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# **The Urgency of Building Oromo National Consensus**

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As an activist- scholar, I have been participating in and observing the development of the Oromo national movement for more than three decades. I have been also studying Oromo society for almost two decades. These experiences have enabled me to have some understanding of the illisiveness and complexity of the Oromo national movement, the challenge it faces from internal and external forces, and its future direction. As the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) emerged and opened a new chapter in Oromo history and culture, it confronted complex problems from different directions. Specifically, this organization has faced the politics of fragmentation due to its internal crises that have prevented it from building an Oromo national consensus.

First, the paper explains how some political achievements without strong organizational and institutional structures have increased political crises in the Oromo national movement. Second, it identifies and explores external and internal factors that have hampered the development of the Oromo national consensus. Third, it suggests what Oromo activists and political organizations should do to overcome their ideological and political weaknesses and political ineptness to develop a national declaration that will be the central guiding principle of the Oromo national movement for human liberation and sovereignty in Oromia and beyond.

## **Some Achievements without Strong Organizations and Institutions**

The Oromo national movement has restored the humanity and dignity of the Oromo people that were almost destroyed by Ethiopian colonialism. The Oromo were removed from their history, culture, and identity and used as firewood by others in building their nations for more than a century. The birth of the Macca-Tuulama Self-help Association (MTSA) in the early 1960s and the OLF in the 1970s moved the Oromo nation from objects of history to that of subjects that can decide its destiny by any means necessary. Unfortunately, substantial numbers of Oromos have remained objects of history and have continued to serve the interests of the enemies of the Oromo nation to satisfy their daily economic needs.

Since the breakdown of the *gadaa* system such Oromos have joined the enemy of their nation because of lack political consciousness and/or opportunism to promote their personal interests at the cost of the Oromo nation. A nation that fails to control its traitors cannot maintain its freedom and sovereignty. The Oromo people have failed for more than a century to defeat their internal enemies. Consequently, today Oromo traitors and opportunists are engaged in destroying Oromia and the Oromo people by joining the Tigrayan gangsters and mafia group called the Tigrayan People's Liberation Front and its puppet organization known as the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) and by empowering them to kill or imprison Oromo activists and loot Oromia economic and natural resources. In order to challenge and defeat their primary and secondary enemies, the Oromo people need strong organizations and institutions that can protect the achievements of the Oromo national struggle and lead the nation to final victory.

The demise of the Mengistu regime in 1991 due to regional and global conditions and the struggles of various national movements enabled the OLF to participate in the Transitional government of Ethiopia and to expand its efforts of developing the Oromo language, culture,

nationalism and to make Oromia a political reality by forcing the enemy. Since the OLF did not develop organizational and military capacities its achievements have been effectively used by the TPLF and its puppet organization known as the Oromo People's Democratic Organization (OPDO), which the Tigrayan elites use as mercenaries in continuing Ethiopia colonialism by engaging in political repression, gross human rights violations, terrorism, and genocide. These twin enemies have been using the Oromo language and culture in suppressing, exploiting, and destroying the Oromo nation.

Consequently, the Oromo people have been divided between those who struggle to restore the sovereignty of Oromia by recreating an independent Oromia state and those who sold their people and country by joining the enemy for their own privileges and nominal power. Today such Oromos are one of important political blocs that keep Meles and his Tigrayan front in power and destroy Oromo society and Oromian resources. The weaknesses of Oromo political activists and their organizations, particularly the weaknesses of the OLF have allowed these traitors and opportunists to join the enemy and engage in political repression and crimes against humanity. These are the foot soldiers of Meles Zenawi that have become a part and parcel of the enemy of the Oromo people. These internal and external political forces are the main obstacles for the liberation of Oromia and its people.

#### **External and Internal factors for undermining Oromo National Consensus**

Ethiopians not only colonized Oromia and its people through war, repression, terrorism, and genocide, but they also denied formal education to the Oromo people to keep them in darkness of ignorance in order to easily dominate and control them. In addition, most of a few Oromos who were educated to be intermediaries were melted in Ethiopian society through cultural and marital assimilation. A small size of educated Oromos resisted cultural and marital assimilation and maintained their Oromo identity, culture, and pride. The fathers and mothers of modern *Oromummaa* or Oromo nationalism emerged from the small size of educated Oromos; these founders of modern *Oromummaa* created MTSHA in the 1960s and the OLF in the 1970s. Furthermore, there have been educated Oromos who joined Ethiopian organizations and fought against independent Oromo political forces.

Ethiopian colonizers have always worried about the size of the Oromo population and the possibility of an Oromo insurrection. Therefore, they wanted to keep Oromos ignorant and divided by colonial regions, religions, and clans so that they would forget their Oromo nationhood and fight among themselves rather than fighting against the colonizers. They have created suspicion and hatred among Oromos of different colonial regions and religions to prevent them from developing national leadership and unity. Habashas tried to create hierarchies among Oromos by praising one group and insulting others. There are still Oromos who do not understand these mechanisms and engage in clan, regional, and religious politics that perpetuate the fragmentation of Oromo politics.

Moreover, Oromos did not yet develop institutional or educational forums that would help them to learn about their national culture, history, philosophy, belief systems, and values. As result, most Oromos are more familiar with their clans and borrowed religions. In the absence of strong organizations, the external factors increase the complexity Oromo liberation politics. These factors have opened doors for enemies to infiltrate Oromo communities, organizations and institutions in order to undermine the Oromo national movement. Habashas even created political confusion and fragmentation in Oromo Diaspora communities and organizations recently. Although our enemies have enormous resources and capacities that they have obtained

from the corrupt and irresponsible international system, the political ineptness of Oromo activists and leaders is having a devastating effect on the Oromo national struggle.

### **Overcoming Political Ineptness in the Oromo National Movement**

What are the essence and characteristics of political ineptness in the Oromo national struggle? Oromo activists and leaders pay less attention to workable political models and policies. Their political models are usually based on trial and error and not on pragmatism. They claim to use *gadaa* models while engaging in individualistic models that are sometimes not related to Oromo culture and history. Regardless of our collective and democratic *gadaa* principles and values, most of the time Oromo activists and leaders employ dogmatic and undemocratic practices like Habashas. Most conflicts among Oromo political organizations have emerged because Oromo activists and leaders do not practice Oromo democratic models and principles, except lip service.

In relation to Oromo political models and principles, what Oromo nationalists claim and what they practice are contradictory. Oromo nationalists use some *gadaa* discourses to challenge others without forcing themselves by the standard of this Oromo democratic tradition. Because of our contradictory political positions, some Oromos talk about the Oromo national cause while engaging in clan or regional or religious politics that can undermine our national cause. Knowingly or unknowingly such Oromos may relate to some internal enemies of our nation because of their clan, regional or religious ideologies and affinities.

Since some Oromo activists and leaders have an exaggerated notion of themselves, they believe that they can do whatever they want since they claim that they know everything. Such Oromos can easily forget that their society is left behind by Ethiopian colonial rule in the modern world system. Most Oromos do not believe that they have to work twice as other nations to maintain the survival of the Oromo nation. Most Oromo activists and leaders undermine by their actions the importance of team and collective work and social scientific knowledge. These are a few examples of political ineptness in the Oromo national movement. How do know which political models are appropriate for organizing Oromo society?

Traditionally, we can learn from the experiences of our *gadaa* leaders. Recently, we can learn from the political models of two farsighted, matured, and complex Oromo nationalist leaders. After researching and talking with hundreds of Oromo activists and political leaders, I am convinced that Hail Mariam Gamada, the principal political architect of Macca-Tulama Self-Help Association (MTSA) and Baro Tumsa, the principal political architect of OLF, developed complex and workable political models based on Oromo democratic traditions and principles. Despite the fact that these two intellectuals were exposed to the political and revolutionary experiences of other peoples, they never abandoned the indigenous models of *gadaa*. The models they used empowered them to create Oromo national consciousness from diverse and complex Oromo society by shattering the obstacles that Habashas created to divide and conquer Oromo society. Learning from the models of these two Oromo intellectuals, Oromo activists and leaders should reevaluate their ideologies and models that are conflict ridden and undermined the Oromo national consensus and unity.

### **Toward Building National Consensus**

Our forefathers and mothers could not build *gadaa*, which was an emblem of Oromo consensus to mobilize their spiritual, political, military, and human and economic resources to unify, confront, and defeat their enemies for many centuries. When some Oromo groups started to ignore the *gadaa* system to pursue different political models in certain parts of Oromia, the Oromo national consensus began to melt away because of internal and external factors. In

addition, the Oromo national movement that was built on an indigenous Oromo political model by leaders such as Haile Mariam Gamada ana Baro Tumsa was confronted with borrowed competing models from the beginning. Some Oromo intellectuals ignored the Oromo political model by accepting the so-called socialist or democratic model in an archaic Ethiopian society that only knows war, murder, terrorism, political repression, and genocide. Oromos lost thousands of intellectuals through such failed efforts.

Despite its weaknesses the Oromo national movement has survived while facing political fragmentation. However, at this moment both the survival of the Oromo people and their national struggle are in question. The minority Tigrayan-led Ethiopian government is attempting to give a final solution for a large political problem that has existed for several centuries—the relationship between the Oromo and their Amhara-Tigrayan colonizers. Since 1992, the Meles government has been focusing on brutally attacking the Oromo national movement and on robbing the economic resources of Oromia in order to enrich Tigrayan elites and their collaborators and to specifically develop the Tigrayan region.

While murdering and terrorizing millions of Oromos in Oromia, the Meles regime has established a political relationship with the governments of Kenya, Djibouti, Sudan, and some Somali warlords in order to prevent outside support and sanctuary for the Oromo national movement and to extend its terrorist activities into the Horn of Africa. The neighboring countries of Oromia are supporting the Meles regime. Furthermore, Western powers, particularly the United States, powerful European countries, as well as China have been supporting the political and economic policies of the Meles regime. The Meles regime has mobilized internal and external forces against the Oromo national struggle in general and the OLF in particular. Under such dangerous circumstances, can Oromo nationalists afford to engage in the politics of fragmentation?

The Oromo national movement cannot afford the politics of fragmentation and disunity. The Oromo nation has only itself, and there is no strong support for its national struggle from any corner. Two of the major reasons why the Oromo lost their national sovereignty were the disintegration the *gadaa* system and the lack of unity among the Oromo nation during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. If disunity and the politics of fragmentation had brought Ethiopian colonialism on the Oromo, how can they help in the 21<sup>st</sup> century? I am convinced that if Oromo nationalists want to consolidate and intensify their national struggle, they must declare their national consensus on the question of Oromia national sovereignty, the essence characteristics of Oromia state in a multinational context, the revitalization of Oromo democratic tradition and the building of an Oromia national assembly called *Gummii Oromiyaa*, and how to cooperate and coordinate the struggle with all forces that want to get rid of the Tigrayan regime. The only force that Oromos nationalists must struggle and dismantle in Oromo society is those Oromo elements that have chosen to be the tools of our enemies.

**Panel Chair Asafa Jalata**

**TOWARD BUILDING NATIONAL CONSENSUS IN THE OROMO NATIONAL MOVEMENT AND BEYOND:**

**Positive Attributes, Obstacles, and Missing Ingredients**

This panel is organized to make a systematic attempt from different perspectives to identify and explore some positive attributes, obstacles, and missing ingredients in the Oromo national movement in order to suggest possible steps toward building an Oromo national consensus in the Oromo national movement and beyond. The panelists may respond to the following questions: 1) why do Oromo activists or nationalists act in contradictory ways? 2) Why do Oromo political actors sometimes focus on forms and trivial issues rather than confronting and addressing some difficult and complex Oromo political problems? 3) What are some strengths and weaknesses of Oromo political organizations and leaders? 4) What are some positive and negative aspects of Oromo society? 5) What roles do Oromo professionals and intellectuals play in the Oromo national struggle? What are their strengths and weaknesses? 6) Where is the Oromo national struggle heading? 7) What should be done to develop a national declaration that will dictate all Oromo nationalists and organizations to act in uniform and form an alliance with other nations on the principles of self-determination and multinational democracy?

The panelists are Harwood Schaffer, Ezekiel Gebissa, Daniel Ayana, and Asafa Jalata. Mohammed Hassen is our discussant.