

From a Student Movement to a National Revolution A Struggle with an Independent Oromo State In Sight *

Mekuria Bulcha

Introduction

The Oromo and the other peoples in the southern part of Ethiopia are caught in a vicious circle of tyranny that is deeply rooted in a colonial conquest at the end of the 19th century. The tyranny had stirred popular uprisings in many places at different times. Hitherto, most of the uprisings have been suppressed, and the revolutions were hijacked and reversed. As we know, the revolution that overthrew Emperor Haile Selassie in 1974 was hijacked by a military junta, which came in promising democracy but delivered terror in abundance. The response to the military dictatorship was the formation of half a dozen *national liberation fronts* with the aim of waging a struggle and liberate their respective peoples from an empire which a British political scientist Ernst Gellner called *a prison-house of nations*.¹ After a decade and a half they defeated the military regime in 1991 and formed a Transitional Government of Ethiopia (TGE). One of the victorious fronts which formed a coalition and built the TGE was the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF). The Charter on which the transitional government was based, promised to bring about fundamental changes in the prevailing political and social order in Ethiopia. It made provisions for a federal structure that will create space for democracy and the self-determination of peoples in Ethiopia. However, within a year, the revolution was hijacked and reversed by the TPLF which was militarily and organizationally the strongest party in the coalition and a new dictatorship replaced the military dictatorship. As an autocrat, Emperor Haile Selassie was the law for there was no law above him. He ran the country as his private property, handing out favors in land and punishing lack of loyalty severely. After consolidating his political power and asserting his position as the prime minister of Ethiopia, the TPLF leader Meles Zenawi assumed an autocratic posture similar to that of Haile Selassie and ruled the country with an iron hand. In his book *Ye-Meles Tirufatoch (The Legacies of Meles)*, Ermias Legesse mentions that Zenawi's subordinates - ministers and other functionaries in his government – referred to him internally as “*Dirgita*”, meaning “The Organization”.² Gradually, his wishes and orders came to weigh more than provisions in the Ethiopian Constitution and conditions set by the laws of the country. Thus, with a pernicious form of Abyssinian rulers' despotism in place, Melese and his acolytes intensified the abuses of their predecessors plundering the properties of the state which they were supposed to guard. They committed human rights violations with impunity that has surpassed the appalling records of the military regime they had replaced. The Oromo have been affected by the policies

of the regime more than most of the peoples in Ethiopia. The reason is simple and well known: (a) they occupy a territory that produces more than 60 percent of Ethiopia's gross national product. The Oromo peasants produce more than 85 percent of the coffee exported from Ethiopia. Gold, platinum and tantalum which play an important role in the Ethiopian economy today are also extracted from mines in Oromia. (b) Democracy, as promised by the Transitional Charter, will not allow the TPLF leaders to structure the political economic institutions in their own favor. (c) Therefore, it was necessary not only to weaken the structure that was designed for a democratic change in Ethiopia, but undermine also legitimate Oromo institutions and political organizations in order to control the state and exploit the economic resources of Oromia, and indeed the rest of the country.

A revolution can be aborted by a counterrevolution, but that does not always mean that no change had occurred or the present is an unaltered continuation of the pre-revolution system. Whenever and wherever revolutions occur somethings will change or seeds of change are planted. One of the changes which was introduced by the 1991 Transitional Charter was the right to language and culture. In the case of the Oromo, what made this change important was the “vernacular revolution” which followed in its aftermath. The speed and efficiency with which textbooks were prepared and the change from Amharic to *Afaan Oromoo* was implemented between July 1991 and June 1992 was stunning. What could have taken several years to organize and implement was accomplished in less than a year under the leadership of Ibsaa Guutama, a member of the OLF who was Ethiopia's Minister of Education in the TGE. The school which, by and large, was seen as an alien institution in many parts of the Oromo countryside in the past became an Oromo institution overnight. With *Afaan Oromoo* as a medium of instruction, it became a place of learning and engagement, where education was sought eagerly and acquired easily by millions of Oromo children. The Oromo children who started their education with *Afaan Oromoo* as a medium of instruction in 1991-92 became the first cohort of the *qubee* generation. The Oromo youth who are currently enrolled in grade-schools (grades 1-8), high schools (grades 9-12), colleges, and universities are over seven million.³ Without this generation, we wouldn't have had the ongoing revolution. The strength of the current uprising cannot be appreciated without a proper understanding of the *qubee* generation's cultural underpinnings and demographic background.

To be called a revolution, an uprising should mobilize a population for a fundamental change. Uprisings can occur in a country in different places and their causes may be also similar; but they become revolutionary only when they occur simultaneously “nationwide”. In the case of the Oromo, the uprising which occurred in a small town a small town of Ginchi, central Oromia, on November 12, 2015 had triggered such an event. Together with the prevailing contention between the Oromo people and the Ethiopian state over the so-called “Addis Ababa Integrated Development Master Plan”, widely known as “the Master Plan,” and multitudes of other illegitimate acts conducted by the TPLF regime against the Oromo, the event in Ginchi, as will be discussed in this article, could raise popular grievances to a boiling point throughout Oromia. The result is a revolution in which millions of people have taken part during

the last five months. In spite of the brutal violence with which the regime has been trying to suppress the revolution, not a single day has passed without massive demonstrations, often occurring simultaneously in a number of towns, cities and districts in Oromia during the last five months. The situation has been such that it gives, at times, the impression that the entire Oromo nation is out demonstrating in the streets.

Purpose of this article

The current Oromo uprising has been preceded by a trajectory of contentious events such as the forest fires of 2000, the 2002 conflict over fertilizer prices, and the 2003/4 conflict over the transfer of Oromia's capital from Finfinnee to Adama that had marked the relationship between the Oromo youth and the Ethiopian regime during the last fifteen years. Since I have dealt with these events and the contentious "Master Plan" at large elsewhere, I will not delve into them here.⁴ Although the outset of the ongoing Oromo uprising was triggered by "the Master Plan", the main focus of this article is on factors that made the year 2014 a turning point in Oromo politics and history. The article will discuss a crucial political identity shift among the Oromo that is caused by the atrocities inflicted on peaceful Oromo protesters by the TPLF regime's police and security forces. It argues also that the consequences of the silence of the international community over these atrocities was, by and large, an Oromo awakening to the realities of realpolitik and strengthening of their will to defend their national rights. With the November 2015 Oromo revolution in focus, the article discusses some important similarities between the revolts of the Oromo *qubee* generation, the Intifada kids of the state of Palestine in the 1990s and the black youth of South Africa's shanty towns in the 1970s and 1980s in revitalizing the revolutionary processes in their respective societies and in influencing positive changes in the positions of world powers on the struggles and rights of their respective peoples. On the home front, it compares the current Oromo Student Movement (OSM) with the Ethiopian Student Movement (ESM) of the 1960s and 1970s. It suggests that, because of its size, the unity of purpose and ideology of its members and their embeddedness in the Oromo society, the OSM will show more resilience against the repression of the Ethiopian regime and become more successful in achieving its goal than the ESM did.

2014 - A decisive juncture in Oromo politics

Since a lot has been said and written about "the Master Plan", particularly in Oromo media, I need not go into details. What I want to mention here are some of the factors that made 2014, in my view, and the declaration of the "Master Plan" a turning point in the struggle of the Oromo people. Obviously, "the Master Plan" was not an Oromo-friendly idea. The Oromo saw it as a physical and psychological attack on them as a nation. Planned to cover over a million hectares of land, it threatened to evict millions of Oromos who live in a dozen towns and rural districts. If implemented, it will tear Oromia into two parts. Between the two, it will carve out of central Oromia a large region from which the Oromo language and culture will disappear gradually.⁵ The political consequences are also obvious. The project will not only violate Oromo sovereignty, but also pose a threat to Oromo nationhood. With its implementation,

Oromia will cease to be a compact contiguous territory as we know it now. In fact, as a concept, “the Master Plan” brings to mind the map of the Palestinian territory and the problems which its separation into “West Bank” and “Gaza Strip” has created for the Palestinian people and state. Should the Oromo accept the creation of similar problems in their territory? Obviously no. Given this and what is said above, it is not difficult to understand why the Oromo oppose resolutely the implementation of “the Master Plan”

One may doubt whether the scenario I have described above is a true intention of the TPLF regime. But it is a reality which is already partially in progress. “The Master Plan” which was announced in 2014 was an enlarged extension of an ongoing project which started in 2005 unannounced by the government. According to Ermias Legesse, the TPLF leaders had grabbed over 50,000 hectares of land that belonged to 30,000 households with over 150,000 family-members were evicted from 29 *kebeles*. Ermias Legesse refers to this as an act of ethnic cleansing. He says that 95 percent of those whose land is confiscated are Oromo and the vast majority of its recipients are Tigrayans.⁶ It is also a widely acknowledged fact that many of the evicted Oromo farmers have died, thousands of families have been disintegrated, and that the majority are now laborers, guards and beggars in Finfinnee and elsewhere in Oromia. The irony is that this is even what members of the ruling party and government are saying.⁷ According to Legesse, those to whom the land was distributed had collected about 20 billion birr or US\$1.5 billion from land sale.⁸ It is public knowledge that the TPLF leaders and their followers became fabulously rich selling the land from which they had evicted Oromo peasants.

A decisive shift in Oromo attitude

The reaction to the news about “the Master Plan” was dramatic. The Oromo were rudely awakened not only by the news about “the Master Plan”, but also by the arrogance of a junior TPLF official who was present at a workshop the regime organized in Adama on April 13, 2014, allegedly to start public discussion on “the Master Plan”. Responding to reactions from some OPDO members who complained that “the Master Plan” imposed from above without consulting the Oromo people he said “there is nothing to prevent us to impose the Master Plan from above.” The implication was “the project will be implemented whether you like it or not”. The TPLF regime’s lack of respect for Oromo rights to homeland and property was reflected by the attitude of the TPLF official. Although the eviction of the Oromo from Finfinnee and its vicinity has been taking place since 2005, that the decisions were made entirely by the TPLF was not clear to most Oromos. As reflected in the reactions at the Adama workshop, ironically, even the members of the OPDO were not informed about “the Master Plan” until April 2014. That the TPLF leaders can exercise their power over the Oromo people and their resources without consultation and legal constraints became crystal clear at the meeting in Adama. When exposed in a rare report by journalists from the state-run Oromiyaa TV (OTV), the knowledge that the TPLF officials did not bother to consult even the mayors of the 15 townships that are affected by “the Master Plan”, let

alone the millions of Oromo farmers of the surrounding villages, was humiliating not only to the junior OPDO members who were attending the workshop, but also the Oromo people at large.⁹

The crisis did not stop there. Be it out of arrogance or ignorance, the leaders of TPLF regime did not give attention to the angry words of some of the young OPDO members at the Adama workshop on “the Master Plan.” They continued to stress the irreversibility of its implementation. Consequently, the protest against the project spread quickly to universities and high schools across Oromia. The students of Ambo University organized a protest on the 25th of April and translated the popular indignation into action. Students from other universities and high schools took similar steps. One of their most resonant slogans was “*Finfinneen handbura Oromiyaati!*”, “Finfinnee is the bellybutton of Oromia!” Their message was clear: “we won’t allow you to cut it out; you are interfering with the geography of our national identity.” The crackdown of the regime’s security forces on the students became the bloodiest they had hitherto conducted against Oromo demonstrators. Over 70 students and residents were killed. Most of them were massacred in Ambo. The impunity with which the federal police and military forces of the regime cracked down on unarmed students revealed clearly their blatant lack of respect for the Oromo right to life.

The atrocity committed against the Oromo youth had unexpected effects. It changed the attitude of the Oromo, including those who hitherto had been indifferent about the ongoing Oromo struggle for justice. It created a reaction which reflected not only the revulsion provoked by the atrocities committed against children, pregnant women and the elderly, but also a national solidarity among the Oromo at large. Above all, the events of 2014 made it clear to many Oromos that regaining control over their homeland is a precondition for exercising their fundamental human and peoples’ rights. “The Master Plan” came to be seen as a crime against the Oromo nation and the attitude of the Oromo people about the Ethiopian state started to take a decisive negative turn.

The banner of Oromo struggle was raised and engrained

The cruelty of the Abyssinian rulers against the Oromo is well-known, but the TPLF regime’s atrocity against the Oromo youth in 2014 was an eye-opener to many Oromos. It stirred the Oromo diaspora across the globe to mobilize and protest in mass. In many cities around the world, they went out condemning the atrocities of the TPLF and chanting the slogan “We are Oromo; we are not Ethiopians.” Many had not only joined the demonstrations against the TPLF-led regime for the first time, but were also carrying the OLF flag. In a number of ways this reaction was significantly different from the mixed feeling which many Oromos had about Ethiopia in the past. What is new, and interesting in my view, is the combination of the declaration of identity expressed as “We are Oromos! We are not Ethiopians!” and the act of carrying the OLF flag, the symbol of the Oromo struggle for freedom, by Oromos who have never been members and even supporters of the OLF. Obviously, the events of 2014 had forced them to take a positions on the “Oromo versus Ethiopia question” which is at the core of Oromo politics. To carry a

flag in a public demonstration is like carrying a banner in a battle: it is to endorse or protect the objective or interest which the flag signifies. Be that as it may, in the diaspora, many Oromos carry the OLF flag at mass rallies, or decorate their homes with it, to express their support for what it represents: that is to say, the establishment of an independent Oromo state.

At home, the significance of flags in identity politics was clearly marked during the 2015 national parliamentary elections. Those of us who followed the 2015 Ethiopian elections were surprised the fact that, among the thousands of Oromos who had participated in rallies organized by the only Oromo opposition party at home, the Oromo Federalist Congress (OFC), not a single person was seen carrying the Ethiopian flag. In fact there were no banners of any kind at many of the videoed rallies. It is said that there was an attempt to distribute the Ethiopian flag to the participants during one of the OFC rallies, but that was unsuccessful. No one was willing to carry it. Given the level of the prevailing political consciousness among the Oromo, it is difficult to expect them to march with a flag which symbolizes the subjugation of their forefathers. But, the intriguing question is that, when we talk about rejection of the flag that does not tell us whether it is the subjugation, which the flag symbolized, which was being rejected, or the Ethiopian identity which is also implied. My guess is both. The rejection of Ethiopian flag and identity is also reflected in the actions of the Oromo youth who have been raising the OLF flag in many places across Oromia. As we have been witnessing during the last five months through social media, it is raised to honor those who were killed by the Ethiopian security.

In general, it seems that as a symbol of resistance, the OLF flag is arousing positive emotions among the Oromo in tandem with the increased atrocity committed against them by the TPLF regime. The demonstrations of 2014, 2015 and the last three four months have indicated clearly the significance the OLF flag in the Oromo struggle. Juxtaposed with the evergreen *odaa* tree, the symbol of *gadaa* democracy, and rays of a rising morning sun, the red, green and yellow OLF banner has become a resonant symbol of the expected Oromo resurgence from the dark nights of a more than a century old subjugation, into the bright light of independence. That the image which the OLF flag is ingraining in the minds of the Oromo. Although the Oromo do not have an independent state, and the use of the OLF flag is not endorsed by an Oromo parliament as a national flag, it is “seen” fulfilling many of the functions that national flags fulfill.

A shocking but liberating moment

The indifference of the international community to the crime perpetrated by the Ethiopian regime was another issue that awakened the Oromo to reality. The Oromo who naively believed that the international system is humane and justice-based were suddenly confronted with the culpable silence of *realpolitik*. Although the atrocities the Ethiopian regime had committed in Oromia constituted a clear case of what the Statute of the International Court (Article 7) defines a crime against humanity, the rest of the world

continued doing business with the Ethiopian regime as usual. The two American Peace Corps volunteers, Jen Klein and Josh Cook who had witnessed atrocities committed against Oromo students in the town of Ambo, central Oromia, wrote “Ironically, as we sat at home, listening to gunshots all day long, John Kerry was visiting Ethiopia a mere 2 hours away in Addis Ababa, to encourage democratic development.”¹⁰

The visiting US Secretary of State was not the only diplomat who was silent about the student massacre. Although 70 peaceful students were massacred in a couple of days, no government raised its voice against the Ethiopian regime. The African Union, which has headquarters in Finfinnee/Addis Ababa, remained conspicuously silent about a massacre that took place “on its doorsteps”. This was also the case with the entire diplomatic corps who staff the embassies of nearly all the member states of the UN, who reside in the heart of the Oromo country. In fact, the two Peace Corps volunteers mentioned above were advised to keep quiet when they started to inform others about what they saw in Ambo. This appalling indifference can be explained by a mixture of factors including the lack of interest in what was happening to the powerless, pursuit of selfish geopolitical and economic interest or selfish individual motives. The Abyssinian ruling elites have a refined tradition of distorting reality. The British journalist Evelyn Waugh wrote “Tricking the European was a national craft; evading issues, promising without the intention of fulfilment...were the ways by which [Abyssinian rulers] had survived and prospered.”¹¹ The rulers of Ethiopia remained adept at exploiting this time tested method long after Waugh made this critical observation. Writing about the 1973 Ethiopian famine, the American writer Jack Shepherd argued in his *Politics and Starvation* that, “honorable men and women’ working for honorable institutions refused to jeopardize their jobs or their comfortable relationship with Haile Selassie’s government by calling international attention to the Emperor’s secret.”¹² The Abyssinian national craft of tricking foreign diplomats is inherited and is being diligently used by TPLF leaders in their dealings with the international community. We also know that they are diplomats and foreign experts themselves who are reluctant to jeopardize their comfortable relationship with the TPLF regime and jobs in Finfinnee (Addis Ababa) today. Avoiding criticism of the Ethiopian government for undemocratic practices, they prefer to talk about a step forward on the right road towards democracy, and pledge assistance for further democratization irrespective of how grave the observed violations of human rights are.¹³

“Oromoo! Walmalee fira hinqabnu!”

Like other oppressed peoples who believed the promises of the UN Charter and that of the other international organizations which that pledge support the oppressed, humiliated and downtrodden peoples, it took the Oromo a long time to understand that their lofty promises are empty words. The Oromo interpretation of the silence over the massacre of Oromo youth in 2014 was that the death of the powerless is not more important than business with the Ethiopian regime. The conclusion they drew from the silence was summarized in a statement which said: “*Oromoo walmalee fira hinqabnu!*” (“Oromo! We have only ourselves!”). This was on the lips of everyone for a while after the tragic massacre of Oromo

students in 2014. Notwithstanding the tone, the statement did not reflect hopelessness or victimhood; it expressed the sober understanding that waiting for others to liberate them was an illusion. It underlined the necessity of internal solidarity and collective action to overcome their national predicament. The overall reaction to the external silence was an internal unity and psychological bonding among the Oromo. The feeling was that “if we are united we will stop the Master Plan; if not our future as a people is in danger.” In my view, the silence of the international community was a “blessing in disguise”: it killed the naïve belief which many Oromos had about the international community’s readiness to condemn injustice wherever and whenever it occurs. It underlined the importance of self-reliance and aggressive engagement in diplomacy.

“Black man, you are on your own!”¹⁴

The Oromo are not the first people to find themselves in that situation. The South African Student Organization (SASO) declared in the early 1970s: “Black man, you are on your own!” Steve Biko, the co-founder and first president of SASO (1969), who is known more as a prominent leader of the anti-Apartheid movement called Black Consciousness Movement (BCM), reminded his compatriots:

We are oppressed because we are black. We must use that very concept [black] to unite ourselves and respond as a cohesive group. We must cling to each other with a tenacity that will shock the perpetrators of evil.¹⁵

The silence of the international community over its massacre of Oromo students in 2014 emboldened the Ethiopian regime to continue its policy of evicting the Oromo from their land. In spite of the widespread Oromo opposition, both at home and in the diaspora, it did not drop the Master Plan. In February 2015, the former Minister of Federal Affairs and current special advisor of the Ethiopian Prime Minister, Mr. Abay Tsehaye, declared his government’s determination to implement the plan. However, it was not only the position of the Ethiopian regime that was unwavering on the question of Finfinnee. Notwithstanding the threats from the government, the Oromo youth at home were prepared to pay the sacrifice it may ask and continue their struggle and defend the sovereignty of their homeland and the rights of their people. In the diaspora, media outlets such as the OMN (Oromia Media Network) and others that connect the remotest parts of Oromia with Oromo communities across the globe were in place. Informed by these sources and through other networks such as Facebook, Tweeter and Instagram, the Oromo in the diaspora were active in bringing the atrocities being committed by the Ethiopian regime in the name of development to the attention of the international community. By and large, the Oromo opposition to the threat posed by the “Master Plan” was united and their response to the crimes committed by the TPLF regime against the Oromo youth was cohesive

The Oromo appeal to the international community got attention after another round of TPLF massacre in late 2015. Following the strong resolution passed by the European Parliament in January 2016, and statements made by the US Department of State on the situation in Ethiopia in general and Oromia in particular, the deafening silence that had prevailed on the ongoing violence against the Oromo was lifted. The Oromo have also started to win some ground in the diplomatic front. However, that does not mean enough work has been done and effective pressure has been applied against the TPLF regime. In fact the violation of human rights in Oromia has kept on escalating since November 2015.

The November 2015 Oromo Revolution

An event in a small town in Oromia on November 12, 2015 epitomized the crimes of the TPLF. An uprising which was ignited in Ginchi, a small town 80 km west of Finfinnee, involved an assortment of injustices: land grabbing, the plunder of Oromo resources, deforestation, destruction of the environment, the impunity of the security forces, in other words, the major causes of Oromo grievances because of which the Oromo students have been protesting for a long time across Oromia. When the news of what happened in Ginchi was reported over social media, it became an epitome of both the crimes of the TPLF regime and the resistance in Oromia. The people could not tolerate the situation anymore. The news caused uprisings first in Ambo and then to Mendi, a town in western Oromia, and immediately all over Oromia. The situation is such that sometimes it seemed as if the Oromo are marching simultaneously in one and the same demonstration. It is as if people were responding in unison to a national call made in March 2015 by the students of Jimma University who, among other things, said: “We have been subjugated together; we should stand shoulder to shoulder to reclaim our God given rights and freedom together.”¹⁶ The news and video records that have been coming out of Oromia on daily basis since November 12, 2015 show successions of mass demonstrations across Oromia that reflect similarities with the daring actions of the Palestinian Intifada kids and the mighty post-Soweto youth protests in South Africa’s black townships in the 1980s.¹⁷

In January 2015 *OPride* wrote that today’s Oromo youth are “like a new species of Oromo.” They are “keenly aware of their state’s boundaries and the Oromo people’s longstanding misgivings about the Ethiopian state.” It said “the average Oromo protester personifies the indomitable spirit of Oromo nationalism and a steely determination to see to it that the injustice against the Oromo becomes a thing of the past. Such open national consciousness was hitherto unthinkable in Ethiopia, which remained a unitary state in large part by harshly suppressing Oromo self-expressions.”¹⁸ In fact, *OPride’s* observation about the Oromo *qubee* generation’s national consciousness and indomitable determination is reflected in the following sample of slogans. Chanted in chorus by tens of thousands of schoolchildren, secondary school and university students, these and other slogans have been reverberating across Oromia during the last five months.¹⁹ In many towns and remote villages schoolchildren were chanting the touching slogans defying cruel beating, tear gas, and even live ammunition directed at them by policemen and the security forces of the Ethiopian regime.

Afaan Oromoo

Oromiyaan Biyya keenya!
 Biyya keenya dhiifnee eessa deemna?
 Oromiyaa irratti dhalannee
 Oromiyaa irratti guddannee!
 Oromiyaa irratti of barre!
 Biyya keenya dhiifnee eessa deemna!
 Biyya keenya ni falmanna!

Oromoon mirga namaa hinxuqnu!
 Barattooni keenya maaliif dhuman?
 Barsiisaan kenya maaliif dhuman?
 Qotee bulaan keenya maaliif dhuman?
 Hojeetaan keenya maaliif dhuman?

Harr'as borus Oromiyaaf duuna!
 Mirga keenya ni falmanna!
 Biyyi keenya hingurguramu!
 Mirga keenya yoomiyyuu ni falmanna!

Lafa hingurgurru
 Oromiyaa ni falamanna!
 Oromiyaan ni bilisoomti!

Translation

Oromiyaa is our Homeland!
 Where shall we go leaving our Homeland!?
 Oromiyaa is our Motherland!
 Oromiyaa has nurtured us!
 Oromia has fostered us!
 We shall not be evicted from our land!
 We shall defend our Homeland!

We do not violate others' rights!
 Why were our students killed?
 Why were our teachers killed?
 Why were our farmers killed?
 Why were our workers killed?

We shall die for Oromia!
 We shall fight for our rights!
 Our Motherland is not for sale!
 We shall never stop fighting for our rights!

We will not sell our land
 We shall fight for Oromia!
 Oromia shall be free!

As reflected in these slogans, the Oromo youth want that their people should get rid of terror, eviction, and humiliation under the rule of the TPLF regime and be in charge of their own destiny. They demand respect for their rights – their right to life, and the right to shape their individual and collective lives without external interference. They will not violate others' rights, but, as reflected in the slogans, they will sacrifice their lives to defend Oromo rights and dignity. To paraphrase a comment made by an observer, the Oromo protesters have shattered fear and intimidation and are confronting the regime's brutal crackdowns, including salvos of live ammunition, defiantly with hands crossed. This bravery is not an impulsive act. To the Oromo, the question of Finfinnee is seen as a matter of life and death for Oromo sovereignty and territorial integrity, in a federation or as an independent state. Although almost all of the Oromo youth's protests have been conducted hitherto peacefully, the responses from the Ethiopian regime has involved deadly brutalities, beatings, rapes, disappearances, imprisonments etc. The men, women and children killed so far are at least 550; those who have been injured are counted in thousands. Nobody knows the number of those who have been kidnaped and disappeared. Those who are detained are counted in tens of thousands.

The Oromo youth, the children of Soweto and the Intifada kids of Palestine

It is interesting to note here that features of the revolution that had been ignited by the incident in Ginchi in November 2015 has similarities with the resistance of the South African and Palestinian peoples in the past. To begin with, welded together by an unwavering faith in their legitimate cause the Palestinian Intifada kids constituted a defiant "army" who faced Israeli tanks, jeeps and soldiers with stones. Their bravery had cost them many lives, but, it was not pointless or in vain. It was contagious and took the Palestinians to the streets in their thousands. The burial of each and every Palestinian killed by Israeli

bullets became a massive show of national solidarity in a resolute psychological defiance against the Israeli occupation. The kids who lost their lives were not betrayed and forgotten. As we remember, it was the heroic acts of the Intifada youth which forced the Israeli government under Yitzhak Rabin to negotiate with the Palestine Liberation Front (PLO) and its leader Yasser Arafat in 1993. Thus, the daring youth also put the Palestinian question on the agenda of the powerful West and the Palestinian state on the map of the Middle East.

The similarities between the current deeds of the Oromo youth to stop the implementation of “the Addis Ababa Master Plan,” and the courage the Palestinian kids had shown in defense of Palestinian rights are striking. It is even the struggle of the Oromo youth that has made the world to pay attention to the Oromo question for the first time. Among others, the European Parliament passed resolution on the situation in Ethiopia condemning the use of violence against peaceful Oromo protesters. The US government expressed its concern publicly for the first time about the situation in Oromia. However, the statements are yet to be accompanied by tangible action. On its part, the Ethiopian regime has continued with its vicious actions against the Oromo people ignoring the concern of the international community.

Again, it is important to remember that the support of the international community, though needed, is not a panacea for a national predicament in the last analysis. Although, the assistance given to the ANC by external powers was very substantial, but we must remember that Apartheid was brought to its disgraceful demise by the monumental demonstrations and death-defying confrontations which were conducted in the racially segregated shanty towns in which the vast majority of the indigenous African population live. Indeed, it was those actions which had gradually turned Apartheid South Africa into a hell for the white racist regime. The trend we see in Oromia is proceeding in the same direction. As the uprising shocked “the perpetrators of evil” in Apartheid South Africa, the Oromo uprising has given the TPLF regime a shock it has never felt during last 25 years. As we know, it took a decade and half to bring down the Apartheid regime after the Soweto uprising. While the popular base of the ongoing Oromo revolution seems to be at least as united and strong as the Anti-apartheid movement had been, one cannot say the same when it comes to the strength of its leadership. However, I can say that what the OMS has already achieved has brought the Oromo people nearer to the goal they have been aspiring for a long time: (a) it has united the Oromo people from corner to corner to struggle for a common goal; (b) it has brought the Oromo question to the attention of the international community. (c) One of the arguments against Oromo independence concerns the security of non-Oromos who live in Oromia today. However, the humanity shown to non-Oromos during the last five months must have, by and large, dispelled that fear. In other words, it has indicated that non-Oromos can live in an independent Oromia without fear for their lives and property. These and other victories scored by the Oromo people, particularly during the last five months, indicate that the day of their independence is not far

Number matters

The current Oromo uprising is maelstrom that has refused to cease for the last five months and is involving scores of cities, all the universities in Oromia, nearly all the high schools and most of the elementary schools. In addition, millions of farmers, businessmen and women, and civil servants have been participating in it. However, the Oromo youth remain in the forefront. The term youth includes university and high school students and primary school children. The TPLF leaders seem to have forgotten the role the Ethiopian Student Movement (ESM) had played in overthrowing the Haile Selassie regime in 1974 when they under-estimated the strength of the Oromo youth. The ESM of late 1960s and early 1970s of which many of the TPLF leaders were members, was based on population of 6,098 university (in 1974-75), 88,541 secondary school and 1,191,158 grade school (1-8) students in the country, including Eritrea, in 1976.²⁰ Compared to that, there are, according to a recent report from the Ministry of Education of Ethiopia²¹, over 600,000 students enrolled in higher institutions of education in the country during the academic year 2013/14. If we estimate that between 35 percent of them are Oromo that means there are over 210,000 Oromo students in the colleges and universities. According to the same source, the number of Oromo students who were attending secondary schools was more than 650,000. Over 6,620,000 Oromo children were attending grade schools. Given this gigantic number of current schoolchildren, it is plausible to assume that the number of Oromo students in secondary schools and universities will double and even triple soon. Therefore, it is unlikely that the TPLF or any other regime that may take power in Finfinnee hereafter can destroy the Oromo youth movement physically or diminish its political importance unless it is prepared to commit a genocide.

It is important to point in this connection that the majority of the Oromo youth with whom the TPLF regime is in conflict were born after it came to power. They are between the ages of 17 and 24. A regime which treats a young generation of such an immense size with unbridled atrocity as the TPLF has been doing for the last fifteen years cannot have a future. The TPLF regime is seating in an irreparably damaged boat that is sinking in a stormy sea. The only means it depends on now to stay in power are the instruments of coercion. But those are not functional any more in Oromia.

Unity of purpose and ideology matter

Unity of purpose and ideology are the other variables which differentiate the Oromo Student Movement (OSM) from the Ethiopian Student Movement (ESM). The ESM's mission was based on the notion of class struggle. Its vision was building an Ethiopian state dominated by a working class. However, a working class that can conduct a revolution and run a state did not exist in Ethiopia. Therefore, the revolution for which it became a catalyst paved the way for a military dictatorship. After the *Dergue* destroyed ESM in the mid-1970s, it has not been possible to unite Ethiopian youth under a similar organization. The case of the Oromo youth movement is different. It is not only larger in size, but is also free from the ethnic division which denied members of the ESM unity. It is based on *Oromummaa* (Oromo

nationalism) the essence of which is psychological bonding and the conviction to defend Oromo rights. As Frantz Fanon had stated, “each generation must discover its mission, fulfill it or betray it.” According to most of the respondents interviewed by media outlets such as *Voice of America* (VOA) and *Oromia Media Network* (OMN), *abba biyyummaa* is the aim for which they will struggle to the end. In its six-point resolution of April 15, 2016 the students of Wallaga University have declared, among others, that “*Diina guyyaa saafaa mana keenya seenuun haadhaa fi ilmoo wal irratti ajjeesaa jiru of keessaa baasuf halkaniif guyyaa hojjenna*” (We will work day and night to dislodge the enemy that is killing mothers and their children together entering our homes in broad daylight).²² Even though it is not declared as a manifesto, the liberation of Oromia is crystalizing as a mission of the *qubee* generation. The events of the last five months indicate a rapid progress in that direction.

Embeddedness

Another factor that makes the Oromo youth movement different from that of the ESM is its *embeddedness* in the society. The signs are that it has greater support from the people than the ESM ever had. In fact few had heard about the ESM outside the major urban centers. John Markakis has the following to say about them. They “came neither from the down-trodden peasant mass nor the minuscule working class. They were the offspring of the ruling elite, the *makuanent*, *gultegna*, *neftegna* and *balabbat*; the overwhelming majority were of Abyssinian origin, and lived in towns. ... [These] town-bred radicals were little acquainted with conditions in the countryside.”²³ In other words, the vast majority of the students knew little about the aspirations of, particularly the non-Abyssinian peoples they were talking about. Since the class perspective defined the sociology of Imperial Ethiopia in their view, its main problem was distributive justice. One was rich or poor, landless or landlord. Therefore, they emphasized distributive justice as a solution for conflict in Ethiopia.

The case of the present Oromo youth movement is different. Conceived in the wombs of an ongoing struggle for national liberation, the overriding concern of the majority of its members is the achievement of national sovereignty. In their view, distributive justice and the national question cannot be seen separately – for a conquered, and politically and culturally dominated people like the Oromo, economic liberation in the absence national freedom is barely achievable. More significantly, the overwhelming majority are from the rural areas and the sons and daughters of farming households. What they want is what their people are aspiring for. The subordination of the Oromo as a nation and the economic disadvantages they experience as individuals are often interrelated. They express the grievances of their people. The most common slogan of the Oromo demonstrators during the last five months has been “*Gaafiin Bartoota gaaffii ummataatii!*” “The student demands are the demands of the people!” As a generation, the *qubee* generation see themselves as the offspring of heroes who had sacrificed their lives while fighting for the liberation of Oromia. Almost every Oromo household seems to have at least one young member who entertains these feelings and convictions of the OSM.

A peaceful resistance against a regime that does not understand peace

The pre-empting efforts to silence the Oromo youth through the practice of arbitrary imprisonment, beating, torture, murder, rape, and disappearing may continue, but there will be no room for the reproduction of the Abyssinian system of domination in Oromia anymore. The TPLF atrocities have not only intensified youth resistance, but also awakened the Oromo people at large to the reality that fighting injustice with every means necessary is a must. The events of 2014, 2015 and now 2016 made the Oromo to come to the conclusion that they cannot allow anyone to hunt and kill their sons and daughters, brothers and sisters or their neighbors as if they are unprotected wild game. The Oromo people have learnt to withstand increasing repression with determination under the present regime. They have “killed” their worst enemy, fear. Many of us have been often stunned with awe during the last five months to see the failure of atrocious violence including live ammunition to force the Oromo youth into flight or silence their protest. They buried their dead and went back to the place where their brothers, sisters or compatriots were killed to continue with the protest. However, their method of resistance may not remain as peaceful as it had been hitherto. Frantz Fanon, whose views about freedom were informed by the struggles waged by indigenous peoples against European colonial rule in Africa and elsewhere in the 1950 and 1960s, and shaped particularly through his direct participation in the Algerian war of independence, has reminded us that, “For he [the indigenous person] knows that he is not an animal; and it is precisely when he realizes his humanity that he begins to sharpen the weapons with which he will secure his victory.”²⁴ Or as stated by another influential thinker Mamood Mamdani, “He of whom they [the colonizers] have never stopped saying that the only language he understands is that of force, decides to give utterance by force” to become the master of his destiny.²⁵ By and large, Fanon’s and Mamdani’s statements mirror a universal truth: whenever history takes that course, we find yesterday’s victims turning around and casting aside their victimhood and becoming masters of their own lives and destiny. So far the Oromo have conducted peaceful protests facing live bullets from the police, the notorious *Agazji* squads and military forces of the Ethiopian state. Confident in the righteousness of their demands, they haven’t been using violence to achieve it. But, they are determined to defeat the Ethiopian regime by making themselves uncontrollable and Oromia ungovernable. In an effort to crash the Oromo uprising, the TPLF regime has made recourse to the indiscriminate use of violence against the Oromo people as a whole. This violence may increase in its atrocity. However, like all oppressors the TPLF-regime tends to forget that it does not have a monopoly over violence. It ignores the Oromo also have the right to use violence in self-defense and pursuit of justice.

Peace and justice go together. Therefore, talking about peace doesn’t make sense in the absence of justice. Wherever it fails to restore justice, peaceful resistance cannot remain peaceful indefinitely. As reflected in the events described above, the peaceful protests of the Oromo students during the last fifteen years have been extremely costly to themselves, their families and the Oromo nation as a whole. The regime has

made it known repeatedly that it will never tolerate, any opposition to its power whether it is peaceful or not. The option which its leaders have been offering the Oromo and other peoples in Ethiopia is not democracy but submission to their rule. As I tried to show in this article the Oromo youth have shown their rejection of subjugation. A writer summarizes their feeling as follows:

The only future I see is a future free of Abyssinians [who do not] dominate any aspect of Oromo life. It is a future where Oromo police protect Oromo towns, Oromo armies protect Oromo borders, Oromo teachers educate Oromo children and where Oromo leaders are peacefully elected to govern Oromo people. It is a future where the name of our homeland is Oromia.²⁶

The independent state of Oromia implied in the quotation is not a new as an idea or a program for action. Hundreds of Oromo have written about it. Thousands of them have sacrificed their lives to realize it. The Indian sociologist T. Oommen has said that “a nation tends to produce its state when it faces abnormal situations.”²⁷ Needless to say here that the situation in which the Oromo had been caught for more than 130 years had been abnormal before it became totally abominable under the present regime. The experience of the Oromo youth during the last 15 years has proved that use of peaceful protests will not change the situation. The logical response to the situation is self-defense by all means necessary. Freedom is seldom given freely. It cannot be achieved by begging oppressors for it. Speaking about Apartheid South Africa, Steve Biko said that for the blacks, begging the Apartheid regime for emancipation is “giving them further sanction to continue with their racist and oppressive system.”²⁸ Begging the TPLF-led regime for political democracy will amount not only to inviting them to continue with the ongoing massacre of the Oromo youth, evicting of Oromo farmers, and imprisoning, torturing and killing Oromos, but also to sanction their blatant contempt for the Oromo people.

Conclusion

The Oromo have shown great patience and tried to create conditions in which they can live on decent and respectful terms in Ethiopia for a long time. It did not work. That is what the 2015 Ethiopian elections showed us. The Oromo do not have much choice but paying the ultimate price to reclaim their freedom. It is a moral imperative to get rid of the repressive grip of a vicious system that is killing them and is destroying the eco-system on which they depend for their survival. The events of the last two years have given us a clearer view of not only the cruelty of the Ethiopian regime, but also a glimpse of a new phase in the Oromo struggle for independence. If I may predict, the increasing number of Oromos who are responding to the call of their youth heralds that the day of freedom is dawning. As I will discuss elsewhere (forthcoming in *Oromia Today*) this does not mean that their revolution is secure against both Oromo and Abyssinian hijackers. What I will suggest here is that our youth should stay vigilant regarding

about political parties who promise democracy now but will even reverse the achievements the Oromo people have made so far through their struggle once they come to power in Finfinnee.

The leaders of the Ethiopian regime did not imagine the resistance which the Oromo had put up, since November 2015 was possible, when they threatened those who would dare to oppose the Master Plan with reprisal. Then, they were shocked and said they had cancelled the controversial Mater Plan. However, the statement about the termination of the project came not only too late, but was also insincere. It was false because the regime did not release the tens of thousands of Oromos they have incarcerated for protesting against “the Master Plan;” they have continued to use violence with impunity against those who demand the release of the detained Oromos and imprison more Oromos. Lately they are even saying the Master Plan is not abandoned but will be revised and implemented. Turning deaf ears to the popular slogan “Oromia is not for sale”, they are promising to pay Oromo farmers for the land from which they will be evicted. The conclusion is that the Oromo have no other option left than getting rid of the oppressors by all means necessary and at any cost to regain their freedom and control over their own resources.

- The first version was presented at the Oromo Studies Association (OSA) 2016 Mid-Year Conference, London School of Economics on April 2 – 3, 2016. This version is prepared for the website *Oromia Today* on request.

¹ Ernst Gellner, *Nationalism*, 1983, p. 85

² Ermias Legesse, *Ye-Meles Tirufatoch – Balabet Alba Ketema (The Legacies of Meles - A City Without Owners)*, 2014, p. 16ff.

³ For non-Oromos who do not have information about Oromo language, *qubee* is the Latin script adapted by Oromo scholars to Oromo sounds and is used in Oromo writing.

⁴ Mekuria Bulcha, “Land Grabbing and the Environmental Crime: Causes of the Oromo Student Uprising 2000-2015.” Paper present at Oromo Studies Association (OSA) Symposium Washington Ethical Society, January 16, 2016. Forthcoming in the Proceedings of the Symposium.

⁵ Gizachew T. Tesso, Amharic interview with *ESAT TV* on November 5, 2015.

⁶ Ermias Legesse, *ibid*.

⁷ See Oromia Media Network (OMN), March 8, 2016. In a meeting which was videoed and leaked to the mass media recently, the current Speaker of the Ethiopian Federal Parliament, Abba Duulaa Gammadaa, was confessing that the said evictions had destroyed the lives of tens of thousands of former self-sufficient families and who are now jobless and beggars, or are daily laborers, guards and cleaners hired by those to whom the government sold their land. In the video, he was persuading Oromo parliamentarians to go and see the situation for themselves. The sincerity of Abba Duulaa Gammadaa is questionable because the ruling party, of which he is a member, is killing Oromos who are protesting against “the Master Plan” while he is speaking. In addition, in the first place, he was the President of the Regional State of Oromia when the eviction of the Oromo farmers he was talking about occurred.

⁸ Ermias Legesse, 2014, p. 6.

⁹ See News report by Yihun Ingda on Ethiopian Television Oromo Program, April 13, 2014

¹⁰ Jen & Josh “Ambo Protests: A Personal Account”, May 24, 2014.

¹¹ Evelyn Waugh, *Waugh in Abyssinia*, 1936.

¹² Cited by Peter Gill in *Famine & foreigners: Ethiopia since Live Aid*, Oxford University Press, 2010, p. 29.

¹³ The hypocrisy of whitewashing Ethiopia’s murky “realities” is not limited to the diplomatic community in Finfinnee but includes also agents of international organizations. A UNDP report which quotes a World Bank document talks about impressive progress made by Ethiopia Cited in *UNDP National Human Development Report 2014: Ethiopia*, p. 86.

¹⁴ Steve Biko, S. *I Write What I Like*, Oxford: Heinemann, 1976, p. 91

¹⁵ *Ibid*, p. 91

¹⁶ See *Gadaa.com*, “Appeal Letter of the Students of Jimma University to the University’s Administration”, March 3, 2015.

¹⁷ See Gizaw Tassisa, “The Soweto (South African) Students Uprising for Freedom and Justice Implications to the April 2014 Oromo Students Uprising for Freedom and Justice”, *Gadaa.com*, January, 2015.

¹⁸ *OPride*, “OPride’s Oromo Person of the Year 2014: Oromo Student Protesters”, January 1, 2015.

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- ¹⁹ See for example Gadaa.com, “Videos Chronicle How Fear Got Defeated by Oromo Protests in Oromia – December 9, 2015 to January 4, 2016, posted on January 6, 2016,
- ²⁰ Central Statistical Office (SCO), *Ethiopia: Statistical Abstract 1976*, Addis Ababa, 1976, p. 231
- ²¹ See Ministry of Education of Ethiopia (ME), *Education National Abstract 2013/14*, June 2015
- ²² See *Ayyaantuu.com*, “A Statement from the *Qeerroo* branch of Wallaga University”, April, 15, 2016.
- ²³ Markakis, J. *Ethiopia: The Last Two Frontiers*, James Currey, 2011, p. 162.
- ²⁴ Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, Translated from French by Constance Farrington, New York: Grove Press, 1961, p. 43.
- ²⁵ Mamdani, M. *When Victims Become Killers*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002, p. 13
- ²⁶ Jiituu Finfinnee, “The Abyssinian Personality: Why They Cannot Be Trusted.” *Oromo Press*, April 22, 2014
- ²⁷ T. K. Oommen, *Citizenship and National Identity: From Nationalism to Globalism*, London: Sage Publications, 1997, p. 31.
- ²⁸ Biko, S. *ibid.* p. 97.