

# Maintaining Control through Lawlessness: The Security and Human Rights Situation in Oromia, Ethiopia

**Commissioned by the Norwegian Organization for Asylum Seekers**

**Oslo, 2025**

# Table of Contents

<i>Acronyms</i> .....	4
<i>Executive Summary</i> .....	5
<b>1. Introduction</b> .....	<b>6</b>
Aims and Objectives .....	6
Methodology .....	7
Outline .....	7
<b>2. Background</b> .....	<b>8</b>
The Oromo and Oromia .....	9
Oromo Ethno-nationalism.....	10
The Oromo Political Landscape .....	11
<b>3. Political Situation</b> .....	<b>13</b>
The Oromo Protests and the <i>Qeerroo</i> .....	13
The Arrival of Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed .....	14
De-democratization .....	15
Prosperity and Poverty .....	17
<b>4. Security Situation</b> .....	<b>20</b>
The Oromo Liberation Army Insurgency.....	20
Civilians and a State of Insecurity.....	24
Negotiations with OLA and Prospects for Peace .....	26
<b>5. Human Rights Situation</b> .....	<b>28</b>
The Narrowing of Political Space .....	28
Surveillance and Control .....	30
Corruption, Lawlessness, and Control.....	33
Arbitrary Arrests and Unlawful Imprisonments .....	35
Disappearances and Abductions .....	38
Extrajudicial killings.....	39
Torture, Gender-Based Violence, and Daily Harassment .....	42
Enforced Conscriptions .....	44
<b>6. Conclusions</b> .....	<b>45</b>

# List of Maps

<b>Map 1: Regions of Ethiopia .....</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>Map 2: Zones of Oromia (additional zones have been added in recent years).....</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>Map 3: OLA's areas of control/operation (marked with yellow/yellow shaded) .....</b>	<b>22</b>

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# Acronyms

ACLED-EPO	Armed Conflict Location and Event Data-Ethiopia Peace Observatory
AHRE	Association for Human Rights in Ethiopia
ANDM	Amhara National Democratic Front
CARD	Center for the Advancement of Rights and Democracy
CPJ	Committee to Protect Journalists
EHRCO	Ethiopian Human Rights Council
EHRC	Ethiopian Human Rights Commission
ENDF	Ethiopian National Defense Forces
EPRDF	Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front
LHR	Lawyers for Human Rights
MTWA	Maca Tulama Welfare Association
NaMa	National Movement of Amhara
NEBE	National Election Board of Ethiopia
ODP	Oromo Democratic Party
OFC	Oromo Federalist Congress
OFDM	Oromo Federalist Democratic Movement
OLA	Oromo Liberation Army
OLF	Oromo Liberation Front
OMN	Oromo Media Network
ONC	Oromo National Congress
OPC	Oromo People's Congress
OPDO	Oromo People's Democratic Organization
OSP	Oromia Special Forces
PP	Prosperity Party
SEPDM	Southern Ethiopian People's Democratic Movement
TDF	Tigray Defense Forces
TGE	Transitional Government of Ethiopia
TPLF	Tigray People' Liberation Front

# Executive Summary

The political and security situation in the Oromia Regional State, Ethiopia, remains volatile, marked by insurgency, governance challenges, and widespread human rights abuses. This report examines the ongoing conflict, its implications for governance, and the deteriorating human rights situation. Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed came to power in 2018 and promised to steer Ethiopia in a democratic direction. Governance has, however, become increasingly authoritarian during his tenure, and political space has narrowed significantly, with opposition parties, civil society, and independent media facing severe restrictions. The ruling Prosperity Party (PP) dominates politics, and power has become increasingly personalized in the prime minister himself.

The economic situation in Ethiopia is difficult. Large-scale development projects, such as the Corridor Development Project, have displaced tens of thousands without adequate compensation. These initiatives, best characterized as “vanity projects,” prioritize urban beautification over addressing pressing socio-economic challenges. Attempting to fund these projects, the government’s increased tax-pressure has significantly exacerbated people’s daily livelihood and eroded trust in state institutions.

Large parts of Oromia are insecure and inaccessible due to an ongoing insurgency led by the Oromo Liberation Army (OLA). The insurgency started in 2019 and spread from Wollega to central Shoa and southern Guji. Two rounds of peace negotiations in 2023 both failed to create any peaceful settlement. The government has adopted a hardline approach, employing military offensives and crackdowns that have caused numerous casualties, displaced civilians, and deepened grievances. Civilians face threats from multiple actors, including government forces, insurgents, and criminal groups. Reports of kidnappings for ransom, intercommunal violence, and property destruction are common.

Governance has become increasingly securitized, and the government frequently uses accusations of OLA affiliation to target critics. Corruption is rampant, with local officials and security forces exploiting the conflict for personal gain without much many consequences. Control is therefore maintained through a situation of lawlessness which exacerbates conditions at the grassroots.

Human rights abuses are pervasive in Oromia, affecting civilians caught in the crossfire between government forces and insurgents. Arbitrary arrests, enforced disappearances, extrajudicial killings, and torture are widespread. An informal security apparatus operates parallel to official institutions, and grassroots enforcement agencies are actively harassing people, contributing to a culture of fear and a sense of unpredictability.

The Oromia crisis highlights the interplay of conflict, governance failures, and human rights abuses. Addressing these issues requires inclusive governance, accountability, and socio-economic reforms. Without meaningful change, Oromia’s cycle of violence and instability will continue, with grave implications for Ethiopia’s broader stability.

# 1. Introduction

The political situation in the Oromia National Regional State (hereafter Oromia) remains fragile and the security situation is similarly volatile. An ongoing armed insurgency has since 2019 significantly impacted millions of people and made large parts of the region inaccessible. Parallel to this, the human rights situation has deteriorated significantly during the last couple of years. Random imprisonment, extrajudicial killings, and daily abuse have become rampant – not only in areas hit by insurgency, but across the region.

The Freedom House ranked Ethiopia as “not free” in 2023 and the World Justice Project’s Rule of Law Index for 2024 ranked Ethiopia at 134<sup>th</sup> place (of 142 countries).<sup>1</sup> The arrival of Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed in 2018 gave signs of an opening of political space, but the country soon moved in an undemocratic direction where power increasingly became personalized in Abiy Ahmed himself. The prime minister and the governing Prosperity Party (PP) keeps a tight grip on the population, curtailing freedom of expression and cracking down on any form of opposition. The last few years have also seen a clear limiting of space for the political opposition, the press, and civil society organizations.

## Aims and Objectives

This report gives a detailed account of the political, security, and human rights situation in the Oromia. It explores how a complex interplay between a situation of instability, governance deficit, and the securitization of society have placed significant stress on the region’s population. Ongoing armed conflict has led to the loss of lives, caused displacement, deprived people of access to basic services, and curtailed movements, and has in addition also affected state-society relations across the country. What has emerged is a reciprocal process where unpopular policies have reduced the government’s legitimacy, prompting the government to resort to violence as a mode of governance, which in turn has further weakened its legitimacy.

The report also demonstrates how this form of governance has led to the increase of human rights violations. Human rights violations are far from new in Ethiopian political history, yet the nature of such violations taking place today is markedly different. While unable (or unwilling) to end the ongoing armed conflict in the region, the government is actively using the insurgency as a means to stifle any form of opposition. This has to a large extent been achieved by giving law enforcement and security agencies at the grassroots level relatively free reigns to harass the population. Lack of accountability, socioeconomic hardship, and rampant corruption have in turn created a situation where harassment in the guise of control has taken on a life on its own, producing a situation of unpredictability, terror, and fear.

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<sup>1</sup> “Ethiopia,” *Freedom House Annual Report*, 2024. <https://freedomhouse.org/country/ethiopia/freedom-world/2024> (accessed November 18, 2024); “Ethiopia 2024,” *World Justice Project*, 2024. <https://worldjusticeproject.org/rule-of-law-index/global/2024/Ethiopia/> (accessed December 15, 2024)

What we see, to put it bluntly, is a situation where those tasked with protecting the people have become part of an organized criminal scheme that actively abuse the people. The state seems, at first glance, to be strong, but the government's inability to fully control its own institutions, its recourse to violence as governance, and its legitimacy deficit means that the current political situation remains highly precarious.

## Methodology

The report is based on data extracted from a range of different sources in Ethiopia, from August - December 2024. This includes in-depth interviews with opposition politicians, activists, religious leaders, NGO representatives, political observers, and ordinary people. Due to security concerns, most of these sources are not mentioned by name. I have visited a few areas of the region, but the as the security situation restricted my movements, and I had to conduct phone interviews and conversations with interlocutors visiting the capital, Addis Ababa. Other sources include official documents, reports from human rights organizations – both local and international – media and social media reports, statements given by relevant actors involved, etc.

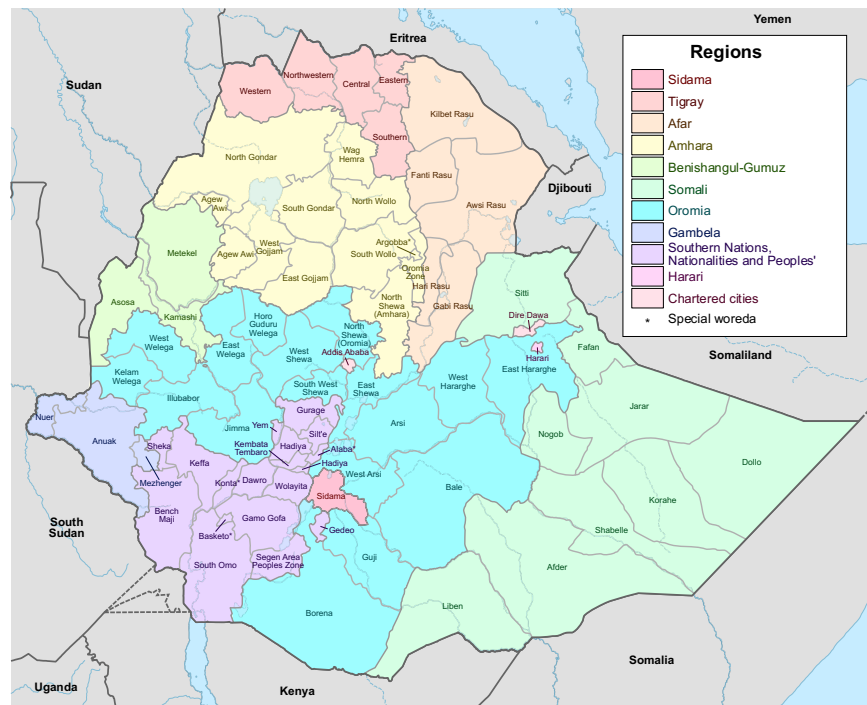
Conducting research for and writing this report has been methodologically challenging. With a complete media-blackout (and often internet-blackout) in the areas affected by the insurgency, detailed information remains scarce. Available data are often fragmented and incomplete, and some information comes from sources that cannot be characterized as neutral. It has therefore been difficult to independently verify some of the information given. These challenges have been mitigated by carefully cross-checking and triangulating different sources, and where independent verification has been impossible, this will be pointed out in the report. I have over two decades of research experience in Ethiopia and having lived in the Oromo region for six years, and with language proficiency in *Afaan Oromo*, I am well-positioned to critically analyze the current situation in Ethiopia, as well as to situate this in relation to important socio-cultural undercurrents which foreign observers fail to capture and often ignore.

## Outline

The report is, in addition to this introduction, divided into four main sections. The first provides a short overview of the Oromo ethnic group and Oromia as a region, detailing its demographic, socio-cultural, and religious makeup. It also discusses the importance of the Oromo ethno-nationalist movement and gives an overview of the current Oromo political landscape. The second section accounts for the recent political and socio-economic developments in Ethiopia, paying attention to post-2018 dynamics. The third section discusses the current security situation in Oromia, zooming in on the ongoing insurgency and detailing the impacts this have had on the civilian population and attempts made and prospects for peaceful solutions. The fourth section is devoted to human rights situation in Oromia, analyzing the shrinking of political space, mechanisms of surveillance and control, the role of different security-and law-enforcement agencies in silencing of opposition. The section also gives an overview of different forms of human rights abuses, focusing on unlawful imprisonment, extra-judicial killings, abductions, torture, and gender-based violence (GBV).

## 2. Background

Historical Ethiopia, or Abyssinia as it was referred to, was a Christian kingdom located in the northern highlands. It is often said to have a 3000-year long history, yet modern Ethiopia with its current borders is a more recent entity – and a result of Emperor Menelik’s (often violent) campaigns into the south at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. These campaigns led to the incorporation of a variety of different ethnic and religious groups, including the Oromo. The Orthodox Christian Amhara remained the dominant group, and the non-Christian and Muslim peoples of the south were both despised and feared by the rulers. Amhara dominance also meant that Ethiopia was perceived through a center-periphery perspective which focused on the Christian highland center, and which overlooked the different peoples in the “periphery.” This has gradually changed and there is currently an increased awareness of the country’s ethnic and religious plurality. Today’s Ethiopia has an estimated population of 130 million, with around 80 ethnic groups. Approximately ca. 30 percent are Muslims, ca. 43 percent Orthodox Christians, and possibly ca. 25 percent Protestant Christians.<sup>2</sup>



Map 1: Regions of Ethiopia

<sup>2</sup> The last national census was in 2007, and these numbers may not be accurate: “The 2007 Census.” *Central Statistical Agency*, 2008. <http://www.csa.gov.et/census-report/population-projections/category/368-population-projection-2007-2037> (accessed February 25, 2020).



## The Oromo and Oromia

The Oromo are Ethiopia's largest ethnic group and with a population of ca. 38 million they count for 30 percent of the country's total population.<sup>3</sup> Oromia is the largest of the regional states of Ethiopia, both in terms of population and size, covering a total of approx. 290,000 sq.km. Oromia is geographical diverse with mountain ranges, fertile agricultural land, and arid lowland areas. The region is divided into 21 administrative zones and three special zones. The Oromo people constitute the vast majority of the region, whereas the largest minority group is the Amhara (ca. 7 percent, according to the 2007 census).<sup>4</sup> Oromia's capital is Addis Ababa (or *Finfinne*, as it is called in *Afaan Oromo*) which is also the seat for the region's administration. The Regional Government is currently controlled by the PP and the president of the region is Shimeles Abdisa (2019-present).



**Map 2: Zones of Oromia (additional zones have been added in recent years)**

The Oromo are religiously heterogeneous where approximately 50 percent are Muslim, 27 percent Orthodox Christian, 18 percent Protestant Christian, and four percent *Waqeffana* (the traditional Oromo religion).<sup>5</sup> The vast majority of Oromo Muslims are found in the eastern parts of the region,

<sup>3</sup> "The 2007 Census," 2008, *op. cit.*

<sup>4</sup> The region is also home to a number of smaller ethnic minorities, such as the Gedeo, Gurage, Sidama, Somali, Wolayta, and Tigray.

<sup>5</sup> "The 2007 Census," 2008, *op. cit.*

the majority of Orthodox Christians are found in the central areas, while Protestant Christians dominate the western parts. The Oromo people are divided into a number of branches, including the Borana, Macha, Tulama, Guji, Arsi, Karrayu, Afran Qallu, and Ittu. Some of these branch names correspond to administrative zones in Oromia, such as Borana, Guji, and Arsi. The Macha inhabits Wollega, Illubabor, Jimma, and parts of West Shoa, whereas the Tulama are found in the rest of Shoa. The Karrayu, Afran Qallu, and Ittu are located to East and West Hararge zones.

## Oromo Ethno-nationalism

The Oromo's self-understanding and identity are shaped by a strong Oromo ethno-nationalist movement. Oromo ethno-nationalism takes as its point of departure the enforced incorporation of the Oromo during the campaigns of Emperor Menelik in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Emerging in the 1960s, Oromo ethno-nationalism was first represented by the Macha Tulama Welfare Association (MTWA). In the early 1970s, Oromo ethno-nationalist ideas emerged among students at Addis Ababa University, leading to the establishment of the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) in 1976. OLF's ideological premise was that the Oromo were subject to internal colonization by the Ethiopian state and its goal was secession from Ethiopia and "the establishment of the people's democratic republic of Oromia."<sup>6</sup> The OLF waged an armed struggle against the Derg until 1991, when it joined the Transitional Government of Ethiopia (TGE). OLF was until then a rather unknown movement, but became, nearly overnight, hugely popular among the Oromo after 1991. Despite its popularity, OLF was unable to capitalize on and manage this sudden support. Political and military pressure from the dominant Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) led the OLF to withdraw from TGE and resume its armed struggle in June 1992. The organization was significantly weakened militarily towards the end of the 1990s, and moved its headquarter to Asmara, Eritrea, in 2000. From there, it launched sporadic military operations in Ethiopia, but internal conflict severely impacted the organization's capacity.

With the OLF exiled, Oromo ethno-nationalism was furthered and institutionalized by the Oromo People's Democratic Organization (OPDO).<sup>7</sup> Established in 1988 by the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), the OPDO became a coalition partner of the EPRDF and the ruling party's sanctioned "alternative" to OLF.<sup>8</sup> While it never gained much support among the Oromo, the OPDO oversaw the establishment of Oromia as a regional state, the introduction of the Oromo language as the instructional language in the schools, and the promotion of Oromo culture. It thus managed – somewhat unintended – to continue and strengthen Oromo ethno-nationalism, albeit in a state-sanctioned form.

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<sup>6</sup> Oromo Liberation Front: *Political Program*, art. VI.A, Unpublished, June 1976.

<sup>7</sup> The OPDO was in 2018 renamed to Oromo Democratic Party (ODP) and was abolished with the formation of the PP in 2019.

<sup>8</sup> EPRDF was a coalition of ethnic-based, and in addition to the TPLF and OPDO, it consisted of the Amhara National Democratic Movement (ANDM) and the Southern Ethiopian People's Democratic Movement (SEPDM). On the establishment of EPRDF and the development of structures of governance and control in post-1991 Ethiopia, see Vaughan, Sarah and Kjetil Tronvoll. *The Culture of Power in Contemporary Ethiopian Political Life*. Stockholm: Sida, 2003.

## The Oromo Political Landscape

While Oromo politics during the EPRDF era were dominated by the OPDO, the first Oromo opposition party was the Oromo National Congress (ONC) established in 1996 by Merera Gudina, a professor of political science at Addis Ababa University. ONC changed its name to Oromo People's Congress (OPC) after the elections in 2005, before merging with the Oromo Federalist Democratic Movement (OFDM) and becoming the Oromo Federalist Congress (OFC). OFC is still led by Merera Gudina and the party has participated in some elections and boycotted others.

After decades of armed struggle, OLF made an agreement with the Abiy Ahmed government in 2018, returned from exile, and was registered as a legal political party in November 2019. However, internal disagreements soon broke out between the party's chairperson, Dawud Ibsa, and an opposing faction led by Ararso Biqila, the deputy chairperson. A dispute about the ownership of the party ensued, involving the National Election Board of Ethiopia (NEBE) and the court system. It is today unclear who formally owns OLF. The OLF also brought ca. 1,500 OLF fighters when it returned in 2018, and some of these, as I will return to in detail below, severed ties with the OLF party and continued an armed struggle against the government.

Similar to Ethiopia's, general political dynamics, Oromo politics revolve around ethnic identity, and all Oromo opposition parties view themselves as defenders of Oromo rights and champions of self-determination in Oromia. What self-determination actually means may be vague, yet intrinsic to this is emphasis on self-governance of Oromia and control over the region's resources: "It is all about Oromo first, and then Ethiopia. If we are able to govern and build Oromia, then we can build Ethiopia."<sup>9</sup> OLF is the only party who still keeps independence of Oromia as a political option.<sup>10</sup>

The key terms used repeatedly by Oromo politicians are *blisumma* (freedom) and *qabso Oromo* (the Oromo struggle), terms that have followed the Oromo ethno-nationalist movement from the time of the Imperial Government when the struggle was about liberation from serfdom and feudal oppression and when the goal was an independent Oromia. The continued use of these concepts in a new and different political context is a clear reminder of the salience of the past in Oromo politics. Although one talks about building a new future, this future is constantly mirrored in a history of Oromo suppression and suffering and embedded in a distinct Oromo victimology. The Oromo struggle thus is, as expressed by one interlocutor a few years ago: "to seek freedom from that past."<sup>11</sup>

Oromo opposition parties have always been weak in terms of organizational structure, many lack any clear and detailed party programs, and they have largely been unsuccessful in disseminating their policies among the electorate. Individual party leaders are therefore often more important than the parties themselves and these leaders' main constituency tend to be their home areas and the branch of Oromo they belong to. Merera Gudina's stronghold is, for example, his hometown Ambo (western Shoa). An individual politician or activists thus becomes the embodiment of the party's policy and ideology, which are made explicit through that person's statements. This is

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<sup>9</sup> Interview, Oromo elder, Robe, February 19, 2020.

<sup>10</sup> Interview, senior OLF official, Addis Ababa, December 1, 2024.

<sup>11</sup> Interview, Oromo youth activist, Dirre Dawa, February 10, 2020.

further augmented by the rather short and imperfect history of party politics and elections in Ethiopia.

### 3. Political Situation

Emperor Haile Selassie, Ethiopia's last emperor, was overthrown during the 1974 Revolution, and the military Marxist Derg government ruled until 1991. The Derg was in turn toppled by different ethnic-based liberation fronts, of which (TPLF) and the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) were the dominant. EPLF secured independence for Eritrea and TPLF formed the EPRDF coalition that governed Ethiopia until the arrival of Abiy Ahmed in 2018. In contrast to Ethiopia's previous governments, which emphasized national unity under a centralist state, the EPRDF opted for a more decentralized structure and introduced what has been known as ethnic federalism, dividing the country into a number of regional states based on assumed ethno-linguistic boundaries.<sup>12</sup> Aimed at ending the dominance of the Amhara and establishing equal rights for Ethiopia's many ethnic groups, the new arrangement contributed to politicize ethnic identity and boundaries.

#### The Oromo Protests and the *Qeerroo*

The Oromo protests erupted among youth across Oromia in April 2014, and while triggered by the proposed new Addis Ababa and Surrounding Masterplan, they were also a response to the EPRDF's decades-long repressive policies. The first round of protests was brutally crushed, but new protests resumed in November 2015. The authorities' response to the protests continued to be heavy-handed, resulting in an unknown number of casualties. The protesters continued nevertheless unabated and soon they called for the overthrow of the government.

The protests were both a spontaneous movement as well as a product of Oromo political activism. The OLF had in the mid-2000s attempted to engage youth in resisting the government, using the word *Qeerreensaa*, and in 2011, it launched an underground network called "*Qeerroo Blisumma Oromia*" (Oromo Youth Liberation Movement). The impacts of these efforts were however limited.<sup>13</sup> Instead, the protests were grassroot-led movement and a result of discontent among the Oromo youth. The protesters soon adopted the word *Qeerroo*, meaning youth; an unmarried person between 20 and 36.<sup>14</sup> The US-based Oromo activist, Jawar Mohammed, played an important role in coordinating the protests, using Facebook and other social media platforms. He was moreover instrumental in establishing the Oromo Media Network (OMN), which also cemented his role as the *Abba Qeerroo* – the father of the *Qeerroo* – and a leading Oromo politician.<sup>15</sup> Protests also spread to the Amhara region in 2016, led by the *Fano* – a decentralized Amhara movement similar to the *Qeerroo*.

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<sup>13</sup> Interview, Oromo activist, Addis Ababa, November 14, 2024. This network also involved *Jaal* Maro, the leader of Oromo Liberation Army (OLA). See "Who is Kumsa Diriba?" *RET1 News*, December 2, 2018. <https://medium.com/ret1-news-press/who-is-kumsa-diriba-104cdcf91f9e> (accessed March 22, 2020).

<sup>14</sup> Mulualem Daba Tola. "'Qeerroo fi Qarree': The Engine of Current Transition in Ethiopia Politics." *International Journal of Scientific and Research Publications*, 9, 5, 2019: 534-343.

<sup>15</sup> Østebø, Terje. "Analyses: The Role of the Qeerroo in Future Oromo Politics." *Addis Standard*, May 26, 2020. <https://addisstandard.com/analysis-the-role-of-the-qeerroo-in-future-oromo-politics/> (accessed December 12, 2020).

The protests and the emergence of young Oromo activists signaled a generational shift in Oromo politics, which furthered the marginalization of organizations like OLF.<sup>16</sup> According to one interlocutor: “Until then, we young people had been looking to the seniors, to OLF, for advice. We as young people didn’t think we could do something on our own.” The new generation sidelined OLF and the “old guys were becoming increasingly irrelevant.”<sup>17</sup>

Although the government responded violently to the protests, it struggled to completely crush them. It declared two rounds of state of emergency – the first in October 2016 after the so-called *Irreecha* incident,<sup>18</sup> and the second in February 2018 when Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn resigned. His resignation was an explicit pronouncement of the government’s inability to quell the protests.

## The Arrival of Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed

Hailemariam Desalegn was prime minister Meles Zenawi’s designated successor and assumed power when Meles Zenawi died in 2012. In addition to the challenge posed by the Oromo protests, the new prime minister also had to deal with challenges coming from within the EPRDF coalition. Within the OPDO, a new generation of leaders emerged. Key figures here were Lemma Megersa, the new chairperson of OPDO and his deputy Abiy Ahmed. Referred to as Team Lemma, the two soon became increasingly critical of the government’s treatment of the protesters and Lemma Megersa promised to address what he called the legitimate concerns of the youth. This soon earned Team Lemma significant support among the Oromo protesters and activists. While Prime Minister Meles Zenawi had held a tight grip on power and on EPRDF until his death in 2012, the coalition’s internal cohesion gradually weakened during Hailemariam Desalegn’s tenure. Together with other parties, Team Lemma started to challenge TPLF’s hegemony within EPRDF and succeeded in having Abiy Ahmed elected as the chairperson of EPRDF and consequently Ethiopia’s new prime minister in April 2018.

Abiy Ahmed quickly promised political reforms and a new path towards democracy. This made him widely popular across Ethiopia, producing what has been referred to as a particular “Abiymania.”<sup>19</sup> The new prime minister also generated strong expectations among the Oromo who celebrated Abiy Ahmed as Ethiopia’s first Oromo prime minister. He also brought home exile political organizations and invited them to participate in the political process. This included, as already noted, the return of the OLF. Promises of political reform and the peace agreement made with Eritrea were major reasons that earned Abiy Ahmed the Nobel Peace Prize in 2019.

It soon became evident, however, that his promises were empty and peace with Eritrea turned out to be evasive. This, and continued difficult socio-economic conditions, with continued high unemployment and increasing inflation, produced a sense of disappointment in the expected “quick

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<sup>16</sup> Interview, Jawar Mohammed, Oslo, January 3, 2025.

<sup>17</sup> Interview, Oromo activist, Addis Ababa, October 11, 2024.

<sup>18</sup> During the annual Oromo *Irreecha* thanksgiving ceremony in Bishoftu on October 2, 2016, the security forces tried to disperse protestors with tear gas, resulting in a stampede. According to government sources 55 people died, but other sources put the death toll much higher, as many as 500.

<sup>19</sup> “Ethiopians are Going Wild for Abiy Ahmed.” *The Economist*, August 18, 2018.

<https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2018/08/18/ethiopians-are-going-wild-for-abiy-ahmed> (accessed March 2, 2020).

fix” the new prime minister would deliver. Foreign and Ethiopian observers moreover questioned the apparent lack of a roadmap toward a peaceful, more democratic Ethiopia.

## De-democratization

Abiy Ahmed assumed power at a time when the political situation was unpredictable and brittle. In Oromia, much of the governing structures at the grassroots had been destroyed during the protests and the *Qeerroo* had in many places replaced local administrations, “acting largely like shadow-governments”<sup>20</sup> In other areas “the local authorities had to consult with the *Qeerroo* when they make decisions.”<sup>21</sup> In his effort to restore governing structures and solidify his power, Abiy Ahmed dug up EPRDF’s playbook and implemented the well-rehearsed policies of cooption. *Qeerroo* leaders became integrated in the local administrations, often given position within youth and sports offices – and with steady salary. Others were given access to economic resources which enabled them to open different businesses.<sup>22</sup>

At the more central level, Abiy Ahmed put much focus on reducing the TPLF over-sized dominance of the government, which culminated with the abolition of the EPRDF and the establishment of the new unitary Prosperity Party (PP) in December 2019. While the PP to a certain extent was a continuation of the EPRDF, the establishment of a new party arguably reflected Abiy Ahmed’s attempts to maintain and further centralize power.

Disappointment over Abiy Ahmed gradually turned into skepticism and then into opposition. Oromo politicians and activists accused him of wanting to abolish the ethnic federal system and his close ally Lemma Megersa went public and criticized Abiy Ahmed’s pan-Ethiopian and unitary discourse.<sup>23</sup> Jawar Mohammed, who had returned to Ethiopia in the summer of 2018 in support of Abiy Ahmed, joined OFC in late 2019 and became the most outspoken critic of the prime minister.

These developments also produced an increasing volatile situation and led to the shrinking of political space. In August 2020, Lemma Megersa was sacked from his position as Ministry of Defense and expelled from PP.<sup>24</sup> Abiy Ahmed also took action towards Jawar Mohammed by attempting to remove his security detail in October 2019. Seeing this as a first step towards a possible assassination, Jawar Mohammed alerted his Facebook followers within minutes, and soon protesters rushed to protect him and riots broke out in the Oromia region, causing the destruction of property and internal displacement of thousands of people.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Focus-group interview, Dirre Dawa, February 9, 2020.

<sup>21</sup> Interview, students at Haramaya University, February 11, 2020; “Ethiopia: Growing Uncertainty Marks Abiy’s First Year in Power.” *Human Rights Watch*, April 2, 2019. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/04/02/ethiopia-growing-uncertainty-marks-abiy-first-year-power#> (accessed March 5, 2020).

<sup>22</sup> Interview, *Qeerroo* leader, Robe, February 15, 2020.

<sup>23</sup> Salem Solomon. “Efforts to End Ethiopia’s Ruling Party Draw Criticism from Within.” *VOA*, December 4, 2019. <https://www.voanews.com/africa/efforts-end-ethiopia-ruling-party-draw-criticism-within> (accessed March 28, 2020).

<sup>24</sup> Elias Meseret. “Ethiopia’s Prime Minister Fires Defense Minister.” *AP News*, August 20, 2020. <https://apnews.com/article/race-and-ethnicity-africa-c202a0d69052f497f2c881caef3bb097> (accessed January 4, 2021).

<sup>25</sup> “Ethiopia: Justice Needed for Deadly October Violence.” *Human Rights Watch*, April 1, 2020. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/04/01/ethiopia-justice-needed-deadly-october-violence> (accessed April 1, 2020);

Developments took another dramatic turn in June-July 2020. On the evening of June 29, the widely popular Oromo singer and activist Hachalu Hundessa was found dead in the outskirts of Addis Ababa, assassinated by unknown assailants. His death immediately caused widespread violence in towns in southeastern Oromia. The Ethiopian Human Rights Commission (EHRC) reported that 123 people were killed, while the Oromia regional police claimed the number to be at least 239, with over 10,000 people displaced.<sup>26</sup> The day after, Jawar Mohammed, Bekele Garba the deputy chairperson of OFC, and others were arrested following skirmishes between them and security forces in Addis Ababa.

Abiy Ahmed's determination to keep power became apparent during the national and regional elections. These elections were scheduled for May 2020, and Oromo opposition parties formed the "Coalition for Democratic Federalism" in January 2020. The members of the coalition agreed to not field candidates in the same constituency, to ensure free and fair elections, to coordinate material and financial resources during election campaigns, and aimed at forming a regional coalition government in Oromia.<sup>27</sup> However, in early 2020, NEBE announced that the elections would be scheduled to August 2020 due to lack of preparations, and in March Abiy Ahmed decided to postpone the elections indefinitely, citing the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>28</sup>

Elections were finally scheduled for June and September 2021. While a few opposition parties agreed to participate, the OFC and OLF declared in March 2021 that they would boycott the elections, due to arrests of their leaders and closure of their offices.<sup>29</sup> Because of continued insecurity, elections were not held in more than 100 of the 547 constituencies. Largely uncontested, Abiy Ahmed's PP won with "a landslide," taking 410 of the 436 seats in the national parliament.<sup>30</sup> Leaders of a few opposition parties, like the Ethiopians Citizens for Social Justice and the National Movement of Amhara (NaMa) were given minister positions in the cabinet. Freedom House characterized the elections as not fair gave them one point out of four.<sup>31</sup>

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Hayalnes Gezahegn and Zecharias Zelalem. "Tragedy Struck Ethiopia, Again: 'We are Dealing with a Different Scenario.'" *Addis Standard*, October 28, 2019. <http://addisstandard.com/analysis-tragedy-struck-ethiopia-again-we-are-dealing-with-a-different-scenario/> (accessed March 17, 2020).

<sup>26</sup> Østebø, Terje, et. al. *Religion, Ethnicity, and Charges of Extremism: The Dynamics of Inter-Communal Violence in Ethiopia*. Brussels: European Institute of Peace, 2021. <https://www.eip.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Ostebø-et-al-2021-Religion-ethnicity-and-charges-of-Extremism-in-Ethiopia-final.pdf> (accessed, November 23, 2024);

"Ethiopia Arrests Suspects over Haacaaluu Hundeesaa Killing." *Aljazeera*, July 10, 2020.

<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/07/10/ethiopia-arrests-suspects-over-haacaaluu-hundeessaa-killing/> (accessed October 2, 2020); Ermias Tasfaye. "Chaos in the Rift: A Microcosm of Ethiopia's Brutal Polarization." *Ethiopia Insight*, January 5, 2021. <https://www.ethiopia-insight.com/2021/01/05/chaos-in-the-rift-a-microcosm-of-ethiopias-brutal-polarization/> (accessed January 6, 2021).

<sup>27</sup> Interview, Jawar Mohammed, Addis Ababa, February 18, 2020. Another – and now defunct – party was the Oromo National Party (ONC) led by Kemal Galchu, an officer in the Ethiopian army who defected and joined OLF in 2006 and who also returned to Ethiopia in 2018.

<sup>28</sup> "Press Statement on the decision it passed based on its analysis of the challenges posed by Coronavirus (COVID-19) on the 2020 elections operational plan and timetable." *National Election Board of Ethiopia*, April 1, 2020.

<sup>29</sup> Aly Verjee. "Why Ethiopia's 2021 Elections Matter." *United States Institute of Peace*, June 17, 2021. <https://www.usip.org/publications/2021/06/why-ethiopias-2021-elections-matter> (accessed November 29, 2024).

<sup>30</sup> "Ethiopia: Abiy's Prosperity Party wins landslide election victory." *Al Jazeera*, July 10, 2021. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/7/10/ethiopias-ruling-party-wins-national-election-in-landslide> (accessed November 29, 2024).

<sup>31</sup> "Ethiopia," *Freedom House Annual Report*, 2024, *op. cit.*



The Oromo opposition had been negative to postponing the elections yet were cautious in criticizing the government.<sup>32</sup> In a statement issued by the OLF and OFC, the parties advised against using the pandemic as a “pretext to further narrow the fragile political space” and urged the government to decide on a date for the elections.<sup>33</sup> The TPLF, on the other hand, voiced strong opposition to the decision. When the EPRDF coalition was abolished, TPLF had refused to join the PP, and its leadership retreated to the Tigray region. In September 2020, TPLF decided to hold regional elections in Tigray, winning nearly 100 percent of the vote. Tensions between Abiy Ahmed and the TPLF had gradually deteriorated during 2020 and soared even more after these elections. Exchanges between the federal government and the regional government in Tigray became increasingly hostile, and in early November 2020, a civil war broke out. This has so far been the bloodiest conflict in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, where the war and its associated humanitarian crisis cost the lives of an estimated 600,000 people.<sup>34</sup>

The post-war period saw increased securitization with a coercive mode of governance throughout the country. Political power became increasingly personalized in Abiy Ahmed, and the ruling PP party and state institutions consequently became irrelevant, with key decisions singlehandedly made by the prime minister himself. Abiy Ahmed has also proved to be a shrewd palace-politician ensuring loyalty through shifting alliances and a corrupt patron-client system.

## Prosperity and Poverty

Abiy Ahmed has been characterized as an enigma and it is difficult to fully comprehend his policies – which often appear ad-hoc and idiosyncratic.<sup>35</sup> As a practicing Pentecostal Christian he claims to have divine calling and believe that he is destined to lead Ethiopia into a future of prosperity. His religious worldview seems to be a mix of ideas stemming from the so-called prosperity gospel and positive thinking teachings.<sup>36</sup>

The latter is arguably crucial for the prime minister’s focus on what can be called the “aesthetics of prosperity.” He has launched a number of large projects aimed at the beautification of the capital and other major cities. These include large parks and green areas, the construction of high-end apartment complexes, and luxury resorts. One major project the Chaka Project in Addis Ababa’s Yeka Hills – which covers 500 hectares and includes a new palace for the prime minister as well as three artificial lakes, waterfalls, and luxury hotels. The price tag is estimated to be \$15 billion.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Phone interview, Jawar Mohammed, April 2, 2020.

<sup>33</sup> “Joint statement of the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) and Oromo Federalist Congress (OFC) on #COVID 19 & Postponement of the 2020 Ethiopian Election.” *Addis Standard*, April 2, 2020. <https://addisstandard.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/OLF-OFC-joint-statement-.pdf> (accessed April 3, 2020);

<sup>34</sup> “Conflict in Ethiopia.” *Global Conflict Tracker*, December 19, 2023. <https://www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/conflict-ethiopia> (accessed December 8, 2024).

<sup>35</sup> Gardner, Tom. *The Abiy Project: God, Power and War in the New Ethiopia*. London: Hurst, 2024.

<sup>36</sup> He has claimed that his mother prophesized that he would become Ethiopia’s seventh king. For more details, see Østebø, Terje. “The Religion of Ethiopia’s Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed: Pentecostalism, Prosperity Gospel, and the Power of Positive Thinking.” Forthcoming in *Journal of Modern African Studies*.

<sup>37</sup> “Addis Ababa ‘Beautifying Sheger’ River Development Project.” *African Development Bank Group*, 17 November 2022. <https://www.afdb.org/en/news-and-events/addis-ababa-beautifying-sheger-river-development-project-56625> (accessed 12 November 2023); York, Geoffrey. “A New Palace for Ethiopia’s Prime Minister Brings Evictions and Dissent in a Country Beset by Hunger and War.” *The Globe and the Mail*, December 8, 2023.

The most recent major project is the Corridor Development Project, which entails the construction of broad profuse boulevards with wide sidewalks and bike lanes – and lined with new shiny, opulent streetlights and palm trees lit with strips of LED lights. Tall buildings are also lit with similar lights and owners have been forced to paint the buildings in white and grey. The first phase was finalized in June 2024 and the second started in October. The price tag on the project’s first phase was \$550 million (for 48 kilometers), while the cost of the second phase is yet to be known.<sup>38</sup>

The Corridor Development Project has largely been ignored by foreign observers and the media – in spite of the severe impacts it has on people’s livelihoods. The first phase led to the demolition of Piazza while the second phase erased Kazainces – two of Addis Ababa most historical neighborhoods. Tens of thousands of people were forcefully evicted, some only given a few days notice. Although some people were given alternative housing, many were not, and those receiving new housing found them lacking basic utilities like water and electricity.

The corridor project was in October 2024 replicated across the country, with sidewalks and bike lanes to be built in all cities and small towns – with similar dramatic impacts. As all businesses in Ethiopian towns are located along the main road, destroying houses along these roads for the purpose of building corridors means that merchants in each of these towns lose their shops and livelihood. Little or no compensation is given to the owners.

The details of how the Corridor Development Project and other similar “vanity projects” are funded remain unclear. While some of this may be covered by foreign aid, a significant portion is to come from domestic revenues. The initial 2024-2025 national budget was increased with 21 percent from the year before, and already in November 2024, only four months into the new budget year, the parliament approved a 56 percent (\$4.8 billion) increment.<sup>39</sup> About \$2.3 billion was to be covered by domestic taxes, which seems to come in addition to the government’s existing goal of raising revenues from ca. \$5 billion to \$12 billion.<sup>40</sup>

It is difficult to exaggerate the impact of tax increases which comes at a time when a worsening economic situation already had severely affected people’s livelihood. Ethiopia was like the rest of the world affected by economic recession caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, yet the cost associated with the Tigray conflict exacerbated the situation. Inflation reached over 33 percent in

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<https://www.theglobeandmail.com/world/article-new-palace-for-ethiopian-pm-brings-evictions-and-dissent/> (accessed 15 January 2024).

<sup>38</sup> “Are Addis Ababa’s Corridor Development Projects Worth the Cost?” *Yekatit Insights*, September 27, 2024. <https://medium.com/@Yekatitinsights/are-addis-ababas-corridor-development-projects-worth-the-cost-2e76277ad7d9> (accessed December 8, 2024).

<sup>39</sup> “Ethiopia’s parliament approves extra \$4.8 bln spending in 2024/25.” *Reuters*, November 26, 2024. <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/ethiopias-parliament-approves-extra-48-bln-spending-202425-2024-11-26/> (accessed December 8, 2024).

<sup>40</sup> “Lawmakers Approve Ethiopia’s 282 billion Birr Tax Increase to Fund Supplementary Budget.” *Birr Metrics*, November 26, 2024. <https://birrmetrics.com/lawmakers-approve-ethiopias-282-billion-birr-tax-increase-to-fund-supplementary-budget/> (accessed December 8, 2024); Agbetiloye, Adekunle. “Ethiopia Revises Revenue Goal to #12.2 billion, Adding Fresh Tax Measures,” *Business Insider Africa*, October 31, 2024. <https://africa.businessinsider.com/local/markets/ethiopia-revises-revenue-goal-to-dollar125-billion-adding-fresh-tax-measures/b94t8t4> (accessed January 9, 2025).

2023,<sup>41</sup> and while the government claims that it dropped to 17 percent, IMF projected that the average inflation rate for 2024 would be 24 percent.<sup>42</sup> Inflation has further contributed to increased food insecurity and a poverty rate at ca. 69 percent, and the World Bank estimated that an additional 10 million people would fall into poverty during 2024 due to inflation.<sup>43</sup> The floating of the Ethiopian currency at the end of July caused the birr to drop 100 percent in only ten days.<sup>44</sup>

A new tax proclamation issued by the Oromia government in 2024 allegedly increased taxes between 300 and 1000 percent. The proclamation also detailed different types of mandatory fees and “volunteer contributions” for rural residents, which included payment for militias, contributions to road construction, feeding of students, and national defense.<sup>45</sup> While this alone has created a nearly unbearable situation for ordinary people,<sup>46</sup> rampant corruption has exacerbated conditions and has, as I will return to, created opportunities for government officials to abuse their positions in extracting resources from the people.

A worsening of the economy has the potential to further deteriorate an already tenuous political situation in Ethiopia. While the IMF and the World Bank has promised a \$20 billion aid package (over a period of ten years), continued budgetary deficit, rising external debt, and the lack of foreign investments represent significant challenges to the economy.<sup>47</sup> The government is determined to attract foreign investors, but armed insurgencies and instability have so driven these away.

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<sup>41</sup> “World Economic Outlook database: October 2023.” *International Monetary Fund*.

<https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/WEO/weo-database/2023/October/weo-report> (accessed December 8, 2024).

<sup>42</sup> “National Bank of Ethiopia Maintains Benchmark Rate at Inaugural MPC Meeting.” *Kenya Wall Street*, January 3, 2025. <https://kenyanwallstreet.com/national-bank-of-ethiopia-maintains-benchmark-rate-at-inaugural-mpc-meeting/> (January 5, 2025); “IMF Revises Ethiopia’s Inflation Forecast.” *Capital*, November 11, 2024.

<https://capitalethiopia.com/2024/11/11/imf-revises-ethiopias-inflation-forecast/>;

<sup>43</sup> “2024 Investment Climate Statements: Ethiopia.” *United States Department of State*, 2024.

<https://www.state.gov/reports/2024-investment-climate-statements/ethiopia/>; “Ethiopia faces pressure to increase public spending amid decreasing support for the poor.” *Capital*, September 2, 2024.

<https://capitalethiopia.com/2024/09/02/ethiopia-faces-pressure-to-increase-public-spending-amid-decreasing-support-for-the-poor/> (accessed December 8, 2024); “Briefing Note on the 2024 Multidimensional Poverty Index: Ethiopia.” *UNDP*, 2024. <https://hdr.undp.org/sites/default/files/Country-Profiles/MPI2024/ETH.pdf> (accessed January 5, 2025).

<sup>44</sup> Birr, or ETB, is the Ethiopian currency. “Ethiopian Birr Devaluation.” *PwC*, October 16, 2024.

<https://www.pwc.com/ke/en/blog/ethiopian-birr-devaluation.html#:~:text=One%20immediate%20consequence%20was%20the,devaluation%20in%20just%2010%20days>. (accessed December 8, 2024).

<sup>45</sup> “News: Residents of Oromia Region Report Growing Financial Burden from Mandatory Contributions for Militia, School Meal Programs.” *Addis Standard*, November 9, 2024. <https://addisstandard.com/residents-of-romia-region-report-growing-financial-burden-from-mandatory-contributions-for-militia-school-meal-programs/> (accessed December 15, 2024); text-exchange, OLF official, December 13, 2024; Jawar Mohammed’s Facebook posting, December 10, 2024.

<sup>46</sup> Abdi Biyenssa. “In-depth: Progress or Hardship?: How Ethiopia’s Economic Reforms Impact Low-income Households amid Inflation, Escalating Cost of Living.” *Addis Standard*, December 23, 2024.

<https://addisstandard.com/progress-or-hardship-how-ethiopias-economic-reforms-impact-low-income-households-amid-inflation-escalating-cost-of-living/> (accessed January 3, 2025).

<sup>47</sup> Jennifer Zabasajja and Fasika Tadesse. “Ethiopia Seeks to Shield Its People from Cost-of-Living Blow.” *Bloomberg News*, August 5, 2024. <https://www.bnnbloomberg.ca/investing/2024/08/05/ethiopia-seeks-to-shield-its-people-from-cost-of-living-blow/> (accessed December 8, 2024).

## 4. Security Situation

Insurgencies and armed conflict have been an integral part of Ethiopian modern history. Except for the insurgencies in Eritrea and Tigray, none of them posed any significant threats to the state, but armed conflict contributed to instability and made certain areas inaccessible. Historically, these conflict areas were relatively peripheral and clearly demarcated. Violent conflicts were few during the EPRDF period, and when they occurred, the government would quickly – and brutally – crush them and secure peace. The situation is distinctly different today, where large core areas of Ethiopia are inaccessible because of ongoing fighting – most prominently in Oromia and the Amhara region. While insecurity in Oromia is much related to the Oromo Liberation Army insurgency, the situation is exacerbated by inter-communal conflicts and by lack of law and order that has enabled the rise in violent crime. All this has contributed to a general state of unpredictable instability and many Western countries have warned their citizens from traveling to the region, and visitors from some countries need special travel insurance when leaving Addis Ababa. Many local Ethiopians are also weary of leaving the capital.

### The Oromo Liberation Army Insurgency

The Oromo Liberation Army (OLA) – or the *Waraanaa Bliisumaa Oromoo* – has its inception been called the military wing of the OLF. However, since OLF was an armed movement, OLA was an indistinguishable part of OLF. When the OLF renounced armed struggle and returned to Ethiopia in 2018, the plan was that its estimated 1,500 unarmed soldiers would become integrated in the government’s military structure – more specifically into the Oromia regional forces.<sup>48</sup> A small group of fighters already present in Wollega, western Oromia opposed this and vowed to continue armed struggle.

The leadership of OLF was reluctant to disavow the armed faction, and Dawud Ibsa, the chairperson of OLF, claimed that he had not agreed to disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration process (DDR) of these OLF fighters. Relations between him and the government gradually soured, and in December 2018, Abiy Ahmed reportedly called Dawud Ibsa, saying his patience was running out and that he was ready to deploy forces to crush the OLA fighters. Dawud Ibsa responded and said that “if you do this many will be killed, but there will be someone left and they would continue the fighting, and the conflict will last.” Abiy Ahmed refused to listen and sent his forces into Wollega. Accordingly, “this is how the conflict started.”<sup>49</sup>

After prolonged negotiations led by the Council of the Abba Gaddaa, Oromo activists, and intellectuals an agreement was reached in January 2019, and nearly 1,000 OLF fighters put down their arms.<sup>50</sup> A few fighters still refused, and as reports emerged that those who had demobilized

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<sup>48</sup> Interview, former senior OLF leader, Addis Ababa, November 30, 2024.

<sup>49</sup> Interview, senior OLF leader, Addis Ababa, December 13, 2024.

<sup>50</sup> Mumbere, Daniel. “Ethiopia's Oromia State Signs Ceasefire Deal with OLF.” *Africanews*, January 25, 2019. <https://www.africanews.com/2019/01/25/ethiopia-s-romia-state-signs-ceasefire-deal-with-olf/> (accessed March 21, 2020).

were imprisoned, tortured, poisoned, and even killed, a growing number of fighters joined the insurgents in the bush. This created a dilemma for OLF which sought to register as a legal party and participate in the upcoming elections, and in May 2019, Dawud Ibsa announced that OLF “disown[ed] any armed groups operating in its name.”<sup>51</sup> OLA, on the other hand, had already in April announced that it had severed all ties with the OLF organization, and in October 2019 it set up the “High Command of OLA.”<sup>52</sup>

For some time, OLA’s objectives remained rather ambiguous, and according to a now defunct webpage, its struggle was “an *act of self-defense* exercised by the Oromo people against successive Ethiopian governments, including the current one.” The struggle was moreover “linked to democratic freedoms” and OLA was “ready to contribute towards any meaningful peace effort, as it did in the past, to reach at a comprehensive settlement to bring peace to all peoples of the empire.”<sup>53</sup> In January 2023, OLA published a *Brief Political Manifesto* where it outlined its goals as fighting for the Oromo’s right to self-determination, including the people’s rights to “freely determine their political status...establish a responsive government through freely elected representatives... to secure the Oromo people's economic sovereignty...[and] to realize the socio-cultural rights of our people.” The latter was clarified as “respect for and full recognition of the Oromo language, culture, and history.”<sup>54</sup>

It is difficult to estimate the numerical strength of OLA. It early attracted new recruits among the *Qeerroo* who refused to be co-opted by Abiy Ahmed, and many joined OLA to avoid prison.<sup>55</sup> Oromo students who left universities outside Oromia due to ethnic violence during 2020 also flocked to the OLA.<sup>56</sup> A general lack of security and high youth unemployment have helped OLA to continuously attract new recruits, while the security forces’ clampdown on real and imagined OLF supporters has contributed further to youth joining the OLA. OLA has claimed that it has 80,000 fighters, while government sources put the number to 8,000. Other sources have put the number to more than several hundred thousand, but that seem too high.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> “News: OLF-SG Disavows Links with all Armed Groups, Agrees to Support Government Peace Process.” *Addis Standard*, May 29, 2019. <https://addisstandard.com/news-olf-sg-disavows-link-with-all-armed-groups-agrees-to-support-government-peace-efforts/> (accessed January 5, 2025).

<sup>52</sup> Ermias Tasfaye. “Two Steps Forward, One Step Back for Oromia?” *Ethiopia Insight*, June 7, 2019. <https://www.ethiopia-insight.com/2019/06/07/two-steps-forward-one-step-back-for-romia/> (accessed March 22, 2020); Zecharias Zelalem. “Failed Politics and Deception: Behind the Crisis in the Western and Southern Oromia.” *Addis Standard*, March 2020. <https://addisstandard.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Special-edition-March-2020-.pdf> (accessed March 21, 2020).

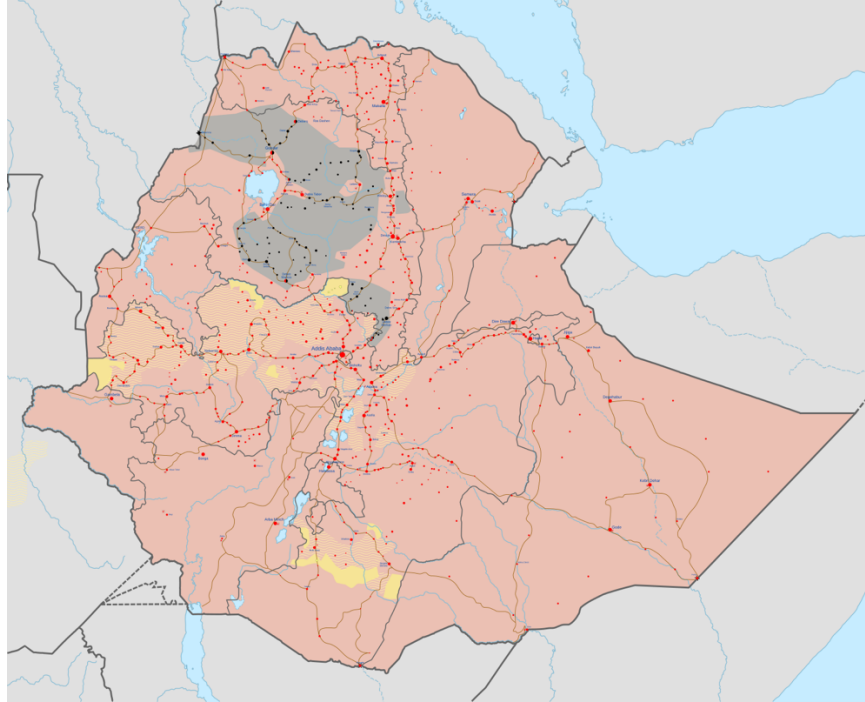
<sup>53</sup> See *Oromo Liberation Army*, <https://www.qondaalaa.com> (accessed March 22, 2020, now defunct).

<sup>54</sup> *A Brief Political Manifesto: From Armed Struggle to the Prospect of Peace*. The Oromo Liberation Front-Oromo Liberation Army, January 2023. <https://irbuu.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/olabriefmanifesto.pdf> (accessed November 30, 2024).

<sup>55</sup> Interview, university professor, Ambo, February 14, 2020.

<sup>56</sup> Interview, Dawud Ibsa, OLF Chairperson, Oslo, January 28, 2020.

<sup>57</sup> Interviews, Merera Gudina, OFC Chairperson, Addis Ababa, November 5, 2024; NGO worker, November 8, 2024.



**Map 3: OLA's areas of control/operation (marked with yellow/yellow shaded)**

As a guerilla movement, OLA has focused on attacking urban civilian government infrastructure. These attacks are of a hit-and-run nature, and it has not been able to control any towns for a longer period. OLA has also engaged the security forces, capturing much-needed armament.<sup>58</sup> Although there are some uncertainties as to the internal organization of the movement, the OLA seems structured with the already mentioned High Command at the top and is further divided into the Western Command (Wollega), Central Command (Shoa), and Southern Command (Guji). The leader of the High Command is *Jaal* (comrade) Maro who also is the leader of the Western Command.<sup>59</sup> *Jaal* Gammachu Aboye is the leader of the Southern Command, while the Central Command was led by *Jaal* Sagni Nagasa until he made an agreement with the government in November 2024 (see below).<sup>60</sup> The current leader of the Central Command is said to be *Jaal* Abdi Dhuga, yet the leadership situation seems to be fleeting.<sup>61</sup> While the OLA is said to be organized into commando units, platoons, etc. it is hard to determine how rigid these structures are, and it is reasonable to believe that the different units operate independent of each other, making OLA quite decentered and fractured. Lack of internal cohesion became evident in August-September 2024,

<sup>58</sup> Ermias Tasfaye. "OLF Integration Underway yet Tensions Remain." *Ethiopia Insight*, March 1, 2019. <https://www.ethiopia-insight.com/2019/03/01/olf-integration-underway-yet-tensions-remain/> (accessed March 22, 2020).

<sup>59</sup> His real name is Kumsa (Million) Diriba and he was deployed by OLF to Wollega in 2010. Interview, Dawud Ibsa, OLF Chairperson, December 13, 2024. See also "Who is Kumsa Diriba?" 2020, *op. cit.*

<sup>60</sup> *Jaal* Golicha Dhenge, commander of the Southern Front, surrendered already in 2021.

<sup>61</sup> "ABO-WBO mariin nagaa Mootummaan WBO Zoonii Giddugaleessaa waliin taa'u 'karoora fashale' ta'uu ibse" (OLF-OLA has stated that the peace talks with the government held with the Central Zone of the WBO have been declared a 'failed plan'). *BBC Afaan Oromoo*, October 10, 2024. <https://www.bbc.com/afaanoromoo/articles/c2lnwqxz9rgo> (accessed January 6, 2025).

when internal disagreement between *Jaal Sagni* and *Jaal Marro* turned violent, leading to an unknown number of casualties.

OLA grew in strength throughout 2019, with low-scale conflicts between OLA and security forces. OLA's main areas of operations were East Wollega, Qellem Wollega, and Horo Gudru zones in western Oromia, as well East Guji zone in the south. In 2020, OLA expanded its activities into West and North Shoa zones, which gradually became important areas of operations.<sup>62</sup> There were also reports of OLA presence in Bale zone in 2020, and from late 2023, OLA had established units in Arsi and West Arsi zones.

When the Tigray Defense Forces (TDF) approached Addis Ababa in August 2021, OLA announced it had made an alliance with TPLF aimed at overthrowing the Abiy Ahmed government. OLA forces moved towards the capital, yet political disagreements between the two groups and the government's counter-offensive against the TDF in December 2021, effectively ended the alliance. Ethiopian and Kenyan intelligence agencies claimed in August 2024 that OLA had established ties to the Somali al-Shabab group, something OLA denounced.<sup>63</sup> There have not been any further reports about such ties, and any connections between the two are unlikely.

Abiy Ahmed's government was from the beginning determined to crush the insurgency and in late 2018, large parts of Oromia were placed under what is called command post, effectively putting the areas under martial law and controlled by the security forces. Phone and internet connections were cut on regular basis, restricting information coming out of the conflict areas. The Ethiopian military launched a major offensive in early 2020 that left an unknown number of people dead – many of whom are civilians – and thousands displaced. There were also reports about indiscriminate killings of civilians by the armed forces.<sup>64</sup>

The government's approach turned increasingly violent after the assassination of Hachalu Hundessa in June 2020, but as the Ethiopian military moved its forces north when the Tigray war broke out in November 2020, OLA was able to expand its areas of operations. These expansions continued into 2021, and the government launched a new offensive in March that year. The conflict between OLA and government forces escalated in November 2022 and the government's use of drones caused a number of civilian casualties.<sup>65</sup>

The Ethiopian National Defense Forces (ENDF) has been the main actors combating the OLA, accompanied by the Ethiopian Federal Police, Oromia Police, and the Oromia Special Forces (OSF). OSF was established in 2008, and with the arrival of Abiy Ahmed, it was given a particular responsibility to secure peace in the region, seeing the number of special forces swelling to an

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<sup>62</sup> Interview, university professor, Ambo, February 14, 2020.

<sup>63</sup> "OLA denounces Ethiopian gov't allegations of Al-Shabaab ties as 'baseless.'" *Addis Standard*, August 23, 2024. <https://addisstandard.com/ola-denounces-ethiopian-govt-allegations-of-al-shabaab-ties-as-baseless/> (accessed December 8, 2024).

<sup>64</sup> Zecharias Zelalem. 2020, *op. cit.*

<sup>65</sup> "Ethiopia: Rampant Extrajudicial Killings and Targeted Attacks on Civilians in Oromia Regional State of Ethiopia." *Human Rights League of the Horn of Africa*: Written statement submitted to UN Human Rights Council, August 23, 2023. <https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/gen/g24/027/20/pdf/g2402720.pdf> (accessed December 4, 2024).

alleged 100,000.<sup>66</sup> Regional Special Forces in all regions were disbanded in 2023, and while there are some discussions whether OSF really ceased to exist, eyewitness accounts indicate that the ENDF currently is the dominating force fighting the insurgents.<sup>67</sup>

Fighting between OLA and government forces has continued throughout 2024, and ACLED-EPO reported that over 3,000 people had been killed in Oromia in 2024 due to the conflict.<sup>68</sup> Violence peaked in April 2024 but subsided in the following months. It intensified again in early fall 2024, when the Ethiopian military launched another offensive.<sup>69</sup> The conflict further escalated in October 2024, and has been particularly intense in North Shoa.<sup>70</sup> There are unconfirmed claims that part of the fighting was a result of different OLA factions seeking to prove their strength to the others.<sup>71</sup> Another interlocutor claimed that the OLA in North Shoa is poorly organized and lacking discipline, and conflict sometimes is a result of vendettas between different clans in the area.<sup>72</sup> Clashes between OLA and government forces also occurred in Wollega and Guji, leaving dozens of soldiers as well as local officials killed.<sup>73</sup>

Violence has since continued, and in early December 2024, the OLA reported that they killed the head of police in Sululta, North Shoa. This was part of a counter-offensive against the government, said to have inflicted heavy losses on the security forces.<sup>74</sup> The government has continued to use drones to fight the insurgents, and there are reports saying that it has targeted civilians.<sup>75</sup> On December 24, OLA announced the Operation *Chichoomina Kaayoo* (Commitment to the Goal) and reported about successful attacks on military forces and government institutions in Wollega, Shoa, Arsi, and Guji.<sup>76</sup>

## Civilians and a State of Insecurity

Nearly six years of fighting between the OLA and government forces has created a highly difficult situation for the population located in these conflict areas. As of June 2024, there was an estimated

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<sup>66</sup> *The Special Police in Ethiopia*. Brussels: The European Institute of Peace, 2021.

<sup>67</sup> Interview, senior leader of an Ethiopian Protestant church, Addis Ababa, November 23, 2024.

<sup>68</sup> “Unrest in Amhara and Oromia Threatens Ethiopia’s Stability,” 2024, *op. cit.*

<sup>69</sup> “Ethiopia’s Oromo rebels accuse govt forces of offensive.” *Ahram*, May 17, 2023.

<https://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsParis/501057.aspx>; Oromo Liberation Army OLF-OLA Statement, October 29, 2024. [https://x.com/OLF\\_OLA/status/1851229274465825125](https://x.com/OLF_OLA/status/1851229274465825125) (accessed December 8, 2024); “Unrest in Amhara and Oromia threatens Ethiopia’s stability.” *ACLED-EPO*, December 13, 2024.

<https://epo.acleddata.com/2024/12/13/unrest-in-amhara-and-oromia-threatens-ethiopias-stability/> (accessed December 17, 2024).

<sup>70</sup> Abdi Biyensa, 2024a, *op. cit.*; “EPO Monthly: November 2022.” *ACLED-EPO*, December 7, 2022.

<https://epo.acleddata.com/2022/12/07/epo-monthly-november-2022/> (accessed January 2, 2021).

<sup>71</sup> interview, Oromo activist, Addis Ababa, November 5, 2024.

<sup>72</sup> Interview, former OLF official, Addis Ababa, November 30, 2024.

<sup>73</sup> Oromo Liberation Front OLF-OLA Statement, November 1, 2024.

[https://x.com/OLF\\_OLA/status/1852404842364293486](https://x.com/OLF_OLA/status/1852404842364293486) (accessed December 1, 2024).

<sup>74</sup> Oromo Liberation Front OLF-OLA Statement, December 14, 2024.

[https://x.com/OLF\\_OLA/status/1867980961562186136](https://x.com/OLF_OLA/status/1867980961562186136); “News: Oromo Liberation Army Attack in Oromia’s Sululta District Leaves Two Dead, Including Police Chief.” *Addis Standard*, December 11, 2024.

<https://addisstandard.com/?p=47415> (accessed December 15, 2024).

<sup>75</sup> Milkessa Gemechu (former PP official) Statement, December 14, 2024.

<https://x.com/milkessam/status/1868104591583138040> (accessed December 15, 2024).

<sup>76</sup> See Oromo Liberation Front OLF-OLA Statement. [https://x.com/OLF\\_OLA](https://x.com/OLF_OLA) (accessed January 6, 2024).



1.1 million internally displaced people (IDP) in Oromia. The conflict has impeded access to basic services like healthcare and education, and in January 2025, UNICEF reported 3.2 million out-of-school children.<sup>77</sup> Local administrations are not functioning in areas under OLA control, and the insurgents have not been able to replace this with alternative governance structures nor to provide basic services.

While the population in these areas are, as I will return to below, subject to violence and abuse by government forces, they are similarly victims of violence committed by OLA.<sup>78</sup> A common phrase used by many of my interlocutors was that people might be “killed by government forces during the day and by OLA during the night.” The OLA fighters are dependent on the civilian population for survival and supplies are often forcefully extracted – which means that refusal to give OLA fighters food could have fatal consequences. This situation has created deep sentiments of fear, where people avoid talking about the killings, let alone who might be behind them.

A general lack of security has also paved the way for increased inter-communal violence with outright massacres of civilians, both Oromo and non-Oromo. The most violent incidents have taken place in Wollega, where, for example hundreds of Amhara civilians were killed in June 2022, and an additional 200 killed in incidents throughout the following months.<sup>79</sup> It has often been difficult to establish who the perpetrators are, and accusations have been directed towards OLA and the Amhara *Fano* forces.<sup>80</sup> The *Fano*, which, as noted, first emerged as a protest movement parallel to the *Qeerroo*, later developed into an Amhara paramilitary force which played a significant role in the Tigray war. *Fano* forces are present in Amhara dominated towns in western Oromia and have make incursion into areas of Oromia bordering the Amhara region.<sup>81</sup>

Inter-communal violence continued in 2023 and 2024, and ACLED-EPO reported that over 104 incidents took place in 2024 with *Fano* forces targeting Oromo civilians.<sup>82</sup> In March 2024, 27 Oromo were killed in Oromia Special Zone (in the Amhara region), reportedly by *Fano* forces, while nine Amhara were killed in Arsi in November, allegedly by OLA.<sup>83</sup> A particularly violent

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<sup>77</sup> “UNICEF Ethiopia Humanitarian Situation Report No. 9, October - November 2024.” *Reliefweb*, January 2, 2025. <https://reliefweb.int/report/ethiopia/unicef-ethiopia-humanitarian-situation-report-no-9-october-november-2024> (accessed January 6, 2025).

<sup>78</sup> “የሰብዓዊ መብት ጥሰት በኦሮሚያ ክልል” (Human Rights Violations in Oromia Region). *DW*, February 16, 2024. <https://www.dw.com/am/የሰብዓዊ-መብት-ጥሰት-በኦሮሚያ-ክልል/a-68360849> (accessed November 18, 2024).

<sup>79</sup> Ermias Tasfaye. “Amhara Civilians were Massacred in Tole, but Questions Remains.” *Ethiopia Insights*, July 2, 2022. <https://www.ethiopia-insight.com/2022/07/08/amhara-civilians-were-massacred-in-tole-but-questions-remain/> (accessed December 4, 2024).

<sup>80</sup> Government forces have in some cases been accused of retreating and allowing non-state actors to attack civilians. Hardly any independent investigations have been done to establish the facts. Ermias Tasfaye. “Peace in Ethiopia’s Oromia will only come through genuine self-rule.” *Ethiopia Insight*, January 8, 2024. <https://www.ethiopia-insight.com/2024/01/08/peace-in-ethiopias-oromia-will-only-come-through-genuine-self-rule/> (access November 29, 2024); Reportedly the highest number of civilian casualties since November 2022: “EPO Monthly: November 2022,” 2022, *op. cit.*

<sup>81</sup> As the *Fano* launched its own insurgency against the federal and the regional government in the Amhara region, its interventions in Oromia have decreased.

<sup>82</sup> “Ethiopia Weekly Update (10 December 2024).” *ACLED-EPO*, December 12, 2024. <https://epo.acleddata.com/2024/12/12/ethiopia-weekly-update-10-december-2024/> (accessed December 17, 2024).

<sup>83</sup> “News: Several Civilians Killed in Series of Attacks in Oromo Special Zone, Amhara Region.” *Addis Standard*, March 20, 2024. <https://addisstandard.com/several-civilians-killed-in-a-series-of-attacks-in-oromo-special-zone->

incident took place in late November 2024, when a 17-year-old boy was beheaded, allegedly by *Fano* forces. A video of the incident was posted on social media, causing widespread protests and uproar across Oromia.<sup>84</sup>

Years of conflict also means that the situation on the ground has become increasingly complex and fluid, where a range of armed actors operate. Civilians are often caught in the crossfire in clashes between different groups, and in the recent conflict in North Shoa, civilians were said to be targeted by OLA, *Fano*, and government forces, leaving people killed, homes burned, and thousands displaced. Local residents accused the government of failing to protect them and of not providing humanitarian aid.<sup>85</sup> Lack of security has also contributed to the emergence of armed criminal groups, acting independently of OLA (sometimes posing as OLA) and in cooperation with OLA and even with government forces.<sup>86</sup> Political motives are often merged with criminal ones, and the lack of internal cohesion within insurgency groups, a general absence of law and order, and economic hardship have, as I will return to more in detail, paved the way for a war economy which further have exacerbated the situation for civilians.

In order to provide protection to civilians in general and vulnerable groups in particular, the federal government adopted a Transitional Justice Policy, expected to be approved by the parliament in early 2025. The policy is aimed at addressing a wide range of human rights violations, conflicts, and abuses as well as to establish independent institutions to implement it.<sup>87</sup>

## Negotiations with OLA and Prospects for Peace

The OLA and the Ethiopian government have met twice for peace negotiations. The first took place in April 2023 and the second in November the same year, both in Tanzania. The first round of talks was described as “encouraging,” but no concrete agreements were made. The two parties did, however, agree to meet again and during the early days of the November negotiations, and according to a source close to the negotiations, initial and important progress was made – on disarmament and integration of OLA into the security forces and on the formation of what was called “an inclusive regional government.” The initial negotiations were led by the military, but when others took over, “all was discarded, and everything fell apart.”<sup>88</sup>

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[amhara-region/](#) (accessed December 11, 2024); “9 Killed in Oromia Region Attack.” *VOA*, November 20, 2024. <https://www.voanews.com/a/killed-in-ethiopia-oromia-region-attack/7882733.html> (accessed January 6, 2025).

<sup>84</sup> “A Shocking Incident in Dera Stirs Ethiopians to the Core; Gojjam Fano Responds.” *Borkena*, November 20, 2024. <https://borkena.com/2024/11/20/a-shocking-incident-in-dera-stirs-ethiopians-to-the-core-gojjam-fano-responds/> (accessed December 15, 2024).

<sup>85</sup> Abdi Biyemssa. “In-depth: Escalating conflict in Oromia’s Darra District Exposes Women, Children to Gender-based violence; Displaced Households left without Livelihoods.” *Addis Standard*, 2024. [https://addisstandard.com/escalating-conflict-in-oromias-darra-district-exposes-women-children-to-gender-based-violence-displaced-households-left-without-livelihoods/#google\\_vignette](https://addisstandard.com/escalating-conflict-in-oromias-darra-district-exposes-women-children-to-gender-based-violence-displaced-households-left-without-livelihoods/#google_vignette) (accessed December 15, 2024); “EPO Monthly: November 2022,” 2022, *op. cit.*

<sup>86</sup> Interview, NGO worker, Addis Ababa, November 5, 2024.

<sup>87</sup> “News: Justice Ministry to Approve Transitional Justice Implementation Directives within Three Months.” *Addis Standard*, December 11, 2024. <https://addisstandard.com/justice-ministry-to-approve-transitional-justice-implementation-directives-within-three-months/> (accessed December 15, 2024).

<sup>88</sup> Interview, Addis Ababa, October 15, 2024 (details withheld). See also “Latest peace talks between Ethiopia’s government and Oromo militants break up without an agreement.” *AP News*, November 21, 2023.

Informed sources consulted in fall 2024 viewed a third round of talks as unlikely, arguing that Abiy Ahmed was not really interested in a negotiated settlement. Instead, it was said, he was more focused on gradually coopting different OLA factions and have them surrender.<sup>89</sup> The already mentioned infighting within OLA in August and September 2024 eventually created a split between *Jaal* Marro and *Jaal* Sagni and eventually led the latter to surrender, who on December 1, 2024, signed a deal with the Oromia Regional Government.<sup>90</sup>

The Oromia government announced a few days later that over 800 OLA fighters were demobilized, and also claimed that 200 of *Jaal* Marro's fighters had laid down their weapons.<sup>91</sup> These were sent to so-called rehabilitation camps, and *Jaal* Sagni reported that the fighters would become part of the regional security, police, and militia forces.<sup>92</sup> The OLA leadership denounced, as expected, the agreement as a “fabricated drama” and that reports about OLA fighters surrendering were fake government propaganda.<sup>93</sup> Some informed sources said that over 2,000 fighters had surrendered, but these numbers have not been independently verified. It is therefore, in the time of writing, difficult to say for certain what the possible impacts would be.

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<https://apnews.com/article/ethiopia-omoro-militants-peace-talks-7252be5f8128dc931982f503180235ca> (accessed November 30, 2023).

<sup>89</sup> Interview, Addis Ababa, October 15, 2024 (details withheld).

<sup>90</sup> “Oromia Signs Peace Deal with OLA Splinter Group.” *Addis Standard on X*, December 1, 2024.

<https://x.com/addisstandard/status/1863182383299604663> (accessed December 1, 2024)

<sup>91</sup> “News: Oromia Regional Gov't Reports OLA Fighters Entering Camps after Peace Deal; Armed Group Rejects Reports.” *Addis Standard*, December 4, 2024. <https://addisstandard.com/oromia-regional-govt-reports-ola-fighters-entering-camps-after-peace-deal-armed-group-rejects-reports/> (accessed December 8, 2024); *Ethiopian News Agency on X*, December 16, 2024. <https://x.com/EthiopianNewsA/status/1868563710182359201> (accessed December 17, 2024).

<sup>92</sup> Gelmo Dawit. “የኦሮሞ ነጻነት ሠራዊት ታጣቂዎች ወደ ማዕከላት እየገቡ መገኘት ከልሉ አስታወቀ” (The Region has Announced that the Oromo Liberation Army (OLA) Insurgents are Advancing Toward Central Areas). *VOA-Amharic*, December 4, 2024. [https://amharic.voanews.com/a/ola-fighters-surrender/7887318.html?fbclid=IwZXh0bgNhZW0CMTAAR2uaiYUfspTfjnYiL0E5nEUX1AN2DCri\\_hN6PEUMQRfOzMlz1HdxB7Nlv8\\_aem\\_OeWQIWOY1hRU785YknfUEg](https://amharic.voanews.com/a/ola-fighters-surrender/7887318.html?fbclid=IwZXh0bgNhZW0CMTAAR2uaiYUfspTfjnYiL0E5nEUX1AN2DCri_hN6PEUMQRfOzMlz1HdxB7Nlv8_aem_OeWQIWOY1hRU785YknfUEg); (accessed December 10, 2024); “ኛል ሰኚ ምን አሉ?” (What did Jaal Sagni Say), *YouTube*, December 6, 2024. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3ltthQXPNQE> (accessed December 17, 2024).

<sup>93</sup> “Fake News Alert.” *Oromo Liberation Army OLF-OLA on X*, December 3, 2024.

[https://x.com/OLF\\_OLA/status/1863972615599321574](https://x.com/OLF_OLA/status/1863972615599321574) (January 6, 2025).

## 5. Human Rights Situation

The level of human rights violations varies across Oromia and fluctuates over time. The more serious violations have occurred in conflict areas and extent of arrests, extrajudicial killings, etc. often dovetails with the intensity of the ongoing conflict. The nature of such violations is to a certain extent a continuation from the EPRDF period, yet there are significant differences. One is the expansion of security agencies and the increased presence of such forces across the region. Another is how the lack of discipline and accountability as well as rampant corruption have created a paradoxical situation where control is achieved through lawlessness.

### The Narrowing of Political Space

Ethiopia's political space has shrunk considerably in recent years, making comparisons with the Derg period relevant. Oromo opposition parties and figures have become rather passive, not commenting much on current affairs. When statements are made, they are carefully drafted. Little is heard from people like OFC's leader Merera Gudina, and his deputy, Bekele Gerba, soon left for the US after he was released from prison. The same is true for OLF's Dawud Ibsa, and one source claimed that "this is why he is tolerated by the government."<sup>94</sup> While the opposition fears reactions from the government's side, it was also underscored that the current situation has changed from just a few years ago: "today the people are divided, and you don't know who to trust... If you make a statement in one or the other direction, it can be interpreted in many different ways. You have to be careful."<sup>95</sup>

While Jawar Mohammed also kept quiet after being released from prison in 2022, this changed recently when he from early November 2024 became increasingly vocal in his critique of the government. He derided the enforced conscription to the military, the new taxation regime, and widespread abuses by the local militia.<sup>96</sup> In December he announced the publication of his new book *Hin Gaabbuu* (I will never regret), embarked on a book tour to Europe and North America, and gave interviews in the media. In an interview with *BBC Afaan Oromoo*, he was rather explicit: "I feel sorry for the [Ethiopian people] and that is why I am working to save the country from this regime... The mission of this generation is to save Ethiopia from Abiy Ahmed."<sup>97</sup> Reactions to his "re-emergence" have so far been mixed, and many have questioned his long period of silence.

The narrowing of political space is further visible in relation to the media and civil society organizations. There are a few private newspapers in Ethiopia, and they are all careful not to criticize the government too openly. A number of newspapers and magazines, including Oromo

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<sup>94</sup> Interview, former OLF official, Addis Ababa, December 11, 2024.

<sup>95</sup> Interview, senior OFC official, Addis Ababa, November 5, 2024.

<sup>96</sup> See postings on his Facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/Jawarmd> (accessed January 7, 2025).

<sup>97</sup> "Jawar Mohammed Haasa'a BBC News Afaan oromoo irratti Taasise dhaggeeffadhaa" (Listen to the speech Jawar Mohammed gave on *BBC News Afaan Oromoo*). *YouTube*, December 18, 2024. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wa3HtKAb6SE> (accessed January 5, 2025).

ones, emerged in the early 1990s, but most have subsequently been closed. Except for the government newspapers, *Bariisa*, there are no private newspapers in Oromia.<sup>98</sup> In addition to government TV, the already mentioned OMN – broadcasting from the US – is the most important independent TV channel in the region.

The Ethiopian Media Law of 2021 guarantees freedom of expression and states that the press should be free from any government interference.<sup>99</sup> However, the Prevention and Suppression of Terrorism Proclamation and the Hate Speech and Disinformation Prevention and Suppression Proclamations, both from 2020, have actively been used as tools to curtail the freedom of the press.<sup>100</sup> From 2020-2023, the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) listed Ethiopia among the top three jailers of journalists in sub-Saharan Africa and another report said that over 200 journalists had been arrested since 2019.<sup>101</sup> In addition to arrests and arbitrary detention, the Ethiopian government has also suspended and closed several news outlets in recent years.

Several foreign journalists have also been deported, including Simon Marks from the *New York Times* and Tom Gardner from the *Economist*. There are today hardly any foreign correspondents in Ethiopia, and they are in general restricted from reporting on controversial issues. In November 2024, the Ethiopian parliament discussed a new bill that would replace the 2021 media law, which members of the Ethiopian media organizations claimed would further limit the freedom of press.<sup>102</sup> The new bill is at the time of writing not yet passed by the parliament.

Internet blackout is often used by the political authorities to curtail the flow of information. For most of the Tigray war, telecommunication and internet was shut down in Tigray, and for long periods the same has been true for parts of Oromia where OLA operates. Phone and internet connections were blocked in fall of 2024, again connected to OLA activities.<sup>103</sup> At critical moments, the government may shut down the internet for the whole country and it is also not uncommon for the government to block access to social media and certain internet sites. The police also check individuals' social media activity, if suspected of oppositional activity.

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<sup>98</sup> There are a number of Oromo diaspora media outlets, and *BBC*, *VOA*, *DW*, and *Addis Standard* publish and broadcast in the Oromo language.

<sup>99</sup> “Media Proclamation, Proclamation No. 1238/2021.” *Federal Negarit Gazette*, April 5, 2021.

<https://www.wipo.int/wipolex/en/text/586376> (accessed November 29, 2024).

<sup>100</sup> “Prevention and Suppression of Terrorism Crimes Proclamation, Proclamation No. 1176/2020.” *Federal Negarit Gazette*, March 25, 2020. <https://chilot.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/e70ce-a-proclamation-to-provide-for-the-prevention-and-suppression-of-terrorism-crimes.pdf>; “Hate Speech and Disinformation Prevention and Suppression Proclamation, Proclamation No. 1185/202.” *Federal Negarit Gazette*, March 23, 2020.

<https://www.accessnow.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Hate-Speech-and-Disinformation-Prevention-and-Suppression-Proclamation.pdf> (accessed November 30, 2024.)

<sup>101</sup> “In Abiy’s Ethiopia, 200 Journalists Have Been Arrested Since 2019.” *African Arguments*, June 3, 2024.

<https://africanarguments.org/2024/06/in-abiy-ethiopia-200-journalists-have-been-arrested-since-2019/> (accessed November 29, 2024).

<sup>102</sup> Ashenafi Endale. “Hurried Media Bill Backpedals Recent Reforms, Threatens Press Freedom.” *The Reporter Ethiopia*, November 30, 2024. <https://www.thereporterethiopia.com/42794/> (accessed November 30, 2024).

<sup>103</sup> Gelmo Dawit. “Residents in Ethiopia’s Oromia Region Report Network Disruptions as Government Forces Fight Rebels.” *VOA*, October 31, 2024. <https://www.voanews.com/a/residents-in-ethiopia-s-oromia-region-report-network-disruptions-as-government-forces-fight-rebels/7846799.html> (accessed November 29, 2024).

While the Charities and Societies (CSO) Act enacted by the EPRDF in 2009 significantly curtailed the operational space for civil society organizations, conditions improved with the adoption of a new CSO law in 2018. The situation has, however, gradually worsened in the subsequent years, particularly during the Tigray war. In August 2023, the authorities stopped giving licenses to any new human rights organizations, and in July 2024, over 1,500 civil society organizations were closed down.<sup>104</sup> In November 2024, the prominent human rights organizations Center for the Advancement of Rights and Democracy (CARD), the Association for Human Rights in Ethiopia (AHRE), and Lawyers for Human Rights (LHR) had their licenses suspended, subsequently causing human rights activists to flee the country. CARD's suspension was, however, lifted a month later, only to be reinstated on December 17.<sup>105</sup> A week later, the Ethiopian Human Rights Council (EHRCO), one of Ethiopia's oldest human rights organization, was closed down.<sup>106</sup> The EHRCO reported experienced of harassment and pressure from government officials since early 2023.<sup>107</sup>

## Surveillance and Control

The Ethiopian government has been touting its efforts in obtaining sophisticated surveillance equipment for law enforcement agencies, and in 2017 it purchased spyware from an Israeli defense contractor.<sup>108</sup> Little is, however known about its actual capacity in digitally monitoring the population. It is clear that phones are tapped and that internet activities are monitored, and as noted, the government is consistently censoring access to certain sites. The government also has elaborate plans for digitalizing society and is currently in the process of implementing a digital ID system, called Fayda, partly funded by the World Bank. The new ID card, which will be mandatory for everyone, is meant to facilitate people's access to essential services, yet it may also be an effective tool in monitoring the population. Currently, fake government ID cards can easily be obtained in exchange for a modest bribe, but this will be difficult with the new digital system.

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<sup>104</sup> "Ethiopia: Massive Crackdown on Civil Society Organisations." *International Federation for Human Rights*, August 19, 2024. <https://www.fidh.org/en/region/Africa/ethiopia/ethiopia-massive-crackdown-on-civil-society-organisations#:~:text=%E2%80%8B%E2%80%8BThe%20recent%20forced,subsequent%20dissolution%20of%20he%20organisation>. (accessed November 30, 2024).

<sup>105</sup> "Ethiopia: Suspension of Three Human Rights Organizations Highlights Growing Crackdown on Civic space." *Amnesty International*, November 26, 2024. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2024/11/ethiopia-suspension-of-three-human-rights-organizations-highlights-growing-crackdown-on-civic-space/> (accessed November 29, 2024); "News: Suspension on Three Rights Groups Lifted Amid Criticism of Civil Society Crackdown." *Addis Standard*, December 11, 2024. <https://addisstandard.com/?p=47422> (accessed December 14, 2024); "News: Local Rights Group Reports Civil Society Leaders Fleeing 'Threats'; Amnesty Warns of Ethiopia's Civic Space 'Crackdown.'" *Addis Standard*, November 27, 2024. <https://addisstandard.com/local-rights-group-reports-civil-society-leaders-fleeing-threats-amnesty-warns-of-ethiopias-civic-space-crackdown/> (accessed November 29, 2024); "News: CARD Faces Renewed Suspension by Civil Society Authority After Recent Lifting of Ban." *Addis Standard*, December 18, 2024. <https://addisstandard.com/card-faces-renewed-suspension-by-civil-society-authority-after-recent-lifting-of-ban/> (accessed January 6, 2025).

<sup>106</sup> "The Ethiopian Human Rights Council, a 33-Year-Old Human Rights Organization, Suspended." *Addis Insight*, December 26, 2024. <https://addisinsight.net/2024/12/26/the-ethiopian-human-rights-council-a-33-year-old-human-rights-organization-suspended/> (accessed January 6, 2025).

<sup>107</sup> "Ethiopia: Arbitrary Arrest and Detention of Four EHRCO Members." *International Federation for Human Rights*, January 11, 2023. <https://www.fidh.org/en/issues/human-rights-defenders/ethiopia-arbitrary-arrest-and-detention-of-four-ehrc-members> (accessed November 29, 2024).

<sup>108</sup> Marczak, Bill, et. al. *Champing at the Cyberbit: Ethiopian Dissidents Targeted with New Commercial Spyware*. Toronto: University of Toronto's Citizen Lab, 2017.

There are in addition other well-rehearsed mechanisms for surveillance and control that are far more effective. Most important here is the widespread use of informants – being present everywhere. Informants were actively used by the Derg and the EPRDF governments. The EPRDF established a formalized network of informants through what was called *and le'amist* (Amharic; one to five) – groups of five with one leader operating in neighborhoods, universities, workplaces, etc. The system was discontinued when Abiy Ahmed came to power, but the widespread use of informants at grassroots level has continued – and increased.<sup>109</sup>

It is very hard for an outsider to fully comprehend the sentiments of fear the ever-presence of informants creates. Memories from the Derg period, when thousands were killed, have produced a lasting trauma in Ethiopian psychic.<sup>110</sup> In a situation of “trust no one” every Ethiopian is suspicious of anyone, and no one will engage a stranger in a conversation about politics. One does not have to live long in Ethiopia before one unconsciously looks over one’s shoulder when mentioning words like OLA.

In addition to this, the Abiy Ahmed government has established new security institutions and structures that have further enhanced the authorities’ capability for control. This is exercised with more brute force compared with the past and the institutions’ effectiveness is, somewhat paradoxical, partly a result of lack of discipline and law and order.

There are several institutions that coordinate security in Oromia, yet their jurisdiction and responsibilities are not always clear. The *Biiroo Bulchiinsaafi Nageenyaa* (Office of Administration and Security) coordinates security at the regional level and the *Bulchiinsaa Nageenyaa* (Peace and Security Office) are found at the zonal and district level.<sup>111</sup> There is also an office called *Mana Marii Nageenyaa* (Security Council) which exists at regional, zonal, and district level. These different institutions are tasked with maintaining security and investigating so-called “anti-peace elements.”<sup>112</sup>

There is, however, a parallel, and informal, structure that is rather unknown, yet which seems to play a particular important role, namely the *Koree Nageenyaa*, or the security committee. The *Koree Nageenyaa* became known through a *Reuters* report in February 2024, which claimed there existed a secret committee that was behind the numerous extrajudicial killings taking place in Oromia. Said to have been established in 2019, *Reuters* reported that the committee was led by Shimeles Abdisa, the president of Oromia and that it included the head of PP in Oromia and the

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<sup>109</sup> Maggie Fick. “Ethiopia’s surveillance network crumbles, meaning less fear and less control.” *Reuters*, December 18, 2019. <https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-ethiopia-politics-surveillance-insigh-idUKKBN1YL1BS/> (accessed December 1, 2024).

<sup>110</sup> Particularly important here is the Red Terror (1978-1979), when as many as 32 000 were killed. It was common to leave the dead bodies on display in the streets and family members were often charged with paying for the bullet that killed the person before they could bury the body.

<sup>111</sup> The direct translation of *nageenya* is “peace” but in this the word used is “security.”

<sup>112</sup> “*Labsii Qaamolee Raawwachiiftuu Mootummaa Naannoo Oromiyaa Irra Deebiidhaan Gurmeessuu, Aangoofi Hojii Isaanii Murteessuuf Bahe, Labsii Lakkoofsa 242/2014*” (Proclamation to Reorganize and Redefine the Power and Duties of Executive Organs of Oromia Regional State, Proclamation Number 242/2021). *Megelata Oromia*, September 25, 2021. <https://www.gonfaatoma.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/Labsii-242-bara-2014.pdf> (accessed November 29, 2024).

head of security for Oromia. It was also claimed that Abiy Ahmed regularly attended the committee’s meetings. The report argued that the *Koree Nageenyaa* was directly responsible for the executions of the Karrayu *gaddaa* leaders in 2021 (see below) and that it kept lists of individuals “deemed a threat to security” which between 2019 to 2022 led to over 1,000 arrests.<sup>113</sup>

While the *Reuters* report was detailed and revealing, it failed to understand that the *Koree Nageenyaa* is not only one committee at the central level, but something replicated throughout Oromia. It exists at regional, zonal, and district levels and operates in parallel to official institutions, such as the *Bulchiinsaa Nageenyaa*. It usually has five members, and at district level it consists of the district head, the head of the district security office, the police chief, and others. At *kebele* (sub-district) level there is something referred to as the *Deeskii Dhimma Nageenyaa* (Security Affairs Desk) and which is said to be similar to the *Koree Nageenyaa*. Interlocutors claimed that it was informal in nature, that it came together at an ad-hoc basis at the different levels, and that its jurisdiction remained unclear.<sup>114</sup>

What seems clear, however, is that the very structure of the *Koree Nageenyaa* has enabled the government to enact security measures far removed from the public eye. According to one source, police officials often complained that they felt powerless in relation to the *Koree Nageenyaa*. Orders would come from the *Koree Nageenyaa* at regional level, but it was also said that the orders “may come from higher up.”<sup>115</sup>

Law enforcement agencies in Oromia include the Oromia Police, the Ethiopian Federal Police (which has jurisdiction over federal institutions, like universities), and remnants of the OFS. The Oromia Police is supposed to deal with criminal cases yet plays an important role as a security force in conflict areas.<sup>116</sup> In addition to these agencies, the local militia and the so-called *Gaachana Sirnaa* have become increasingly important as agencies directly affecting people’s lives at the grassroots level. The militia is organized at *kebele* level and has its root in the *abiot tebeqa* (Amharic; the protectors of the Revolution) created during the Derg period. What has changed is the establishment of a separate Office of the Militia in Oromia in 2021, the subsequent growth in the number of militias, and the extended authority they are given.<sup>117</sup> Members of the militia are given uniform – for which the local people are forced to pay for – and they are sometimes armed.

*Gaachana Sirnaa* literally means “the shield of the system,” and would in this context best be translated as the “protector of the system” or “protector of the regime.” Formally established in 2022, it is a system whereby “the people in the region can be organized in the cultures and norms

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<sup>113</sup> Paravicini, Gulia. “In Ethiopia, a Secret Committee orders Killings and Arrests to Crush Rebels,” *Reuters*, February 23, 2024. <https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/ethiopia-violence-committee/> (accessed November 20, 2024).

<sup>114</sup> Phone interview, local resident, eastern Oromia, December 1, 2024.

<sup>115</sup> Phone interview, local human rights organization executive, December 14, 2024.

<sup>116</sup> *Oromia Region Government State Police Commission*. n.d. <https://www.romiapolice.gov.et/en/news1-2/responsibility-and-duties> (accessed December 8, 2024).

<sup>117</sup> “*Labsii Qaamolee Raawwachiiftuu Mootummaa Naannoo Oromiyaa Irra Deebiidhaan Gurmeessuu, Aangoofi Hojii Isaanii Murteessuuf Bahe, Labsii Lakkoofsa 242/2014,*” 2021, *op. cit.*



of Geda System<sup>118</sup> to protect and defend its interests, benefits and rights.”<sup>119</sup> Recruitment and training for the *Gaachana Sirnaa* started, however, before 2022, and it is presented as a grassroots initiative. According to one local official: “*Sirni uummatni ofii isaatiin ijaarrate, hirmaannaafi abbummaa uummatichaatiin eegamuutu irra jiraata*” (the system built by the people themselves must be protected through the participation and ownership of the people).<sup>120</sup> The fact is, however, that people are forced to attend training for both the *Gaachana Sirnaa* and the militia.<sup>121</sup> The *Gaachana Sirnaa* is separate from the *kebele* militia, and its members are trained by the local police or other security agencies. According to the proclamation, the *Gaachana Sirnaa* have the right to bear arms, but this seems to vary across the region.<sup>122</sup>

## Corruption, Lawlessness, and Control

Both the militias’ and the *Gaachana Sirnaa*’s main task is to keep law and order in their respective localities. The *Gaachana Sirnaa* is in addition charged with monitoring individuals in different localities by verifying “the identity of persons that are not residents of the kebele or neighbor” and to send “information about them to the concerned body.”<sup>123</sup> Both agencies are formally under the local administration, but it is clear that they in reality are accountable to the *Koree Nageenya*.

Acting as executives of the *Koree Nageenya* they are given relatively free reigns and can operate without much scrutiny. The members of the militia and the *Gaachana Sirnaa* are often given little training and lack the discipline common for other law enforcement agencies, something which has created frustration among the regular police and military officers.<sup>124</sup> Interlocutors claimed that those who join the *Gaachana Sirnaa* are “mostly outcasts, addicts, and losers.”<sup>125</sup>

The increase and the ever-presence of militia and *Gaachana Sirnaa* at the grassroots level have proven to be pivotal in tightening the government’s control of the people in Oromia. This was made evident during the above-mentioned Corridor Development project. In spite of tens of thousands of houses and businesses being destroyed, with, as noted, short notice and without compensation, people have been very quiet. Hardly any protests have been voiced, and those who

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<sup>118</sup> The now largely defunct *gaddaa* system was an integral part of the Oromo indigenous heritage and can best be characterized as a socio-political system based on generation groups.

<sup>119</sup> “*Labsii Gaachana Sirnaa Naannoo Oromiyaa Murteessuuf Bahe, Lakkoofsa 245/2014*” (Proclamation to Determine Oromia Region Gaachana Sirna, Proclamation Number 245/2014). *Megelati Oromia*, March 22, 2022. <https://www.gonfaatoma.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/Labsii-245-bara-2014.pdf> (accessed November 28, 2024).

<sup>120</sup> “*Leenjiin 'Gaachana Sirnaa' Oromiyaa keessatti kennamaa jiru maali?*” (What is the training called 'Gaachana Sirnaa' being conducted in Oromia?). *BBC News Afaan Oromoo*, August 24, 2021. <https://www.bbc.com/afaanoromoo/oduu-58307452> (accessed November 29, 2024).

<sup>121</sup> “News: Mandatory Militia Training Disrupts Transportation, Livelihoods in Sendafa Town, Oromia Region.” *Addis Standard*, December 31, 2024. <https://addisstandard.com/mandatory-militia-training-disrupts-transportation-livelihoods-in-sendafa-town-oromia-region/> (accessed January 12, 2025).

<sup>122</sup> “*Labsii Gaachana Sirnaa Naannoo Oromiyaa Murteessuuf Bahe, Lakkoofsa 245/2014*,” 2022, *op. cit.*; interview, university professor, Addis Ababa, November 18, 2024.

<sup>123</sup> “*Labsii Gaachana Sirnaa Naannoo Oromiyaa Murteessuuf Bahe, Lakkoofsa 245/2014*,” 2022, *op. cit.*

<sup>124</sup> Phone interview, local human rights organization executive, December 14, 2024; interview, NGO worker, Addis Ababa, November 8, 2024.

<sup>125</sup> Phone interview, local resident, eastern Oromia, November 17, 2024.

expressed opposition were immediately imprisoned. One source explained the situation as follows: “everyone knows what may be next, jail and torture, and that is why everyone is quiet.”<sup>126</sup>

While abusing people to instill a culture of fear is a well-rehearsed mechanism of governance in Ethiopia, the current situation is markedly different. In contrast to the EPRDF, which had strong state institutions to maintain security, the current government lacks the necessary institutional “muscle” and resources to keep control over its own security apparatus. The result is a situation where these grassroots agencies have carved out quite a degree of autonomy and where they both are executing the government’s policies and utilizing them for their own benefit. As expressed by one informed interlocutor: “while the militia and *Gaachana Sirnaa* were deliberately put there to keep order and silence the people, I think they have lost control now.”<sup>127</sup> This has created a paradoxical situation where control is enabled through lawlessness and where security is maintained through insecurity.

The key reason behind this is corruption. Corruption was rampant and an integral part of government structures during the imperial period, but the Derg made significant effort to reduce it. While the EPRDF continued this policy which further limited corruption, mechanisms curtailing corruption loosened with the arrival of Abiy Ahmed, and recent studies show that corruption has become a growing problem in Ethiopia. Transparency International ranked Ethiopia 98<sup>th</sup> (of 180) on its corruption index in 2023 and increased public corruption is said to have “strongly affected socioeconomic development and governance.”<sup>128</sup>

Interlocutors across Oromia all agreed that corruption had increased dramatically over the last two years, being present at all levels, becoming “part of the official system,” and something “out of control.”<sup>129</sup> Officials are conspiring in extracting money from people, and it has become nearly impossible to get public services without paying bribes. The above-discussed tax regime has enabled tax-collectors to overcharge the people at will. This is particularly true in the rural areas, and one interlocutor described the conditions as: “there is no law at all, it’s anarchy... anybody can ask for anything.”<sup>130</sup>

The key point to be made is that collecting bribes are not about amassing wealth but has rather that it has become a means of survival. Increased cost of living and stagnant wages are affecting everyone, and people are doing what they can to survive. This has been evident among local militias who often are paid little or no salary. One interlocutor said he was contacted by militia members who explained the reason for extracting money from people was “to feed their families.”<sup>131</sup> Another source claimed that “fathers will steal from the children and brother from

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<sup>126</sup> Phone interview, local human rights organization executive, December 14, 2024.

<sup>127</sup> Interview, Jawar Mohammed, Oslo, January 3, 2025.

<sup>128</sup> “Corruption Perception Index.” *Transparency International*, 2024.

<https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2023/index/eth> (accessed January 7, 2025); Degye Goshu, Arege Shumetie, Demirew Getachew. “Who is Corrupt in Ethiopia?” Policy Working Paper 24, *Ethiopian Economics Association*, June 2024. [https://eea-et.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/EEA\\_PWP-24\\_Corruption\\_2.pdf](https://eea-et.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/EEA_PWP-24_Corruption_2.pdf) (accessed January 7, 2025).

<sup>129</sup> Phone interview, local human rights organization executive, December 14, 2024.

<sup>130</sup> Text exchange, local resident, eastern Oromia, December 13, 2024.

<sup>131</sup> Interview, Oromo activist, Oslo, January 3, 2025.

their brothers and neighbors from their neighbors... corruption is what is creating this, everyone is struggling to survive.”<sup>132</sup>

Also important is how the OLA insurgency and insecurity have given law enforcement agencies, security forces, and government officials opportunities to fleece the people of resources. Accusations of ties to the OLA have become a common practice in order to extract money and, as expressed by one interlocutor: “the security situation has created a huge market for the security agencies.”<sup>133</sup> This has not only led to an increase of human rights violations, but they have created a situation of *unpredictability and randomness*. While people with certain profiles previously would be considered at risk, this is not the case anymore. Anyone can be targeted.

## Arbitrary Arrests and Unlawful Imprisonments

Arbitrary arrests and unlawful imprisonments are not anything new in Ethiopia and the practice has continued during the current government in order to curtail opposition. Leaders and members of the legal opposition have been subject to arbitrary arrests, something which became evident in the process leading up to the elections planned for 2020. Both the OLF and the OFC saw their offices in different parts of Oromia closed by the authorities, and local leaders put in prison.<sup>134</sup>

Amnesty reported in January 2020, that over 75 OLF supporters had been arrested in different parts of Oromia.<sup>135</sup> In late February 2020, security forces arrested nine OLF officials in Addis Ababa. Eight of them were soon released, but Abdi Regassa, a member of OLF’s Executive Committee, remained held at an undisclosed location for two months. In July the same year, additional six OLF leaders were arrested, who also disappeared for long periods. Some of them were set free only to be also re-arrested.<sup>136</sup> In September 2024, these seven were released on bail.<sup>137</sup> Dawud Ibsa, the chairperson of OLF, was in 2021 placed under house arrest for nearly a year.<sup>138</sup> The OLF moreover reported that family members and relatives of its members routinely were

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<sup>132</sup> Interview, local resident of Haramaya, Addis Ababa, November 7, 2024.

<sup>133</sup> Phone interview, local resident, eastern Oromia, November 18, 2024.

<sup>134</sup> “A Hidden War Threatens Ethiopia’s Transition to Democracy.” *The Economist*, March 19, 2020. <https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2020/03/19/a-hidden-war-threatens-ethiopia-transition-to-democracy> (accessed March 23, 2020).

<sup>135</sup> “Ethiopia: Police must Account for Missing Oromo Opposition Leader.” *Amnesty International*, March 3, 2020. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2020/03/ethiopia-police-must-account-for-missing-oromo-opposition-leader/> (accessed March 21, 2020).

<sup>136</sup> “Ethiopia: Oromo Opposition Figures Held Despite Court Orders.” *Human Rights Watch*, July 24, 2023. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/07/24/ethiopia-oromo-opposition-figures-held-despite-court-orders> (accessed November 29, 2024).

<sup>137</sup> Tseday Damtew. “Ethiopia releases opposition politicians from prison.” *VOA*, September 15, 2024. <https://www.voanews.com/a/ethiopia-releases-opposition-politicians-from-prison-/7773637.html> (accessed November 29, 2024).

<sup>138</sup> “Dura taa'aan ABO Obbo Daawud Ibsaa hidhaa mana keessaa bahuun alatti mul'atan” (The Chairman of the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF), Obbo Dawud Ibsa, has been seen outside following his house arrest). *BBC Afaan Oromoo*, March 16, 2022. <https://www.bbc.com/afaanoromoo/oduu-60749286> (accessed December 9, 2024).

abducted and arrested.<sup>139</sup> OFC officials in Ambo reported in early 2020 that 15 local activists had been arrested and that the party was prevented from organizing public meetings.<sup>140</sup>

Opposition politicians have also been arrested in recent years. Christian Tadele, a member of parliament representing NaMa, was arrested in August 2023 after asking the prime minister to resign because of his failure to maintain security in the country and for questioning the prime minister's spending of federal funds. His whereabouts were unknown for a long time and it took eight months before he appeared in court.<sup>141</sup> Taye Dandea, an Oromo politician and the former Minister of Peace, was dismissed from his position and arrested in December 2023 after posting critical remarks about Abiy Ahmed on social media.<sup>142</sup> He was released on bail on December 4, 2024, yet was immediately taken away to an undisclosed location by "masked individuals."<sup>143</sup> He was released a few days later, and according to one source, the government admitted that the abduction had been "a mistake."<sup>144</sup>

Beyond these public figures, it is very hard to determine how many people have been subject to arbitrary arrest and how many remain unlawfully imprisoned. Amnesty International reported in 2019 that over 10,000 persons were imprisoned in Oromia in relation to the OLA insurgency,<sup>145</sup> and during the violence after Hachalu Hundessa killing, it was reported that 9,000 people were arrested.<sup>146</sup> One source said that according to a senior official in the Oromia *Biiroo Bulchiinsaafi Nageenyaa* (Office of Administration and Security), the number of people arbitrary detained in Oromia was currently 50,000.<sup>147</sup> The same source said his organization had documented 4,000 detainees in West Shoa Zone of Oromia – all being arbitrary arrested. None of these figures have been independently verified and are likely to be underestimations. As expressed by one

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<sup>139</sup> Posted on OLF-OLA's Facebook page.

[https://web.facebook.com/OLF1973/posts/280766480897543?\\_rdc=1&\\_rdr](https://web.facebook.com/OLF1973/posts/280766480897543?_rdc=1&_rdr) (accessed December 9, 2024); Ermias Tasfaye, 2024, *op. cit.*

<sup>140</sup> Interview, OFC official, Ambo, February 15, 2020

<sup>141</sup> "Parliamentary Immunity Ignored: House of Representatives Member Christian Tadele Taken by Security Forces." *Addis Insights*, August 5, 2023. <https://addisinsight.net/2023/08/parliamentary-immunity-ignored-house-of-representatives-member-christian-tadele-taken-by-security-forces/> (accessed November 29, 2024); "Christian Tadele Court Appearance Reveal Arrest Motivated by Ethnic Hatred," *Borkena*, April 6, 2024. [https://borkena.com/2024/04/06/christian-tadele-court-appearance-reveal-arrest-motivated-by-ethnic-hatred/#google\\_vignette](https://borkena.com/2024/04/06/christian-tadele-court-appearance-reveal-arrest-motivated-by-ethnic-hatred/#google_vignette) (accessed November 29, 2024).

<sup>142</sup> "Ethiopia Arrests Former Peace Minister over Alleged Links to an Outlawed Rebel Group." *AP News*, December 13, 2023. <https://apnews.com/article/ethiopia-peace-minister-fired-ola-rebels-6bf55a6d9096e15662c38bd16b03d11c> (accessed November 29, 2024).

<sup>143</sup> "Taye Dandea Released After Year-long Detention, Reunited with Family." *Addis Standard*, December 5, 2024. <https://addisstandard.com/taye-dandea-released-after-year-long-detention-reunited-with-family/?amp=1> (accessed December 9, 2024).

<sup>144</sup> Interview, foreign diplomat, Addis Ababa, December 6, 2024.

<sup>145</sup> Elias Meseret. "News Report Alleges Killings, Mass Detentions in Ethiopia." *AP News*, May 29, 2020. <https://apnews.com/article/78d1d784e9c7c441df4ee9632557a900> (accessed December 1, 2024).

<sup>146</sup> Elias Meseret. "Ethiopia's Week of Unrest Sees 239 Dead, 3,500 Arrested." *Washington Post*, 2020. [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/africa/ethiopias-week-of-unrest-sees-239-dead-3500-arrested/2020/07/08/8eb30952-c100-11ea-8908-68a2b9eae9e0\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/africa/ethiopias-week-of-unrest-sees-239-dead-3500-arrested/2020/07/08/8eb30952-c100-11ea-8908-68a2b9eae9e0_story.html) (accessed November 23, 2020); "More Than 9,000 Arrested Since June Killing of Singer." *Aljazeera*, 2020. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/8/13/more-than-9000-arrests-in-ethiopia-since-june-killing-of-singer> (accessed November 30, 2020).

<sup>147</sup> Phone interview, local human rights organization executive, December 14, 2024.

interlocutor: “I don’t think the government knows the exact number.”<sup>148</sup> Due process rights are generally not respected and seldom are people arrested for political reasons allowed the right to a fair trial.<sup>149</sup>

Arrests based on ties to the OLA are most common in areas where OLA operates, and the threshold for suspicion and subsequent arrest is rather low. Being at the wrong place at the wrong time is, for example, reason enough – as explained by one interlocutor: “I can no longer visit my family in the rural areas; they will suspect me of being OLA if I appear there.”<sup>150</sup> The OLA tag can also be applied to more “innocent” issues. One professor in culture and folklore at a university in Wollega was arrested three times in four years – for talking to local people about Oromo culture.<sup>151</sup>

The return of a person to his area after a period of “unexplained absence” also serves as a good reason for being arrested. One source told the story of a relative who was captured by OLA while serving in the army. He was released by the OLA, but when he returned to his home area the local authorities sought his arrest. He was forced to flee and “now he is working as a daily laborer in Gambela with his brother supporting him.”<sup>152</sup> In addition, any person that moves to a new area will immediately be noticed. One interlocutor said that: “when I go to the rural areas, I am asked by the local cadres who I am, where I come from, what I am doing there. There is constant control.”<sup>153</sup>

In some cases, ties to OLA may be real, but in most cases, they are not. The key point is that OLA has, as noted, become a tag government officials put on people as a means of extraction. Arbitrary arrests are often a result of collaboration between local law enforcement agencies and government offices. The militia and the *Gaachana Sirna* do not have the jurisdiction to arrest people, but they can label an individual an OLA supporter and that in itself enables them to collect money. Refusal to pay may lead to the involvement of the police and other government institutions, which also means that the amount one is forced to pay increases. The common phrase is that “someone comes to you and say that we have credible information that you have links to this and that organization.”<sup>154</sup> No further evidence is needed, and everybody knows it is about money. One source narrated how a family dispute landed his whole family in prison, after being accused by his sister of supporting OLA.<sup>155</sup> When several Oromo businessmen were arrested in October 2024, speculation emerged that they had refused to contribute money to government projects and thus accused of having links to OLA.<sup>156</sup>

According to interlocutors, the most important thing is to avoid being imprisoned. Once in prison, it is very hard to get out: “If you enter prison, you don’t get out unless you pay.”<sup>157</sup> The above-mentioned interlocutor was able to get his parents out for free, but had to pay 5000 birr to get is

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<sup>148</sup> Interview, Oromo opposition politician, Addis Ababa, November 5, 2024.

<sup>149</sup> “Ethiopia,” *Freedom House Annual Report, 2024, op. cit.*

<sup>150</sup> Phone interview, local human rights organization executive, December 14, 2024.

<sup>151</sup> Interview, former employee at Dembi Dolo University, Addis Ababa, November 13, 2024.

<sup>152</sup> Interview, NGO worker, Addis Ababa, November 8, 2024.

<sup>153</sup> Interview, local resident of Haramaya, Addis Ababa, November 7, 2024.

<sup>154</sup> *ibid*

<sup>155</sup> Phone interview, local resident, eastern Oromia, November 17, 2024.

<sup>156</sup> Interview, local resident of Haramaya, Addis Ababa, November 7, 2024.

<sup>157</sup> Phone interview, local resident, eastern Oromia, November 17, 2024.

brother freed.<sup>158</sup> Another source said that his brother was detained accused of having links to OLA, but “the real reason was that they needed money from him... and I had to pay 45,000 birr [\$360] to have him released.” He added: “no one can be released unless the *Koree Nageenyaa* agrees.”<sup>159</sup>

While arbitrary arrests and unlawful imprisonment happened during the EPRDF government, those arrested were never held in ordinary prisons or at police stations but were instead hidden at undisclosed detention centers. A representative of a local human rights organization said this is not the case anymore and that detainees are unlawfully incarcerated in plain sights in regular prisons and police stations.<sup>160</sup> Another source said that “in Arsi, Shoa, Bale, and other places in Oromia, the small police stations and prisons are filled with prisoners... being accused of supporting OLA.”<sup>161</sup>

## Disappearances and Abductions

As noted above, Oromo opposition figures may be taken to undisclosed locations with their family members not knowing where they are for long periods of time. The EHRC reported in June 2023 that disappearances were on a rise, both in Oromia and elsewhere in Ethiopia and claimed in October 2024 that the trend was continuing. It said that individuals were “taken from their homes by unidentified personnel, often arriving in vehicles without license plates and wearing police uniforms... without legal proceedings leaving families uninformed about the whereabouts and conditions of their loved ones.”<sup>162</sup>

Lack of accountability and proper registration of prisoners have exacerbated the situation resulting in countless of people simply “disappear” in prison.<sup>163</sup> This is in contrast to the EPRDF government, which kept clear records of the detainees. In cases of mass arrests connected to the OLA insurgency there is seldom any proper registrations. Similarly, a person may be rounded up by security forces passing by a particular area, being brought to a local police station and left there – while the security forces leave the area. “There is no file, and the arresting security officer who moves on soon forgets about the person.”<sup>164</sup>

Kidnapping for ransom has in addition to abductions by security forces increased significantly in Ethiopia over the last years – to the extent it has been labelled a “pandemic.”<sup>165</sup> Most of them have taken place in Amhara and Oromia regions, and the kidnapping of students from Dembi Dolo University in 2020 marked the start of this trend.<sup>166</sup> OLA was behind a number of kidnappings of

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<sup>158</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>159</sup> Phone interview, local human rights organization executive, December 14, 2024.

<sup>160</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>161</sup> Interview, senior OLF official, Addis Ababa, November 1, 2024.

<sup>162</sup> Maya Misiker. “Enforced Disappearances Rise in Ethiopia, Says Rights Commission.” *VOA*, June 13, 2023. <https://www.voanews.com/a/enforced-disappearances-rise-in-ethiopia-says-rights-commission-/7135831.html>; <https://www.thereporterethiopia.com/42459/> (accessed December 9, 2024).

<sup>163</sup> Interview, university professor, Addis Ababa, August 29, 2024.

<sup>164</sup> Interview, NGO worker, Addis Ababa, November 8, 2024.

<sup>165</sup> Harter, Fred. “‘This is a pandemic’: Ethiopia’s Oromia region gripped by surge in kidnappings.” *The Guardian*, January 23, 2024. <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2024/jan/23/im-scared-to-leave-addis-ababa-ethiopia-s-oromia-region-gripped-by-kidnapping-pandemic> (accessed December 4, 2024).

<sup>166</sup> Firehiwot Kassa. “Ethiopia’s Missing Students: Families’ Pain and the Unsolved Mystery.” *BBC*, March 15, 2020. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-51411720> (accessed December 4, 2024).

government officials in 2021 and 2022, which were politically motivated and aimed at attracting attention to their struggle.<sup>167</sup> Starting from 2023, kidnapping of officials became more financially motivated and by 2024 kidnappings for ransom had become “commonplace” with abductions taking place close to the capital of Addis Ababa.<sup>168</sup> One recent incident took place on July 2, 2024, when a bus transporting students in northern Shoa were stopped, reportedly by OLA forces. The students were taken hostage and was only released upon paying ransoms ranging from 150,000 to 400,000 birr (\$1,200-3,200). A similar incident took place a month later, where the driver and his assistant were killed.<sup>169</sup>

OLA generally deny accusations that they are using kidnapping to fund the insurgency, but as the group is decentralized and loosely organized, local commanders have the freedom to act independently. A restructuring of OLA in the first part of 2024, where OLA platoons operating in different localities were made responsible for their own supplies, may have contributed to the increase of kidnappings.<sup>170</sup> There are several reports claiming that financial institutions are involved and families of abductees are often given bank account numbers to transfer the ransom money to.<sup>171</sup> It is commonly believed that police and other security forces are involved in the kidnappings, making people reluctant to report such incidents.<sup>172</sup> People are also afraid that the police would accuse them of funding OLA if they paid the ransom.<sup>173</sup>

The kidnapping “pandemic” is unprecedented in modern Ethiopian history. Travel to the regions, Oromia and Amhara in particular, has become increasingly difficult and risk of abductions has also put significant strain on people living in the different regions, limiting their mobility.

## Extrajudicial killings

Extrajudicial killings of public figures have become noticeable during Abiy Ahmed’s tenure and many members of the legal political opposition have been targeted. Different from the EPRDF government, the current government seems little concerned with concealing such acts. In June 2020, an OLF leader was killed in his car in Addis Ababa, just before the assassination of Hachalu Hundessa.<sup>174</sup> Several Oromo opposition leaders were killed during 2022, including Moibone Bekele, a Central Committee member of OLF who was killed by unknown assailants upon his

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<sup>167</sup> Gardiner, Richard. “Kidnapped in Oromia: The Growing Threat of the OLA.” *S-RM*, May 2, 2023. <https://gsi.s-rminform.com/articles/kidnapped-in-oromia-the-growing-threat-of-the-ola> (accessed December 4, 2024).

<sup>168</sup> Harter, Fred, 2024, *op. cit.*

<sup>169</sup> “አማራ፣ ኦሮሚያ፡- መንግሥት በተስፋፋ ሁኔታ የሚፈጸም የሰዎች አገታን ሊያስቆምና ተጠያቂነትንም ሊያረጋግጥ ይገባል” (Amhara, Oromia: The government must take action to stop the widespread displacement of people and ensure accountability). *Ethiopian Human Rights Commission*, September 3, 2024. <https://ehrc.org/አማራ፣-ኦሮሚያ፡-መንግሥት-በተስፋፋ-ሁኔታ/> (accessed November 18, 2024).

<sup>170</sup> Interviews, Oromo activist, Addis Ababa, September 20, 2024; NGO worker, November 8, 2024.

<sup>171</sup> Messay Asgedom Goben and Tadesse Simie Metekia. “Organised Crime in Africa / Ethiopia Kidnappings: Terrorism, Transnational Organised Crime or Banditry?” *ENACT*, December 12, 2023. <https://enactafrica.org/enact-observer/ethiopia-kidnappings-terrorism-transnational-organised-crime-or-banditry> (December 4, 2024).

<sup>172</sup> “አማራ፣ ኦሮሚያ፡- መንግሥት በተስፋፋ ሁኔታ የሚፈጸም የሰዎች አገታን ሊያስቆምና ተጠያቂነትንም ሊያረጋግጥ ይገባል,” 2024, *op. cit.*

<sup>173</sup> Harter, Fred, 2024, *op. cit.*

<sup>174</sup> Gardner, Tom and Lule Estifanos. “Political Violence Could Derail Ethiopia’s Democratic Transition.” *Foreign Policy*, September 20, 2020. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/09/20/political-violence-could-derail-ethiopia-democratic-transition-assassination/> (accessed January 8, 2025).

release from prison in March 2022.<sup>175</sup> One OFC official claimed that the party’s leader in West Shoa, Melese Chala, was killed just outside of Addis Ababa the same year.<sup>176</sup> The OLF has also reported that family members of its leaders were assassinated. The chairperson, Dawud Ibsa, claimed in March 2021 that four of his relatives had been killed by security forces.<sup>177</sup> OLF has continued to blame the government of routinely targeting and killing their members, leaders, and their relatives.<sup>178</sup>

One particular incident took place on April 10, 2024. Batte Urgessa, an OLF official, was arrested in February 2024 after meeting with a French journalist, Antoine Galindo from *African Intelligence*, and later released on bail. Few days later he was found shot and dead outside Meki, his hometown.<sup>179</sup> Batte Urgessa was an outspoken and known critic of the government, and his assassination drew much attention.

Extrajudicial killings of ordinary citizens do occur across Oromia but have become very common in the region’s conflict areas. These may take the form of outright executions, and many such incidents have been reported by the EHRC.<sup>180</sup> One interlocutor narrated from his travels in Wollega that it was not uncommon to find bodies laying by the wayside. The same interlocutor claimed that a high-ranking government official in Wollega personally participated in executing civilians suspected of OLA ties.<sup>181</sup>

While human rights organizations continue to document extrajudicial killings, it is impossible to know how many have been killed and it is safe to say that there is significant underreporting.<sup>182</sup> There are incidents that receive some attention, like the government’s crackdown on the violence in connection with Hachalu Hundessa’s death which accordingly left 76 people dead.<sup>183</sup> Another

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<sup>175</sup> Interview, senior OLF official, Addis Ababa, November 1, 2024; “Oromo Liberation Front Accuse gov’t of ‘Assassination Attempts’ of Leaders.” *Borkena*, March 4, 2020. <https://borkena.com/2020/03/04/ethiopia-oromo-liberation-front-accuse-govt-of-leaders-assassination-attempt/> (accessed March 21, 2020); “OLF Strongly Condemn Brutal Killings of its Leadership.” *Oromo Liberation Front-OLF/ABO on Facebook*, October 13, 2022. [https://web.facebook.com/OLF1973/posts/pfbid025ShW63H3Kv2Vu9rahFmrHYpRqL7uc9FDa7vDSRiHgAhTjg3CZJCWVvTxSJsqL5l?\\_rdc=1&\\_rdr](https://web.facebook.com/OLF1973/posts/pfbid025ShW63H3Kv2Vu9rahFmrHYpRqL7uc9FDa7vDSRiHgAhTjg3CZJCWVvTxSJsqL5l?_rdc=1&_rdr) (accessed December 9, 2024).

<sup>176</sup> Interview, Oromo opposition politician, Addis Ababa, November 5, 2024.

<sup>177</sup> Oromo Liberation Front-OLF/ABO on Facebook, March 18, 2022. [https://web.facebook.com/OLF1973/posts/280766480897543?\\_rdc=1&\\_rdr](https://web.facebook.com/OLF1973/posts/280766480897543?_rdc=1&_rdr) (accessed December 9, 2024).

<sup>178</sup> Ermias Tasfaye, 2024, *op. cit.*

<sup>179</sup> Bojang Jnr., Sheriff. “Ethiopia: Pressure Mounts for probe Into Killing of Prominent Oromo Politician.” *The Africa Report*, April 11, 2024. <https://www.theafricareport.com/343980/ethiopia-pressure-mounts-for-probe-into-killing-of-prominent-oromo-politician/> (accessed November 30, 2024).

<sup>180</sup> “በኢሮሚያ ክልል በመንግሥት የጸጥታ ኃይሎች እና በታጣቂዎች የተፈጸሙ የሰብአዊ መብቶች እና የዓለም አቀፍ የሰብአዊነት ሕግ ጥሰቶች ላይ የተደረገ የምርመራ ሪፖርት” (An Investigative Report on Human Rights Violations and Breaches of International Humanitarian Law Committed by Government Security Forces and Insurgents in the Oromia Region) *Ethiopian Human Rights Commission*, February 28, 2024. <https://ehrc.org/download/በኢሮሚያ-ክልል-በመንግሥት-የጸጥታ-ኃይሎ/> (accessed November 18, 2024).

<sup>181</sup> Interview, NGO worker, Addis Ababa, November 8, 2024

<sup>182</sup> “በኢሮሚያ ክልል በመንግሥት የጸጥታ ኃይሎች እና በታጣቂዎች የተፈጸሙ የሰብአዊ መብቶች እና የዓለም አቀፍ የሰብአዊነት ሕግ ጥሰቶች ላይ የተደረገ የምርመራ ሪፖርት,” 2024, *op. cit.*; “Ethiopia: Events of 2023.” *Human Rights Watch*, December 14, 2023. <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2024/country-chapters/ethiopia> (accessed January 8, 2025).

<sup>183</sup> Østebø, Terje, et. al., 2021, *op. cit.*



incident was the already mentioned killings of 14 Karrayu *gaddaa* leaders by Oromia security forces.<sup>184</sup>

Extrajudicial killings are committed by government security forces for various reasons. Those targeted include those providing support for OLA in cash or kind, yet mere suspicion of such support may be reason enough for being killed. One interlocutor from one of Ethiopia’s mainline churches narrated, for example, that two of its pastors were killed at their homes by security forces during summer 2024, accused of giving food to OLA forces.<sup>185</sup> A senior clergy from the same church confirmed this, and added that there were far more similar cases.<sup>186</sup>

Besides actual and alleged support for the OLA, another reason for such killings could be revenge, with government security forces killing OLA insurgents and civilians after suffering battle losses.<sup>187</sup> One unconfirmed story is about an OLA fighter in Bale who killed a number of government forces around June 2024. He was killed in a shootout with government soldiers, who laid his body in the streets of a nearby town for several days.<sup>188</sup> In other cases, a person abducted by security forces and imprisoned may just end up executed after a period of time.<sup>189</sup> According to one interlocutor: “killing has become more common than arrests.”<sup>190</sup>

Extrajudicial killings are also taking place in prisons, and with lack of records, this occurs with little or no scrutiny. One person was, for example, arrested in June-July 2023, kept in prison for a few days, “and then taken out of town to a place called Minko, ca. 30 minutes from Dembi Dolo, and killed.” His body was found after two days, “but the family wasn’t allowed to have a funeral.”<sup>191</sup> A representative of a local human rights organization said that there were cases where prisoners were killed even after being brought to court. If a judge ordered the police to gather more evidence and to return to court, the easiest “solution” would be to execute the prisoner. The explanation brought to the court would be that “the prisoner tried to escape.”<sup>192</sup> There are also cases where detainees have been killed in police custody because they reported being tortured when appearing in court. In one particular instance, a police officer accused of torture reportedly said openly in the courtroom: “Why do you complain about torture, I can kill you right here.”<sup>193</sup>

Extrajudicial killings are not only committed by government security forces, but also by OLA and other unidentified armed actors.<sup>194</sup> OLA regularly target local government officials, causing many to resign and leave their areas. The so-called *Abba Torbee* (lit; father of the week) is important

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<sup>184</sup> “በከረዩ የሚችሉ ገዳ የጅላ አባላት ግድያ ላይ የተደረገ የምርመራ ሪፖርት” (Investigation Report on the Killing of Civilians by Members of the Jila Militia in Karayu). *Ethiopian Human Rights Commission*, February 2, 2022. <https://ehrc.org/download/በከረዩ-የሚችሉ-ገዳ-የጅላ-አባላት-ግድያ-ለ/> (accessed November 30, 2024).

<sup>185</sup> Interview, former president of an Ethiopian Protestant church, Addis Ababa, October 11, 2024.

<sup>186</sup> Interview, senior leader of an Ethiopian Protestant church, Addis Ababa, November 23, 2024.

<sup>187</sup> Damene Abeba. “Conflict Trend Analyses: Western Oromia.” *Rift Valley Institute*, March 2023.

<https://riftvalley.net/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/RVI-2023.03.14-Western-Oromia-Conflict-Trend-Report.pdf> (accessed December 3, 2024)

<sup>188</sup> Interview, university professor, Addis Ababa, November 18, 2024.

<sup>189</sup> Interview, NGO worker, Addis Ababa, November 8, 2024.

<sup>190</sup> Interview, former employee at Dembi Dolo University, Addis Ababa, November 13, 2024.

<sup>191</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>192</sup> Phone interview, local human rights organization executive, December 14, 2024.

<sup>193</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>194</sup> “የሰብዓዊ መብት ጥሰት በኦሮሚያ ክልል,” 2024, *op. cit.*

here, operating as OLA’s intelligence wing and tasked with assassinating government officials.<sup>195</sup> Suspicion of collaborating with the government would easily lead to executions by the OLA. If a person, for example, from the rural areas who visits a nearby town he or she may be killed by OLA upon his return – suspected of being a *nyapa* (traitor).<sup>196</sup>

The nature and scale of arbitrary arrests, abductions, and extrajudicial killings are closely related to a lack of discipline and accountability, both among state- and non-state actors, the weakening of law and order, and general instability. These developments have paved the way for the development of a war economy in Oromia’s conflict zones, where distinctions between political groups and criminal elements and between ideological and more opportunistic motives are blurred. This also involves, as noted, the active collaboration of state actors, and one interlocutor claimed that local government officials sometimes re-allocate public funds under the “security” heading, as this is exempt from auditing, and then cooperate with OLA units in sharing the money. If disagreement over how the funds would be distributed occur or if officials refuse to share the funds, these officials risked being targeted by the OLA. The OLA, in turn, would report the killing as “being part of the struggle.”<sup>197</sup> Another source told the story of a wealthy businessman who in 2021 was killed by OLA “in the center of Dembi Dolo. He even had a brother in OLA.”<sup>198</sup>

This situation has created deep sentiments of fear, where people avoid talking about the killings. A senior clergy from a mainline Protestant church said that he had received numerous reports about local pastors being killed, but little information about possible perpetrators: “People are killed by different actors, but no one wants to put the blame on anyone, being afraid of retaliations.”<sup>199</sup>

## Torture, Gender-Based Violence, and Daily Harassment

Torture in Ethiopia is a common and something nearly taken for granted as part of incarcerations. The EHRC has provided detailed documentation on the continued use of torture by government security forces.<sup>200</sup> Systematic torture is obviously a part of interrogation processes, something narrated by interlocutors who had been detained: “they were asking questions and beating me with the butts of the AK47 and with pistols.”<sup>201</sup> An executive for a local human rights organization narrated how “some prisoners cannot even walk when they appear in court.”<sup>202</sup>

The EHRC has also reported that detainees were held in conditions without access to “toilets, clean bedding, hygiene products, and adequate food and drink.”<sup>203</sup> One interlocutor who was detained

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<sup>195</sup> “*Mootummaa Naannoo Oromiyaa: Miseensonni ‘Abbaa Torbee’ ragaa waliin to’ataman*” (Government of the Oromia Region: “Members of ‘Abba Torbee’ have been arrested with evidence). *BBC Afaan Oromoo*, June 5, 2020. <https://www.bbc.com/afaanoromoo/oduu-52932024> (accessed January 3, 2025).

<sup>196</sup> Interview, former employee at Dembi Dolo University, Addis Ababa, November 13, 2024.

<sup>197</sup> Interview, Oromo activist, Addis Ababa, December 14, 2024.

<sup>198</sup> Interview, former employee at Dembi Dolo University, Addis Ababa, November 13, 2024.

<sup>199</sup> Interview, senior leader of an Ethiopian Protestant church, Addis Ababa, November 23, 2024.

<sup>200</sup> “በአርማያ ክልል በመንግሥት የጸጥታ ኃይሎች እና በታጣቂዎች የተፈጸሙ የሰብአዊ መብቶች እና የዓለም አቀፍ የሰብአዊነት ሕግ ጥሰቶች ላይ የተደረገ የምርመራ ሪፖርት,” 2024, *op. cit.*

<sup>201</sup> Interview, activist, December 11, 2024 (information withheld).

<sup>202</sup> Phone interview, local human rights organization executive, December 14, 2024.

<sup>203</sup> “Alarming rise in individuals abducted by police and taken to secret camps: EHRC.” *Ethiopia Observer*, October 27, 2024. <https://www.ethiopiaobserver.com/2024/10/27/alarming-rise-in-individuals-abducted-by-police-and-taken-to-secret-camps-ehrc/> (accessed December 4, 2024).

in 2021 told how he was put in a cell “perhaps four by four meters, with 19 persons sleeping there, on the cement floor without any madras or covers.”<sup>204</sup> The above-mentioned executive of the local human rights organization reported that in a district in West Shoa, a police station that had the capacity to hold 45 prisoners had over 300.<sup>205</sup>

Gender Based Violence (GBV) has seen a significant increase in Ethiopia over the last year, with the number of different GBV cases rising from an estimated 3.5 million in 2021 to 7.2 million in 2024.<sup>206</sup> A high number of these cases are related to armed conflict, and GBV was common during the Tigray war. Displacement is also a major factor for GBV, as it leads to the unsafe environments and breakdown of existing support mechanisms. Despite the increase of GBV, there is a lack of data and systematic analyses and it is clear that stigma and fear of retaliations means that many cases remain unreported.

Accurate numbers for GBV in Oromia are also lacking, but it is evident that continued conflict has led to significant increase.<sup>207</sup> Women-led households are in particular subject to GBV, and there are also reports of a rise of GBV cases in displacement camps in Oromia, where unmarried girls are particularly vulnerable. Female detainees are often subject to GBV, and particularly those in so-called informal detention centers.<sup>208</sup>

A new development is the daily harassment of ordinary people by the militia and members of the *Gaachana Sirnaa*. Patrolling their neighborhood and managing checkpoints, the members of the militia are regularly accused of being abusive and of constantly “harassing people.”<sup>209</sup> Videos documenting such abuses have in recent months appeared on social media.<sup>210</sup> Interlocutors reported that people will be stopped and questioned by the militia on daily bases and for no reasons: “these people lack training, they are brutal and will stop you at any time asking for your ID, and demanding money.”<sup>211</sup> One said that the militia are given the power “to come to your home at night and arrest you.”<sup>212</sup>

In eastern parts of Oromia, in areas with a cash economy based on *khat* trade, local militias are reported to harass people by going around to people’s houses as night demanding money. Accordingly, “they go to one house one night, to another house the next, and after a while the start

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<sup>204</sup> Interview, Addis Ababa, December 2, 2024.

<sup>205</sup> Phone interview, local human rights organization executive, December 14, 2024.

<sup>206</sup> “Ethiopia: Protection Analyses Update.” *Protection Cluster Ethiopia*, August 2024. [https://globalprotectioncluster.org/sites/default/files/2024-10/pau\\_ethiopia\\_august\\_final.pdf](https://globalprotectioncluster.org/sites/default/files/2024-10/pau_ethiopia_august_final.pdf) (accessed December 11, 2024).

<sup>207</sup> “Ethiopia: Protection Analyses Update,” 2024, *op. cit.*

<sup>208</sup> Abdi Biyenssa, 2024b, *op. cit.*; Abdi Biyenssa. “In-depth: Silent Suffering: Tales of gender-based violence echo across conflict hit Western Oromia.” *Addis Standard*, March 1, 2024. <https://addisstandard.com/in-depth-silent-suffering-tales-of-gender-based-violence-echo-across-conflict-hit-western-oromia/> (December 12, 2024); Phone interview, local human rights organization executive, December 14, 2024.

<sup>209</sup> Phone interview, local resident, eastern Oromia, November 17, 2024; interview, university professor, Addis Ababa, November 18, 2024.

<sup>210</sup> Posted on Jawar Mohammed’s Facebook page, January 3, 2025. <https://fb.watch/wYMe1B7LY-/> (accessed January 7, 2025).

<sup>211</sup> Phone interview, local resident, eastern Oromia, November 17, 2024.

<sup>212</sup> Phone interview, local human rights organization executive, December 14, 2024.

again with the first one. If you refuse to give, they will beat you.”<sup>213</sup> It was also said that if one person goes to the market and sells *khat*, the militia will come and visit him at night, asking for a share of his profit.

## Enforced Conscriptions

Rumors about enforced conscription to the military started to surface in the first part of 2024, and more concrete information came during fall. In early November one source narrated how young boys were detained “while meeting, chewing chat, and playing games”<sup>214</sup> and on November 13, Jawar Mohammed went public on Facebook, reporting how local security officials were rounding up young boys and holding them at detention centers, before sending them off to military training camps. He moreover claimed that parents were approached by official who offered the release of their sons in return for ransom – ranging from 100,000 to 500,000 birr (\$800-\$4,000).<sup>215</sup> *Addis Standard* confirmed these claims a few days later,<sup>216</sup> and in early December, EHRC published a report that detailed how boys as young as 11 years old across Oromia had been subject to enforced conscription. It also said students wearing school uniforms and arrested on their way home from school were taken and that parents were forced to pay ransom to have their – underage – children released.<sup>217</sup> One interlocutor said that different zones and districts had been given quotas of boys to be recruited, and in order to meet the targets, officials had resorted to enforced conscription. He also claimed that the army would not accept those who claimed to have been forcefully conscribed, but added that if a person reported this and asked to be sent home “he risks lots of problem from the local officials.”<sup>218</sup>

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<sup>213</sup> Interview, local resident in Haramaya, Addis Ababa, November 7, 2024.

<sup>214</sup> Interview, former OLF official, Addis Ababa, November 1, 2024.

<sup>215</sup> “State and Ransom: Jawar Mohammed’s Alarming Account of Ethiopia’s Forced Conscription Crisis,” *Addis Insight*, November 13, 2024. [https://addisinsight.net/2024/11/state-and-ransom-jawar-mohammeds-alarming-account-of-ethiopias-forced-conscription-crisis/#google\\_vignette](https://addisinsight.net/2024/11/state-and-ransom-jawar-mohammeds-alarming-account-of-ethiopias-forced-conscription-crisis/#google_vignette) (accessed January 3, 2025).

<sup>216</sup> “News: Oromia Residents Report Widespread Forced Conscription, Allege Detentions, ‘Extortion’ by Gov’t Forces,” *Addis Standard*, November 20, 2024. <https://addisstandard.com/oromia-residents-report-widespread-forced-conscription-allege-detentions-extortion-by-govt-forces/> (accessed December 6, 2024).

<sup>217</sup> “ኦሮሚያ ክልል፡- ሕፃናትን ጨምሮ ሰዎችን ከሕግ ውጪ መያዝን በተመለከተ” (Oromia Region: Regarding the Extrajudicial Detention of People, Including Children). *Ethiopian Human Rights Commission*, December 5, 2024. <https://ehrc.org/ኦሮሚያ-ክልል-ሕፃናትን-ጨምሮ-ሰዎችን-ከሕ/> (accessed December 6, 2024).

<sup>218</sup> Phone interview, local resident of eastern Oromia, December 6, 2024.

## 6. Conclusions

The political and security situation in Oromia is a reflection of the broader challenges facing Ethiopia. The region continues to grapple with the complexities of insurgencies, authoritarian governance, and pervasive human rights violations. The important point to be made is how this has created a situation of unpredictability and randomness when it comes to human rights abuse. While known critics of the political authorities are at risk of government reactions, this also extends to anyone suspected of support for movements like OLA are at risk of government reactions the different and unprecedented situation today is, however, that lawlessness, corruption, and lack of accountability *have put anyone at risk* regardless of actual oppositional activities.

The erosion of democratic processes and institutions under the current administration has intensified grievances among the Oromo population. The narrowing of political space, suppression of opposition, and widespread corruption have not only undermined governance but also deepened mistrust in state institutions. The ongoing insurgency in parts of Oromia has had profound impacts, including the loss of lives, worsened food insecurity, and internal displacements. It has also paved the way for widespread human rights violations committed by both state and non-state actors. Civilians bear the brunt of these atrocities, caught between government forces, insurgents, and criminal groups. Arbitrary arrests, extrajudicial killings, and forced displacements have created an environment of fear and uncertainty.

Governance has become increasingly securitized, and the government frequently uses accusations of OLA affiliation to target critics. Corruption is rampant, with local officials and security forces exploiting the conflict for personal gain with very little liability. Control is therefore maintained through a situation of lawlessness which exacerbates conditions at the grassroots.

Ethiopian youth, both from Oromia and elsewhere, are applying different mechanisms to cope with their precarious life-situations. Many “vote with their feet” by leaving the country through the dangerous Eastern Corridor, which crosses the Red Sea into Yemen and on to Saudi Arabia. From there they try to make it north. An estimated 23,000 people make this journey every month and the vast majority is from Ethiopia.<sup>219</sup> Another report said the number of refugees crossing the Red Sea went up 32 percent in 2023 and that 95 percent of them were from Ethiopia.<sup>220</sup>

There is a lacuna of information about refugee returnees to Ethiopia. The last study about assisted (voluntary) returns was done in 2016, evaluating Norway’s agreement with Ethiopia about assisted returns.<sup>221</sup> The entirely different situation today makes these studies outdated. The European Union

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<sup>219</sup> “Ethiopia: Protection Analyses Update,” 2024, *op. cit.*

<sup>220</sup> “2023 Movements between the Horn of Africa and the Arabian Peninsula.” *The International Organization for Migration*, May 24, 2024. [https://eastandhornofafrica.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbd1701/files/documents/2024-05/iom\\_migration\\_overview\\_hoa-arabian-peninsula\\_2023.pdf](https://eastandhornofafrica.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbd1701/files/documents/2024-05/iom_migration_overview_hoa-arabian-peninsula_2023.pdf) (accessed December 15, 2024).

<sup>221</sup> Strand, Arne et. al. *Programmes for assisted return to Afghanistan, Iraqi Kurdistan, Ethiopia and Kosovo: A comparative evaluation of effectiveness and outcomes*. Bergen: Christian Michelsen Institute, 2016. See also Brekke, Jan-Paul. *Why go back? Assisted return from Norway*. Report no. 08. Oslo: Institute for Social Research, 2016;

suspended issuing visas for Ethiopian citizens in April 2024, citing lack of information about returnees and “low level of cooperation.”<sup>222</sup>

For Ethiopia to move forward, it is imperative to restore democratic norms, ensure accountability for abuses, and create an inclusive political environment that accommodates diverse perspectives. A coordinated, multifaceted approach that addresses political, security, and socio-economic challenges is the only viable path toward lasting peace and stability in Oromia and Ethiopia at large.

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Talleraas, Cathrine. *The Unintended Effects of Norway’s Readmission Agreement with Ethiopia*. PRIO Policy Brief, 3. Oslo: The Peace Research Institute Oslo, 2014.

<sup>222</sup> “Ethiopia: Council restricts visa provision.” Press release, *Council of the European Union*, April 29, 2024. <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2024/04/29/ethiopia-council-restricts-visa-provision/> (accessed January 16, 2024).