

OLF and Ethiopia. By Yilma Bekele

The news that the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) has decided to struggle for freedom in consort with all Democratic forces in Ethiopia is the best Christmas present the Ethiopian people gave themselves. There is no question we are entering a new chapter in our struggle to be free like any other human being. The decision by the leadership of the OLF is a very significant development that has a potential to tip the balance of power. If you ask me, two hands are always better than one.

As reported by Abebe Gelaw of ESATⁱ the OLF at its Plenary National Council meeting held in Minnesota on December 30 and 31 “announced its historic decision to drop its long-held secessionist agenda and to embrace the unity of Ethiopia under a genuine federal arrangement that must guarantee the rights, equality and liberty of all Ethiopians.” What more can one ask for?

The OLF led by Brigadier General Kemal Gelchu made a very tough decision. All Ethiopians owe him a debt of gratitude for his farsighted leadership. The position he reversed is not an easy one. It took courage by him and the other leaders to take such undertaking. Generations of our Oromo people have grown with that aim as a call of duty. It will take a lot of work to change that.

Change is something that is difficult to accept. It is natural that most of us resist change. We all have our comfort zone and any thing different is disconcerting. The OLF and Brigadier General Gulchu’s decision is bound to disturb our comfort zone. That is what leadership is all about. This is not the first tough choice made by the Brigadier General. On August 8, 2008 he defected from the Ethiopian National Defense Forces with two hundred soldiers and officers with him.

As a person sworn to protect Ethiopia he did not look kindly at becoming an errand boy for TPLF. Upon defection he joined the OLF and rose to position of leadership. Today under his leadership the OLF is entering a new chapter. The Oromo people have paid a heavy price under different administrations. The rest of the Ethiopian people have suffered as well. The realization by the OLF that the bond that ties us together is so strong and deep that decoupling is not a worthy endeavor is a breath of fresh air. If this bold decision will shorten the suffering of our people even by a day we welcome it.

The new situation does not sit well with some people. It is understandable. Separation, secession, self-determination have been a mantra of the liberation movements in Ethiopia for the last fifty years. It is like all other liberation movements that emerged in the sixties. You know us we Ethiopians once we got hold of something we don’t let go. ELF, EPLF, OLF, TPLF stayed true to that religion of unending struggle. It has not brought us peace or prosperity. A new OLF is emerging from the old. A smarter and mature OLF that will satisfy the real needs of the Oromo people.

The lack of competent leadership has been the Achilles heel of the movement. Many so called ‘educated’ leaders have caused a lot of agony and hardship to the Oromo people. There is no need to pretend otherwise. Over fifty years of sacrifice and nothing much to show for it is a loud statement. The TPLF mafia group acerbated the problem by stocking hatred and animosity while ruling with an iron fist from the background. The OLF was reduced to peddling hate to collect revenue while exposing its constituents to abuse and shame. In today’s Democratic Ethiopia every prison, jail, detention center is filled by Oromo political prisoners.

Ginbot 7 Movement and Dr. Berhanu should be given credit for patiently working without much fanfare and prepare the ground necessary for such decision. It shows maturity by both organizations to put differences aside and work for the common good. There are only winners and no losers in this situation. The OLF press release states “The OLF National Council also focused on the timely demand of working with other democratic forces in forming the new Ethiopia that will guarantee and protect the fundamental rights of all peoples in Ethiopia. The new social contract will and should be based on the free will and consent of all peoples in Ethiopia.”

The job is half done. It is a very promising beginning. The real work starts now. Changing people’s hearts and minds is not an easy task. On the other hand if it were easy we would not be where we are now. The TPLF regime will do all it could to throw cold water at this news. It will go out of its way to dismiss it as useless. It will create bogus news and opinions to discredit the participants. The regime fears unity more than any army. It was the unity of all those organizations under the umbrella of Kinijit that exposed the hollowness of the TPLF regime. The unity of OLF with any other organization is their nightmare come true.

The news will also get its share of criticism from the opposition. It is understandable. After all separation was the only demand on the table. The leadership of the Fronts saw it as the magic cure. The central highlanders saw it as the final disintegration of Ethiopia. Most Ethiopian political leaders used the issue to further their own agenda. Some used it a recruiting tool regardless of the consequences. At the end it came to loose its meaning except to the people on the ground that are still paying the price for failed leadership and unholy alliances.

Some in the opposition are crying foul before they even saw the press release. That is nothing new either. We love to jump the gun and dive into condemnation and mudslinging. It is a shame when it comes from those that should know better. Reasoned and well research thesis that will enhance the discussion to higher level is what is expected. I am not against opposition to the new position as articulated by the OLF but I am only asking for a seasoned discussion that will take the aspirations of our people into consideration.

It is not a good idea to scratch the bottom of the barrel and emerge with such prize as “Oromo nationalism was built by successfully deconstructing the Ethiopian nationalism. Since 1991, the former has effectively displaced the later in Oromia and as a result an entire generation has been brought up with that narrative. Furthermore, despite its limits, self-rule has allowed the rise of millions of bureaucratic elites who have vested material and political interest in preserving the gains of the Oromo struggle and maintaining the nationalist narrative.”

What exactly does that mean? Has OPDO satisfied the aspirations of the Oromo masses? Are we praising it for raising a new generation that is programmed to hate Ethiopia? Is that Good? When did being mildly screwed pass as a fair reward or a fair exchange, is that what is meant by limited self-rule? Furthermore when did Bandas that serve the occupying force get elevated to future leaders? I hope we are not thinking of rewarding TPLF controlled Oromo thugs that have amassed huge fortune robbing the Oromo people and build the new Oromia on their shoulders? It is a wobbly foundation if you ask me.

I am assuming the so called 'bureaucratic elites' are the same ones that for example are selling and leasing fertile Oromo land to such as Flower growers that suck every drop of water from the rivers and streams, discharge carcinogen chemicals that will stay in the soil poisoning the drinking water for the next hundred years, that hire our Oromo girls of fifteen years old to spray the flowers with chemicals without adequate protection not even lousy gloves and increase the chances of respiratory and other disease with no health insurance and no compensation and no retirement – I will say these folks are not good material for a solid foundation.

Name-calling and cynical dismissal of our leaders efforts is not a winning strategy. The OLF and Ginbot 7 are not some garden-variety organizations to be dismissed lightly. They are doing what they believe is the right thing to relieve the hardship of eighty million Ethiopians that are faced with hunger, disease and ignorance as we speak. We give our leaders the respect that is due. We respect them for their vision of a better future, intelligent leadership, and their sacrifice of family and profession while working on our behalf. That is not much to ask.

Both Dr. Berhanu and Brigadier General Kemal are successful in their own right. That is why they have attained such a high level in our society and the profession they choose. They did not kill, bribe, threaten or bully to reach where they are now. We should encourage such behavior in our leaders. They are just like us and they should act like one of us. I do not have the pleasure of meeting the brigadier General but I have the honor of meeting Dr. Berhanu. I found him to be both humble and real in the way he looks at himself and his surrounding. I like it when my leader is just like me not someone that sits on my shoulder constantly telling me how better and different he is from me. If we don't show them respect who would?

We welcome our Oromo brothers and sisters. It will not be an exaggeration to suggest that it will be very rare to find an Ethiopian with out a trace of Oromo in him. That was one of the reasons the concept of separation of Oromia from the rest of Ethiopia did not get traction. It was not because there was no national oppression, it was not because there was no injustice but rather the prescription being suggested for the disease did not feel right.

It is very unfortunate for our country and people that we are a witness to such malpractice by TPLF Doctors regarding Eritrea. Separation was the medicine administered to the illness we had. It did not take long to see how wrong it was. Today both people are paying the price. Mistake was made. People's lives were ruined. We hope future generation will set this right and bring children of the same mother together again. It will happen. Take my word for it.

What makes every Ethiopian happy is this single step taken by the OLF leaders. A single bold step in the right direction is what I thought. Our role will be to sing 'wefe komech, wefe komech' stretch our arms and make sure no one fails. We are not into looking back at what happened yesterday. Why do that when tomorrow is a brand new day and we can create a new reality. We are going to get rid of our old baggage. We do not obsess about our past failings but look forward to what can be achieved when we work together. That is the message of OLF to the rest of us. It is smart to hit the reset button and start new and fresh.

It is a good beginning for 2012. We can build a lasting union on solid foundation starting now. We urge the leaders to involve as many people as possible in this national dialogue. This is our school in

building a brand new Ethiopia. No one has failed like us so we really can turn that negative experience into a valuable lesson. Our association with the TPLF virus and the Derg germ though depilating hopefully have given us a good dose of anti body for a long and bitter struggle.

Our vow for the New Year should be 'I have heard, listened, experienced the atrocities of the TPLF regime now it is time to do what is necessary to liberate myself.' It is true you cannot liberate others while you are still a slave. We are slaves to old ideas, old biases and old-fashioned way of thinking. Starting 2012 we are going to think different. We are going to judge others as we judge ourselves. We are not going to wait for others to liberate us while we sit on the side watching. That does not work. That has never worked. To own your freedom you have to work for it.

I am not being a blind cheerleader. There will be bumps on the road. In order to minimize unfortunate misunderstandings I believe the best remedy is to stay vigilant and be part of the struggle. It is a lot better to contribute sincerely and positively to enhance the quality of the struggle. Nitpicking and negative comments will only help those that are working overtime to protect their ill-gotten power and wealth and that is exactly what we claim not to want.

Let me say something before some of you raise it. I am qualified to say all I said because I am an Ethiopian. If you want more I am an Amhara, a Gurage, and an Oromo born in Sidama. I share blood with all the first three groups and due to birth I have a strong affinity with my Sidama brothers and sisters. I am a rainbow Ethiopian. Melkam Gena.

ⁱ <http://addisvoice.com/2012/01/olf-drops-secession-embraces-ethiopian-unity/>