November 3, 2019

Dr. Abiy Ahmed, Prime Minister
Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia
Office of the Prime Minister
P.O. Box 1031
Finfinne, Ethiopia

Dear Prime Minister Abiy:

Please accept my congratulations on winning the 2019 Nobel Peace Prize. I believe the award is not only for what you have done in the past, but it is also an encouragement for what you can do in the future. You now have the global and local support to transform Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa region and make democracy and regard for human rights the new norm.

On behalf of the Oromo Studies Association (OSA), I am writing this letter out of grave concern about widespread human rights violations, killings, imprisonments, and disappearances in Oromia and other regions, as well as the hate speeches and collective violence engulfing Ethiopia. OSA appreciates that you played a key role in brokering peace between Ethiopia and Eritrea and easing the suffering of people in both countries. We also give you credit for freeing tens of thousands of political prisoners and responding to one of the critical demands of Oromo protests. However, we are concerned that your government has failed to bring peace to the Oromo people—a constituency that you were presumably elected to represent in the Ethiopian government. Instead of addressing the demands of the Oromo people for justice, freedom, and self-rule, your government is engaged in reincarnating the imperial systems and institutions that are contrary to the core human values—human dignity—democratization of the multinational Ethiopian state. This allowed blunt racist/ethno chauvinist to grow in Ethiopia. We are seriously concerned that your rhetoric and actions since you came to power have emboldened racist/chauvinist forces that pose a serious threat to peaceful coexistence in the country.

The OSA was formed three decades ago; since then, we have been studying the socio-political-economic-environmental situations in Oromia- Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa. We have documented the ways the consecutive Ethiopian regimes’ social policies destabilized the region and exposed the people to famine, diseases, and eroded the natural environment. For policymakers, choosing the right framework of thinking is essential to achieve the desired goals. The failure of your predecessors, from Menelik II to Meles Zenawi, comes from a racist/chauvinist framework of thinking. Their policies were designed to dominate and exploit human and natural resources of others. For multi-ethnic/national/religious countries like Ethiopia, allowing domination of one group over the other is not only morally wrong; it is unsustainable. Because denial of difference is a denial of justice, the most appropriate political arrangement is federalism, and the framework of thinking that can provide a workable solution is “equity, diversity, and unity.”

The OSA has been constructing and synthesizing knowledge on matters related to Oromia and the Horn of Africa. There is ample historical evidence that King Menelik II- the founder of the Ethiopian state
and his army known as Neftegna policies were driven by a racist mindset and was responsible for hand and breast mutilation, the slave trade, genocide, and ethnic cleansing. The Haile Sellasie regime followed the footsteps of Menelik and was responsible for ethnic cleansing, evictions, dispossession of lands, and forceful assimilations. Glorifying those kings is adopting their motives and allowing the revival of racist views. When you publicly glorify Menelik and Haile Selassie, you are committing a grave mistake—because you are validating their racist views. Racism/chaunivinism is a chronic problem in Ethiopia, and it is settled in the minds of the group who hold that view. The holders of such backward views do not see any wrong in their biased attitudes. Racist views are widely reproduced in formal and informal schools. The consequences of validating racist views are enormous, and some of them are listed in the following paragraph.

First, role modeling should inspire and set values that people should follow. As you glorify Menelik II and Haile Selassie, you validate their racist views and provide theoretical reasons for ultranationalist Amhara to revive. These extremists openly claim “restoring the past Ethiopian glory” – “the good old days.” The revived ultranationalists Amhara are now organized as the Fanno and Satenawu and act like Menelik II, and they are engaged in collective acts of violence, i.e., burning houses, looting and killing the Qimanti, Agaw, Oromo and Gumuz people. In the manner the Nazis characterized the Jewish as “alien race” and indiscriminately killed them, the Amhara ultranationalists are bluntly calling the Gumuz people as “chimpanzees” and indiscriminately gunning them down in the Matakal region.

Second, as you openly romanticize the legacy of Menelik and Haile Sellasie, the chauvinist/racist views are validated, private, and public media start to freely air hate speech, prejudices and make racist terms acceptable. Referring to the Waqefatatas, those media described them as the followers of foreign God ከላእ ከሆል and devil ከላእሆል worshippers. On the one hand, they attempted to categorize the Oromo people as outsiders, and on the other, they delegalized the Oromo religion and dehumanized them. We have ample evidence that legitimizing racist views and dehumanizing people are precursors of collective violence. OSA expects your office to make individuals and institutions that promote racist and biased views accountable.

Third, one of the major policies of your predecessors was assimilating the Oromo people to the Abyssinian culture. This includes delegitimizing Waqeffana and Oromo language. Consistent with those policies, although your office had met with the Christian and Muslim leaders, you did not invite the Waqeffanas. This did not happen by accident—it is because your office inherited racist episteme or staffed by individuals who promote racism. When religious leaders pray, they are not only asking for divine intervention but also stating what policymakers need to give attention to. When you meet and discuss with the dominant religious leaders, you gave them a forum to present issues that are relevant to their members. However, you denied issues relevant to the Waqeffana, and that is discriminatory.

Fourth, the language policy pursued by successive Ethiopian regimes have been openly discriminatory against the Oromo people. It denied them getting public health information and conditioned them to die from easily preventable diseases. There were times when innocent individuals were charged as guilty because they were not well versed in Amharic. As it is in the past, recently, the Ministry of Education’s “education road map” proposed imposing the Amharic language on the Oromo and others. The Ethiopian Orthodox church has blatantly opposed the demand of Oromo Orthodox Christians to manage their churches and use their language in church services. OSA expects you to correct those wrongs and prioritize making ‘Afaan Oromo’ one of the working language of the Federal government.

Fifth, the 1995 Ethiopian constitution legitimized ethnic cleansing against the Oromo people when it took out Finfinne and Dire-Dawa out of the legal jurisdiction of Oromia regional state. Failing to repatriate and compensate those who have been evicted from their ancestral lands and denying the Oromia regional state managing the affair of its capital and major city Dire-Dawa, constitutes validating ethnic cleansing. OSA expects, that you initiate the process that will effectively address these historical injustices and guarantees the inalienable rights of Oromia over Finfinnee and Dire-Dawa.
Sixth, racist views are precursors of institutional racism, and this made the Ethiopian institutions exclusively Abyssinian institutions. The prime examples of institutions that remain mostly Abyssinian are the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, Ethiopian Airlines, and the Commercial Bank of Ethiopia. These institutions denied Oromo people job opportunities and promotions. The Prime Minister’s office needs to either have policy directions to reform those and other institutions or demand those institutions to come up with their own policy directions. Ethiopian institutions should resemble the people of the country.

Seventh, wittingly and unwittingly, your office is still functioning in the Abyssinian culture, i.e., the art of saying in the Wax and Gold (አሸምና ዓርቅ) metaphor is in play, and what you said is not what you really mean. This makes settling political disputes among the Oromo parties challenging. For example, the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) is accusing the ODP of failing to fulfill their Asmara agreement. Many of those 1,500 OLF armies that were handed to the Ethiopian government as part of the agreement complain that they are mistreated. Those OLF armed forces who agreed to settle the political dispute peacefully and handed their guns to the Gada leaders also feel betrayed. Those armies even accuse the administrators of the military training camp of poisoning them. The Gada leaders who were involved in arbitration also complained of being deceived. If those issues are indicative of how you operate, it shows you are not genuine about social transformation.

Eighth, the racist framework of thinking promotes the concept that one ethnic/national/cultural group is emphatically right, and the others are collectively wrong. Such a view is a recipe for collective violence. Your office has imposed undeclared martial rule on Western and Southern Oromia and others and kept them under endless command post. The acts of the Ethiopian army in those regions are collective violence. In addition to the widespread killings and imprisonments, the Ethiopian army is engaged in burning houses and forcing farmers as to what types of crops the y need to plant.

Ninth, wittingly and unwittingly, you surround yourself with those who are against equity and diversity. As it is said, “promoting unity without equity and diversity is putting the cart before the horse.” The racist mindset is backward thinking, and it has no place in the twenty-first century.

Tenth, the last speech you gave in the Parliament regarding media, coupled with the late-night order given to Jawar Mohammed’s security personnel to abandon guarding his residence, has triggered alarm bells among Oromos that your administration is attacking their media, the Oromo Media Network (OMN) and its executive director. Taking a cue from that speech, and the action of security forces, the Ethiopian social and regular media have polarized the situation, by demonizing the Oromo Media Network (OMN) and its executive director. The resulting protests and counter-protest in Oromia have thus far claimed the lives of several dozen individuals. Media informs, educates, entertains, molds opinion, advocates, provides a framework of thinking, connects people and ideas, and records events, and for the Oromo people, it is critically needed to empower themselves. Conducting counter-protest and demanding the closure of Oromo-centered media organizations such as the OMN is a clear sign that those with hegemonic dreams have made it their apparent mission to silence independent Oromo voices. The latest formal accusation of OMN and ONN by the Amhara regional state appears to be part of this effort. OSA considers these unprovoked actions as aggressive moves made to disempower the Oromo people.

To sum up, identity politics is both about defining who they were and who they are and who they want to be and accordingly setting a framework of thinking. When the Oromo people identify themselves as the people of Gada/Siiqee/Qaalu they are saying they are democratic, transparent, equitable and have high ethical standard. In their struggle, the Oromo people have been striving to end unfair-unjust social relations, with the aim of constructing an equitable, diverse, and united society. We believe that the Ethiopian Prime Minister and the Chairman of the ODP should have to adhere to these core Oromo values. OSA believes that human rights are inalienable, indivisible, interdependent, and intertwined. Individual rights cannot flourish without guaranteeing collective rights. If you are undermining collective rights, you
are going to violate both—because they are inseparable. The primary responsibility of your government should be balancing and advancing both rights.

Dear Mr. Prime Minister,

We are not convinced that your current path will offer lasting solutions to the multi-faceted problems in the Ethiopian empire. We ask you to make democracy, human rights, and equity the framework on which you strive to find political solutions. In the interest of peace and social transformation in the region, I respectfully request you to:

1. Address the legitimate Oromo questions and accommodate their aspirations
2. Free all political prisoners and pay compensations to those killed and imprisoned
3. Take to court individuals who have been involved in the killing and torturing of innocent people
4. Immediately end the Command Post in Western, Southern and Central Oromia and strive for peaceful conflict resolutions
5. Use the powers of your office to stop the undue intrusions of ultranationalist Amhara political parties and institutions in Oromia
6. Create a fair and free playground for political parties to work with their people
7. Criminalize hate speeches without compromising flourishing free media

OSA is willing to contribute its part to mediate or offer advice on the disputes between Oromo political parties to peacefully settle their differences. I want to end my letter with a quote from UNESCO constitution, which states, “since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defenses of peace must be constructed”.

Thank You,

Begna Dugassa, Ph.D

OSA President