

OLF IN THE SWEDISH PARLIAMENT AND OROMO YOUTH IN GLOBAL INTERCULTURAL SHOW



"Banned and forced out of Transitional Government": Struggle for National Rights and Democracy, in the Era of a "New World Order" - the Case of OLF by Dr. Shigut Geleta full speech.

Dear Mr. Chairman,
Esteemed members of the Swedish Parliament,
Dear Honourable guest speakers,

Ladies and Gentlemen,
First of all, I would like to thank and convey my deepest gratitude to the organizing committee for inviting me to present a paper on this seminar on behalf of the Oromo Liberation Front, OLF. It is a great privilege and honour

for me and my organization to be here today representing the Oromo people.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The topic on which I am going to speak is **“Banned and forced out of Transitional Government: Struggle for National Rights and Democracy - the Case of OLF”**. My presentation is organized in five main parts:-

1. I will give some **background** on the Oromo people and Ethiopia.
2. I will elucidate **the birth and grand objectives of the OLF** and its formidable role in the past, today, and the future politics of Ethiopia.
3. I will try to indicate how the vision of **“New world order” challenged by Global War on Terror (GWOT)**.
4. I will skim over **the current situation in Oromia/Ethiopia**, and finally,
5. I offer my organization’s view on **the way forward**.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

1. Background:

The Oromo make up a significant portion of the population of the Horn of Africa. In Ethiopia, the Oromo constitute about 40% of the 101 million population of the country. Oromia, the land of Oromo, is the economic backbone of Ethiopia. Despite the fact that, Oromo’s maintain distinct and homogenous culture, common language, history, ancestry, and separate territory, they are socially, economically, and politically subjugated and marginalised in Ethiopian. Ethiopia is an empire-state created as an outcome of the 1884/1885 Berlin Conference during the era of the "scramble for Africa". The core Abyssinian kingdom was assisted to expand by annexing the other nations and nationalities to their south. The Ethiopian empire that emerged as a result of this expansion is ethnically heterogeneous, comprising more than 80 nations and nationalities with 83 languages and over 200 dialects. The Oromo and Amhara are two of the largest ethnic groups. Since the expansionist occupation, the Oromo people have lived under successive brutal and oppressive rules to this day. The fact that the Oromo were occupied by black African nation makes their case quite blurred compared to nations colonized by Europeans. The pain and brutality of inter-tribal occupation among black Africa was and is as severe and bitter as that of white occupation of black Africa nonetheless.

Following the occupation of the 1880s, Ethiopia was ruled by successive emperors including Menelik II and Haile Selassie I. The later was ousted by Marxist military regime of Mengistu Haile Mariam in the early 1970s which was in turn overthrown by the Tigrayan Peoples Liberation Front in 1991. All successive Ethiopian regimes have been characterized by harsh exploitation, political suppression and marginalisation of the Oromo and other peoples of Ethiopia. Discrimination, subjugation, repression, exploitation of the people and torture and killings of opposition forces were rampant. Political pluralism and tolerance has never been part of Ethiopia’s political makeup. The imperial attitude without a shred of concern for the growth and development of the country has been a source of obstacle towards economic development, giving rise to abject poverty and hunger in perpetual. The Oromo people’s struggle is to bring about an end to this vicious process, and to build a fair and just political system where the rights and lives of the people are respected, and all live in peace in union or as neighbours. This is our inalienable

right that we ask, and demand, this is the purpose of our struggle for which we are willing to fight regardless of the stakes.

2. The birth and grand objectives of the OLF

All peoples of Ethiopia including Oromo, Sidama, Ogaden, Afar, Gambella, Walaita, Benshangul, Gedyoo, Gurage peoples, etc. have vehemently resisted the process of subjugation both at the time of annexation and thereafter to this day. The nature of the resistance has taken various faces and patterns. There is no other road that leads to peace and stability in Ethiopia and the region that doesn't fully address the legitimate struggle and demands of these peoples to obtain their full rights.

The Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) was established in the late 1973 to give voice and legitimacy to the Oromo resistance following a number of brutal interventions by the Ethiopian government to suffocate peaceful demand of the people for equal rights.

When all peaceful venues were met by killings and tortures, the OLF amended its program in 1974 and established its military wing, the Oromo Liberation Army, (OLA). Right at its emergence OLF was challenged both by Ethiopian nationalists and Somali nationalists in South east during Ethiopia-Somalian war. The Republic of Somalia used a Somali proverb saying: Wherever the camel goes that is Somalia. This was used rhetorically to encompass its direct claim to huge swatches of territory occupied by Oromos. On the other side the Ethiopian military regime was using a say: anyone who wore "Shirit" (cultural wear of both Oromo and Somali in south east) is "Sergogeb" (infiltrator) from Somali government and then shoot it. However, OLF managed to survive this Ethio-Somalia war safeguarding its independence and area of operation. The OLF aimed to create an Oromo national movement that would allow the Oromo people to decide their political destiny democratically through referendum. Since its inception, the OLF has survived massive military assault by the Ethiopian governments, and continues to grow despite Ethiopian government's propaganda to the contrary. In fact, resistance of the Ethiopian governments to peacefully and amicably address ethnic injustices in the country, and its often ruthless reaction to even peaceful demonstrations have forced many more fronts to take arms to fight for their inalienable rights as people. The OLF has engaged the Ethiopian Military regime of Mengistu until the fall of the regime in May 1991, and has defended its posts against the TPLF since 1991. During all these years, the OLF has never targeted civilians, and conducted its operation with internationally accepted norms of military conflict. However, the Ethiopian government has repeatedly attempted to paint our struggle for freedom and equality as terror, while freely terrorizing, arresting, and killing civilians with impunity, without a due process. The evidences for these mass killings are abundant.

3. Let me now address the 1991 transition – the emergence of the TPLF and the fall of the Dergue regime in the era of The New World.

Right at the eve of the downfall of the Dergue, the US government took an initiative to lay down a plan for peace and stability in Ethiopia, and invited the major armed groups: Eritrean Peoples Liberation Front (EPLF), Tigray Peoples Liberation Front (TPLF), Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) and the falling Dergue for a conference in London on May 1991. To motivate all parties to the peaceful talks, the US government declared **"No democracy, No Cooperation"**. Believing in the leadership of the US government, and the promise they gave, the OLF joined TPLF as a partner in drafting the Transitional charter and establishing a Transitional government (1991-1992). Knowing the political traditions of the

land, it was difficult but necessary to be optimistic. The OLF took the Charter and worked on it for a democratic process building a new road for Ethiopia, the first of its kind in the history of the country.

However, the TPLF, with its marionette parties amalgamated under an umbrella organization named Ethiopian people Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), started violating the charter from the get go, paving the way for a one-party dictatorship. Elections were rigged, OLF members and candidates were arrested and the EPRDF declared landslide victory even in Oromia region. Observers from Norway, Sweden, USA and other democratic countries have witnessed this at that time. The OLF was forced out of the government and declared illegal. Human rights abuses, tortures, disappearances, and untold pain met our people who live under unbearable political repression since. Over forty thousand from members and the people suffered in different concentration camps. About thirteen thousand perished out of this by disease and other means.

Geostrategic interest shackles democracy:

The vision of a “new World order” that assumed a peaceful, stable and just new world order has been sooner challenged elsewhere, like in June 1991 Yugoslavia descended into civil conflict that left nearly 20,000 dead and more than one million homeless within a year. Three of successors of the Soviet Union Georgia, Tajikistan and Azerbaijan have experienced power struggles over control of their governments involving varying degree of violence. In Somalia 30,000 died and 2.5 million displaced from January 1991 to July 1992. Bin Laden the Master mind for the emerging terrorism deported in 1992 from Saudi and took Sudan, neighbouring Ethiopia, as its destination from 1991 to 1996. US peacekeeping force is forced to leave Somalia in 1994. In addition to the above enumerated situations, the US intervention in Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait has renewed the Geo-strategic interest of US across the western side of the Arabian Peninsula (Ethiopia, Eritrea, Djibouti Somalia and Kenya). This interest has become vital after the terrorist bomb attack on the U.S. Embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in 1998. Moreover, the identification of Somalia by the US since 9/11, as an area of state collapse conducive to support for al-Qaeda, the presence of US force in Djibouti since December 12, 2002 and the Islamist agendas of some of the local factions have enabled Ethiopia to link its own security interests in the region to the “Global war on terror”. The Horn dominates a part of the Gulf of Aden and the Indian Ocean through which oil tankers constantly move and overlooks the passages where the Red Sea, the Gulf of Aden and the Indian Ocean converge became the main strategic interest of US policy makers. According to some scholars (Baffour Agyeman-Duah, 1994) three types of USA “Global security network” incorporation were readily discernible: direct or absolute NATO’s type of relationship, surrogate model whereby the state was armed to play a regional role on behalf of the United States like that of Ethiopia and peripheral in which the state was to provide local facilities for electronic surveillance installations or the pre-positioning of logistics, for instance, troops, arms, and refuelling or refurbishing centres.

Because of this rapidly changing Global security and politics, the US policy makers prioritized to partners of Global security than anchoring democracy. To this day, our people see the slogan and promises of the US government that stated “No democracy, No co-operation” as an empty promise.

The TPLF led Ethiopian regime exploited the US policy on terrorism and the emerging global fear and caution tagging popular liberation movements and political parties as terrorists and banning them. The TPLF has effectively transformed itself into a ruthless dictatorial party. The institutional base for

EPDRF's hegemony began with the elections of 1995 with an amended constitution. Regional parliaments were created after the elections. As the election was run under the supremacy of one party, EPDRF/TPLF became the indisputable winner by near perfect margins. The government declares an opposition illegal whenever it finds the opposition threatens its power. Thus, currently there is no political space for the opposition as was evidenced again in 2015 when the government declared winning by 99.6% electoral results in 2010 national elections, and by 99.9% in May 2015 local elections. Clearly, despite all the Western financial supports and promises of no democracy no help, today the Ethiopian government has become one of the world's ruthless and totalitarian regimes.

Sadly, the Ethiopian government has masterfully ridden the "war against terrorism" wagon labelling its oppositions as terrorists. The OLF is the main target of this Machiavellian machination mainly because the OLF is a real threat to the regime. The Ethiopian government has made significant efforts to misinform the Western public and governments misrepresenting the OLF and lobbying to put the organization on a terrorist list. The government has planted bombs and targeted civilians only to blame the OLF, and then use its criminal act as a proof against OLF. In a document released by WikiLeaks the head of Ethiopian security *Getachew Asefa* tells the US ambassador in 2009 that "the OLF and ONLF should be designated as Foreign Terrorist Organizations (FTOs)"¹. However, an earlier report of the same source states that "an embassy source, as well as clandestine reporting, suggests that the bombing may have in fact been the work of the Government of Ethiopia's security forces."²

4. In outlining the current situation in Oromia/Ethiopia

I start quoting Nelson Mandela who said "It is the oppressor that dictates the nature of the resistance".

After it was forced out of the Transitional Government in 1991, the OLF continued for what it stood and was created for, standing for and defending the fundamental rights of the Oromo people. And yet the OLF never ceased on calling TPLF for a negotiated peaceful settlement. However, all our attempts fell in deaf ears. Instead of resolving the conflict, TPLF has several times declared that it has eliminated the OLF from Ethiopia altogether only to issue public statement weeks later accusing the OLF for destabilizing the country. Despite dooming government propaganda, the OLF has remained steadfast, as it will always be, determined to guard the national interests of the Oromo people, ready to sit down with all interested parties to discuss a peaceful process that brings justice and harmony for much needed progress. Today, because of its unwavering determination to peace, but guarded by its unflinching position to stand for human rights to end the human misery in Ethiopia, the OLF has gained immense diplomatic sympathy and political support from across the international community.

Attempts by the TPLF to portray the OLF as a terrorist organisation have backfired, and in addition to a full backing of our people who have suffered greatly defending their rights, we also enjoy a full and growing support and recognition by the international community.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

To sum up, generally OLF has engaged itself into five major areas. Namely: organising Oromo's both in clandestine and overtly where the situation allowed, try to solve the problem with TPLF/EPDRF through

¹ Cable reference id: #04 ADDIS ABABA 001318

² Marked "Secret; Subject: Ethiopia: Recent Bombings Blamed on Oromo Possibly the Work of GOE [Government of Ethiopia]" "Classified By: Charge [affairs] Vicki Huddleston", "(Cable reference id: #06ADDISABABA2708.)

dialogue, laterally co-operating with other political forces (such as Paris Conference on peace, joint co-operation work and forming an alliance), distancing itself from terrorist act and educating Oromo people from any sorts of fundamentalism, and defending itself militarily by being transparent to international community in presenting the Oromo cause is a just cause.

Today we are on a high moral ground, and we are a living testimony of our people's perseverance, marching towards a more stable, prosperous and democratic system that honours the cultural values and human rights of all peoples in Ethiopia.

The Ethiopian government is waging unwinnable war on Oromo and Ethiopians. This round of Oromo protest and general civil unrest championed by Oromo Youth, locally known as *Qeerroo*, have been underway for the last six continuous months. These protests have now covered the entire Oromia and beyond, surviving hundreds of killings, thousands of wounding, disappearances, and over 40 thousand detentions by the Ethiopian security forces. We have the identity of several murdered individuals with their names and pictures. These protests proved to the world that: **1) the Oromo struggle is intrinsically non-violent, 2) Oromos are determined to end the political marginalisation and economic exploitation perpetuated by TPLF, 3) torture and mass killings will not stop Oromos from fighting for their rights, 4) their demand is for deep political transformation, not for cosmetic changes, and 5) the people continue giving their unflinching support to the OLF.**

5. The way forward, OLF's perspectives

Ladies and gentlemen,

As the saying goes "a hammer drives nails because of its mass". Because of its geographic position, Oromia have cultural ties and economic interactions with diverse peoples living adjacent to Oromia. This gave Oromos a unique opportunity to coexist with others in peace. It developed social harmony, economic interdependence, and democratic pluralism. Because of its ancient democratic heritage known as Gada, which limits political office of elected officials to 8 year terms, there is deep rooted respect for opposing views, tolerance for clashing ideas, and urge for a negotiated settlement. Oromos share three major religions, and yet religious extremism is unheard of until Ethiopian government's political manipulation attempted to create one. Oromos who constitute 40% of Ethiopia, the 3rd largest nation in Africa, can be a powerful instrument for peace and progress. Further attempt to marginalize our people will result in more tragic episodes the outcomes of which are continuation of war, poverty, and hunger. Unfortunately the US government has provided a lip service to Oromo protest even in the face of hundreds of killings of innocent civilians by the security forces of the Ethiopian government. The US government has yet again given a tacit support to the government in Ethiopia by failing to fully report these killings in its annual Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2015, and by making various bilateral agreements on various issues with Ethiopia.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Ethiopia received approximately 3 billion USD for the so called development Aid annually, that is, more than a third of its annual budget. Assistance of Western countries for this regime by negating the very basic democratic values on which Western countries are founded is paradoxical. This paradox will breed a very dangerous situation with far reaching consequences unless addressed immediately. Assistance of western countries for this regime negating the very basic democratic values on which western countries are founded is paradoxical. I assume it is the politics of perceived fear at the stake. To mention some: 1)

the outcome of Oromo people's referendum. It is great failure deciding the outcome of a people's choice that affects the existence of the right to make a choice moreover the quest of self-determination is not a vanity question 2) Ethiopia has estimated Moslem population more than any of the Arab countries except Egypt. However tolerance of religion is an existing fact for the Oromos 3) the western perception of the link between poverty, "failed states" and religious radicalization. The TPLF-led regime used safety nets for its political patronage 4) Ethiopia's role as an anchor State in a "turbulent" region. But there are a lot of witnesses that the regime instigating the conflict and posture itself as a neutral peacemaker 5) China's domination in the region. As a result the west perceived fear Ethiopia will go with China. 6) Package for refugee influx from Ethiopia via North Africa to Europe. These and some other factors dictated Western policies to maintain states quo. However, it is our fresh memory that some Arab leaders (Tunisia Ben Ali-1987, Hosni Mubarcic-1981, Libya Mummer el Kaddafi 1969, Yemen Ali Abdallah Saleh -1978 and Mr. Bashir al Assad Syria 1963) for too long (more than 25 years), ageing autocracies were supported by Washington, London, Paris, Brussels etc. The Arab Revolution has transformed this situation to the point that western governments remain uneasy with the existing situation and its potential challenge to their previous hegemony.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The international community should be serious about supporting social equality and preventing further destabilization of the Horn of Africa by stopping continued moral, financial, diplomatic and other support to an authoritarian regime in Ethiopian.

Taking this opportunity, I would like to extend our call to international communities and all peoples in Ethiopia to stand shoulder to shoulder with the OLF to fight for freedom, liberty, justice, and peace for our peoples and for our troubled region. We are forced to raise arms, ready to pay the ultimate penalty than accept maltreatment by a government that provides respect based on ethnic domination and political affiliation. If the peoples of Ethiopia rise with us demanding equality, justice, and rule of law as a day in which all people are treated equally is in sight. We can then start a long and much needed journey of taking the peoples out of perpetual hunger and poverty; we can then start curving a new paradigm and tradition in which all human beings are treated equally by law, where political corruption and abuse of human rights are considered illegal and shameful, and the region is no more considered a hell to run away from by its own citizens.

Peace shall prevail!

Thank you for your attention.