

Exploring New Political Alternatives for the Oromo in Ethiopia

Report from Oromo workshop and its after-effects

Edited by Siegfried Pausewang

R 2009: 6

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Abbreviations

AAPO	All Amhara People’s Organisation (an urban Amhara party in opposition since 1991. Note: The organisation intended to call itself All Ethiopian, but was forced by legal requirements for registering to use the term “Amhara” as identification.)
ADLI	Agricultural Development Led Industrialisation (official rural development programme)
ANDM	Amhara National Democratic Movement (member of EPRDF)
CMI	Christian Michelsen Institute,(a foundation in Bergen, Norway, engaged in research on economic and social conditions and the practice of Human Rights in developing countries.)
CUDP	Coalition for Unity and Democracy Party (successor of CUD formed in the effort to unite CUD into a party)
CUD	Coalition for Unity and Democracy (oppositional party, originally a coalition of four different urban parties)
EHRCO	Ethiopian Human Rights Council
EPRDF	Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front (the governing coalition in Ethiopia, under the leadership of TPLF)
HRW	Human Rights Watch (international non-governmental organisation)
OLF	Oromo Liberation Front (officially prohibited party, in exile with headquarters in Asmara)
OPDO	Oromo People’s Democratic Organisation, (political party formed by TPLF in 1990 from Oromo prisoners of war, member of EPRDF.)
ONC	Oromo National Congress, (political party, in opposition, but a legally registered party with representatives in parliament.)
OFDM	Oromo Federal Democratic Movement, (political party, in opposition, but a legally registered party with representatives in parliament.)
SNNPRS	Southern Nations Nationalities and Peoples’ Regional State, (the state comprising of a motley mix of ethnic groups in Ethiopia.)
TPLF	Tigray People’s Liberation Front, (the official party of the Tigray, dominating all sectors and levels of government)

Ethiopian words (Oromifa and Amharic)

Abessinia, Abyssinia	ancient name for the core of the Ethiopian Empire
Afan Oromo	the Oromo language
Agazi	special forces, highly trained for internal security interventions, under strict Tigrean control and mostly Tigrean elite soldiers
Amhara	ethnic group in Ethiopia, strongest rival with the Tigray for domination in Abyssinia and since the consolidation in the 20th century in the Ethiopian Empire.
Assab	harbour town in Southern Eritrea, earlier main outlet to the sea for Ethiopia
Axum	town in Tigray, the capital of the ancient Abessinian state
Axumite	inhabitants of Axum; anything relating to the Axum period
Borana	subgroup of the Oromo, inhabiting the area with the same name
Derg	“group” or “junta”, the name used for the military leadership committee during the military dictatorship
Gada	traditional age cycle system of the Oromo, often quoted as the source of Oromo democratic traditions
Gedeo	ethnic group in Eastern SNNPRS
Gujji	subgroup of the Oromo
Gult	a right of a nobleman to a granted land area; given by the Emperor; not hereditary right to collect taxes and personal contributions from the peasants
Gurage	ethnic group in SNNPRS, known as migrant traders or labourers
Habesh	Amharic term for the inhabitants of the old Abessinian empire. i.e. the Tigray and Amhara, in contrast to the later conquered peoples of other ethnic origin
Kebele	local administrative unit, comprising about 100 000 people, introduced during the military (“ <i>derg</i> ”) regime
Neftegna	imposed nobility in the conquered provinces in the south, recruited from the military, mostly as civil servants, or pensioned officers. They received land rights and became a nobility in the Ethiopian South.
Oromia	the land of the Oromo; used both for an aspiration of a sovereign Oromo state, and also for the federal state of the Oromo in the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia
Oromiffa	the Oromo language (Amharic term)
Oromo	the largest ethnic group in Ethiopia
Shoa	region (former province) in Ethiopia inhabited mostly by Oromo, but in its northern parts being a province in Abyssinia since historical times. Shoa lies in the centre of today’s Ethiopia, with Addis Ababa as its modern capital
Sidama	ethnic group in SNNPRS, numerically the strongest group in the region
Sidamo	region in SNNPRS, the region of the Sidama
Teff	a grain endemic to Ethiopia, small seeded variety of sorghum. Staple food in most parts of Ethiopia and Eritrea, especially in the highlands
Tigray	ethnic group, founder of the Abyssinian Empire, rival since medieval times with the Amhara for domination in the empire
Wollega	area in Western Ethiopia inhabited by the Wollega Oromo

THE OROMO BETWEEN PAST AND FUTURE

INTRODUCTION

Siegfried Pausewang

Why this report?

This report is in several ways different from most others in this series. It is primarily intended to give an input towards stimulating a thorough debate in a particular ethnic and social group – the Oromo of Ethiopia. So was the symposium from which it reports, an attempt to spark off a debate on political issues of vital importance for the Oromo. They are in a very crucial and rather unique situation. Their fate, and their plans and actions during the coming months and years may be key to determining conditions of life in Ethiopia and in the Horn of Africa. If they play their cards carefully, the Oromo might contribute substantially to peace, protection of Human Rights and freedom in a region where conflict, insecurity, lawlessness and despotic rule have too long characterised the political game.

The Oromo are the largest single ethnic group in Ethiopia, constituting roughly one third of the population. They have managed admirably well to create a common feeling of belongingness during the last 30 or 40 years. Local clan- or community-based identities were forged into a strong common identity of “Oromumma”, an Oromo national identity. But precisely that made all other groups look at them with fear and suspiciousness: In a political context where ethnicity decides over political association, all other groups must fear that the Oromo, should they be able to challenge the present rulers, would establish yet another system of domination, as all predecessors had done.

On the international scene, too, the Oromo are at present not considered a credible alternative to the ruling government that at least guarantees stability. Their political organisations are split in many groups and fractions, and they have no political alternative to offer. Their standard argument remains: Let us first get rid of the present government to achieve majority rule. Then we will know to establish a more democratic society, based on our tradition of “*Gada*”. Their traditional social order is indeed built on basic democratic elements. But it is that of a traditional society, not adapted to be operational in a contemporary society.

The Oromo need desperately to clarify their political positions and to develop a credible political alternative vision. If they want to convince others, both in Ethiopia and among the donors and the international community, they need to offer a prospect of a genuinely bottom-up democratic alternative for Ethiopia and for the region. But their fragmentation prevented a process of planning up to now. Instead, they gave priority to tactics, to challenge the present government. They attempted to coordinate the resistance of different groups in the country, and demanded a return to the promising start with the “Transitional Charter” of 1991. Challenged to disclose their political alternative and their visions for the future, their standard answer is: Let us first achieve victory and majority rule, and self- determination.

In September 2004, the Chr. Michelsen Institute called together a group of Oromo elders, scholars, politicians and opinion leaders in an attempt to open a debate on the future policies. Until then, each

fraction had demanded unconditional support from its members. To maintain unity in the struggle, they were not to challenge the decisions of their Central Committee.

Two questions stood in the centre of the “Bergen Meeting” at CMI: First, is armed struggle a way towards achieving change in Ethiopia; or is it self defeating? Would negotiations allow better success? Second, is it politically wise to aspire an independent sovereign Oromo state, or is substantial autonomy within an Ethiopian Federation a more realistic alternative?

After confronting the meeting with views and critical analyses from several internationally known scholars on the issue, the Oromo conducted their debate in their own language and without interference. The meeting did achieve to spark off a debate. It was said to have taken the lid off a boiling kettle, opening a free and uninhibited debate among the Oromo majority. First and foremost among the refugees with asylum in the Western world, but also with a strong echo into Ethiopia, the debate took off.

Yet, events during and after the elections of 2005 overshadowed the debate. New splits threw the work for more political influence considerably back again. All in all, the problem has worsened, rather than improved. In a renewed attempt to stimulate a creative discourse among the Oromo, we make, belatedly, the report from the “Bergen meeting” available for a wider group of politicians, planners, organisations, and foremost for the members of the different political organisations of the Oromo. We hope that their debate will contribute to finding constructive political solutions in a spirit of peace, democracy and human rights.

There is today more than ever a need for a radically new approach. The Oromo need a political vision that can attract also other ethnic and political groups in Ethiopia. A truly democratic alternative must inspire an enthusiastic attitude of “YES, WE CAN!”. A credible concept of how to overcome the control over the majority by a minority can rally different peoples and marginalised political groups. Suppression happens today on local level. A credible programme for democracy on local level will promise these people a genuinely different local administration that protects local interests and people’s rights, rather than controlling them from above. Local leaders have to feel responsible to the people, and represent their interests and demands towards higher authorities, rather than feeling masters over the people, and protecting their own privileges by implementing orders from above. The administrative system has to institutionalise their commitment to local democracy.

Who are the Oromo?

Ethiopia houses about eighty different ethnicities. The Oromo constitute about one third of the population or less. Figures vary with their author, and are politically tainted and debatable. Some Oromo claim to be as many as 50 per cent. Their majority lives in rural areas, as peasants on what they produce on small plots, as pastoralists, or in other rural professions.

The majority of the Oromo have reason to feel in Ethiopia today politically marginalised, controlled and dominated by a ruling party from another ethnicity. In retaliation against OLFs armed operations in Ethiopia, the Oromo are the single group that is most exposed to control and repression. Oromia is the region with most political prisoners, and most reports on human rights violations, torture in prison, and even “disappearances”(Human Rights Watch 2005, 2006;Amnesty 2005, 2008). The federal structure of the Ethiopian state, introduced in 1991 as a response to resistance in many small ethnic groups, has not been able to soothe the trauma the Oromo suffered after a century of Amhara domination, dispossession and relegation to the status of landless serfs or tenants, and suppression of their language and culture.

The Oromo have thus all reason to demand an alternative social order with equal rights and a democratic order. But the political organisations of the Oromo, split into many factions, are in practice today helpless onlookers without influence. Back in Ethiopia, particularly in Oromia, any form of opposition is suspicious, people are closely watched, dissidents are persecuted as “state enemies”, and any indication of opposition can be life dangerous. The refugees in the “diaspora”, in exile, are split in different organisations and fractions and use as much energy fighting each other as working for an improvement of political conditions at home.

The Oromo can not be served by making this situation permanent. Their first priority must be to get out of the deadlock, if they want to regain political space.

For that, they have to speak with one voice. Different interests and views may well exist in separate organisations. But they must be able to cooperate in formulating common demands. They must know what they want. They must realistically assess the promises and limitations of negotiation. A good political analysis and a vivid political debate are needed to hammer out a positive vision for an alternative future in a democratic society in peace with its neighbours.

The history of the Oromo the last 150 years

The different groups and peoples belonging to the Oromo had lived side by side and in competition with the Amhara for land for a long period. At times the Oromo drove the Amhara back into the mountains, settling in the fertile lower regions, at times the Amhara pushed them back again to the marginal areas suitable for pastoralist life only.

In the 19th century the Amhara-dominated Ethiopian Empire expanded to the South, making use of larger quantities of firearms imported from Europe. When European powers engaged in competition for partitioning Africa among themselves as colonies, a strengthened Ethiopian State could as the only African nation claim a stake in this “scramble for Africa”. European weapons allowed the Empire to subdue the different small kingdoms and communities of many ethnic groups, Ethiopia more than tripled its territory southward. This expansion allowed to amass resources for a strengthened and centralised state structure, and gave the strength in terms of military, manpower and economic clout to resist European attempts at colonizing it. When Italy attempted to include Ethiopia into its colonial Empire, king Menilek managed to raise a huge army and to defeat the Italians in the battle of Adowa in 1896.

The conquered peoples had to pay a high price for Ethiopia preserving its independence. Rich booty from the military campaigns financed much of the costs of building a central state structure. The conquering armies were paid with land rights in the conquered areas. An entirely new class of rulers was established to pacify and control these areas, locally called “*neftegna*”, literally “gunmen”. In many areas they were also summarily called “*Amhara*”, even if they may have been individuals from other ethnicities, assimilated into the state administration or military. The State confiscated the supreme right over land. But the new land holders were not interested in tilling it themselves: they were interested in keeping the peasants there, and live off a portion of their produce to be delivered to the “*gult* lord” or “*neftegna*”. Such land rights could be given as remuneration for services rendered during the conquest, or in lieu of a salary for services in the administration or in keeping peace and enforcing the rules of the State in the local population. Thus the state established a class of landlords. Rising costs of living, combined with the trend of centralisation, forced these landlords to raise their shares, and the contributions of peasants, including forced labour and other services, were constantly rising. If a “*neftegna*” moved to town, accepting a position in the central administration or the military, he would maintain his privileges, though dropping his local obligations to the peasants. The peasants turned step by step, almost without recognising it themselves, into the position of tenants and serfs. Economically peasants felt increasingly exploited, culturally subjected to a rising pressure to assimilate to Amharic as the “*lingua franca*” in Ethiopia,

to join the Ethiopian Coptic Church. Their language was forbidden in public contexts, their culture ridiculed.

Only later, when Haile Selassie introduced private property, and when in the period after Second World War investment in land turned profitable, did the landlords attempt to transform their privileges into land ownership. Haile Selassie's law proclaimed that the one who paid the land tax was considered the legal owner. The local "*neftegna*" nobility was quick to understand this. By collecting rural produce, selling it for money to pay the tax, they could document their "ownership" through tax receipts for a series of years. Still, the peasants realised their de facto expropriation only when land prices rose, and landlords evicted their "tenants" to dispose of the land for other purposes. An independent peasantry was gradually dispossessed. At the same time, the "*neftegna*" power over peasants increased, exposing them to increasingly harsh conditions, rising contributions, and harsh punishments in case of default, or even for no apparent reason (Mohammed Hassen 2000; Pausewang 1983).

Among the newly integrated peoples, the different communities, tribes and kingdoms belonging to the Oromo ethnicity were the largest group. But they shared the fate with many others, as they share the trauma from this experience until today.

The Oromo after 1991

Towards the end of the Military dictatorship, around 1989, when TPLF together with EPRDF and several other liberation movements (among them the Oromo Liberation Front OLF) was at the verge of winning the resistance war, TPLF had to plan ahead for the future. Until 1987, TPLF had fought for independence of Tigray from Ethiopia. Two reasons might have inspired them to change their political vision. First, the leaders of TPLF must have realised that an independent Tigray could hardly expect to live in peace alongside all other ethnic new states, smaller or larger. In particular, the neighbour Oromia, being much bigger and richer, could make Tigray virtually powerless. Second, TPLF must have realised during the resistance war that it was dependent on other parts of Ethiopia. Tigray is endowed with limited natural resources and agricultural potential. It is particularly exposed to weather fluctuations and failure of the rains. Even in a normal year, Tigrayan agriculture can hardly feed its growing population. Agricultural land, weather conditions and agricultural potentials are much better in neighbouring Oromia and Amhara. TPLF decided after victory not to dismantle the Ethiopian state by claiming independence, offering it to the other ethnicities as well. Instead they promised to establish a federation of self administered ethnic regions.

There was hardly any choice but to establish the federal states along ethnic lines. Critics, especially in the urban Amhara milieu, condemned that decision from the beginning as "ethnicising" politics and as a split- and- rule tactic. In fact, TPLF often used it as such. However, in 1991 there was hardly any other choice. The "Red Terror" of the military regime had wiped out any internal political resistance. During the worst years of 1977 to 78, whoever was young and educated was suspected of political deviation, rrested, tortured and executed summarily for betraying the revolution or anti people activity. Those who escaped the purge could only go to exile or hide in their rural home areas. There, only local resistance groups offered them any chance for political exchange or activity. These were ethnically organised. W hen the military dictator fell, the only nuclei of political organisation were ethnic resistance groups who fought for independence or self determination. They were highly influenced by the trauma of subjugation and exploitation since the conquest a hundred years ago. In 1991, nobody could expect to win political legitimacy without recognising their influence and offering them if not independence, at least wide autonomy. Any other but an ethnic division would have made a new administrative structure impossible.

But TPLF found a way to counterbalance the disparity in the size of the different ethnicities. Since 1989 they formed political parties from other ethnic groups which were allied to and dependent on TPLF. To control the future political destiny of the Oromo, they organised Oromo prisoners of war into the Oromo People's Democratic Front (OPDO). While TPLF cooperated with the Oromo Liberation Front in the last phases of the resistance struggle, it favoured OPDO and prepared it for manning the political positions in a future Oromia regional state and the local administration.

After victory in 1991, OLF was invited together with TPLF and EPLF to a Conference in London, where the future structure for Ethiopia was discussed and a "Transitional Charter" drafted in lieu of a constitution for a transitional period. OLF leaders were centrally involved in drafting the Charter. To the follow up conference in Addis Ababa, all ethnic groups were invited to delegate their representatives. Those ethnicities who had no functioning resistance organisations, had to rally together representatives in a hurry, often simply delegating urban intellectuals from their ethnic group in Addis Ababa. The Conference established these representatives as a transitional parliament, adopted the Transitional Charter, and called on TPLF and their leader, Meles Zenawi, to form a central government. OLF was given four minister posts in the central government, against three for OPDO. But OPDO was put in charge of building up the administration on local, district and regional state level, except for a few small areas which OLF had militarily liberated and continued to administer.

Thus OPDO was heading the local administration, under the guidance of TPLF representatives. They also had control over police and local security personnel in Oromia, while TPLF was in charge of national security. The fighters of OLF were confined to their camps. This position gave OPDO the opportunity to build up a local administration loyal to it, and to TPLF. The law required for any administrative position the knowledge of the local language. OPDO controlled recruitment. But it was difficult to find qualified people locally. School dropouts, some local school teachers, and a few other opportunistic elements saw their chance for secure jobs and positions, and acted swiftly. Becoming members of OPDO, they emerged as the few who could read and write, qualifying them for most administrative jobs. Among these elements, OPDO recruited a corps of unconditionally loyal administrators. They knew that their positions, their newly won social roles, their power was owed to and depended on their loyalty to the party. They knew they would lose all of it and end up back in the streets as unemployed misfits, should OLF win any election. Already in the 1992 local elections, they made sure OLF did not get any chance to organise a campaign in their villages. They did it their way. They intimidated potential candidates, they threatened their families, organised mob action against OLF campaign organisers, destroyed party offices of OLF wherever it managed to open one, they imprisoned candidates on concocted pretexts. It did not help OLF to have four ministers, as long as they were prevented from organising political competition on local level in the election campaign. Nor could it help them to retaliate against OPDO representatives in their small areas of administrative control. The central government did not intervene to stop OPDO abuses. When OLF understood that they had no chance in the election to win any seats outside of their own small areas, they withdrew from the election. In response, TPLF military forces tried to swiftly occupy the OLF fighter camps. In most places they succeeded, but fighting arose in a few places, such as Wollega, putting OLF against TPLF in a virtual state of war. The central government declared OLF an illegal organisation, sacked their ministers and forced their leaders into exile.

From there, OLF has since being engaged in an armed resistance struggle in Ethiopia. With limited resources and manpower, and difficulties in finding bases in neighbouring countries for smuggling their fighters clandestinely into Ethiopia, this war was most of the time very limited and conducted on a low key. It has never come close to putting up a serious challenge for TPLF security forces. But it has been significant in keeping a feeling of OLF presence awake in the Oromo peasantry.

And it has had considerable effect in giving Oromo peasants the feeling that OLF continues to be the only organisation defending their rights.

On the other hand, OLF fighters attacking security forces here or there, have given OPDO a welcome pretext for strong vigilance, for watching the peasant population and clamping down on any form of opposition or protest, under the pretext of fighting OLF insurgents. It gives the security forces a justification for keeping the local population in a constant fear of retaliation. They punish any kind of support for other parties except OPDO. In the election campaign of 2005, even legally registered Oromo parties, especially ONC and OFDM, were harassed and persecuted on local level, just as OLF members, for trying to compete against OPDO.

The present situation

Most political observers, Ethiopians and foreigners alike, see Ethiopia today with two faces: one for the diplomatic and international scene – showing a democratic order, a constitution that guarantees all the important human rights, a functioning legal system and a progressive and prospering economy. But the people in the country experience another reality in their daily life. Especially in rural areas, the daily experience of a repressive rule of state organs contradicts all democratic promises and constitutional guarantees. An opportunistic and authoritarian administrative hierarchy reigns on local level, in the name of the State and the Party. Human Rights are guaranteed – but Amnesty International¹, Human Rights Watch², the Ethiopian Human Rights Council (EHRCO)³ and the US State Department⁴ report time and again, with no apparent decline, on violations by police and security forces, on torture in prisons, arbitrary arrests, even extrajudicial executions, without any attempts by the central state to curb such acts. A federation of self-determined ethnic member states was established in 1991, to offer the peoples of the South, who were conquered and included into the Ethiopian Empire by force of superior weapons just a century ago, a chance for healing their trauma of suppression and for developing their cultural independence (Kidane 1997). This was thought to bridge internal conflicts and ease cooperation. But the rural people experience daily a continuing control from the powerful rulers from the North, and feel economically exploited and culturally marginalised.

A majority experiences daily the deep gulf between political claims and lived reality. People are disillusioned and have learned by default to arrange with realities, and to view the promises of Human Rights and of the Constitution as just a political façade, designed to preserve support from abroad.

The governing party coalition considers that unfair. Its leaders are equally convinced to do their very best for their country – as long as their own positions, or the political role of the ruling Tigray, or their food and other supplies are not put at risk. The EPRDF has indeed freed the people from a series of extremely unpopular policies of the military government. Before the elections of 2005, the government allowed and even supported a considerable opening for freedom of speech and a broad election campaign, even in rural areas. But when election day showed that an opposition party had a potential to challenge the EPRDF, the opening was swiftly closed again (Aalen 2008). Most importantly, the ruling party is convinced it is alone in representing the interests of the peasants (Transitional Charter 1991). This claim is not entirely false. After the victory of 1991, it freed the peasants from a series of highly unpopular measures of the military regime, and gave them an expectation of better times. Referring to that liberation, it wants to teach peasants, claims their

¹ www.amnesaty.org/eng/regions/africa/ethiopia

² www.hrw.org/africa/ethiopia

³ www.ehrco.org

⁴ www.state.gov/g/drl/hrrpt/2007

loyalty and is prepared to enforce it – but does not want to hear their needs and complaints (Pausewang 2004:18, 23, 36, 2007b).

The urban elites, ethnically mixed, and speaking Amharic, are equally convinced that their alternative of a centralised national integration is best for all, including the marginalised peoples. They equally claim to advance the interests of the peasants. The public discourse remains thus a purely urban affair. 80 percent of the population have no access for voicing their concerns. Peasants can not participate in shaping public opinion. Other actors claim the right to speak for them (Pausewang 2007).

The Oromo have achieved some of their political ambitions since the days of Haile Selassie, though. The land reform of 1975 has restored their traditional right to land, at least in theory. In Ethiopia today they have their own Federal state, Oromia, which is administered by an Oromo party, the Oromo People's Democratic Organisation (OPDO). Both on communal and federal level. Formally they were granted considerable autonomy. They are administered by Oromo persons, and their language *Afan Oromo* is official language. Schools teach in their mother tongue, and they write *Afan Oromo* in Latin instead of the Amharic script employed in most parts of the country.

Yet at the same time, the Oromo have good reasons to complain about a deep gap between this formal emancipation and the practice on the ground. Oromia is the region with strictest levels of control and security surveillance. Human Rights violations are most frequent and most serious in Oromia, apart from temporary episodes in other regions in case of conflicts and public unrest. Oromia is the region with most political prisoners, and the most tight and merciless security surveillance system (HRW 2005). Any suspicion of being a supporter of the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) will bring an Oromo in conflict with security forces, and expose him to arbitrary arrest, interrogation, imprisonment or worse. Before the elections, a new system of neighbourhood cells were organised, which gave the local authorities a tool to check every single household. Human Rights Watch has documented in 2005 how this new control system worked as a disciplining device for any form of Oromo opposition.

Also land rights, though guaranteed in the Constitution, are in practice used to hold peasants under control. Civil servants may tell a peasant he would lose his right to land if he voted for any other party but EPRDF. "The state owns the land. We don't give you from our land if you don't vote for us. Ask your party to provide you, if it can..." In the election campaigns, we heard many peasants, all over the country, complain about land being used to put peasants under pressure or to punish them (Aalen 2002:184-6; Pausewang 2004: 17).

There are good reasons for special vigilance towards the Oromo. As they are the largest ethnicity in Ethiopia, others are afraid they might assume the power to dominate them. The largest group is the potentially strongest competitor. Smaller groups might fear the Oromo could replace the present regime with yet another ethnically defined rule. They could replace Amhara or Tigray hegemony with just another ethnic domination, to the advantage of one, at the expense of all the other ethnicities.

The Tigrayans in particular have some reason to fear the Oromo. They are no more than 7 per cent of the Ethiopian population, but their TPLF controls at present the levers of government. They must be particularly concerned to prevent the much larger Oromo from conquering such powers – be it through democratic elections or through other means.

However, the biggest challenge to any government of Ethiopia comes today neither from the Oromo nor the Tigre. It comes from urban interests, manifested in a group of urban Amhara. The term indicates that the group consists not only of ethnic Amhara, but is of mixed ethnic stock, assimilated

to varying degree to Amhara language and culture. It organised in the run-up to the 2005 elections in the “Coalition for Unity and Democracy” (CUD). It collected specifically urban interests. In a population that consists of 80 % rural people, almost all of whom live on subsistence agriculture, a few on larger scale agriculture or rural business or professions, their interests are distinctively not rural. CUD has been described as a rightwing populist movement. CUD was not too far from winning a majority, a landslide by all means, in the first election the party contested. The government reacted with unrestricted force when they dared to challenge the official election results and to stage public demonstrations. It is now split and surviving with broken back.

But the emboldened urban interests do not go away, they will in one or another form return and try to gain political control. Prime Minister Meles Zenawi has indeed reason for concern, as a section of the internal opposition in his Tigray party TPLF in Mekelle appears with its own urban ideology to come to a position rather close to that of CUD. Today, the rural population is totally excluded from the political debate in Addis Ababa. Should the urban Amhara and Tigre meet in a common front against Meles, his position could turn untenable over night. Both his Federation and his project of a democratic constitution, though it has been rendered hollow by his priority for order, stability and control, would be at stake. At stake would also be the peace in the region, because the urban Amhara demand an Ethiopian access to the sea. Geographically that can only mean a claim to regain Assab – and Assab is part of the sovereign state of Eritrea. Claiming it would inevitably lead to a new war. Together with the Oromo, Meles would have a chance to save his Constitution, his federation, his confessed protection of peasant interests, and peace.

Meles Zenawi closed this door already in 1992, when he chased the OLF into exile. He closed it most decisively in 2005-2006. He does certainly not wish to open it again. But he may be forced to re-consider his decision. He has several times after 1992 offered OLF negotiations (see David Shinn, above). When the urban Amhara recover from the shock of 2006, they will regroup and challenge his power again. Conditions beyond his control could force him to choose whether to form a coalition with the urban Amhara, - a successor of CUD – or with the Oromo. After the elections of 2005, Meles felt so much cornered that at some point he invited OLF to negotiations without any preconditions. But after he offered Ethiopia as a partner to the USA and a guarantor for stability in the Horn, he felt sufficiently secure to drop the offer to OLF quietly. Yet those who stood behind CUD won't give up. That is paradoxically OLFs chance. For such a possibility the Oromo have to be prepared.

Context and Intentions of the “Bergen Meeting”

The Chr, Michelsen Institute in Bergen called in September 2004 together Oromo elders and opinion leaders, mostly from the diaspora, but also a few individuals from Ethiopia, to a meeting to discuss the political situation and the alternative options for the Oromo. The meeting was initiated by individuals in the Oromo community in Bergen and other places who felt that political debate within their community was too much restricted. The predominant attitude among the Oromo appeared to be: Keep united, support your organisation, but don't weaken the cause by criticism and disunity. Unless we stand together we can not succeed...

Nevertheless, splits occurred at different occasions, and the postulated unity of purpose was not a reality among the Oromo. Both in the diaspora and in Ethiopia, other parties or groups came up. Unity of purpose could not be claimed to be a political reality.

The “Bergen Meeting” was thus intended to help open up for a debate within the Oromo on their own political situation, their visions, the tactics in their struggle for a better life situation of the Oromo majority in Ethiopia. Opening up for a debate among the Oromo, meant also, and prominently, opening up a debate inside OLF. We can conclude today that this very intention, to open a debate, was achieved beyond expectation. The most hotly debated issues in 2004 were:

1. Should the Oromo concentrate on armed struggle or on a peaceful negotiation?
2. Should the Oromo concentrate their struggle on achieving independence for a sovereign state of Oromia – or settle for a democratic state in Ethiopia in which the Oromo could regain self determination, and participate as equal citizens together with other Ethiopian groups and nationalities?
3. What are the best ways to get out of the political deadlock, regain the initiative, and bring new political space and a new dynamic into the Ethiopian political sphere?

After the Bergen Conference, though an intensified debate emerged, it must be realistically considered that the unity of purpose has not come closer. All attempts to re-unite the different political groups in the Oromo community were frustrated. The Oromo have split even more. New groups emerged both in Ethiopia and in the diaspora. But the need for a debate and for new efforts to unite the Oromo remains no less topical. Therefore, we at the Chr. Michelsen Institute have decided to make the papers presented at the Bergen Conference available at last. We are reproducing these papers unchanged, but in the context of today's alternatives. Today, more than before, three major important imperatives confront the Oromo in their efforts to bring movement into the deadlocked political situation in their home country. The first imperative is to re-unite the Oromo groups, so that they can speak with one voice. Second, they have to create an internal dialogue, so that they can build their political positions on a strong internal democratic legitimacy. Third, they have to be prepared for negotiations both with the international community and with the Ethiopian government and other political groups in Ethiopia. The major aim, however much disagreement there should and could legitimately be on the ways towards achieving it, is for the Oromo to develop a vision for a democratic social structure, based on open debate, and free of repression.

Structure of the Symposium

The Bergen Symposium was structured in three parts. The first two days were devoted to different views on the problems facing the Oromo today and possible political ways out. We wanted to confront the Oromo with outside analyses, views and opinions of researchers. International scholars from Europe, the United States, and from the Oromo diaspora, and some political leaders, gave their views on the problems facing Oromo politics. A day of relaxation was inserted to give participants a chance to digest the presentations and get their minds off the immediate reactions, and to learn a glimpse from a different society, where they would feel a world free of repression and of ethnic strife. After that, the third part consisted of two days of discussion among the Oromo participants, in their own language. Europeans were almost entirely excluded. The meeting ended with a general statement of the assembled Oromo participants summarizing the debates, deliberations and conclusions.

The debate was indeed initiated after the Bergen meeting. Even before the Conference started, the participants sat in a long evening meeting in a hotel and discussed the event. A heated debate ensued when some Oromo participants demanded to boycott the meeting. It was accused of being an "imperialist plot" to divert the political zeal of the Oromo organisations away from their primary goal: the liberation of the Oromo from Ethiopian domination and exploitation. But the view prevailed that debate could not do harm. One should participate in the meeting, and judge its intentions and effects afterwards.

Many strong attacks on the organisers as well as the participants were circulated in the Internet and on email discussion fora. There was hardly any suspicion and accusation not brought forward against the organisers and those who allowed themselves to be seduced. But there were also many Oromo participants who enthusiastically congratulated the organisers for having initiated a free

debate in a democratic atmosphere. Many Oromo outsiders and members also applauded, expressing satisfaction that finally the ice had been broken, giving room for a free debate among the Oromo.

Nevertheless, the split among the Oromo is not overcome. To the contrary, a new split has been created within the OLF in summer 2008. In Ethiopia, another new Oromo party has emerged in front of the 2005 elections. In 2005, for a short moment, meles Zenawi opened a door of opportunity for OLF but closed it soon again. The need for an inclusive debate is thus even more pressing now. Therefore we make available the papers and a glimpse of the debate of those days, in the hope that this publication may assist in stimulating further debate, and help in clarifying the issues at stake in the political discussion in Ethiopia.

The publication

A preliminary and partial report was issued in 2004 in a very limited number of copies, essentially as an input to the debates at the General Assembly of OLF in December 2004. It was not a complete report, as it did not contain all papers presented. But it gave an intensive selection from the debate on internet and some other reports by participants and insiders which by now appear of lesser interest.

The first part of this publication is reproducing the papers presented by European and Ethiopian scholars and politicians. They are reproduced here to make them available to a wider group, and stimulate further debate in wider circles.

These contributions were very different both in content and style. Some are scholarly essays and papers, with footnotes and documentation, while others are held in a more oral and eloquent style. All emphasize the need for openness, debate, and a dynamic orientation towards the realities in a changing international and internal political context. They are intended to inspire evaluating new alternatives, trying alternative approaches, waging new ideas and inventing innovative tools to reach improvements in an untenable life situation.

Christopher Clapham, professor at the Centre for African Studies at Cambridge University, took up the problem of ethnic diversity not only in Ethiopia, but in most African countries. In his known well formulated and eloquent style, he compared the different historical approaches to diversity: Haile Selassie's attempt at assimilation of all others to Amhara culture; the Derg's attempt at solving the problem through "revolutionary nationalism", and the project of ethnic federalism of the EPRDF. Clapham identified three different important problem complexes emanating from the federal project. First, the problem arises for the Oromo, but also for other nationalities, of the relationship between being Oromo and being Ethiopian: is it possible to be both at the same time, or does being Oromo exclude being Ethiopian citizen. This entails the question of He compares the Ethiopian federation to the European Union, where "being 'European' is accessed through a prior membership of the individual member states". Second, he identifies the problem of fixing borders and generating cooperation between the different nationalities within the Federation: problems of physical borders without having clear ethnic borders, hence including overlapping nationalities between federal states. Third, and foremost, he identifies the problem of internal differences of identity within the Oromo nationality, and the question to what extent for example the Moslems, the *Borana*, or the *Gujji* would feel dominated and marginalised in a state governed by ethnic Oromo from Wollega or Shoa, being protestant or orthodox Christians. These problems have to be thought about, and solutions identified, if the Oromo want to speak with one voice and plan for a better alternative political future.

David Shinn, professor at the George Washington University in Washington D.C. and former US Ambassador to Ethiopia, took a very different approach, starting his presentation with very personal

and very frank words about the genesis of his association with and interest in Ethiopia and in particular the Oromo. He then touches upon problems for democratic development in Ethiopia, such as ethnic diversity, a history based on the power of the gun rather than democratic legitimacy; He links the Oromo question directly to democracy: only in a democratic Ethiopia is there room for a peaceful coexistence of different ethnicities; and the Oromo as the largest single ethnic group have all reason to make sure neither their own leaders nor others attempt to govern through force. He argues that, therefore, the time has come for the Oromo to contemplate ending armed struggle and returning to political competition in Ethiopia. He sums up a series of failed attempts of dialogue between the Oromo and the Ethiopian government. He discusses issues of political organisation in the existing opposition parties and warns that unless those parties reach out or win the peasants, they are not likely to win seats in parliament. He lifts the idea of creating instead of an ethnic Oromo party, a national party with a democratic programme, open to all nationalities. And he suggests that the United States might well be interested in supporting a new approach, provided it would entail a realistic promise of more democratic and peaceful solutions to the diverse problems of Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa.

Mohammed Hassan, professor of history at the University of Atlanta, presented a detailed and solidly documented scholarly account of the history of the Oromo struggle in Ethiopia. He also documented the repression, the human rights violations and the discrimination practiced against the Oromo in present day Ethiopia, and concluded that the people in rural Ethiopia see no other alternative but to resist the continuing Ethiopian infringements with all possible means. He demonstrated the uninterrupted continuity of discrimination to which the Oromo, especially in the remote rural areas, are subjected. He concludes that OLF can not maintain its credibility without supporting their resistance which is borne out of their daily experience.

Lovise Aalen, doctorate student at CMI (she has by now finished her doctorate), essentially summarised the experience of the elections in 2000 (national and regional) and 2001 (local) in Ethiopia. As an observer she has been witness to countless complaints and incidents demonstrating a considerably less than plain playing field. Especially in Oromia and in the SNNPRS, where “Southern” ethnicities try to assert their political rights to self determination and administration, observed and reported attempts at influencing election results and at coercing rural people to vote for EPRDF were not to be overlooked. She describes the mechanisms employed by local authorities and party cadres to coerce peasants into “loyalty” towards the EPRDF parties. She concludes that “a political structure that is built on parties that depend entirely on the access to state resources does not allow for a democratic change.” But she also gives a prospect of hope, noting that a state structure can not be maintained through coercion indefinitely. This places a great responsibility on all political forces to develop and present democratic alternatives to the people.

The contribution by Siegfried Pausewang, former Asst. Professor at the then Haile Selassie I University in Addis Ababa, and senior researcher at Chr. Michelsen institute, looks in more detail to the rural structures that allow EPRDF to maintain peasant support at least in more remote rural areas. It exemplifies mechanisms of maintaining the loyalty of local functionaries, and their almost unlimited impunity for acts of pressurizing and coercing peasants, and links these acts to the unlimited social and economic dependence of those functionaries on their party. To achieve democracy and human security also for the Oromo, the paper suggests that the Oromo have to renounce violence and negotiate for a return to the political competition in Ethiopia. The paper suggests first of all thorough and detailed planning for alternative social structures on local level, which would allow elected administrators and independent civil servants and public functionaries to represent the interests of peasants and local people in the higher political institutions, rather than blindly executing orders from above.

As the last of the scholarly presentations, Kjetil Tronvoll, associate professor of political science at Oslo University, reflected upon which alternative scenarios Ethiopia and the Oromo would have to expect with different approaches to their political predicament. His visions were structured by a power point presentation, which better than words illustrated his different scenarios. We therefore decided to present his contribution in the form of the very power point planches he used to visualise his alternatives. Tronvoll imagined what would happen if the CUD would win the elections of 2005 – would EPRDF accept defeat and leave government offices to CUD, or would it stage a coup to “save the nation”? What would happen if EPRDF would intensify repression to stem the ascent of CUD? What would OLFs future be if it were declared a “terrorist organisations” by the US government, and exposed to a worldwide ban? His conclusion was that OLF had rather few realistic options. The most promising would be, in spite of many uncertainties and risks involved, to renounce violence and negotiate for a return as a legal party to participate in the political process in Ethiopia.

An ad hoc contribution by Dr. Asfaw Beyene emphasized the right of peoples to resistance against repression. He claimed as a last resort for the Oromo the right to violent resistance.

As last speaker, Daawud Ibsaa, the current Chairman of OLF, gave a political analysis of the situation from the viewpoint of the OLF. He repeated that the Oromo at no time had any interest in fighting, but was always aspiring for chances to solve problems peacefully. “We can not afford to sacrifice our youth as we need each and everyone of them alive to grow our country, fight poverty and achieve a better standard of living”, he said. He expressed the hope that the Conference would contribute to “a long journey towards making Ethiopia, and in extension the Horn, a more democratic, peaceful and stable region.” But he reminded the participants of the obstacles to peaceful solutions, due to Ethiopian history of conquest, the imperial nature of the state, with a minority clinging to power, while the subjugated nations attempt to free themselves. “At no time did the Oromo close the door for peaceful political alternatives”, he said. He spoke of OLFs vision “to build a brand new polity on a new paradigm based on mutual consent of the peoples concerned”. He summarised that “our freedom requires us to work relentlessly to build a healthy and working relationship with all the peoples in Ethiopia, and come up with a more democratic, representative and viable alternative to the incumbent regime”.

The second part of this document attempts an overview over reactions from the Oromo political organisations. It will also attempt to draw some conclusions about the road ahead, and about ways for the Oromo to widen the political space for their aspirations of a more democratic and inclusive state and society.

The publication of these papers has been facing continuous obstacles. The meeting had agreed to publish the papers and appointed an Oromo as co-editor. But internal negotiations caused delays, and time constraints of the supposed editors – both from the Oromo and from the side of CMI cost us more time. Considerations of political opportunity have also been responsible for hesitations at certain particular moments.

We are now making these documents available as a CMI report. We believe they are today even more important for clarifying the need for dialogue and maintaining the dynamic of a debate among the Oromo. We believe they have to make a contribution to that debate.

And they should, first of all, stimulate and urge the OLF to continue a process of thorough planning for a democratic alternative. To envisage a democratic Oromo society; is one thing. To gain influence, it is now important to develop a plan that promises positive alternative social structures. Unless such plans are readily available, it will not be possible to change the present dependence of the local administrators on the governing party. Knowing how such an alternative can be built and

protected against abuse or perversion, could help develop a political vision which looks forward, creates hope, and can unite the Oromo, with support from other suppressed groups in the country. Such a vision can bring a new dynamic into the political constellation, and open the political deadlock OLF finds itself in.

If OLF can achieve to develop that vision, it is worth the prolonged, at times frustrating effort.

PART I: THE BERGEN MEETING

Professor Christopher Clapham opened the session on opinions and analyses of scholars on the political situation with a historical and analytical consideration of the problems of ethnic diversity in a context of state sovereignty. Addressing his Oromo audience with an oral presentation, he refrained from a scientific apparatus of footnotes and references, though his text certainly is informed by a long career of research on this and related topics in the context of the region.

FROM HAILE-SELASSIE TO MELES: GOVERNMENT, PEOPLE AND THE NATIONALITIES QUESTION IN ETHIOPIA

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Ethiopia and the problem of diversity

The basic question with which Oromos and other nationalities in Ethiopia are concerned is by no means restricted to Ethiopia or even to Africa. That question – is it possible to reconcile the identities and aspirations of particular peoples with the demands of membership of a single multinational state? – is the most important challenge facing the construction of a peaceful and democratic global order, and it must be answered not only in Africa, but in the great majority of the countries of the world. Very few states indeed have but a single ‘nationality’, and even the attempt to create states that are ethnically homogeneous has usually been accompanied by great violence. Though the existing frontiers of states are not sacred, and these may sometimes have to change, and indeed have changed, there is no conceivable way in which the diverse peoples of the world can each be divided into separate sovereign states. The successful development of democratic governance, in Ethiopia as elsewhere, critically depends on the accommodation of diversity.

In most of Africa, the problem of diversity is automatically ascribed to European colonialism, and to the arbitrary and artificial frontiers of most African states, which were usually drawn by colonialists, without any reference to the African peoples whom they divided between one territory and another. I am often greeted with astonishment when I tell other Africans that this problem may be greatest in those states that were created not by Europeans, but by Africans themselves. The reason is that European colonialism subjected all Africans to the common oppression of an external power, whereas indigenous African states were almost necessarily based on the power of one group inside that state over others, and therefore had a much more basic ‘premise of inequality’ built into the state itself. Ethiopia is in this respect by no means alone; a number of other African states with essentially indigenous origins, such as Sudan, Rwanda and Burundi, have experienced far more intense internal inequality and conflict than Ethiopia.

Ethiopia is indeed a very peculiar country: it was never an apartheid-style state, with power reserved to the members of one particular nationality, but has always been multi-national. It *has* however had a dominant *cultural* core, notably represented by Orthodox Christianity, the Amharic language, and the acceptance of as ‘great tradition’ of Ethiopian history, which anyone who wanted to ‘belong’ to the state has had to adopt. The resulting sense of inequality was then greatly intensified by the great expansion of the territory of the Ethiopian state at the time of Emperor Menilek, and by the intensely exploitative system of land-holding that was then established, as well as by the deeply authoritarian culture of the state itself.

It is a state in which *some* Oromos, albeit always a small minority, have had an important place for the last three centuries, whereas many, indeed most, Oromos have been among its most exploited peoples. We may think of Menilek’s general Ras Gobana as an Oromo who conquered Oromos, but Menilek himself – coming as he did from an area of mixed population in which Oromos, Amharas and other peoples had mingled for several centuries – is almost certain to have had some Oromo blood, and was evidently very different in appearance from the classic Amhara type. Ninety years ago, Ethiopia was ruled by the Oromo Negus Mikael and his son Yasu; but Haile-Selassie, who overthrew them, was himself half-Oromo, since both of his grandfathers were Oromo (for completeness, one grandmother was Amhara, and the other Gurage). For much of their recent history, Oromos have been partly inside and partly outside the Ethiopian state, an ambivalent position due partly to the peculiar nature and changing boundaries of the Ethiopian state itself, but also to the great diversity among Oromos, who have many different histories, just as they have different religions and different traditional modes of production. This peculiar status, partly inside and partly outside a state of whose population they form the largest single group, continues to define the problems facing Oromos today.

Alternative approaches to diversity

There are only a limited number of ways in which states and peoples can respond to diversity, and over the last 50 years, Ethiopia and the Oromo have experienced three different ones, which between them represent three of the main mechanisms through which some accommodation between statehood and identity can be attempted. Each of these, certainly, has had its problems, which in the first two cases go a long way to explain why they have now passed into history. We must however remember that this is an area in which *every* would-be solution has its problems: there is no perfect outcome, and whichever option is adopted, including those that have not yet been tried, will necessarily have its downside as well as its advantages.

Haile-Selassie and assimilation

The imperial government Haile-Selassie, through to his deposition in the 1974 revolution, followed a policy that can broadly be described as assimilationist: he assumed that over time, all Ethiopians would become roughly the same, by becoming in essence like himself, Amharic-speaking, Orthodox Christians, embodying the Ethiopian ‘great tradition’ of Axum, Lalibela and empire. His home region of Shoa was itself an expression of this idea of Ethiopia, a region of mixed ethnicity, many of whose peoples had only recently been annexed to the country, but which was nonetheless central to the Ethiopian state. Haile-Selassie did not do very much to promote this policy, but as a feudal or dynastic leader he did not see much need to. His agenda was largely limited to the extension of centralised government over the whole country, and the suppression of any attempt to develop any alternative source of identity, such as Somali, Eritrean or indeed Oromo. More positive attempts at integration involved ensuring that education and other government services were provided only in Amharic, and dynastic marriages with the historic ruling families of Welega and Tigray; but the active promotion of Ethiopian nationalism would in itself have implied a level of popular participation in government that the imperial state could not have withstood.

Haile-Selassie's assimilationist policy, like his government as a whole, was always a lost cause. Increased demands for popular participation are an inevitable consequence of modernisation, and such demands always intensify latent identities. The imperial government did nothing at all – indeed, quite the opposite – to rectify the deep injustices that had been perpetuated by the existing class and especially land-holding structures of southern Ethiopia. Already by the end of his reign, the idea of self-determination for Ethiopia's nationalities was coming to the fore, a process represented in the case of the Oromo by the Macha Tulama association, one of whose young activists, Mamo Mezmir, was a member of my own class at the Law School of Addis Ababa University in the late 1960s. The idea that Ethiopia's numerous nationalities could be seamlessly welded into a common identity represented by 'historic' Ethiopia was never realisable; and the revolution that erupted in 1974 simply precipitated into the political arena tensions that would inevitably, sooner or later, have made their way to the surface.

The Derg and revolutionary nationalism

The Derg regime of Mengistu Haile-Mariam and his associates had a very different vision of Ethiopia, which derived from their own revolutionary military nationalism. They felt that if oppression and inequality could be swept away, and the injustices of the old 'feudal' system could be rectified, notably with regard to the land question, then the basic underlying causes of Ethiopia's internal divisions would no longer exist, and all Ethiopians could join together as members of a single equal and united nation. This vision was moreover very widely shared by the young, educated and idealistic Ethiopians of that time. Its great expression was of course the land reform of 1975, and the *zemecha* or revolutionary development campaign that immediately followed it, in which high school and university students were despatched to the countryside, to reconnect with their rural roots and implement the land reform and other revolutionary measures on the ground.

This again was not an entirely fraudulent vision, and like Haile-Selassie's Shoan attitude, it made sense especially to those who promoted it: in this case, junior officers in the army, and many of their contemporaries in the university and elsewhere. Mengistu Haile-Mariam's own ethnicity remains uncertain, though he was most probably a Kullo Konta from the south-west; and whatever you may say about him, there can be little doubt that he was an Ethiopian nationalist, with a whole-hearted (indeed brutal) commitment to national unity. The great land reform likewise undoubtedly created enthusiasm for the revolution among the peasantry, and perhaps especially the Oromo peasantry, who unlike their northern counterparts had lacked the security provided by traditional systems of land tenure. The great revolutionary armies of the late 1970s, that in 1977/78 defeated the Somalis and pinned back the Eritreans, were to a very large extent Oromo armies, and credible reports from that period emphasise the enthusiasm with which they saw themselves as defending their revolution against its domestic and international enemies. Many of the intellectuals who, initially at least, supported the revolution and offered advice and encouragement to the Derg, were likewise Oromos, with Haile Fida most prominent among them. These were associated especially with the Meison movement, and some of them continued to support the Derg right up until the end

But as we all know, the Derg too was doomed, not just because of the end of the Cold War and the loss of Soviet support, which I would rank only as secondary causes of its fall, but much more important, because it had failed inside Ethiopia, both economically and politically. Regardless of the international situation, it would soon have collapsed anyhow. Economically, the gains from land reform had been lost by a socialist planned economy, with its counterproductive insistence on centralised control, and were emphasised by famine. Politically, the Derg completely failed to put together any form of participation that would meet the needs of Ethiopia's diverse peoples; its Leninist vanguard party, like all such parties, was no more than an instrument for ambitious careerists. Militarily, as Ethiopia's old professional army was wasted away in never-ending conflicts against highly motivated and well-organised guerrilla forces, and their conscript replacements lost the will to die in a losing cause. We have to remember that it was *not* overthrown

by Oromos, directly at least, but by a movement which was drawn from 'historic' Ethiopia, in Tigray and even Amhara; but its fall was certainly hastened by the loss of Oromo support: the conscripts of the 1980s were very different from the volunteers of 1977, and were only too ready to desert, at which point many of them were recruited to help start the PDOs, through which the EPRDF sought to extend its support into areas in which it had no military presence. Eventually, the Derg armies just fell apart.

The EPRDF and ethnic federalism

This brings us, of course, to Meles Zenawi, the EPRDF, and a third approach to the issue of nationalities in Ethiopia, very different from the previous two – and indeed from anything else in Africa. I have never met any African political figure from outside Ethiopia who did not regard Ethiopian ethnic federalism as completely crazy, and so it is worth remembering where this remarkable experiment came from. It has two sources: one external to Ethiopia, and one internal. The external one came – paradoxically, given Soviet support for the Derg, against which Meles and his colleagues had spent so long fighting – from the USSR, and notably from Stalin's theory of the national question, which not only Meles but Mengistu and the Derg had studied carefully.

This held that differences between 'nationalities', a word which comes directly from the vocabulary of Soviet communism, were ultimately due to class exploitation, and could be removed by autonomy, of the kind that produced the Union Republics of the USSR, now independent states. In the Derg's time, the attempt to implement a Soviet model of development led not only to central planning and the formation of a Leninist vanguard party, the WPE, but also to the establishment of the Institute for the Study of Ethiopian Nationalities (ISEN), and the ethnic mapping of Ethiopia, an enterprise that had not previously been attempted. Strangely, the boundaries between the current Ethiopian regions, and within the SNNPRS, derive very largely from work carried out for the Derg, which the EPRDF simply took over, even though it is inconceivable that the Derg could ever have taken nationality autonomy to anything like the lengths promoted by its successor.

But within the country, it is also important to remember the experience of the TPLF in Tigray, and the particular slant that this gave them on the 'national question' in Ethiopia. This in turn did much to shape the policies of the EPRDF regime. For a start, there was never any contradiction between being 'Tigrayan' and being 'Ethiopian'. Tigrays remain proud of their historic role in the formation of the Ethiopian state, dating back to the time of the Axumite empire, and however great their resentment at their subordination to Amharas (and especially Shoans) to the south, they only ever really wanted autonomy within Ethiopia. It was correspondingly easy for them to assume that the relationship between maintaining your own ethnic identity and belonging to a wider Ethiopia would be as simple for others as it was for themselves. Equally, Tigray as a deeply impoverished region is highly dependent on the rest of Ethiopia, and splitting away from it makes no economic sense. Tigray is also an exceptionally homogeneous region in ethnic terms, precisely because it is so poor that people have always migrated out of it and not into it, and it was therefore easy for the TPLF leaders to assume that the rest of Ethiopia could be divided into ethnic blocks equivalent to Tigray. In fact both the distribution of nationalities in other parts of Ethiopia, not least for the Oromo, and the relationship between the way in which people identify with specific nationalities on the one hand and the Ethiopian state on the other, are vastly more contested and complex than in Tigray. Finally, of course, the policy of ethnic federalism also made a politically convenient platform through which to build alliances with other regional forces against the Derg. I very much doubt, however, whether the TPLF adopted this programme for purely tactical reasons; for them it really seemed to make sense.

Ethiopian politics and the logic of nationality

This is not the place to go into the lost opportunities of the post-1991 period, the break between the EPRDF and the OLF, and the current political situation in Ethiopia and the Horn. These are matters

which other and much better qualified participants will be taking up in the course of this meeting, and about which I myself have much to learn. It may be helpful, however, is to explore some of the logics that the current system gives rise to, taking account of the truism in the study of conflict management, that what appears as the ‘solution’ to a conflict in some respects, creates further potential sources of conflict when looked at in different ways.

For the EPRDF, if the salient ‘problem’ of Ethiopia was its division between nationalities, and its history of the exploitation of some nationalities by others, then the answer to that problem was to give a high level of autonomy to each nationality within a federal system of government. But this answer, whatever you may think of it as a diagnosis and response to the challenges facing Ethiopia, has created further problems at three different levels.

First, there is the question of the relationship between nationalities and the Ethiopian state, not just in terms of the level of actual devolution to each national state, and the genuineness of the autonomy offered by the central government to the regions, both of which we will certainly be looking at later in this meeting, but in terms also of the question of how ‘being’ Oromo – or Amhara, or Gurage, or Afar – relate to the idea of ‘being’ Ethiopian. Are these opposed or compatible ideas? Most studies of nationalism regard the ‘nation’ as making a hegemonic claim on the loyalty of its citizens, such that a commitment to the nation must displace any alternative loyalty, or at least relegate it to a very clearly subordinate position. On this basis, then either the vast majority of Ethiopians would have to come to think of themselves as being primarily Ethiopian, essentially replicating the programme of the Derg, or else the competing claims of different nationalities could be achieved only by splitting the country apart into its separate ethnic elements, in the way that happened with the break-up of the Soviet Union. Both Ethiopian nationalists, in the current political situation, and the proponents of separatist or secessionist ethnic identities, are essentially agreed on the mutual exclusivity of these rival claims on people’s allegiance; they differ only in which alternative they seek to promote. For the EPRDF, on the other hand, belonging to a particular nationality and belonging to Ethiopia as a whole are not only compatible but complementary: federal Ethiopia is quite extraordinary among states in insisting that its people cannot be simply ‘Ethiopian’, but requiring that they belong to Ethiopia through their prior membership of a particular nationality. There is no political party, for example, at least on the government side, for anyone who does not identify themselves as belonging to one or another nationality. You must first identify yourself as being Oromo or Afar or Gurage or whatever, in order to participate in Ethiopian political life. The nearest equivalent of which I am aware is the European Union, where being ‘European’ is accessed through a prior membership of the individual member states.

Second, there is the question of the relationship between one nationality and another, which scarcely mattered when nationality in itself scarcely mattered, but which becomes of critical importance when nationality is made the basis on which the whole of Ethiopia is to be governed. In terms of *territory*, for example, lands which were historically shared between different peoples, as was the case along much of the frontier between what are now Oromia and the SNNPRS, have to be allocated according to a fixed boundary between one group and the other. This can easily create conflicts that did not exist before ethnicity became the basis for governance, as of course did separation of Eritrea from Ethiopia, which gave a vastly increased importance to the Ethiopia-Eritrea frontier, the precise location of which had scarcely mattered when the territory on both sides of it came under common rule. The relationship between nationalities now equally raises issues of *identity*: whereas in the past, a great many Ethiopians had mixed identities, being descended from different groups, under the new structure they have to identify themselves as belonging to one group or another. Finally but not least, this relationship now affects issues of *power*: whereas before, this was obscured both by the myth that everyone was just ‘Ethiopian’, and more practically by the fact that everyone was governed from Addis Ababa, it is now much more explicit because important

issues of local governance depend on it. It matters, in a way that it previously did not, whether Gambela is controlled by Anywaa or by Nuer, whether the city of Awassa is part of the Sidaama zone or outside it, or whether Silte are treated as Gurages, or as a separate nationality of their own.

Third, the new political order also affects the relationships between different people and groups of the *same* nationality, an issue that is especially important for the Oromo, who are so many and so varied. Since there is now an Oromo regional state, as there never was in the past, then it matters which Oromo govern that state, in the way that it never did in the past. Power divides, and behind the façade of unity that masks any political movement (and especially any nationalist movement), there are always divisive questions as to who will exercise that power, and how it will be used. There are deeper issues, too, for any movement, and notably in this case for Oromos, as to what 'being Oromo' involves. How do you define the nature of 'Oromoness', and how does this relate to the many ways in which Oromos differ from one another? Different Oromo groups have historically pursued very different lifestyles, from peasant farmers at one end of the spectrum to nomadic pastoralists at the other. They adhere to different religious beliefs, whether traditional, protestant Christian, Moslem or Orthodox. They have created very different histories for themselves, or had such histories created for them: the Oromos of Borana, of Jima and the Gibe river states, of Welega, Showa, Welo, Arsi, and Kereyu, have had very different experiences of the past, which may be expected to shape their aspirations for the future. Power imposes great responsibilities on those to whom it is entrusted, and as Oromos come increasingly to exercise the power to which they are entitled, then those responsibilities, and the choices that power brings with it, will have to be faced.

CHALLENGES AND PROSPECTS FOR THE OROMO IN ETHIOPIA

Remarks Delivered At a Conference on Conflict Resolution in the Horn of Africa: Bergen, Norway September 27, 2004

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I would like to thank the Christian Michelsen Institute, the organizer of this important conference, for inviting me to participate. I join you today as a private individual who simply maintains an interest in peace and stability in the Horn of Africa. I no longer represent the American government. I am a professor in the Elliott School of International Affairs at George Washington University. I continue to work with non-governmental organizations in the region, especially in Ethiopia, Somalia and Sudan, in the hope that my exceedingly modest contribution can in some small way further tranquility for the peoples of the region.

My academic association with Ethiopia began in 1962 when I wrote my masters thesis at George Washington University on the Pan-Somali Movement and again in 1968 when I studied at Northwestern University in the African studies program under professors Richard Greenfield and William Shack. I was the State Department assistant desk officer for Ethiopia from 1969-1971, director of East African and Horn of African affairs from 1993-1996 and American ambassador to Ethiopia from 1996-1999. Earlier this year I co-authored a Historical Dictionary of Ethiopia. I have also had extensive experience with other countries in the region.

My remarks today will be frank. Many of you may disagree with some of them. But I am at that point in my life where I can say what I believe without worrying about repercussions from my government or any other government and organization. But this is your conference and, after considering the views of the international scholars, it is up to you as Oromo elders and leaders and Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) leaders and supporters to determine your future course of action. You have an opportunity this week to follow a new direction. I am told there is an Oromo proverb that loosely translated into English suggests that “history lost is not sought.” Put another way, “the past is past.” (*Seenaa bade / himbarbaadani*). That proverb may represent the point in time where the Oromo now find themselves in world politics, the Horn of Africa and Ethiopia.

The world’s most populous land-locked country, Ethiopia is the key to the Horn of Africa. It shares a boundary with five countries—Djibouti, Eritrea, Kenya, Somalia/Somaliland, and Sudan. The Horn serves as the backdoor to the troubled Arabian Gulf and has itself been one of the most conflicted parts of the world during the past fifty years. Ethiopia has been the origin of several of these conflicts and been negatively affected by numerous others emanating from neighboring countries. The Oromo constitute the single largest ethnic community in the country. They share borders with most of the other ethnic groups and live in much of Ethiopia’s heartland. The Oromo have, therefore, an unusually significant impact on internal stability. Major dissension among the

Oromo or between the Oromo and other peoples threatens stability inside Ethiopia and has the potential for extending conflict beyond its borders.

One way to accommodate the problems facing the Oromo is to pick up substantially the pace of democracy in Ethiopia. True democracy can only exist if all of Ethiopia's component parts are allowed to participate equally and equitably in the political process. It is essential, therefore, that legitimate concerns of the Oromo be dealt with fairly and expeditiously by authorities in Ethiopia.

There are obstacles to making democracy work in Ethiopia and one of the most important ones is historical. Looking back over more than 2,000 years of rule, whether the government is feudalist, communist or based on ethnic federalism, there has always been a tendency to try to exercise strong control from the center, especially when it concerns maintaining security and political power. The present government operates this way as have previous regimes. The vast majority of Ethiopians, 85 percent of whom are peasant farmers, seem to grudgingly accept this tradition. Hierarchy and obedience are an important part of Ethiopian culture, especially the 'historic' Ethiopia of the Northern regions. Human rights activist Mesfin Woldemariam put it starkly: "We have failed to develop any other alternative to the use of force for administration. We differentiated ourselves between those who are superior and inferior, between those who have obligations as masters and servants in an uncomfortable relationship." Professor Mesfin also argues that Ethiopia has not been able to institutionalize political power; governments link power to guns and, if democracy is to prevail, he emphasizes that it is necessary to change this dynamic. The Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) says that it wants to create democracy in Ethiopia. If you accept that this goal is sincere, the EPRDF and any successor ruling group must still overcome more than two millennia of political history to the contrary.

I want to comment on the democratization process in Ethiopia because it impacts directly the decisions that you make at this conference. The sooner that Ethiopia, and for that matter all countries in the Horn of Africa, develop stronger democratic institutions and create an environment where opposing ideas can be debated freely in these institutions, the greater will be the opportunity to redress the concerns of groups like the Oromo. The political environment must allow a responsible opposition to compete for power on an equitable basis. A responsible opposition is one that operates within the framework of a nation's constitution and seeks power through legal means, assuming there is a process for changing governmental authority. It becomes irresponsible if it tries to achieve power through the use of force or other extra-legal methods. The opposition is also irresponsible if it succeeds in reaching power through the democratic process only to disregard democratic practices thereafter.

An important part of this democratic political environment is regular, free and fair elections. I will return to elections in a moment. But elections alone are not the solution. A vigorous, independent and professional press must be allowed to operate freely. At the same time, there are responsibilities that accompany the private press. Since I began serving as ambassador to Ethiopia in 1996, I have observed some progress in both the quality of the private press and the willingness of the government to allow it to operate. The independent press is increasingly outspoken, critical and professional. On the other hand, the perception of press freedom in Ethiopia has been damaged by the draft press law and the dispute between the government and the Ethiopia Free Press Journalists' Association.

The judicial system in Ethiopia remains woefully understaffed; this contributes to caseload backlogs. Where justice is delayed, it is denied. It is also necessary to inculcate within the government and citizenry respect for independence of the judiciary. Together with other countries in the Horn of Africa, Ethiopia needs to improve substantially its handling of human rights, including the arbitrary arrest of Oromo and other political dissidents. All elements of society, led by

the government, must make a commitment to reduce and eventually eliminate human rights abuses. Although human rights organizations do not always get the facts right, they should be applauded for their efforts rather than vilified when the government perceives that they are being overly critical. Human rights should be a matter of national policy. Ethiopia has finally named persons to lead a national Human Rights Commission and Office of the Ombudsman. Now these institutions need to prove they will take seriously their responsibilities. Although the Ethiopian Human Rights Council remains a vigorous organization, the government has not approved the charter of the Oromo Human Rights League. Permission for this organization to function would send a positive signal to the Oromo people.

A critical element in the development of Ethiopian democracy is the strengthening of civil society organizations. This includes independent trade unions, chambers of commerce, women's groups, professional associations, student groups, human rights councils, etc. As these structures become stronger and develop their own constituencies, they can make a major contribution to the building of an environment that encourages democracy. This is another area where I have seen some modest progress over the past eight years. The sooner that civil society groups take root in Ethiopia and spread throughout the country, the greater the likelihood that real democracy will follow.

While much remains to be accomplished in Ethiopia and more should have been done by this point, I become a little impatient with critics who do not understand why the process is so far from completion. I think the answer is pretty simple. It is a combination of inherent Ethiopian poverty, an historical tradition of central control and the absence of a full commitment by the government. It will take time to overcome these obstacles. Building democracy is a long, hard process. I don't believe it is possible to achieve instant democracy, certainly not in Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa. But the trend must be in a positive direction. If there is constant, visible improvement in a variety of fields, the opposition parties should be patient and the international community should be supportive. If the process stalls or goes backwards, opposition groups and Ethiopia's international partners should be outspoken in their criticism.

Let me conclude this brief discussion of the democratization process in Ethiopia with a final cautionary note. Any progress that comes from improved democratic practices can be destroyed quickly by corruption. In a worldwide ranking of 133 countries in 2003, Transparency International has Ethiopia tied at position number ninety-two with several other countries. By comparison, neighboring Sudan ranked 106 and Kenya 122. The EPRDF has aimed most of the corruption allegations at political figures, bureaucrats, bankers and businessmen. The government has launched a spirited anti-corruption campaign, but some believe it is targeting members of the opposition. The fact remains that corruption is troublesome and threatens the integrity of governance in Ethiopia. Bribing of public officials is a common practice with a long tradition. Corruption is a problem in every country. It is important to stamp it out while not using it as an excuse to target political enemies.

Why is this discussion of efforts, however tentative, to build democracy in Ethiopia relevant to this conference? The OLF has never tried to hide that it is waging an armed struggle against the current government in Ethiopia. It occasionally issues press releases concerning its military activity in the country. I would argue, however, that the time has come, in fact that it came long ago, to change this strategy. Your movement is at the point where it is time to ask each other frankly what this policy has accomplished. Do you really think the OLF can win an armed struggle? Is the OLF any closer to achieving positions of political leadership as a result of this policy? Has the OLF armed struggle made life better for Oromo and other Ethiopians? Does it have any prospect of doing so in the foreseeable future? I have my own answers to these questions but my conclusions are not important. Your answers to these questions are important and I hope during this conference you discuss these issues candidly.

From my perspective the time has arrived to end the armed struggle and join the political process inside Ethiopia. Are there dangers to this course of action? Of course there are. Have past efforts since 1992 to participate in the system had any success? Unfortunately, they have not. We might disagree why past efforts broke down, but it is useful to review those initiatives. In 1992 and 1993 ambassadors from Europe and the United States created an Ambassadorial Contact Group that attempted to bring the OLF and the EPRDF together in Asmara. It failed. The EPRDF did not attend the Conference of Peace in Paris in March 1993 or the Peace and Reconciliation Conference in Addis Ababa in December 1993. Former American President Jimmy Carter failed to resolve differences between the EPRDF and OLF in 1994. An American Congressional Task Force headed by Representative Harry Johnston assembled EPRDF and opposition party representatives in Washington in 1995. I represented the State Department at that conference and regret to say it also failed.

A former German ambassador initiated a dialog between the OLF and EPRDF in 1997. The talks ended before there was any serious progress. The Lutheran World Federation and Norwegian Church Aid, backed by the Norwegian government, subsequently made several attempts to open a dialog between the OLF and EPRDF. There were no concrete results. The last attempt to bring together the EPRDF and OLF in Oslo occurred in 2003 with the assistance of Norway. Again, there was failure.

Many of you have probably concluded that with this kind of track record, what is the point in trying again. My response would be to ask if you have an alternative that has better prospects of improving the situation in the country for Oromo in particular and Ethiopians generally. If you do, I would be interested in hearing your proposals during the course of this week. This brings me to my principal theme: it is time to renounce the use of force and join the political process in Ethiopia so long as there are reasonable, tangible assurances from the EPRDF that the OLF and other opposition groups can contest the upcoming elections on a reasonably level playing field. In this connection, there have been some interesting, recent developments in Ethiopia.

Prime Minister Meles sent a letter dated 24 August 2004 to the president of the fifteen-member opposition party coalition known as the Union of Ethiopian Democratic Forces (UEDF). Meles indicated that the EPRDF is prepared to sit down and discuss modalities for the 2005 national elections. The letter reportedly says that the EPRDF hopes that all the opposition parties will participate in the elections. It also informed the UEDF that Minister of Information Bereket Simon and the secretary of the parliament for the Southern Nations, Nationalities and People's Regional State, Tsegaye Mamo, will represent the EPRDF in these talks. This is the first time that the EPRDF has agreed to meet with opposition leaders to discuss possible changes in the electoral law, the composition of the national electoral commission and guarantees for allowing opposition parties to engage in normal political activity. I have discussed this initiative with several opposition political leaders. They are intrigued by the offer, but, not surprisingly, remain skeptical about the outcome. To fail to explore this offer would be an opportunity lost.

In another recent development, Prime Minister Meles announced that he has agreed to allow international observers into Ethiopia to monitor the 2005 elections. As in the case of the 24 August letter to the UEDF, the devil is in the details. It remains to be seen how many international observers are allowed in the country, when they can begin and where they can go. This offer is meaningful only if international observers are allowed to come in significant numbers well before the balloting begins and if they are permitted to travel throughout Ethiopia.

Both of these initiatives are steps in the right direction and deserve to be pursued by opposition parties and the international community. They also suggest that the political environment inside

Ethiopia may be improving for organizations like the OLF should it decide to renounce violence and join the political process.

In the event that the OLF concludes that the situation has changed sufficiently to warrant participation in the 2005 elections, I would underscore the importance of developing a realistic program that appeals to the Ethiopian peasant farmer and ordinary laborer, who still constitute 85 percent of the population. It is not adequate to argue that the OLF or any other party should simply replace the EPRDF. I doubt that most Ethiopians want change just for the sake of change. They want assurances that change will result in something better. This brings up another problem with most of the opposition groups operating inside Ethiopia and especially those in exile. They tend to be intellectuals talking to intellectuals. With all due respect, most voters in Ethiopia do not qualify as intellectuals. Until opposition parties connect with the peasant farmer and average worker, they are not likely to have much success winning seats in parliament or anywhere else.

And as a final point concerning political organization, I would like to suggest a truly radical idea for the OLF. Most political parties in Ethiopia and, for that matter, in the rest of Africa are based on ethnic support. As the largest ethnic group in Ethiopia, the Oromo may continue to find that an attractive way to organize. But you might want to consider creation of a national party. If the OLF decides to contest the next election, it may find that it is very strong in parts of Oromia but faces significant opposition elsewhere. If this happens, it might argue for seeking support from non-Oromo areas.

Now that I am well into controversial ideas, I want to deal with another one. I have argued for years that the people of the Horn of Africa are ill-served by the long-standing tradition of one country supporting opposition groups that are trying to overthrow the government of a neighboring country. All the countries in the region have engaged in this practice at one time or another. Today, Ethiopia hosts Eritrean dissident organizations while Eritrea supports groups, including the OLF, engaged in armed struggle against Ethiopia. This policy of support for the mutual destruction of neighbors is costly and rarely has a happy ending. Should the OLF decide to rejoin the Ethiopian political process, there would be no need to maintain offices in Eritrea. In fact, if it were to continue its presence there, many Ethiopians would be highly suspicious of its intentions. Not only has the time come to renounce the use of force but to leave Eritrea and go home to Ethiopia.

How does the United States fit in to the change of strategy that I am proposing for the OLF? As a private citizen, I can not speak for the government but I can speculate based on thirty-seven years of experience in the State Department. First, between now and election day on November 2 it is highly unlikely that the United States would undertake any initiative to help narrow the gap between the EPRDF and the OLF should the latter decide to pursue participation in the next elections. Second, the outcome of the elections may have an impact on possible American involvement. A White House occupied by a Democrat would probably be somewhat more inclined to favor an activist approach on this matter than one occupied by a Republican. The personal views of the Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs will play a key role. That individual in a second Bush administration will probably continue to be Connie Newman. It is not known who would occupy the office in a Kerry administration. Congress might also come into play. It is highly unlikely that the House of Representatives, irrespective what happens in the presidential election, will shift from Republican to Democratic control. The prospects for Democrats obtaining a majority in the Senate are slightly better. Most importantly, the leaders of the African sub-committees in the House of Representatives and Senate could have an important influence on the role of the United States.

There is no guarantee after the election that the United States would become active on this issue. If the American government concludes, however, that the EPRDF is sincere about holding free and fair elections and the OLF is equally committed to participating in those elections, I believe the

United States, whoever controls the White House and Congress, would comprehend the potential for reducing conflict in the region and do what it could to ensure success of this new and significant development. If I could end by paraphrasing another Oromo proverb: “Salt is not roasted, what has passed is not remembered.” Put in more colloquial English: “let bygones be bygones.” (*Sogidda hinwaadani / waan darbe hinyaadani*).

Thank you for hearing me out. I suspect that many of you disagree with some and perhaps even most of my views. All I ask is that you think about them and understand that they are expressed with the goal of achieving a more peaceful Horn of Africa and a central government in Ethiopia that is more representative of all ethnic groups, including the Oromo. I wish you every success as you proceed with these important deliberations.

OROMO NATIONALISM, AND THE CONTINUOUS MULTI-FACETED ATTACK ON THE OROMO CULTURAL, CIVIC AND POLITICAL ORGANIZATIONS

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This paper attempts to briefly discuss the development of Oromo Nationalism and the continuous multi-faceted attack on Oromo cultural, civic and political organizations. The paper aims to show that the attack on Oromo political and cultural institutions which began during the imperial era, continued through the period of garrison socialism, and still continues under federal democratic republic of Ethiopia. In short, the paper shows that imperial, socialist, and federal Ethiopia has not produced a government that did not attack Oromo national identity, Oromo political organizations and cultural institutions, and a government that respected Oromo rights as full citizens of Ethiopia. The continuity of the attack and low level killings of the Oromo has triple purposes. The first is to destroy Oromo nationalism (an openly declared policy of the ruling party) by eliminating or smashing¹ Oromo political, intellectual, cultural and business elite, who are accuse of nurturing nationalism and serving as the ideological fountainhead for the Oromo struggle for self-determination. The second is part of the first. It is to destroy Oromo national identity by undermining the development of Oromo language and cultural heritage. The third, is to eliminate the limited gains the Oromo have achieved since 1991, by systematically destroying the autonomous status of Oromia, with the goal of restoring the pre-1991 status-quo in Ethiopia.

Finally, the paper shows that today the low level killings of the Oromo and the attack on Oromo civic and political organizations is at its widest from the Sudanese border in the west to the Ogaden in the east, from Wallo in the north to Northern Kenya in the south. In this vast region, the organizationally disunited , militarily disarmed Oromo face the formidable military might of the TPLF-dominated Ethiopian state.

Before I proceed to the main subject three caveats are in order. First, an attempt at a scholarly treatment of the attack on Oromo identity and nationalism over a long period is bound to be a vast and complex subject and cannot be adequately discussed in a short paper such as this one. Instead of a detailed discussion of the subject, therefore, I will begin by outlining the salient features of the attack up to 1991 and discuss in some detail the period after 1991. Second, before I discuss why Oromo nationalism developed only during the 1960s, I will present the background out of which it grew.

Third, "Historians, in general, are more at home when dealing with events that have been allowed to settle over time."² Therefore, as a historian, it is easier for me to discuss the attack on Oromo political and cultural institutions before than since 1991, because the former period belongs to

¹ This was clearly expressed in the ruling party's official quarterly publication known as *Hizbaawi Adera* ("The People's Trust", volume 4, Number 7, December 1996 - February 1997). This document is replete with references to Oromo intellectual businessmen and women, political and cultural elite, who are accused of nurturing Oromo nationalism. The upshot of *Hizbaawi Adera's* contention is that the Oromo educated elite and capitalist class must be eliminated for the Oromo to be free from "narrow nationalism," a euphemism for Oromo nationalism. See pp. 11-12.

² *The Transfer of Power in South Africa* (Claremont, South Africa, David Philip Publishers, 1998) p. VII.

history, while the latter is history-in-the-making. However, as I have noted elsewhere "[a] discussion on history in progress is, by nature, a risky undertaking."³ No matter how hard one tries dispassionately to discuss the attack on Oromo political and cultural institutions under the successive Ethiopian governments, one cannot escape being accused of exaggerating what has been happening to the Oromo and of indulging in anti-Ethiopia propaganda. My purpose is to document the attack on Oromo identity and nationalism as a scholar loyal to the canons and standard practices of my discipline. If this discussion encourages a reader of this paper to express concern and raise her or his voice against the unlawful attack on Oromo political and cultural institutions, its purpose will have been fulfilled.

The attack on Oromo political, cultural institutions and national identity began with the conquest and incorporation of the Oromo into the Ethiopian empire created by Emperor Menelik II (1889-1913). Following their conquest, the Oromo institutions of self-government were destroyed, their leadership liquidated or coopted, their territory divided, their social cohesion disrupted, their cultural institutions destroyed, their property plundered, their traditional religion interfered with, their population decimated through a combination of factors including brutal warfare and natural calamities which accompanied that warfare.⁴ After their conquest, the Amhara ruling elite headed by Emperor Menelik regarded the Oromo and other peoples of southern Ethiopia "as sub-human and their culture and languages as inferior."⁵ In one Amharic expression, Oromos were equated to human feces "Gallana sagara eyadar yegamal" ("Galla and human feces stink more every passing day").⁶ In another Amharic expression, even Oromo humanity was questioned, "saw naw Galla?" ("Is it human or Galla?"⁷), thus making them "... something less than fully human" resulting in ... "their exclusion from the moral concerns of the conquerors."⁸ After the conquest of the Oromo, Emperor Menelik abolished the Oromo chafee assembly,⁹ thus eliminating the political significance of the gada system at one blow.

By 1900 Menelik even banned the famous Oromo pilgrimage to the land of Abba Muuda.¹⁰ The latter was the leader of traditional Oromo religion; and every eight years the Oromo from every corner of their country sent their representatives to honor Abba Muuda in Southern Oromia. Through this pilgrimage, the Oromo maintained contact with their spiritual father and with one another. The pilgrimage was the focal point for their unity. By banning the pilgrimage, Menelik prevented the Oromo from meeting with each other and, above all, he destroyed the religious aspect of their unity. Once traditional Oromo religion was weakened, the ground was prepared for the

³ Mohammed Hassen, 1990B. "The Militarization of the Ethiopian State and the Oromo. *Proceedings of the 5th International Conference on the Horn of Africa* (New York: Marsden Reproductions): 98.

⁴ These included the cattle plague of 1880-1893, (which wiped out a vast part of the animal population), epidemics of typhus, dysentery and the great Ethiopian famine of the period.

⁵ *Federal Ethiopia At Cross-Roads: the Path Toward Justice, The Rule of Law and Sustainable Human Rights and A Critique of the 1995 Reports of Amnesty International and the New York Branch of AAICJ* (Addis Ababa: 1995): 23.

⁶ Donald Donham, "Old Abyssinia and the New Ethiopian Empire: Themes in Social History," *The Southern Marches of Imperial Ethiopia: Essays in History and Social Anthropology*, ed. by Donald Donham and Wendy James (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986): 13.

7. Teshale Tibebu, *The Making of Modern Ethiopia, 1896-1974* (Lawrenceville, NJ: The Red Sea Press, 1995): 17.

⁸ Mekuria Bulcha. *The Making of the Oromo Diaspora: A Historical Sociology of Forced Migration* (Minneapolis, MN: Kirk House Publishers. 2002): 70.

⁹ *Asthma Giyorkis and His Works: History of the Galla and the Kingdom of Sawa*, trans and ed. by Bairu Tafla (Franz Steiner Verlag GMBH, Stuttgart, Wiesbaden 1987): 134-135.

10. K. Knutsson, *Authority and Change: A Study of the Kallu Institution Among the Macha Galla of Ethiopia* (Göteborg, Enografiska Museet, 1967: 147-155.

imposition of Amhara religion in Central and Western Oromia and the rapid spread of Islam in Southern and Eastern Oromia..

In Central and Western Oromia the Oromo were even denied the spiritual experience of personal conversion to the Ethiopian Orthodox Church Christianity. They were subjected to collective baptism. Once converted into Christianity, Oromo personal names were replaced by Amhara ones. The use of Oromo personal name became a mark of shame and a badge of humiliation. However, ". . . since in the Oromo tradition, personal names locate individuals within kinship structures, such forced name changes led to the alienation of people from kinship ties and caused a rupture in their social history."¹¹ The goal of imposition of Amhara names, religion, language, culture and way of life on the Oromo was to change them into Amhara society. For that purpose, a policy of Amharization (i.e. assimilating the Oromo into Amhara names, religion, language, culture and a way of life), became an article of faith for successive Ethiopian regimes up to 1991. Amharization was an Ethiopian state policy. It was also an ideology of the Amhara elite. For instance, some of the prominent Ethiopian intellectuals of the early twentieth century were preoccupied with the policy of assimilating the Oromo into the heart and soul of Amhara society. Perhaps what Tedla Haile says about it may sum up the prevailing attitude of the time:

After reducing the protagonists of the Ethiopian polity to the two peoples, Oromo and Amhara, Tedla prescribes the formula for their harmonious relationship. The Ethiopian emperor has three options with regard to the Oromo: enslavement¹² and expropriation,¹³ assimilation,¹⁴ and indirect rule Assimilation . . . remains the only credible and sensible option. As to who is going to assimilate whom, Tedia has no doubts: is for [the Oromo] to become Amhara [not the other way round]; for the latter possess – a written language, a superior religion and superior customs and mores.¹⁵

For Sahle Tsadolu, the Minister of Education, the policy of assimilation even involved the banning of the majority of Ethiopian languages. Such a drastic measure was necessary for the unity of Ethiopia, a euphemism for perpetuating Amhara religious, political, cultural and economic domination of Ethiopia.

The strength of a country lies in its unity, and unity is born of [common] language, customs, and religion. Thus to safe-guard the ancient sovereignty of Ethiopia and to reinforce its unity, our language and our religion should be proclaimed over the whole of Ethiopia, otherwise unity will never be attained ... Amharic¹⁶ and Geez¹⁷ should be decreed official languages for secular as well as religious affairs and all pagan languages should be banned.¹⁸

Indeed after 1941 Oromo language was banned and as a result, it was not permissible to teach, preach, write and broadcast in that language up to the early 1970s. What is more, the government of Emperor Haile Selassie (1916-1974) prohibited the use of Oromo literature for educational or

¹¹ Mekuria Bulcha, 2002, 192.

¹² Following Menelik's conquest of southern Ethiopia, his generals and soldiers were slavers who depopulated many areas. See for instance, H. Darley, *Slavery and Ivory in Abyssinia* (London: H.F. and G. Witherley, 1926): 97-199.

¹³ After conquest and occupation of Oromia, Menelik gave two-thirds of Oromo land together with the people to his unpaid soldiers.

¹⁴ It was the desire to assimilate the Oromo which gave birth to the policy of Amharization.

¹⁵ Quoted in Bahru Zewde, *Pioneers of Change in Ethiopia: The Reformist Intellectuals of the Early Twentieth Century* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2002): 132.

¹⁶ Amharic is the language of the Amhara which was made the sole official language of Ethiopia.

¹⁷ Geez is the language of Ethiopian Orthodox Church.

¹⁸ Quoted in Bahru Zewde, 2000, 250.

religious purpose and existing Oromo literature, was collected and destroyed.¹⁹ Oromo cultural and religious shrines and places of worship were replaced by the Amhara ones. Even Oromo village and town names were replaced by Amhara ones. For example Finfinnee became Addis Ababa, Ambo was changed to Hagere Hiwot, Haro Maya to Alem Maya, Hadema to Nazreth, Walliso to Ghion, The Village of Ejersa Goro where Haile Selassie was born, was renamed Bethlehem.²⁰

The goal of replacing Oromo village and town names by Amhara ones, to borrow a great scholar's apt phrase, was to obliterate, "Every reminder of the former national character"²¹ of the Oromo. A concentrated and coordinated attempt was made to obliterate Oromo national identity. For that purpose, Ethiopian educational system, cultural institutions and governmental bureaucracy were deployed for the express purpose of denigrating the Oromo people, their history, culture and way of life while ensuring the establishment of the hegemony of the Amhara culture masked as "Ethiopian culture."²² In the Ethiopian educational system, nothing positive was taught about Oromo heritage. On the contrary, an Oromo child was "... made to feel his or her mother tongue was inferior and too 'uncultivated' to be used in a civilized environment such as school."²³

In the school, the Oromo child was not only mobbed; but was 'fed' negative biases against everything that was Oromo. Mixed in with the Amharic language and Abyssinian history, he/she was taught many of the Amhara prejudices against the Oromo. The Oromo people were depicted as subjects and dependent in relation to the Empire and its rulers whereas the Amhara and Tigreans were presented as citizens. The Oromo were (are) described as a people without culture, history and heroes. ... The Oromo were characterized not only as uncivilized, but uncivilizable. The Oromo language and culture were reduced to marks of illiteracy, shame and backwardness as the school pressed Oromo children to conform to Amhara culture. ... Those who were completely overwhelmed by the unmitigated assault on Oromo culture and history, dropped (or tried to drop) their Oromo identity. Among these, were some who tried to get rid of every sign of what the Oromo themselves call *Oromumumaa* ("Oromoness"). In a desperate move to assimilate they 'forgot' the Oromo language.²⁴

With the intensification of the policy of Amharization and de-Oromoization, the Oromo were subjected to total domination in every aspect of life – economic, political, social, cultural and religious. In a very fertile land, they were doomed to live in abject poverty, as their labor and produce supported the large and parasitic Ethiopian ruling class. The contrast between the Amhara landlords and Oromo *gabbars* (serfs) was striking. There were power, glory, pride, wealth, strong feelings of superiority, pomp, arrogance and luxury on the side of Amhara landlords, while powerlessness, landlessness, rightlessness, and poverty were the lot of Oromo *gabbars*. who were

¹⁹ Mekuria Bulcha, "The Language Policies of Ethiopian Regimes and the History of Written Afaan Oromo: 1844-1994." *The Journal of Oromo Studies*, Volume 2, Numbers 1 and 2 (July 1994): 102.

²⁰ Mohammed Hassen and Richard Greenfield, "The Oromo Nation and Its Resistance to Amhara Colonial Administration," ed. by Hussen M. Adam and Charles L. Gesheker (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1992): 576.

²¹ Raphael Lemkin, *Axis Rule in Occupied Europe: Laws of Occupation, Analysis of Government Proposals for Redress* (New York: Howard Fertig, 1973) 82.

²² Edmond Keller, "Regime Change and Ethno-Regionalism in Ethiopia: The Case of the Oromo." *Oromo Nationalism and the Ethiopian Discourse: The Search for Freedom and Democracy*, ed. by Asafa Jalata (Lawrenceville, NJ: The Red Sea Press, 1998): 121.

²³ Mekuria Bulcha, (1994), 103.

²⁴ Mekuria Bulcha, (1994), 103-104.

physically victimized, socially and culturally humiliated and devalued as human beings.²⁵ The Amhara landlords:

. . . Maintained a social and often spatial distance from the *gabbar* populations that they considered uncivilized and worthy only of exploitation. Before the revolution of 1974, a *gabbar* was not often allowed to enter the house of the landlord when he brought grain or other products to him. The landlord differentiated little between the *gabbar* and the pack animal he used to bring him the goods.²⁶

Ernest Gellner, a noted scholar aptly described Ethiopia as "a prison-house of nations if ever there was one."²⁷ In that prison-house of nations the Oromo language was banned from being used for preaching, broadcasting, teaching and production of literature up to 1974. "In court or before an official an Oromo had to speak Amharic or use an interpreter. Even a case between-speaking magistrate, had to be heard in Amharic."²⁸ This amounted to an ethnocide which stripped Oromo children of their language, culture and identity and destroyed their pride in their cultural heritage and kept them chained with no faith in themselves, their history, and their national identity,²⁹ "It remains the belief of the Amhara ruling class and elites that to be an Ethiopian *one* has to cease to be an Oromo. The two things were/are seen as incompatible."³⁰

Oromo nationalism developed as a response to continuous attack on Oromo national identity and cultural heritage. It developed as a peaceful self-help organization with the goal of up-lifting the Oromo spirit, improving their economic condition, and spreading literacy, building roads, clinics and schools, churches and mosques.

Oromo nationalism is still developing and changing. It took shape against several decades of economic exploitation, military subjugation "political and cultural domination"³¹

Oromo nationalism differs from other nationalisms insofar as the experience of Ethiopian rule differs from that of being ruled by a Western colonial power. Ethiopian colonial power was centered in the country itself and not in some distant metropole. The rulers were also 'natives', and did not have immense technological superiority over the ruled nor enjoyed vastly superior standard of living.³²

The development of nationalism is a long, complex and slow process. It is mediated by national awakening or national consciousness, which "refers to an amalgam of feelings, impressions and ways of thinking, which find their expression in the psychological and physical solidarity of the

²⁵ Mohammed Hassen, "The Militarization of the Ethiopian State and the Oromo." *Proceedings of 5th International Conference on the Horn of Africa* (New York, NY: Marsden Reproductions, Inc. 1991): 94.

²⁶ Mekuria Bulcha, 2000, 192.

²⁷ Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991): 85.

²⁸ Paul Baxter, "Ethiopia's Unacknowledged Problem, The Oromo," *African Affairs*, Number 77 (1978): 288.

²⁹ Mohammed Hassen, *The Oromo of Ethiopia: A History, 1570-1860* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1990): 3.

³⁰ Mekuria Bulcha, (1994), 101.

³¹ Mohammed Hassen, "The Macha-Tulama Association and the Development of Oromo Nationalism." *Oromo Nationalism and the Ethiopian Discourse: The Search for Freedom and Democracy*. (Ed. Asafa Jalata, (Lawrenceville, NJ: The Red Sea Press, 1998): 190.

³² Paul Baxter, "Ethnic Boundaries and Development: Speculations on the Oromo Case," in *Inventions and Boundaries: Historical and Anthropological Approaches to the Study of Ethnicity and Nationalism*, edited by Preben Kaarsholm and Jan Hultin. Roskilde: International Development Studies, 1994.

group experiencing them in common.”³³ National consciousness emerges primarily as a result of several factors including the spread of modern education, better communication, improved transportation system, growth of mass media and the press, higher standard of literacy and growth of literature, and intensive interaction among people, all of which combine to provide "a crucial environment for the spread of a national consciousness through a given population.”³⁴ The overwhelming majority of the Oromo were peasants who lived in rural areas and therefore were not exposed to the factors just mentioned. Even the tiny Oromo elements that lived in urban areas did not have access to education and literature in their own language. It is not surprising then for Oromo nationalism to develop much slower than other nationalism in colonial Africa.

Before the 1960s, the Oromo lacked an intellectual class that aspired to create cultural and political space for itself. Intellectuals are, "predestined to propagate the 'national idea'," just as those who wield power in the polity provoke the idea of the state.”³⁵ The lack of an intellectual class not only delayed the development of Oromo political consciousness, but it is still one of the major weaknesses of the Oromo national movement. In the rise of nationalism in Asia, Africa and other parts of colonial territories, the educated class played a very decisive role.³⁶ "It is hard to find a single one of the African nationalist leaders, whether radical or conservative, who was not a graduate of a western university or else had some other prolonged exposure to western life.”³⁷ In the Oromo case, there was no western educated class that aspired to create cultural space for itself before the 1960s, much less to lead a nationalist movement.

In sum, the absence of modern education, the tight control of Ethiopian administration, the absence of an intellectual class, and Amharization policy of Haile Selassie's government, all delayed the development of Oromo nationalism before the 1960s. Furthermore, from its birth in the 1960s, Oromo nationalism faced strong opposition from the Somali ruling elite. While the Amhara ruling elite feared development of Oromo nationalism as a threat to their empire, the Somali ruling elite regarded it as a dangerous movement that would abort the realization of the dream of a greater Somali.³⁸

Evidently, Oromo nationalism of the 1960s was not a mass movement. Like the early phases of nationalism in different parts of the world, Oromo nationalism of the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s was an elite movement.³⁹ This was because "Nationalism is usually a minority movement pursued against the indifference of members of the 'nation' in whose name the nationalist act.”⁴⁰ Nevertheless, Oromo nationalists of the 1960s knew that nationalism is "above and beyond all else, about politics, and that politics is about power. Power, in the modern world, is primarily about control of the state.”⁴¹ The nationalist leaders of the Macha and Tulama Association knew about this reality. And it was precisely for this reason that General Tadesse Birru, a leading figure of the

³³ Maurice Pearton, "Notions in Nationalism," Volume 2, Part I, March 1996, *Journal of the Association of the Study of Ethnicity and Nationalism*. Cambridge University Press: 7.

³⁴ Peter Alter, *Nationalism*, translated by Stuart McKinnon-Evans. Edward Arnold, a Division of Hodder & Stoughton, New York. 1989, 77.

³⁵ Max Weber, "The Nation," in *Nationalism* edited by John Hutchinson and Anthony P Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994): 25.

³⁶ Margaret Lamb, *Nationalism* (London: Heinemann, 1974): 36. Margaret Lamb, *Nationalism* (London: Heinemann, 1974): 36.

³⁷ Christopher Clapham, *Third World Politics: An Introduction*, (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1984):

³⁸ Mohammed Hassen and Richard Greenfield, "The Oromo Nation and Its Resistance to Amhara Colonial Administration: in *Proceedings of the First International Congress of Somali Studies*, ed, by Hussein M, Adam and Charles L. Gesheker, (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1992): 576-577.

³⁹ It was only in 1991-1992 that Oromo nationalism was transformed into a mass movement.

⁴⁰ John Breuilly, *Nationalism and the State* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1982): 19.

⁴¹ John Breuilly, 1982, 2.

Macha and Tulama Association attempted to capture state power in November 1967 though the attempt ended miserably.

The founders the Macha and Tulama Association articulated Oromo cultural rather than political nationalism and their officially-stated goal was the search for and recognition of Oromo identity within the larger Ethiopian identity itself. Consequently, they did not reject Ethiopian identity, the state and its institutions while the Oromo nationalists of the 1970s and after, who articulated Oromo political nationalism, did reject Ethiopian identity and its institutions.⁴²

In 1967, by imprisoning its leaders and dissolving the Association, the government of Emperor Haile Selassie won a short-term victory. However, within seven short years, by 1974, its policy unwittingly transformed Oromo politics beyond recognition. The Association's demand for equality within Ethiopia was transformed into the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) commitment to self-determination for Oromia. Since 1974, according to Ibsaa Guutama, the liberation of Oromia has been on the mind of every Oromo nationalist.⁴³ That marked a quantum leap from the Macha and Tulama Association leaders' vision for the future of the Oromo. The Association's efforts to spread literacy in the Amharic language and Ethiopic script were transformed into literacy in the Oromo language using the Latin alphabet. What was unthinkable in 1967 became feasible by 1974. The Ethiopian government's unwarranted cruelty and brutality- produced the Oromo elite's rejection of Ethiopian identity itself. For those who rejected Ethiopian identity, the Ethiopian state neither embodies a consensus of beliefs, values and aspirations nor instills in them trust in its institutions, laws, leadership and administrative machinery. On the contrary, these are the tools of oppression and subjugation that have to be removed and replaced. As a consequence, after 1974 Oromo politics was never the same again. What the Ethiopian government wanted in 1967 by destroying the Association was the destruction of Oromo political consciousness. What it got in 1974 was a mature form of Oromo political nationalism which was opposed to Ethiopian identity and directly challenged Ethiopian nationalism itself.⁴⁴

The Ethiopian Military Regime's Attempt to Contain Oromo Nationalism, 1974-1991

The 1974 revolution offered Ethiopia an opportunity not only to democratize itself, heal the old wounds, redress old injustice, right old wrongs, but also to decentralize power in the country. "Most Oromos had assumed that the revolution of 1974 would lead to decolonization and equality of all peoples in Ethiopia."⁴⁵ The formation of the OLF and the 1974 Ethiopian revolution stirred Oromo aspirations to regain their political rights, human dignity and equality. The revolution not only aroused Oromo pride in their national identity, language and culture, but also raised their expectation to regain their land. After 1974 revolution, land reform of some kind was a foregone conclusion." Without it, it would have been impossible to take impetus out of the flood of spontaneous Oromo peasant uprisings, especially in Hararghe."⁴⁶ According to Rene Lefort, it was the fear of Oromo uprising and the desire to prevent it from happening that forced the military regime to take radical measures including land reform.⁴⁷ Asafa Jalata also convincingly argues that the military regime took some radical measures not only to address Oromo grievances but also to get their support and consolidate it.⁴⁸ Thus, the Derg's nationalization of all rural lands in March

⁴² The 1976 Oromo Liberation Front political program clearly expresses its rejection of the Ethiopian identity of the time.

⁴³ Ibsaa Guutama, *Prison of Conscience: Upper Compound Maa' Ikalaawii Ethiopian Terror Prison and Tradition*, (New York: Gubirmans Publishing, 2003): 137.

⁴⁴ Mohammed Hassen, "A Short History of Oromo Colonial Experience, Part Two: Colonial Consolidation and Resistance, 1935-2000." *The Journal of Oromo Studies*, Volume 7, Numbers 1 and 2 (July 2000): 144.

⁴⁵ Asafa Jalata, "The Emergence of Oromo Nationalism and the Ethiopian Reaction." *Oromo Nationalism and the Ethiopian Discourse: The Search for Freedom and Democracy*, 1998, pp. 10-11.

⁴⁶ Mohammed Hassen and Greenfield, 1992, 590.

⁴⁷ Rene Lefort, *Ethiopia: An Heretical Revolution?* (London: Zed Press, 1981): 110.

⁴⁸ Asafa Jalata, 1998.

1975 was a legal recognition of *fait accompli*, especially in Oromia, designed to arrest the tempo of peasant uprisings. According to Christopher Clapham, instead of devolving power to the peasantry, the land reform of 1975 centralized the power of the state in Ethiopia.⁴⁹

In April 1976, the Derg declared the National Democratic Revolution Program (NDRP). This program, which became the blueprint for the transformation of "Ethiopian socialism" into "scientific socialism" was "... the first official policy that recognized Ethiopia's national diversity."⁵⁰ The NDRP stated:

The right to self-determination of all nationalities will be recognized and fully respected. No nationality will dominate another one since the history, culture, language and religion of each nationality, will have equal recognition in accordance with the spirit of socialism.⁵¹

However, the NDRP was never implemented and it remained on paper, an empty gesture. In fact, the Derg used the NDRP not only as a showpiece of its radicalism to impress the Soviet Union, but also for waging war against what it called "narrow nationalism", a euphemism for Oromo nationalism. Narrow nationalism was proclaimed as the main enemy of the unity of the country and the Derg began a policy of physically destroying the best elements of the Oromo society, especially the intelligentsia.

For seventeen years the peoples of Ethiopia suffered under a brutal military dictatorship, whose historic mission was nothing but destruction. It is believed that hundreds of thousands⁵² of peasants lost their lives between 1974 and 1991, not to mention millions of Oromo who were internally displaced and thousands who were scattered as refugees to many parts of the world. When the authors of sorrow and destruction were overthrown in May 1991, there was a sigh of relief, a time of joy and a moment of hope for the peoples of Ethiopia in general and the Oromo in particular. They were to be disappointed soon.

The TPLF Dominated Ethiopian Regime and the Attack on Oromo Organizations

For seventeen years the OLF struggled against the Ethiopian military regime and made a significant contribution to the combined effort which defeated the regime in May 1991. In recognition of this fact, the OLF was invited to participate in both the London Conference in May and the Addis Ababa Conference of July 1991. In the latter thirty-one parties, including five Oromo organizations participated to discuss the future of Ethiopia and draft program of transition towards a democratic order. The OLF co-authored the Transitional Charter with the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Forces (EPRDF), the coalition of the various ethnic organizations affiliated with the Tigrayan People's Liberation Front (TPLF) and then joined the Transitional Government of Ethiopia (1991-1992). The Transitional Government was billed as a coalition government representing three main interests: the Oromo interest, the Amhara interest, and the Tigrean interest, with others ... being considered important but secondary.⁵³

⁴⁹ Christopher Clapham, *Transformation and Continuity in Revolutionary Ethiopia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988): 6.

⁵⁰ Leenco Lata, *The Ethiopian State at the Crossroads: Decolonization and Democratization or Disintegration* (Lawrenceville, NJ: The Red Sea Press, 1999): 59.

⁵¹ Clapham, 1988, 199.

⁵² According to one source "an estimated 2 million or 7 percent of the 1974 population were lost during the period 1974-91" *Federal Ethiopia at a Cross-Roads, The Path Toward Justice, The Rule of Law and Sustainable Human Rights and a Critique of the 1995 Reports of Amnesty International and the New York Branch of the AAICJ* (Addis Ababa: 1995): 180.

⁵³ Tecola Hagos. *Democratization in Ethiopia (1991-1994)? A Personal View* (Cambridge, MA: Kherera Publishers, 1995): 97.

For the first time in modern Ethiopian history, the principle of respect for human rights was popularized in Ethiopia and enshrined in the Transitional Charter of July 1991. The Charter was meant to democratize the unitary Ethiopian state which was dominated by one ethnic group and replace it with a federal system in which all citizens enjoy equal rights. By effecting such a profound transformation, it was hoped that the Ethiopian state will be reconstituted into a legitimate sovereign authority that will serve as the accepted "arena ... the decision-making center of government," and the institution that maintains law and order and enhances societal cohesion.⁵⁴ The future was uncertain, but the prevailing mood among the Oromo was one of optimism. The Transitional Charter had "... laid down major human and political rights principles and⁵⁵ the transitional period was meant to launch a process of democratization and empowerment of the people. For several months after the establishment of the Transitional Government, there was marked improvement in the human rights situation in Ethiopia.⁵⁶

In 1991, the stage was set for a gradual transition from authoritarian misrule to a democratic governance. It appeared as if a tolerant political culture was developing in Ethiopia. Various organizations, including the TPLF and the OLF, worked together without resorting to armed conflict. That window of opportunity raised hopes for the establishment of a democratic system that would promote human rights, economic development and social welfare and contribute to peace and stability while fostering cooperation and mutual understanding among the peoples of Ethiopia. However, before the first anniversary of the TGE, democracy was abandoned and autocratic rule was reinstated.⁵⁷

Thus, the Oromo people's hope for peaceful devolution of power was shattered by the TPLF's blatant power-grab. What promised to be the dawn of a democratic experiment turned out to be the beginning of Tigrayan hegemony in Ethiopia. What was billed to be the first multi-party elections in June 1992 . . . was turned into a single party exercise.⁵⁸ Since then, the TPLF leaders have used their formidable military muscle to keep their ill-gained power, destroy all independent Oromo organizations, and wage war in Oromia. The TPLF leaders justified their actions as a defense of "Revolutionary Democracy", an ideology invented by the TPLF leaders for the purpose of defining all political positions that did not agree with theirs as sworn enemies of democracy and liable for elimination.⁵⁹

The extent to which the TPLF/EPRDF leaders can go in violating human rights may be gleaned from the size of their security machinery. The security apparatus of the EPRDF regime is reportedly larger than that of the former military regime, its predecessor to commit egregious violations of human rights more subtly and efficiently.⁶⁰ Atrocities on the scale of the 1977/78 Red Terror do not occur in Ethiopia today, but low level secret terror is going on in the country, especially in Oromia. In a practice reminiscent of the Mengistu era, hundreds of individuals have "disappeared", a

⁵⁴ William Zartman, "Introduction: Causing the Problem of State Collapse," *Collapsed States: the Disintegration and Restoration of Legitimate Authority*, ed. By William Zartman (Boulder, Co.: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1995): 5.

⁵⁵ Leenco Lata, (1999): 59.

⁵⁶ *African News Agency*, (January 5, 1998): 31 It is to be noted that the government [of Meles Zenawi] has learned in some instances from mistakes of the previous one. It does not openly and blatantly hail the on-going terror against its political opponents. It covers the real issue, the motives of the killings, pays lip service to due-process of law, sets up kangaroo courts, in some cases, buys witnesses and uses the special prosecutor's office to tender its control to the hilt.

⁵⁷ Edmond Keller, (1998): 110, 114.

⁵⁸ Marina Ottaway, "Democratization in Collapsed States," *Collapsed States: The Disintegration and Restoration of Legitimate Authority*: 238-239.

⁵⁹ Paulos Milkias, "The Great Purge and Ideological Paradox in Contemporary Ethiopian Politics," *Horn of Africa*, Volume IXX (2001): 76.

⁶⁰ Tecola Hagos, *Demystifying Political Thought, Power, and Economic Development* (Washington, D.C. Khepera Publishers, 1999): 50-51. According to Tecola, "The capital outlay and expenditure for the security of the current Ethiopian government and the leadership is almost double that of the previous government".

euphemism for secret killings. Innocent people were killed for such innocuous reasons than participation in peaceful demonstration.

The TPLF dominated regime claims that the government of Oromia is autonomous. However Oromia is under the iron grip of the TPLF/EPRDF soldiers. Regional and local authorities who naively challenged the TPLF authorities even on minor points are either dismissed from their positions or imprisoned and in some cases even secretly assassinated. For instance, OPDO Central Committee members Mokonnen Fite and Bayu Gurmu were killed by government agents in September 1997. When other OPDO Central Committee members met in the palace to discuss the killings of the above mentioned individuals, another OPDO Central Committee member was killed in the palace while the meeting was in progress.

While we were in that meeting, Alemayehu Desalegn, Central Committee member and the head of Oromia Finance, died elsewhere in the palace under mysterious circumstances. His death was explained as "suicide". . . We were all in grave danger of being killed on account of our political views and actions as members of the [OPDO].⁶¹

The words quoted above came from Hassen Ali, the first President of Oromia (1992-1995) and the Vice President (1995-1998) and Central Committee "member of the ruling EPRDF Party. "The government of Oromia is autonomous according to the Ethiopian Constitution, the Federal Government and [the EPRDF] soldiers interfere in all matters," of the Oromia regional state.⁶² According to Hassen Ali, "I saw and experienced clearly that the Regional Government of Oromia cannot stop the arbitrary arrests, torture, extra-judicial killings and disappearances of innocent people in the face of the ruling party's police and security forces.⁶³ The rank and file members of the TPIF sanctioned Oromo People's Democratic Organization (OPDO), arguably should have been safe from the regime's persecution. However, in November 1997, there was a major purge of the OPDO which included over 20,000, some of whom are probably still in detention.⁶⁴

The TPLF dominated regime's attack on the Oromo started in 1992, after the Oromo Liberation Front boycotted that year's national election and was subsequently forced out of the Transitional Government of Ethiopia. Innocent Oromo were herded into concentration camps where they were tortured and killed on charges of sympathizing with or reflecting views akin to those of the OLF.⁶⁵ A political organization that co-authored the Transitional Charter and participated in governing the country as part of the Transitional Government, suddenly became a pariah entity. Consequently, Oromos whose political views happened to coincide with those of the OLF became victims of a political witch-hunt which claimed many lives.⁶⁶ Hundreds of Oromo nationals were detained *en mass*, told not to attend meetings of the Matcha-Tulama Association and, in an attack on the very essence of being Oromo, warned against singing Oromo songs.⁶⁷

The attack on Oromo organizations exhibit discernible trends. First the TPLF appears determined to destroy all independent Oromo leaders and organizations in an effort to remove any obstacle to its desire to control the resources of Oromia. Hassen Ali, who worked with the TPLF leaders from 1989-1998 describes the situation in Oromia in the following terms:

⁶¹ Hassen Ali, quoted in *Sagalee Haaraa*, Number 28 (May-July, 1999): 3.

⁶² Since the summer of 1998 Hassen Ali has been living in the United States, where he was given political asylum.

⁶³ Hassen Ali, 1999, 2.

⁶⁴ Around 250 of those were still in detention in 2000.

⁶⁵ Mekuria Bulcha, "A Note on the New Reign of Terror in Ethiopia," *The Oromo Commentary*, Vol. VI, No.1 (1996): 3.

⁶⁶ I have drawn on Ma Kaa Wa Mutua, "Preface to Democracy, Rule of Law and Human Rights in Ethiopia: Rhetoric and Practice," *The Ethiopian Human Rights Council* (Addis Ababa: 1995).

⁶⁷ Oromo Support Group: *Press Release* (March 1998). Tecola Hagos, *Democratization*, 1995, 135-36.

The TPLF soldiers and its members are a law unto themselves. Only what they say and what they want is implemented in Oromia to the general exclusion of Oromo interests or wishes. . . . Although Oromia is autonomous in name, the government soldiers and secret service agents have total power to do whatever they want in Oromia. They imprison, torture, or kill anyone, including OPDO members and our government employees without any due process of law. They have established several secret detention centers, where thousands of innocent people are kept for years without trial or charge. Federal government soldiers, more appropriately the TPLF soldiers, are in practice above the law In Oromla.⁶⁸

A second disturbing development is the attack on the small Oromo free press and civil society institutions. In 1992 there were several magazines and newspapers in the Oromo language. By using its restrictive press law and legal mechanisms to bankrupt newspapers and magazines and imprison journalists, the TPLF dominated regime, closed down all private newspapers and magazines. The attack on the free press literally killed the small publications in the Oromo language in Latin alphabet. The death of Oromo publications in Latin alphabet has been a fatal blow to the flowering of Oromo literature and the standardization of the Oromo language itself. Oromo magazines that have disappeared include, (1) *Gada*, (2) *Biftu*, (3) *Madda Walaabuu*, (4) *Odaa* and (5) *Urji* magazine, which started and ended in 1997, when its editors were detained by the government. In 2004, the Oromo lack a single newspaper or magazine that expresses their legitimate political opinions. The regime also closed down the Oromo Relief Association, a humanitarian organization that was established in 1979, and had its property confiscated without compensation and without due process of law. The goal of the suppression of all independent Oromo organizations and the disappearance of the once vigorous private Oromo newspapers and magazines is to deprive the Oromo of any leadership and any voice in the affairs of their own country. As the result, today the Oromo " ... are not only oppressed but also handcuffed to move and mind cuffed to think and speak by a system that best thrives in darkness and misinformation."⁶⁹

The third disturbing development is the attack on educated Oromo and the educational system in Oromia. To begin with, only a fraction of the Oromo are educated. According to government sources, as late as 1995, only 20 percent and

12 percent of children in Oromia were enrolled in primary and secondary schools respectively.⁷⁰ Out of an estimated population of over twenty-five million in Oromia, only 0.1 percent received the third level education in 1994.⁷¹ Oromo students have limited chance of proceeding to college or university level education owing to the poor quality education in Oromia that fails to equip them well for passing the high school leaving exam. Early in 2004, 380 Oromo students were either suspended or expelled from Addis Ababa University. When high school students demonstrated against the dismissal of Oromo students, eleven students were killed by the government soldiers and a total of seven thousand students and teachers were arrested." The secondary and higher education of Oromo in Ethiopia has been severely disrupted, with consequences for generations to come."⁷² The attack on educated Oromo and the educational system in Oromia continues unabated. Its purpose is clear. It is to deprive the Oromo of educated manpower, silence their voice in the affairs of their own country and to make their future as bleak as it is today.

⁶⁸ Hassen Ali, quoted in *Sagalee Haaraa*, Nos. (November 1999): 1-2.

⁶⁹ Seyoum Hameso, "The Sidama Perspective on the Coalition of the Oppressed Nations," *Eleventh Annual Conference of Oromo Studies Association Proceedings*, eds. Gulama Gameda and Bichaka Fayissa, (1998): 39.

⁷⁰ Andargatchew Tesfaye, "Human Rights and Socio-Economic and Political Development: The Ethiopian Situation," (A paper presented at the 1997 African Studies Association Meeting): 15.

⁷¹ *Oromo of Finfinnee University, 1993-1994 Graduates*: 30.

⁷² Oromia Support Group, *Press Release*, (March 21, 2004): 1.

The fourth disturbing development is the collective punishment that is inflicted upon Oromo men, women, children, animals and even the environment. In cases where Oromo pastoralists were suspected of harboring the small OLF guerrilla fighters, TPLF soldiers punished them by destroying or confiscating their cattle or by poisoning the water wells from which the cattle drank. Oromo farmers who are suspected of feeding OLF fighters, have seen their farms burned to the ground and the defenseless members of their household brutally murdered.⁷³

Perhaps the more ominous development is the attack on Oromo-speaking Kenyan nationals. According to a Kenyan Human Rights Commission Report, (KHRCCR) Ethiopian government soldiers carry raids into Kenya which involves "bombings, murder, rape and plunder of Borana Oromo and assassination of prominent elders suspected of supporting the OLF."⁷⁴ In March 2001, Ethiopian government soldiers reportedly killed 160 Oromo-speaking Kenyan Nationals.⁷⁵ By its unprecedented action, the TPLF regime extended the violence against Oromos beyond its borders.

Even more distressing of the TPLF's atrocities is the extension of the violence against Oromo refugees in the neighboring countries. Thousands of Oromos fled to the neighboring countries, to escape from the reach of the long arms of the Ethiopian state. However, that was not to be the case. TPLF agents assassinated Oromo refugees in Djibouti,⁷⁶ Somalia and Kenya,⁷⁷ the Sudan and even South Africa.⁷⁸

In the end, the most disturbing development is the TPLF's war on Oromo nationalism. This was clearly expressed in Hizbaawi Adera or *The People's Trust* (Vol. 4, No.7, December 1996 - February 1997) (the official quarterly of the ruling party). In this publication, the TPLF-dominated regime has expressed significant fear of "narrow nationalism", which it says is stronger in Oromia than anywhere else in Ethiopia. This publication is replete with references to Oromo intellectuals, businessmen, and women as constituting the problem of "narrow nationalism." Narrow nationalism is defined as ". all the views and actions of the higher echelon intellectuals and big business people whose ambitions are to monopolize power and impose their will on the people of their own nation/nationality. [Narrow Nationalism] exerts strong influence in Oromia."⁷⁹ The purpose is to demonize Oromo intellectual, business, cultural and political elite and prepare an ideological justification for making the Oromo elite the enemy of "Revolutionary Democracy" a euphemism for the TPLF dominated regime. *Hizbaawi Adera* argues:

Higher echelon intellectuals and big business people are narrow minded. Their aspiration is to become a ruling class only to serve their own self-interests. They are so greedy that they want to "eat" alone. as they are desperate, they can be violent. So we should always remain vigilant. Unless these narrow nationalists are eliminated, democracy and development cannot be achieved in Ethiopia.⁸⁰

⁷³ Susan Pollock, "Ethiopia: Human Tragedy in the Making," *The Oromo Commentary*, Volume VI, No, 1 (1996): 10.

⁷⁴ "Kenyan Human Rights Commission Report" quoted in OSG Press Release (January/February, 1997): 2.

⁷⁵ *The Daily Nation*, Kenya, February 16, 2001.

⁷⁶ Bruma Fossati, et al. *Documentation: The New Rulers of Ethiopia and the Persecution of the Oromo* (Frankfurt am Main: Evangelischer Pressedienst, 1997): 1-56.

⁷⁷ Oromo Support Group: *Press Release*, Number 17 (May/June, 1997): 14.

⁷⁸ Oromo Support Group 1997, 14.

⁷⁹ *Hizbaawi Adera*, Volume 8, Number 7 (December 1996-February 1997): 11. I am deeply indebted to Professor Tilahun Gamta for his elegant translation of this issue of *Hizbaawi Adera* for me.

⁸⁰ *Hizbaawi Adera*, 1996-7.

The upshot of *Hizbaawi Adera's* contention is that, in order to destroy Oromo nationalism, it is necessary to isolate, expose and crush Oromo intellectuals and wealthy merchants, who are accused of nurturing it.⁸¹

In 2001, the TPLF government dropped all pretensions of a commitment to building a multinational Ethiopia. It turned against Oromos its own surrogate parties through which it had hoped to reach and placate the various nations within Ethiopia. In early 2001, several OPDO leaders were removed from positions of power. Some of the OPDO leaders escaped from Ethiopia to save their lives, including Almaz Mako, the Speaker of "the House of Federation and the second in line of succession to the presidency of Ethiopia."⁸²

In her press release on August 13, 2001, Almaz Mako stated:

The EPRDF government has brought untold miseries and sufferings on the Oromo people. [The] OPDO is . . . reduced to a rubber stamp for TPLF rule over Oromia . . . Oromo resources are mobilized and looted to develop Tigray. . . . The ruling party is categorically rejected by the entire Oromo nation and survives only on the back of its repressive security forces. . . . [because] my continuous existence in my post will only give the false impression that the Oromos are represented in the government, I have decided to vacate my position as a Speaker of the House of Federation and seek political asylum in the United States.⁸³

In July 2004, the Macha and Tulama Association, one of the oldest Oromo civic organizations was dissolved, its property confiscated and its leaders detained by the TPLF-dominated government. The illegal dissolution of the Macha and Tulama Association is the latest example of the TPLF leaders relentless determination to destroy all independent Oromo civic organizations. The TPLF's assault on Oromo Nationalism and all independent Oromo organizations and its determination to deprive the Oromo of any leadership brought on the Oromo the painful reality that the archaic Ethiopian political culture, in which the minority dictates the fate of the majority, has not changed at all.

Conclusion

Since their conquest in the 1880s, Oromo cultural, civic and political organizations have been subjected to multi-faceted attacks by successive Ethiopian regimes. In 1991, with the end of the Amhara elites' political, economic, cultural, and military domination of the Ethiopian state, it appeared for a while that the attacks on Oromo cultural, civic and political organizations would come to an end. However, that was not to be. Once the TPLF leaders established their full control over the Ethiopian state, they continued with the tradition of multi-faceted attacks on all Oromo institutions. Consequently the TPLF dominated Federal Republic of Ethiopia has continued to be a prison house of the Oromo nation just as imperial Ethiopia was. Much damage has been done to the spirit, property, and humanity of the Oromo people. Like the previous Ethiopian regimes, the current TPLF dominated regime is consistently denying Oromo civil and political rights and equal protection under the law. Furthermore the TPLF dominated regime has attempted to destroy all independent Oromo organizations. Deprived of vigorous democratic leadership and denied freedom of expression in their language, the Oromo are subjected to a double pronged attack on their nationalism and their right to govern themselves in their own regional state. The objectives of such continuous multi-faceted attacks on Oromo civic and political organizations can be summed up in three sentences: control of Oromo resources under the guise of a federal system; destroying Oromo

⁸¹ *Hizbaawi Adera*, 1996-7.

⁸² Milkias, 2001, 30, 80.

⁸³ Almaz Mako, *Press Release* (August 13, 2001): 1.

nationalism and independent organizations in the name of Ethiopian unity and restoring the pre-1991 status-quo in Ethiopia, behind the facade of “revolutionary democracy” thus eliminating the limited gains the Oromo have achieved since 1991.

What the TPLF leaders do not realize is that the Oromo have always struggled to develop civic and political organizations. But never more than since the 1960s. They have always produced heroes but never more than since the 1960s. The Oromo need for profound dedication to their civic and political organizations springs from the fact that they are the organizational expression of Oromo Nationalism, which has altered the Oromo perception of themselves and how they are perceived by others. Nationalism has captured the heart and mind and the soul of the Oromo who will find inner fountains of fire not only to defend what has been achieved since 1991, but also to shorten the journey for the true self-determination of Oromia. As they survived the previous regimes attacks, the Oromo will survive the current multi-faceted attacks on their civic and political organizations. The sooner TPLF leaders realize this and change course, the better it will be for the Oromo and other people of Ethiopia.

ETHIOPIA SINCE THE DERG: DEMOCRATIC PRETENSION AND PERFORMANCE. DEMOCRATISATION IN ETHIOPIA ON LOCAL AND NATIONAL LEVEL

Lovise Aalen

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The point of departure for this presentation is that the Oromo question cannot be solved without the development of a genuinely democratic Ethiopia. Whether the Oromo choose to be a part of a united, federated Ethiopia or opt for another solution, the political conditions within Ethiopia matter for the Oromo people. Currently, the majority of the constituency of the OLF lives within a centralised party state, dominated by the ruling EPRDF. Through their every day lives, the Oromo people together with large parts of the Ethiopian population have to face challenges of suppression and human rights violations from agents of the state and the ruling parties. Due to this, the Oromo question cannot be seen in isolation, but has to be approached through a wider scope: it needs focus on possible solutions to the fundamental deficits of democracy at both local and national level in Ethiopia as a whole.

Today, I would like to present to you the result of Norwegian Centre for Human Rights and Chr. Michelsen Institute's research on the democratisation process in Ethiopia from 1991 to 2001, which is essentially compiled in the book "Ethiopia since the Derg: Democratic pretension and performance" edited by Siegfried Pausewang, Kjetil Tronvoll and myself in 2002. As you can read from our conclusions, we appreciate the formal opening up for a multiparty system and the ratification of a constitution which includes the fundamental democratic and human rights principles, but we have serious doubts about the democratic performance of the ruling regime, from the national level all the way down to the *kebele* at local level.

As we see it, the *formal* structures are at place for the development of democracy in Ethiopia. The constitution guarantees for the protection of human rights and the establishment of democratic institutions and elections. The federal structures provide for regional and local self-rule on the basis of ethnicity. Whatever opinion one might have about *ethnically* based federal systems, the devolution of power from central to regional and local government could, at least in theory, be a means of pushing decision making closer to the people affected by the decisions, and allowing more cultural and social self-determination.

Although some progress has been made, these formal provisions for a democratisation of Ethiopia lack genuine implementation. The major obstacle in the implementation of democracy in Ethiopia is the existence of a centralised ruling party, the EPRDF, who keeps tight control at all levels and makes sure that no one can use the democratic institutions efficiently to challenge its power. Out of this comes a dual structure of government, where the formal structures provide for a democratic façade, while the actual performance severely restricts the fundamental rights and freedoms of the citizens of Ethiopia. The existence of a centralised party rule is fundamentally incompatible with a federal form of government, since the presence of an all powerful party inevitably centralises power and undermines regional and local autonomy. The regional governments in Ethiopia today are in practice directed by representatives from the EPRDF, if not from the TPLF, who have no formal positions, but still have the authority to intervene and make final decisions.

This dual structure becomes particularly evident in times of elections, where the democratic credentials of the incumbent are supposed to be demonstrated nationally and to an international audience. At the same time the power and positions of the ruling party officials will be at stake. What we have seen through our research on the elections from 1992 to 2001 is that the ruling party would *not* allow democratic competition to take place if it threatens the positions of its party cadres at local, regional and national level of government.

Ethiopia has had five elections since the change of power in 1991: the regional elections in 1992, the election to the constituent assembly in 1994, the regional and national elections of 1995 and 2000 and the local elections in 2001. The elections in 1992, 1994 and 1995 were boycotted by the main opposition parties, while the elections in 2000 were the first elections in Ethiopian history where the ruling party was challenged by the participation of opposition candidates. Although the challenge from the opposition was limited to Addis Ababa and the Southern region, it resulted in a few seats for the AAPO and the Southern Coalition led by Beyene Petros in regional and national parliaments. If opposition had been allowed to compete on equal and free terms, changes in power could actually have taken place in several locations. But the challenge from the opposition had a price, particularly in the Southern region, where the people of Hadyia and Tambaro had to face the retaliations of local EPRDF cadres and administrative officials. With assistance from the federal police they used force to hit back at popular resistance to the EPRDF dominance during and after the elections. The National Electoral Board recognised that the elections in some parts of Southern region had been manipulated and arranged re-elections later the same year.

The opposition's limited success in the south and the Electoral Board's willingness to address some of the problems were encouraging. But the performance in the local elections in 2001 shattered the hopes of a democratisation process on the right track in Ethiopia. The patterns of control and manipulation that were evident in those rural areas where opposition candidates were competing in the 2000 elections became apparent even in Addis Ababa during the 2001 elections. *Kebele* officials and EPRDF cadres conducted door to door campaigns to ensure that people voted for the ruling party. Opposition candidates were intimidated and harassed to make them withdraw from the elections. Addis Ababa could no longer be put up as a showcase of EPRDF's democratic credentials to an international audience. In the Southern Coalition's strongholds of Hadyia and Kambata in Southern region, many opposition candidates did not dare to participate because of fear for their lives or livelihoods. Also this time, a huge number of candidates were imprisoned before, during and after the elections. The expected competition between Southern coalition and the ruling party was therefore absent or severely hampered. Members of the local party organisations and local administrative officials repeated mistakes of the past, and their first priority seemed still to be preventing the opposition from winning seats, by all possible means.

So, which mechanism does the ruling party enforce to curtail the opposition and make the large majority of the Ethiopian population vote for them in elections after elections? In our book, we argue that the performance of the ruling party in the elections is a result of both central directions *and* independent actions of the local party officials. Decision making within the EPRDF is extremely centralised, and central party officials take the effort of intervening in very localised affairs if the party's interests are threatened. At the same time, local party officials, as employers or stakeholders in the local administration of resources and power, have personal interests of maintaining their positions as a way of securing their livelihoods. Politics in general, and elections in particular, become a zero sum game, where the loss of power means loss of access to resources.

After the split in the TPLF in 2001, the EPRDF launched the so-called *tehadiso*, or renewal movement, in order to face the challenges of a new opposition within the ruling group and to address problems in the party organisation. One of the stated aims of the *tehadiso* was to put local

accountability into practice and to implement reforms that enhanced the separation of party interests from that of the state. But so far, these reforms have not born much fruits.

The blurred distinction between the party and the state means that the ruling party has access to the state's resources and is using it to maintain its opposition. On the other hand, to be a part of the opposition means to be denied this access. The elections are therefore a matter of defending one's daily bread, if one looses, everything is lost. People are threatened to be denied food-aid, fertilizers, ID-cards, job-opportunities etc if they do not vote for the EPRDF. This is institutionalised through the *kebele* system, a local administrative structure inherited from the Derg, but adapted and fully exploited by the current regime. Every citizen of Ethiopia has to face the *kebele* officials in their everyday lives and maintain a good relationship to them, as illustrated in this quote by an old voter in Addis Ababa:

“The house belongs to the *kebele*. If I need to repair it, I need to get approval from the *kebele*. If I get sick, I have to pass through the *kebele* to the hospital. If my sons and daughters are looking for a job, they have to go to the *kebele* first. Unless and until we follow the orders of the *kebele* we have no services.”

In our conclusion, we state that a political structure built on parties that depend entirely on the access to state resources does not allow for a democratic change. As long as material interests keep the individual actors loyal to the ruling party, it is easy to manipulate elections and maintain control through repression. But we also conclude that a state structure cannot be maintained through repression for an extended period, as we have seen when the Derg finally lost its credibility and eventually the support and loyalty from the majority of Ethiopia's peasants. We have also observed that peasants as well as city dwellers of Ethiopia are aware of democratic values. When they experience pressure and suppression, they know that this is not democracy. This brings hopes for the future. A great responsibility lays on the shoulders of all political forces in Ethiopia today, not only the ruling party but also the OLF and other opposition forces, to present to the people democratic alternatives of government based on non-violence and human rights and accountability to the people.

DEMOCRACY AND HUMAN RIGHTS – NOT FOR THE OROMO? STRUCTURAL REASONS FOR THE FAILURE OF DEMOCRATISATION

Siegfried Pausewang

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I am asked to draw some conclusions from our studies on the elections for the Oromo people in Ethiopia. I think the most central observation is that democracy goes wrong on local level, mostly in the *kebele*. It is local leaders, first of all, who make sure that the EPRDF wins and that no other competitor can challenge their positions. Wherever there is competition, there is a tense atmosphere of fear among the peasants, often there occurs violence, and different ploys are used to curtail the possibilities for the opposition to win an election. In our book we reported similar patterns from many rural areas and in different elections. Lovise Aalen has given you a report on our findings and told several examples, and I need not repeat.

It is important to keep in mind that the elections did work alright in most areas. Wherever there was no competition, the National Electoral Board managed to organise a technically good election, without any major flaws. So the Board has a good record of well organised elections in most localities to its credit. But a view at the lists shows that about 50 % of all seats in the last national elections were not contested at all. Only 121 out of 522 seats were contested by opposition parties, mostly in towns. A closer look on local conditions reveals that a local structure of control and coercion exists, making it difficult for any opposition to organise and nominate a candidate. In many rural areas opposition party offices were closed and house owners warned not to rent out their houses to an opposition party. Leaders were blackmailed, threatened, arrested under concocted charges. Known supporters were intimidated, their family members were threatened, children beaten up on the way from school. From areas where there was shortage of food, we got many reports of leaders telling peasants that they should not expect relief food unless they supported the ruling party in the election. In one report we were told that opposition supporters were made to rise in a public meeting and ridiculed: *We don't give you our food, go to your party and see if they can give you*. Other reports told us about peasants who were told: *The Constitution says the government owns the land. We don't give you from our land if you betray us by voting for another party*. We heard of a few examples where the threat had become true, peasants were deprived of their land. Peasants know that the authorities can put force behind their threats, and land is the lifeline for a peasant. So they are frightened into submission.

Actually, the situation during the elections in Oromia was not the worst. In most areas in Oromia there was no opposition competing. OLF is not there as an opposition to run for the election. And ANC, the only legal Oromo party, withdrew its candidates from places where it feared for their lives. So in most constituencies in Oromia, the OPDO ran unopposed or only challenged by a few independent candidates with little chances to win.

But in Southern region, in a few zones and ethnic regions, Beyene Petros managed to build up an impressive party structure and to register candidates in spite of all odds. There we observed the most threatening examples of pressure on voters, tricks and ploys to prevent opposition supporters from casting their votes, isolation and intimidation of women, and outright fraud in the voting. Local leaders used all their means of power, including the police force and the prisons, for ensuring their victory in the elections. You can read these examples in the book.

A local culture of power and control

Why is this pattern of local repression prevailing in the rural areas, and how did it develop? First of all, one has to remember the situation of 1991, when the TPLF and the EPRDF took over the power of government in Addis Ababa and invited resistance movements and other ethnic representations to cooperate. Ethiopia became a federation of ethnic regions. The government had to build up quickly a local administrative structure to replace the military control of the now defunct regime. Local leaders had to speak the language of their region, so they had to be recruited locally. In rural areas, there are few educated people to be recruited. The only ones readily available were school leavers – youngsters who had passed through the school system but failed to achieve the entrance to university education. Usually they do not want to go back to agriculture, they hang around in the small towns looking for a job opportunity. They saw their chance in registering themselves as party member. They knew: without a party membership card no job opportunity. So they were the first wave of party members who were recruited for training courses and put in charge of local offices.

These administrators know: if their party loses an election, they stand to lose both their job, their influence, their power, their positions. They can not take any chance. They fight for their positions by any means at their disposition, including illegal ones. They consider any opposition as a personal threat. They identify themselves with the political system, and hence consider any threat to their positions as one to their party.

To be fair, the government has done a lot to improve their qualifications. It has instituted massive training programmes. Many administrators down to zonal and *woreda* level have completed a degree in economics or development studies. On lower level much training has been invested in improving their education. The government has also instituted several reforms, not least the *kebele* reform, and further steps towards decentralisation, giving the *kebele* and the *woreda* stronger budget autonomy, introducing stronger controls from publicly elected bodies on the administration, and separating the administration from elected bodies.

But all these reforms have not been able to change the principal pattern which makes these administrators defend their positions, and by so doing, making sure their party stays in power, by hook or by crook. They control the lives of the people in their area, and make sure that no-one can challenge them. In this, they follow an old culture of power in Ethiopia which has it that power needs to be exercised to be maintained. Whoever shows leniency shows weakness, and the weak is bound to lose his power. Kjetil Tronvoll and Sarah Vaughan have analysed this “culture of power” in a recent book, and I will not repeat its findings here.

A concept of traditional loyalty

The ruling EPRDF coalition claims to represent the interest of the peasants, and hence to have their support. This claim is not altogether unfounded. In 1991, it liberated the peasants from an oppressive system that forced farmers to deliver their grain to a National Grain Board at artificially low prices: in addition to taxes, they had to pay extraordinary contributions for different campaigns; peasants had been forced into the immensely unpopular villagisation programme, and to work as forced labour on environmental protection programmes. The EPRDF abolished these practices, together with the detested resettlement campaigns and forced recruitment into the military. In addition, EPRDF guaranteed the peasants’ traditional system of land distribution, in which every person has a right to access to land to till for feeding a family. In theory, the Constitution protects that right, though in practice, local representatives of the government misuse its prerogative to land ownership as a means to control peasants and punish those who do not accept its decisions.

In return for representing the interests of peasants, the ruling parties feel convinced of their right to maintain their loyalty. Their idea of loyalty is not one of democratic representation. It does not follow political causes or legal principles, but is oriented towards personal commitment. It is built on past merit rather than on a shared vision and a political programme for the future. It demands personal, rather than democratic loyalty.

This concept of loyalty is closely related to an understanding of tradition, a vision of “African democracy”: Many African societies have a tradition of debating in public meetings until consensus is reached. A solution to problems is found to which all members can agree, or at least, with which they can live. Most often such practice is closely tied to a concept of loyalty to the rightful leaders of a clan or a group. This concept is strong also in the *Gada* system of the Oromo, which is often cited as an alternative to “Western” democracy. Indeed, if such a system, based on general assemblies or other forms of participation, really allow an open debate in which all members can voice their opinion freely, and the essential needs of all, even of the weak, are protected, then such an alternative way of arriving at workable compromise can have democratic value. There is all reason to respect African traditions. A secret election following the model of the most industrialised societies does not necessarily fit all societies on the globe.

But if consensus is achieved through enforced loyalty and not through arguments and discourse, then it is not reflecting the democratic will of the people. If consensus is controlled and enforced from above, such a practice is not an African expression of democracy – it is perverting and discrediting democracy.

In such an atmosphere, even the control through elected representatives does not protect democratic rights, because those who are elected on the ticket of their party without competition, feel loyal to their party, not to the voters. They want to be part of the administration, to participate in their power – not to be inconvenient watchdogs for the public.

Even the judges in rural areas, a recent study suggests, do not want to be independent and exercise control over local administrations. They prefer to see themselves as part of the local administration. They know they depend on the local authorities, and the local power structures do not allow them to enforce any court decision that the local authorities do not like.

What does all that mean for the Oromo?

First of all, the Oromo are mostly a rural people. Their majority are peasants, and they are exposed to the local power structures without much chance to approve or reject. The political debate in Addis Ababa is to some degree reaching out to the lesser towns. But rural areas are not touched, the peasants are not asked for their opinion, even on issues as vital for them as land tenure, or local administrative structures, or a war that demands the rural youth as cannon fodder. Elections are held all over the country, but apart from that, the demands of rural people are supposedly taken care of by EPRDF representing their interests.

Second, after OLF withdrew from the elections of 1992 and had to seek exile, OPDO administers in Oromia on behalf of EPRDF. OPDO cadres at local level fear OLF as the worst challenge. Everyone who supports OLF is considered a threat. OPDO cadres use their local power to remove anyone considered an “anti-government”. They suspect anyone who dares to voice criticism or to challenge their decisions of being a secret supporter of OLF. The local police imprisons suspected OLF- members and supporters, and admonishes people to “*Never give room to anti-governments*”.

The central government must be aware of such practice, but does little against it. It tries to label the OLF as terrorists, thereby justifying a harsh practice against OLF supporters, including

imprisonment and, in practice, torture. After 11. September 2001, the government was quick to support the American war against terrorism, in a bid to win understanding for their own fight against internal “terrorists”.

Today, OPDO is in shambles. Many leaders have defected, disillusioned about the possibilities in the government structure. The best of them had joined the party in a bid to work for as good as possible living conditions for the Oromo people, including their human and democratic rights. But the conditions on the ground, with a local leadership which does not share these motivations and feels compelled to protect their positions and privileges, and a central leadership which fears to be outnumbered by the Oromo, left little room for their idealism.

In practice, EPRDF is dependent on OPDO to keep a check on OLF. The fact that OLF insists in fighting an armed struggle, keeps OPDO alive. As long as OLF fights, OPDO is needed, so the positions of their cadres are secured. On the other hand, it is probably also true that OPDO keeps OLF alive: as long as harassment and subjugation of the Oromo continue, peasants will continue to say: At least, OLF is the only organisation fighting for our rights. They can not be expected to see an alternative to violence. A person who suffers injustice, or who sees relatives imprisoned, can not be expected to imagine peaceful political alternatives. Violence breeds more violence. The result is a strange symbiosis of interests, maintaining a vicious circle of violence.

Democracy and human security also for the Oromo?

So far, it seems, OLF is able to maintain confidence in considerable parts of the Oromo society. But its armed struggle appears pathetic. OLF is in no way in a position to raise the resources, the armaments, or the manpower necessary to defeat the Ethiopian army. But however insignificant, even a pretence of armed struggle helps to keep OLF in the minds of Oromo peasants as *the only ones who fight for our rights*”.

On the other hand, as long as OLF continues a policy of armed struggle, it excludes any chance of doing anything positive for the poor Oromo peasants. To the contrary, every shot fired will be revenged against more or less innocent Oromo peasants. The OPDO and their local cadres will not be able to get hold of the OLF leaders. But they can hold Oromo peasants hostage, and can take revenge against anyone they consider a potential supporter of their rivals.

The conclusion is easy to draw. To get peace, the Oromo need a peaceful alternative. They have to continue their struggle with other weapons. As long as OLF is engaged in armed struggle, even if it is perceived to continue fighting, the Oromo in Ethiopia will achieve neither human security nor democracy. The fight against OLF will always be used to justify all sorts of retaliation, and OPDO will continue to feel free to dominate, to decide on their behalf, to allow as little room for deviation as possible. The very logic of the vicious circle of armed struggle is thus to perpetuate, not to overcome suppression of the Oromo.

In my understanding, the question is not to either denounce armed struggle and surrender or to be principled and continue. The question is rather to identify new approaches to the same goal – Oromo self-determination. To continue the struggle with other means, to find a new path that might be able to reach the goal on a shorter and less costly route. Or even, to leave a long and stony road that leads to nowhere, in search for the hilly footpath that leads to the goal..

One has to do first things first. Daily survival is first things for most rural Oromo. If OLF wants to help the peasants improve their everyday situation, it needs to continue the struggle with other weapons. Renouncing violence would strengthen the moral force of their democratic argument. There is a lot of moral force needed to convince the international community of a genuine change of

policy. Without achieving that, it seems impossible to gain support from the international community. Such support is difficult to achieve, it has to be earned. And it is essential. If OLF wants to get into negotiations with the critical backing of international actors, it has to get out of this vicious circle of violence and retaliation.

The first preconditions for winning credibility for such a change of policy would be threefold: OLF would have

- **to renounce violence,**
- **to get out of Eritrea,** and
- to develop and present **a positive and credible non-violent alternative** for a democratic structure on local level, that can replace present repressive practice in a democratic disguise.
- For such a democratic local political structure, it is necessary to think carefully about how to make sure to build up
- an administration that listens to the people, instead of dominating them;
- a security system that protects the law, instead of enforcing the will of the executive;
- a court system that gives justice to the people, instead of enforcing the power of the administration.

P.S.: In the course of the discussions, I have come to understand why OLF faces problems if renouncing violence. I had assumed the insistence in a pretence of armed struggle was first of all caused by the trauma of 1992, when OLF members indeed suffered severely. I learned about other concerns OLF has to take care of, and other groups to consider. I also understand that getting out of Asmara is not easy for OLF. There is simply no other place OLF could move to, except – after a successful negotiated settlement - Addis Ababa. Therefore I suggest to change the succession of the three preconditions I outlined above.

In order to break the vicious circle of violence, OLF has to get three essential conditions in place:

- to design a positive and credible non-violent alternative for a democratic structure on local level
- to offer a renouncement of armed struggle in return for a guaranteed safe return to Ethiopia
- to get out of Asmara – and back to Addis Ababa and Finfinne.

FUTURE SCENARIOS IN ETHIOPIAN POLITICS AND POSSIBLE IMPLICATIONS ON THE OROMO QUESTION

Kjetil Tronvoll..

Kjetil Tronvoll illustrated his contribution with a power point presentation in six scenarios, with an introduction and a conclusion. As his power point planches appeared very thought provoking and illustrative, we chose here to reproduce them with only marginal reporting on the suggestions made by Tronvoll. The comments are cut from a report by David Shinn.

The presentation by Kjetil Tronvoll proposed six very different scenarios for the Oromo to contemplate the context for their political discourse and planning. The scenarios were preceded by five underlying assumptions, to give a basic understanding of current Ethiopian politics:

Basic understandings of current Ethiopian politics

- Although the EPRDF government has adopted a democratic constitution and discourse, its policies and politics exhibit non-democratic tendencies
 - There exists wide-spread human rights abuses in Ethiopia today, and the government denies responsibility
 - The Oromo issue is central to solving the Ethiopian political crisis
 - Oromo people's right to self-determination must be respected, in order to achieve democracy and peace
 - The current status quo prohibits a desirable political development in Ethiopia and Oromia
-

The first scenario posited that the OLF achieves territorial control by military force over large parts of Oromia. This would raise a series of questions:

6 scenarios impinging on Oromo political strategy

What if the armed struggle is successful and OLF achieve territorial control of large parts of Oromia?

- Will the international society accept a de facto splitting up of Ethiopia?
 - What will happen to the “rest-Ethiopia” south of Oromia (Somali, SNNPR, Gambella and Benishangul)?
 - How will the internal differences within Oromia be conceptualised when the ‘common enemy’ is defeated?
-

Tronvoll suggested that the international community probably would not accept this scenario. An independent Oromia would likely result in the disintegration of Ethiopia, although Amhara and Tigray States might remain as the core of the country. There is a good chance that divisions would develop in an independent Oromia.

The second scenario suggested that dissenters within the EPRDF toppled Meles.

What if the dissenters are successful and Meles Zenawi is toppled from within EPRDF – what will come next?

- The Amhara fraction within EPRDF will be the dominant political force, probably in alliance with Tigrean nationalists.
 - OPDO will still remain weak and incapacitated
 - Post-Meles EPRDF will probably centralise politics and exhibit a more classical Habesha position on the Oromo question
-

This would probably result in a predominant Amhara faction that allies itself with Tigrayan nationalists. The OPDO would remain weak. A post-Meles EPRDF would end ethnic federalism and revert to central control. The Amhara National Democratic Movement would likely provide the next prime minister. This would not improve the situation for the Oromo and might even worsen it.

The third scenario assumed a resumption of the Ethiopian-Eritrean war.

What if the Eritrean-Ethiopian war resumes?

- How will OLF be restricted in their political, diplomatic and military manoeuvres by the war itself
 - How will Eritrea utilize its relations to OLF in its war effort?
 - How will it affect the perception of OLF among Oromos – and Ethiopians at large?
 - ... and what if the current stalemate continues for another 10 years...?
-

If the OLF came to the aid of Eritrean forces, it would pit Oromo in Ethiopia against their OLF brethren. The more likely outcome is a continuation of the current situation because Eritrea is bankrupt today and reluctant to sacrifice its people.

The fourth scenario proposed that Ethiopia manages to get the OLF included on the list of terrorist organisations. This also raises some interesting questions:

What if the Ethiopian government is successful in putting OLF on the list of international terrorist's organisations?

- How will the international society react against OLF? (Military, political and economic measures)
 - What will Eritrea be forced to do?
 - How will the reaction be within Ethiopia?
-

If put on the list, OLF would likely confront travel restrictions, the closure of overseas offices, and the freezing of financial assets. The OLF should give careful consideration to this possibility.

The fifth scenario indicated that the EPRDF delivers major social and economic development programmes to Ethiopia in general and Oromia in particular.

What if the EPRDF manages to deliver economic and social development within Ethiopia and Oromia?

- How will this affect the support to the armed struggle by Oromo peasants?
 - What will the political consequences be within Oromia and Ethiopia?
-

If they see the situation truly improving, Oromo peasants would be reluctant to give OLF any support.

The sixth scenario predicated that the EPRDF consolidates democracy and human rights.

What if the democratic development is consolidated and human rights protection is enforced?

- How will this affect the formation of new political representative parties for Oromia?
 - If OLF is continuing with armed struggle in a phase of consolidating democracy, how will this influence OLF's status as the genuine Oromo political representative organisation?
-

The result would probably be a number of new Oromo parties that would result in the marginalisation of the OLF. It would also bring in professional international observers during elections.

The last planche drew conclusions, asking for the main challenges for the Oromo: what is the best way to grapple with the problems raised?

Where to go, what to do?

Two main challenges for OLF and the Oromo people

Relocation or repatriation of the OLF?

Accept or reject armed struggle?

Like the other non-Oromo international scholars at the conference, Tronvoll urged that the OLF should reject armed struggle and return to Ethiopia. He concluded that it is more difficult today for the OLF to achieve its objective through armed struggle.

PROSPECTS FOR OROMO STRUGGLE UNDER THE PREVAILING SITUATION

Daawud Ibsaa

Chairman of Oromo Liberation Front (OLF)

Introduction

Please allow me to present to you warm greetings from OLF leaders, members and supporters to the participants of this conference. It is a great honor and pleasure for me and our leadership team to be in your midst to jointly explore the challenges and prospects for a peaceful resolution of the conflicts ravaging the Horn of Africa region.

On behalf of all the suffering people of the Horn, Oromo and non-Oromo alike, I sincerely thank the Chr. Mechelsen Institute, particularly Dr. Pausewang, for successfully organizing this very timely, pertinent and exploratory conference on Conflict resolution in the Horn in general and in Ethiopia and Oromia in particular. It is a new testament to the deep concern of your institute, your government and your great country for the well-being of the voiceless in the world.

Allow me also to thank Ambassador Shinn, Prof. Clapham, Dr. Pausewang, Lovise and Dr. Tronvoll for a scholarly assessment of the situation on the ground and for sharing it with us openly. Let me assure you, our organization takes your recommendations seriously as it critically rethinks and readjusts itself to better face new challenges and vigorously exploit new opportunities. We hope this will be the beginning, not the end, of a long journey towards making Ethiopia and by extension the Horn a more democratic, peaceful and stable region.

Having said this, please allow me to focus on the obstacles and prospects for a peaceful resolution of the mayhem in the Horn. In order to do that, I have to make these assumptions:

- You are all aware of the history of the formation of contemporary Ethiopia;
- The impact of the conquest on the Oromo and other people in the South;
- Despite the many upheavals and so called transformations, Ethiopia has yet to shed its imperial nature where the minority dominates the majority by sheer force of arms and crucial support from outside;
- And that the current conflict is a result of a determined minority trying to cling to power by all means and the attempt of the subjugated nations to free themselves from domination, subjugation, repression, marginalization and exploitation.

At every historical juncture Oromos have acted in good will to bridge this gap. Many Oromos had served Ethiopia with distinction. The collaboration of famous Oromo generals like Gobana with Minilek, the exemplary leadership of Iyyasu, however short-lived, the statesmanship of Habtegiorgis, the decisive support extended to H/Silassie against the Italians by heroes like Ababa Aragay, the guidance given to Mengistu by theoreticians like Haile Fida and finally the cooperation given to Meles by the OPDO, and even OLF, albeit briefly, all ended in frustration. Oromos have also attempted to peacefully improve their lot by forming the first official Oromo NGO, the legendary Macca & Tulama Association, which was of course open to non Oromos reflecting the goodwill and openness of Oromos, but it too did not fare any better.

After assimilation, cooperation and entreaties for a peaceful redress of their grievances failed, it was only natural for the Oromo to ask, “What is left to be done?” Although an independent militant organization was the answer, in no time did the Oromo close the door to a peaceful political alternative. When Mengistu assumed power and temporarily opened the field for political agitation the OLF helped form a multi-national political organization called the Ethiopian Oppressed Peoples’ Revolutionary Struggle (ICHIHAT) by bringing activists from all nationalities to strive for a peaceful political transformation of the Ethiopian state. However, when the Dergue reneged on its earlier promises, OLF had to go back to the field. Continuing the policy of working with others whenever possible, it took initiatives to build alliance with other forces to topple the Dergue and subsequently joined the Transitional arrangement in 1991/92 with a positive spirit. This is evidence that OLF has always been and remains to be open to alternatives for cooperation. OLF has never been and shall never be shy from embracing a more comprehensive agenda that does not compromise on the national aspirations of the Oromo people.

Although the price paid by OLF for this experiment is heavy, it did not make us give up on the search for a just peace nor dampen our desire for negotiation. We continued our exploration for just peace after the abortion of the Transitional arrangement. From the Paris conference, the different bilateral and multilateral arrangements to peacefully negotiate all outstanding issues down to the many attempts by the Americans, Germans, and the Norwegians attests to our ceaseless search for just peace. Since the war is being fought on our soil and financed with our own resources our resolve for peaceful resolution of conflicts is not a tactical but rather a strategic one. We cannot afford to sacrifice our youth as we need each and every one of them alive to grow our country, fight poverty and achieve a better standard of living. We understand that whereas we have everything to gain from peace, we have plenty to lose from continuation of violence imposed on us. However, while being relentless in our search for just peace, we shall never compromise nor bargain, in the name of an empty promise for peace, on the fundamental interests and rights of the Oromo people for which thousands of Oromos have sacrificed.

OLF has always been advocating for a just peace of the brave. That is why we proposed a bold agenda for peace in 2000 only to be frustrated by lack of response from the regime. That is why we took initiatives to bring several opposition parties together to form an alternative political force. That is why we went even further by issuing a joint statement with them indicating our desire for voluntary and democratic unity based on the freely expressed will of all peoples.

The Objectives and Obstacles of the Struggle

Contrary to the disinformation and propaganda by the regime, the main objective of the Oromo struggle is not revenge for past crimes or retribution for present transgressions but rather to change the victor-victim relationship between the conqueror and the conquered and build a brand new polity on a new paradigm based on the mutual consent of the peoples concerned. This will create harmony and open the way to build a democratic society that will work for the well-being of all the peoples. As we have indicated before, given a willing partner, I assure you we are ready to travel extra miles to rest this conflict causing misery for millions.

The obstacles to achieving peace are two-fold. First, the regime, being a minority pays only lip service to democracy- not wanting to lose the absolute advantage it currently enjoys. Second, Abyssinians lack a culture that tolerates differences and nourishes democracy. Every power transfer has been through violence. The winner takes all; compromise is seen as weakness. That is what makes the automatic resort to violence and political machinations possible.

The regime has perfected its oppressive machinery. Its propaganda campaign has escalated to the extent of suppressing any movement, whether political or non political, inside the country and branding those outside as terrorists. Nevertheless whenever one venue is closed the subjugated

people resort to the next available means and the machinery follows suit- thus perpetuating the vicious cycle, the outcome of which is abject poverty, endless war, disease, famine, repression manifested by thousands of political prisoners and the forced exodus of skilled manpower, polarization of inter-communal relations, isolation of the government from the people, and inter-state conflicts. The Oromo people carry the brunt of this burden. According to objective reports from independent Human Rights organizations and neutral observers, the atrocities committed against the Oromo nation rise to a level of genocide.

The simmering Oromo-Ethiopia conflict will not affect only Ethiopia, but the whole region of the Horn of Africa. Owing to the proximity of our region to the troubled Middle East and the religious composition of the peoples, the rise of religious extremism is a real threat. Thus the search for just peace needs to be aggressively pursued as whatever happens in Ethiopia has a spillover effect on the Horn countries and vice-versa.

Oromia shares boundary, traditions and religion with almost all the regions in Ethiopia. It is at the center, it is the most populous and the largest in land mass and resources. Oromia manifests all the diversity of Ethiopia. Thus, whatever takes place in Oromia affects all of Ethiopia. It is the only society where Islam, Christianity and Waaqeffanna harmoniously flourished side by side for centuries and there are no signs of religious extremism so far. OLF's adherence to a strictly secular policy contributes greatly to curb the mushrooming of religious fundamentalism.

The OLF sees the solution to the Oromo question from the perspective that the aspiration of every popular struggle is the political, economic, and social well-being of its constituents. We believe all people benefit from just peace and a genuinely democratic arrangement. We therefore believe that prospects for Oromo freedom lies in the freedom of all the peoples in the area and the establishment of a truly democratic institutional and legal framework premised on the freely expressed will of all the peoples in Ethiopia.

This can only be based on the mutual recognition and acceptance of the principle of self-determination of peoples where all genuine representatives of these peoples come together and agree on a basic constitutional charter that will guide the way to commonly agreed democratic governance. This should include recognition of the right to form ones own government. If everyone is assured one's appropriate share and a just, equitable and democratic system is devised we don't see any basis for a deadly conflict that we are currently observing in Ethiopia and throughout the region. What the concerned peoples in the region desperately need and where friends of the region could help is thus in facilitating such a broad-based and serious dialogue.

We in the OLF believe that there should be a guarantee that all peoples will have the right to self administration within their own demarcated and sovereign area to develop their language, preserve their culture, manage their economic resources and better their lives. Human Rights, Rule of Law, separation of state power, multi-party democracy with free and fair election, free enterprise, sanctity of private property, the rights of national minorities, religious freedom and all relevant UN and international conventions will provide the basis for such a charter.

The Oromo people has been waging a continuous struggle to achieve the above objective for the last three decades. The struggle went through many ups and downs overcoming many obstacles. When this struggle started, the consciousness of the Oromo people was at its infancy. It took immense sacrifices to cultivate *Oromummaa* (Oromo nationalism) and rally Oromos for this just struggle of national liberation. Today *Oromummaa* has been widely and firmly established and Oromo consciousness has reached an irreversible stage. Today OLF is not just a front but a vanguard of a growing mass movement. The struggle has galvanized Oromos of all walks of life. What OLF started with a few dedicated members is inspiring and rallying millions of Oromos in Oromia and

around the world. We take pride in that all Oromos have come to know that they have one aspiration and goal- national self-determination. Despite some of our shortcomings that is what makes us optimistic about the future of our struggle and our beloved organization.

The TPLF Regime

Eventhough the Meles group has an upper hand, the division that surfaced within the top leadership of TPLF in 2001 has not come to an end. Credible intelligence reports from inside the Defense Council shows a new crack among the high ranking officers over how to share state power, the question of promotion, how to dole out military ranks, the disposition of Badme and access to sea port. This disagreement has gone down to various ranks in the army and taken the form of ANDM vs. TPLF or Amhara vs. Tigrai. If this continues, as we believe it would, the power structure in Ethiopia is headed for another internal implosion. Sadly, the change may not lead to a better understanding of the main problem, lack of democracy and domination of majority by the minority, nor its peaceful resolution. On the contrary it may lead to reversing the positive gains made thus far and lead to more agony, turmoil and unnecessary bloodshed.

The erosion of mass support for EPRDF is driving local officials to rely more on force than on the rule of law. Desperation is leading them to take heinous actions. The massacre in Gambella, the killing of innocent Oromos in Watar, Bale, Jimma and Ilu Abbabor, the gunning down of peaceful demonstrators in Awasa, Shakka-mazengir, and Dirre Dhawa are manifestations of this desperation. A good recent example is what happened in Tajjo-Walal, western Oromia, where a hysterical TPLF cadre opened fire on a group of Oromo peasants killing four in cold blood.

TPLF's track record on goodwill negotiation leaves much to be desired. We in the OLF have plenty of disappointing experiences from the Transitional period and afterwards. A good latest example is the border ruling by the Border Commission at The Hague. In Algiers, Ethiopia and Eritrea concluded a peace agreement in the presence of representatives of governments, the UN, EU and AU, to stop hostility and abide by the court's ruling that would be final and binding. This did not prevent TPLF from rejecting the final ruling. This unreliable nature of the TPLF/EPRDF and its political culture of uncompromising intransigence is a major obstacle for peace.

The EPRDF is gearing up to "elect" itself to office once again in 2005. We sincerely believe this upcoming "election" won't be different from the previous ones in significant aspects. The peaceful conditions necessary for a free and fair election do not exist. The Election Commission remains entirely packed with TPLF protégées. Without significant reform of the electoral laws, members of the EPRDF and its satellite organizations would compete among themselves and declare themselves winners as they have done in the past. Despite the lofty promise by Meles, TPLF is hesitant to let independents or opposition organizations freely contest and win seats in the parliament. Even if TPLF affords some opposition parties nominal participation, the latter are not in a position to seriously challenge the EPRDF that controls the economy, the bureaucracy, mass media, security, army and police. Hence the prospects for transforming the political system through the ballot box look as dim as when we were forced to abandon it in 1992.

The Situation in the Horn of Africa

Two opposing trends are being observed: peace making and escalation of conflict. The more than two decades old conflict between North and South Sudan, that consumed more than two million lives and devastated countless properties, is coming to an end. The peace agreement signed between SPLA and the Sudanese government, if it succeeds as hoped, will be a breakthrough to bring peace from round table rather than from the barrel of the gun. While wars have victors and losers, everyone wins in peace. Contrary to this positive development, the carnage engulfing Darfur risks to plunge Sudan and the Horn into further chaos.

The tension on the Ethio-Eritrean border is not abating and could erupt into war at any time. The situation in Gambella is far from settled. Popular discontent against the regime are on the rise. Recent killings in Dirre Dhawa and the restlessness within the Ethiopian Defense Council demonstrate the volatility in Ethiopia. Although the situation is favorable to bring peace to Somalia, Ethiopia is doing everything to sabotage and foil the on-going peace process.

The Global Situation

The current global situation is one of turbulence. During the cold war, the global situation was clearly defined. There were known camps to which governments and organizations adjusted their orientation. The New World Order has made sovereignty and territorial integrity less absolute. We saw nations determining their affair and forming new states. The right (to) of self-determination, which used to apply only to countries under colonial rule, is now recognized as a universal right of all nations and peoples. Consequently the map of the world is being redrawn.

On the contrary, with the formation of unions like the EU state sovereignty has become more symbolic than real. Countries joining such Unions voluntarily sign treaties that undermine their sovereignty to avail their people of economic, social and economic benefits from a larger pie.

We are encouraged by both trends. The increased recognition of the right of nations to self-determination gives us hope that if our genuine appeal for peace is rejected and met with violence rather than being reciprocated, as has happened many times in the past, we have the right and the will to decide our fate. The trend towards cooperation is also encouraging to us because it opens new doors and creates more opportunities for our people to work with others to build a more prosperous, harmonious, stable and peaceful region.

Conclusion

The conditions on the ground tell us that there is no easy walk to Oromo freedom. The situation is complex, complicated and rife with uncertainties. TPLF has chosen to resort to all means of suppression to stay in power instead of working for long-term peace and prosperity. It has declared rich and educated Oromos to be enemies of its Revolutionary Democracy. Unfortunately it has also managed to muster enough international support for this unjust and destructive endeavor. It has Ethiopia's human and material resource at its disposal. It has exacerbated the hitherto existing contradictions pushing Ethiopia and the region to further chaos.

The Oromo have been continuously pushed out of the system and marginalized through systematic denial of access to resources and opportunities. We are afraid that the rising tide of Oromummaa, the involvement of all sectors in the struggle, the denial of all venues to air their grievances and seek their aspirations peacefully, and the effort to categorize even the legitimate quest for self-determination as terrorism, may eventually push the Oromo to desperate actions.

As we have tried to indicate on several occasions, armed struggle has never been the choice of our esteemed organization. OLF has no desire whatsoever to waste its precious resources, the lives of our youth, in fighting. It is engaged in armed struggle merely because all other venues to address Oromo grievances and seek their aspirations have been denied. On the contrary it is the regime that is systematically using its monopoly on violence to quell the Oromo people's legitimate quest for freedom and justice. OLF is ready to engage the regime in a peaceful dialogue and enter into a process that would lead to retiring violence as a political means. Unfortunately, it takes three to make a just peace- the courage, foresight and goodwill of the parties in conflict as well as crucial support from neutral third parties with a clear commitment to take appropriate action when one side reneges on implementing its part of the bargain.

In addition to the desire to launch a meaningful dialogue with the TPLF/EPRDF regime, a close cooperation and coordination with the struggle of other peoples and parties interested in justice, sustainable peace and prosperity in the area is vital. Engaging Ethiopian opposition organizations to form alliances of various forms is another agenda that OLF is committed to continue to work on. We cannot afford to view Oromia as an island. Our freedom requires us to work relentlessly to build a healthy and working relationship with all the peoples in Ethiopia and come up with a more democratic, representative and viable alternative to the incumbent regime.

Eventually all parties concerned have to come together on a round table and jointly chart the future of Ethiopia. A strong and committed international input is a sine qua non to kick-start this process and ensure its success. If the global community takes its responsibility seriously and backs its commitment by real action, OLF is ready to do its part in the search for just peace.

Should this fail, the situation will further deteriorate and descend into lawlessness and a breakdown of central authority. OLF has an immense desire to avert this impending chaos and resolve the underlying reasons for this conflict through a peaceful political means. It has demonstrated this will publicly, unambiguously and repeatedly.

Let me remind the distinguished international scholars as well as honored participants of this conference that the miraculous transformation in South Africa was not solely the genius of ANC nor Mandela; it also required a courageous decision by Deklerk. We do not believe Meles will follow this noble example but peace is so precious for our people that we are not going to leave the issue of war and peace to the whim of one person or a minority party. With your help OLF is prepared to take a new peace offensive. However, for this noble endeavor to bear fruit, interested parties need to pursue a two-pronged strategy. While putting real pressure on the regime to seek peaceful resolution of the Oromo-Ethiopia conflict, they need to support and empower the weak so that the powerful can no longer afford to dismiss it as mere nuisance. Unless the present power asymmetry is changed, the TPLF has no incentive to seek peace.

PART II: THE DEBATE

SUMMARY OF THE DEBATE ON OROMIANET AND IN THE INTERNET

A lively debate started immediately after the Bergen Meeting in the internet, particularly on Oromianet. Some participants in the debate accused the organisers of the Conference of being hired hands for the CIA or for other sinister international forces, to divert, undermine or disunite the just struggle of the Oromo. Others even accused them of being hired by the EPRDF regime in Addis Ababa to try to weaken or sabotage the resistance of the Oromo.

On the other side there were also many Oromo participants and others who congratulated the organisers enthusiastically for having initiated a free and open debate in a democratic atmosphere. Some expressed satisfaction that finally the lid had been taken off a debate that many thought was overdue, but had been suppressed by restraint and self-censorship.

Even before the Bergen symposium started, the participants sat a long evening in a Bergen hotel and discussed whether the Oromo should boycott this meeting, as many suspected it to be a plot to seduce the Oromo into passivity or defeatism. Some participants accused the meeting of being an imperialist plot to divert the political zeal of the Oromo organisations away from their primary goal of liberating Oromia and the Oromo people from colonial domination in the Ethiopian empire. They emphatically insisted in the primary goal of full independence for Oromia. But the view prevailed that a debate would not do any harm, and that one should participate in the meeting and judge it later, assessing its effects.

We leave aside the most aggressive and abusive postings and the most unfounded accusations against the Conference and its organisers and participants, and summarise in the following some of the main arguments brought for and against the Bergen meeting and its proceedings and results.

Reading the internet postings and email letters circulated again after some months of distance, one is struck how much internal quarrel, insisting on previous statements and programmes, and accusations against each other for having defended different positions there was. We can leave aside those internal quarrels and highlight the more serious political arguments.

1. Mekuria Bulcha on October 10 2004 summarized his criticism of the Conference and his alternative message. He gave a short characterisation of the positions of some of the scholars present at the meeting, summarising their main advise as suggesting the Oromo should lay down their weapons and give up all armed struggle, return home and ask for democracy in Ethiopia. He criticised this attitude and advise, stating that democracy can not be achieved by begging for it but only by determined struggle. The Oromo are constantly being oppressed in Ethiopia. "Oppressive authoritarian regimes are not known for their generosity and for giving their oppressed subjects the right for self-determination freely. Every Oromo knows that." Luckily, he said, "there are still those who will continue the struggle whatever the cost will be". "Our struggle for human rights and

dignity is in deep troubles at the time when the oppression against the Oromo and other southern peoples is worst...”

2. Beyan Asoba (Oct. 14) argued that different opinions have to be tolerated in a healthy society. But he deplored that in the last few years, in the Oromo diaspora reigned an atmosphere where “speculation, flimsy evidence, incomplete information, misrepresentation of facts, faulty logic and a twisted characterisation of ill motive” are used to discredit each other. The participants of the Bergen Conference had been called many derogative names and unfairly maligned. He asked whether participation could be considered to warrant being called treason. Noting that successes in Ethiopia always had been linked to relations to outside powers and forces, he argued that the Oromo have to do more efforts to win international support, not to withdraw. He deplores the disunity among the Oromo who instead of debating their policies, fight each other and tend to undermine the legitimacy of their organisation. He commended the Conference for having brought together a free debate on sensitive issues of the Oromo. He hoped that the debate could add to bringing back Oromo civility to the Oromo national discourse.

3. Gurraacho Silgaa on Oct 17 asked for the real objectives of the Conference. On the surface, he says, it attempted to convince or coerce the Asmara Group of OLF to abandon the political programme dismantle the Ethiopian empire and democratize it. Gurraacho suggests that the Asmara group had been convinced even before the conference, and that the real objective was to “to confuse, intimidate and demoralize the Oromo people into surrender”.

4. Many participants are repeating the call for unity and cooperation among the different factions of the Oromo political organisations, and deplore the aggressive and uncompromising tone in their present attacks at each other.

5. Beyan Asoba on Nov. 10 asks for pragmatism in tackling the real obstacles to realizing independence. He argues for negotiations as a political means no less justified than armed struggle, criticising the TA (one of the splinter groups emanating from OLF) for inconsistency and lacking realism, and arguing that armed struggle should always remain a policy of last resort. One should never close the door for peaceful resolution of conflicts.

6. Messele on Nov. 11 criticizes Beyan and others for going to Bergen and advocating for peaceful negotiation, while not having made equal or more efforts to accommodate the arguments of the internal opposition group within OLF. At the same time he criticises Leenco Lata whom he accuses of having been for an independent Oromia while he was deputy secretary of OLF, and later writing a book which he concludes with the wish for a democratic Ethiopia. He demands that a major shift in paradigm should go to the OLF congress first, not to Bergen.

7. Also Gurraacho Silgaa, on Nov. 15, attacks the leadership for having gone into negotiations with the Ethiopian government on the basis of a draft proposal contrary to the programme of liberating the Oromo from Ethiopia. He criticises in particular a letter to the Lutheran World Federation, in which the leadership offered to suspend any armed action while the negotiations are in progress, and to accept the Ethiopian Constitution as an existing reality. He brings the differences to the point: The “Asmara Group” was working for free and fair elections and a legal framework for the OLF to participate fairly, “within the Ethiopian Constitution, which the OLF policy is against. “The Asmara Group (wanted) to democratise the empire, QC-ABO (opposing fraction) to stick to dismantling it”

8. The arguments are taken up by Dhugaa Basi on Nov. 18, where he extensively refers to differences and different positions in the leadership of OLF at different times. He showed that also Galassa, chairman of OLF in the 1990es, was willing to discuss a solution for the Oromo self

determination within an Ethiopian federation, and an adaptation of the existing constitution. He quotes Galassa for having answered, in an interview, when he was asked whether he preferred a federal state or a confederation for Ethiopia: “The right of all people to self-determination must be respected first. In general we in OLF say that the people shall decide on the character of the government under which we live together in the ‘Empire’ with others.” Dhugaa concludes that there are many issues worthy of discussion within OLF. But there are no issues worthy of a split.

9. Finally, Hassan Hussein, Beyan Asoba and Mohammed Abdi on Nov. 16 appeal for sanity in dealing with adversaries in the political debate. They invite all fractions to lay aside the bitterness of the past and participate in a renewed debate. While being critical of opposing views, they request mutual respect and urge all to avoid questioning the motives and integrity of the opponents. They express the belief that re-articulating the cause by soberly taking into account the changing internal, regional and global reality is a sign of strength and maturity.

10. Almost as an epilogue, on Nov. 24, Alemayehu Birru gives, in a somewhat poetic language, an appeal for re-uniting the two main contending splinter groups of OLF, in a spirit of debate, not mutual incrimination and annihilation which only would serve to destroy both groups of OLF. He urges the Oromo public to control their leaders, and suggests as soon as possible to “come together face to face with open, honest, tolerant and above all responsible minds in order to extensively deliberate on the issue.” He believes “it is time to convene an all inclusive public meeting in the near future with the aim of exercising public pressure on both groups to end up the hovering tragedy on our people.”

STATEMENT OF THE CONFERENCE ON CONFLICT RESOLUTION IN THE HORN OF AFRICA

October 1, 2004
Bergen, Norway

We, participants of the Conference on Conflict Resolution in the Horn of Africa, a consultation among Oromo elders, civic associations, professionals, leaders and international scholars organized by the Chr. Michelsen Institute in Bergen, Norway from September 27, 2004 to October 1, 2004 that was sponsored by the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, after in-depth and exhaustive deliberation and consultation on the most important issues facing the Oromo national liberation struggle and after a cogent analysis of the prevailing international, regional, national and local conditions as well as a thorough evaluation of the challenges, alternative scenarios, prospects, obstacles, and possibilities facing the Oromo question, issue the following press release.

1. The Oromo people, who are the majority in Ethiopia, live under a condition where all efforts for justice, equality and peace are taken as sedition and met by repressive measures. The undemocratic minority TPLF/ EPRDF regime views even criticism as subversive and criminalizes political opposition. The Oromo people being the majority in Ethiopia, democracy is inconceivable without their free and full participation.
2. The Oromo people have been waging a continuous struggle to free themselves from colonialism. The struggle went through many ups and downs overcoming many obstacles to the extent where today Oromummaa (Oromo Nationalism) is firmly established and reached an irreversible stage. We take pride in that Oromos of all walks of life have come to the realization that they have one aspiration and goal: exercising their right to national self-determination and live in democracy, peace and harmony with all peoples in Ethiopia.
3. We believe the Oromo people will give up armed struggle when and if the conditions that forced them to raise arms in the first place are removed. Hence it would be impossible for the Oromo people to embark upon a unilateral renunciation of armed struggle.
4. We have concluded that the Oromo people are engaged in armed struggle as a last resort merely because all other democratic and peaceful venues to address their grievances and seek their aspirations have been denied. We also note that OLF has always sought to engage the regime in a meaningful dialogue to peacefully and democratically resolve the Oromo question. It takes three to make peace- the political will, foresight and courage of the parties as well as crucial support from neutral third parties with a clear commitment to take appropriate action when either side reneges on implementing its commitment. Although we do not see the Ethiopian regime taking confidence building measures to demonstrate its readiness to kick start a peaceful dialogue and regrettably our past efforts have not be reciprocated, peace is of such precious value for our people that we will continue to pursue peace as a strategic alternative to resolve the conflict and end the misery of all the peoples in the Horn and build a stable environment for a prosperous future. OLF has no desire whatsoever to waste its precious resources, the lives of Oromo youth, in fighting because we need each and every one of them to build a better future for our people. Regrettably war is imposed on our people against their will.

5. We are convinced that the realization of the Oromo nation's right to self-determination is a must for a peaceful, democratic unity, stability and coexistence of all the peoples in Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa. In addition to the desire to launch a serious dialogue with the regime and all stakeholders, a close cooperation and coordination with the struggle of other peoples and parties interested in the long term justice, democracy, the rule of law, respect for human rights, peace and prosperity in the area is vital. Our freedom requires us to work relentlessly to build a healthy and working relationship with the representatives of all the peoples in Ethiopia and come up with a democratic, representative and viable alternative. Therefore we call upon all responsible forces to join the OLF in this noble effort.
6. We believe that free, fair and periodic elections are the cornerstones of democracy. And this requires the existence of the rule of law, a peaceful atmosphere, a level playing field, equal access to resources and a professional and independent election administration body. We believe that even the minimum conditions for free and fair elections do not exist in Ethiopia today. Thus we remind all stakeholders in Ethiopia and other concerned parties that meeting the fundamental prerequisites for free and fair elections is the basis for a peaceful and democratic resolution of all conflicts which is in the best interest of all peoples. The Oromo people have nothing to lose and all to gain in participating in a free and fair election.
7. The Ethiopian government has been financed and supported by Western powers. Understanding this reality, we request these powers to understand the dilemma the Oromo people are facing and intervene in the process of promoting peace, democracy, and stability as a neutral body rather than siding with the Ethiopian government that has been engaged in massive human rights violations and destructive conflicts and wars.
8. We thank the sponsors and organizers of this conference and sincerely request them to continue organizing and sponsoring similar conferences in the future for the purpose of creating the conditions for democracy, peace and stability to the Horn of Africa region.

Participants of the Conference on Conflict Resolution in the Horn of Africa
October 1, 2004

THE RESOLUTIONS, DECLARATIONS AND POSITION OF THE 3RD OLF NATIONAL CONGRESS

December 27, 2004

The much eagerly awaited 3rd National Congress of the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) convened from December 21-27, 2004 and successfully concluded its meeting.

Noting that the fundamental objectives of OLF, for which thousands of our dear martyrs have paid the ultimate sacrifice, are widely and strongly embraced by the vast majority of the Oromo people and the struggle has registered tremendous achievements even if the liberation of our people from subjugation, repression, marginalization and exploitation has yet to be achieved;

Mindful that the strategies and tactics pursued by the organization have been effective in mobilizing the Oromo people in the millions and in catapulting the Oromo question into one of the most burning and central issues in Ethiopia as well as the Horn of Africa;

Understanding that the local, regional and global changes that have taken place since the last Congress necessitate crafting appropriate and fitting strategies and tactics as well as qualitatively increasing the efficiency and effectiveness of our organization to meet the challenges of the time;

Believing that the cornerstone of our struggle has been, and remains, the realization of our people's inalienable right to self-determination recognized by international law;

Cognizant that the realization of this objective will lay the foundations for freedom, democracy, peace and stability for all peoples by removing the underlying causes for chaos with the accompanying human and material costs and pave the way for a genuinely new voluntary and democratic political union and thereby create a conducive and enabling environment for sustainable development;

Observing that the TPLF/EPRDF regime has emasculated democracy while swearing in its name, undermined the rule of law by defying its own laws and constitution, and denied the opportunity to effect change through the ballot box by rendering its elections into a futile and sham formal exercise to appease the international community and collect funding for its ill-conceived and failed policies;

And convinced that these policies not only marginalized the Oromo people but also alienated the overwhelming majority in Ethiopia, including Tigreans on the back of whose blood TPLF ascended to power, and therefore the need to devise a more credible, broad-based, and vigorous alternative to a regime whose legacy is acute poverty, brutal repression, and deadly conflicts and wars.

The 3rd National Congress of OLF therefore:

- 1) Instructs the National Council to devise concrete policies and programs to safeguard the gains achieved, intensify the struggle to defend the rights of the Oromo people and ensure victory.

- 2) Affirms its unwavering commitment to continue with its just struggle until our people are free to exercise their right to self-determination.
- 3) Assures other peoples in Ethiopia and the region that the victory of the struggle of the Oromo people will lead to democracy, lasting peace and stability. We do not hold any people or community to be our enemy. Our enemy is the oppressive system that is militating against democracy, peace, and stability. The Oromo holds a strong desire to live in a just peace, freedom and harmony with its neighbors. For this noble desire to be materialized, the right to self-determination needs to be recognized as the cornerstone to chart a new common future.
- 4) Directs the Council to make a relentless effort to seek a peaceful solution to this conflict so that the resources and energy consumed by the conflict could be used to improve the lives of our suffering people. We also direct the leadership to conduct a robust diplomatic effort to execute this policy.
- 5) Calls on the international community to seek a comprehensive regional solution to the many seemingly unrelated but intertwined intra and inter-state problems creating havoc in the Horn.
- 6) Condemns terrorism in all its forms. We task the leadership to join hands with all democratic, peace loving and freedom seeking forces to combat this menace.
- 7) Calls on the Oromo people, our youth, students, teachers, workers, farmers and all sectors of our society to strengthen their organization capacity to intensify the resistance against the oppressive machinery of the regime and persevere until the inevitable victory is achieved.
- 8) Calls upon the peoples neighboring Oromia to stay vigilant against the divisive tactics of the Wayane who is callously pitting you against the Oromo people in the pretext of adjusting borders. We strongly urge you to defeat the mischievous machinations of this regime by maintaining our fraternal relations.
- 9) Condemns the massacre perpetrated by the TPLF/EPRDF regime against the innocent in Oromia, Sidama, Shakka Majangir, Gambella and other peoples. We declare our solidarity with them.
- 10) Instructs the Council to forge a coalition with all democratic and progressive forces, organizations, and movements struggling against the TPLF/EPRDF to end the agony of all the peoples in Ethiopia.
- 11) Calls upon all Oromo nationals working for TPLF/EPRDF to reassess their loyalty to this anti-Oromo regime and do all they can to defend the rights and interests of the Oromo people.
- 12) Calls upon Oromo professionals and intellectuals to render your services for this cause by helping to renew and enhance the capacity of this vanguard and indispensable organization.
- 13) Instructs the leadership to draft a national policy on HIV/AIDS and produce a regular broadcast on VOL and other media to heighten awareness on better methods of prevention and treatment.

- 14) Commends the courage of the patriotic Macca & Tulama Association and the gallant Oromo students for opposing the illegal decision by EPRDF to take away the ownership rights of Oromia on Finfinne.
- 15) Demands the unconditional release of all political prisoners languishing in various known and unknown prisons for the mere crime of exercising their basic human and civil rights.
- 16) Condemns the forceful eviction of Oromos from their ancestral lands in the name of investment and the resettlement of non-Oromos in Oromia as this would plant the seeds for future conflicts.
- 17) Issues a general amnesty to all former individual members who were separated from their mother organization and hereby instruct all relevant organs of OLF to swiftly implement this decision.

The 3rd OLF National Congress

THE OUTCOME OF THE 3RD OLF NATIONAL CONGRESS

OLF'S NEW VISION FOR THE OROMO, ETHIOPIA AND THE HORN OF AFRICA REGION

The long anticipated 3rd OLF National Congress took place from December 21-27, 2004. It brought together delegates from all walks of life- from Oromia as well as the Diaspora resulting in a measure of national consensus on the key demands of the Oromo people and how to attain them. The Congress elected a leadership that has a good mix of familiar and new faces. The new leadership has unprecedented consensus and enthusiasm to see through the implementation of the resolutions of the Congress. The Congress successfully concluded after deliberating on organizational, global, regional and local conditions and passing important resolutions, which we believe will promote the cause of democracy, freedom, peace and stability in Oromia, Ethiopia and the Horn.

Part I: The OLF and its New Vision

a) *The Congress came out with a more pragmatic political program.* The new OLF political program focuses on freeing the Oromo and other peoples from subjugation, marginalization and exploitation by the minority. The program envisions that it will be in the best interest of the Oromo to seek new and diverse forms of association with all other peoples in Ethiopia as well as the Horn to jointly advance common interests and face common challenges together. More emphasis was given on how to create state institutions that help address past grievances and chart new relations thereby transforming the political, social and economic setup of the Ethiopian state that has become a source of contest and conflict. The OLF is determined to pool the voices and energies of the various stakeholders to make this vision a reality. To this effect, the Congress delegated the Council to bring its policies in line with changing realities and its modus operandi in tune with this new vision.

The Council acknowledged that the Oromo has everything to gain from democracy and just peace. Yet, war is imposed on the Oromo against its will. The continuation of war is not in our best interest, and the search for peaceful resolution of the destructive conflict shall be one of the priorities of the new leadership. The Congress instructed the Council to work on building strong domestic and international pressure on the TPLF/EPRDF to come to the negotiation table and seek a peaceful solution rather than trying to suppress the legitimate demands of the Oromo by force.

b) *The Congress devised a new organizational model that can best rally the Oromo people as well as other peoples.* The chief weapon in the hands of the Oromo movement is the number of its target constituency- 35 million strong- and its appeal to many other peoples in Ethiopia. The Congress instructed the leadership to formulate clear guidelines on how to transform this potential into actual strength by reaching out to all sectors of the society and organizing them to better defend their rights and secure their freedoms. To expand its organizational network inside the country, the Congress also elected activists at home into the new leadership.

c) *The Congress embraced a clearer vision on the future of the Horn of Africa region.* The freedom of our people is intertwined with the freedom of other peoples in the region. Our political, social and economic security as well as ecological well-being cannot be seen in isolation from that of neighboring peoples. The Oromo understands that as the majority population in the region occupying a land that is the breadbasket of the region it bears a special responsibility to share its

resources and provide moral leadership. The Congress instructed OLF to be at the forefront of the struggle to bring democracy, freedom, peace and stability to Ethiopia in particular and the Horn of Africa in general. This entails working with other democratic and peace-loving forces and taking a more comprehensive and pragmatic stand on issues.

Part II: Prospects for Free and Fair Elections

OLF believes that the Oromo has everything to gain and nothing to lose from a free and fair election. However, we regrettably observe that the conditions for free and fair elections are not present at this time. So long as the ruling party maintains complete control over the vital resources of the country including the media, the electoral commission is packed with TPLF appointees, the line between party and government is blurred, the military and security establishment is partisan and any viable dissenting voices are suppressed by force, it is impossible for opposition parties to get a fair chance. The opposition could not even field candidates in many parts of the country. Without a fair chance and participation of major political forces such as OLF, the outcome of the election cannot be a legitimate expression of the will of the majority. The security of the parties and the candidates contesting the election as well that of the electors themselves did not improve over previous elections. Despite the lofty promises by the Prime Minister, we have no reason to believe that this election will be different from the previous ones. For the election to be meaningful and produce a legitimate outcome, the conditions that allow free and fair elections must be in place. Thus the pressure to make the system more open, competitive and inclusive needs to be pursued more aggressively.

Part III: The Ethio-Eritrean Conflict

The OLF and the Oromo people have a vested interest not only in the expeditious resolution of the conflict but also on how this comes about. The best guarantee for peace and stability are states that uphold the rule of law and that are democratic. States that uphold the rule of law internally are more likely to act similarly in their external dealings.

Tension is building on the Ethio-Eritrean border. Minor missteps on either side could trigger war. There is agitation for war by hardliner elites in Addis and the Diaspora. According to official releases, Eritrea is also finding it increasingly difficult to continue to tolerate the humiliation of what it believes to be its sovereign territory being occupied by force. The emasculation by the war of its already fragile economy is causing severe political and social strains. It is inconceivable for the stalemate to continue indefinitely, yet Ethiopia does not seem ready to fully accept the international border ruling, neither is Eritrea ready to budge on its insistence that Ethiopia first implement the ruling.

We believe there is a possibility that war may erupt anytime again. Should war erupt, the level of animosity, determination and preparation on either side is such that it will not stop until a change of regime has taken place either in Ethiopia or Eritrea or both. If Ethiopia is the “victor”, the TPLF will be forced, by sheer power of public opinion from Amhara and Tigrean elites, to claim the Red Sea port of Assab for possible annexation. This could rekindle an even deadlier war as Eritrean nationalists may go back to the same old and proven guerrilla tactics that had enabled them, against all odds, to defeat the much superior Ethiopian war machine during the 30-year war of liberation.

If Eritrea becomes victorious (which is conceivable only if its efforts are combined with mass insurrection by the many oppressed peoples of the South, mainly the Oromo, Sidama, Ogaden, Tigray and the like), this will not go down well with the Amhara and Tigreans. The latter in particular will possibly be divided. This in turn could herald the possible break up of Ethiopia along the South-North as well as the North-North divides.

The third possibility is one of stalemate. The point of stalemate, however, is likely to be reached only after thousands of lives have been wasted and a calamitous loss of resources. This can hold up development for decades to come in both Eritrea and Ethiopia. The resulting deterioration of the poverty situation may lead to different social and political upheavals with incalculable consequences for the entire region.

Without a strong Oromo voice TPLF is much susceptible to succumb to the pressure of hardliners. TPLF allies itself with this group to counter the rising tide of Oromo nationalism. This alliance hinders progress towards freedom and democracy in the region. Indeed, some cite the fear of an overbearing Ethiopia as one of the reasons behind the reversal of the democratization process that was underway in Eritrea before the war. On the other hand, a strong Oromo and Southern voice reassures Eritreans against what they see as a menace from their giant neighbor. Thus resolving the Oromo question could very well be a catalyst for pushing both Ethiopia and Eritrea on the road to democracy.

The solution therefore is a comprehensive regional policy that takes into account the inter-state and intra-state dimensions of the conflict, including the Oromo question. The notion that this is a simple border conflict that went too far is incorrect. Border demarcation will not remove a pervasive sense of insecurity felt by both sides. The empowerment of the Oromo and specifically OLF, can on the other hand serve as a moderating and stabilizing factor.

Part IV: Radical Islam and the War on Terrorism

The Horn is a bridge to the troubled Middle East and one of the focus areas for the war on terrorism. This is where both Christianity and Islam have deep roots. It is instructive to take into account the following points in executing U.S. policy in the Horn:

- a) *Public diplomacy has to be seen as an integral part of this war.* In the long-term promoting democracy and equity, coupled with a robust effort to reduce poverty and create the conditions for economic prosperity, will be critical to defeating terrorism. This in turn requires creating a stable condition necessary for free enterprise to flourish-which in turn presupposes resolving the inter-state and intra-state political tensions in the region, of which the Oromo question is perhaps the most important.
- b) *Success in this war requires quality intelligence.* There is plenty of reason to believe that the intelligence fed by undemocratic regimes like the TPLF/EPRDF is colored by their domestic political agenda. There is a lot of misinformation and disinformation. In its zeal to win favor with the US, the Ethiopian regime tries to cast even secular democratic forces that are fighting against tyranny and oppression as terrorists.
- c) *Relying on undemocratic and unpopular regimes as an ally in the war will be a mistake.* An overwhelming majority of Muslims in the region do not welcome radical Islam. Its ideology does not resonate with their lives as well as cultural ethos. However, if this war is executed by TPLF/EPRDF, it may alienate many moderate Muslims and aggravate their grievances. The US should consider the danger that the effort is seen as a war against Islam. Besides, the war should not poison the Christian-Muslim relationship that has thus far been cordial and exemplary. The balance hangs in the ability of governments, including the TPLF/EPRDF, to employ domestic institutions, traditions and sentiments in traditional Islam itself that have proven to be durable and effective antidotes against radical Islam. It also depends on obtaining quality intelligence; making more room for secular democratic forces; and, perhaps most importantly, not alienating moderate Muslims. With its narrow ethnic and religious constituency, and its demonstrated dictatorial tendencies

towards the rights of other nationalities, the TPLF/EPRDF has no credibility to accomplish any of these at the moment. Changing the situation necessitates tackling the Oromo question.

d) *We believe that OLF is a natural and effective ally to the war on terrorism, with good reasons.* The rise of radical Islam, or any form of religious extremism, poses a direct and serious threat to the very survival of our movement and our nation. The Oromo subscribe to three religions - Christianity, Islam and the traditional Waaqeffanna. Religious tolerance has been and remains a strong Oromo national value. It is common to find Christians, Muslims and Waaqeffata to dwell in the same hut. Due to our religious diversity, OLF has a vested interest in promoting religious tolerance and in fighting extremism. We believe religious tolerance is one of the many gifts the Oromo people can provide the world in this time of sectarian strife.

Part V: Prospect for the Resolution of the Oromo vs TPLF/EPRDF conflict

There is a new breeze of fresh air blowing in the Horn. The Somali peace process has finally yielded a result that has a good chance of success. The signing of a landmark power-sharing agreement in the Sudan heralds a new beginning, however incomplete it is and despite the possibility of unraveling due to the unfolding tragedy in Darfur. The Ugandan government is showing some flexibility in opening a dialogue with LRA.

We believe all of these are important developments. However, the linchpin for stability in the Horn is Ethiopia. If the political problem in Ethiopia is amicably resolved, it will have a domino effect on the entire region. The situation in Ethiopia could not change for the better until the Oromo questions is judiciously tackled.

There are three ways to resolve this problem. One is the Eritrean model. The other is the South African model. The third and most recent example is the Sudanese endeavor itself. The first one did not result in regional stability. It did not lead to improvement in the living standard of the populations affected. This is because the project of resolving the intertwined conflicts in the region through a comprehensive regional formula was prematurely aborted in 1992. On the contrary, the South African experiment brought domestic tranquility and regional peace leading to improvements in living standard.

The OLF has a keen desire to follow in the footsteps of the ANC and the Sudanese model to launch a new experiment in Ethiopia. This new arrangement should be based on respect for the right to self-determination of all peoples. If this right is genuinely respected and put into practice in good faith, there will be no need to resort to armed struggle. In addition, all peoples will be willing to forge genuine unity based on their free will and mutual interest. The key stumbling block is the lack of a De Klerk in Ethiopia. If the Ethiopian regime comes to a negotiating table and enters into substantive and meaningful peace talks, OLF is ready to go the extra mile in search for just peace.

Part VI: The Role of the US government

We are very much encouraged and uplifted by the inaugural address of President Bush where he stated: "Democratic reformers facing repression, prison, or exile can know... When you stand for liberty, we will stand with you." We hope that this administration will live up to its declaration to no longer tolerate despots that flout democracy.

Our people continue to dream of the day they will be free from a century of tyrannical misrule and enjoy freedom like many in the world. Continued military, economic, and diplomatic support to a minority and undemocratic regime in Ethiopia cannot bring justice and peace. It is only the advancement of freedom that will lead to peace.

The Oromo question and the situation in Ethiopia call for the application of this new US doctrine. Although the formal provisions in place create a façade of democracy, they lack genuine implementation. TPLF makes sure that no one can use the system efficiently to challenge its monopoly on power. TPLF is locked into a win-lose mode in its relation with OLF, the most significant political force excluded from the political process. Now that the goal of seeking a total annihilation of OLF has failed, it is high time to pressure the regime to try an approach that is based on a win-win mode of thinking.

Neither the parties nor the world community could afford to wait until a Darfur-like crisis develops in Oromia and Ethiopia. It does not take much time and effort for the situation to reach such a stage. If such a stage is reached in Oromia it will be Darfur on steroid. That is why we believe early intervention is needed. This calls for a preemptive, even-handed and vigorous US diplomatic effort. The OLF wants to reassure the US that it is ready to be a partner in this effort to make the Horn a more democratic and stable region.

We propose that the US bring pressure to bear on TPLF to take the following confidence building measures to kick-start this change of course and launch serious negotiation:

- 1) Release Oromo political prisoners and prisoners of conscience;
- 2) Lift the ban on Mecha-Tulama Self-Help Association, Oromo Relief Association, Oromo Human Rights League, and other Oromo civic and media organizations;
- 3) Stop the harassment, detention and disappearance of OLF members/supporters;
- 4) Reinstate expelled Oromo university students;
- 5) Cease hostile propaganda against OLF and the defamation of the Oromo cause;
- 6) Commit to resolve the Oromo question peacefully by engaging OLF in a peaceful negotiation in the presence of third parties without any precondition.

If these tangible steps are taken by the Ethiopian regime, we will respond accordingly by

- 1) Ceasing hostile political campaign against the regime;
- 2)
- 3) Renouncing armed hostilities pending the outcome of the negotiation;
- 4) Committing to resolve the Oromo people's question peacefully by engaging the Ethiopian government in peaceful negotiation in the presence of third parties without any precondition.

STATEMENT OF THE OLF EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE

June 30, 2005

The Executive Committee of the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) conducted its regular session from June 18- 30, 2005. After an in-depth analysis of the state of the Oromo people's struggle, the extraordinary developments in Ethiopia following the May 2005 Elections and the future of freedom, democracy, peace, and stability in the Horn of Africa, the Committee concluded its meeting by issuing the following statement:

- 1) Ethiopia is at a crossroads once again. Both tremendous opportunities and grave dangers have come to the fore as a result of the current election. Whether these opportunities will be successfully utilized or ignored to the consequence that the country slides into an even more dangerous period depends on how the various stakeholders read the situation and act upon it. Many golden historical opportunities to bring about a clean break with the country's autocratic and imperial past have been lost. The tyrannical behavior of the regime before and in the aftermath of the election does not inspire confidence. The opposition should also be careful not to misread the true meaning of this election: what is witnessed is a protest vote underscoring the utter disapproval of the TPLF/EPRDF rather than a sweeping endorsement of their programs. It is therefore incumbent upon all to note that this is another opportune time and turning point. This is no time to exploit temporary advantages but rather a time to seek comprehensive solutions to the many deep-rooted structural problems that have made Ethiopia the scene of unending conflicts, destructive wars, abject poverty and cruel repression for years.
- 2) The momentous situation demands from all stakeholders to be realistic, responsible and foresighted. The era when nations and nationalities are told that they have the right to govern themselves while in reality the ruling party handpicks those who govern them and then centrally controls them is over. The era when the very identity and the right of nations and nationalities is denied and demands for these rights are repressed under the guise of the unity of Ethiopia is long dead, never to return again. The subjugation, domination, and marginalization of the majority by the minority can no longer stand. We can only move forward, not standstill, not backward. OLF believes the road forward is to adopt a brand new model in which individual liberties are guaranteed and the rights of nations and nationalities are recognized and genuinely implemented.
- 3) The actions of the TPLF/EPRDF during the May 2005 Election and afterwards have validated our analysis that the regime has no inclination whatsoever to peacefully give up power. Although this election is different from the previous two in the sense that it is relatively more contested, it is woefully short of being free and fair, especially in Oromia and the oppressed South where the people were systematically prevented from having real choices and where an atmosphere of fear, intimidation, harassment and repression prevailed. The regime was forced to allow a measured degree of openness to deflect popular pressure for change and to win legitimacy from the international community, on whose diplomatic and financial support it depends for its fleeting grip on power, and extend its tyrannical rule. The popular desire for change put this neat calculation of the regime on its head. Sensing this rejection the regime is currently making all kinds of intrigues behind the partisan Election Board to manipulate the result. The opposition is also not providing leadership in the face of TPLF's determination to cling to power by all means. The confusion and vacillation when firm leadership is needed is providing the regime with the

perfect opportunity to manipulate a flawed process to systematically frustrate the yearning of the peoples for change.

- 4) It is no secret to any Oromo national that the TPLF/EPRDF has been thoroughly and categorically rejected all over Oromia ever since 1991 and its hold on Oromia was facilitated by an egregious violation of human rights, repression of basic freedoms and liberties and the naked use of force. The May 2005 elections have made the rejection of the incumbent regime by all the peoples in Ethiopia complete. The regime of Meles Zenawi is clinging to power only thanks to its tight grip on its loyal and purely Tigrean security force. The regime is deliberately fanning inter-communal tension and then presenting itself as the arbiter. We condemn this abhorrently destructive action. The OLF therefore urges the international community to urgently reassess its policy on Ethiopia by noting that the TPLF is no longer a force for stability but rather a tyrannical regime whose continuation on power would only bring more chaos, repression and instability.
- 5) Until the TPLF/EPRDF regime ends its intransigence to resolve the impending crisis in Oromia in particular and Ethiopia in general through a peaceful political means, the OLF will continue with the popular resistance to bring about the desired change. To this effect the OLF will intensify the popular resistance in Oromia and coordinate with other organizations in other regions of Ethiopia to bring about a speedy resolution of the current crisis. We thus urge the Oromo and all peoples in Ethiopia to remain steadfast in the struggle and continue the popular resistance until victory. We believe such cooperation forged during this trying of times will lay a firm foundation for a new future where individual freedoms shall be guaranteed and the rights of nations and nationalities for self-determination shall be genuinely implemented as a basis for lasting peace and harmony.
- 6) We share the concerns of the international community for peace and stability in Ethiopia. We want to take this occasion to emphasize that no security force, however massive and efficient, can provide peace and stability against mounting popular resistance. No lasting solution can emanate from a political process where the major players are purposely excluded and from an electoral system that is inherently flawed and created to serve the interests of the incumbent party. The road forward is to help launch a broad-based and meaningful dialogue between all the major actors to search for a comprehensive rather than temporary solution to address all outstanding political problems. Lastly, we forewarn all the domestic and international players that no system in Ethiopia could bring about lasting peace and stability unless and until the quest of the Oromo and other oppressed peoples for self-determination is resolved and their aspiration for freedom is met.

Victory to the Oromo people!

OLF Executive Committee

CONCLUSION (FROM A EUROPEAN POINT OF VIEW): FROM BERGEN VIA UTRECHT TO OROMIA?

Siegfried Pausewang

A group of influential Oromo elders in Ethiopia met in November 2008, and challenged the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) to renounce armed struggle and open talks immediately with the government of Ethiopia on modalities for a contract, to allow OLF to return safely to Ethiopia and participate in the political struggle there as a registered political party. There are at least two versions as to how this meeting came about. Officially it was initiated by Ababiya Abajibir, a lawyer and the grandson of the last king of Jimma Abba Jifar. Ababiya had been a founding member of OLF and for some years its head of foreign affairs in Washington⁸⁸. He had just returned to Ethiopia after many years in exile. Obviously he had negotiated a personal amnesty for his OLF activities against a promise of political abstinence. Well informed observers, however, insist that Ababiya did not even attend the meeting, but his name was used to give the appeal of a group of elders with good relations to the government a more authentic appearance. It is also suspected the appeal was intended to create another split within the Oromo political movements.

In any case, those elders who issued this appeal, hoped with their initiative to get OLF out of a double deadlock: Sixteen years of fighting from the diaspora have not brought OLF any closer to a solution for the Oromo in Ethiopia. In addition, being stranded in Asmara, the only place OLF can find a haven close to their homeland, the organisation brought itself into a situation from where it has very limited scope of action, while losing its credibility at home for any action to advance democracy in Oromia or in Ethiopia. Stationed in Asmara, its leaders are considered tools of Essayas Afewerki, whether rightly or no. Large parts of the Ethiopian population, not only the extreme nationalist wing, consider them as traitors. The elders' appeal was thus in fact calling for a radical change of OLFs political positions.

Prime Minister Meles Zenawi was quick in welcoming this initiative, stating that he was ready to negotiate without any preconditions. In fact, it is likely that he wanted such an initiative and supported the elders meeting even before. It is difficult to understand how Ababiya Abajifar could have received a visa to return from exile in the USA, without the consent of the PM. To my knowledge the OLF has so far not given any official answer. But one hears from usually informed observers that leading figures in OLF believe he has his own agenda in splitting the OLF further and eliminating it, as he has succeeded in splitting and isolating the CUD. That may be so or not. In any case, the initiative has opened a window which the Oromo should not miss to exploit.

For that they need first of all unity, an organisational base for speaking with one voice. But the political organisations of the Oromo have been divided by internal disagreements time and again. In summer 2008, yet another split occurred within OLF. A group of leaders meeting in USA accused the group around the Chairman, Dawud, in Asmara of having left the approved platform of OLF, and claimed they were the only legitimate representatives of the OLF and its tradition. There are thus now three factions of OLF fighting each other, each of them claiming to be the authentic OLF. In addition there are at least four Oromo resistance groups outside OLF, and two legal Oromo opposition parties within Ethiopia. On the other hand, OPDO, the Oromo party within EPRDF, is kept united and governs in Oromia on behalf of EPRDF.

⁸⁸ Press release by Walta, Addis Ababa, December 6, 2008 (accessed 7. 12. 2008.)

In August 2008, a group of Oromo elders were called together in Melbourne, Australia, to discuss this deplorable state of the Oromo political organisations fighting each other instead of uniting to confront the political dilemma of the Oromo people in Oromia and Ethiopia. They resolved to form an “Oromo Front for Dialogue and Reconciliation” and issued a 30 pages “Proposal for the Consolidation of Oromo Forces for Liberation, Peace and Prosperity in the Horn of Africa”. The paper emphasizes the efforts and achievements of all the seven different political organisations of the Oromo in the diaspora as well as the three organisations in Ethiopia, compares their programmes and urges them to join forces and create a broad alliance of anti-colonial forces of the Oromo. To facilitate this reconciliation, the meeting suggested a group of elders to mediate and to create a new united political organisation of all Oromo, and to link it with organizations of other colonized peoples of Ethiopia.

Whether the initiative of Dr. Ababiya Abajobir is a calculated step in this reconciliation process or a separate initiative is hard to know. Also other initiatives attempt to mediate unity, both within OLF and around a wider effort of re-uniting all Oromo organisations. However, so far they have achieved little visible effect. But in any case they are exploring a new opening. It is to be hoped that the Oromo manage to unite and seize whatever chances may occur now or in the near future for more fruitful negotiations.

In 2006 leaders of OLF met in Utrecht, in Holland, with representatives of other opposition groups confronting the Ethiopian government, both parties legally participating in elections in Ethiopia and liberation movements involved in armed struggle in different parts of Ethiopia. An “Alliance for Freedom and Democracy” was formed with the aim of challenging TPLF and bring down the present government.

The “Alliance” brought OLF together with as unlikely partners as CUD, a party with a programme opposed to the aims of OLF in almost every point, except in the political struggle for bringing down the present government. In that sense it was an odd alliance, and it raised heated controversies between the different fractions of OLF. Instead of uniting the opposition against TPLF control over Ethiopia, around their most central common goal, it rather deepened the split among the Oromo. Many politically active and thoughtful leaders considered an alliance with the potentially most dangerous adversary of all Oromo peasants, the populist and rightwing political party of the Urban Amhara, as absolutely unacceptable.

The leadership of OLF insisted that all political forces had to be engaged to end the present situation, and come to a situation that allowed a new start. The alliance would cease to exist the moment this stage had been reached. When the modalities of a new order in Ethiopia or in the region were to be decided, they saw clearly their aims in conflict with those of CUD and its successors. They expected to be able to rally the Southern majority around their alternative of a basic democratic social and political order, be it in an independent Oromia alongside separate states for other ethnicities, or be it in a renewed and democratically restructured Ethiopian state in which all groups should have their equal position.

However, the “Alliance could never play the role it was designed for. It became the single issue that for some time drove the fractions within OLF into deeper conflict. Former central leaders of OLF protested, considering the “Alliance” crossing an ultimate “bottom line”. Others considered a pact with the Amhara as a gamble with the devil, a morally contagious as well as politically hazardous experiment that could lead into disaster.

In the meantime the “Alliance for Freedom and Democracy” is dead. Internal differences were too large for it to last. The different, even radically opposed political aims and agendas made it more of a stumbling bloc than an asset in the political game. And the Alliance did not either add any

strength or open any new opportunities for the opposition. When some released leaders of CUD attempted to collect the remains of their former party and register it again as a political party in Ethiopia, they had to renounce their membership in the Alliance. Also for OLF, the alliance with other violent resistance movements proved to be a liability. So the Alliance was dropped even without formally being dissolved or declared dead.

Any way, the primary objective of OLF is not to create chaos in Ethiopia – but to get into a position for working actively for tangible improvements for the Oromo in the country. Whether this can be done best through a political “long march”, by succeeding in occupying influential positions within the framework of the present constitution, or whether it can only be achieved through toppling the government and dissolving the Ethiopian Empire, or in any possible political course in between these two extremes, is an open debate. At least in planning and thought, no alternatives should be left out from being contemplated. In any case, turmoil and violence could never be the goal, but only a last resort through which to establish a political regime that cares for the needs of the local people, of all ethnic groups, and that puts their wellbeing in the centre of its efforts. This demands a peaceful organisation of everyday life without repression and violence. It has to allow people to live without fear of being persecuted for their political opinions or aspirations.

Such an order can only be established through a radical change in the local administration, be it through a reform or through replacing the present local administration by a new one. Getting into a position of influence on political decisions that allow to initiate this reform is the major task for OLF.

It can only be done in Oromia. The detour through Utrecht – through the Alliance – has proven not to lead forth. The big question is how OLF can get into a position of influence on such local reforms. Fighting has so far not brought OLF any closer, neither in the Alliance with other opposition forces, nor alone. Chances may be slim to achieve it through negotiation, after Meles Zenawi so decisively closed any opening for democratic competition that could challenge his control. Yet, he knows that his power too is limited and will be challenged again..

Meles Zenawi has learned a lesson from the shock of the 2005 elections, when he was, at least for some time, afraid his own party coalition could have lost its parliamentary majority to the opposition. He had never expected that CUD, the Coalition for Unity and Democracy, as an urban populist rightwing movement, could win many parliamentary seats even in clearly rural areas (including in Oromia). It can safely be assumed that much of this electoral avalanche was due to protest votes: wherever no other opposition party had posted candidates, peasants who resented the present rulers at local, regional, or even central level, felt that CUD offered an alternative, and had a potential of winning. So they gave their vote to CUD, not for their programme, but in the hope of achieving at least some change. The French researcher René Lefort (2007) observed an even a more thought provoking peasant reaction in Northern Shoa. In the villages he visited during election time and before, peasants demanded to know in advance who would win the election. They felt compelled to vote for the winner because they expected otherwise to be punished by whoever won, for voting “wrong”. They did not expect much from change: if CUD won, they expressed, they would at least get a few years of relief, until the new rulers were sufficiently established to revive the exploitation and suppression and harassment of peasants, as all regimes before them had done.

I disagree with the generally repeated version that CUD had won a majority in the 2005 parliamentary elections, if the counting had been continued in a fair way. True, when about half of the votes were counted, it looked like a comfortable victory for the opposition, and CUD was its strongest party. But by then only the towns and the more accessible rural areas had been reporting their results. Had the counting continued, more remote rural areas would have tilted the balance the other way, even if a relatively close race could have been expected. But TPLF was so shocked by

massive gains of CUD even in rural areas in the first results, that Meles Zenawi stopped the counting of votes and delayed it beyond any controllability. Massive pressure on the voters allowed EPRDF to win all contested seats in the re-election. Months passed before the Election Commission announced official results, which gave EPRDF a two-thirds majority.

Meles had relied on his control over the rural areas. His party prides itself of representing peasant interests in Ethiopia. This claim is not entirely unfounded: TPLF freed peasants in 1991 from a series of oppressive and detested measures, such as the forced quota deliveries to the Grain Board, the forced collectivisation of agriculture and the villagisation programmes, the “voluntary” labour obligations and the intensely resented forced recruitment of soldiers. And the Constitution of 1994 preserved two highly contested decrees from the “Transitional Charter” of 1991 (which had been drafted and designed together with OLF): the Federal structure of the new Ethiopian republic and the decision to keep agricultural land as property of “the Ethiopian peoples”, though controlled by the state. State control has been widely misused by local authorities, who arbitrarily deprive peasants of their land to punish critics and trouble makers, and to frighten peasants into obedience. But the urban parties’ demand to introduce private property would necessarily bring peasants into an even more frightening prospect of being forced into debts and losing their land resources. Yet, the rampant misuse of “state ownership” of land and the control and misuse of power on local level have eroded this support of peasants to a degree that Meles was not willing to realise. Still, EPRDF remains in control of the most remote rural areas, where no opposition parties were able to put up any competition. Had the counting continued in a fair manner without interference, the results from the more remote areas would have tilted the balance bit by bit in favour of EPRDF. Having followed the elections since 1992 closely, and having been for a short period a member of the core team of the EU election observers in Addis Ababa in 2005, though I was not able to be in Ethiopia on election day, I know what I am talking about.

Many of the votes for CUD in rural areas were without doubt mere protest votes. But a vote is a vote – nobody can challenge the motivation for a voter decision. It is thus an entirely different issue to guess what the result had been in a totally free election in which also OLF and other exiled and outlawed political groups could participate.

Meles Zenawi managed to split CUD and destroy its organisational clout – at least for some years to come. But he learned the lesson that he can not rely on the peasant majority. In 2005, he was looking for alternative partners. At one point, soon after the elections, he asked OLF for negotiations without preconditions. According to some sources, OLF never managed to respond before the window was closed again. Other sources maintain that OLF put up unacceptable conditions, demanding to govern Oromia, in exchange for renouncing violence, accepting the Constitution and cooperating with central government. Meles could not possibly accept such a demand, as OPDO had won the regional election in the absence of OLF, and replacing them would have completely undermined any appearance of democracy. In any case, when Ethiopia offered itself as an ally in Somalia, Meles received support from the United States of America, and did not need the OLF any more. Negotiations never started.

Meles managed to close again the democratic window he had opened before the 2005 elections. Democratic development was thrown back to the practice of 1995 or before. But Meles knows that a similar constellation could occur again, if another opposition party, however urban oriented, were formed. Frustrated and disillusioned peasants could again vote in protest against his administration. Then he will need other partners for an alliance.

In many ways, Meles has more interests in common with OLF than with the rightwing populist urban Amhara – whether they are organised in CUD or any other new party or movement. And he

knows they will try again to get organised and to challenge him. He can no more rely blindly on support from a rural majority. From his viewpoint, it has become treacherous.

For this situation the Oromo have to be prepared. And OLF should know that it can only be a credible alternative and a possible partner in negotiations for a democratic solution, if it has very concrete and detailed visions that offer Oromo peasants new hope. They need plans for a bottom-up democratic local administration that offers peasants an effective defence for their social and economic rights and a voice in political matters. For their voters and their clientele in Oromia, OLF needs to offer a credible prospect of justice and equality and a voice in local and regional affairs. For support from foreign donors and mediators, it needs to give a realistic promise for democratic structures which channel the people's complaints and demands from the rural local level to the top. They need a political alternative that accepts and practices an administration in which the people are the real sovereign, not the administration nor the government. I have earlier in short sketched some steps in the process of planning for such an alternative concept of a bottom-up democratic administration (Pausewang 2006).

OLF should go a step further – and take Meles by his word. It should gladly accept his invitation. As long as it still commands a substantial majority support in rural Oromia, OLF has some assets to offer. It can bring an end to violent resistance and forge a common defence of the Constitution and the Federal structure of the State of Ethiopia. It can give the peasants a right to access to land by preserving common ownership of land, and save the democratic project on which, after all, Meles Zenawi's government has based its international standing. To defend these unquestionable gains against urban attempts to reverse the events of 1991 and after, should be a solid common ground for OLF and EPRDF to cooperate.

There is hardly any reason for illusions: had the government in 2005 been defeated and had Meles been forced out of office, not OLF but CUD would have been the obvious alternative. Both in Ethiopia, where it stood as victorious against all odds, as well as among the donor nations and the diplomatic community, who generally accepted CUD as democratic alternative, it would have been legitimized to succeed in government. Likewise, should EPRDF for any reason fail, or should a new party be able to collect the discontented and frustrated majority in Ethiopian towns, and should any other event make EPRDF collapse, the urban Amhara would carry the day, not the rural Oromo. Without any reasonable doubt, for the OLF and for the Oromo at large, that would spell more disaster.

OLF has nothing to lose. Sixteen years of armed struggle, on a very low flame, has brought it nowhere. The only success, if one may call it one, is the ability to give the frustrated Oromo peasants a feeling that there is at least one organisation, even if in exile abroad, that defends their rights. Understandably, OLF does not want to abandon and renounce armed struggle as long as peasants in Oromia wage whatever resistance they can- They see no other way out than resisting the control from an administration they experience as despotic rule by an outside political group. Disappointing their expectations, OLF would erode its local support.

However, OLF has to realise that its major and most dangerous adversary in Ethiopia is not the political programme of EPRDF, but that of the urban Amhara populist rightwing elites. Their programme of "Unity" means dismantling the Federation, replacing it with a new centralist structure. Their demand to privatise the land would expose peasants to the intrigues of speculators and investors who would deliberately drive them into debt in order to get access to their land. In Ethiopia, where around 80 percent of the population live on whatever they can harvest from their small plots, there is no alternative employment available for them if they are forced out of agriculture. They would be starving – or flock to towns, swell the uncounted masses in unregulated slum areas and live on begging or end as criminals.

The populist political demand of the urban Amhara that Ethiopia needs access to the sea, can only mean a claim to Assab. Assab is situated in Eritrea which is by now a sovereign, internationally recognised state. Any attempt at enforcing such a demand would necessarily spell another war. Any attempt to revise the Constitution and the Federation would inevitably provoke fierce resistance from the ethnic minorities in the South who have not left behind the trauma of the occupation a hundred years ago and the exploitation and suppression they experienced from the Amhara. They would fear the return of the landlords and *neftegna*, and rally in defence of the federation and the Constitution. Most likely they would also defend the land reform of 1975 against any attempt of privatisation of land. And they have no interest in a new war against Eritrea, in which their sons would be recruited and die once again as cheap cannon fodder. But their demands and interests are so far not even entering the political debate in Addis Ababa. They are mostly illiterate peasants who neither get newspapers, nor can they read them, and only the radio, in government control, reaches them. I presented these arguments in more detail in 2007 (Pausewang 2007, 2007 b).

In any case, it appears much more promising for the Oromo and for OLF to protect the gains of the 1991 Transitional Charter and the Constitution against this political alternative. If OLF can oblige EPRDF to implement its democratic project of a really federal republic, then it is worth the experiment. OLF needs to convince Meles Zenawi that this is the better alternative both for TPLF, for EPRDF and for OLF. That presupposes that OLF has a very clear concept and understanding of how, precisely, it expects to develop a more democratic order on local level in Ethiopia, which makes the people sovereign. That is why thorough planning is the first step, and negotiating an agreement is the second.

OLF has not many options open right now. It should consider seriously any option, also offering to renounce armed struggle, in exchange for a safe return. OLF must be able to promise peasants a prospect of establishing, step by step, a new rural administration crafted upon the active and voluntary participation of peasants and the fair representation of peasant interests and political ambitions to the central authorities. A reasonable *modus vivendi* with OPDO would have to be part of the negotiation. One has to consider that option realistically, Meles Zenawi could not just push OPDO out of office, to get OLF back and take over the regional government. Enforced from above, such a decision would completely undermine and discredit the very democratic structure OLF would be claiming to build and protect. For sure, the modalities of a transitional period would have to be thoroughly negotiated, to make sure that OLF while waiting for the next regional elections could freely and effectively channel peasant demands to the central authorities, develop and represent their political alternatives, and prepare for a rural administration of and for the peasants.

To make any alternative credible, both among the Ethiopian people and among potential international intermediaries and donors for assistance and finance, a thorough planning is desperately needed. How such a plan eventually would be, is a matter for the Oromo people, and for all different interest groups in the country. No foreign observer can seriously expect to shape or even influence such a plan. However, some remarks about what it demands are possible. Some principles can be safely agreed beforehand. A new vision can unite different ethnicities, different professions, religions and groups in a feeling of togetherness. It has to attract their active support by appealing to their significant contributions: “You can contribute – together we can do it... Together we can achieve an alternative structure for a basically new structure of local society, to establish a bottom-up democratic administration.”

The plan has to be inclusive. It should unite not only the Oromo, but all who have an interest in changing the present political structure. In particular, the Oromo should address the Oromo community, and the entire community, not only the supporters of one fraction. It should not exclude other interests, neither the other Southern ethnic groups nor the professional or religious

communities and their representatives. Just adding “...and other suppressed ethnic groups” after long talks about “self-determination” for the Oromo, in long arguments and deliberations about Oromo interests and their suffering under the present regime, is not inviting others to join into a common effort. Nor does it attract their interest in supporting any Oromo political initiative. To the contrary, it is bound to revive old suspicions and fears of Oromo domination replacing the Amhara. Instead, one should argue with interests and interest groups, not with identities and ethnicities. It is sufficient to talk about the Oromo when specific Oromo issues are concerned. In other contexts it is more important to emphasize the unity of purpose, which is the birth of real democracy.

The plan has to be anchored on local level. The repression and the manipulation of the present version of a democratic society is principally felt locally. It is there that the decisive majorities for democracy live. They will defend it. It is there the battle will stand. It is there democracy has to be founded and anchored. Only locally can a structure be secured which allows the people to control politics, and to defend it against the distortion and the control of the political power holders. Unless democracy works to the people’s interest on local level, it cannot work on more central arenas either. Democracy has to be local, or it can not last.

Lastly, planning has to start NOW. There is no time to waste. It is not enough to postulate that the first priority is to get rid of the TPLF regime – and promise that we will find a democratic solution once we get there. A political opportunity does not open up too often. There is no chance to seize it unless one is prepared beforehand. Besides, any power corrupts, and any group coming to power will see it the first priority to defend and secure their position, not to lose the hardly gained chance. That is human, and it is necessary. But it is necessarily also leading away from a democratic project. In addition, having a concrete and credible plan and vision to offer at any time, increases the chances of finding support and achieving a position to implement it. Without a specific plan for an alternative, no political claims would appear attractive and worthy of support.

A few general principles of how to achieve a bottom-up democratic structure can possibly be hinted at.

Local officials depend on their superiors for support, for their salaries and for all of their positions. They know that they will lose everything and end as jobless school leavers if they fail to please their superiors (Pausewang 2004: 17-19). To make officials responsive to the interests of people, and break their preoccupation with defending their personal positions, the plan has to emphasize:

- Make offices dependent on support from the local people, by giving the latter the right to recall and replace officials and elected representatives any time, through a public protest, a referendum, or similar means of intervention
- Make sure that those mechanisms of grassroots control can not be hijacked by their superiors or higher authorities
- Ensure a strict division of powers – on local level as well as in higher offices. Make judges, parliaments or councils independent of one another and of party leadership, withdraw any authority for party officials to sack community functionaries or judges or others
- forbid duplicity of offices, in particular prevent party leaders from public offices at the same level

To ensure that officials and party leaders do not exceed their powers or otherwise break the rights of individuals, it is essential to create effective channels and avenues for complaints and redress. To give people a basic security of their rights, it is important to establish

- An Ombudsman function or similar institution of advocacy, independent of the administration
- to give legal protection to individual rights

- to strengthen the protection for human and civil rights
- to include social rights specifically in the values to be protected
- to give courts a specific authority to judge over misuse of power and other violations of people's rights
- to give courts the power to implement their decisions, and oblige the police to respect court decisions
- to give poor people legal assistance in case of complaints free of charge

A vivid public debate on all levels is essential for a living democratic order. Enabling and stimulating and protecting such debate is therefore an essential part of transforming a hollow and formal into a real democratic order. To that end the programme ought to

O establish public fora without party or official control

- support NGOs and advocacy groups on local and higher levels
- support the organisation of different interest groups
- organise or to stimulate a proper representation of peasants - workers – judges – religious groups – craftsmen – women – or any other groups and interests, independent of authorities or parties or other public control
- to give these organisations a right to be heard wherever administrative or political decisions impact on their interests

A rigorous and foolproof programme for a democratic local structure that implements such principles, would offer OLF a strong position in the political landscape which other players on the field, nationally and internationally, could not ignore. It would also lend OLF a stronger self confidence in entering negotiations. And not least, there is no option visible for OLF to put their alternative visions into practice – neither in Ethiopia as a whole nor in Oromia – unless the organisation is able to spell out clearly for what political and social order they want to raise the enthusiasm of their people, as well as the support of other people in the region and in the world

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SUMMARY

This report is intended to stimulate a debate on political alternatives for the Oromo, an ethnic and social group in Ethiopia. It makes documents from an Oromo conference in Bergen at CMI available for the discourse among the Oromo in exile and also in Ethiopia. It argues that it is necessary to consider alternative strategies apart from armed resistance struggle. The contributors, scholars from different countries, with long experience in Ethiopian politics, consider it essential to discuss again issues of armed struggle and of the location of their political organisation in exile in Asmara. They strongly suggest the OLF to develop a detailed and credible, applicable plan for a political order that gives sovereignty back to the people. The report urges the Oromo to design a model of how to organise a local administration that responds to the needs of the local people, and represents and defends their interests towards higher authorities. Such a vision is considered essential both to give the Oromo new hope, and to lend their organisation a more solid political credibility in international diplomacy, as well as among their own people.

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