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Genital maiming and Male Rape as a Political Tool in 'Oromo war' against the Amhara people

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INTRODUCTION

‘Back to Past: The Oromo Dominated Government of Ethiopia is practicing its forbidden old tradition of Genital Mutilation and Maiming’ (WM).

Since the war against the Amhara people started, horrific news has appeared in the media. The most recent is what the so-called Ethiopian army committed against young males of the Amhara region that is severing their genital organs. When talking about wartime sexual violence, it is primarily images of raped women and girls, of female victims of sexual slavery, of forced pregnancies or abortions, that come to mind. But what about men who are victims of castration, genital mutilation, of cigarette burns or of acid poured on the genitals? What happens now in the Amhara region can be called emasculation. It is the removal of both the penis and the testicles, the external male sex organs. The potential medical consequences of emasculation are more extensive than those associated with castration, as the removal of the penis gives rise to a unique series of complications. In any case, according to my observation, the crime being committed by the *Ethiopian Army* constitutes mainly genital mutilation.

In recent months, it has come to be recognized that male and female activists, prisoners of conscience, and critical journalists in Ethiopia have been sexually abused in detention. This abuse is not a deplorable ‘part and parcel’ of prison life among hardened criminals, but instead a calculated method of submission. In Ethiopia, torture and humiliation are a means to an end. Admittedly, we do not know how common this abuse is: few current or former prisoners are willing to disclose their experiences. Instances of rape, genital maiming and mutilation, and acts of sexual violence including sodomy are under-reported by both men and women. Male survivors of sexual violence are less likely than women and girls to disclose assaults (Callender & Dartnall 2011) due to a combination of cultural and religious reasons manifested through shame, confusion, and guilt. This ongoing study uses personal accounts and anecdotal evidence to investigate the alleged abuses. The limited data indicate that genital maiming and rape have been practiced in the Amhara region during the current war in an attempt to silence dissent and humiliate the victims, Amhara civilians. This study highlights the urgent need for the international community and local human rights organizations to address seriously the needs of victims of sexual violence such as genital maiming, rape, and other obscene and sadistic, ill-treatment in the Amhara region in amidst of the war, in detention centres in the Oromia region. The human cost of silencing and the marginalization of survivors can only be estimated at present.

The project is underway and the conclusions that we can draw from this work are tentative. For many years during the TPLF regime, there have been rampant rumours that prison officials and interrogators in Ethiopia abused prisoners of conscience, journalists, and members of the opposition party. These prisoners have been exposed to unspeakable violations and are at the same time incapable of public expression in Ethiopia, where sexual abuse remains a taboo subject. Rape and the maiming of genital organs as a method of torture are part of this tragedy. Abuses are not only sexual. They are multifold: dehydration, starvation, and solitary confinement; refusal to provide basic medical care; ignoring cries for help; and varied forms of psychological abuse. We thought that such acts were a thing of the past, a distinct signature of Woyane's thumb on Ethiopians willing to speak out.

However, currently, a similar but less recognized abuse is conducted in Oromia regional prisons and extensively in the Amhara region by the regime's soldiers. I am compelled to write this article based on data collected from the Gojam area. The victims are Amhara civilians— 12 young male adults. They were injected with foreign materials into their penis. The purpose is still unclear. Are they injected with a virus? Is the purpose to make the penis dysfunctional and cause infertility? As I write this article, I am conversing with one of the 12 victims who happened to escape from the detention centre. He is now in hiding. We are trying to investigate the purpose and the foreign material inserted into their private organs. Such materials cannot be metabolized, and a foreign-body reaction occurs. As a result, health risks may need immediate intervention.

As may be remembered, a humiliating sexual assault was conducted on an Ethiopian Orthodox Church priest. The priest is from Yabello (Kibre Mengist), Oromia Regional State, and testified to the attempted sodomy by an Oromo police officer a few months ago. The video was viral on social media^[1].

The recent wave of attacks on Amharas is on the verge of becoming a full-blown genocide. The war-torn Amhara Region has been cut from any means of communication, including the internet. Because the Government has recently declared a state of emergency in the Amhara region, many of these abuses have been hidden from view. Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed has imposed restrictions throughout the Amhara region and obstructed efforts by independent investigators, journalists, and humanitarian workers, making it difficult to verify accounts from the region. The situation has recently escalated even further, as Abiy Ahmed's regime launched an all-out war against Fano in the Amhara region. This has created an ideal opportunity for the Oromo-dominated regime and army to launch a wide range of genital maiming and male rape as a political tool.

OBJECTIVE OF THIS STUDY AND CHALLENGES

The objectives of this study are (a) to document the magnitude of this tragedy; (b) to create public awareness; (c) to assist the victims; and (d) to encourage survivors to come forward and share their stories with researchers and human rights activists. As there is no possibility of obtaining recognizable justice in Ethiopia, this documentation is essential to helping the victims gain access to international judicial mechanisms. Survivors could file suit and pursue criminal prosecution and trials for both the perpetrators and those who ordered the sexual torture. It has been demonstrated on many occasions that the federal judiciary in Ethiopia lacks the independence and determination to prosecute these crimes. As a result, an international system would provide hope to the survivors and their families in pursuing criminal prosecution. There are several challenges to realizing the above objectives and goals. The first is a lack of credible evidence. It is next to impossible to induce survivors to talk about their ordeals, so most of the evidence and data in this report are anecdotal. Some of the personal accounts lack rigor because survivors were not willing to share their experiences in detail. A second challenge lies in the ability to prove systematic abuse. Zawati (2007) observes, “The International Criminal Court Statute states that sexual abuse is a crime against humanity if they can prove that it was done in a systematic way”.

Theoretically, one ought to regard these atrocities or acts in their context and verify whether they may be regarded as part of an overall policy or a consistent pattern of inhumanity, or whether they instead constitute isolated or sporadic acts of cruelty. The limited data in this study indicate that the atrocities are planned, systematic, procedural, and omnipresent. The study is still underway, but the limited findings show that obscene and sadistic forms of torture are used in prison against Ethiopians considered influential activists, the Orthodox faithful, Orthodox priests, and Amhara nationals.

The purpose of the abuse is purely to humiliate the victim and intimidate others. Sexual abuse has consequences far beyond the event itself. Harms include physical damage, psychological insults, sexually transmitted diseases, depression, and intrusive memories. In a country where psychological and psychiatric treatment, counselling, and emotional support are not common, it is very difficult for the survivors to reassemble their lives and to function as socially adequate and occupationally competent citizens. The gravity of this problem can be even more complicated among male victims because of cultural beliefs and deep-seated traditions. A cardinal reflection and overwhelming surprise in this study is the widespread rumour among Ethiopians that sodomy is also practiced in detention centres by government agencies as a method of torture. More research and investigation are required to substantiate such rumours. At present, the data are quite limited and diffuse. However, other forms of sexual abuse, such

as genital maiming, rape, obscene, sadistic, and ill-treatment are documented practices. This is happening now in the Amhara region against civilians in multiple places. A 17-year-old young man in the Gojam zone, in the vicinity of Bahir Dar has his penis removed by the army members. His aunt was recently on the media describing their agony, demanding justice and medical treatment.

POSSIBLE PURPOSES BEHIND THESE ATROCITIES

Whether rape is conducted in the heat of war or within the cold boundaries of a prison, the purpose is to humiliate the victim and intimidate others. It may be to obtain information from a third party. These are the reasons why the authorities seem to condone or encourage the rapes, which are never purposeless. Rape is committed for a combination of motives including the exercise of power, the infliction of humiliation, and lust, and even the perpetrator is not likely to know which is predominant. Unwanted sexual activity, by its nature, is always humiliating and degrading, which is not necessarily the case for non-sexual assault. When it is carried out in an organized manner as we witnessed in the current war against the Amhara people it aggravates the humiliating and degrading treatment such that it can be considered torture. The evidence in this report testifies to the fact that Ethiopia has also become a hub of this evil practice which can be characterized as a true crime against humanity if victims dare to speak about their ordeals.

Reports of torture, sadistic cruelty, and other ill-treatment are never investigated and those suspected of criminal responsibility are never brought to justice. Criminal proceedings in Ethiopia continue to place the burden of proof on an individual complaining of torture, or other ill-treatment, something which flies in the face of international human rights law and standards. The law rightly places the burden of proof on the authorities to prove that confessions were lawfully obtained, but judges (extension of the corrupt Oromumma political system) continue to give primacy to evidence presented by a public prosecutor without questioning its legality and are failing to exclude evidence obtained under acts of enforced sodomy, other forms of sexual torture and ill-treatment. This is a hidden horror, untold by the victims and undocumented by local and international bodies— Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, or investigative journalists/researchers. Sexual violence used as a form of torture seems to have become a routine part of interrogations. Rumours are rampant that one way of torturing devices by security forces in Ethiopian prisons is raping women activists and sodomizing men dissidents. Lately, it includes maiming genital organs.

The purpose of rape as a method of torture is twofold: one is to coerce these innocent dissidents or political activists to secure confessions for crimes they have not committed; and the second and most important of all is to dehumanize,

terrorize and cripple the activism and motivation of the activists to fight for justice and democracy. These past weeks the crime has been elevated to genocidal acts through severing reproductive organs (ethnic cleansing). My objective is that this preliminary report should be a call to action for us all starting today. In my opinion, today we must form an independent commission consisting of international and national human rights activists to investigate sexual abuse in prison, as well as to develop the cases, inform the public, and pursue the main agents of these crimes within the international system. The commission I am suggesting here cannot be materialized without the help of every single victim or the help of a close relation to the victims. This will not be possible without breaking the silence or without the will of everyone to end the darkness and silence of the victims and all the other unknown men and women who are not among us today and have been the victims of ethnic apartheid and horrific sexual abuse in prisons.

THE CULTURAL, RELIGIOUS, AND IDENTITY ASPECTS OF THE ATROCITIES AND LIFE AFTER PRISON:

I am outraged! While I say I am outraged, I know this quiet consuming rage has uplifted me to passionately get involved in this terrain: “Rage — whether in reaction to social injustice, or to our leaders’ insanity, or to those who threaten or harm us — is a powerful energy that, with diligent practice, can be transformed into fierce compassion.” — Bonnie Myotai Treace. My overall impression and observation of life, if we ever call it life, in Ethiopia after the fall of the TPLF (EPRDF) regime, is rather than justice for all, we are evolving into a system of justice for those who belong to a privileged ethnic group and who can afford it. We have a network of complex institutions that are not only too big to fail, but too big to be held accountable. However, as we stand up for an ideal, or genuinely act to improve a lot of our long-suffering Ethiopians, or strike out against injustice, we sweep down these walls of oppression and resistance. What saddens me equally is the reaction of some good friends and relatives when I told them that we need to expose this particular crime perpetrated by the Abiy government. Their reaction/statements may be well meant but crippling. Some of their statements were: “Ethiopians are too sensitive to the concept of obscene sexual practices”; “It causes uncomfortable feelings for a society unprepared to hear these stories”; “Our society is deeply religious, what terms are you going to use to unravel these?”; “What use does your work have”; “Be careful! These evil forces can harm you”; “The victims will never talk openly about it because of shame and societal values, and how do you collect reliable data in this situation, better focus on other injustices” etc. These types of reactions have three consequences 1) the victims never get the support that they deserve upon their release 2) This ‘political and justice apathy’ prolongs the life of the oppressive system 3) The perpetrators escape justice. Many people seem to forget that exposing the crime

would inject a threat of accountability into power and upend the impunity these security apparatuses had operated for years. In the international law of human rights, it refers to the failure to bring perpetrators of human rights violations to justice and, as such, itself constitutes a denial of the victim's right to justice and redress. Impunity is especially common in countries like Ethiopia which lack a tradition of the rule of law, suffer from corruption or have entrenched systems of patronage, or where the judiciary is weak, or members of the security forces are protected by special jurisdictions or immunities.

The main problem for most of the victims is to openly talk about the abuse. Ethiopian society is still traditional in many ways. There is shame associated with sexual abuse creating a sense of shame and guilt. The devastating scale of this sexual violence against political activists is being exposed today by sporadic evidence which indicates that almost no victims report perpetrators to the police or the judge as these forces are part of the machinery of torture. Negative social attitudes to rape and sexual assault victims, in particular, Sodom performed on male inmates, play a big part in the reluctance of victims to come forward, according to my observation. The issue of sexual abuse including genital mutilation/maiming in general and acts of sodomy in particular is an extremely taboo subject in Ethiopia as in many other countries. The stand-out fact is that almost none would report it to officials or even to loved ones, because of this general perception that society is unsympathetic or lacks understanding.

A similar observation has been documented in other countries. In the last decade alone, sexual violence—including rape, sexual torture and mutilation, reproductive violence, sexual humiliation, forced incest and forced rape, and sexual enslavement—against male civilians and combatants, both adults and children, has been reported in 25 conflicts across the world (Lewis, 2009; Peel, 2004).

PATTERNS OF VIOLENCE: HISTORICAL CONTEXT

In 1888, Ethiopian forces under Emperor Menelik II defeated the Italians in the battle of Adwa safeguarding the country's independence. One of Menelik's generals was Balcha. Balcha Safo is one of the Ethiopian national heroes, who fought in the first Italo-Ethiopian war. An Ethnic Gurage from the central part of the Ethiopian highlands. Fast forward 132 years, the anniversary of the battle of Adwa is still celebrated by Ethiopians. Old and young, Christian or Muslim, the battle of Adwa is still an event most Ethiopians take pride in. Only this year it was slightly different. Instead of Emperor Menelik & his queen Taitu Bitul, who followed him to the battle, Ethiopian mainstream media, which is under the tight grip of the government displayed the pictures of Balcha Safo and PM Abiy in posters celebrating the anniversary. It's rather unsurprising that the PM's picture

is being celebrated in this context. The personal cult around him (he is an ethnic Oromo), which is like that of Kim Jong Un or Joseph Stalin means that although the man was born almost a century after the battle, giving him credit for the victory serves a political agenda, albeit triggering some logical questions. The case with Balcha though is interesting. It is interesting because of his childhood.

During the great Oromo invasions of Ethiopia, something awful happened to the country as a whole and to Balcha, in personally. Perhaps that was the most decisive and significant chain of events in the country's 3000+ years of history. After a long, and judging by the results, pointless war between the Christian highlanders of Ethiopia supported by the Portuguese and Muslim lowlanders supported by the Ottomans, both parties were weakened, so much so that they could not defend their southern borders from the Oromo penetrations. Without any significant resistance Galla (currently called Oromos) tribes rampaged through Ethiopia's south looting, killing, and displacing hapless peoples who could not stand up to the waves of brutal assaults they never encountered before. Like the Viking invasions of northern Europe and the British Isles, Galla tribes made their way north, east, and west wherever the earth was green and rich in water (they were semi-nomadic pastoralists), erasing most of the traces of the peoples they invaded off the face of the earth.

Balcha was born at a time in which the brutal incursions of Oromos into the Ethiopian heartland were not entirely over. As it was customary amongst Oromos, people who fell victim to their invasions were either killed en masse or in as much as they saw fit, were condemned to slavery. Aba Jifar, the ruler of the Jimma Kingdom, an ethnic Oromo who was one of the richest among the kings of Ethiopia, made his fortune through the slave trade. Most slaves were those who were deemed too young to be a danger. But that's not all. There were peculiar characteristics of the invaders. An urge to not only Oromize the present but also the past, so that identities, history, and heritage that were unique in one way or another would be replaced by fabricated ones. This is most visible in the Oromo cultural practice of not only changing subjugated peoples' names but also last names. Balcha had not only his genitalia removed but also his heritage and his identity. His Gurage heritage was replaced by a fabricated one. His posters decorated the Adwa celebration this year because now he has been made an Oromo. The removal of male genitalia was practiced by this group of people culturally to present it as a trophy to a new bride. I will explain next.

Patterns visible

Indeed, body mutilation was a common practice in the Oromo culture. A young man was not considered mature enough for marriage unless he killed a person from another tribe. Flaunting severed parts of the victim served as evidence of the

heinous deed that was considered a gallant act by the adherents of this culture. Menelik's reign put a stop to this and most other inhumane practices in the then Ethiopia. It is worth mentioning though, that if those practices were visible deep into his reign, Menelik reluctantly tolerated them as his Ethiopia displayed much more federalist characteristics of not interfering in internal issues of its constituent states. But even his patience was tested on multiple occasions. Negus (king) Tona of the Wolayta was forced to abdicate his kingship due to his insistence on slavery. The ban on the body mutilating practices meant for the Oromos, who had in the meanwhile become an integral part of the Ethiopian constituency that there were no longer genitalia available to proudly flaunt. So, the real ones were replaced by those made of wood. This object of cultural identification called *Kelecha* which, as such has been accepted by Ethiopians and never questioned does bear centuries-old pain suffered by countless people. Some were even erased off the face of the earth as the result of Oromo expansions through Ethiopia. The number of peoples, languages, and cultures who fell victim to this expansion is yet to be studied. In a country, in which social norms do not necessarily encourage critical questions and a politicised definition of ethnicity meant such questions of significant magnitude were not only unwelcome in public discourse but were also considered a risk to the country's integrity.



This though, isn't what this article aims to dissect. Rather, patterns of violence that have become palpable since the current Oromo-led government took power display a striking resemblance in rhetoric and modus operandi to the times of the Oromo expansions, centuries ago.

In the past five years under PM Abiy the country witnessed outbreaks of violence hardly ever seen in its' long history. The main event that dominated public focus was the Tigray War. Perhaps the most devastating war of this century. But the cycle of violence in Ethiopia, at least in the current context started rolling not long after the PM took power. Not all these outbreaks were related to the Oromo people, but it is noteworthy that most are. The government's lenient approach to crimes if they were committed by Oromos was striking but was left unquestioned by the public as the enthusiasm for better post-TPLF days was still fresh and was reinforced by Abiy's, at least in appearance, reconciliatory and inclusive tone. People chose to believe this was perhaps a sacrifice that needed to be paid to steer the country to the lane of a much-needed transition. There were plenty of red lights early into the PM's reign.

Resettling hundreds of thousands of Oromo IDPs to Addis from the Somali region, a very well thought through plan to engineer the demography of the city in order to reinforce Oromia's claim over the capital, ever louder territorial claims by the Oromia regional state that put it at odds with all neighbouring regions, more frequent scenes of Oromo mobs sweeping through major cities including Addis which resulted in hundreds if not thousands of deaths, the occupation of high and strategically important offices within the administration by ethnic Oromos despite questionable credentials somehow slipped under the public's focus. In short, the PM's patriotic rhetoric was deceptive. The pervasive talks of an inclusive and fair country resonated with the people, especially the Amharas who have always remained loyal to this idea despite the hardships they had to go through for decades solely due to their ethnicity. It was perhaps midway through the war with the TPLF that suspicion kicked in.

In the hearts of the residents of Addis who call themselves "Addis Abebans" a term some use as a form of rejection towards any ethnic allegiance and a sign of embracing multi-ethnic unity and acknowledgment of a city reflective of the country's diverse ethnic heritage in its entirety, a peculiar fear of being unwelcome in their own city began to be felt. Children in kindergartens and primary schools were forced to sing the Oromia national anthems and hiss the Oromia regional flag. Reports of residents who were refused service in city administrations because they didn't speak Afan Oromo were until then merely rumours but the city administration's and Oromia regional state's actions of re-demarcating the city's boundaries rendering hundreds of thousands of "Addis Abebans" effectively stateless as they overnight became residents of the Oromia regional state: a regional state in which, since inception in 1991, paved the way for the extermination of 18 ethnic groups showed those fears were indeed justified.

There is an urge to impose the Afan Oromo language and the Oromo “culture” if one can define it, as one would be able to define say the Amhara or Gurage culture, on non-Oromo ethnic groups. Since the Oromo incursions into heartland Ethiopia in the 17th century, many towns, cities, villages, and even entire regions were renamed and locals over generations were made to abandon their heritage and were given new ones. Addis Abeba, with all its beauty and flaws, is considered not only the capital of Ethiopia but also of Africa. But pulling the city down from the heights it climbed as the symbol of decolonization and Pan-Africanism and reducing it to one of an ethnic superiority in which those who aren’t members of that ethnic group are merely “settlers” and shall only be tolerated, evidently is a political bargain as claiming Addis has been one of the many issues in which all political doctrines emanating from Oromo scholars and political parties agree on. The Oromo and only Oromo ownership of the city. “Finfinnee” they call the city, is also a sign of defiance and rejection towards Addis’ recorded history, in which even Fra Mauro accurately pinpointed its location on his map in 1459. Berera was the medieval name of the location in which parts of Addis rest today and the locals were Semitic-speaking people of the Orthodox Christian faith. Kombolcha, Chercher, and Welega to name a few were all towns and regions that were renamed after their locals couldn’t withstand waves of Oromo invasions any longer.

Today, in the 21st century this drive to erase what was before still manifests itself in the same manner it has for a few centuries. The most recent testament to this behaviour that has become the most efficient tool to mobilise the Oromo masses is the annexation of Awra Godana, a small but strategically important town in the southern tip of the Amhara region. The residents of the town repelled incursions by the Oromia regional forces and the OLA for as long as they could. But even the most skilled shots were hapless against the heavy artillery shelling of the ENDF. The locals in the military language would retreat, but in fact, they were displaced. Pictures and videos of the looted town made the rounds on social media along with that of Oromia regional forces replacing the welcome sign of the town in which Amhara ownership is written and was being replaced by a new sign with a new name stating Oromia region’s ownership. This could only be possible, as previously mentioned, due to the government’s premeditated occupation of high offices, which include the army, with ethnic Oromos who have in the meanwhile become confident enough not to hide their expansionist agenda. In Ethiopia under PM Abiy, all three pillars of a functioning state, the executive, judicative and legislative, have been redesigned in such a manner, that provides auspicious circumstances to the aforementioned urge for expansion.

A further resemblance with the 16th and 17th-century expansions is also the sheer brutality and predilection to the violence displayed by the Oromo-dominated ENDF soldiers. While old-school Oromo nationalists made

no secret of their endeavour to wreck the Ethiopian state to the ground and build the new “Great Oromia” on its ruins. Scholars like Assefa Jalata created or rather fabricated the premises on which the righteousness of an independent Oromia would rest. They bemoaned the lost independence of a utopic society, its “democratic” self-administration system, the Gedda that the “despotic” Abyssinians banned along with their culture and language. Some even went as far as accusing emperor Menelik of committing “genocide” on the Oromo people. In the mid-1800s Menelik is said to have killed five million Oromos. While it remains unrealistic for any reasonable mind to believe such accusations (the entire population of Ethiopia back then is estimated to be no more than eight million and it was the 1800s), such travesties proved efficient in reinforcing the hatred towards the Amhara.

The victim rhetoric which served as the justification for socio-political demands ranging from equality all the way to self-determination grew and morphed into a genocidal one that targets a single ethnic group responsible for all evil, real, and fantastic, to ever visit the Oromos as a people. Countless massacres and the way they were committed, mostly by the OLA but also spontaneous and unorganised killings by Oromo mobs especially Qeerroo do not suggest otherwise. Accounts of survivors of these killings in recent years display a similar inclination to sadistic violence to that of the 16th and 17th-century ones. Perhaps, the main difference today is that these behaviours have the backing of the state. The Oromia special forces have been not only complicit but were sometimes even at the forefront of some of the massacres of ethnic Amharas in various places in the Oromia region. There is tangible evidence for their complicity. A few days after one of the biggest massacres, the PM angered many Ethiopians as he downplayed a sad event in which hundreds of civilians, including toddlers, were killed by the OLA in Welega by saying seedlings would be planted on their graves so that their corpses “may have shade”. Even by the standards he set, this is insensible and lacks any human decency let alone empathy. But the PMs knew exactly what he was doing. In a political culture in which the one common denominator is hatred towards the Amhara, any acknowledgment of the sufferings of the Amharas and a hint of empathy towards it would mean a political goal. The country’s security apparatus's lukewarm approach to stopping the killings, and even its involvement, the reluctance of state media to report them all but reassures the bitter pill of truth is that the Amhara genocide has transcended from a tool of achieving a political goal to an actual political goal.

A few months after the Pretoria agreement between the Ethiopian Government and the TPLF, it was within a few days that Abiy’s government decided to dismantle the Amhara regional forces, a decision that sparked protests across the entire Amhara region. While the announcement to do so was impromptu, (the government representative inadvertently revealed that all regional forces bar the

Oromia and Somali ones would be dismantled a statement which compelled him to revise it on social media), potentially rendering the Amhara people in the Amhara region defenceless from attacks by the Oromia regional forces, OLA and TPLF.

To say the decision backfired is an understatement. Not only did the soon-to-be “disarmed” Amhara regional forces join the Fano en masse, but the decision made even strong supporters of the Abiy regime reconsider their support, as the danger facing the Amhara people was obvious. There were open and behind closed-doors discussions between Abiy’s Oromo-dominated PP and the TPLF. The government’s half-hearted pursuit of disarming the TPLF, which was one of the requirements of the peace deal, was very soon followed by the decision to disarm the Amhara forces, whilst keeping the Oromia regional forces armed and actively recruiting new soldiers plus the arrest of Amhara journalists, activists, former military personnel all but corroborated the fear that this was a pre-emptive move on the government’s behalf to quell any resistance of the Amhara people that is certain to ensue when the government’s and TPLF’s newly discovered fraternity was bound to be at the cost of the Amhara peoples’ not only freedom but their very existence. It was the Fano’s refusal to lay down arms and the massive influx of new members it gained not only from former military personnel but everyday Amharas and the large support it enjoyed in the region that the government feared as what it had instilled for the Amharas, could only be achieved if they were completely defenceless.

Civilians as targets

The military campaign that was launched by the government further emboldened the Amhara people’s willingness to resist but it also revealed some very uncomfortable truths about the nature of conducting politics and law enforcement in the country. The Amhara phobia that had become the bread and butter of Ethiopian politics for about half a century gave birth to various political and armed entities in the country with varying success. While examining the country’s political landscape does suggest that Amhara-phobia is the one least common denominator almost all political parties share (and it was also encouraged by the ruling TPLF), the most important question that ought to be asked is, why it gained more resonance within the Oromo population than it did elsewhere. A few elusive statements by government officials including the PM about the Fano during the war with the TPLF, barring ethnic Amharas from travelling to the capital, and incarceration of Amharas across the entire country which reached unprecedented magnitude among a few, are actions taken by the Oromo led government to cripple the Amhara people. The Amharas, due to their size, potential, and history are considered the main obstacle to the hegemonic ambitions of the Oromo-dominated ruling PP. To cause discord between

Amharas and between Amharas and other ethnic groups, to render them ineffective economically and politically by denying them participation, in short, to subjugate them became the fixed variable in the formula to achieve uncontested Oromo superiority. It remains unstudied why the urge to subjugate others especially the Amhara has become the most effective political tool to rally the Oromo masses, but Ethiopians' denial of it perpetuated its' lack of understanding, partly due to lacklustre history teachings in schools mainly focusing on the country's glorious past rather than the less glorious one which most current problems could be traced back to.

Certainly, though, a very cautious approach to not blame the Oromo as a people meant that an element in their socio-political culture which is extremely volatile and tends to apply despicable violence on others was left unchecked. Hatred towards anything Amhara simply works. This explains not only coordinated designs to erase the cultural heritage of the Amhara, like the language, history, and even religion on a government level but also uncoordinated and spontaneous attacks on Amhara civilians, civilian institutions, and even smaller ethnic groups considered to be loyal to the idea of a united country, by extension potential allies of the Amhara. It was uncoordinated and spontaneous attacks that led to hundreds of deaths of Amhara but also Gammo, Gurage, and other civilians after the killing of Hachalu by another Oromo individual. The Oromo-led government not only tolerated this and multiple other killings but also abetted them. In fact, the estimated 15 million non-Oromos who live in the Oromia region (about 90% being Amhara) are held for ransom to achieve political goals. A predicament that has been haunting the Amhara struggle for years. Even today, as the Amhara resistance is gathering momentum in the region, a scenario in which this struggle not for justice and representation but the right to exist would be met by punishing Amhara civilians in the Oromia region is a bargaining option on the table for the government.

Oromo "opposition" parties are likely to side with the Oromo government and mobilize their followers against the Amharas if called upon, as we have learned over the past decades, hatred towards the Amhara is the main knot tying various Oromo political ambitions together. The prospect of an Oromo government surrendering power to an Amhara popular movement would surely unite all Oromo political and armed entities across the board. Shimeles Abdisa, the president of the Oromia regional state recently issued a statement in which he said he expects "reconciliation" between the government and the OLA. A rather confusing statement considering the OLF, an armed group only known for killing civilians, lootings, and recent kidnappings for ransom, and Oromia regional forces made no secrets about their cooperation. At least on a lower level. The fate of millions of Amharas and other ethnic groups, once an Amhara victory is beyond doubt is unimaginable, even considering how Amhara-phobia is saturated

in the self-esteem of millions of Oromos and how this has manifested itself over the decades.

The brutality at which Amhara civilians are treated by Oromo members of the ENDF makes what has been a distorted imagination in the collective memory of the Amharas during the Oromo expansions more vivid. Soldiers have not only committed extrajudicial killings of civilians, are accused of rape of even children, and targeting and using civilian institutions as military installations but witnesses even reported genital mutilations of Amhara boys. A cultural practice, as far as we know, is unique to Oromos. The Oromo-led ENDF's total disregard to the customs of the Amhara and their religion is to be expected. The majority of the Amharas adhere to the Orthodox Christian faith and the EOTC has been an institution in Ethiopia for over 1600 years. The move by a group of splinter priests consisting mainly of Oromos to dismantle the second oldest synod in the world by citing asymmetrical representation of "Northerners" and declaration of a new synod is not as many assume an attack solely on the EOTC, but a calculated move to rip to bits the social fabric of the Amhara and other majority Orthodox peoples of Ethiopia. In that sense drone attacks and heavy artillery shelling of centuries-old churches and monasteries which resulted in the deaths of hundreds of churchgoers, monks, and priests could be interpreted as the extension of the rebel priests' attacks on Orthodoxy by military means.

SUMMARY AND PRELIMINARY CONCLUSION

The project is underway and the conclusions that we can draw from this work are tentative. For many years there have been rampant rumours, particularly over the last 32 years, after the TPLF took power in 1991 right through to this day, prison officials and interrogators in Ethiopia abuse prisoners of conscience, journalists, and members of the opposition party. These prisoners have been exposed to unspeakable violations and are at the same time incapable of public expression in Ethiopia where sexual abuse is a taboo subject. Rape, sodomy, and the maiming of genital organs as a method of torture are part of this tragedy in particular during the TPLF regime. Currently, the Abiy government and its security apparatus appear to have intensified the practice against the Amhara people. Abuses are not only sexual. They are multifold: dehydration, starvation, and solitary confinement; refusal to provide basic medical care; ignoring cries for help; and varied forms of psychological abuse. Rape, Maiming, and Medieval Barbarism in the Oromo Region's Concentration Camps, and against civilians on the street of the Amhara region is the order of the day! All these crimes against humanity are perpetrated by the regime in power in the name of "violent overthrow of the constitutionally elected government" accusations. Besides, Ethiopia's Tribalistic Despotism is entrenching itself like tribalistic corruption in Nigeria. It is becoming THE system, and for a young generation of

youngsters, particularly in South and West Ethiopia,...an accepted normality... a mindset on which to advance at the expense of others.

(In collaboration with Abiasaf Gezaw —Hamburg, Germany)

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