

## Escalating carnage while the dinosaurs fight

Despite a media blackout to hide government abuses, the Oromia Support Group (OSG) has recorded the killing of at least 1342 civilians by the forces of Abiy Ahmed.<sup>i</sup>

The slaughter began shortly after the return of the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) to Finfinnee/Addis Ababa in September 2018 with the shooting of three demonstrating Jimma University students on 12 October (OSG Report 50, p.11).



Since then, Oromo have been taken from police custody and summarily executed on a scale not seen since the Red Terror. The two men in the photograph are young farmers Girma Desse and 24 year-old Lema Boki from Meta Robi in West Showa. They were shot dead by government soldiers on 30 September and their bodies discarded (Report 54, p.4) because they were suspected OLF supporters.

Not all killings are part of this orchestrated campaign to eliminate the OLF, Oromo Federalist Congress (OFC) and Qeerroo/Qarree. Some are frivolous, such as the shooting of mother-of-four, Amsalu Gudata in Anfilo, Wallega, in May 2020 for a wager (Report 53, p.21), or the shooting of Yakuta Ahmed in Dire Dawa in June 2019 when buying breakfast for her two children (Report 51, p.10)).

Just as it did in 1992 when the OLF was first outlawed, persecution has broadened from the obvious targets; Oromo Liberation Army (OLA) supporters, political opposition (OLF, OFC), and young Oromo activists in Qeerroo/Qarree; to Oromo media (OMN, ONN) and now Oromo NGOs and Oromo business-people. Any prominent Oromo, unless a government supporter, could be killed or detained.

As well as the carnage, there are more sinister echoes of the Red Terror. There is no judicial independence. Since 2018, OSG has documented coercion, discrimination, dismissal and detention of judges. The judicial system was never entirely independent under the TPLF but now there is nowhere to turn for justice.

Rape and gang-rape was common under the TPLF (Report 49, pp.20-22). Now there is gang-rape of girls and boys in military camps (Report 53, pp.23 and 27). The brutality of torture and killing - beheading, gouging of eyes, removal of tongues and genitalia - distinguishes this regime from the TPLF.

The war against Oromo and other proponents of regional autonomy vouchsafed in the 1995 Ethiopian Constitution, became very bloody long before the invasion of Tigray in November. In its first 49 reports of atrocities committed between 1992 and 2012 by forces loyal to Meles Zenawi, OSG recorded 4498 extrajudicial killings.

Since OSG's January report went to press, 329 died in Benishangul-Gumuz,<sup>ii</sup> and another 30 in Oromia.<sup>iii</sup> Thus, in two years and three months, 1701 civilians have been killed. This compares badly with 4498 killed by the TPLF and recorded by OSG over two decades. More than one third of the civilian deaths in barely one tenth of the time.

Ostensibly, the TPLF rejected feudalism in establishing the 1991 federal structure. This suited nearly all parties at the London conference. Whether or not the TPLF included Article 39, concerning the right to self-determination up to secession, in the 1995 Constitution as an attraction for others or as a get-out clause for Tigray, it failed.

The TPLF behaved like imperialists during its hegemony from 1992-2016. Like the dinosaur Tyrannosaurus Rex, it practised a zero-sum, winner-takes-all game with domination of resources and economy, and violent suppression of dissent.

The TPLF were vindictive to Amhara elites. Federalisation of Ethiopia was a deliberate affront to them. Hostility to Amhara manifested after the 2005 election when seats were won but denied to opposition parties. Over 200 CUD supporters were killed and scores of thousands detained at demonstrations.

Although a federal matter, Meles Zenawi insisted that 18,000 remaining detainees were tried in Oromia Region Supreme Court. The court's President, Teshale Abera, was told Federal Court judges were suspected of being CUD supporters and that 'it would be a good opportunity to exact revenge on Amharas'.<sup>iv</sup> Teshale Abera was rebuked by Region President Abadula Gamada for refusing to play their vindictive game, releasing 17,500 and handing others over to the Federal Court.

This detail from 2005 illustrates both the problem and the way forward. We must ditch the dinosaur zero-sum mentality and the winner-takes-all game. These are the ways of others; the feudal kings of two centuries ago; the behaviour of school bullies. This is not the Oromo way - kara Oromoo.

But the Oromo way is hidden from view. The war waged by Abiy Ahmed on Oromo is disguised for international media. Using techniques honed under the TPLF (remember the Bedeno 'massacre' in 1994 and the grenade attack on the Tigray Hotel in Finfinnee in 1997),<sup>v</sup> atrocities are engineered by the government and then blamed on the OLF, OLA or Qeerroo to vilify them and spread fear and hatred among non-Oromo.

Thus the killing of mostly Oromo in central Oromia mid-year was described in national media as an atrocity, even a genocidal act, perpetrated by Qeerroo against Amhara in response to the assassination of Oromo singer Hachalu Hundessa, on 29 June, which was itself orchestrated by the OLF and OFC.<sup>vi</sup> Despite evidence that the violence was committed by outsiders led and directed by local government officials and with the acquiescence of local law enforcement officers, national media very quickly blamed Qeerroo.

Thus there has been no widespread condemnation of Abiy Ahmed for his abuses and the Oromo are portrayed not as victims of persecution but as perpetrators of racist violence against Amhara.

The punishment of Tigray for exerting its autonomy by holding an election (and for holding a considerable proportion of national war equipment and weapons) was fuelled by ancient feudal antagonism between Tigrean and Amhara dynasties.

The ferocity of the attack is consistent with the crushing of regional voices elsewhere; not only in Oromia, but in Amhara Region (100 Qimant killed in 2019), Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples Region (150 Sidama killed in 2019; 58 Walaita killed in 2020) and in the border area of Amhara Region and Benishangul-Gumuz, where there is ethnic cleansing and killing by soldiers and Amhara militia.

Old imperialist elites are calling for the complete elimination of the OLF after ‘finishing with’ Tigray, and for Oromo youth to be ‘knocked on the head’. Abiy Ahmed says that nothing and no-one will prevent his God-appointed leadership of a united Ethiopia, a future super power.

We are witnessing no more than a continuation of the medieval clashes between rival kings of Showa and Tigray: except now they are fighting over the resources of the Ethiopian empire, not just old Abyssinia. The Oromo and other peoples incorporated by force into the empire by Menelik II are irrelevant to this power struggle.

It is like two classroom bullies fighting over the right to steal other pupils’ pocket money. But these zero-sum, winner-takes-all days are over. Feudal dominance went out with the dinosaurs.

Profound racist ideology underpins the subjugation of the majority of the peoples of Ethiopia. It is as though the voices of Oromo, Sidama, Walaita, Ogadeni, Anuak, Benishangul-Gumuz, Afar and numerous other peoples simply do not exist or matter.

But zero-sum behaviour is not part of Oromo history or culture. For example, any captive taken in war automatically became a full citizen with equal rights at the next (eight-yearly) Gada ceremony. Decision-making at Gada ceremonies is by consensus after debate, without coercion or violence. There are checks and balances in the power structure. Any representative of their eight-year age set can be withdrawn instantly by popular vote.

By contrast, captives were enslaved and sold in Amhara Region until 1936. Despite Ethiopia’s membership of the League of Nations, which forbade slavery, about 500,000 slaves were liberated in Amhara Region by Italian invaders;<sup>vii</sup> significant, considering the population of Ethiopia was 10-12 million. 60% were Oromo; other slaves were mainly Benishangul-Gumuz.

Ruling elites fear if Oromo had power and access to resources and media proportional to their numerical dominance, that all other peoples would be suppressed, in tune with their own zero-sum culture.

But this is not the Oromo way. Zero-sum and winner-takes-all are not the Oromo way. Whether their aspirations are embodied by the OPDO, OFC, OLF or whatever legal or illegal party, Oromo want no more than equality, a fair share.

But they are frustrated by those who refuse to respect the rights of others; those wishing to reduce regional autonomy, to maintain hegemonic power by force.

If the TPLF were the equivalent of Tyrannosaurus Rex, the current regime and the parties which back it are the equivalent of Stegosaurus, a slow lumbering giant which was already a fossil by the time T. Rex became dominant. Hegemony is so 19<sup>th</sup> century.

The OLF includes a spectrum of views on independence. Its manifesto states that the citizens of Oromia - whatever their ethnicity - should decide by referendum the system under which they are governed. There has been less appetite for secession since regional autonomy realised a place called Oromia and allowed administration and primary education in afaan Oromo in 1991.

Until now. Young Oromo are again talking of secession of Oromia from Ethiopia.

It is time for another transitional government, as in 1991. Otherwise the country is heading for mass slaughter and conflict, even greater than in Tigray. Amhara Region could become the rump of Ethiopia after the smoke and dead bodies are cleared. Other regions will have separated.

Amhara have been bombarded throughout their lives with negative propaganda about Oromo. The Amhara media lens amplifies fear and distrust of Oromo parties and institutions.

Nonetheless, the Oromo owe it to the future to temper their justified anger and continue to eschew the violence that has cursed Ethiopia's history. Now is not the time to dig trenches and build barriers due to persecution under successive regimes. Now is time for the Oromo way: a vote and a voice for everyone.

If Oromo and Amhara politicians and organisations would cooperate and work in common with genuine respect for human rights then Amhara fears may be allayed and trust may develop. A transitional government apparatus could facilitate this.

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<sup>i</sup> OSG Reports are all available at <https://oromiasupport.org/osg-reports/>

<sup>ii</sup> *Al Jazeera*, Death toll in western Ethiopia 'massacre' reaches 207: Red Cross, 25 December 2020; Over 80 civilians killed in latest west Ethiopia massacre: EHRC, 13 January 2021.

<sup>iii</sup> Oromo Menschenrechts und Hilfs Organization, Report for 2020, Hannover, Germany.

<sup>iv</sup> Interview with Teshale Abera, President of Oromia Region Supreme Court, 2001-2006, OSG Report 43, August 2007, p.12, and correction in Report 44, August 2008, p.42.

<sup>v</sup> The Bedeno massacre was a fabrication and government employees eventually admitted the hotel bombing. In 1994, Amhara media amplified EPRDF propaganda that the OLF killed a large number of Amharas, Tigreans and Sudanese by throwing them off a cliff at Bedeno, E. Hararge. In South Africa in 2012, I interviewed a refugee who lived in Bedeno and was there in 1994 at the time of the reported massacre. The fence at the top of the cliff, to protect animals, was intact. There were no bodies at the foot of the cliff. The OLF had retreated before the incident was reported. The only known deaths were of Oromo at the hands of government forces, including an Oromo Sheikh who was killed by soldiers. Local elders accused the government of lying. Because of these complaints, residents from a radius of about 10 km were ordered to attend a public meeting in the town of Bedeno. Those who refused were shot or arrested and accused of supporting the OLF. About 2000 gathered in Bedeno. Soldiers ordered them to admit the killings were the result of the OLF, but they refused to accept the government version of events and asked for evidence. About 200 were detained in Girawa camp and tortured (OSG Report 49, p.46).

<sup>vi</sup> In-depth Analysis: Spate of targeted attacks, excessive use of force by security in Oromia leave death trails, destruction. Etenesh Abera and Bileh Jelani, *Addis Standard*, 15 July 2020.

<sup>vii</sup> Alberto Sbacchi. *Legacy of Bitterness: Ethiopia and Fascist Italy, 1935-1941*. p.12. Red Sea Press, New Jersey and Eritrea 1997. ISBN 0-932415-74-1.