

THE PROTEST, THE PLAN, THE PERSECUTION, AND THE PROSPECT (S)

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Introduction

When, on the 12th of November 2015, protest erupted in the small town of Gincii, in Oromia (Ethiopia), it was because the local officials 'sold' a school football field to private investors. Students of the school marched to express their resentment. Soon, it echoed the misgivings people had about the privatization of the the Cillimo Forest reserve in the nearby district in the area. The protests there echoed the deeper pre-existing grievance people had regarding land grab in and around Addis Ababa (sanctioned, inter alia, by the infamous Addis Ababa Master Plan). Soon, the local protests took on a national colour when university students, farmers, and local residents across Oromia, re-engaged in protesting the Master Plan and the wider land grab across the country. Since then, all is not well with Oromia and Oromos across the globe. As peaceful protests raged, violent repression also raged: the Ethiopian government responded with murders, arrests, tortures, and numerous forms of atrocities by deploying its Federal Army, the Special Forces (otherwise known as *Ag'azi*), and the Federal Police. Similar Oromia-wide protests had erupted in April 2014 when the Ethiopian Government revealed a Master Plan that expands the border of the capital city, Addis Ababa, to the Oromia State. Oromos viewed the expansion as an annexation of their land that evokes the memory of violent dispossession and displacement experienced when the city was conquered, occupied, and 'founded' as the capital of the modern Ethiopian state in 1886. Who are the Oromos?

The Oromo

With a population of over 40 million, the Oromo are the largest ethno-national group in the Horn of Africa region. The large majority of them live in Ethiopia, although some Oromos live in parts of Kenya as well. The Oromos in Ethiopia live in their homeland, Oromia, a region that constitutes over a third of the Ethiopian landmass. Oromia was incorporated into the modern Ethiopian state in the late 19th century through wars of imperial-colonial conquest directed at them by the Abyssinians who, after conniving with colonial Europe of post -1884/85, had just acquired modern European rifles. Although the encounter between Oromia and the Abyssinian state is reported to go back to the 13th century, and there is a relatively notable writing of the Oromo expansion of the 16th century, the Oromos are generally rendered invisible in the mainstream Ethiopian historiography, even after the 19th century colonial-imperial occupation. As a people, they were subjected to political domination, economic exploitation, and cultural denigration. Thus, they were denied the right to use their language in schools until 1991. They were denied the right to use names that express their identity and cultures. They were also denied the right to cultural self-

expression including the right to worship their own God, *Waaqa*, in accordance with their own tradition. Owing to the land tenure system that gave the land and the people over to the soldiers of the conquering Abyssinian state (the *nafoxanya-gabar* system), the basic means of livelihood, land, was given over to the settlers and the people were reduced to serfs. Official state nationalism ignored their history. At times, it positively erased them from history. As a result, the Oromo became one of the history-less peoples in Ethiopia. For far too long, their image has been rendered invisible, their voice inaudible, their cultural and institutional life implausible, their political perspectives unpalatable. In resistance, Oromo nationalists waged a liberation war since the 1960s, some organized, some unorganized. The liberation struggle that was spearheaded by the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) since 1974 finally led to the Ethiopian government's concession of autonomy in a Federal Ethiopia since 1995. Accordingly, Oromia became one of the nine states of the Ethiopian federation. Addis Ababa (which Oromos call Finfinnee) was designated as the seat of the Federal Government while also serving as the capital city of the State of Oromia. Its settler population (which has displaced the native Oromos) are self-governing. Much to the resentment of the Oromo population, the city government is accountable to the Federal Government. While the city is constitutionally, cunningly, rendered outside the political and administrative jurisdiction of Oromia, Oromia's 'Special interest' over the city was constitutionally recognized. However, the interest was neither legally articulated nor practically implemented. One of the reasons Oromos protest the expansion, apart from its annexation of more territory from Oromia, is its neglect of the constitutionally recognized 'Special interest'. Years of resentment to Federal denial of autonomy, increasing securitization of Oromo identity, persecution of dissident Oromos as 'terrorists', and the disproportionate presence of Oromos in Ethiopia's prisons (86% of the prison population in Ethiopia today is Oromo!) have been simmering underneath before the eruption of the recent protest.

The Protest

The protest started in April 2014. The immediate cause, then, was the Addis Ababa Master Plan. The protest was national. The youth from all over Oromia and the Oromo diaspora from across the globe protested the implementation of the Master Plan that epitomized the more widely practised phenomenon of land grab in Oromia (and Ethiopia). In response, in 2014 alone, the government killed over 80 students, injured hundreds, and arrested thousands of peoples some of whom it is prosecuting as terrorists to date. When the protest started again in November 2015, the government responded by killing over 200, injuring hundreds more, and arresting tens of thousands. In places, protestors have had to barricade themselves from the military for fear of mass murder. The government parachuted special commandos from helicopters in Jaldu, Ginde-beret, Ambo, Sululta, and several other spots. In time, Oromia became what some commentators referred to as 'a war zone.' The protest still continues. So does the repression. At the moment, a Command Post chaired by the Federal Prime Minister rules the entire State, completely unconstitutionally (without a Federal Intervention Order, or an Emergency Declaration). When the protest came close to

unseating the regime, it has now declared that the Master Plan is 'suspended'. However, the protest has now become about bigger issues of Oromo-Ethiopia relations and the fundamental legitimacy of the regime to govern. In the meantime, the regime has imprisoned opposition political party leaders such as Mr Bekele Gerba, a former prisoner of conscience who was released only in 2015. The protestors now demand the release of all prisoners of conscience, restoration of land rights to the farmers evicted by expropriation, and establishment of an impartial inquiry commission for investigating the killings, the injuries, the tortures, the arrests, and the many indescribable acts of political violence. They also demand that perpetrators be brought before justice. In addition, they seek to see the respect of all human rights of Oromo persons without discrimination. They demand Oromo right to self-rule in the federation and self-determination in Ethiopia. The protestors insist that their voice is a voice of justice, a voice of suffering, a voice for the respect of the human dignity of the Oromo person in Ethiopian and beyond.

The Plan

The ominous Plan, known by the more elaborate 'Addis Ababa Regional Integrated Development Plan, 2014-2038' (the Master Plan for short), seeks to draw a master plan for 36 small towns and 17 districts in the Special Zone of Oromia that surrounds the city. By 2033, it predicts that Addis Ababa will be a mega city with a population size of 12.1 million. This demographic growth, obviously, is the result of displacement of Oromo residents and farmers who are currently living on the land. It divides the area into Industrial Zones, Recreation Parks, Dry Ports, and Investment Sites, in complete neglect of the people living in the area, operating as if the land is empty, a virtual *terra nullius* that the regime just discovered. By so doing, it expands the jurisdiction of the city, injects an unconstitutional change of state boundaries, annexes the Oromo land, and erases the culture, history, identity, and language of the indigenous peoples from the area. Needless to say, it renders the population homeless, jobless, and placeless. As such, it re-enacts the historic violence inaugurated at the moment of conquest in the late 19th century. Oromos fear that the Plan divides Oromia into two and brings an end to Oromia as we knew it thus far. It also undermines state autonomy and the federal nature of the bigger Ethiopian polity. Hence, the bitter resistance.

The Persecution

The government responded in the best way it always responded to its citizens and subjects alike: violence. Oromos, who sustained a century old violence, faced the violence that is familiar to them: dispossession, displacement, and dislocation of life; barbaric killings of children, women, and senior persons who are not involved in any political activity; mass arrest of peaceful protestors and torture of the same in detention centres, school compounds, university campuses, and 'prison fields'. To date, over 200 have been extra-judicially murdered since the re-ignition of the protest. Children (confirmed to be 17 so far), women, and elderly people are among them. University campuses have been encamped by

the Army, dormitories are raided, and rooms are destroyed and vandalized by the regime's Special Forces. Students are forced to flee into the jungles exposed to harm, danger, and diseases. Oromo political leaders and renowned persons (e.g. Bekele Gerba, Yonatan T Regassa, etc) are jailed arbitrarily. Schools are closed in many places. Universities are closed or, where they are open, they are under constant Army surveillance and patrol if not converted into military camps altogether. Students who took part in the protest are banned from their studies. In places, public mourning of the dead are banned for fear of the funerals turning into spontaneous rallies. Oromo activists are threatened with persecution as terrorists. Oromo identity is securitized, i.e. *Oromumma*, to be an Oromo, is presented as a security threat to Ethiopia and its development. The government of the State of Oromia is rendered inoperative. The Oromo branch of the ruling party EPRDF, i.e., the Oromo People's Democratic Organization (OPDO), is blamed for the protest. The Command Post chaired by the Federal Prime Minister, and the Counter-Terror Task Force, rules Oromia. There is a heavy military and security presence across the towns in the entire Oromia region. War helicopters fly low in towns. Army regiments march up and down the streets of towns such as Ambo, Naqamte, Ciroo, etc. The goal is to terrorize the people into silence.

The Prospect: Grim Future...

The effect, especially in the towns of Western Shoa is the lock down of towns including markets. Coupled with the closure of inter-city roads in various parts of the Oromia State, the freezing of movement of goods and people has created conditions for a bad omen: there is now fear of an impending famine. In a country where 20 million are already exposed to famine created by drought and mismanagement of resources, the persecution is feared to lead to the world's second worst humanitarian crisis (next only to the Syrian crisis). This in turn may lead to huge internal displacement as well as refugee outflows into an extremely volatile sub-region (of South Sudan, Eritrea, and Somalia, all of which are constantly in the news headline in their own right).

In addition, given the toxic current political climate, there might be incidents of more protest and more state terrorism. From experience, we all know that state terrorism breeds only more terrorism. The result may be a humanitarian crisis that defies the wildest of our imagination: state collapse, genocide, and other forms of mayhem. The impending crisis of human security is so huge that there needs to be a concerted international effort to stop the carnage and to restore a just peace to the region. The West's hesitation to condemn the acts of state terror just because Ethiopia is their 'strategic ally' is becoming counter-productive. From the way it acts, after closing down the political space and clamping down dissent, it is inviting an armed struggle or a more violent form of resistance. Needless to say, this is a liability to regional peace and stability.

What to do now...

In the interest of restoring peace and stability, the government of Ethiopia has to remove the Federal Army, the Special Forces, and the Federal Police from the state of Oromia. They should restore peace to the region. The army regiments that have encamped schools and university campuses must vacate them immediately. Roads ought to be unblocked, and economic life must resume (harvests must be collected). Farmers must be returned to their lands. Replacements must be given to those whose houses were razed or lands are taken and irreparably transformed. Housing and other basic social services must be provided to those families that were evicted without compensation. Repeal of the master plan and related laws must be effected legally. All political prisoners, especially those that are arrested in relation to the protest, must be released. The Command Post must be disbanded. An impartial inquiry commission must be established. Investigation must be duly conducted and perpetrators of state terrorism must be made accountable before impartial courts. The government must take political responsibility and extend apology to the Oromo public for all its misdeeds and misstatements. Local administration must be restored as quickly as possible. The government and parliament of Oromia must be dismissed. An interim government that facilitates snap state election must be set up. It is imperative to take concrete measures toward protection of all Oromo human rights including the special interest over Addis Ababa. Likewise, it is important to take measures to start a national conversation on whether and how to remove the federal government from Oromia. It is also important to start a deep conversation to heal deeper wounds in Oromia and beyond.

The Oromos across the globe are standing in solidarity with the Oromo protest. The Oromo diaspora have been engaged in massive acts of lobbying, advocacy, and activism. The Australian Oromo community has also been doing its part to sensitize the Australian public about the Protests. Alongside the wider international community, the Australian government needs to put pressure on the Ethiopian government to stop the carnage and to work towards restoration of durable peace in the country before it is too late. Given the volatile geo-political situation, the stakes are too high. The Australian government, human rights institutions, civic organizations, and the general public needs to use all possible avenues to reckon with the goings-on in Ethiopia and bear witness. It is the call of human duty to stand with the Oromo protest because the protest is a voice of justice. It is a voice of conscience. It is a voice of democracy. It is a voice of suffering, the voice of human rights. As a voice of resistance to historic violence of dispossession, it is also a voice of self-determination.

In supporting the Oromo Protest and sending a strong message to the Ethiopian government to stop the violence, we believe that Australia will join the chorus of voices of conscience (so far) expressed institutionally through the European Union (and hopefully the wider international community). In so doing we, Oromo Australians, believe that Australia will stand on the right side of history. It will be a responsible member of the international community. It will rise to the challenge of discharging its responsibility as a respected 'international citizen'. Its citizens will be proud of standing in solidarity with those who

struggle for a “fair go” in their own context. Australia will be engaged with the world as a force for good. In standing with the Oromo and echoing their voice of memory, Australians will find an occasion to live out their own values (democracy, human rights, equality, dignity, etc) in the international arena. Australians will deepen their own engagement with the issues of justice, plurality/diversity, and equality in the home front thereby enhancing their own self-definition (and re-definition) as a people.