

# Promoting Reconciliation, Peace, and Democracy Building in Oromia and Ethiopia

## *Concept Note*

*Forum for Reconciliation, Peace, and Democracy*

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## **Introduction**

This document is prepared to propose the creation of a forum to promote reconciliation, peace, and democracy in Oromia and Ethiopia. The most immediate goal of the forum is to propose mechanisms to put the faltering reform process that the country initiated two years ago back on the track.

Ethiopia has a consistent and persistent history of civil wars, military coups, political violence, inter-ethnic conflicts, and popular uprising since its formation that has left the people without a stable country. Nonetheless, the latest widespread protests have culminated with the creation of a reformist government of Prime Minister Abiy has introduced rapid political liberalization on the one hand and faced a surge in large-scale conflicts on the other hand.

Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed assumed power with the explicit promise to address the root causes of the popular grievances, which lasted for over half a decade, during which thousands of protesters lost their lives. In his first parliamentary address, he acknowledged and, in fact, apologized for the government's past repressive actions and pledged to undertake far-reaching democratic reforms that can take the country from a de facto autocratic state to a multi-party democracy. In light of that, he undertook several encouraging and promising measures during the first few months of his

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administration, which included, among others, opening up democratic spaces, freedom of expression, reforms of the military and security apparatuses, etc. The initial pace of the change has created a widespread hope that Ethiopia would soon transit itself to the era of democracy and lasting peace. Particularly, the Oromo youth, known as Qeerro, the engine behind the change, hoped that generations of systematic marginalization of the Oromo people would come to an end.

Added to this optimism was peace efforts with Eritrea that won him global accolade and the much-coveted Nobel Peace Prize. However, the promising democratic space and media freedom initiated at the beginning of the reform were rapidly rolled back, and the reform process encountered a series of setbacks. In sharp contrast to the expectations of Ethiopians and the international community, the achievements of the early few months began to erode. Even more alarmingly, the government began to resort to old tactics to resolve conflicts: military adventures and a series of state of emergency measures.

In the past two years, Ethiopia has experienced both rapid political liberalization and a surge in widespread conflicts. The rise in militancy, ethnic skirmishes, authoritarian political institutions, and the state's fragility are the primary driving force behind the violence. Recent sporadic ethnic outbreaks have displaced millions of people, caused a massive humanitarian crisis, and left one-third of the country in a state of emergency. The culture of going to war to settle political differences, for instance, the military crackdown in western and southern zones of Oromia, has significantly impacted civilian lives and led to the shutdown of telephone and internet services, in these zones, for more than six months. The emergence of the global coronavirus pandemic emerged in addition to the already worsening internal instability.

As the hope of the change is evaporating, the prime minister's actions, whose catchword is "*Medemer*," which means synergy, ironically causes more controversies in the country. Critics of the Prime Minister characterized him as the reincarnation of imperial persona with prophetic persuasions who cares, if any, little about listening to and addressing the people's widespread grievance. They accused him of prioritizing power consolidation over introducing meaningful democratic transformations and systemic reforms. Evidence for this comes in the form of the rigor he showed for ruling party reform (dissolving the EPRDF and the creation of the Prosperity Party)

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and lack of similar commitment in the areas of transforming state institutions and bringing down bureaucratic red tape. Opposition leaders have accused him of restricting their activities, harassing their supporters, and wanting to dismantle the country's constitution and federal dispensation.

The supporters of the PM dismiss the allegation of his imperial tendencies and praise him as a messiah to move the country forward. They hope that he would reverse the current 'ethnic' federalism and finish up the nation-state building process, commenced a century ago. They also allege that he has to get enough time for the reform to take root, and those who are keen not to wait are remnants of the former regime who strive to derail the nascent reform process.

On top of this, the country faces a number of problems that require immediate attention. With high youth unemployment, widespread poverty, rising inflation, and surging ethnic tension, the country is sitting on a ticking time bomb that can explode anytime. Perceived as an oasis of peace in the turbulent Horn of Africa region, the deterioration of peace and security in Ethiopia can destabilize the already fragile geopolitical situation of the Horn of Africa, which is a crucial shipping route to the world commerce. The turbulent Horn of Africa is home to stateless Somalia, civil war-torn South Sudan, one-man rule Eritrea, and sanction-ridden Sudan. The potential implosion of the situation in Ethiopia, particularly due to the derailment of the reform process, may send hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of refugees to Europe and further complicate European politics. In this case, it's worth noting that Ethiopia is hosts millions of refugees and itself being a nation of 110 million people.

The coronavirus pandemic's breakout adds another layer of the problem to the country beset with a chain of chronic troubles. The declaration of a nationwide state of emergency to control the spread of coronavirus has put the fragile democratic process on hold. The government's motivation to declare the state of emergency seems to be mainly to acquire new sweeping powers. As a result, the government has indefinitely postponed the elections scheduled, triggering a constitutional crisis. The measure put the people of Ethiopia in great doubt and concern about the sincerity of PM Abiy's administration to undertake genuine democratic reform. Most importantly, COVID-19 will lead to an economic downturn, further complicating the country's already tense political situation.

The outcome could be a worrisome proliferation of violent ethnic-based conflicts as well as civil unrest throughout the country.

## **Rationale**

The Forum for Reconciliation, Peace, and Democracy is an initiative put in place by concerned citizens who want to contribute their part in facilitating the culture of discussion and smooth transition of the country to a democracy. In this regard, inclusive dialogue among all actors, including political parties and civic organizations, is necessary to help reduce the tense temperature. Creating a conducive environment for reconciliation paves the way for an active democratic state formation. All concerned parties (party leaders, elites civil society, religious and traditional leaders) must focus their efforts on concrete steps required to facilitate a transition to a genuine democratic state that accommodates all Ethiopians' interest, which is anchored on the principles of equality, equity, respect for human rights, tolerance, and respect for constitutional order.

Ethiopia is at a critical political juncture, and the current change brings both a challenge and an opportunity for the country. Our approach is working on mitigating risks to the reform. We sincerely believe that if the reform process is not properly handled, there's a risk of reversing achievements already attained, ending with the old ways of doing politics in Ethiopia. In the worst-case scenario, the situation may descend to complete chaos and state failure. The best way for the reform to succeed is by moving forward with political dialogue and reconciliation, through the participation of all concerned parties into the political process.

Ethiopia needs an immediate series of dialogues to chart her way out of the looming crisis that threatens to devastate nascent democratic exercise. Those dialogues are crucial to building lasting peace, democracy, and shared values that can unite all. According to senior expertise and key players for the 2018 change, there is credible evidence that the reform agenda has been derailed, and the situation is rapidly descending to widespread conflicts in many parts of the country. We believe that the above factors are compelling reasons to initiate a dialogue to build consensus and avert the looming conflict in Oromia and throughout Ethiopia as well as the wider region.

## Objectives

The ultimate aim of the **Forum for Reconciliation, Peace, and Democracy** is to create a peaceful and stable Oromia and Ethiopia, where cooperation prevails over destructive competitions; consensus prevails over hostile disagreements; all parties should solve their problems or differences through a civilized dialogue. The Forum for Reconciliation, Peace, and Democracy plans to work simultaneous on the following objectives:

**(a) Create a platform to discuss, define and refine the interest of Oromo and the state of Oromo politics in the Ethiopian political context**

This is a *ne plus ultra* platform where we re-evaluate and re-assess the state of the Oromo politics. Under the guidance of elite facilitators, this objective intends to create a mass-based, inward-looking, and continuous engagement with the Oromo mass. The goal is clear and precise: *to re-assess, re-evaluate, and redefine the Oromo interest in a self-evident manner*. The reform has brought into the surface deep-seated contradictions of the state that has further polarized the nation. For example, the discourse of restoring Ethiopia's past glory has caused resentment and fear among the nations and nationalities of the country. Nowhere this fear is palpable more than in Oromia, whose protests contributed to the lion's share in bringing about this political change. Oromia, the most populous region of the country, makes nearly half of the Ethiopia population. The Oromo elites have rightly argued that the current reform empowers the proponents of the old imperial order that wants to overturn their incremental gains, let alone to defend the current federal arrangement. Such an approach, they espouse, has the potential to side-line the legitimate grievances of the Oromo people and take the country to the uncharted territory. In light of this, we want to host online and offline forums of Oromo political actors and stakeholders to come together to deliberate, articulate, and formulate a blueprint of the Oromo questions and interests in light of the political dynamics Ethiopia. Such inclusive engagements, among all players, to produce a consensus will potentially reduce tensions and frictions between rival groups, dispel a culture of mistrust among once hostile factions, create public pressure on the actors to adhere to matters of mutual interests meant to build consensus.

**(b) Facilitate the creation of a forum for all Oromo opposition parties to discuss their vision for Oromia and Ethiopia to solidify and enhance understanding between and among Oromo political parties or finding alternatives to current dysfunctionality**

Building democratic governance and institutions are essential elements and prerequisites for promoting representative democracy and sustainable socio-political and economic development. Democracy works best when there is strong and credible opposition in any political system. Here, first focus is in Oromia to create a platform where the opposition parties come together to talk about the future of the country and forge a coalition if possible. In this connection, our goal is to create a forum for the opposition parties in Europe, North America or Ethiopia to convene for an in-person discussion.

**(c) Assist with conflict resolution through reconciliation between government, oppositions parties and rebel groups to build and maintain peace in Oromia and Ethiopia**

The Forum for Peace, Democracy, and Reconciliation also has a bold and ambitious to facilitate a reconciliation forum between the government, opposition parties, and rebel groups to have a discussion. In doing so, we want to enhance a culture of both formal and informal discussions, deliberations, trust, and cooperation among political parties and their leadership on the crucial domestic, regional, and global issues. We hope the government and oppositions can work together and hammer out on how to conduct fair and free elections and avoid post-election violence and, above all, agree on to co-govern the country if such need arises in the future.