



A Genuine National Dialogue is Based on the Right to National Self-Determination.

Statement by Oromos for Justice, Peace and Truth (O-JUST)

The PP-led government has recently announced that it has reached the final stages of what it calls the “national dialogue” and that its first meeting will be convened in Finfinne. Members of O-JUST have examined the nature and goals and the risks and consequences of the said dialogue. After careful deliberations, O-JUST has issued this statement on the kind of national dialogue that must be conducted to address the multidimensional problems the country faces.

The Importance of National Dialogue and the Political Drama of the PP

The Oromo people, like other oppressed nations in Ethiopia, have been under unparalleled oppression for more than a century. During this period, their language was banned from public use, their identity shamed, their history distorted, and their land appropriated by conquerors. After many years of struggle, the legal strictures on the Oromo language were lifted, and the door was opened for the Oromo people to revive and cultivate their culture and identity. However, the Ethiopian Peoples' Democratic Revolutionary Front (EPRDF)-led government established a system that prevented the full implementation of the rights of self-determination the constitution granted to the nations and nationalities in the country. As a result, the Oromo people were exposed to continued unequal treatment. Compelled to continue the struggle for their rights, the Oromo played a decisive part in forcing the ruling party to accept change, replace the administration with reformists, and carry out internal reforms in 2018.

The new government came to power under the incumbent prime minister, Abiy Ahmed, with a mandate to address the demands of the masses. It was expected to fully implement multinational federalism and the constitutionally guaranteed right of self-determination of nations and nationalities. Its mission was to create a country that looks like the nations and nationalities and integrates every group's history into the national history. The change of leadership in the EPRDF was meant to implement the demands for equality, respect for human rights, and true democracy. Pushing aside the people's demands, the Abiy Ahmed government formed the Prosperity Party (PP), whose aim was to return the country to the imperial era. This has led to deadly conflicts.

In early 2022, the government established the Ethiopian National Dialogue Commission (ENDC), appointed known party loyalists to lead it, and entrusted them with a special mission of consolidating the PP's power. The ENDC was a result of a merger of the existing Reconciliation Commission and the Border and Identity Commission, which were established in 2018 and 2019, respectively. All of these ventures have the singular mission of restructuring state institutions to suit Abiy Ahmed's preferred system of governance.

Like all the oppressed peoples in that country currently subjected to unprecedented suffering, the Oromo people will benefit from a genuine national dialogue. However, the activity labeled as national dialogue is nothing but a vehicle designed to translate into practice the PP's vision and objectives. The recent forums the ENDC conducted including last week confirmed that the discussions were a conference of the PP and its allies. Even before the so-called national dialogue was launched, the PP ensured that Oromo parties such as the Oromo Federalist Congress (OFC), the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF), the Oromo Liberation Front - Oromo Liberation Army (OLF-OLA), and many Oromo intellectuals would not be able to participate in it. As such, the party made the national dialogue its own private affair. The primary evidence

for this action is the effort to proceed with the national dialogue, knowing full well that it is unthinkable to hold a national dialogue while Oromia is in the midst of an ongoing conflict.

Representatives of all nations and nationalities from all corners of the country who demand freedom from oppression under the incumbent have been effectively excluded from participation in the so-called national dialogue. As such, it is appropriate to call the first meeting in Finfinnee a PP assembly rather than a National Dialogue. Characterizing a gathering of per diem-collecting PP members and supporters under the motto “Ethiopia in a Dialogue” is tantamount to insulting the country’s entire population.

Overall, the outcome of the PP-established ENDC is obvious. In his remarks on the occasion, Abiy Ahmed, the PP president, disclosed that the primary purpose of the “national dialogue” is to amend or destroy the existing constitution and write a new constitution conforms to the priorities of the ruling party and its allies. The second is to “abandon the historical narratives that have divided the country and plugged the people in internecine conflicts and replace it with a new narrative that affirms our national unity.” Thus, the outcome of “national dialogue” is going to revolve around these two basic points. Let’s explain these a bit in detail.

Constitutional Change

The PP is not in favor of the “ethnic politics” practiced in the framework of the current multinational federalism. In fact, it considers it a criminal enterprise, accusing the federalized administrative structure of destroying the country. Therefore, party officials declare that they are determined to transform the country’s politics by dismantling political parties organized along ethnonational lines. With the exception of the Tigray People’s Liberation Front (TPLF), which refused to join the new party, the PP itself was founded by dissolving the ethnic-based parties that previously governed the regional states. The “national dialogue” is now deployed to outlaw “ethnic politics” and dismantle multinational federalism. Ultimately, the national dialogue’s goal is reportedly to move from “multinational politics” to “citizenship politics.”

The Oromo have been struggling for their right to self-determination. The Walaita are in a struggle to establish a Walaita regional state. The response of the PP government to these demands is invariably more repression and the use of brute force. It is now obvious that the PP is determined to return Ethiopia to the pre-1991 system by instituting what it calls territorial or geographic federalism. The program is to disperse the nations and nationalities across several federal units, depriving each of its identity, creating barriers to linguistic affinity, and re-installing the oppressive system that was dismantled through fierce struggle.

The so-called citizenship politics promotes the idea of Ethiopian identity by rejecting one’s ethnonational identity. The goal is to create a sense of self-loathing, where Oromos resent Oromoness and love Ethiopianism; Somalis deny Somaliness and cheerfully embrace Ethiopianism; and Sidamas abandon Sidamaness and venerate Ethiopianism. The concept of “citizenship politics” is unknown in Ethiopia’s history. Ethiopian politics has always been the politics of nations and nationalities. There can be no other. Those advocating what they describe as “Ethiopian politics” are those who have always praised the politics of “one language, one culture, one religion, one flag, and one country.” The politics of homogeneity or uniformity is neither the politics of citizenship nor the politics of unity. According to these groups, Ethiopia is a nation, and various ethnonational groups are tribes or sub-clans. The proponents of this view have now mounted a horse named the National Dialogue Commission to conduct the final assault on the right of self-determination of nations and nationalities.

The decision to write the right of nations and nationalities to self-determination into the Transitional Charter of 1991 saved Ethiopia from disintegration. This is an uncontestable truth.

Ethiopia's oppressed nations and nationalities are still paying a high price to ensure that their right to self-determination is inviolable and genuinely implemented. In contrast, the PP and its allies are organizing meetings and beating the drums of restoring the unitary system of the past by removing the right of nations to self-determination. In so doing, the incumbent regime has confirmed that it is an enemy of the rights of nations and nationalities.

In his opening remarks at the opening of the "national dialogue," the PP leader took the issue of the flag as an example and said the dispute over whether the symbol of a star on the Ethiopian flag should be removed or not would be resolved through the national dialogue. He stated, "If this house [the national dialogue members] decides it should be removed, we will remove it; if you say it should not be removed, we will keep it; and if you disagree, we will let the people decide through a referendum." According to the constitution, however, only the people can change any part of the constitution, including the design of the national flag. A discussion among like-minded people in a drama called a "national dialogue" has no right to change the constitution. This means that the PP is determined to write and promulgate its own constitution.

National Narrative Approval

Ethiopia does not have a history that is distinct from the history of the nations and nationalities that make up the polity. The histories of the Oromo, the Somali, the Sidama, the Gedeo, and others is what constitute Ethiopia's history. Ethiopia does not have its own history that is independent of its people. Despite this fact, the true history of the ethnonational communities was actively suppressed for more than a century. At the same time, the dynastic history of monarchs drawn from a single area of the country was paraded as the country's national history. Books on the history of the ethnonational groups were burned, and their intellectuals and cultural leaders were killed or deported. As a result, their national narrative could not gain acceptance. Yet, the ethnonational groups were able to preserve and develop their own history and traditions.

A case in point is the history of the Oromo Gadaa democratic governance system, which is an Oromo history when the Oromo people were free and self-governing people. On the negative side, the story of the mutilation of Oromo men and women at Aanolee and the savagery exhibited at Calii Calanqoo during Menelik's conquests have withstood the test of time despite the effort to hide or erase it over many years. Under the PP government, however, we are being told that the history of the wars that have left an indelible scar on the conscience of the Oromo people is a false story.

As part of the plan to rewrite history, the PP president reopened, with great fanfare in October 2019, the renovated Feasting Hall in the old palace, which had remained closed during the Derg and EPDRF governments. He authorized spending billions on building wax models of Menelik and Haile Sellassie, which were placed in the reopened Feasting Hall. True to form, the opening ceremony included a grand dinner party modeled after those hosted by Emperors Menelik and Haile Sellassie and was attended by advocates of the old regime. The event showed that the so-called national narrative is, in fact, the narrative of the ruling class.

In addition, the PP president has inaugurated various several monuments and halls in honor of Menelik. Recently, the Property Party invited a ghost of Menelik was invited to deliver an opening speech at the Adwa Memorial inaugural event in Finfinne. Dutifully, Menelik appeared on television and delivered a message: "My true son is now your leader. Honor him by attending to what he says and implementing his orders." All of these performances demonstrate that the PP is already in the process of reinstating the old narrative of domination. The "national dialogue" was instituted to endorse this old narrative and facilitate its public acceptance.

Emperor Menelik might be a hero for the PP and its allies but not for oppressed people such as the Oromo; he was their enslaver.

The policies and actions of the PP government are hastening the disintegration of the country rather than forging unity. All ethnonational groups have their own history and narratives. Any group that takes away this heritage can only propose to enslave them. These actions prove that the PP is a dictatorial faction whose goal is to achieve unquestioned domination. However, reinstating the narrative of domination is unacceptable to the vast majority of Ethiopians. It is a narrative that has been practiced for over a hundred years and proved to be a disastrous failure. Unless they want to destroy this country that is engulfed by turmoil, the PP's attempt to impose on all ethnonational groups a failed system will only result in further loss and destruction.

Standing up to the PP's Path of Mutually Assured Destruction is Everyone's Responsibility

Since the PP took power, the country has moved from chaos to a deadly civil war to a weakened state of affairs. The PP government does not exercise effective authority outside Finfinnee except when it makes incursions to kill, kidnap, arrest, or effect enforced disappearance. Convening a national dialogue in the middle of such a chaotic condition, envisaging changing the constitution, dismantling the regional states, and reinstating the narrative of domination shows that PP officials are preparing for a campaign against ethnonational groups. The outcome of such a project is likely to have disastrous consequences for the whole polity.

It is now apparent that the PP leader is intent on writing a constitution that serves his purpose of dismantling the existing parliamentary system and replacing it with a presidential system in which he will be the all-powerful leviathan. This change entails the end of the regional state, the deracination of ethnonational groups, and the abrogation of the constitutionally enshrined rights of nations. This will make the ongoing civil war even more deadly, leading to the violent collapse of the state that will make the task of reconstitution all the more difficult. The PP trajectory will ensure its self-destruction while taking the country down with itself. This needs to be condemned and resisted in unity.

The solution is unity. The entire Oromo people must stand up in unity to defend their right to self-determination. History has shown that false narratives cannot be imposed on the Oromo people. The Oromo nation must ensure respect for their history, identity, language, culture, and land are protected. The source of the people's capacity to achieve victory is unity.

Similarly, all oppressed nations must rise in unity to defend and protect their inherent right to self-determination. A true national dialogue is one that is based on the right to self-determination and the history of nations. The PP's exercise will not guarantee these rights. A genuine national dialogue can take place in a situation that is free enough to allow popular participation and involvement of all political parties, and authentic representatives of the people lead it. A convention of PP officials cannot be a replacement for a true national dialogue.

A Genuine National Dialogue is Based on the Right to Self-Determination of Nations and Nationalities!

June 7, 2024

Oromia, Ethiopia