



Oromoota Haqa Nageenyaa fi Dhugaa (O-HAND)

Oromos for Justice Security and Truth (O-JUST)

## **The Claim that the “Oromo Are Liberated” Is a Big Lie**

A Press Release

July 8, 2024

Manufacturing false narratives and perpetuating downright lies has become the identifying feature of the ruling Prosperity Party in Ethiopia. The party’s president habitually throws unfounded stories at his political opponents, particularly his Oromo opponents. On March 22, 2022, for instance, he stated in parliament that “the Oromo Liberation Army has no clear political goals. Bereft of any respect for human dignity, it murders indiscriminately, plunders private property, and destroys development projects. It is a rudderless and leaderless gang roaming the countryside looking for victims and cash to loot.” It was a ploy to assert that the Oromo struggle had been rendered causeless when he, a person hailing from Oromia, became prime minister.

The ploy was taken to its logical conclusion on May 8, 2024, during a visit to Naqamtee. Addressing attendants that his party gathered in Wallaggaa Stadium, the prime minister stated: “The Oromo have been liberated. The Oromo no longer demand to use their language. That is history. The Oromo no longer struggle to achieve self-rule. That has been realized. They do not have a national question. Their next task is to protect the liberty they have achieved after a bitter struggle as a victorious people, not relaunch a struggle all over again.” The upshot is that there will be no justification for a continued struggle for the Oromo people when he is the occupant of the highest office in the land.

Perhaps influenced by a false narrative perpetuated by the country’s leader, who occasionally identifies himself as an Oromo for instrumental reason, and his sycophantic media that parrots “the leader’s” pronouncements uncritically and indiscriminately, many mistakenly ask: “What do the Oromo want?” In effect, the Oromo, who continue to suffer injustice on an unprecedented scale, are being asked to justify their continued struggle when their “demands have already been met.” Worse still, they are faulted for demanding freedom from oppression. Unless a full response is given, the question of “what the Oromo want” will

remain a political space left unattended into which the Prosperity Party will continue to smuggle reactionary ideas that justify its rule in perpetuity.

### **False Narratives**

The change of head of government in 2018 was a moment for addressing popular demands that were raised during the Oromo Protest of 2014 to 2018. Even though protest culminated in creating a moment of structural opening for political transformation, political power unfortunately fell in the hands of counter-reform forces that seized the moment to turn the clock back on the progress that had been made since the 1974 revolution. The forces of reaction ensconced in the Oromo People's Democratic Front (OPDO), a party of war captives and assimilated settlers the Tigray People's Liberation Movement (TPLF) created to subvert Oromo nationalism, have mounted a campaign of ostracization, vilification, and delegitimization of Oromo nationalists who believe the struggle must continue until full emancipation is achieved.

Rechristened as the Prosperity Party, the members of the now-defunct OPDO have concocted and pushed a false narrative, presenting their ascendancy as the fulfillment of the longstanding demands that the Oromo national movement has made against the Ethiopian state. It is a political strategy designed to deny Oromo nationalists a reason for existence, render meaningless continued struggle against the new powerholders, and criminalize those Oromo who refuse to fall for their narrative. The Prosperity Party's Oromo elements have damaged the Oromo cause and partially immobilized the Oromo national movement.

The Oromo movement's traditional enemies have joined the Prosperity Party's campaign of delegitimization with their own campaign of denigration, boldly asserting that the Oromo movement has not produced any success in its half-century-old struggle. This is another ploy designed to demean the Oromo national struggle, which has scored glaring victories in the last five decades. It is a sinister narrative to dismiss the Oromo people's heroic resistance and sacrifices to ensure the survival of the Oromo nation and to force the Ethiopian state to recognize the Oromo nation's right to self-determination, up to and including secession.

In reality, the Oromo struggle has registered substantive victories and made meaningful progress. Originally launched to save the Oromo from the imperial regime's assimilationist policies known as Amharanization, Oromo has since reemerged as a nation with a territorially defined homeland, a regional state bearing the name Oromia, and *Afaan Oromo* as its official language and a regional lingua franca. The Amharic dominance, which facilitated Amhara cultural hegemony, has withered away along with the deeply once-entrenched military, bureaucracy, and security institutions of the Ethiopian colonial regime. Significantly, the right of national self-determination has been enshrined in the Ethiopian constitution. These victories belie the accusation that the Oromo movement has not made any progress after five decades of struggle.

### **Historic Demands Rearticulated**

In its contemporary iteration, the Oromo national movement's demands were expressed by the Oromo protests of 2014-18. The longstanding demands were expressed in the all-encompassing slogan of *abbaa biyyummaa*, or inalienable rights to exercise full sovereignty over Oromo politics and policies, control over the administration of the natural resources and ownership of the benefits thereof, and unfettered liberty to develop Oromo cultural assets.

During the Oromo protests, a consensus was reached among the Oromo public, Oromo political parties, and political activists regarding this set of demands and the fact that the Oromo cause is built on principles and values codified in Oromo heritage and the struggle for freedom, justice, peace, and dignity. Let us expound on these categories.

1. *The Oromo demand political freedom.* There was a consensus that the Oromo demand for political freedom meant self-rule. It signified that the Oromo should govern Oromia without external dictation and proportionally participate in the shared rule of the Ethiopian Federation, co-governing with other nations, nationalities, and peoples. In short, the Oromo seek democratic self-rule in Oromia and democratic shared-rule at the federal level. It also meant equal treatment, respect for their identity, language, and culture, and protection of the Oromo person's right to live in dignity, free from unlawful interference by government bodies, the coercive apparatus, and government mass media establishments.

2. *The Oromo demand social and economic justice.* Oromo political forces also demanded the protection of farmers and urban dwellers from unlawful eviction from their land and an end to land grab schemes and illegal investments, trades, and constructions in Oromia. Consistent with Oromo's attitude towards natural endowments, the protestors demanded protection of natural resources, below or above the ground, and protection of the natural environment. Aware that the violations of socioeconomic justice are rendered worse by abuse of power, there was a demand for an end to widespread corruption in Oromia and the implementation of principles of good governance at all levels of administration.
3. *The Oromo demand cultural Equality.* The Oromo national struggle was launched to save the Oromo nation from extinction under the imperial period's policy of assimilation, which outlawed the use of *Afaan Oromo* as a language in the public square. During the Oromo protests, the demand was the equality of *Afaan Oromo* and its adoption as one of the federal working languages and affirmation of the integrity of the Oromo *qubee* or alphabet in the form it was originally adopted. The Oromo protests also demanded recognition of Finfinnee as an Oromo city, as Oromia's capital city, and as the seat of the federal government, the African Union, and the United Nations headquarters. A corollary to this was the unconditional implementation of the 'special interest of Oromia over Addis Ababa' provision in the Ethiopian constitution Art 49 (5).
4. *Like all other Ethiopians, the Oromo demand peace and security.* Because the Ethiopian empire was founded through conquest and sustained by the rule of violence, the Oromo people's right to peace has never been respected. During the Oromo protest, the military and the federal security forces rained violence over civilian lives. Under the Prosperity Party, in addition to the usual rule of violence, cross-border aggression from the adjacent regional states elevated the price the population paid in their quest for peace and security. Oromos continue to demand an end to violence and the removal of command post rule in Oromia.
5. *Along with the oppressed ethnonational groups, the Oromo demand human dignity.* In the Ethiopian empire-state, Oromo civil liberties were consistently violated with impunity. Oromo politicians and political parties were banned, labeled as terrorists,

and supporters imprisoned or continuously intimidated. The Oromo Protest demanded an end to the ban on Oromos' freedom of expression, association, and assembly, as provided for in the constitution. Concomitantly, the movement demanded freedom from fear for all Oromos living, working, or studying in Oromia and other regions of the country.

It is clear that the Oromo protest demanded that the Ethiopian government live up to the expectation of the federal constitution, nothing more, nothing less. They were uncomplicated, straight forward and deserved. Our position is that the Oromo people and the Oromo cause are worse off today under a government sporting the name of the Oromo. To those who now demand that the Oromo movement is causeless, whether they are individual freelancers or government placeholders, we suggest that they look inward to their moral compass and ethical principles and judge for their own. We reverse the question and ask: Which of the above-articulated Oromo demands have been met as of today?

### **Unfulfilled Aspirations**

Though the Oromo struggle has made tremendous progress and achieved substantive victories, including the ouster of the EPRDF despotic regime, under the Prosperity Party rule, the Oromo quest for positive liberty, the freedom to exercise democratic rights, constitutional rule, respect for human rights, and the right to live in peace remains unfulfilled. Likewise, the Oromo quest for negative liberty or freedom from violence, authoritarian rule, deprivation, arbitrary detention, torture, and murder by security forces remains unaddressed.

Ethiopia is ruled by a government that has returned to the worst features of Ethiopia's political culture with a vengeance, with mass arrests, lengthy detention without charge, extrajudicial execution of innocent people, and violence against opposition politicians going on unabated. The regime stands accused of committing heinous atrocity crimes, crimes against humanity, ethnic cleansing, and possibly genocide. It is unlikely that Oromo's aspirations for positive and negative freedoms will be addressed under such a regime. Here are some of the non-negotiable Oromo core values that the current regime is attacking by crossing redlines. The Prosperity Party poses new threats to the Oromo.

1. *Oromo unity is under threat.* While the Oromo struggle has saved the Oromo nation from extinction, the right to continue as a unified nation has not been secured. The EPRDF managed to divide the Oromo people into the “good” OPDO-supporting, pro-peace, pro-democracy, and pro-development “patriots” and the “evil” OLF partisans who are anti-peace, anti-democracy, and anti-development “terrorists.” Acting as the perfect EPRDF scion, the Prosperity Party has followed suit, working assiduously to divide the Oromo nation along regional and sectarian lines. The widespread rhetoric that the conflict in Oromia is “brothers are at war” is inaccurate, but the Prosperity Party consiglieres characterize it as such for their politics of “divide and rule.” Safeguarding the Oromo nation’s right to exist as a unified, undivided, unassimilated, and unassimilable nation remains the goal of the Oromo struggle.
2. *The dignity of the Oromo person is not secure.* As long as despots exist, the right to life remains under threat. Being an Oromo nationalist is now considered a security threat. Innocent persons from areas considered OLA strongholds are detained, tortured, terrorized, and persecuted with impunity. Under a regime where criminalizing, degrading, and dehumanizing the Oromo person is a standard operating procedure, the demand for Oromo human dignity remains unfulfilled.
3. *Self-determination has been criminalized.* The right to self-determination is the foundation of human rights and the organizing principle of the Oromo political community. The Oromo people’s demand to exercise their right to self-determination is just, legitimate, and constitutional. It must be inviolable, unbridgeable, and non-derogable. Under the Prosperity Party regime, the bedrock Oromo demand for self-determination is considered a political demand that must not be raised.
4. *The right to peace is in danger.* Peace is key to an orderly and properly functioning human system. Preventing the disruption of peace and endeavoring toward sustainable peace is essential for a stable political order and economic growth. For the Oromo, the right to peace is a constant under threat. The Oromo Protest demanded that the Oromo people’s right to sustainable peace be respected. But peace has become ever more elusive, and the struggle for its achievement continues to be justifiable.

## Legitimacy of Our Cause

The Oromo struggle started not fifty years ago but more than a century ago as a resistance to conquest by the Ethiopian empire-state, which resulted in the loss of the Oromo Gadaa civilization, founded on the Oromo language, Oromo sacred knowledge traditions, indigenous conception of the cosmos, and the *gadaa* politico-military system, religio-moral system, and socio-economic system. The goal of the Oromo struggle is the rebuilding of the Oromo heritage of participatory democracy, harmonious and sustainable human development, and a system of peace maintenance, all based on a deep reverence for human dignity.

The Ethiopian Constitution affirms the Oromo nation's struggle and its goals. The constitutional provision that the nations, nationalities, and peoples of Ethiopia are co-equal sovereign communities and are entitled to full and free exercise of the right to self-determination is the core of our political goals. The multinational federal structure is the framework in which all other rights are respected. The boundaries of the multinational structure are consistent with Oromo's demands for self-rule, as is the use of referendums as a mechanism for settling contested boundary disputes.

The Oromo people's quest for self-determination, justice, and democracy is consistent with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), the International Covenants on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), and other relevant international legal instruments.

The Oromo struggle is to reclaim what is rightfully theirs. The Oromo national movement demanded the restoration of the land, government, and identity they lost to conquest. While reclaiming theirs, the Oromo respect the demands and rights of all other nations in Ethiopia. The Oromo have no interest in retaliatory imperialist expansion, economic reparation, or reverse cultural domination. As such, the Oromo people's struggle is legitimate, constitutional, and consistent with all the major internationally recognized declarations, covenants, and conventions.

## **Conclusion**

In the last half-century, the goals of Oromo nationalists have always been the same as the political demands of other Ethiopians. Nevertheless, when Oromo raises the same demands, it evokes a rhetorical question: “What do the Oromo really want?” This is not an honest query but a mischievous scheme designed to marginalize the Oromo nation, disparage Oromo political demands, and criminalize the Oromo nationalist movement. It is a ploy employed by Ethiopia’s powerholders to make the Oromo the perpetual outsider and cast the Oromo national movement as a subversive nationalism.

Regardless of the schemes and ploys, the progress made in the last fifty years must inspire nationalists to continue the struggle. It is the right way to honor the sacrifices of Oromo heroes, heroines, and martyrs who lost lives and limbs in the struggles of the past decades. The struggle must continue until all Oromo demands are met and freedom is fully achieved for ourselves and for all Ethiopians suffering under the Ethiopian state, which has proven time and again that it is incapable of divorcing itself from despotism and transforming into a democratic polity.