

Stop the Violence Against Oromo Students!

By Abdi Galgalo*

The oppressed nations and nationalities of Ethiopia including the Oromos have been struggling to exercise their internationally recognized right for national self-determination. The fall of the communist regime of Mengistu in 1991 brought hope for the oppressed people of Ethiopia who had been longing for equality, justice, self-rule, and democracy. Such hope was shattered when the TPLF (Tigray People's Liberation Front)-led minority government consolidated its tyrannical rule over the people of Ethiopia in general and the Oromo people in particular by ostracizing the majority of the people of Ethiopia from the political process. In order to extend its tyrannical rule, the regime of Meles Zenawi has been engaged in weakening and suppressing dissenting voices among the Oromos, the largest ethnic groups of Ethiopia, by direct use of force and indirectly by instigating clashes between Oromos and other ethnic groups.

As a platform to answer the long-standing question of national self-determination, 'ethnic'-based federal structure was put in place to serve, in part, as a political remedy for the historical oppression of nations and nationalities of Ethiopia including Oromos whose human right, language, and culture was undermined by the successive regimes of Ethiopia. However, the Tigrian-led regime has failed to uphold the ideals enshrined in its own constitution as well as international norms, including the right of nation and nationalities of Ethiopia to exercise their right for self-determination, holding free and all-inclusive elections, freedom of free speech and assembly, etc.

The TPLF government began derailing the democratic process when it forced genuine political organizations with wide public support such as the Oromo liberation front (OLF) to leave the political process thereby denying Oromos the choice to elect leaders of their preference. These are the main issues of discontent voiced by many Oromos for which the regime responded with violence.

The 'ethnic'-based Federalism has become nothing more than the TPLF government's ploy, carried out through its surrogate parties, to undermine the co-existence and harmony between different ethnic groups in Ethiopia to extend its rule over the majority. High on the government's agenda has been instigating ethnic clashes and sowing the seeds of mistrust and disharmony between Oromos and other ethnic groups in Ethiopia. The motive is clear: an undemocratic minority regime with meager popular support can only thrive by weakening the majority. The Oromos and Oromia are at the center of Ethiopia's and East Africa's geo-politics; Oromia borders almost all ethnic groups in Ethiopia as well as three sovereign East African Countries thereby facilitating the minority regime's plan of creating havoc between Oromos and many of their neighbors.

Such government's machination of weakening and suppressing Oromos is often times taken to institutions of higher learning, where activism for the rights of Oromos finds its roots. Oromo students have been persistently subjected to harassment, jailing, dismissal from academic institutions, beatings and killings by the government agents. These right

violations are expressed and well documented by notable International Organization and governments among those include: The Human Rights Watch reports, The US State Department Human Rights Report, The Amnesty International report and alerts, The EU Human Right reports, the African Union, the UK secretary of State for international development, etc. Sadly, such reports did not compel donor countries to chastise the regime of Meles Zenawi for its atrocity against Oromo students. The government, with all its wickedness, is also utilizing students, mostly from Tigre ethnic groups, to spy on Oromo students at all levels of academic institutions.

While the harassment of Oromo students is widespread, Oromo students attending institutions outside Oromia, particularly Gonder University and Mekele University, have frequently complained about verbal abuses and threats they receive from TPLF cadres (some of whom are students), from University staff and officials. They had sent letters to appropriate authorities expressing their concern and they had also gone on hunger-strikes in an effort to be heard by higher authorities. However, the University administration, the State and Federal authorities have turned blind eyes and deaf ears to the innumerable safety concerns of these Oromo students. The condition at Mekele University is significantly alarming and the violence against Oromo students in this institution has become a well coordinated activity involving civilian residents of Mekele, Tigrian students, the University authorities, and the state's security apparatus. Such a coordinated violence against any particular ethnic shall not be overlooked especially in such an ethnically polarized society such as Ethiopia.

Mekele is the capital of the Tigrian Regional State-the home of the TPLF minority regime. Unlike many Oromia towns, Mekele is not known for its diversity and, not surprisingly, many Oromos do not feel at home there. This is partly due to the government's divisive policy in which Oromos are portrayed as significant threats to the only strong institutions the Tigrrians possess-their government. Thus, Oromo students at Mekele University have been repeatedly subjected not only to unwelcoming remarks, but also to state-sponsored violence including killings and also insults that is incorporated into one of Mekele University's teaching text.

Incidents leading up to the current standoff between Oromo students at Mekele University and Tigrrians include the publication of a history text book, with significant support from Mekele University administration, by a Tigrian faculty member where in the book Oromos are referred as "uncivilized and inferiors". The aim of this ethnic provocation is clear. To this provocation, Oromo students responded in a civil way by writing a protest letter to the sponsoring Mekele University Administration. A few days later, an Oromo student was injured in a hand-grenade attack.

The most alarming of all is the recent organized violence in which the armed residents of Mekele city, who are supporters and cadres of TPLF, marched to Mekele University and attacked Oromo students in collaboration with Tigrian Students. The Oromo students also point that not only that the security force was reluctant to protect them, but also directly cooperated with the anti-Oromo mobs by rounding up many Oromo students and denying

their freedom of movement and assembly. Oromo students are living in fear now, and needless to say, their learning process is disrupted.

Mekele University and the Tigray state government have repeatedly failed to provide protection to Oromo students. The confidence of Oromo students in this institution won't easily be revived nor does the psychological trauma they've suffered for being persecuted simply for being Oromos will be easily healed. Thus, Mekele University has proved to be an institution that does not cater security as well as emotional stability necessary for Oromo students to continue their education in this institution. Of additional concern is that such ethnic violence may also be directed towards other ethnic communities that have cordial relationship with Oromos. Thus, the continuing violence against Oromo students in different institutions of Ethiopia is a serious concern for Oromos and other peace-loving Ethiopians thereby requiring the following actions to stop the violence and find a lasting solution to the overall political crises:

1. That the international community put pressure on Ethiopian government, Tigray Regional Government, and the Mekele University officials to allow voluntary transfer of Oromo students and others whose safety may be threatened to other institutions.
2. That pressure shall be exerted on Meles' regime to bring the perpetrators to justice, and investigate the security forces for alleged discrimination against Oromos, reluctance to take appropriate security measures and collaboration with the rioters during the violence.
3. With the understanding that Oromo students will continue voicing against the lack of democracy and the ostracization of genuine political leaders from the political process, a long lasting solution to Oromos present question can be sought only by resolving the current political impasse between the government of Ethiopia and oppositions groups, notably the OLF. Therefore, the international community shall exert pressure on TPLF-government to be sincere about democracy and stability in Ethiopia and East Africa as well.

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