

THE JAL MAROO TRANSCRIPT AND THE QUESTION OF SELF-DETERMINATION

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The transcript of the Tanzania meeting between the Oromo Liberation Army (OLA) and the Abiy regime as recounted by Jal Maroo, leader of the OLA, and as translated into Amharic by Tsegaye Hailu Balcha [1] was recently posted online. In it, Jal Maroo gives us a blow-by-blow account of what transpired at the meeting. A couple of interesting things caught my eye and they will be the focus in this article.

In March of 2024, I wrote an article posted on Borkena.com, titled in part, “The Perfect Being the Enemy of the Good...”[2]. In it, I talked about the solid foundation of FANO and the remaining tasks for the movement to be a force to mid-wife a transitional government following the ouster of the Abiy regime. As collaborators and stakeholders in this journey, I mentioned the peaceful opposition and civic groups and the OLA and the TPLF. One critic of that article stated that the TPLF and the OLA were irrelevant. Such amateurish talk aside, it is important to assert that all stakeholders in Ethiopia are important and must peacefully discuss outstanding issues to break the cycle of violence in the country and usher in a peaceful and prosperous era of a united democratic Ethiopia. Similarly, there are some who consider TPLF a spent force and irrelevant. Nothing could be further from the truth. A force that is armed to the teeth and not going through DDR as the Pretoria Agreements require is not a spent force. Its recent collusion with the PP attests to this fact.

So, it is in this context that I comment on a couple of the issues Jal Maroo raised. The first is the fact that Abiy’s emissaries revealed to Jal Maroo and the OLA that Abiy has sent them “a special message”. According to Jal Maroo, the regime delegates insisted on not divulging the “special message” in the presence of foreign observers that were at the meeting. Avoiding this awkward moment, the OLA leaders cleverly used a break to receive the message. The message was a pleading and prodding by Abiy for OLA to integrate with regime forces and fight against FANO and Eritrean forces. To their credit, the OLA leaders promptly rejected the proposal and plot of the regime. Jal Maroo adds that Abiy was banking on his belief that OLA, as anti-Amhara force, would jump on the proposal and put itself in the evil aggression of the regime.

The position that the OLA took deserves ample appreciation and flickers a ray of hope of a new era of principled positions. It also lays bare the fact that Abiy and his regime are intent to do whatever damage to the country and its people to stay in power. This takes us to the second point Jal Maroo raised in his transcript. I will quote it as transcribed and translate it into English later “ የኦሮሞ ህዝብ ነፃ ወጥቶ በሃገሪቱ ውስጥ ያሉ

ተቋማት ከመድሎ ነፃ ከሆኑ በሁዋላ የሚቀጥለዉ የኦሮሞ ህዝብ የራሱን እድል በራሱ የመወሰን ማለት ከፈለገ ከኢትዮጵያ ጋር አብሮ መኖር ወይንም መለያየትን ይወስናል።”

“Once the Oromo people are free and the institutions in the country are free from prejudice and favoritism, the next step is for the Oromo people to undertake self-determination to decide whether to stay in Ethiopia or secede from it”.

To say the least, this is curious. Upon reading this statement, the first question that comes to mind is why would a referendum (through which self-determination can be expressed) be even necessary if institutions in Ethiopia are democratized and free of favoritism? Be that as it may, the OLA/OLF has consistently talked about self-determination as its eminent goal for a long time. What makes Jal Maroo’s statement curious is the additional emphasis that even after the establishment of a democratic Ethiopia, the OLA wants to exercise this right.

This will take us back to the history of self-determination, the potential problems with its application in post-Abiy Ethiopia, and we will explore if there are any lessons we can learn from our recent and

Amazingly, self-determination is one concept both the East and the West shared as a right of a nation, with slight variations and emphasis by each. While The socialist world of the East debated it starting around WW1 and framed it as “the right of nations to self-determination including and up to secession”, (thus its emphasis on the rights of people in one nation state), the West generally considered it as a principle of international law concerning the colonial context of territories’ right to independence or an outcome of decolonization.

As an international agreement, the United Nations on self-determination, Chapter 1, Article 1, part 2 states that the purpose of the UN charter is “to develop friendly relations among nations based on the respect for the equal rights and self-determination of peoples and to take other appropriate measures to strengthen world peace” [3].

Coming to Ethiopia, I believe the most pressing problem is shaping the future and not grieving about the past. Grieving about the past has a special place within National Dialogue and Reconciliation in post-Abiy Ethiopia. Just as there are voices in the Oromo community that believe that they have been aggrieved by successive Ethiopian regimes, so too there are communities that state they or their ancestors have been victims of the 16th century Oromo expansion and the present Oromo Prosperity Party. The claims and counter claims are expected to be plenty, and they

should be adjudicated in a transitional justice through truth telling leading to forgiveness, reparations, prosecutions and institutional democratization as necessary.

Compounding the past, Jawar Mohammed has identified 6 areas of conflict encompassing the present between the Oromo elite and other elites, primarily Amhara elites: differences emanating from understanding of our history; "ownership" of Addis Abeba; on the current constitution; on national and working languages; on internal boundaries, and regarding the rights of minorities within each region [4].

Most constitutions, old or relatively newer do not have provisions for the self-determination of a part of a country or nation. Those that do, and have occasionally experimented with it like Canada and Scotland, are advanced countries that have ensured the basic rights of their citizens before they proceeded to providing group rights. We do not need to look further than the false and failed experiment of TPLF that denied individual rights under the pretext of giving group rights, and miserably failed at both.

If we were to follow the logic of Jal Maroo and apply the notion of self-determination for an Oromia that claims ownership of Addis Abeba and other regions like Wollo, we are setting up ourselves for a fight and prolonged warfare that would make us the laughing stock of the world many times over. Rather, these putative differences should be subjects of the National Dialogue in post-Abiy Ethiopia within a democratic and united Ethiopia. This means forces like FANO, OLA, civic groups and the legal opposition should focus on avoiding the past and the present violence-prone politics, honor the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Ethiopia and work in tandem to democratize our institutions and modernize the ethnic-based constitution.

The lessons from the 1993 Eritrean Referendum should not be lost on us. All the world knows that the two peoples are historically intertwined. The Eritrean struggle of 30 years took place because the Federation was wrongly abrogated by Ethiopian rulers. That was a mistake of historical proportions. However, the vindictive TPLF also made a mistake of historical proportions by rushing the idea of Referendum and facilitating Eritrean separation without adequate preparation and time to heal the wounds of war.

How did we pay for that? Two wars from 1998-2000 that claimed the lives of over 100,000 people, a still un-demarcated border and two regimes that do not see eye

to eye with a potential for another war always on the horizon. If time had been given to heal the war wounds following the Dirg era, the Eritrean people could have conducted their referendum after the cooling off period, with prior border and economic cooperation arrangements made in the case of secession, and the two nations could have had fraternal relations. That is history now. As the Spanish philosopher George Santayana said, “those who do not learn from history are doomed to repeat it”.

The Eritrean case was unique in that an internationally recognized Federation was abrogated. Therefore, it is not applicable to any part of Ethiopia. The lesson here is if you do a referendum, that may not solve your problems and the energy and effort should rather be spent on building and democratizing shared institutions.

CONCLUSION

The OLA is implicated in such crimes as Amhara massacres in Wollega, forced displacement of the Amhara community there, attacks on Christians and kidnapping for ransom. OLA has steadily denied the allegations and put them on the federal and regional governments quasi-terrorist forces. Just like the many crimes committed in the Abiy era, these too must await the establishment of an independent investigative body to find out the culprits.

The TPLF/OLF constitution has corralled us all into one identity- linguistic/ethnic. However, as Amartya Sen [5] argues and as we see every day, human beings are multi-identities: Sidama, Ethiopian, woman, Protestant, lawyer, Marxist etc, etc. We should conceive of an Ethiopia where Oromo, Amhara and Tigray women come together to renounce rape and violence committed in this madness of the tenure of the Abiy regime.

Special Zones in the Amhara region should be viewed as models, although some understandably recently have argued that they should be dismantled as long as Amharas in other regions such as in Oromia are not accorded such rights [6]. Peeled away from the machinations of this constitution that is premised on the disenfranchisement of Amharas, Special Zones could enhance the bill of rights of citizens to promote their culture and heritage and should be given to all minorities in a region, and not be politicized or selectively applied.

Amhara cries for equality and human dignity should not be manipulated as expressions of hatred and desire for dominance. Throwing around allegations such as አሃዳዊነት is a double-edged sword that can only find solutions in the breakup of

the current Oromia and Amhar highly centralized states to take public service and local governance to the people. The future of Ethiopian affairs must have the footprints of all Ethiopians and should be the handiwork of all stakeholders.

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NOTES

1. በኦሮሞ ነፃነት ግንባርና- በኦሮሞ ነፃነት ሰራዊትና በኢትዮጵያ መንግስት መካከል በታንዛንያ ለሁለተኛ ዙር ተደርጎ የነበረን የሰላም ድርድር አስመልክቶ በኦነግ-ኦነስ ዋና አዛኝ ጃል መሮ ድረባ የተሰጠ ማብራሪያ- ፀጋዩ ሃይሉ ባልቻ እንደተረጎመዉ። April 2024
2. The Perfect Being the Enemy of the Good- Amhara FANO’s Deliberate Pace at Forming a Unified Command Center, Solomon GebreSelassie, Borkena.com, March 2024
3. Purpose and Principles of the UN Chapter 1, Article 1(2)- Equal Rights and Self-Determination of Peoples
4. The Next Chapter of the Struggle, Jawar Mohammed, February 2023, p.53
5. Identity and Violence: The Illusion of Destiny, Amartya Sen, Norton, 2007
6. Tribalism Primitizes and Zoombifies (sic) the Human Mind and Stifles the Soul, Yonas Biru, April 18, 2004