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The Oromo Protest, approaching its fourth year, is now an established historical fact as an Oromia-wide, yearlong resistance movement involving the entire Oromo population. Despite frustrating obstacles to the attainment of its broad goals, the resistance has had many successes. It has rocked an entrenched authoritarian political system to its roots, nibbling down the Ethiopian federal government to paralysis and compelling the Oromia regional government to embrace the demands of the Oromo people. It has exposed the inequities of an economic system purported to be on an inexorable trajectory of growth and broad-based benefits for all citizens. The Ethiopian military, the third largest in Africa, deployed extensively to put down the resistance, was shown to be impotent against unarmed but determined protestors. In sum, the Oromo Protest, an epochal event in Ethiopia’s history, has occasioned the rise of an emergent Oromo nation and a resurgent Oromo nationalism.

In the last half century, the goals of Oromo nationalists have always been the same as the political demands as other Ethiopians. But when the Oromo raise them, they invariably evoke a rhetorical question: “What do the Oromo really want?” This is not an honest query but a mischievous scheme designed to marginalize the Oromo nation, disparage Oromo political demands, and criminalize the Oromo nationalist movement. It is a ploy employed by Ethiopia’s powerholders to make the Oromo the perpetual outsider and cast the Oromo national movement into a subversive nationalism.

**THE OROMO ALTERNATIVE:**
**FREEDOM, EQUALITY, JUSTICE AND DIGNITY IN A PARTICIPATORY DEMOCRACY**

_Ezekiel Gebissa & Jawar Mohammed_

The Oromo Protest, approaching its fourth year, is now an established historical fact as an Oromia-wide, yearlong resistance movement involving the entire Oromo population. Despite frustrating obstacles to the attainment of its broad goals, the resistance has had many successes. It has rocked an entrenched authoritarian political system to its roots, nibbling down the Ethiopian federal government to paralysis and compelling the Oromia regional government to embrace the demands of the Oromo people. It has exposed the inequities of an economic system purported to be on an inexorable trajectory of growth and broad-based benefits for all citizens. The Ethiopian military, the third largest in Africa, deployed extensively to put down the resistance, was shown to be impotent against unarmed but determined protestors. In sum, the Oromo Protest, an epochal event in Ethiopia’s history, has occasioned the rise of an emergent Oromo nation and a resurgent Oromo nationalism.

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Within the framework of this ploy, Oromo nationalism is consistently labeled as a separatist movement that injects discord into domestic politics and threatens the stability of the existing state system in the Horn. In scholarly literature, Oromo nationalists are depicted as disciples of Eritrean secessionists whose objective is the dismemberment of the Ethiopian state. In Ethiopian popular consciousness, Oromo nationalists came to represent a relic of the era of liberation movements who, unlike the level-headed “democrats” of our time, want to tear down the state, subvert democracy, thwart development and disrupt peace. Simply put, Oromo nationalism was rendered a genie that should be kept inside the bottle.

The eminent British anthropologist Paul Baxter observed this phenomenon nearly forty years ago. In a definitive article published 1978, “Ethiopia’s Unacknowledged Problem: The Oromo,” he wrote:

"The efflorescence of feelings of common nationhood and of aspirations for self-determination among the Oromo has not been much commented upon. Yet the problem of the Oromo people has been a major and central one in the Ethiopian Empire ever since it was created by Minilik in the last two decades of the nineteenth century. If the Oromo people only obtain a portion of the freedoms which they seek then the balance of political power in Ethiopia will be completely altered. If the Oromo act with unity they must necessarily constitute a powerful force."

For the next four decades, even though both the Oromo nation and Oromo nationalism continued to play a critical role in matters of war and peace, in the formation and fall of regimes, and in the quest for equality and justice, the Oromo question remained Ethiopia’s unacknowledged problem that must be confined the periphery of Ethiopian politics.

**ETHIOPIA’S UNACKNOWLEDGED PROBLEM**

The contemporary Oromo struggle emerged during the revolutionary fervor of the late 1960s as a movement against national and class oppression. During this time, the impoverished, overtaxed and landless Oromo peasants Bale presented their grievances in an armed rebellion, the Bale Rebellion, which lasted several years. Oromo elite who served in the imperial regime as civilian and military officials, realizing that their place was always subordinate to the dominant Amhara, started to join the nationalist camp. In 1963, their dissatisfaction coalesced into an organized movement with the establishment of the Mecha Tulama Self-help Association (MTA).

By the late 1960s, the Bale rebellion had been quelled and the MTA had been outlawed by the imperial government. In response, Oromo nationalists founded a political organization named the Ethiopian National Liberation Front (ENLF) in 1971. Led by Hajji Hussien Sorra, one of the leaders of Bale rebellion, the ENLF’s declared objective was to overthrow Haile Sellassi’s “feudal regime” and to create a “progressive republic” based on a decentralized union comprised of autonomous regions. Specifically, it supported land distribution to peasants, freedom of the press, release of political prisoners and the right to organize political parties and professional associations. Put succinctly, the focus of the Oromo nationalists during this period was on the restoration of human dignity for an Oromo and respect for the identity of the nation.

In the 1970s, the Ethiopian Student Movement (ESM) became the locus of opposition political activities against the imperial government. Oromo nationalists were not just members of the ESM unions but also served in various leadership roles. In these capacities, they participated in the articulation of the two major political questions, encapsulated in the motto of “land to the tiller” and “the question of nationalities,” that have since shaped Ethiopian politics. These same political demands that animated the ESM also galvanized Oromo nationalists.

The twin questions of land and identity culminated in the Ethiopian Revolution of 1974. During the early phases of the revolution, Oromo nationalists gave critical support to the Derg government for issuing the Land Nationalization Proclamation of 1975 and introducing various measures to allow cultural expressions of the various nationalities of Ethiopia. Many Oromo nationalists became leaders of the various political parties of the time including the All Ethiopia Socialist Union or Me’ison (Haile Fida) and the Revolutionary Struggle of Ethiopia’s Oppressed or Eche’at (Baro Tumsa) and the League of the Proletariat or Wez Liig (Senay Likki). Once the Derg consolidated its power, it made any talk of the nationalities question a treasonable crime. Oromo nationalists in urban centers were subsequently imprisoned, tortured and killed. Oromo farmers in the eastern region were labelled collaborators of the Said Barre regime, rounded up indiscriminately and summarily executed.
In the aftermath of this unparalleled brutality, some Oromo nationalists joined the armed struggle in the Chercher highlands in the East. At the same time, Oromo nationalist intellectuals framed Oromo nationalist goals in terms of freedom from the Amhara nafxanya class who had oppressed and persecuted Oromo peasants and from the descendants of the nafxanya in urban areas who kept Oromo professionals in perpetual second class status. As Leenco Lata, a leading leader of the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) put it in a recent interview on ESAT, “framing the Oromo national question as a colonial question was necessary because Oromoness itself was threatened with extinction by the assimilationist policies of the imperial regime.” The political program that was sketched in the context of a worldview shaped by the prevailing realities of the time culminated in the regime change of 1991.

In the 1990s, the Oromo struggle began to move away from the guerilla movement posture it had for decade to a mass movement on Ethiopia’s national political stage. Within the framework of the language-based federal structure, the use of the Oromo language as the working language in Oromia and the use of Latin script in writing in Afaan Oromo, the Oromo people gradually overcame the cultural domination of the era of assimilation and came to realize that they have a common destiny as a unified nation. This sense of unity was reinforced by protest songs, resistance literature, cultural performances and a public display of new symbols of national pride. The annual Irreecha festival, celebrated in Bishoftu from the early 1990s onwards, became a manifestation an Oromo cultural renaissance and a nationalist struggle that had entered a more mature stage of political evolution.

By 2000, Oromo cultural consciousness, resulting from cultural renaissance and mounting deprivation caused by the barefaced exploitation of the Woyyane era, began to coalesce as an organized collective action. The forest fire of 2000 in Bale and opposition to the relocation of the capital of Oromia from Addis Ababa to Adama in 2003 prefigured a more powerful and resilient civic action that erupted a decade later in 2014. This was the university student-led protests opposing the planned implementation of the now infamous Addis Ababa and Surrounding Oromia Special Region Integrated Development Master Plan.

Since 2014, despite ebbs and flows, the Oromo protest has continued to this day. Even though this epochal phenomenon has yet to achieve its goals, it has incontrovertibly changed the face of Ethiopian politics permanently. With the Oromo People’s Democratic Organization (OPDO) ending its quarter century long drama of dissimulation and promoting the longstanding agenda of Oromo nationalist movement, Oromo nationalism has become the leitmotif of politics in Oromia and in Ethiopia. As such, the fate of the Ethiopian polity is now inextricably linked with answering the Oromo demands for freedom, equality and justice. Ethiopia’s unacknowledged problem has been acknowledged as Ethiopia’s political problem that can no longer be externalized or pushed to the periphery.

OROMO PROTEST, AN OROMO RENAISSANCE

The Oromo Protest, the current stage of the long Oromo struggle, is characterized by fast, aggressive, sharp-paced resistance actions that took advantage of technology, artistic expressions and the ingenuity of organizers. Tech-savvy activists creatively employed new communication technologies—especially social media via the Internet—for the mobilization of collective action and the subsequent creation, organization, and implementation of tactical moves in pursuit of strategic goals. They were able to use the Internet to initiate and organize a broad spectrum of activities, including consumer boycotts, public protests, stay-at-home strikes, and demonstrations.

In addition to organizing and implementing collective actions on the ground in Oromia, social media technologies were used to coordinate transnational actions between activists in the diaspora and their counterparts at home. The technologies were used in promoting a sense of community and collective identity among Oromo society, creating less-confined political spaces, establishing connections with other social movements, and publicizing the Oromo cause to gain support from the global community.

One of the internal characteristics of the Oromo protests is the activists’ devotion to planning and execution of sophisticated civil actions. The activists created symbols, notably the crossed hands over the head, and employed new methods, tactics and actions which were quickly adopted by protestors in major cities, towns and villages across Oromia. Though Oromia-wide in scope, the network of activists who organized and led the protests remained invisible to the regime’s security apparatus. Unable to pin-down the organization and leadership of the
people demand self-determination. At this stage of the struggle, the Oromo protestors have re-articulated the longstanding Oromo quest for political programs. Through the slogans, chants, placards, are no longer the pawn of the competing positions enunciated in of the enduring legacies of the Oromo Protest. Oromo demands The apparent unity purpose among Oromo political forces is one of the enduring legacies of the Oromo Protest. Oromo demands are no longer the pawn of the competing positions enunciated in political programs. Through the slogans, chants, placards, speeches, songs and other forms of expression, the Oromo protestors have re-articulated the longstanding Oromo quest for self-determination. At this stage of the struggle, the Oromo people demand positive liberty, the freedom to exercise democratic rights, constitutional rule, respect for human rights and the right to live in peace. They also demand negative liberty or freedom from violence, authoritarian rule, deprivation, arbitrary detention, torture and murder by security forces.

Rearticulated as such it is clear that the longstanding demands of the Oromo people for self-determination are not antagonistic to the demands of all peoples in Ethiopia. They are not only the same demands as other peoples of Ethiopia but also consistent with the rights that are enumerated in the Ethiopian constitution and in notable international human rights declarations and conventions such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), the International Covenants on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (ICESCR). By expressing Oromo demands so clearly and unambiguously, the Oromo protestors have rendered ineffective the TPLF’s tactic of presenting Oromo demands as a plot designed to dismember and destroy the Ethiopian state.

The Oromo Protest’s immediate impact is on the Oromia government leaders. At least three cases exemplify the new leaders’ transformation. First, when Lemma Megersa, President of the Oromia region, decided to stay away from the Irreecha celebrations of 2017, he showed a rare political acumen of exercising leadership by refraining from acting impulsively. Second, during the celebrations at Lake Arsadi, Burayu and in other places all over Oromia, the Oromia police acted in the best police tradition of not using the force’s mission is “to protect and serve.” Third, after the Liyu Police of the Somali region engineered the forced displacement of hundreds of thousands of Oromo from the Somali region, the regional government quickly organized a relief effort to attend to the needs of the displaced. The senior leader of the OPDO, Abba Duulaa Gammada, realizing that his seat of power wasn’t matched by the authority to effect change, resigned in protest. In recent weeks, the new leaders have foiled the plot to instigate conflict between the Amhara and Oromo people and helped diffuse public fear of an impending inter-ethnic conflict by holding a solidarity conference in with the people of the people of the Amhara region.

It is true that the current OPDO leaders were forced by the resilience and determination of the Oromo Protest to respond to popular demands. Regardless, they made the right decision in choosing to heed the people’s voice, embrace the protestors’ vision and desist from doing more harm. Beyond these overall adjustments, the specific actions they made since the Irreecha
festival of 2017 are important not just in resolving existing problems but also in terms of their implications for the future. A leader avoiding an opportunity to bask in limelight is a first in Ethiopia. A police force exercising restraint not to shoot at protestors sets a precedent that will be a model of police behavior in the future. A high level official giving up power rather than continue to be a hatchet man presages a new era in Ethiopian politics. The ‘reformed’ OPDO is an unmistakable example of the institutionalization of Oromo nationalism.

The Oromo Protest has also reshaped Oromo nationalism forcing its intellectual leaders to reckon the many lost opportunities, strategic blunders, and self-destructive initiatives that have obviated progress toward self-determination. There is now an emerging Oromo nationalism that is pragmatic and is oriented towards solving the problems of everyday life. It is nationalism that is not and cannot be depicted as destructive, dystopian and iconoclastic. It is nationalism that is rational and has a responsible approach to nation-building. No longer the pariah in Ethiopian politics, the new generation of Oromo nationalists is now a positive force for desirable change and for devising workable solutions for Ethiopia’s future.

The Oromo Protest has shown that the force that poses a threat to the unity of Ethiopians is not the Oromo demand for self-determination, which in fact is the ultimate exercise of democratic rights, but a government that is committed to perpetuating a single group’s domination of the state by pitting against each other the various nations and nationalities in the country. The solution to the country’s ills cannot be achieved by denying the right to choose one’s ethnonational identity. The future of unity lies in the construction of a genuine multinational federation based on equality, justice, human dignity and constitutional rule. This is the Oromo alternative vision to a workable social contract for a future of peace and prosperity.

THE OROMO ALTERNATIVE

Nearly forty years after Paul Baxter bemoaned Oromo political marginalization and lack of unity among them, in 2012, the eminent University of Chicago sociologist, the late Donald Levine, expressed optimism about the role of the Oromo in Ethiopia in an article entitled “the Oromo vision could electrify Ethiopia.” He writes: Oromo leaders could promote wider understanding of the democratic ethos of the remarkable

political Gada system and invite themselves more robustly into the Ethiopian center, with a vigorous campaign to reform democratic procedures, protect human rights, and guarantee civil liberties for ALL Ethiopians. Such a role would be in keeping with the expansive project of the Oromo people and their most salient traditional virtues.”

The Oromo vision that Levine proposed for Ethiopia is precisely the vision that the Oromo Protest has put forth. It is a vision of a freedom, equality, justice and dignity in a participatory democracy. What makes it so compelling is that it is shaped by Oromo indigenous knowledge traditions rather than by transplanted ideologies or borrowed experiences that have thus far proven to produce only failed experiments and false starts for positive change. The Oromo vision reaffirms Oromo democratic ethos, notions of inclusive economic development, principles of peace-maintenance and respect for human rights rather than by opposition to the now defunct Ethiopian colonialism. As such, it offers a refreshing alternative to the current one-party dictatorship and holds out a realistic hope for attaining a peaceful, prosperous and democratic Ethiopia.

In addition, Oromo nationalism is no longer an urban-centered movement led by a handful of elites but a broad-based social movement involving Oromos from all walks of life. Protests occurred in all of the twenty-one zones of Oromia and in over 200 cities and numerous villages. The absence of a distinct class of elite leaders did not result in chaos and the reign of unruliness in Oromia during the protests. Despite the effort to fan inter-ethnic suspicion and instigate conflict, the protest exercised great restraint not to let emotions run high and create a circumstance where non-Oromo citizens in Oromia could be harmed. By acting responsibly, the protestors have shown that Oromo nationalism isn’t a negative nationalism that poses a threat to non-Oromo or to Ethiopia’s unity but a movement rooted in the Oromo tradition of social inclusiveness, tolerance and willingness to relate to non-Oromo on the basis of common humanity.

These are positive reasons as to why non-Oromo Ethiopians should find a more reliable, stable, and enduring partner in Oromo leaders to create people-based solidarity against domination. Because of the new realities in Ethiopia, solidarity is now possible on the basis of broadly shared democratic, cultural and geographic values. The majority of Ethiopians are members of a
national community of the badly governed. The risk of not having solidarity is too grave and the penalty of refusing to forge one too high. That imposes the moral imperative of seeking solidarity based not on ill-defined uniformity or uncritical acceptance of the other but on common ground and common purpose, and mutual acceptance of each other’s differences, and a willingness to tolerate each other’s excesses. It is solidarity for a more positive future which envisions a shared commitment to the ideals of democracy, human rights, government accountability and transparency and other ideas of both positive and negative freedoms.

Even governments who have interest in the Horn of Africa region should find in the Oromo a more credible and better alternative to the incumbent regime to stabilize the region. This is not to suggest that the Oromo cause should be subservient to the needs of the rest of the world, but a simple statement that the Oromo peoples’ quest for fundamental human rights, rooted in its own heritage and traditional values, is not antithetical to international principles that have avoided conflict and sustained peace in the world. Oromo nationalist leaders realize that the Oromo cause is more attainable if it is aligned with the needs of the international community.

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