

Hate speech in Ethiopia

Press Release by Coalition of Oromo Advocacy and Human Rights Groups

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We, the undersigned,¹ denounce the expression of national, racial, ethnic and religious hatred in the public space, including public media and social media. Such speech constitutes discrimination, hostility or violence as identified by the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination ([ICEFRD](#)) and Article 20 (2) of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. We also acknowledge state-led measures – legislative and other regulatory mechanisms – against hate speech, online and offline.

However, we are cognizant of misuses of the application of the term ‘hate speech’ and warn against the increasing use of legal measures ostensibly targeted ‘to prevent hate speech’ as pretexts by repressive regimes, such as Ethiopia, to suppress freedom of expression, thought and civic engagement. Such policies stifle and suppress an emerging critical and politically conscious, literate and aware citizenry.

Protecting citizens against genuine hate speech – speech which creates conditions that lead to violence – without limiting their fundamental freedoms, requires delicate balance and in-depth historical, cultural and socio-political understanding of that specific society. Such a task is complicated and full of pitfalls in a country like Ethiopia with its contested historical narratives and memories and its asymmetric power relationships. Yet, despite these challenges, it is the duty of governments and the responsibility of individuals to mitigate hate speech while facilitating civic engagement.

With rapidly evolving technological means of communication, there is a heightened risk of socially embedded antagonisms and contestations finding a way onto social media platforms in addition to print and electronic media, expanding the reach of these antagonisms and vastly increasing the risk of harming the general public. While open dispassionate conversations on controversial national issues would, in theory, benefit any society, this has failed to happen in Ethiopia. The instability and conflict that characterize current Ethiopian discourse have exposed historically and institutionally embedded hostility and supremacist ideologies on both mainstream and informal communication channels in Ethiopia. Regrettably, such harmful discourse has not only been condoned by the authorities in Ethiopia but has been enabled and empowered by the very government which has the duty to regulate such violence.

Ethiopian government officials, [including](#) Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, repeatedly use social media platforms for inciting violence, creating and affirming a false narrative and, [spreading misinformation and disinformation](#). Social media platforms are being used to effectively change agendas and misguide the international community. A recent development is to use these platforms to divert international humanitarian concerns and focus the World’s attention away from the catastrophe in war-impacted parts of the country. The government and its supporters use social media to misinterpret and pervert international calls to halt the war and investigate potential war crimes.

Despite the fact that hate speech has been officially made ‘illegal’ in Ethiopia, the Oromo and other social groups which subscribe to a pluralistic vision of the country are constantly subjected to dehumanizing speech, with the Amhara presented as the ‘civilizers’ and ‘architects’ of Ethiopia – the chosen people, the ‘Chewa’, with a divine right to rule. Such assumptions of privilege, entitlement and superiority embody a disdain and hatred for other peoples at every level of society and state. Local, regional and national government decisions, and minor details of bureaucracy and governance are all infused with an asymmetric view of Ethiopian society in which built-in assumptions and the language of denigration are conveyed; hate speech without accountability. The assumption of superiority of one group over others pervades the national media, politicians and non-governmental organisations.

¹ A coalition of Oromo advocacy and human rights organizations based in the United States, Canada, Europe and Australia, who honor equality, mutual respect, and fraternity as guiding principles (see list of signatories).

Since Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed assumed office, he has exacerbated this asymmetry by speaking of ‘making Ethiopia great again’. By applauding Ethiopia’s imperial past and by labelling any person or group who counters that notion as ‘terrorists’, the Prime Minister has suppressed open public discussion, criminalized certain forms of expression and fanned the flames of hate speech by the proponents of the ‘Make Ethiopia Great Again’ narrative. In this quest he has enrolled religious leaders and retired military generals of the Imperial and the Derg eras to utilize hate speech with impunity.

The subtleties of this distinction in identifying hate speech and its targets are difficult for foreign observers to appreciate. Ethiopia may have had a ‘great’ past, but only for a few. For the majority, especially for those in the broader South, Ethiopia is exploitative and imperialist. It has failed spectacularly to respect the basic rights of the majority of its population. It is a state where non-Amhara culture, language and existence are ‘othered’, demonized, and victimized. Applauding such a past insults the victims of those times and whitewashes historical injustices and legitimizes and incentivizes the continuation of the same violence and injustice.

Cognizant of the [United Nations Strategy and Plan of Action](#) on Hate Speech, we therefore urge the international community, civil society organisations and UN agencies to exert their influence on the government of Ethiopia and its supporters to:

1. Refrain from using, encouraging or tolerating the use hate speech.
2. Stop utilization of state-controlled and government-affiliated media and social media platforms to encourage and circulate hate speech.
3. Scale down the ongoing politics of hate, recognize the structural and historical roots of hate speech in Ethiopia and determine ways to prevent it.
4. Refrain from labelling criticism of the government as ‘hate speech’, thus using the law as a tool to suppress freedom of opinion and expression.

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