

“Tanan Kaygna, Ethiopian Kaygna”: Our Tana, our Ethiopia

By

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“Some people think it is their birthright to continue ruling Ethiopia.”

“The EPRDF is not a god to be worshipped.”

“Ethiopia faces an existential crisis.”

“The people are protesting not because they are rebellious but because they have legitimate demands”

Lemma Megersa, Jan 4, 2018.

In the history of a people’s struggle against oppression, seemingly innocuous events trigger a movement for fundamental change. Rosa Parks’ refusal to give up her seat in a bus to a white man in 1955 kindled the civil rights movement in the US. When Mohammad Bouzazi set himself on fire in 2010 in Tunisia, his self-emulation reverberated throughout the Arab world. Similarly, when Oromo youth defiantly protested at Ginche and Ambo against the implementation of the master plan for Addis Ababa in 2015, they started the peaceful resistance against the regime in Ethiopia.

But to achieve its goal, the resistance requires unity. And when some 250 Oromo youth went to Bahir Dar from Oromia to weed out water hyacinth from Lake Tana, under the banner *“Tanan Kaygna”*, they set in motion the drive for unity, reconciliation, and mutual respect between the Oromo and Amhara people. More importantly, they ignited an *“Ethiopian Kaygna”* movement, an all-inclusive movement to establish democratic rule in Ethiopia. *“Tanan Kaygna”* underscores the need for unity not just between Amharas and Oromos, but also among all Ethiopians to achieve a common goal. Their action heralds the dawn of a unity movement known as *“Tokuuma”* in Afan Oromo for a united, democratic Ethiopia:

Leadership matters

The TPLF leaders have attempted and succeeded to some extent in dividing the Ethiopian people along ethnic lines. The TPLF and the regime it controls have been condemning Amharas as chauvinists and the Oromos as narrow-minded nationalists for more than 25 years. That is offensive, bullying, and divisive rhetoric. A current member of the TPLF’s Executive Committee, three years ago infamously chastised the TPLF for not doing enough to incite conflicts between

Oromos and Amharas. The TPLF's statements and policies have had the intended consequences. Ethiopia has witnessed many incidents of ethnic conflict over the last 25 years. Even today, when most Ethiopians have opted for unity, the TPLF is advancing disunity. On January 3, a statement issued by the EPRDF's Executive Committee, which most people think was written by the TPLF, condemns cooperation between the OPDO and ANDM as an unprincipled conspiracy.

By contrast, the current OPDO leadership to its credit has unequivocally stated that it upholds national unity based on equality among Ethiopians. On January 4, Mr. Lemma Megersa (Mr. Demeke Mokonnen of ANDM too) rejected the TPLF's accusation and emphasized the need for cooperation between parties and unity among the people to overcome the problems Ethiopia faces.

The OPDO leadership realizes that unity is indispensable to eradicate poverty or to establish democracy in Ethiopia. Mr. Lemma Megersa underlined the need for unity—*"Tokuuma"*—when he said last November in Bahir Dar, *"The Oromo people will not cross Awash alone, even if they try a thousand times. Similarly, the Amhara people cannot jump over Abay alone. Unless, the nations, nationalities, and peoples of Ethiopia unite, we will never tackle the problems we face. The problems will enslave us."* (Translation, mine).

That's the kind of statement Ethiopians expect from their political leaders. The statement reflects a mature, cerebral, visionary leadership, something that has been woefully lacking in Ethiopia for the last 26 years.

The current OPDO leadership has gone beyond publicly making the right statements on democracy and national unity. It has introduced a number of unity-enhancing initiatives. It organized the *"Tanan Kaygna"* trip, most suspect. Kudos to Mr. Lemma Megersa, Dr. Abiy Ahmad, and others for taking the historic initiative. Their undertaking has brought the Amhara and Oromo people together and has galvanized the Ethiopian people for peaceful change.

The OPDO leadership played a crucial role in arranging the "people-to-people conference" that took place in Bahir Dar last November. It intervened at the right time to prevent civil war in Illubabur where agent provocateurs were trying to incite civil war between Amharas and Oromos last October. It reprimanded the government and pro-government media for indirectly inciting violence between Amharas and Oromos. ENN admitted its mistakes and issued an apology on October 26, 2017. The OPDO leadership has dropped "ethnicity" as one of the categories for identifying individuals on the official ID issued by the state of Oromia.

In other *Killels*, Ethiopians are still forced to carry IDs, similar to those issued by Apartheid South Africa, that forces them to identify their ethnicity. The measures introduced by OPDO so far are small steps, and yet significant for building national unity.

In Praise of Oromo Youth

What is so remarkable about the “*Tokuuma*” movement is that it started with the Oromo youth who grew up on a daily dose of anti-Amhara propaganda. For the last 25 years, they were relentlessly told that the Amhara were the colonizers, the enslavers, the enemy of the Oromo people. The “*Tokuuma*” movement repudiates this hateful propaganda and embraces reconciliation. The Oromo youth, reflecting the best values of the Oromo people, have taken the first crucial step towards reconciliation.

The Amharas must take steps that will strengthen “*Tokuuma*”. They must undertake a series of “*Oromo Yegna*” deeds. The government of the so-called Amhara region should help financially the displaced Oromos. The regional government should encourage the people to hold concerts and other events to raise funds for the displaced. It is not the amount that matters; it is the intention that counts. It could also resettle some of the displaced Oromos in its region. Amharas and other Ethiopians, inside and outside Ethiopia, should contribute generously through the Red Cross or other humanitarian organizations to help the displaced.

Inspired by “*Tokuuma*”, Oromo and Amhara intellectuals could start a forum to discuss the historical relationship between the Amhara and Oromo people with a view to promoting unity. They could address the historical past with honesty, rigour, and objectivity. Quite often many of the Oromo and Amhara public intellectuals and academics concerned about the future of Ethiopia and the Oromo people talk past each other, instead of talking to each other. Badly needed is a common forum, particularly in the diaspora communities where diametrically opposed views on the future of Ethiopia seem entrenched.

The dialogue could contribute towards establishing the modalities of reconciliation. It could interject new ideas, concepts, and frameworks to solving the current impasse and towards establishing a democratic, united, and prosperous Ethiopia. When Amharas and Oromos join forces, when all Ethiopians unite, the possibilities are infinite. No wonder, the anti-unity forces are terrified by “*Tokuuma*”.

“*Tokuuma*” rejects ethnic exclusiveness and welcomes ethnic inclusiveness. It confirms that the Ethiopian people may speak different languages, live in different regions, and practise different religions, but they face the same enemy and share the same destiny. “*Tokuuma*” appeals to our

sense of collective obligation, pride, and duty to protect that which is ours. It inspires the Amhara and Oromo people, as well other Ethiopians, to stand together in the fight against the common enemy, natural or political, internal or external.

Tokuuma” fosters collective agency in resisting the regime and in effecting political change peacefully. It inspires self-reliance, self-confidence, and self-efficacy. Ethiopians should welcome the “*Tokuuma*” movement, for the alternative is the status quo, or worse. In the words of Mr. Lemma, “*The road we have travelled so far has not benefited us; it has only hurt us, truth be told.*” (Translation, mine). I couldn’t agree more.

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