

THE OROMO - NO RESPITE FOR 120 YEARS

Ever since Menelik II overrun Oromo land toward the end of the 19th century, it has been the misfortune of the Oromo people to form the lowest stratum of Ethiopian economic and political life. There is no denying that other peoples of the South also suffered the same fate.

Menelik's rule was unbearably harsh. Oromos and other Southern peoples were treated as serfs – close to slavery. For example, a landlord in Harar, Bale (Goba), Illu Ababora and Arsi forced his tenants and their families to work on his land. When he had a wedding or any festive occasion, whole families would move to his house and work for two to three weeks until the event was over.

This situation changed somewhat during Emperor Haile Sellassie's reign, as farmers were allowed to pay their dues in grain in lieu of labor. It was during this period that the Oromo of Bale rebelled and were hit hard by Emperor Haile Sellassie's army.

During the last half of the Derg regime, conditions of life for the Oromo underwent some changes, as the Government became the landlord instead of individual settlers. Farmers were moved from one plot to another, or from one locality to another, at will. Forced resettlement greatly affected the Oromo farmers. In addition, during the last years of the Derg, the Oromo began to suffer another kind of oppression, as some Oromo youth (the embryo of the Oromo Liberation Front - OLF) ran away to Khartoum and from there, took to the jungle to carry on armed struggle. The Oromo population suffered further as their sons and daughters were being hunted on suspicion that they were OLF sympathizers and potential recruits. This situation has continued even until today with greater intensity because Oromo youth continued to be arrested and incarcerated in hardship areas by the thousands, and often died of malaria and other maladies. Zeway prison has been a symbol of Oromo oppression with its sprawling detention center.

Ever since it replaced the Derg, EPRDF has continued to make positive gestures to the Oromo. The formal introduction of the Federal System brought to the Oromo some perceived but largely empty promises. The Oromo were told, like everybody else, that they could teach in their language in schools and run their Regional Government in Afan Oromo. In terms of living standard and psychological and emotional emancipation, no change took place in the life of the Oromo. In elementary schools, there are normally 100 students in one classroom. Schools are, on the average, an hour-and-half apart, walking. Clinics are even worse. They are about two hours walk from each other, on the average.

Judges and teachers in Oromia are often people of Amhara descent because the Oromo had very little opportunity for higher education. Infrastructure in Oromia is very inferior to that of the Northern States. Soil erosion has reduced coffee production seriously not to mention the fall of coffee price internationally.

The Oromo people are highly frustrated. Their neighbors in the North have a better educational and health infrastructure. Teachers, doctors, engineers, judges, civil servants in general are better trained in the North, because the Oromo did not have the same opportunities for higher

education. From casual observation of everyday life, for example, there may be one Oromo Ph.D. for every 200 Amhara Ph.D.s. Clearly, there was a lack of equal opportunity for education in this country.

Now, the Oromo, confused by the diverse messages of OLF, OPDO, ONC and OFDM, and angered by the inaction of the Government (Regional and Federal), have become restless and inflammable. They see their land being given away to investors (mostly domestic) without any meaningful compensation from such investors or the Government. Low-paying employment may be the only advantage, if they are lucky. Benefits accruing from forward activity of such investments do not reach the dispossessed poor Oromo farmers.

Today, Oromo youth, supported by their relatives, are venting their anger as recently demonstrated in Ambo, Jimma, Nekemte, Gimbi, Nedjo, Bodji, Kofole (Arsi), Tiquir-Inchinni, Gedo, Mandi, and possibly others. OFDM says: "Let us exercise our legitimate citizen's rights through constitutional means." Parents who are concerned about the spread of student unrest listen to OFDM, but their children tell them: "Kun soba" (It is not true).

Consistently, Oromo students repeat some of the following public declarations everywhere they tried to demonstrate in the last few weeks:

1. Free Mecha-Tulama leaders because the Government has been unable for two years to provide any evidence that Mecha-Tulama leaders had any connection to OLF (for which they were accused). Their arrest and imprisonment has portrayed to the Oromo the Government's apparent desire to punish Oromo prisoners extra-judicially. About eight years ago, the Government detained some 45 Oromo individuals (some of them 65 years old), kept them in prison for over four years, and then simply released them. They were also accused of aiding and abating OLF activity in the country. No evidence was ever provided. They were tried in a special court organized for trying "Oromo cases". Again, they were punished extra-judicially by being imprisoned for four years.
2. Effectuate the provision made in the Constitution that Oromia would get economic benefit from Finfinnee (Addis-Abeba). Oromo officials should be involved in the administration of Finfinnee, and Finfinnee should share with Oromia certain tax revenues. Land should be available for constructing an Oromo museum and cultural centers. Tens of millions of Birr is collected in the form of various taxes every month from commodities produced in Oromia and sold in Finfinnee. Finfinnee cannot survive without the animals and commodities brought to it by Oromo farmers every day.
3. The Government of Oromia is unacceptably far from good governance. This year alone, many students have died in the hands of the Government of Oromia, while trying to exercise their constitutional rights to demonstrate. They never started by throwing stones. They sometimes did after they were attacked by policemen simply for gathering together even in school compounds.

4. Two Oromo prisoners were shot in Akaki Prison with the allegation that they were trying to escape. One of the two young men, who died later, was on crutches and could have hardly tried to escape.
5. A few years ago, hundreds of square kilometers of forest land was burnt down in Bale. This could hardly demonstrate good and competent governance.
6. In 2004, 250 Oromo students were expelled from the University of Addis Abeba with the instigation of OPDO.
7. During the May Elections of this year, many constituencies in Oromia were badly handled, especially during the Election Rerun. OFDM went to the Federal High court complaining that five constituencies, which should have been reviewed, were not reviewed. The High Court decided in favor of OFDM. The Election Board immediately appealed to the Supreme Court, which hurriedly reversed the decision. (It is only logical that one questions the fairness of making the President of the Supreme Court also Chairman of the National Election Board.) Therefore, OFDM knows, from first hand experience, about the performance of N.E.B. during the last National Election.
8. These measures of misrule and oppression imposed on the Oromo people, must be corrected. Corrective actions must be taken immediately in many cases while others could be handled in the short to medium term.
9. These extremely serious problems relate to the Oromo people, but OFDM acknowledges that other national issues raised by other Political Parties must also be handled expeditiously.

However, solving only the problems relating to:

- Parliamentary procedures,
- Human Rights in general (Rule of Law),
- Access by political Parties to public media, and
- Reform of the National Election Board (enhancement of institutional capacity)

and not attending to the particular Oromo issues, would still leave the country in chaos and might require the constant use of security forces to quell unrest in Oromia.

Oromo Federalist Democratic Movement (OFDM)

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Finfinnee (Addis Abeba)