Failure to Deliver: The Journey of the Oromo Liberation Front in the Last Two Decades Part I

By Jawar Siraj Mohammed July 27, 2009

By writing this article, I understand that I am touching on one of the most closely guarded taboos, the untouchability of the OLF. I also understand that, because so many precious lives were sacrificed under the banner of this organization, emotions run very high at the mention of criticism. But I have the right and the duty to share my views and ideas regarding our movement. I have no intention to inflict any discomfort on any particular individual or group, I have tried to be as impartial as possible but if anyone is personally offended, I hope you will grant me forgiveness. The article touches on some of the most controversial topics in our politics; therefore, I plead with my readers to patiently and soberly look through the entire essay in order to get the overall message: Note: This is not a research or scholarly paper, it is purely based on my understanding of the issue from informal discussion I had with former and current members of the leadership, active and retired members, ex-soldiers in Oromia and abroad, discussion forums, public gatherings and what I observed in Oromia over the past years. In this article OLF refers to all the three faction that are using the name, and the general criticism is fully applicable to all Diaspora based political organizations.

Introduction

THINK BIG! Wrote one of my heroes, a man who suffered years of incarceration in the notorious Ethiopian prison for the just cause of the Oromo people. That man is honorable Ibsaa Guutamaa, whose book, "The Prisoner of Conscience" details the moral, psychological and physical degradation inflicted upon Oromo nationalists in Mengistu's prison, is one of the most moving books I ever read. He recently, published an article appealing to all OLF factions to overcome their division and forge a united front. Although I totally respect his genuine call for unity, I must disagree with this hero of mine by saying that the OLF has been damaged beyond repair. The beloved organization of our people has outlived its purposefulness and continuing to cover up the wounds would cause more harm to the movement than benefit.

It has been years since OLF has ceased to be the pride of the Oromo people and has transformed itself to a source of shame and disappointment by facilitating disintegration, growth of regionalist sentiment and retardation of the movement in general. This essay is not a response to Obbo Ibsaa's latest article; rather it is an attempt to present a case against wasting time, energy and resources to resuscitate an organization that will not likely benefit the Oromo anymore. I will argue that because of weak, undisciplined and incompetent leadership, through exile politics and a cult-like

outdated organizational tradition, the OLF could not produce any result over the past decade, therefore brought its own demise. Furthermore, the destructive internal conflict has intoxicated the organization beyond any repair that plastering it together will further spread the poison into the Oromo public.

This essay is organized in four parts; the first part identifies the primary cause of the problem, which is lack of action, and the second part deals with factors that exacerbated the inefficiency of the front. The third part will make case why reforming the organization may not be possible and the last part contains suggestions for the way forward.

PART I : Misdiagnosing the Root Cause and Dealing with the Symptoms

Lack of Action: Broken Promises, Fabricated Accomplishments and Its Consequence

It's common to hear words such as "Oromo people and OLF are one in the same", "OLF is the vanguard of Oromo people" and "the Oromo struggle is unthinkable without OLF". These loaded words have been deeply engraved in our psyche that we do not even see how erroneous and misleading they are both to the leaders and supporters of the organization. If we just take away our emotional attachment to the organization and assess its accomplishment vis-a-vis its stated goal, we can see how wrong these words are. An organization, be it a business or political, must be evaluated based on it's merit and practical accomplishment not based on how articulate its mission statement is, or whether it has taken up the right cause.

There is no question that OLF's political program effectively reflects the just demand of Oromo people. However, over the past two decades, OLF has been in a downward spiral, despite the unparalleled financial and moral support it received from the Oromo public both at home and abroad, the organization cannot show a single achievement under its belt during this period of time. It has not freed an inch of land in Oromia, or had a single victory against the enemy. But by repeatedly and falsely convincing ourselves about the greatness of the organization, we supporters, failed to demand results from the leadership. Leaders, using slogans and excuses, instead of showing results avoid fulfilling their responsibility and taking accountability for their failures. The insignificant achievement of the organization year after year has produced low expectations. A nation that settles for mediocre gains ends up with no gain at all.

It's a simple common sense that victory is instrumental in forging unity while lose and underachievement brings shame and disunity. When a company reports gain, stockholders are happy, and the CEO is rewarded a bonus. More investors will be

attracted and the company grows. If the company does not make profit, investors withdraw their share which weakens the company and eventually goes bankrupt. The Oromo people heavily invested their property and the lives of their children into OLF, but they have seen no dividend from the organization over the past two decades. Failing to satisfy the public, instead of assessing their problem and coming out with solutions, the leadership of the organization continued to fabricate excuses about the geopolitical hardships, the changing of the international geopolitical dynamic and the uniqueness of the enemy. Such excuses gradually became unacceptable to the new generation of students who joined the organization in mass in the last decade but to find out that the organization they once revered has been taken hostage by cunning authoritarian state, Eritrea.

When fabrication and exaggeration was not enough to quell the anger and frustration of the members and soldiers the leaders turned into labeling them as regionalists in order to isolate the dissenters and destroy the reformist push. In turn the sidelined and frustrated officers also began grouping those from their own region as others shunned them under the propaganda of the establishment. Primordial (preexisting) regional and clan affinities provide fertile ground for this kind of clique formation. Outsiders (Oromos who do not know the inner working of OLF), often make wrong generalization by looking at such clique formation by confusing the symptom, regional grouping, with the cause, lack of action. They fail to understand that to cover his own failure to deliver result, the top leader resorts to surrounding himself with "yes-men", who often happens to be from his own area but whose view by no means can represent the general sentiment of that particular region. The dissenters, who are the underdogs of the game, play in the hand of such leaders by creating their own regional power base. The establishment leader often wins the battle of propaganda because not only does he have the first strike advantage but also because he uses the entire backing of the institution, particularly the media. The end is obvious; the opposition leaves and forms its own faction.

For instance, it was quite common few years back to hear people complaining about Wallagaa's sabotaging the struggle. Such sentiment, in addition to misidentifying the cause of the failure, misses one critical issue. Those leaders who failed the struggle might happen to be from that region, but they do not represent the people of Wallagaa who never voted to elect them in the first place. In the organization, they represent themselves, but they form cliques to relieve themselves of taking responsibility for their action and inaction. Even if they were true representatives of that region, individuals not the people who voted bears responsibility for failing to fulfill their duty. The following diagram is an attempt to summarize the life cycle of the crisis within OLF, especially over the past two decades.



The diagram shows the wave of problems that develop within an inefficient organization that lacks action. Leaders of such organization often have to fabricate excuses or achievements in order to stay in power. But some members who reject the fabrication begin demanding tangible action from the leaders who respond by suppressing the dissent. As openly airing of dissatisfaction is no longer an option, secret cliques of dissent form. So far, the problem brews only within active members. However the dissenters, overpowered by institutionally backed establishment, leak the information in order to expose the leaders. They do so to gain support and sympathy for their side. The establishment also leaks information aimed at defaming the dissenters. The public, who usually do not have the full picture of the problem, begin to contemplate conspiracy theories about the problem. Such often unsubstantiated rumors are always taken advantage of by the competing factions to strengthen regional/clan power base bringing the organization into turmoil.

Eventually, the organization splits into factions, followed by intensified competition to dominate the outcome. Although one dominant group finally will emerge, the chaos paves a way for raise of an illegitimate, unelected and polarizing leadership. Pushed out by the leadership, worn out by infighting and being fed up of nasty politics, supporters and members abandon the organization. This, coupled with wasted resources and

destroyed lives, weaken the organization making it even more inefficient which brings the beginning of a new cycle.

As the two-way arrow shows in the diagram, lack of action and each state of the crisis are mutually interdependent. For instance, as lack of action leads to dissention, presence of dissension also prolongs inaction because of the time and resources wasted to quell such revolt and because the division weakens performance. Thus, if the leadership brings action, for example, a successful attack on enemy, not only will they satisfy the dissenters; they can also make formation of cliques unattractive and unnecessary. That is why I believe lack of action is the primary cause of the OLF's perpetual internal turmoil, because action at any stage could prevent the problem from exacerbating. Once the cycle is completed, it is irreversible because the factional climate is so intense and personalized, plus members and supporters so polarized that rational, logical and conciliatory efforts do not have any space. The best that can be done at that stage is, for either of the faction to realize the root cause, lack of action, and produce real, visible and tangible result to prevent another cycle.

However, when this cycle is repeated, the damage to the organization grows exponentially. The OLF has gone through such cycles at least three times (IFLO crisis, the Transitional Authority split, the Change coup), and therefore one has to imagine how much damage and destruction it has suffered. After these three cycles, I do not see any of the factions understanding and addressing the root cause. Even if they do, it is too late to revive the front, because the organization is so weak, its reputation highly tarnished and its credibility heavily damaged, that it will be impossible to engage in any meaningful action.

Therefore, before we move to cure a disease we must identify the cause, which in the case of OLF's deterioration is lack of tangible result. Dealing with the symptom could lead us to subscribing the wrong medicine that can worsen the situation. Inaction is the primary cause of OLF's demise, while regionalism, disintegration and factions are symptoms.

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PART II: SOURCES OF INEFFICIENCY

In the first part, I have discussed how lack of action perpetuated the crisis within OLF and damaged it beyond repair. I have suggested that growth of regionalism and incompetent leadership are mitigating factors that are the by-product of the chaotic life

cycle of an organization that lack action. Now I must answer the legitimate question. Why did the organization lack such necessary action to avoid the problem in the first place? In this part, I present three major factors that hindered the organization from delivering the much needed action. The first factor, forces us to look back into the history of the organization and understand that the front inherited deep and complicated political tradition that prevented the leadership from dealing the root cause. The second and third factors are new phenomenons that the organization faced during the last decade or so.

a) Inherited Destructive Organizational Traditions

OLF is a foster child of the student movement that brought the revolution; as such it shares some common organizational behaviors and characteristics with all other organizations that came out that era, such as the EPRP, TPLF and EPLF. Some of these characteristics are lack of political civility, sense of entitlement and the desire to control everything and everyone within the society they claim to represent. These behaviors are the result of the situation they came out of, therefore we must look at the social and political climate under which the student movement was created, formed and developed into political parties.

After the 1960's coup attempt blew off the lid of "untouchability" from Harresillassie, students began debating and discussing politics, breaking the taboo of " zim bala af zimb aygebam"- a mouth that remains shut has no worry for flies. However, the absence of any culture of political dialogue prior to that era means the young students had to deal with the highly charged communist theory without any prior knowledge about political civility that is essential for constructive debates to take place. Thus, it was common for discussions and debates to heat-up and name calling and fighting to ensue. Policy and ideological debates were assumed to be ways of differentiating the winner from the looser which usually led to jubilation and humiliation. Arguments were taken so personally that it usually resulted in the formation of cliques. Character assassination politics that have been too common among Ethiopian politicians has its origin to that era.

The situation got worse when the regime moved to suppress the student movement. To overcome the persecution of the security forces, the discussions and debates went underground, through formation of small cells, where secrecy was crucial. Those underground cells were the breeding ground for the already rife Abyssinian debtera culture of suspicion and conspiracy. The debtera tradition is one that is full of secrecy,

conspiracy and backstabbing. In that world, there are clear winners and losers. Concepts such agreeing to disagree and power sharing are unknown. If a group member disagrees with a view held by the majority, he was excluded from the cell and begins his own defamation campaign against his former friends often by creating new cliques. The underground world made it difficult to differentiate credible information from fabricated vengeful accusations. This created a favorable condition for individuals to falsely accuse those who disagree with them.

Thus, the two political parties that came out of the student movement, MEISON and EPRP, and the later ones such as OLF, were built by individuals who had their first political training on the chaotic campus and the underground world. The revolutionaries were known for fighting over nothing and suspecting everything. It is now clear MEISON and EPRP, although lead by some of the brightest individuals, destroyed each other practically over insignificant differences.

Founders of OLF brought good share of that political tradition with them, that one should not be surprised to find out that the leaders spend most of their time chasing rumors than developing fact based strategy. When the first power struggle broke out, Jaarraa was accused of conspiring with Somalia to spread Islam, and his team in return hit back by labeling OLF as a Protestant organization. If a leader disagrees with a person from Shawa, the accepted tactic was to tie him with the dead Gobana - a sellout, regardless of that person's merits and records. This has contributed to insignificant participation and representation of Shawa in OLF - despite its numerical and strategic importance.

How people like Lencho Leta were dealt with is another example. Although he was one of the founding members of the organization who played critical role, mostly good but some unforgettable mistakes, after 1993, so many rumors, conspiracy theories and accusations were orchestrated about him. Some called him a sleeper agent, other accused of selling the cause to TPLF, and some swore that he is not even an Oromo. Here is what is interesting, those ridiculous rumors were mostly fabricated by individuals who know the man from childhood, and never raised such issues while working with him for decades. There is no doubt that Lencho's mistakes have played critical role in the disastrous encampment of the OLA, but he was not solely responsible. The remaining leadership embarked on the defamation campaign in order to paint Lencho as a sellout and enemy infiltrator, then blame him for everything that went wrong--so that they can be relieved of accountability. This tradition is so widespread within the organization that it has become the most preferred method of covering up issues and discrediting one

another. It has also contributed to the infamous extreme negative reaction against critics and the common practice of outsourcing cause of failure by fabricating excuses. Never admitting mistakes and blame-game is a shared characteristic of all those organizations and individuals that came out of the student movement.

Before falling under subjugation, the Oromo had no hierarchical social structure, that all men regardless of their wealth or political role were considered equal. The poor and rich dined together, even the Abba Gada never received a bow from a layman. The Abyssinians were different; strict hierarchical division based on wealth, family and power were enforced. Sense of entitlement was so strong amongst those rich and powerful. The youth who established our movement was by large trained under such system that, although they rose against it, they could not completely free themselves from this culture of entitlement. This was clear from the very beginning as the educated were so elitist that they staged a coup against Jaarra Abbagadaa simply because they felt that he was not good enough since he had no "modern" education.

As the organization moved on, education as a source of entitlement was replaced by the years one has spent with organization. Although hundreds of highly skilled soldiers and well qualified intellectuals joined the organization, they were denied the opportunity to utilize their skills and knowledge to benefit the front. This has immensely contributed to the lack of effective leaders the movement desperately needed.

One of the main characteristics of the leftist organizations was their obsession to control every aspect of their society. They are so obsessed with controlling the mind. Such organization, who always claim to be the "vanguard" of the cause regardless of their popularity and strength, work so hard to make sure that their constituency falls under their absolute monopoly. The youth, the women, the elders, the religious institution and business are expected to be organized under the vanguard party. Information flows through tightly controlled, top-to-bottom structure.

The political forces that emerged from the student movement were led by individuals who worshiped Mao Zedong and Stalin , so they embraced such undemocratic, rigid and control freak organizational model. The TPLF today controls the youth, women and farmers associations, the church, the mosque, the media, businesses and almost every aspect of the Ethiopian people. OLF, which claims to oppose such totalitarianism, wastes so much time and resource to control the Oromo community association, the scholarly organization, Maccaa Tuulamaa, Waaqeffannaa, churches, mosques, and the media including the Internet if they can. Unfortunately for OLF, the time when people accepted

such control in the name of satisfying the vanguard, has passed as citizens are sick and tired of any kind of dictatorships, be it individual, party or a state. Unlike Woyane and Shyabia, it had no state power to enforce its desire, therefore every attempt it makes to control civic associations has backfired.

In general, as the product of the 1970's student movement, OLF has done so much for the Oromo people by challenging and destroying the Abyssinian cultural and political colonialism. Unfortunately it has also inherited all the evils of the Abyssinian hierarchical culture and the totalitarian leftist organizational tradition. As time changed, these inherited organizational and structural norms have contributed to the slow death of the front.

b) Exile Politics: The Reality Gap and Sucking the Energy Out of the Grassroots
When they left the charter in 1992, the OLF leaders abandoned their soldiers and supporters without any notice or guidance. The chaos and confusion that followed caused general breakdown of the command structure where rules and discipline were ignored, and some rogue soldiers committed unspeakable crimes against their own people, especially in Hararge. The disorganized and leaderless soldiers fell pray for the well financed and effectively commanded Shabiya-Woyane coalition that, despite the heroic defense by the field commanders, effectively removed OLA from its liberated zones. The organization that was believed to have some forty thousand soldiers was left with a small fraction of that, as many perished and the majority were rounded up and thrown to jail or just gave up. The blame-game that flared up amongst the leadership, soon after, further disabled the front from regrouping and hitting back.

Although OLF claims to be led by a National Assembly comprised of some forty or so people, since late 1990s, there is no single individual who resides within the Oromian soil. The vast majority of the leadership reside in the Western countries where they wage cyber politics while the remaining few have taken comfortable refuge under the wing of the Eritrean dictator.

An organization that has its leadership in exile cannot lead a struggle because of two simple realities. First, presence of a leader amongst his supporters and soldiers has significant symbolic role both in strengthening party cohesion as well as boosting moral. It is morally indefensible for a leader of any movement, let alone, an armed front, to sit in a safe and comfortable place and urge oppressed and poor people to die. Soldiers and followers need a leader who can command them by example, by starving and

surviving with them. The presence of a leader amongst fighters boosts their confidence, loyalty and commitment. OLF leaders betrayed their members and the Oromo people by running away when the time got tougher, as a result not only did they lose respect but also numerous conspiracy theories were developed about the true desire of the leadership. Second, an exiled leader faces serious reality gap. Policies and strategies that are developed based on second-hand and heresy information are sure to fail. The political, social, environmental and economic realities of today's Oromia are dramatically different than they were when OLF leaders left Oromia over a decade ago.

Departure of the leadership moved the center of the struggle from Oromia to the Diaspora. The more the leadership stayed away from the homeland, the more dependent they became on the Diaspora for support, which forced them to cater to their views and demands. Leaders prioritized the satisfaction of the Diaspora base so the dollar would continue to flow that, they ignored the burning plight of the peasants in Oromia. An interesting evidence of this can be observed from the annual display of pictures of soldiers to arouse emotions and convince supporters about victories it had never accomplished.

A rebels' success depends on how well its structures are intertwined with the people and land it fights to liberate. A rebel that is dependent on its mass has to continue to improve its performance both in expanding its control, and defend the peasant from enemy attack. Thus, the necessity of gaining material and tactical support from the peasants necessitates an insurgent movement to continue delivering tangible results. Since OLF leadership, in the past decade or so, did not really rely on the Oromo peasants, they did not have to fulfill their duty in order to survive. The Diaspora, who do not deal with daily abuse by the oppressive system, do not truly see the fierce urgency someone in Oromia feels. That is why, leaders and supporters of OLF who live outside Oromia rather derail the struggle forever than see their perspective views and faction lose this endless war of words. It is also important to note that even if all Oromo political factions in the Diaspora reconcile and united by some miracle, they cannot produce any result as long as the leadership remains in exile.

Oromos must learn from the experience of the Tibetan people, that despite being the most internationally supported independence movement and led by one of the most famous individuals on earth (Dalai Lama) , today they are not any closer to independence than they were fifty years ago. By establishing an exiled government, the Dalai Lama effectively took life out of the movement, because running away, not fighting at homeland became the norm. In our case the exile- centered movement also

made Oromians to wait for the Diaspora to bring freedom, which negatively prevents strong grassroots movements from emerging which could nurture potential future leaders. I strongly believe that he who is truly prepared to sacrifice for the cause must move to Oromian soil before promising any change. The Diaspora plays important role as supporters of the struggle, but must not be allowed to become center of the movement and suck out the energy.

c) Eritrea: A Safe Haven for Incompetent Leadership and The Movement that Became Hostage

It is a public secret that Shabia played critical role in forcing the OLF out of the transitional government in 1992. After coercing the organization to encamp its soldiers, Shabia joined hand with TPLF to wipe out OLF. The egomaniac Eritrean leader miscalculated the prospect of using Meles Zenawi as a puppet to build his war wretched state by exploiting Oromian resources. He mistakenly thought that eliminating OLF from the scene would allow him unconstrained access to the resources of the South. His ambitions began to fade away in front of his eyes, because his supposed puppets in Finfinnee turned against him after they consolidated their grip on the empire. Facing a certain defeat at the hand of the supposed puppet, which was using the entire human and material resources of the empire, Eritrea began to look for proxies, and at the same time OLF leaders happen to be in deep disillusionment that they welcomed the invitation to settle in Asmara.

Eritrea's role in destroying OLA withstanding, there was no strategic benefit gained by moving to Eritrea, as there was no landmass or water body that connect Oromia and Eritrea. It is common for an insurgent movement to establish a base in a neighboring country across the border but moving to Eritrea is like moving to Uganda. It's unthinkable to provide supply and reinforcement for the fighters across the unfriendly state of Sudan as it was proved to be when SPLA and Khartoum sabotaged almost all efforts. Therefore, I argue that there was only one factor that determined the decision to move to Eritrea, the safety of the leaders.

In addition to the strategic difficulty, moving to Eritrea created three major problems to the movement. First, it created disconnect between the leadership and the soldiers at the front. One has to be under constant eminent danger in order to fiercely fight and such quest for survival forces him to develop effective tactics and strategies not only to defend himself but also to expand his strong hold and move to the offensive. When a

rebel leader is on the field thus he is permanently alert and has to be engaged in commanding and coordinating his force using strategies and tactics that were developed based on real time situations. The OLF leaders who reside in Asmara were not under such threat, and hence their survival did not depend on the success of their army but rather on the Eritrean government. The strategies and policies they devise were based on outdated information that it was often difficult to implement by the commanders in the field. This greatly contributed to the failure of few attempts to engage the enemy, that resulted unnecessary loss of life and deterioration of morale amongst commanders and soldiers who finally abandoned the field.

The second obstacle OLF faced by being in Eritrea was the fact that it provided the corrupted leaders institutions to suppress their dissenters. It is no secret that several Oromo students, journalists and soldiers who were critical of the leadership were thrown to the Eritrean jail or prevented from leaving the country for years. This was done to prevent such critics from exposing the corruption and inaction of the leadership. The third yet most crucial effect of locating in Eritrea is that, it made OLF and the Oromo movement hostage to Shabia-Woyane conflict. The Eritrean regime's wants to use the OLF as a proxy, therefore it had to effectively control the organization in order to manipulate any outcome of OLF-TPLF engagement as it was evidenced when it vetoed almost all of the negotiations, even those where OLF apparently accepted. A strong, effective and active OLF that has its leaders outside Eritrea would have not allowed Shabia to undermine the organizations interest. However, OLF's chairman who needed Shabia's protection even from his own dissatisfied soldiers was too happy to serve the former in order to survive and remain at the head of the organization.

Therefore, I strongly believe that relocating the headquarters of OLF to Eritrea was the worst strategic blunder committed by OLF leadership, and being in Eritrea heavily contributed towards weakening the front. I do not believe Eritrea will ever allow OLF to leave, and as long as it remains there, it will not serve the interest of the Oromo people.

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PART III: THE WAY AHEAD, Is Reform Possible? Can the Damage be Undone?

Several Oromos I have spoken to believe that there is still hope for reforming the OLF.

But as I will show next, one needs to assess why past efforts aimed at reforming and changing the organization failed. By using the last two breakups as examples of impossibility of reforming the OLF , I will demonstrate that the organization has been damaged beyond repair.

1) Endless Transition: The Ideological Difference that Never Was

About eight years ago OLF split into two factions that became known as Transitional Authority (TA) and Central Committee (Shanee Gumii) -which kept the existing organizational structure. Although ideological differences were cited as the cause for the split, we now know that was not the case. As mentioned above, the organization suffered devastating defeat at the hand of the enemy during the prior decade because of absent, disorganized and sometimes abortive leadership, who wanting to clear their name from wrong doing began blaming each other. It was this attempt to avoid responsibility by painting the other that developed into factions.

In attempt to defend their record and maintain dominance within the organization, the top two leaders began surrounding themselves with loyal cadres. Therefore, ideological difference, independent Oromia vis-a-vis Democratizing Ethiopia" was never really big enough to split the organization, it was simply manufactured to give the conflict an ideological face. By their own admission the TA faction know that from the very beginning Lencho Leta believed in democratizing Ethiopia and hence this issue could not have become a reason for split decades later. They even followed him into the transitional government without any hesitation. The TA group took ideology as a major issue not because they truly believed in it but rather because they assumed that the OLA and the public at large supports the idea of independent Oromia, therefore they wanted to use it to consolidate support.

The fact that, although independent Oromia was a more popular position, the TA lost the battle to the other faction, confirms my believe that the internal conflict was a result of lack of success rather than ideology. Frustrated by a decade of defeat and humiliation, the burning demand of the soldiers and the public, who blamed the old leaders for all the mess, there was a change in leadership. Dawud Ibsa, although a veteran within the organization was a new face, so the members and the public chose to take a chance with him rather than the TA that was dominated by the old guard. Therefore, the TA , despite its populist ideology and highly respected and recognized individuals, failed to gain significant support and eventually died out. Therefore, there is no doubt that the cause of the 2001 split was neither ideological nor regional but rather a failure of the organization to deliver any results.

2) The Last Chance: The Leader that took life out of the Front

The victorious Dawud group clearly did not understand neither the cause of the split nor reason why, despite their unpopular ideology, they won the public support over their formidable foes. Hence they kept repeating the same mistake as their predecessors. Thus OLF under Dawud Ibssa's leadership continued to fade away without any notable accomplishment. As leaders and cadres channeled their energy into destroying the TA, the true mission of the organization was ignored. However, the group came under pressure from the influx of young students who were eager to fight the enemy that forced them out of schools, but they were dismayed to find out that the front had neither the structural capability, nor a willing leadership that can channel the energy of the youth towards constructive role. Once they were shipped to Eritrea and completed training their fate was to engage in hard labor at Mr Afeworki's farm. This was unacceptable to the restless youth who dreamed of joining the vanguard in order to liberate their people. Those who demanded action were systematically silenced by labeling them as enemy infiltrators and then making them disappear by throwing them to jail.

Nevertheless, the pressure on the leadership dramatically increased when hundreds of Oromo soldiers defected from the Ethiopian military and joined them. This had two major effects on the leadership. First, it increased expectation of better performance because, members and supporters hoped that, addition of such skilled and decorated officers would reinforce and re-energize the organization. Second, the soldiers who came in hundreds have a deeply held personal grudge against the regime in Finfinnee that they came to immediately engage in a struggle of payback. Contrary to their statement, about their sympathy for the Oromo mass, and the accusations labeling them as Woyane agents, the primary cause of defect for those soldiers and other OPDO members were the deep and personal humiliation they suffered under Tigrean domination. Therefore, for them the need for immediate re-engagement was not negotiable.

This fierce urgency of the soldiers strengthened those who were demanding more action. Unfortunately once again, the leadership took this as an offense to their authority. Here I would like to stress that, it is not that the leadership does not want to fight but rather they did not appreciate the fact that "outsiders and newcomers" who do not have years of "jungle credit" within the organization could dare to tell them what to do. The result as we know is that, a new split occurred slicing the already deteriorating organization.

Although this last split was framed and did happen across regional basis, it is wrong to assume that regionalism was the cause of the split. As that of 2001, the 2008 breakup was caused due to lack of any concrete action since the then cabinet took power. The entire leadership was responsible for the failure as each of them were engaged in vilifying the TA group day and night instead of doing the job they were entrusted with. When blaming the TA leadership for all misdeeds was no longer an option, they had to turn against each other and resorted to the good old OLF tradition of using regional affiliation to strengthen factional power-base and accuse the opposite.

3) Show me the Change! A Timely Slogan, Business As Usual

Last year this time, a grouping calling itself, Change! emerged and promised to bring tangible result within short period of time. So far they have showed absolutely nothing that resembles change. In fact they continue the same old OLF tradition of fabricating victories, exaggerating reforms and most importantly engaging in a nasty war of words against their former colleagues. Their cadres who spend twenty-four hour on pal talk have been spreading the poison of regionalism just like the group they broke away accusing of domination.

From the outset their overtly hateful campaign against the great people of Wallagaa, whom they do not even know, has undermined their rather appealing call for change. Through their narrow and childish behaviors such ill-mannered cadres have shamed the glorious people of Arsi, whose unforgettable battle against colonizers at Aanolee is a source of pride for all Oromos. Those cadres understand nothing about the "waadaa and hoodaa" of Sikkoo Mandoo. If they do, they would have known that the Arsi are waiting, praying and crying for that day when they would join their brothers to celebrate the end of subjugation and the return of Kaawoo Oromo. Their counterparts are no better as they shamelessly speak of Arsi without knowing that that generous and respectful people, who would never allow even a stranger drink water but milk in their house, let alone engage in a nasty low blow. Therefore, the Change group has failed to bring the much needed shift in political culture and continue to make the same mistake as their foes.

The vast majority, if not all, of the leadership of the Change group, just like the other two faction, still live in exile. Hence, their faction is as dependent on the Diaspora as before. Therefore, their best accomplishment so far is having larger public meetings and a one-time flow of hard earned dollars. They clearly did not learn any lesson because the large crowd was there as spectator to see the new faces of the old organization, and it was the momentary hope and anger at the old guard that helped them generate such large sum of money. Neither the crowed nor the money will continue as the faction will not be able to deliver what they promised.

As mentioned above Eritrea plays critical role in sabotaging OLF and the Oromo struggle at large. OLF will not be able to effectively engage in fighting the enemy as long as it remains in Eritrea. If the change group was serious about transforming the dormant organization into an active insurgent movement, the first thing to do would have been to leave Eritrea for the jungle of Oromia. Now their faction is as a prisoner as the faction they broke away from. Their actions, policies and strategies will be subjected to the approval of Eritrea, and from the experience of OLF under Mr Dawud Ibsa, we know what a leadership that is controlled by Issaias can produce. Therefore, I conclude that the change group can bring neither political nor practical change to the Oromo cause. They are as destructive and useless as their opponents if not worse.

4) Unity as a Slogan? Is Reconciliation Possible?

Unity is the most abused and deeply misunderstood word by Oromo politicians such that it has developed a negative connotation. I am always amazed when people who spend so much time spreading false allegations, conspiracy theories and prejudicial assumptions preach about unity. It is wrongly assumed that unity of the larger Oromo people is dependent up on the unity of political factions. Such believe comes from the deeply held dogma about the indivisibility of the front from the people. While consolidations of Oromo forces help strengthen the movement,

their fractionalization does not necessarily dismantle the Oromo.

I have no doubt that the internal conflict within the front has traumatized our people especially those who reside abroad. I have heard of numerous stories about families, relatives and lifelong friends, who withstood together the suffering of Sudanese and Somalia refugee camps, whom the 2001 split had broken apart. Our women who once consoled and gave each other the strength of caring for their family while their spouse were in the field have abandoned each other due to such highly charged, deeply personal and painful split. It's such a traumatizing experience for children to be told , all of the sudden, that they could not visit childhood friends. It is shameful that disagreement over politics could destroy the bonding that was formed by blood and sweat and stood firm through thick and thin. The sad thing is that OLF leaders either never understood the magnitude of the damage they caused to the Oromo community, or they just did not care as long as their selfish and narrow interest were fulfilled. Hence, it was no surprised they repeated the same crime again in 2008.

I have noticed that those families and relationships that were destroyed in 2001 have gradually healed, often because individuals understood how unnecessary it was to choose factional politics over precious relationships. Many people just gave up politics

in favor of family and friends, while others completely stopped discussing political issues. Thus, I am optimistic that relationships that were ruined in 2008 will be eventually repaired as people realize how wrong it is to shun a dear friend in favor of some useless factional politics.

But, one crucial issue that must be raised here is that it was the incompetence of the leadership to deliver victory that led to the formation of factions, who spread their organizational poison to the larger public. Therefore, there is no doubt that OLF as an organization has been the biggest source of regionalism and other societal poisons. Any attempt to resurrect OLF will further worsen the damage as these leaders will have another chance to split again and fracture our people.

I do not understand why individuals who know very well how the effort of the "shanacha Jaarsummaa" and formation of ULFO could not solve the OLF crisis now call for another round of phony and even distractive reconciliation effort. I am opposed to the idea of wasting time trying to reconcile OLF because 1) It will be impossible to bring genuine reconciliation due to the deeply held organizational culture, lack of a single concrete issue of disagreement and because Eritrea will never allow a move that makes the organization less reliant on it. 2) What will bring Oromos together, heal the wound and strengthen our unity is action and victory, and this cannot be expected from the very people who made it impossible. Therefore, anyone who truly wants to unite the Oromo, must make the crucial decision and move to Oromia; be it through Bole or Bale. Fight the enemy either in the jungle or streets of Oromia, and I will bet my life that it will take no conference before all Oromos rally behind such movement..

Failure to Deliver: The Journey of the Oromo Liberation Front in the Last Two Decades Part IV

PART IV: The So What Question: My Ten-Cent Recommendations

In this essay I believe I have shown the cause and extent of the OLF's deterioration, and how futile any attempt to resurrect it would be. I am sure that even those who agree with me will ask what I might suggest for a solution. There is no simple and right answer that can be detailed in this piece. However, for a starter, I would like to suggest few.

For those who live abroad, the first step is to understand that their role in the movement is limited to the crucial role of supporting the struggle back home. This could be either in the form of material contribution or by being the voice for their suppressed brethren. But they must refrain from overstepping their duty and sucking out the energy from the home front.

The politics and resources of the Diaspora have been effectively monopolized by the OLF over the past two decades. Despite its failure to deliver any meaningful result, the OLF has used the emotions and aspirations of the people to collect millions of dollars. It's quite common to see a taxi driver or a janitor give a thousand dollar without any hesitation. Oromos have to stop investing their hard earned dollar to organizations that bring them no return. Such investment must be conditional on results, excellence, progress and accountability.

Furthermore, the Diaspora, by funding competing faction, has been fueling forces of disintegration. If the Diaspora is serious about helping the Oromo movement, they must channel their support towards organizations and individuals who are operating at the homeland. In addition to systematic problem, the two Oromo parties in Oromia, remain weak because they have no access to the Diaspora resources that their counterparts heavily benefit from. By monopolizing the Diaspora, the OLF has systematically prevented those parties from tapping into the resources abroad. Who should be supported, one that actually is facing the hardship with the people, and doing something no matter how small it might be , or those who have shown nothing positive but destruction? If one does not agree with the politics and methods of those organizations, why not finance the education of one Oromo student rather than throw his money into the fire that is destroying the fabrics of his people?

Similarly, those at home must realize that, there is nothing coming from outside to save them from the jaws of the oppressive regime. No country or people have ever won their freedom by an exiled organization and leadership. The youth have to realize that they must write their own destiny. No organization holds the key to the future. Organizations come, organizations die, and it is a matter of fact. They must face this reality head-on, and mobilize the public through grassroots movements to defeat the exploitive and ethno-racist regime.

The OLF has sucked in and destroyed the best and the brightest of Oromo student leaders in the past decade, this got to stop. Each young Oromo, both at home and abroad, needs to build him or herself economically and intellectually. This will help avoid the dependency trap many Oromos within OPDO fallen into. Economic security is essential for free thinkers and independent organizations, to this end entrepreneurship must be nurtured to facilitate the emergence of the Oromo middle class that is lacking today. We must get over the one-formula-fits-all thinking as our struggle requires multifaceted approach.

Conclusion

"Man has no property in man; neither has any generation a property in the generations which are to follow." Said the forgotten founding father of the United States. Our elders, the generation that drew the program of the OLF, the generation that produced Qubee, the glorious youth of the 70's who paid the ultimate price to free us from mental and physical bondage deserves our utmost respect. They will forever be remembered as the generation that saved the beautiful Oromo nation from complete destruction. We are their product, we are proud of being their successors. But it is a serious mistake for our elders to expect us to adhere to the same old ways of doing business, to not challenge and disregard what is inapplicable and unacceptable to the world of our time. The OLF is clearly an organization of the past, its model, organizational structure and dogma is outdated. The front has outlived its purposefulness and it has been allowed to derail and distract the movement for too long.

My generation must write its own destiny. We can learn from our elders' wisdom and experience, but this generation shall not be held hostage to the old days. This generation must free our people from dependency on exiled politics, a hostage organization, and incompetent leadership. Our enemy is weak, morally bankrupt, uses the most fractured military and bureaucratic structures. It's life is dependent on the cooperation of our people. We must make such cooperation impossible, one way or the other. Most importantly, our people today expects nothing less than excellence from their organizations, in this fast moving world, we must make our movement compatible, flexible and efficient as to utilize all opportunities to satisfy the expectations of the mass. Our people's pride has been deeply injured by the incompetency of leaders who exposed the nation to laughs and ridicules. We will and we can change that, because today, Oromos from all angles of the land have been fully alert and ready to retake their rights back. Today, Oromos are sending their kids to school in millions and are leaving none behind. We, Oromos, have the culture, resources and determination not only to solve our problem, but also we can and we shall play the leading role in democratizing, stabilizing and developing the entire East Africa. We must believe in ourselves, be true to our conscious and loyal to our people nothing and no one else!

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