

Open Letter to Ethiopians and to the International Community

RE: Communique of “Concerned Ethiopians” Issued on July 19, 2019

July 28, 2019

On July 19, 2019, 145 individuals who called themselves “Concerned Ethiopians”, mostly who hail from Amhara ethnic group, issued an alarmist communique titled, “Communique Urging Prevention of Genocide and Balkanization of Ethiopia.”

We, the undersigned individuals and national/ethnic based nonprofit and community organizations representing our members, found this Communique to be extremely disingenuous, doom-laden and reflecting a one-sided political narrative that does not represent the view of the vast majority of the peoples of Ethiopia. And hence this response.

Unlike most of the African countries, Ethiopia was not directly created by the European colonialists. The modern Ethiopia was created by Emperor Menilik the II in the 19th century when Abyssinia or the northern part of Ethiopia invaded and occupied the southern part of the current day Ethiopia. Ethiopia was an empire state governed by kings and emperors up to 1974. Since Menilik’s conquest, the peoples in southern Ethiopia comprising of many nations/ethnic groups lived as conquered peoples in their own country. Their lands were by and large expropriated and given mostly to Amharas and their agents during the occupation. The Ethiopian empire dismantled the conquered peoples’ governance systems and rendered them illegal and replaced them mostly by direct or indirect rule through its agents.

Amharic, the language of the Amhara people, became a “national” language. All students in southern Ethiopia were forced to abandon theirs and adopt Amharic as their native language. All government offices, including courts, conducted their services only in Amharic. In order to be real Ethiopian one is directly or indirectly compelled to learn Amharic and adopt the Amhara culture which was institutionalized and became synonymous with Ethiopian culture. The official overt and covert policy of the empire was to assimilate all the southern peoples to the Amhara culture. The languages, cultures and way of lives of the southerners were denigrated, and every policy was devised to homogenize all ethnic groups towards one Ethiopian culture, i.e., the Amhara culture. Due to prevalent

discriminatory policies, most of the educated elites, bureaucrats, high and middle class individuals and city dwellers until few decades ago were Amharas.

Whenever such blatant discriminations and oppressions exist in any society, it's natural that resistance ensues. Ethiopia was not an exception to this. From the very first time they were put under the Abyssinian occupation, the peoples in southern Ethiopia started revolting against it, or opposed it in one form or another. It is the accumulation of all these resistances and rejection of the imperial rule that finally culminated in the 1974 revolution. Even though the 1974 revolution was hijacked by the military, the southern people registered one of their first major victories against conquest during this period. The land proclamation of the 1975 was one of the major acts that liberated the southerners from individual Amhara landlords and their agents.

Even though the land proclamation ended landlordism and individual Amhara dominated rule, the military government continued to rule with an iron hand. It stifled democratic rights of all Ethiopians, specially suppressing the just demands of ethnic groups to exercise their culture, use their languages in schools and have the right to self-administration. While the military government was an equal opportunity killer, the out-and-out suppression against national/ethnic movements was particularly heinous. This resulted in the creation and proliferation of liberation organizations and in the strengthening of organizations that were created during the empire era to fight against feudalism and for liberation.

Contrary to the assertion of the Communique's signatories, it is very clear and uncontroverted for any objective observer of Ethiopia, that neither Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) nor the 1995 Constitution created national/ethnic problems in Ethiopia. It is rather the existence and prevalence of severe inequalities and discrimination along ethnic lines that created these organizations. Even with all its limitations, especially in its application, the 1995 Constitution was also not a cause, but rather a mechanism or tool intended to deal with the prevalent serious ethnic problems to rectify historical injustices.

The signatories try to portray the past Ethiopia as a land of peace where all ethnic groups lived in harmony prior to the 1995 constitution. Little do they remember that Eritrea seceded prior to this constitution, and the biggest internal conflicts in the world were transpiring in Ethiopia before the constitution. From their vantage point, Ethiopia may have looked peaceful and a just country, but for the conquered

people, Ethiopia had never been peaceful or a just country. The conquered people were suffering violence and inequities every single day.

It defies any logical thinking to assume with the signatories, that one obscure TPLF Manifesto instigated and unleashed ethnic hatred against the Amharas. It is rather the rank the Amhara ruling group held in the social hierarchy, that made them and their system to be a target during the revolution and thereafter. The signatories, with purposeful malice, present as if *all* Amharas were made a target, but this is a total fabrication. All oppressed nations and their organizations that were created to struggle against domination, have always made it clear that they have no issues with the larger Amhara population who were themselves oppressed by their own ruling group that also oppressed the others. The struggle of the Oromo and other people had always been against the system of domination which for historical reasons was mainly controlled by the Amhara ruling group.

It is mind boggling to imagine how some of these dignitaries felt comfortable affixing their signature to this communique that is full of malicious, exaggerated or unfounded allegations. It is also disingenuous how after meticulously listing what happened in the rest of the country, they conveniently omitted ethnic targeted killing that occurred in Amhara region or in Addis Ababa against others. As a case in point, nothing was mentioned about Oromos who were killed or whose businesses were stoned in Addis Ababa when they came to celebrate the return of the OLF. One of the most barbaric killing in the recent memory occurred, when more than 200 ethnic minorities including children and women were massacred in Metekel by the Amhara state militia. The communique, however, deliberately skipped over this. The killing of many Tigrayan in Gondar, the closing of boarder with Tigray by Amhara youth with the purpose of starving them are also glossed over. The continuous killing and displacement of the Kimant people in Dembia and Chilga Woreda, Gondar, is disregarded as if they do not count. In the past the application of such double standard between the Amhara and other ethnic groups had been the hallmark of the Amhara elites, and it appears the current elites are also continuing in the same vein.

The hyperboles, exaggerations and misstatement in the Communique not only crosses the line, but it is also revealing how irrational and extreme the Amhara nationalists have become. For example, the preposterous claim that the Amhara population constitute 50 million out of the 110 million Ethiopian population is instructive of who they are. Even more detrimental and alarming is their effort to

make an Amhara hero out of General Asaminew, the cold blooded killer. Asaminew is a murderer who tried to take over the regional state by force (by itself a coup d'état), and eventually control the federal government. The series of steps he took in the run up to his final evil act clearly show where he was heading. Within a short period of assuming power, he trained thousands of Amhara partisan paramilitary force and smuggled and amassed arms to Amhara region. Once that's done, he unleashed his riffraff army on Gumuz minority group and massacred hundreds in Agew Awi Zone in Amhara Region. He also tried the same on Oromos in Kemise, Wollo, but was rebuffed. Furthermore, he made incendiary speeches all over the place inciting Amharas against Oromos and Tigrayans. His building of rogue militias, amassing arms and his inflammatory speeches were very indicative of what his end game was. It was stark clear that with his buddies in National Movement of Amhara (NaMA) their final goal was to take over the state power and reinstitute the Amhara domination. Herman Cohen, who served as United States Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs, perfectly captured this in his Twit of June 24, 2019. Here is what he said;

Failed coup in #Ethiopia's Amhara state was an attempt by ethnic nationalists to restore Amhara hegemony over all of Ethiopia that existed for several centuries prior to 1991. That dream is now permanently dead.

By attaching their names to this Communique, the signatories have confirmed their allegiance to the right wing Amhara supremacist NaMA. In fact, the dedication of so much space in the communique to the demised general, and the elaborate effort to rehabilitate him through ridiculous conspiracy theory makes one wonder how much extensive the general's and NaMA's influence was and how much it was expanding. And this is a great concern that all federalists in Ethiopia should take seriously.

Ethiopia is a multinational country that is coming out of ethnic subjugation and suppression. Most of the previously conquered nations want to belong to Ethiopia only if and when self-rule and shared rule are instituted through multinational democratic federation. Ethiopia that does not recognize the right of self-rule of its constituent nation and equitably represent them on the federal level will no more be acceptable. The choice for Ethiopia is no more between multinational federation and unitary form of government or other types of federation; the choice is between multinational federation and no Ethiopia. If not to bring back the pervious

domination, it is not clear why of all the ethnic groups in Ethiopia, only the Amhara elites are vehemently opposed to multinational federation.

Ethiopia is currently facing multiple challenges and opportunities due to changes occurring in the country. All changes, especially transitional changes happening in a complex society like Ethiopia, could not occur without acute challenges and setbacks. In order to discredit the efforts of Prime Minister Abiy's government, the signatories exaggerate the problems and setbacks and try to depict as if all is doom and gloom. If one listens to their wistful rumbling, one concludes that all is lost for Ethiopia. Even if there are some vulnerabilities and challenges, Ethiopia is not as they claim, on the precipice of civil conflict. In fact, Ethiopia has never come so close in its history to forming a just, peaceful and stable country as today. Except for some remnants remaining, all organizations that were previously engaged in armed conflict have now joined the peaceful march towards building a more perfect union. The no-peace, no-war situation with Eritrea, which could have descended to ugly conflict at any moment, is now more or less resolved. Even though recently there are some concerning developments, including in Sidama, human rights violations is by and large at its lowest ebb in recent memory. Freedom of speech and organization is flourishing at an unprecedented level. Where the Amhara elites who signed the Communique see half empty, we see half full. Where they propagate unfounded fear and despair, we preach hope.

The only potential for civil conflict comes from the mentality that wants to bring back the archaic, "one language", "one culture", and "one nation" assimilation project. It is unimaginable to think the oppressed nations of Ethiopia who through their relentless struggles have come so far and have unequivocally rejected rule by others will relinquish their autonomy and self-rule. In fact, the trend is in the other direction. Nations like Sidama are struggling to attain their statehood guaranteed in the constitution. No one is saying the current constitution is perfect and nothing should be changed. However, if change is needed, it's for all Ethiopians to decide through extensive dialogue at a later time in parliament after the election, and not through unconstitutional way by those who are accustomed or think they are entitled to rule the country.

Ethiopia is on the verge of a new beginning where all its nations for the first time in its history will live together in democratic equality. We understand that there is a great divergence on the idea of what course of action the country should take going forward. We also understand that there is a great anxiety among many who are

used to privilege to see that power is shifting. The change that is occurring is making the nations on the periphery to come into the center for the first time. This has the potential of bringing equality and equity between all nations in Ethiopia.

Of all the preposterous allegations and false narratives of the Amhara supremacists, nothing is far from the truth than the so-called Oromo domination by the current Administration. The government driven assimilationist and discriminatory policies of the last 150 years were not inconsequential. They have left behind drastic economic, political and social inequalities between the Amharic speakers on the one hand, and the rest of the excluded population. Just to cite one example, for instance, the Oromos, the population group that constitutes at least 40% of the Ethiopia population, is less than 10% in Amhara elites dominated Ethiopian federal workforce. The entitlement mentality these policies nurtured in the minds of the Amhara elites is even more astounding. The vicious attacks on handful Oromo politicians, activists, professionals and diplomats including the Prime Minister himself partly emanates from this mentality of entitlement. The vicious attack by the supremacist Amhara elites on all and every Oromo person of power has an unintended consequence of a grave magnitude. By doing this they are not only pushing everyone to their ethnic enclave, but also creating a political environment where no one can dare to transcend such divides and come forward to resolve intricate country wide issues.

We hope the international community understands the communique issued by the signatories is an exceptionally one sided, extremist narrative that has no objective foundation, and does not reflect the sentiment of the vast majority of the Ethiopian peoples. Their recommendations are oblivious to the realities on the ground. They try to suggest solution based on biased and wrongly framed assessment of problems. Even though theirs is a view of the minority, their self-positioning as representing the interest of 110 million Ethiopian, is reprehensible and deeply rooted in imperial legacy of imposing a minority's will on the majority. Their argument misrepresents or glosses over the imperatives of history and the lessons thereof. Theirs is a futile attempt to envision Ethiopia's future while neglecting historical and contemporary questions.

Negotiated settlement of pending issues is very important for the future of Ethiopia. However, the signatories' preposterous and inflated self-image, which is evident throughout the communique, does not provide any room for dialogue and negotiation. Advancing such a supremacist attitude, and calling for actions

informed by it, is dangerous for contemporary Ethiopia. Many of their calls are morally bankrupt, politically sloppy, and hopelessly disconnected from prevalent realities. While most people of Ethiopia are calling for the realization of democratic multinational federation that effectively decentralizes decision-making power, the signatories call for further recentralization in pursuit of their reactionary dreams. To heed their call is to commit strategic mistake. To consider their unilateral voice as reasonable and representative, which they claim, is to neglect the voices of reason of the diverse Ethiopians who gave their lives and limbs to see the hope that is dawning in Ethiopia. To support their cause is to engage in swimming upstream, against the tide of the legitimate demands of the diverse peoples of Ethiopia, with potentially disastrous outcomes for Ethiopia, the Horn of Africa, and beyond.

Although the signatories lament about the impending civil conflict, they should be aware that it is their intransigent and out of touch thinking that is contributing towards the possibility of a conflict. Ethiopia is gone way beyond the empire era; and the old system of domination is buried not to be resurrected. It is high time that they come into terms with this fact and adjust their way of thinking. We encourage them to open up their eyes and hearts and discern the reality on the ground. We, in our part, wish the best for our country and work towards genuine federalism and peaceful coexistence of all nations where there is no domination of any type. With multinational democratic federation the future of Ethiopia is bright.

List of Signatories

1. International Oromo Lawyers Association
2. Oromo-American Citizens Council
3. Oromo Community in San Diego
4. Oromo Community Association of Columbus, Ohio
5. Oromo Cultural Institution of Minnesota
6. Abbaa Caalaa Lataa
7. Abdusemed Youssouf, MD
8. Abraham Dalu, PhD
9. Alemayehu Bekele, PhD Candidate
10. Aliye Hussen
11. Asfaw Beyene, PhD
12. Ayele Galan, PhD

13. Baisa Wak-Woya
14. Bayissa Didi
15. Bekele Geleta
16. Benti Geleta
17. Beyan Asoba, JD
18. Daniel Ayana, PhD
19. Daniel Degago
20. Dessalegn Chamada, PhD
21. Dune Silga
22. Eshetu Beshada, PhD
23. Endale Wakjira
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29. Habtamu Awetu
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46. Solomon Ungashe, PhD
47. Suffian Mohammed, PhD
48. Taha Abdi
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50. Teferi Margo, PhD
51. Yadessa Dhaba, Rev.
52. Yaya Beshir
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