



The Essence of Alliance For Democracy

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June 3, 2006

AFD (Alliance for Freedom and Democracy) arrived with a bang and took almost everyone by surprise. Its birth had already generated strong reaction among all the stakeholders. Several articles and commentaries were written in this short period of time; mostly pro, a few against. Its arrival is welcomed by the majority as a beacon of hope, but a few others dismissed it as an unworkable venture; for some this was capitulation for the OLF, for others it was surrender for the CUDP. Some thought it will bring overnight the demise of EPRDF, and others feared it as an alliance against the Tigrai. This was an interesting week not short of opinions.

This Alliance is misunderstood by some quarters from its very outset. In a country accustomed to politics of zero-sum game this is not surprising. The essence of AFD and the revolutionary concept underlying it need to be captured and expounded, and the zero-sum fallacy underlying some of the criticisms should be exposed. It's only if we understand the rationale for its creation that we can appreciate its implication and criticize its shortcomings. From what I have seen AFD is both praised and denigrated for the wrong reasons.

At the beginning I will in particular address Oromo groups, both those who support and oppose the formation of AFD. The Oromo people's struggle has come a long way. Today, even if controlled by the TPLF, we have Oromia as a politico-administrative reality. Today, the brutal repression aside, Oromia's children learn in their own language and more or less exercise their culture. Today, we have OLF, an organization that has, not only acquired a great deal of experience, but also earned a great respect among our people as well as beyond. Compared to the past, our people's struggle has reached such a stage that even the ruling group could rule us only by using our own people. Given where we were about 30 years ago, this is one stage forward, but now we have to move beyond this. The TPLF, with all its state machinery, the army, the security and the bureaucracy, cannot rule Oromia without OPDO, and cannot undo Oromia without inviting a great danger to itself. Our new rulers have become in some curious ways the prisoners of our potential might; they are not free to act the way they want to. In short, it could be safely said that, if not impossible, it is very difficult for any force to dismantle Oromia. Oromia is today a reality that exists, and it is here to stay.

Two interdependent deductions could be made from this; the first from the Oromo side and the second from the angle of non Oromo political forces. Even, as some predict, if

AFD resulted in exclusively bringing CUDP to power (mind you this is a big if and the chance of that happening is very minimal), would this be an end of Oromia? To this lingering question in the mind of many Oromos in Diaspora, my answer is, “absolutely not!” Even assuming for a moment that CUDP will try to do this, there is no way that this will be an easy ride for CUDP. To conclude that CUDP could easily dismantle Oromia, we have to assume that our people will not fiercely resist this. For me this assumption is preposterous. In fact, rather than fighting to achieve something new, people fight more fiercely when you try to take away from them what they already have. The Oromo are “given” some rights on paper and they want nothing short of making the promise for self-government real. Thus, the fear that the AFD will empower the CUDP, which will in turn lead to dismantlement of Oromia, is unfounded or highly exaggerated.

The existence of Oromia as a politico-administrative unit the last 14 years, and the support it has generated among the Oromo population has also implication on the other non Oromo political protagonists in Ethiopia. If democratic rule follows the fall of TPLF, it means that such major undertaking as dismantling the existing structure should be done democratically. Given the commitment that the Oromo people have for Oromia, I fail to see how this could be achieved democratically without the blessing of Oromos. If the Oromos agree to this in a democratic way, so be it. But the basic point is this: Any force or organization that has any ambition of becoming a national organization will not attempt to do this for the simple reason that it would not want to alienate Oromos. Democratic power basically means vote, and the Oromos have a lot of it that any organization would like to court; and that is the beauty of democracy. Of course, the question that follows is, “what if these forces want to achieve this undemocratically, i.e., by way of force or trickery?” This would be inviting a civil war in Ethiopia. After the fall of TPLF not many would want to go there. I believe that the commitment of our people and the strength of our political organization would be a great disincentive from indulging in this. And even if there are some foolhardy who would attempt to achieve this, given where we are today, they will not be successful. Thus, notwithstanding the declaration of this intention by some at this stage, no one who would come to power would attempt to implement this unless they are insane.

The above is based on the worst case scenario, and does not at all imply that CUDP will try to dismantle Oromia unilaterally. I can understand that not to alienate some of their supporters the leadership might not want to come out and clearly state that they are not against the existing structure. But the reasonable amongst them do recognize, even if they may not like it, that this is something here to stay. They have come into terms with it as an existing reality. This is one reason why the CUD platform left this to the decision of the people instead of taking a stand on it. To summarize, the two deductions are: The Oromo people would strongly resist any effort to dismantle Oromia as a politico-administrative entity, and the knowledge that the Oromo people would strongly resist dismemberment will restrain other forces from attempting this (cost factor).

Because of the above, there is no need to dwell on the fear of Oromia’s demise with the very remote possibility of CUDP’s coming to power alone. The danger to the existence of Oromia is not as serious as some want us to believe. The TPLF tries to paralyze the

initiative by exaggerating the danger coming from Amharas, and we should not fall prey to it. This brings me to the second point of criticism of the AFD from Oromo angle. I have heard comments along the following line: “TPLF’s program is closer to OLF, therefore, OLF should have formed alliance with TPLF rather than with CUDP,” or something to that effect. I totally reject this line of thinking because unwittingly it is predicated on the assumption that we are destined to choose between TPLF and CUDP. The Oromo is no longer a force forced to choose between the two but a real force on its own merit. Besides, it is only when you vote that the question of whose program is close to you is of paramount importance, you look at the program of a party and choose the one that is close to your belief. When you are the contender for power it is not in all situations the cardinal point. The question for us today should not be whether it is TPLF or CUDP that is better to rule us. The question should rather be, “what situation will bring us closer to be masters of our own affairs?”, or “what situation will bring us closer to establishing a just, representative and democratic society?” I say, as long as the TPLF is in power, the possibility of resolving our issue, as well as the question of forming a democratic polity is out of question. TPLF is maintained in power by dividing the people in Ethiopia. The essence of its existence is rooted in divide and rule. This is so, not merely because Meles Zenawi is a bad person, but simply because the constituency of Tigray cannot be the basis for democracy--majority rule.

If the Oromos and Amahras are not in each other’s throat, then Meles will not be in power, as simple as that. Besides, there is nothing more that the Oromo people need from TPLF, short of the TPLF stepping down, which the TPLF would never accept; therefore, there is no rationale for contemplating an alliance with Meles. TPLF’s control of power is the major stumbling block to the resolution of our question through dialogue and negotiation with others. In the journey to seek a solution, TPLF is not a member of the search team, but a spoiler that is there only to sabotage the search. Thus, the first objective, at this juncture, should be to force the TPLF out of office. And the formation of AFD is essential to achieve this. However, the creation of alliance with CUDP should not be supported simply because it is essential to force the TPLF from power, but also because it presents us with an opportunity to seek solutions to our problems together for the first time in our tortuous history. Given its constituency, its leadership and the common repression we suffered in the hands of TPLF, CUDP is a better partner to negotiate with.

This brings me to my third and last point. Only the belief and practice in democratic principles could bring together organizations as divergent as the OLF and CUDP together. It is essential for these organizations to be democratic for them to stand together. To be democratic essentially means accepting the supremacy of the people. It means not imposing your will on others by force. It means agreeing to disagree. It means resolving contradictions through dialogue and peaceful ways. It means respecting each other and each others views, it means disagreeing without being disagreeable. This means, as long as they are ready to bring their program to the vote of the people for decision, OLF and CUDP do not have to have the same program in order to form an alliance. Semantics aside, this is only an alliance; there is no objective to have the same political program. The only substantive agreement going beyond the

ousting of TPLF is about the formation of a transition government that will lead to a democratic society. OLF does not have to change, and did not change its program and vision and CUDP does not have to do the same in order to achieve that. Agreeing to create AFD means, “let us create a democratic society where we can compete freely,” and does not mean let us merge our organizations. At the core of the formation of AFD is the dawn of democratic society---as their statement says “a just, representative and democratic order”. One has to be totally democratic to accept this and even to understand it, and hence the confusion and hullabaloo in some sectors.

There are those who claim that OLF is using others as a vehicle to come to power. This is a concern raised by those who claim that they are for “unity” and sadly from quarters that traditionally supported “people’s rights”. One thing that needs to be clear is that it is inevitable for the Oromo to assume a central role in a free and democratic Ethiopia. On the other hand, an Ethiopia that has fully embraced the aspirations of the Oromo and addressed their grievances would be a powerful Ethiopia, a peaceful Ethiopia. The fact that OLF played a central role in the formation of AFD should be commended and encouraged and not feared and discouraged. This for the first time brings the Oromo people to the central stage in Ethiopian politics and that is what makes AFD historical. In the long-term, we will not be talking about which group is the majority and which one is not. The majority will be based on ideas. That is the beauty of a free and democratic society.

The idea that empowering the OLF and the Oromo is tantamount to risking the dismemberment of Ethiopia is totally preposterous. This comes from those who still think in the old paradigm of win-lose and domination. The future the AFD promises is not one of domination. On the other hand, as Fekade Shewakena aptly suggested, “What is wrong with representatives of the Oromo people manipulating the rest of us at least once in history,” given “how many times in our history the Oromo people have been manipulated.” The fear of the Oromo is a presupposition that is based on the belief that the contradiction between Oromos interest and the Amharas is irreconcilable. If Ethiopia is free and democratic, the Oromo and others have no incentive to even consider breaking away as an option. The gain for the Oromos does not necessarily mean loss for the Amahras and vice versa, there is no reason why we cannot create a win-win situation for all.

If this venture becomes successful it will change politics as we know it in this part of the world. Ethiopia cannot be saved by excluding Oromos and their organizations, but by making the Oromo movement to play a central role. The more democratic Ethiopia become by including the aspiration of the Oromo, the more difficult it will become to separate Oromia from Ethiopia. With negotiation, dialogue and compromise there is no contradictions that we cannot resolve or mitigate. There are even worse contradictions in history that were peacefully resolved to the satisfaction of all stakeholders. This is what underlies the formation of AFD, and what make it revolutionary in our context.

This is a new paradigm, a paradigm based on the simple thesis that conflict is not a natural and inevitable law of nature, that conflicts could be overcome, people could rise

above their differences, however protracted and deep-rooted. It is based on the belief that the problems in Ethiopia are complicated and even if we agree amongst ourselves on many of the fundamental issues, the problems we will be facing are still enormous. It is based on the premise that there is hope in freedom and democracy. The promise of freedom and democracy is what AFD offers—the hope that we can someday leave our terrible past behind us and concentrate on leading our lives freed from the violence, fear and repression that we are accustomed to. It is a result of the conclusion that domination, subjugation and exploitation of each other have condemned us all into misery, poverty, tyranny and underdevelopment. For those who think that this is a pact against the Tigray people, AFD has extended its offer to the TPLF to change its ways and join the common effort. Even if the TPLF declines this offer and remains outside, it should be clear that this Alliance is not targeted against the Tigray people. AFD is an all inclusive undertaking. Lasting solution in Ethiopia cannot be found by excluding the Tigray people who have always played important role in the past.

AFD is an idea whose time has come. It is still a beginning but a beginning towards a journey into a new future, a future that is radically different from our past, a future where we can all win together, a future where the specter of the zero-sum game is once and for all retired from Ethiopian politics, a future where politics would not be our single most pressing preoccupation, a future where we can also dedicate part of our lives to more important things like love, literature, art, travel, culture and what not. AFD is a dream, a positive dream, a glimpse of the great things we could do together if we have the courage to redefine what is meant by “us” and “them”. Past systems might have unjustly benefited elites from only certain sectors of the society while the majority suffered. In a large sense, we have all been suffering, mostly together, for generations; for heavens sake, can we not think of a future where we can all thrive and prosper together, a future where the menace of unending animosity and conflict would give way to just peace and harmony? I am fully cognizant of the challenge, but fully believe we can! Ni danda'ama. Yichaalaal!