

Ethiopia is at the verge of a huge leap forward and the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) can play an important role in this transformative process

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“In 2007 when I met my friend, he had a dream... He was selling custom made clothing out of his basement.

I came straight into his life and challenged him to pursue that dream past this little basement based shop and to start selling his clothing online and doing fashion shows to get the word out about his clothing line.

Within a year we were doing fashion shows all over the country including NY fashion Week, and had become an International brand sold in seven countries. Not only that, but we were also seen on reality TV shows on MTV, VH1 and the Ellen Show”. This is taken from a story I read few months ago.

In my opinion, the Oromo Liberation Front’s (OLF’s) situation is very much similar to what was happening in this story. OLF can garner huge support and peruse a significant role in the Ethiopian political arena. However, so far, it has not taken the bold steps that could help achieve this stature. Instead, it has now engaged in activities that bring it in conflict and confrontation with Oromo politicians, the public and Ethiopians at large. This would most probably increasingly alienate it from the very people it purports to represent.

From the very beginning, OLF has pursued a struggle based on Oromo nationalism and selling the dream of getting rid of national operation (political alienation including the creation of a separate country), achieving democracy, rule of law, equality, respect for the Oromos of Ethiopia... etc. etc. One of its biggest selling point was the lack of fair representation of the Oromos in the political hierarchy of Ethiopia compared to the overall percentage of Oromos in the total population. This has helped OLF to garner significant support from time to time..

Fast forward to 2018, the political reality in Ethiopia has changed significantly.

- The minority domineering group within the ruling EPRDF, TPLF, is dislodged from most of its powers. Dr Abiy Ahmed, leader of the Oromo political party (OPDO), has become the head of EPRDF and the PM of Ethiopia. Obo Lemma Megerssa,

(President of Oromiya), is now among the most popular politicians in the entire country.

- Increasing number of Oromos hold key positions within the federal government including Foreign Affairs, Attorney General. For the last few months, the President as well as the Defence Minister were from Oromia.
- A number of key positions within the security apparatus are now controlled by Oromos. The Mayor of the capital city, Addis Ababa, is an Oromo.
- Dr Abiy has now released political prisoners including supporters and followers of OLF.
- Abiy and his government have lifted the ban on political parties and the terrorist label on all oppositions. The first political group to benefit from this openness was the Oromo based ODF. Another one is OLF who was labelled as terrorist by the parliament few years ago..
- Freedom of expression is reinstated, chief among the first to benefit from this openness was the Oromo Media Network (OMN) that opened offices inside the country led by the activist Jewar Mohamed.
- All exiled Oromo political groups (about five) have now returned to Ethiopia and begun peaceful political activities.
- In fact, in an unprecedented move, one of the leaders of the former rebel group, General Kemal Gelechu, has now been appointed as the head of security affairs of the Oromia regional government.
- The state of emergency that was imposed in Oromia and elsewhere is lifted.
- Dr. Abiy has started to take unprecedented measure such as closing a gold mine in Oromia that apparently were harmful to the health of residents.
- Dr. Abiy has put under control the menacing displacement of Oromos by the Somali regional police etc. The key perpetrator, President of the Somali region is now in prison.

PM Dr Abiy has also a soaring popularity in all parts of the country including in Tigray. His popularity ranges from the lowest of 75 % to over 90% in some regions. I am not sure any other politician has had such high popularity in the recent history of Ethiopia. Definitely, this is the envy of any politician.

PM Abiy was a senior government official and an officer in the despised EPRDF army. He has garnered a significant support by moving away from his old political confines and by adopting new political vision and approach. He and his team have not only embraced but championed change. He has openly stated that he is separating from the past and charting a new future for the entire country based on equality, inclusiveness, reconciliation,

building national consensus (as opposed to dividing) and freedom for all. Such vision as well as action has made Dr Abiy an embodiment of the change that most Ethiopians are dreaming of. So many Ethiopians have pinned their hopes for a more inclusive, and responsive government on the young leadership of Dr Abiy and Team Lemma.

Dr Abiy and Team Lemma acknowledged the trauma suffered by the people but no more utilize them to foster hate and discord. They are now using the history of shared traumas to bring people closer and teach them not to seek vengeance but “to do unto others what you would have them do unto you”.

OLF has now to compete for popularity among the 10 or so Oromo political organizations and with such popular leaders as Dr Abiy and Obo Lemmma Megerssa. The issues with which OLF mobilized the public since its inception are addressed or in the process of being answered by Dr Abiy and his team. OLF has now to pursue a political agenda that is more attractive than the rest of its competitors. It can no more garner support by focusing on history, political alienation, the absence of basic human and democratic rights, the systemic disadvantage of the Oromos in Ethiopia ...etc. This just does not reflect the current political reality in the country.

All of this has increasingly put pressure on OLF and other political parties. In my opinion, the impact of the current change is so extensive that neither OLF nor any other political organization can continue without adopting the new reality. This requires at least putting some of the organizational identity, history ... etc to the side so that the organization can project itself into the new reality.

In this regard, OLF seems to be undergoing a process of deciding what agenda to pursue and how to manage within the rapidly changing political environment. However, it seems that the agenda it has chosen, at least for now, is to be confrontational with PM Abiy and his team.

In some of parts of Oromia, OLF has been accused of alleged attempt to provoke armed confrontation, disrupt transportation services, disregard the government's order to disarm... etc. It has allegedly picked armed confrontation with neighbouring regions such as Benshangul, causing the displacement of over 90,000 residents mostly Oromos.

All of this will create instability in Oromia, it discourages investment, tourism and development. It also creates heightened concern about the true agenda of the organization. This is not at all in the best interest of the Oromos and the rest of Ethiopians.

There is no question that in the past, a number of Oromos gave credit to OLF for perusing a fight against the repressive regimes of Colonel Mengistu and the TPLF. Those who participated in OLF have paid significant sacrifice. There is no denial that OLF achieved key goals in particular when it was part of the coalition with the TPLF after the fall of Mengistu's military government.

But time has changed and for a changed time, OLF has to change its agenda too and adapt to the new reality. It has to reorganize and create partnerships in a new way with new players in the field. If this does not happen fast, OLF could be looked at as increasingly obstructionist and an impediment to change.

Its alleged current confrontational approach will also put OLF at a huge disadvantage perusing political power. With its current provocative stance, it is very difficult to imagine OLF finding a sympathetic support from political parties (or the public) in any other part of the country. Every disruptive action OLF takes alienates it from other political players except from the TPLF. For any political party that competes for political power in Ethiopia, the above is a disaster.

Given the current pluralistic politics, it is unlikely that a single political party will win sufficient seats in the national (or most probably regional) parliaments to form a government. This means that if OLF does not come up with a renewed and visionary political agenda, its pathway to political power both regionally and nationally will become narrower and narrower by the day.

While I do not agree with a number of OLF's point of views or vision, I still think, as a society, we should give OLF (just like other organized resistances) due credit and respect for its struggle and contribution to the change we are witnessing now. I personally salute them for their tenacious struggle. Most leaders of OLF have abandoned their personal gains for collective wellbeing. They have paid dearly, both materially and emotionally. All of these are huge sacrifices we must appreciate and honour.

After so many years, the collective struggle of all Ethiopians has started paying dividends. Politically speaking, Ethiopia is at the verge of a huge leap forward. Hence, more than ever, I believe OLF can play an important role in this transformative political process.

OLF has a lot to offer to all Ethiopians and learn from other Ethiopians too. OLF is an ethno specific (Oromo based) party. However, it is part of Ethiopia's history. Ethiopia needs to go through a process of building national consensus, reconciliation and charting a collective path forward. This could be enriched by the full participation of organizations such as OLF. The personal as well as the collective experience of each and every member and leadership of OLF, for that matter other organizations too, is immense. Their experience could help build a solid foundation for our collective wellbeing and collective destination. All of Ethiopia could be enriched by the unreserved positive participation and contribution of OLF.

As they say, there is time for everything, there is time to start and there is also a time to end. Time to hate and time to love.; time to destroy and time to build; time to let go and time to embrace.

OLF should not be afraid to let go of the past and embrace the new reality on the ground.