges at the cost of the national cause. In the case of the Oromo national movement, discernable patterns are already emerging along this line. For example, there are individuals who have been taking over organizations or creating organizations with exclusive support of their regional groups. Oromo professionals have an opportunity to reverse this dangerous trend. Minimally, they should resist in participating in these type of political activities. [5]
- 4. Culture of Indifference:** The current crisis and opportunities to make a difference in The Oromo national movement demands that Oromo professionals have to overcome the culture of indifference. Elsewhere, I have addressed the social phenomena manifested by Oromo professionals, which has prevented them from full and meaningful participation in the Oromo national movement. For lack of space, I will summarize the salient points here. They are: (a) the minimalist syndrome; (b) the need to keep the good person image; (c) the need to look like respectable educated

Oromo in eyes of relatives and other professionals; (d) class alliance with other educated Oromos who may be doing harm to the Oromo cause; and (e) the lingering doubt about the legitimacy and practicality of the Oromo national movement. [6]

5. The Need to Develop a Code of Ethics: Service oriented professions such as the medical profession, social work, and the legal profession have developed clearly defined code of ethics when dealing with clients as well as the larger society. The need to develop such ethical standards emanated from the fact that the professionals in these fields possessed special knowledge, which if not handled in some ethical manner, could do some harm to the clients and the larger society. In my view, there is an imbalance in the relationships between Oromo masses and Oromo professionals relative to the sphere “special knowledge”, which if not handled in some ethical manner, could do harm to the Oromos both at individual and national levels. The case of the OSA crisis has clearly illustrated the existence of this problem. Therefore, it is incumbent upon the Oromo professionals to develop some clearly stated ethical standards.

VI. Summary and Conclusions:

In this document, I have proposed the steps that should be taken in order to effectively address the crisis relating to the Oromo national movement. I hold the following basic assumptions in proposing these steps. First, the Oromo national movement has been hampered, in a large measure, due to the fact that Oromo professionals have not participated in the movement. Second, participation by Oromo

professionals can make qualitative difference in the national movement. Third, the Oromo issue has been unambiguously defined by recent events. The earth shaking political development of 1991 led to the fall of the *utuba* in the Ethiopian Empire. By *utuba*, I mean the false image created by the Amhara elite that Ethiopia is for all, and if there is cooperation and hard work, members of every ethnic group would be treated with equity and dignity in the modernized Ethiopia. The Tigrean power, by creating ethnic based façade “federalism,” has shattered this promise. Thus, the Oromos, as the most oppressed nationality, remain most vulnerable.

With these in mind, I have suggested some specific steps to be taken by Oromo professionals. In addition, I have pointed out some specific impediments which have caused serious harm to the Oromo national movement. In my view, the current paralysis in the Oromo national movement is unacceptable.

Endnotes

1. See Hamdesa Tuso,