

## Amnesty's Report: Don't "kill" the messengers

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Often, we have the intention to believe that human rights abuse is unique in countries where tyranny has reigned. We will be hard-pressed to find a country where human rights abuse does not exist. However, there is a big difference between those who pay attention to any human rights violation and those who ignore it. Those who pay attention make the effort to make violators accountable and protect the rights and interests of their people. Those who ignore it often wait until it is too late for them to take any corrective actions. Often, those in power are abusive; for that reason, we must have a system where ordinary citizens can report whatever grievances they have and the government is held accountable for any corrective actions it takes. What we are currently witnessing unfold in the world stage is the result of decades of human rights abuse, racism, and human rights violations perpetrated against African Americans in the US. Because the US government ignored these overt, covert, and systematic violations, protests and riots erupted not only in various US cities, but also in London, Berlin, and Toronto. It is in the backdrop of these protests that Amnesty International issued a human rights violations report in Ethiopia. Amnesty's report is not unique to Ethiopia; it evaluates the human rights situation in almost every country including The United States and the United Kingdom. Often the response of the concerned governments has been defensive and dismissive. These governments act as if they own human rights issues and any reports of violation in their nation are uncalled for. They don't want to deal with the problem they see beneath the surface. Until the problem reaches its epic moment and their major cities streets are filled by the abused and victims of human rights violations.

For many years, this has been the approach taken by the Ethiopian various governments. In fact, the TPLF led EPRDF government had a "war room" that responded and attacked all human rights violation reports including reports by the US Department of State. Such a defensive and dismissive approach did not help the EPRDF. It is the responsibility of the government to have a closer look to all human rights abuse allegations even if and when the government thinks the report is politically motivated. If the "Prosperity Party-led" government is serious about human rights reform in Ethiopia, it needs to take all human rights violation reports seriously and use the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission or other independent body to investigate all human rights violations reports. Whether we like it or not, human rights violations will be with us for a long time to come; it is only when we make people and institutions accountable, we can improve human rights protections for our citizens. The current government must learn from its predecessors and must change the status quo.

In 2018, during his speech in Hawasaa, I was amazed but not surprised when Dr. Debretsion Gebremichale claimed that he was not aware of the gross human rights violations in Ethiopia and he learned about it "recently". This is an indicative that clearly shows how our "officials are out of touch with the reality on the ground. How is this possible? Are we going to continue to see

such a bizarre response from our current officials? Only time will tell. Until then, we have to convey a clear message and say denial will not get us anywhere. It is disturbing to see Dr. Abiy's supporters condemn Amnesty International. "Killing the messenger" will not change the message. The message is coming from our people. Amnesty only reported the allegations that it learned from eyewitnesses. It is the government's responsibility, to make sure what is alleged is true or not and if it is true to make those responsible accountable. The barrage of condemnation against Amnesty International or any other organization is a foolish attempt to silence our people. Hence, I urge supporters of Dr. Abiy's government to stop condemning and demonizing the messengers like Amnesty and push the government to take the report seriously. If we allow the government to take a dismissive approach, we are not any better than those who violate the rights of our citizens. We can't be complacent knowing the report is a cry for help from those who are helpless. Moreover, we are opening the door for a cover-up and for more human rights abuse. I ask you to stop being enablers and demand a system that mitigates human rights violations. Put pressure on the government to allow an independent investigation of the incidents in the report, make its findings, and the method used to investigate the incidents public in a clear transparent manner. Most of all, take the appropriate action against violators and take corrective measures to make sure such violations will not be repeated again.

The new trajectory for the protection of human rights in Ethiopia cannot be one and the same with our past experience. Today, the importance of human rights protection is amplified in the world stage symbolizing what happened to Mr. George Floyd in the United States. Ethiopians have paid an enormous price for their rights and freedom. We should not allow anything that will suck the oxygen from the journey we have begun. We must be duty-bound to make sure all our citizens human and civic right is protected unconditionally. The recent Amnesty International report on Ethiopia may not be to your liking and may not be accurate to its last details; however, we must recognize the report is done based on eyewitnesses' accounts. Therefore, it is the responsibility of the government and particularly the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission to investigate every allegation. If we wait until we see a video to acknowledge the existence of human rights violations in Ethiopia, it may be too late to calm the anger and the frustration of the people who will take the law into their hands to protect themselves and their families. Stop politicizing human rights issues.

There is no shame in acknowledging the government's shortcomings. Dr. Abiy's administration cannot be tone-deaf to human right reports and act as if everything is normal. This will be contrary to everything he claims he stands for. Take the report with a grain of salt, but take it seriously. Don't dismiss it, thoroughly investigate every allegation, and make your findings public. As they say, "where there is smoke, there is fire". If the government and its supporters reject Amnesty's report and simply dismiss it as a politically motivated report, the current regime will not be any different than the past regimes. The rights of our citizens cannot be violated under any circumstances. Unless Dr. Abiy's administration embodies the basic principle of human rights protection and adheres to its values, abuses of power by political leaders, state authorities, bad actors, and those connected with the ruling party will have devastating effects. We must change our approach; we must not regress to yesteryears.

Yes, it takes time to change the system and to put the necessary infrastructure to gather information and open the door for the public to report human rights violations. However, we don't need to wait until the necessary infrastructure is put in place to combat human right violations. We can start now by changing our behaviors. Obviously, most of us claim we want

"change" in our country, but we are not willing to examine our own conduct and change ourselves. Change begins with each of us if we want fundamental and true change for our people. Talking about "change" in its abstract form would be just talking about an imaginary concept. If we want something concrete and real change, let us start changing our behaviors and actions. Change does not mean recycling individuals or organizations from one position to another. The current Amnesty International report has exposed how the same we are in our approach. The only difference is the role most are playing is reversed. Those who used to wave and embrace human rights reports only when they were opponents of the government are now condemning it because they have become supporters of the government. Those who were part of the government and supported the previous regime condemned and attacked human rights reports in the past, are now waving it because it fits their political agenda.

It is clear the problem is not with the report, it is with the mindset we have. Instead of recognizing human rights violation reports as tools to help those in power take corrective actions, these reports are considered "tools for the opposition" designed to attack the government. No one can deny such reports are weaponized by anti-government elements; however, the answer is not to dismiss and condemn the reports. The answer should be to accept it, examine it, and take the appropriate action to get to the bottom of it. It is important to understand that most human rights reports are allegations based on witnesses' accounts. It is up to independent fact-finders to investigate all allegations and determine what is true and what is fiction. We need to change our mindset and stop using human rights reports only when it fits our political purpose.

Yes, all allegations are not true, but all allegations are not false either. Dr. Abiy's government has the burden of changing the paradigm in our nation. As far as I am concerned, he has been a leader who listens to the heartbeats of our people. If and when he fails to listen, we need to push him in the right direction. Giving any administration blind and unconditional support will be to that government's detrimental. In the long run, it is a path to its demise. Let us take a lesson from the current incident in the United States; this incident illustrates many things. The most notable is how combustible human rights abuse can be if it is not addressed properly, make the abusers accountable, and craft solutions to solve problems that lead to injustice. As we witness what is taking place in the US, let us draw lessons from it to make our nation and the world better. Most of all, let us change our mindset and understand that we all are in this together in every sense. If we continue to ignore any form of human rights abuse, if we campaign against human rights organization with the desire to strangle their voice and "kill the messengers", there will be no lasting peace, ergo "no justice, no peace" will become our slogan. Henceforth, investigate all human rights reports and allegations of human rights abuse that are not in the reports and make those who violate human rights accountable no matter who they are.