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# A BRIEF POLITICAL MANIFESTO

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*From Armed Struggle to the Prospect for Peace*



**Oromo Liberation Front- Oromo Liberation Army  
(OLF-OLA)**

**January 2023**

## 1. Our Struggle

We, the Oromo Liberation Army (OLA), fight for the Oromo people's right to self-determination. We fight for the freedom of the Oromo people from political exclusion, economic exploitation, and socio-cultural marginalization.

- a) We fight to realize the Oromo people's right to freely determine their political status. For the right of our people to determine their political destiny and establish a responsive government through freely elected representatives.
- b) We fight to secure the Oromo people's economic sovereignty. To stop the exploitation of our people's natural and human resources. To develop these resources for the benefit of all.
- c) We fight to realize the socio-cultural rights of our people. We demand respect for and full recognition of the Oromo language, culture, and history.

We have willingly dedicated our lives to the liberation of our people not because we are warmongers who relish deadly conflicts and their attendant vagaries but because armed struggle is the sole means left to free ourselves from the ravages of tyranny and rebuild our humanity and identity that have been pulverized by a century of cultural degradation and dehumanization.

The right to self-determination has been the longstanding quest of the Oromo national struggle. The *Qeerroo* Revolution, the recent iteration of the long Oromo struggle otherwise known as the Oromo Protest, reaffirmed this in unambiguous terms. Though Ethiopian politicians habitually attempt to cast the Oromo people's demands in negative terms, the principle of self-determination is a foundational human right on which all other rights are based. The right to self-determination remains one of the few inalienable human rights that permeate both the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (ICESCR).

The right of self-determination is not just a right to be respected, protected, and fulfilled, but also a core organizing principle of peace and security. Our quest for this right is not directed against anyone or is designed for iconoclastic goals. It is the embodiment of the just cause of the Oromo people to achieve equality, justice, dignity, and freedom. It is because of the clarity and justness

of our cause that all Ethiopians rallied in support of the Oromo *Qeerroo* Revolution, which toppled the Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front's (EPRDF) dictatorship, paved the way for the repeal of some of the draconian laws and repressive practices of the authoritarian order and a fleeting moment of nascent liberalization of the political and economic system. Our quest for Oromo rights is in a multitude of ways compatible with the quest of other peoples of the region for their rights.

The Oromo *qeerroo* who led the social protest movement and the OLA fighters are two faces of the same phenomenon. As such, preserving the victories gained on the back of the Oromo *Qeerroo* Revolution was OLA's political priority. However, the hope of democratization quickly evaporated once a backward-looking clique snatched political power, put forth a nostalgic vision of a unitary state with a centralized power structure, and vowed to wage genocidal wars against all nations to ensure the restoration of the old order. In the face of the incumbent regime's aggression and violence to push its agenda forward, armed struggle became the only means of fighting for our national survival. Our fight is legitimate because the right to resist tyranny is an inalienable human right.

Though we will fight to the last drop of our blood to overcome the threat to our survival as a people, we are equally committed to peacemaking. As Oromo, we understand peace (*nagaa*) is the foundation and a prerequisite of a properly functioning political system, religious rituals, social relations, and moral order. Among the Oromo, *nagaa* is key to an orderly universe and a strong, prosperous, and self-reliant society. War is never our choice. It is not our goal. We desire peace and its attendant social and economic benefits for our people. We believe in a negotiated peace that produces a lasting political settlement that accommodates our people's age-old demands and honors our sacrifices.

The proof of our commitment to peace is that we have repeatedly expressed our readiness to do the unconscionable thing of sitting down with an Ethiopian government that has desecrated the bittersweet victories of the Oromo national movement and is busy restoring the worst aspects of Ethiopia's autocratic legacies. We have been prepared to set aside our reservations that Ethiopian officials could be rational actors who have the capacity to understand that war is destructive. We

pursue peace for the sake of our cause, in honor of our martyrs, and out of respect for the aspirations of our people.

## **2. Our Institutional Independence**

After the relative liberalization of the political space on the back of the *Qeerroo* Revolution, the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF), now registered with the National Election Board of Ethiopia, and the Ethiopian government reached an agreement providing for the termination of hostilities, de-securitization of politics, and ushering in of a new age of peaceful political contestations. Accordingly, the OLF returned to Ethiopia in September 2018 to participate in a peaceful political struggle. Though the Ethiopian government refused to allow third-party observers or formally sign the agreement, the two sides agreed to establish a joint committee to implement the agreement, specifically the Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR) of combatants into the security and/or civilian sector.

In the first months, even though there was demonstrable reluctance on the part of the government to implement the DDR, a conflict between Ethiopian security forces and OLA units did not occur. For the most part, the OLA and government forces recognized their respective areas of operation and in effect cooperated in maintaining law and order. The OLA never attacked government security forces at any time. Cooperation, not confrontation, was the mode of interaction and the spirit of the “Asmara Agreement.”

However, the agreement was never implemented. The Oromo People’s Democratic Organization (OPDO) government made a calculated political decision not to allow any political competition in Oromia. The party’s central committee made a deliberate decision to obliterate all Oromo political forces. Immediately after OLF leaders returned home, the government let loose its political operatives and OPDO-affiliated Oromo minions to conduct a virulent campaign of vilification and humiliation against the OLF. Incitement, incrimination, and instigation of violence against the OLF became commonplace. Minor clashes took place resulting in the death of many.

The government blames the OLF for the non-implementation of the “Asmara Agreement.” However, the facts show that the government is wholly responsible for sabotaging the

implementation process because destroying the OLF was its goal from the outset. All along, the OLF's position was that the "Asmara Agreement" must be implemented fully. The government found its *casus belli* in the issue of disarmament, orchestrated a campaign of scapegoating, and finally declared war on the OLA, boasting that its military would destroy the fighters in weeks. The OLA reacted only in self-defense and eventually in defense of the national aspirations of our people.

The sudden decision of the OLF top brass to make an informal Asmara "peace deal" with the Ethiopian government that is not observed by a neutral third party to end decades-long armed hostilities had led to controversies in the party. There were no robust internal discussions, particularly with the Oromo army, and the decision-making processes that led to the party's return to Ethiopia remain controversial to this day. Some members of the party's Central Committee (*Gumii Sabaa*) question the legality of those internal decisions that led to the party's homecoming.

By accepting the Asmara "peace deal" without a signed document and in the absence of a third-party observer, the OLF leadership also fell into the traps of the legendary Ethiopian politics of evasion, prevarication, and downright treachery. OLF combatants who had entered military camps for retraining before integration into Ethiopian security forces were harshly mistreated. OLF officials were denied visiting the OLA combatants and their entreaties to improve the proceedings were ignored. The initial steps to implement the "agreement" confirmed the Ethiopian government was not committed to executing the agreement faithfully.

Under pressure from Oromo elders, notable figures, and intellectuals, the OLF leadership publicly disavowed and severed relations with the OLA. The OLF made a public declaration of separation from the OLA. Even then, the OLF was constantly accused of association with the OLA to a point where it was unable to function as a legally registered political party.

Hence, the following considerations necessitated a redefinition of the relationship between the OLF and OLA.

- A. As a legally registered political party, it became clear that OLF is not in a position to command an armed group or lead an armed struggle against the Ethiopian government.
- B. Some OLF Executive Committee members joined the ruling regime's administrative structure at the federal and regional levels. In addition, Prosperity Party operatives and double agents infiltrated the OLF structure. Consequently, the OLF leadership lost its autonomy and political capital in order to continue to give political directions to the OLA.
- C. Nearly all high-level OLF leaders were incarcerated and a few that remained out of prison were placed under continued surveillance and subject to manipulation by the ruling regime. Effectively immobilized, the OLF did not have the requisite political presence to give operational guidance to the OLA.

In practice, the OLF became legally, politically, and operationally impotent. To resolve the impasse, the OLA convened a General Assembly (*Kora Sabaa*) in Oromia in the summer of 2021. The OLA political leaders, military commanders, members, and supporters of the OLA representing all regions of Oromia participated in person and virtually. The General Assembly created a politico-military body called the *OLF-OLA High Command* as the only legitimate politico-military entity directing the OLA and its military, political and diplomatic engagements. The name OLF-OLA is chosen to signify the unification of the political and military leadership in the same body: the OLF-OLA High Command.

### **3. Our Army**

The OLF-OLA is committed to protecting our people against the ravages of the actions of Ethiopian security forces. Our fighters are trained to observe rules of engagement and adhere to strict military discipline. We have a zero-tolerance policy for any activity that is not authorized by the chain of command. If rogue elements are found engaged in unauthorized actions, they are dealt with expeditiously and appropriate disciplinary measures are taken with dispatch.

Our fighters understand that the Amhara and other non-Oromo residents of Oromia who live among the Oromo people are citizens of Oromia. Their rights are sacrosanct and inviolate that cannot be infringed under any circumstances. Our fighters are trained to observe our doctrine that one should not be the target of any form of attack solely on account of one's identity. The OLA

and its fighters who fight for Oromo rights would never adopt a retributive approach that emasculates others of their inalienable rights.

We are aware that the Ethiopian regime accuses OLA combatants of perpetrating violence against civilians. Its officials charge our fighters of indiscriminately killing civilians and terrorizing citizens. This has been proven to be a trivial political ploy that aims to transfer to OLA fighters crimes that the regime's agents themselves commit with impunity. The actual perpetrators are mercenaries masquerading as OLA that the Ethiopian regime created to commit heinous crimes that would subsequently be blamed on the OLA. The crimes the counterfeit OLA commits would then be used as a pretext for "law enforcement" operations against the OLA and its support system among the Oromo people.

Indeed, the counterfeit OLA bands of marauders have committed heinous atrocities against the Oromo people and non-Oromo residents of Oromia. More than manufacturing reasons for scorched earth military interventions, the objective of the unconscionable atrocities they commit is to create a gulf between the OLA and the Oromo people, delegitimize the OLA in the eyes of the international community including by creating links between the counterfeit OLA and some terror groups in the region, and sow discord among the Oromo people by associating the Oromo national struggle led by OLA with specific parts of Oromia.

We strongly encourage the international community, through the United Nations and/or other mechanisms, to find out the truth and live up to its pledge of "Never Again." On our part, we continue to call for credible, internationally-mandated independent investigations into the atrocities or reports of atrocities committed in Oromia.

#### **4. Our Case Against the Regime**

In the last four years, the Oromo people have been denied all aspects of their right to democratic self-rule:

- a) They stand denied their right to freely elect their government to office. Every moderately informed and assertive Oromo is physically and systematically eliminated from the political space insofar as they stand in opposition to the ruling regime.
- b) The human and material resources of the Oromo people are being exploited and squandered on an industrial scale. The rampant poverty has gotten worse.
- c) A few gains we had made towards respect for the Oromo language and culture are being reversed, among other things, through the introduction of education policies that undermine the Oromo language in Oromia.

However, the story of the past four years goes further. In addition to the denial of all aspects of the exercise of the right to self-determination, the Oromo people are denied the very right to exist in their own territory. After the Prosperity Party regime came to power, the Ethiopian government waged wars in which war crimes, crimes against humanity, ethnic cleansing, and even genocide have been committed. At the very least, we maintain that the Prosperity Party regime has committed “crimes against humanity” that meet every single criterion of the Rome Statute (Art 7(1) (a-k).

1. The regime treats Oromoness as a security threat and, using fabricated crimes of association with the OLA, indicts innocent Oromo and subjects them to murder and mayhem. We protest the *crime of murder* (Art. 7, 1, a) because the Oromo person’s very humanity is denied and denigrated.
2. Under the pretense of “law enforcement,” the regime’s security forces have committed the *crime of extermination* (Art. 7, 1, b) against the Oromo people. Under a military rule known as command posts for three years, western, central, and southern Oromia have suffered extrajudicial killings, rape, maiming, and other inhuman acts perpetrated by attacks on unarmed civilians, including bombing by the Ethiopian Air Force drones and other airborne assets.
3. Since coming to power, the Abiy regime has planted seeds of suspicion and division among Oromos and incited the Oromo against other ethnic groups using government and party media assets and resources. The ensuing intercommunal conflicts have occasioned *deportation and forcible transfer of population* (Art. 7, 1, d), giving Ethiopia the unenviable



moniker of being the country with the largest number of internally displaced persons in the world.

4. The regime has unlawfully subjected tens of thousands of people to *imprisonment or other severe deprivation of physical liberty* (Art. 7, 1, e). Ethiopian prisons are filled with innocent people whom the regime's prosecutors have falsely charged and jailed. Nearly every Oromo opposition political leader and many thousands of prisoners of conscience are now languishing in squalid prisons, makeshift detention centers, and concentration camps.
5. With an intent to destroy, the regime has unleashed waves of *persecution against an identifiable group or collectivity, committing acts that are universally recognized as impermissible under international law* (Art. 7, 1, h). In the last three years, the regime has worked relentlessly to weaken and destroy legally registered Oromo political parties, the Oromo Liberation Front, and the Oromo Federalist Congress in particular, using violence, conspiracy theories, and corrupt money.
6. Under the Abiy regime, Oromia has endured "*inhumane acts ... intentionally causing great suffering, or serious injury to body or to mental or physical health*" (Art. 7, 1, k). Crimes of awful magnitude have been committed in Oromia, drenching it in blood. The region was turned into grotesque scenes of flaying, beheading, and burning humans alive, and landscapes of maimed, tortured, and decapitated bodies, mutilated by beasts, and homesteads that are deliberately touched and burned to the ground.
7. All of the aforementioned crimes were *committed systematically and directed against a civilian population* (Art. 7, 1). The Oromo people were despised, denigrated, and dehumanized. Controlling the media, closing down independent media outlets, or muzzling them with threats, the regime has allowed genocidal narratives to be aired, distorting Oromo history, denigrating Oromo culture, and deforming Oromo identity. Most importantly, the regime perpetrated these crimes with *full knowledge of the attack*.

The OLA is currently the only force standing between the dehumanizing brutality of a regime that has lost any capacity of fellow feeling for human beings, a leadership that callously trivializes the loss of human life and a society that has been cowed to condoning crimes against humanity. Despite the fact that the OLA has the moral and legitimate responsibility to defend the Oromo people

against the excessive violence the regime has unleashed against them, the OLA wants to be on record that our preference is peace.

## **5. Towards the Prospect of Peace**

The OLA maintains that a lasting and sustainable solution to Ethiopia's multifaceted and complex political problems can result only from a comprehensive political settlement that emanates from an all-inclusive political process involving all stakeholders and representative political forces. The Ethiopian government no longer possesses the legitimacy and confidence of all stakeholders to convene and preside over such a process. The regime-sponsored national dialogue is demonstrably dead-on-arrival. International sponsorship of a genuine political process is necessary for a number of reasons, chiefly:

- a) While the great majority of the Oromo people support the OLA, the remaining few individuals closely work with the regime in various capacities. In such a polarized political landscape, finding a neutral mediator within the country is a far cry from a viable possibility.
- b) Meaningful mediation requires skills, logistics, and related facilities. OLA commanders and negotiators should be moved in and out of conflict zones. The necessary security guarantees and logistics can only be sourced internationally.
- c) To be effective the process of mediation should be formalized and observed by neutral third states. Anything less will be a repeat of the failed 'Asmara Agreement' between the OLF and the Ethiopian government.
- d) Only international actors can be guarantors for the enforcement of mediation agreements. This is a singularly crucial piece of the puzzle. Even internationally, only a few actors can guarantee implementation.

Therefore, a process that aims to address the root causes of the ongoing Ethiopian civil war must be internationally sponsored to produce the desired outcome of reaching a political settlement and peaceful resolution of political problems. The OLA is prepared to work with all stakeholders and with the international community to make this a reality.

On its part, the government can take the following steps to demonstrate its readiness to do everything for peace to return to Ethiopia. In order to pave the way for a negotiated settlement, the government must take the following confidence and security-building measures.

### **5.1 Confidence Building Measures (CBMs)**

1. Open humanitarian corridors in Oromia to allow aid agencies to reach the populations affected by the conflict and its attendant ravages.
2. Release all Oromo political detainees, specifically the many thousands of innocent farmers, business persons, students, and community leaders who are languishing in prisons and concentration camps across Oromia, accused of being OLA supporters.
3. Terminate the intensified persecution of all Oromo opposition party leaders, and supporters and the wanton closure of Oromo opposition party offices.
4. Take practical steps to make *Afaan Oromoo* a federal working language and rescind policies the Federal Ministry of Education has promulgated that erode *Afaan Oromoo*'s status as the main instructional language in Oromia.
5. Agree to recognize Finfinnee as an integral part of Oromia. While respecting the full political, economic, and property rights of residents and the city's status as an international capital, the government must commit to acknowledging the Oromo peoples' longstanding proprietary right to the city.
6. Halt the intensification of land theft by Prosperity Party officials, religious institutions, robber barons parading as businesspersons, and social misfits who call themselves custodians of Finfinnee. The government must end these corrupt practices. Not doing so is tantamount to dereliction of duty.

### **5.2 Security Building Measures (SBMs)**

1. End the rampant extrajudicial killing of the Oromo simply by labeling them terrorists or associates of a phantom terrorist organization called "Shane." In particular, the government must end the practice of guilt by association, collective punishment, and scorched earth punitive measures under the guise of fighting a non-existent threat of terrorism.

2. Respect the dignity of Oromo individuals and their inviolable right to life, liberty, and property. We demand legal and practical guarantees that will end the rampant dehumanizing practices, namely arbitrary arrests, detentions without charge, illegal searches, and denial of court-ordered bail, and ordered the release of the thousands of Oromo political prisoners in federal custody and in detention facilities in Oromia.
3. End military operations in Oromia and encamp the military and security forces in barracks. The government must also find ways to work in partnership with the OLA to maintain peace and security in many parts of Oromia.
4. Abolish the illegal and immoral rule of a significant portion of Oromia by Command Posts. It did not result in the government gaining legitimacy or control of the region. It must end immediately.
5. Stop the horizontalization of conflicts among the Oromo; between the Oromo and Amhara and others.

## **6. Regional Security and Stability**

The Horn of Africa is a highly fragile region. Despite domestic and international efforts to reconstruct the state, Somalia has not been able to form a functional central government. Sudan is haltingly undergoing a delicate transition. South Sudan is striving to emerge out of the post-independence civil war.

Ethiopia, for all intents and purposes, has become a failed state. Once considered an anchor state and one of the fastest-growing economies in the region, Ethiopia now stands as an impediment to regional peace and security. Financing a huge military and security apparatus and operations to keep an unpopular party in power has become a major factor inhibiting economic growth and human development. If it continues on its current trajectory, the collapse of authority is a distinct possibility and its reverberations will be felt all the way to the European shores of the Mediterranean Sea and beyond.

The Oromo people constitute the largest ethnonational group in the Horn of Africa region. Oromia is the demographic, geographic, and economic center of Ethiopia. The Oromo also live in Kenya, Somalia, and Djibouti. Peace and stability in Ethiopia cannot be achieved and sustained without

the resolution of the conflicts in Oromia. By effectively organizing and allocating this vast material and human resources, the OLF-OLA has begun to contribute to sustainable peace and security in the Red Sea basin. In addition, the OLF-OLA has formed alliances with other Ethiopian progressive and federalist forces to ensure that the Red Sea is a peaceful zone of international commerce.

One of the main problems perpetuating instability in the Horn of Africa is the abject poverty in which the majority of the population lives. By addressing the legitimate quest of the majority of the Ethiopian nations for democratic self-governance, the OLF-OLA and its progressive partners intend to build a political economy that invests in education, technology, and innovation and creates conditions in which livelihoods flourish, and, consequently, renders obsolete the political economy of predation that fuels terrorism, illegal migration, and human trafficking as a means of income generation.

Significantly more needs to be done to improve the economic conditions of the people of the region. First, the rule of the law must prevail in the region. Secondly, private property ownership should be respected. Third, enabling conditions for free competition ought to be in place. Forth, while certain pockets of market failure require social policies that necessitate the role of the state in the economy, a government should assume a carefully balanced role in the market. We hold these conditions to be key ingredients and drivers of human development and economic growth—in the region and beyond.

## **7. The End Must Be Peace and Justice**

The first requirement of successful peacemaking is that the parties in conflict express their political will to persevere through the vicissitudes of peacemaking and peacebuilding. Political will often means being secure in one's own capabilities. The incumbent party must preserve or enhance, rather than endanger, public security. Thus far, its activities have been the emblem of the reckless use of military resources to advance a narrow political agenda. It has the chance to change course by taking CBMs that strive to eliminate the elements of secrecy in military activity and enhance confidence in a just peace process.

At the same time, the regime has the opportunity to reduce human suffering by refraining from taking measures that do not undermine public security. For instance, the indiscriminate use of drones to hit civilian targets has no military objective to advance. Instead, the regime can take SBMs measures that can prove beneficial in the short run and have a greater chance of creating opportunities for peacemaking and developing into further cooperative activity. The OLA is ready to respond to constructive gestures. It is also ready to defend the Oromo cause if the regime chooses to stay the course.

OLF-OLA High Command

January 2023