

Remarks by Mr. Obang Metho on Shimelis Abdissa's speech at the Ireecha Festival

A MISTAKE OR INTENTIONAL? EITHER WAY, OROMO REGIONAL PRESIDENT'S STATEMENTS RAISE SERIOUS QUESTIONS

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In a speech given at the 2019 Ireecha Festival, Mr. Shimelis Abdissa, the President of Oromia Regional State, who also is the head of the Oromo Democratic Party (ODO), the political party currently in power in Ethiopia and also the former Chief of Staff to Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, made a number of highly controversial statements that have incited anger and rocketed suspicions to new heights among countless Ethiopians.

Whether it was a mistake or intentional; either way, President Shimelis Abdissa's comments raise serious questions that require some explanation. *In our present ethnic-dominated, political climate, such comments are loaded with innuendos of what people are now saying is "a takeover turn." It builds the case of those who are suspicious of the motivation behind the players leading the current reforms. Are they genuine? If this was an unfortunate overstatement by Shimelis, the public needs answers to their questions before it creates a bigger divide between an already divided society.*

I also have questions. The language he used was similar to what we have heard over the past 27 years from the TPLF-controlled EPRDF *who used the dehumanization and labeling of others to separate, alienate and isolate Ethiopians from working together or standing together. It resulted in erasing an important bond, hat of our shared humanity and common national identity that previously had kept Ethiopia together a proud nation. It served as an attempt to divide and conquer "the people" outside their own "ethnic box."*

I could not ignore it in the past fifteen years of my effort to advocate for the rights and wellbeing of all Ethiopian and to help bring reconciliation, peace and respect to the people of Ethiopia and I cannot ignore it now. In fact, *in the past years when this kind of language was used against fellow Ethiopians, including my own ethnic group as well as Oromo, Amhara, Somalian, Muslim and others, I condemned it. This is why it is so shocking to hear this now coming from the president of this region. I thought we were done with the abusive languages of division and dehumanization.* So, when I heard him speak to thousands of Ireecha celebrants at Meskel Square in the center of Addis Ababa, I was greatly disturbed to hear him talk about defeating.



He said, :*“This is where the Oromo people broken. This is where the humiliation began. This is where his conscious is broken. This is where Tufa Muna and other fighters of that time broken by the Neftegna system. Today we have broken and rooted out who broken us. Oromo honored in its humiliation place. You won Oromo”!*

He also stated that the Oromo had been denied the opportunity to celebrate the Ireecha Festival for the last 150 years. It is true that Ethiopia has a mixed history like most of the countries in the world; some of which we can be proud of and some that we are not. Opinions also may vary from group to group about what is good and bad; however, *the speech was disheartening and many Ethiopians are now reacting to it. His labeling did not make the break from our flawed past, but seemed to repeat some aspects of it once again. It was not something we would have expected from the president of one of the largest, most populous regions of the country and the party that is in charge of leading Ethiopia. Mr. Shimelis’s speech is not only opposite to the Medemer Philosophy but it erased the Medemer Philosophy that Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed and his Oromo Democratic Party (ODO) uses as a fundamental concept to convince and unity the people of Ethiopia.*

What we all, Ethiopians need to “Break and Root Out” is not an ethnic group or religious group or any other group but they are multiple, namely: tyranny, persecution, injustice, ethnic hatred and violence, human rights abuses, false imprisonments, denial of freedoms of expression, assembly or movement, the lack of free and fair elections, a weak rule of law, insecurity, and inequality of opportunity, poverty, health care, lack of education, housing, road, infrastructure and sustainable development. Most of all, **it is ethnic-based politics and ethnic federalism that is most likely to tear Ethiopia apart if it is not handled swiftly and wisely, with justice and wisdom.**

When this current change of Team Lemma or Oro-Amhara began in May 2018, I came out right away and embraced it. *I supported the prime minister Dr. Abiy Ahmed; not because of his ethnicity or political party, but because he articulated a vision for a country where the best interests of the people—not a region or a group—would be made the priority, giving us hope for a country where we can all live together and be valued as citizens. This is what I stand for and is what will bring peace among us, regardless of differences.*

These are ways to measure genuine victory but we are not there yet. We may have won some battles as result of the Team Lemma or Oro-Amhara coalition, but we the people are still far away from the total victory. **To gain that Common Good Victory for all, we have to reclaim our individual dignity and respect the dignity of others—for no one will be free until all are free.** This means restoring the value of each of us—*putting humanity over ethnicity or any other differences.* These are the foundational principles for any healthy, harmonious and prosperous society.

This Ireecha celebration could have been used as an umbrella to bring everyone together for peace building. It could have been utilized to reconcile Ethiopian people who for many years have been intentionally divided by their ethnicities and any other differences as a means to maintain power over them by few elites.

One of the biggest mistakes done at this Ireecha celebration was the glaring absence of any Ethiopian flag, even the current flag of the EPRDF. Instead, the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) political flag was there and the security officials did not take it away. In Ethiopian society, flags have been repeatedly used as strong identity symbols of alliance or rebellion of opposing groups. The missing Ethiopian national flag during the Ireecha Festival was a strong statement that was all the more shocking after the historical Ethiopian flag was outlawed during the annual religious holiday in the Ethiopian Orthodox Churches commemoration of the discover of the True Cross just over a week ago.

The EPRDF flag with the star in the middle was allowed. Some among the Orthodox defied the restrictions. It resulted in the arrest of some 55 people who carried or *displayed the historic flag of green, yellow and red that many Ethiopians regard as highly symbolic of the sacrifice of those who fought for the country in the past.*

These are the kinds of loaded sensitive issues that can become major mistakes, with serious consequences, for any country that is truly seeking peace. It can be especially dangerous in a country like Ethiopia where ethno-nationalism and conflict is on the rise. *Look at our unhealthy obsession with ethnicity, starting with the Preamble of the Ethiopian Constitution that addresses the people of the country as “Nations, Nationalities and Peoples”. Add to that ethnic federalism, ethnic-based political parties, regional states, banks, ID cards with ethnicity, sports clubs and so on—all geared to an ethnic group. We should be cautious.*

As someone who cares a great deal about the welfare of all Ethiopian regardless of ethnicity, I hope this kind of mistake will not be done again; or if it was intentional, that the whole agenda behind this be re-evaluated in a transparent manner. It is very dangerous and a threat to the existence of all of us. The concern for the basic rights of our citizens should not be greater simply because someone comes from a preferred group or region.

I call on all Ethiopians to abandon the politics of ethnic hatred, isolation, deception and pretension. It is time to embrace the politics of ideas and principles that advance justice, rights and equality for all. It is too early to celebrate a true victory! Let us hold off our celebrations until we see meaningful reforms, especially constitutional and institutional reform, restorative justice and genuine reconciliation provide a foundation for a healthier, righteous, more caring, and more peaceful society.

Let us then pass this kind of blessing to future generations of Ethiopians as well as to those beyond our borders. The choice is ours! Let us, strive to make it become the “Genuine turn of all the people not only few” for all the citizens of the country.

May God bless Ethiopia and long live Ethiopia!