

The Ethiopian Government Is Not an Oromo Government

Press Release

Oromos for Justice, Security, and Truth (O-JUST)¹

Background

The notion that the incumbent Ethiopian government is an “Oromo government” emerged in April 2018 following the ascension to power of Abiy Ahmed Ali, the incumbent Ethiopian prime minister. The Oromo Protest that commenced in November 2015 ended authoritarian rule, occasioned a democratic transition, and paved the path to power for the prime minister. Because he rode the wave of Oromo Protest to power, his rise was popularized as the first Oromo prime minister, even though the statement was verifiably inaccurate. The international media extolled him as a reformist leader with widespread support in the country.

The Oromo national movement was a demand-driven movement with a distinct agenda for the Oromo people in Ethiopia. It was never a personality-centered political force aiming to coronate an Oromo-speaking person. It certainly did not have the goal of bringing to power a leader of the Oromo People’s Democratic Organization (OPDO), an ostensibly Oromo political party with dubious origins and history.

When the latest phase was expressed in 2008 in the form of the Oromo Protest, the movement demanded constitutionally guaranteed self-rule, property ownership, and identity rights. They were fair, legal, and moral demands consistent with those of Ethiopia's other nations and nationalities. The prime minister was entrusted with the mandate to serve the remaining term in office of the Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) until free, fair, and competitive elections were held and a legitimate government was established.

Ignoring the reality of the Oromo movement and the nature of his mandate, the Abiy regime invented a narrative that an Oromo had taken power. Then, he used the narrative to neutralize opposition within the Oromo, claiming Oromo demands had already been answered. At other times, he discreetly deployed to mobilize them to “protect the Oromo government” against hostility from non-Oromo Ethiopians.

The Rhetoric: Building the Myth of an Oromo Government

The prospect of democratic transition engendered a euphoric national feeling that the days of the despot were gone and that the era of popular will had arrived. The domestic and

¹ O-JUST is group founded by concerned Oromos in Ethiopia.

international media headlines unscrupulously kept pushing the utterly false narrative that an Oromo had taken over power for the first time in Ethiopian history. In reality, at least six persons of Oromo lineage have served either as president or prime minister since the end of the imperial regime in 1974. But history was eclipsed by a false narrative, paving the way for the creation of the Oromo government myth, a sinister ploy designed to reduce the Oromo national movement to a quest for a political office.

The narrative was taken to the next level by the most ardent and certified Oromophobes in the country. Mesfin Woldemariam, the dean of anti-Oromo rhetoric, elevated the prime minister to a demigod status, calling him a “divine gift with unparalleled intelligence.” Daniel Kibret, the foul-mouthed cleric known for his crass and vulgar language, called him a millennial leader devoted to Ethiopia’s glorious past. Berhanu Nega, the personification of unprincipled political opportunism in Ethiopian politics who asserted his cardinal political mission of protecting Addis Ababa from the Oromo, described Abiy as an Oromo genuinely committed to Ethiopian unity. Song artists composed songs venerating Abiy Ahmed as a messiah who would proclaim an era of national unity, love, ethnoreligious tolerance, and social peace. All of this was rounded off with an online media campaign aimed at disseminating the myth of Oromo takeover of the country’s “tanks and banks,” maliciously drilling down into the public consciousness that Oromo leaders have a monopoly on the country’s military and finances.

Oromo activists and politicians who have become Abiy’s sycophants took over where the Oromophobes left off and embarked on building Abiy’s messianic image as the deliverer of the Oromo from the century-old oppression and suffering under the Ethiopian empire. Some of these individuals are veterans of the Oromo struggle. Others are novices who returned home from life in exile in search of employment. Both groups became the primary agents of convincing the Oromo public that Abiy’s assumption of the premiership was synonymous with Oromo liberation. Critics who noticed the wrong trajectory and warned against traveling down that path were caricatured at best as naïve dupes, incapable of grasping Abiy’s “novel” politics of “confusing and convincing” and, at worst, vilified as envious losers with sour grapes in their mouths.

Currently, the myth of the “Oromo government” aims to present Abiy Ahmed as the bulwark against the Amhara Fanno threat that, if left unchallenged, will destroy the Oromo as a people. Never mind that Fanno was created, recruited, trained, and armed to the teeth to fight the Tigray and Oromo ethnonationalism and their legacies of ethnic politics and “ethnic” federalism. The fact is that Abiy created the chimeric political creature known as Fanno. Now, his sycophants implore the Oromo public to stand with the “Oromo government” that can save the Oromo from the looming apocalypse of a Fanno ascendancy.

On several occasions, the prime minister has used demagogic rhetoric to reinforce the myth of the Oromo government. In October 2018, soldiers marched to his office, allegedly to

overthrow the government. Reporting the incident to parliament, Abiy stated that Oromo youth from the areas surrounding the capital began marching on the capital to engage the mutineers and defend “their government.” This is one of the umpteen occasions that Abiy used to insinuate that his opponents were motivated by opposition to his Oromo identity.

The Record: Eliminating Opposition, Controlling Oromia

On April 2, 2018, Abiy Ahmed's inaugural speech was expected to offer a roadmap for the transition period, a forward-looking commitment to democratization, and a democratic dispensation. The Oromo protestors, whose struggle paved the way for his ascendancy, trusted their demands would be addressed through a successful democratic transition. The new prime minister delivered a nostalgic diatribe looking backward to Ethiopia's glorious past, sprinkled with a slanderous denunciation of ethnonationalism. The speech was the opening salvo of an inevitable conflict that belied his deafening commitment to love, justice, and peace. Stepping into the prime minister's office for the first time, he poured accolades on his distant predecessors, the despotic and cruel monarchs and the military dictator a few decades ago.

Though the transition's direction was problematic, Abiy Ahmed was determined to achieve his goal of restoring Ethiopia to greatness. In one of the OPDO's leadership meetings held soon after he became prime minister, he told his party that the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) managed to remain in power for nearly three decades by clamping down on any sign of dissent in Tigray and that the OPDO, too, must adopt the same strategy of not tolerating any opposition in Oromia to ensure the region is their exclusive political base. Rather than govern constitutionally and provide necessary public services, the OPDO prime minister made protecting and keeping power his primary mission. To this end, indiscriminate violence was chosen as a weapon to silence, intimidate, and eliminate political opposition in the Oromia region.

The first order of business was to neutralize the agitated Oromo youth from launching a youth opposition movement resembling the Oromo protest. The regime invited representatives of Oromia youth in Adama, ostensibly to update them on the progress of “reform.” The assembled youth were given an ultimatum: either join the Oromo People's Democratic Organization (OPDO) and follow its political line or get out of political activism. Oromo youth who refused to join the ruling party were subsequently harassed, imprisoned, and executed, and their bodies were left to be scavenged by wild beasts. Mohammed Amin of East Hararge, killed on May 14, 2020, became one of the first of the thousands of Oromo youth killed in this manner. Galana Emanu, a key coordinator of Oromo protests in West Shawa, was picked up in Ambo on November 20, 2020, murdered brutally and hurriedly buried in a secret location. In the same week, several leaders of the Oromo protest were

arrested in several cities across Oromia, executed, and their bodies left on river banks and roadsides. In this way, death and the threat of brutal murder muzzled and buried the storied Oromo youth movement.

The regime adopted other measures to implement the plan, including mass incarceration and confiscation of property, which were used to terrorize civilians into submission. According to one influential observer, Oromo has not seen a more brutal situation. *The Oromo society is devastated by war and persecution. In the city today known as Shagar, there are 30 prisons filled with hundreds hauled in every day. At least 100,000 Oromo political prisoners exist in Oromia. No such thing has happened before. No other regional state has as many political prisoners. Hundreds are killed in Oromia every day. The Oromo farmers in Shewa, Wallaga, Guji, and Arsi have not lived in a hell-like situation as they do today. The household head is abducted, and someone confiscates his oxen. When he returns, regime operatives confiscate the remaining animals, accusing him of collusion with rebels. The people are caught up in a political football, unprecedented in history. The number of people killed in the last five years is double those who were killed under Hailesellasie, Mengistu, and Meles.*

Concurrently, targeted killing was deployed to reduce the Oromo population into docile and unquestioning subjects. Security forces went on a killing spree of young men and women across Oromia. Hundreds of children were orphaned. In late October 2023, Kuli Hawas of Boset, East Shewa, mother of seven, was brutally murdered along with two others. They joined the thousands of mothers who were subjected to a fate like hers. Her case is the only one that was publicized because of the cruelty and inhumanity meted out to one mother. Numerous mothers were rendered childless. On May 11, 2021, Amanuel Wondimu was publicly executed in Dembi Dollo, western Oromia. His mother was forced to witness the execution of her young son and was forbidden for hours from recovering the body in order to bury it. Tens of thousands of mothers have lost children, husbands, and livelihoods all over Oromia whose stories did not make it to the media.

Artists and activists who led the Oromo protests were not spared. On the evening of June 29, 2020, a legendary Oromo artist and activist, Hacaaluu Hundessa, was assassinated in Addis Ababa. The following day, the government rushed to bury the deceased without performing an autopsy to determine the cause of death. It was an indication of an attempted cover-up, which was a suspicion then, but a pattern began to emerge after several mysterious assassinations.

In the subsequent days, the brutality of the killing and the dishonorable way the officials handled the artist's burial sparked massive protests in Addis Ababa and the Oromia region. Even before the artist was interred, thousands were arrested, including opposition party leaders and human rights activists Jawar Mohammed, Bekele Gerba and Dejene Tafa of the Oromo Federalist Congress (OFC), and Colonel Gemechu Ayana, Michael Boran, Lemi

Benya, and Kenessa Ayana of the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF). The police crackdown, imprisoning about 5000 and leaving at least 177 dead and hundreds wounded.

The next target was the Oromo youth who escaped the brutality in cities to rural areas, where they joined the armed opposition. The regime never concealed the tactics it planned to use against the insurgents. Speaking to the Oromia Region Parliament in Adama on 27 February 2021, Fikadu Tesema, the party regional bureau chief, publicly disclosed the approach to defeat the armed opposition in Oromia. He stated: *“Operations against insurgencies different from conventional warfare. The insurgents are supplied by the populations among whom they live. ... The way to eliminate them is akin to fishing. Collecting all the fish in the Atlantic or Pacific Oceans is impossible. You will have to drain the oceans to eliminate the fish.”*

This mission was assigned to and carried out by the military and the security apparatus. Six months after taking power, Abiy Ahmed’s “reformist” regime commenced under the pretext of law enforcement counter-insurgency operations against the fighters of the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF), the very political party invited back into the political arena. Subsequently, the regime established Command Post or martial law administrations in the Guji Zone in southern Oromia and the four Wallaga zones of the Oromia region, unleashing murder and mayhem, death, and destruction against civilians. Family members of the Oromo Liberation Army (OLA) were subjected to scorched earth tactics (burning down homes of alleged OLA sympathizers, preventing farmers from collecting their ripe crops, barring urban residents from traveling to rural areas); guilt by association (tens of thousands of young men and were hauled to prisons, makeshift concentration camps, and in private prisons, accused of harboring sympathies for OLA); collective punishment (parents and siblings someone suspected of joining OLA was either killed or imprisoned and their homes burned to the ground).

Since the counterinsurgency operations started in late 2019, the Oromia region has been in a brutal war. Up to 8 divisions of the Ethiopian National Defense Forces (ENDF), contingents of the Federal Police, the Federal Rapid Deployment Force, the Oromia Special Force, Oromia Police, the Amhara Special Forces, and Amhara Fanno vigilantes and private armed groups masquerading as OLA combatants have been swarming Oromia, particularly the four zones of Wallagga, West and North Shawa, and Guji, southern Oromia, killing indiscriminately “to drain the ocean” of the Oromo population.

The operation was assisted by the latest technology of warfare to kill indiscriminately in large numbers. Between October 19, 2022, and November 26, 2022, drone and airstrikes on civilians had been conducted, killing a total of 443 and wounding 277. Among the places attacked are the following: Gooroo (Kuruphee) village, Meettaa Walqixxeetti district, West Shawa Zone (October 19,), Bakker Oofuu village, Chobbi district, West Shawa Zone (October 22, 23 and); Nunnuu Qumba district in East Wallaggaa (October 22); Bonnayya town of

Waayyuu Tuqaa district in East Wallaggaa (October 27); Qassoo village in Waamaa Hagaloo district, East Wallaggaa Zone (October 28); Wayyuu Tuqaa and Waama Hagaloo districts, East Wallaggaa (November 02); Qilxuu Kaarraa, West Wallaggaa (November 01); Biilaa, Boojji Birmajjii district, West Wallaggaa Zone (November 02); Mandii, Mana Sibuu district, West Wallaggaa Zone (November 09); Doqdoqqee, Cobbii district, West Shawa Zone (November 14); Raachoo Barreessaa, Darraa Zone, North Shawa (November 15); Waddeessa, Ambo district, West Shawa Zone November 16); Lopii village, Begii district, West Wallaggaa Zone (November 20); Fincha'a village, Horroo Guduruu Zone (November 26).

According to a richly documented investigative report by a Reuters reporter, the Oromia government established a killing squad named *Koree Nageenyaa*, lit—Security Committee, directed by top Oromia government and regional ruling party officials. The body was established in 2019 to prevent a youth protest from gathering momentum and turning against the OPDO regime. The Committee went into action when protests arose in 19 big cities and 21 zones in the Oromia region following the killing of Hacaaluu Hundeessa. The Committee's principal leaders, the Oromia president and the regional party bureau chief, ordered security forces to arrest every protestor and shoot to kill if the situation careened out of control. At least 200 civilians were killed and 5,000 arrested. Later actions showed that the *Koree Nageenyaa* is the secret agency tasked with suppressing any sign of opposition in Oromia by preemptively eliminating suspected opposition figures. The committee acts with impunity, outside the purview of courts of law. Even judges and lawyers who resist orders to desist are intimidated, assaulted, kidnapped, or even executed.

One of the prominent killings ordered directly by the Oromia regional government leaders was the massacre of 14 members of the Karayu Gadaa council on December 1, 2021. The message from the upper echelons of the *Koree Nageenyaa* to the executioners was as telling of the brutality as it is shocking: "Don't spare anyone. Shoot them all." This was done not just to punish the Gadaa council members. It was to blame the killings on the OLA and use it as a pretext to "drain the ocean" of support for it. It is a criminal behavior exhibiting the nature of the incumbent regime: it is a criminal regime that does not represent any ethnic group.

The Relapse: One Step Forward, Three Steps Back

The incumbent regime consolidated its power by "winning" an election that the world, except for the Africa Union observer group, repudiated as unfree and unfair. Ethiopia is currently led by a fifth columnist who invited foreign forces to commit atrocity crimes against his compatriots and allowed the violation of his country's sovereignty. It is led by a regime accused of committing war crimes, crimes against humanity, ethnic cleansing, and possibly genocide. It is a pariah regime that has chosen to violate human rights with

impunity, created non-state actors to commit horrific violence against innocents, and decided to militarize politics rather than search for workable solutions through dialogue.

The regime's criminal record is documented by impartial and credible international organizations, including the United Nations International Commission of Human Rights Experts on Ethiopia (ICHREE). Three years into the new prime minister's tenure, Amnesty International published a report that established the mass arrests, lengthy detention without charge, and other infringements of citizens' rights, including illegal searches, restrictions on assembly, expression, and movement, physical beating, torture, and even extrajudicial execution, have returned with a vengeance. The brutality and cruel efficiency with which opposition was dealt evinced that Oromia was strolling into the abyss of humanity, unchecked by reason, law, or self-restraint, under a regime many strove so fervently to present as an Oromo government. (AI, *Beyond Law Enforcement: Human Rights Violations by Ethiopian Security Forces in Amhara and Oromia*, 2020).

Even the otherwise hapless government-sponsored Ethiopian Human Rights Commission has released reports on well-documented multiple cases of extra-judicial killings, arbitrary detentions, torture, enforced disappearances, extortion, and other rights violations in various reports. The last report issued on February 24, 2024, states that human rights violations, specifically extrajudicial killings, are increasing at an alarming rate. Other reports show the level of impunity and brutality, ranging from the public execution of Ariti Shununde of Adadi, East Guji, the young man shot in the back because his cellphone rang in a public meeting, to the blatant murder of Battee Urgessa, a member of the opposition Oromo Liberation Front (OLF), who was taken out of his hotel, shot dead and his body dumped by the road.

Conclusion

The last six years have confirmed the longstanding doubt the Ethiopian state is not amenable to change. The more things seem to change, the more they take a turn for the worse. We have now exchanged EPRDF's authoritarian regime with a kakistocracy manned by blood-thirsty kleptocrats. This is not our conclusion but the testimony of Taye Danda'a, a civil servant who served the government as its chief spokesperson but resigned when his conscience could no longer continue to perpetuate the Abiy's regime lies. In his departing words directed to the prime minister, he dismantled the charade that the incumbent is an "Oromo government" in the following words: *"I elected to follow you because I believed in the ideas you wrote in the Medemer book. I have now realized that you do not live what you say but a barbarian who cherishes the spilling blood of your fellow humans. Trusting that you are genuinely defending the country from an existential threat, I have been glossing over your fratricidal war that has devastated the country. You fired me today because I advocated stopping the civil war in which brothers annihilate one another. I am glad I am no longer a part of the gamble aimed at pitting Oromo against the Oromo, and the Oromo people against other fraternal peoples in Ethiopia in*

exchange for the comfort of a position and a vehicle. I am grateful for the brief period together. My struggle for peace and solidarity among people will continue as long as I live."

Finfinne

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