



## **Taxing Political Dissent in Ethiopia**

### **Executive Summary**

The Amhara Association of America (AAA) has verified that since the intensified crackdown dissenters in May 2022, the Prosperity Party using exuberant procedural fees to economically cripple critics as part of a systemic silencing of journalists and public figures sympathetic to the Amhara cause. This is achieved through a series of unjust arrests, seizures of private property, and indefinitely delaying trials after collecting bail money from accused individuals. These actions have left several prominent journalists, advocates and critics facing economic hardship. AAA finds that these actions amount to taxing political dissent and are a mechanism for silencing voices by penalizing criticisms against the government.

Individual cases reflected in this report are based on firsthand information from victims. AAA's investigators interviewed 10 journalists, activists, and public figures during preparation of this report. All interviews show that victims were arbitrarily arrested without due process and legitimate accusations. The bail money set by authorities was disproportionate to the alleged crimes and circumstances of the individuals. Authorities also seized private cell phones, computers, and other electronic devices of victims without

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court orders. There was also a failure to guarantee a speedy trial, establish a formal charge, or return bail money to released individuals.

## **Political Context**

In 2018, when Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed Ali first came into power, the conditions of human and civil rights in Ethiopia seemed to have improved for a brief period. Especially freedom of expression for political parties, activists, and journalists. The public witnessed the release of hundreds of journalists, activists, and other prisoners of conscience. Prime Minister Abiy came into power following mass protests among the Amhara, Oromo and other communities of Ethiopia which ousted the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) from central power. However, political power in the country shifted from the TPLF-led Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) to the Oromia Prosperity Party (OPP) [also known as the Oromo People's Democratic Organization; OPDO].

Not long after, [Prosperity Party officials started unlawfully detaining](#) journalists, activists, opposition party members, and human rights advocates. In 2022, there was a major crackdown on students, teachers, journalists, health professionals, community leaders, and other prominent influencers who spoke out against injustices committed against Amhara people across Ethiopia. The crackdown was especially targeted towards those engaged in bringing awareness to the ongoing Amhara Genocide in the Oromia, Benishangul-Gumuz and other Regions and the persecution of Amhara civilians by Tigrayan militias in Northern Ethiopia. Unlawfully detained individuals were kept in jails for long periods without formal charges. Beatings and insults from security personnel were common. Security officials also implemented third-degree methods of interrogation on detained victims.

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The main purpose of this report is not to expose all human rights violations perpetrated by government security agents against arrested individuals. Rather, this report aims to disclose the government's measure of taxing political dissent. The taxes are applied in the form of excessive bail and sometimes by directly seizing properties belonging to the accused without due process of the court.

### **Taxing Political Dissent**

Under international law, articles 17 and 19 of the Ethiopian Constitution expand on the rights to liberty of Ethiopian citizens. The constitution states that individuals must be protected from arbitrary arrests and accused individuals have the right to legal counsel, the right to stand before a judge within 48 hours of their arrest, the right to be protected from coerced confessions, and the right to a speedy trial within a reasonable time. Article 19 also states that accused suspects have the right to be released on bail. The purpose of releasing accused individuals on bail is in accordance with an individual's right to maintain innocence until proven guilty. It serves to ensure innocent citizens are not serving time for crimes they have not committed. Accused individuals pay the bail with the understanding that they will receive the money back once they have appeared before the law on all the designated court dates and have maintained their innocence.

Interviews conducted with political detainees indicate that authorities repeatedly detained victims without presenting a court order for their arrest or even communicating the reason for their arrest. If allowed bail, accused individuals are often asked to pay an amount that is disproportionate to the nature of the crimes they are accused of. Once released, officials repeatedly failed to institute a formal charge against the accused individuals. Accused individuals are not guaranteed a speedy trial and are often turned away when they inquire about their case. There is a pattern within the Ethiopian government of unjustly arresting vocal critics of the Prosperity Party administration and the ongoing Amhara Genocide.

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The government is silencing criticism by jailing opponents outside the law for an arbitrary amount of time.

Below are names and personal accounts from public figures, journalists, and activists that were unlawfully detained by authorities during the Prosperity Party's crackdown against dissenters and later released on bail.

### **Journalist Abay Zewdu**

Journalist and editor-in-chief of Amhara Media Center, Abay Zewdu has been unlawfully detained by authorities on two times. He was first detained on July 18, 2021, after reporting an attack on Amhara residents of the Kemashi Zone in the Benishangul-Gumuz Region of Ethiopia. Abay was detained and interrogated by government personnel for a second time on September 10, 2022.



**Figure 1:** Pictured is journalist and editor-in-chief of Amhara Media Center, Abay Zewdu.

Abay Zewdu gave AAA the following account:

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*“In 2021, there was an incident where Gumuz militias attacked ethnic Amhara residents in the Kemashi Zone of Benishangul-Gumuz Region. There were at least 50 residents killed in the attack and many others were displaced. About 200 of the internally displaced residents (from Kemashi) came to Addis Ababa. I met with these residents and interviewed them. I reported the situation in Benishangul-Gumuz and the conditions of the victims on Amhara Media Center. The government was unhappy and detained me for reporting the truth. Security forces arrested me without following legal procedures such as showing a court warrant for my arrest or even disclosing who they were and who had ordered my arrest. When I asked them who they are, they told me they were security agents for the federal government, and that their boss had ordered them to arrest me. They detained me for 10 days in the prison center. On the 10th day, they released me on a 5,000 ETB bail.”*

Since his release, Abay has not received a court date nor have federal personnel established formal charges against him. However, Abay told AAA:

*“I asked the concerned officials at the police administration to return the money. They told me ‘we are not allowed to give you the money back.’ I asked for the official that had the authority to return my money. They told me to ask permission from the security office and submit a formal application. They told me they will return the money if I do so.”*

Abay added that he had requested his money from the police administration office on 5 different visits. He added that the procedural bureaucracy is intentionally long and designed to wear out individuals requesting bail refunds. Abay told AAA it seemed like the administration had no intention of returning the bail money. Abay was finally able to secure a refund after several efforts.

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Abay was unlawfully detained for a second time on September 10, 2022. The security personnel did not specify the reason for Abay's arrest on this occasion. Abay was first taken to the Federal Bureau of Criminal Investigations around Mexico sub-city of Addis Ababa, the capital city of Ethiopia. Abay was interrogated there and later taken to Aba Samuel Police Station where he was detained for 24 days. The officials failed to establish formal charges against Abay during the 24 days he was detained. However, Abay was asked to pay a bail of 5,000 ETB despite having no charges against him.

Abay described his ordeal to AAA as follows:

*“I was released with a bail of 5,000 ETB following my 24-day detention at the police station. I have asked the federal bureau of investigation to return the money 3 times. But I was unsuccessful. In addition to the money, they seized my mobile phone and SIM card. They are unwilling to return both the money and the mobile phone to me.”*

**Lecturer, Journalist and Political Pundit Meskerem Abera**

Meskerem Abera is a well-known political analyst, journalist and founder of Ethio-Nikat Media, an independent news channel. Meskerem uses her platform to bring awareness to the plight of Amhara people across Ethiopia and the persecution of ethnic Amharas across Ethiopia and particularly in the Oromia Region. She is a vocal critic of the federal and regional government's failure and negligence in protecting civilians.



**Figure 2:** Pictured is political analyst, lecturer and founder of Ethio-Nikat Media, Meskerem Abera.

Meskerem told AAA the following:

*“I was detained on May 21st, 2022. I was detained at Bole Airport - the moment I landed from Bahir Dar. During that time, members of the federal police force did not communicate the reason for my arrest. They said they wanted me for interrogation purposes.”*

Meskerem was released on a 15,000 ETB bail after being unlawfully detained for 23 days. The prosecution appealed against her release to the Federal High Court and the Federal Supreme Court. Meskerem was released on June 15, 2022, after the Cassation Division of the Federal Supreme Court affirmed the decision of the Federal High Court and First Instance Court. Meskerem informed AAA that federal security personnel seized two of her laptops, her passport, and two mobile phones along with SIM cards. The seizure happened without a court order. Meskerem told AAA she has requested the security officials to return her properties on three different occasions. During the writing of this report, Meskerem had yet to receive either her confiscated properties or bail money.

On December 13, 2022, Meskerem was once again arrested by security forces in the 22 Area of Addis Ababa city. During the arrest, members of the Federal Police personnel told

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Meskerem's husband (Fitsum Gebremicheal) that they took her to the Federal Bureau of Investigations for interrogation purposes. Further at the time of the arrest, members of the Federal Police failed to show the court warrant for Meskerem's arrest nor did they communicate the reason for her arrest though these are fundamental components of due process and a right of any person facing arrest and accusation. After 3 days, Meskerem was presented before the Federal High Court on December 15th, 2022.

Though Meskerem has done nothing wrong other than exercising her freedom of expression enshrined in international human rights documents by which Ethiopia is a party and under the Ethiopian constitution enshrined in article 29 the court granted 14 days remand for the prosecutor to collect evidence. On December 30th, 2022, Meskerem was once again presented before the Federal High Court and the court granted 7 days for the prosecutor to institute charges. Following this, the prosecutor instituted a charge against Meskerem alleging that she is "*dividing the national defense force and spreading hate and inciting violence using private media*". Finally, after she stayed for about 22 days in jail, on January 5th, 2023, she was released with bail money of 50,000 ETB by the judgment of the federal High Court. With the unfounded reason of arrest, to ask for such an exorbitant amount of bail money for journalists could amount to taxing dissent for silencing voices that support the Amhara causes.

### **Brigadier General Tefera Mamo**

Brigadier General (B.G) Tefera Mamo was the former Commander General of the Amhara Special Security Forces. He was appointed to lead the defense effort against TPLF's invasion of the Amhara Region in 2021. He was later ousted from his position and offered a new position as a special advisor to the Amhara Regional Government administration. B.G. Tefera declined this role and has been a [vocal critic](#) of the federal government's mishandling of the security of the Amhara Region and the widespread



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corruption in the Amhara Regional Government.



**Figure 3:** Pictured is former Commander General of the Amhara Special Forces, Brigadier General Tefera Mamo.

On May 18th, 2022, Ethiopian government authorities arrested B.G. Tefera from Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. The arrest was arbitrary and the officials had no formal charges against him. B.G Tefera told AAA that his arrest was due to his criticism of the Prosperity Party leadership and its failure to deliver reform, democracy and equality to the country. Federal security agents in Addis Ababa seized his car, mobile phone, and everything they found in his pocket. After being detained in Addis Ababa for two days, he was transferred to Bahir Dar city (Amhara Region) and he was detained at the police station for 10 days. B.G Tefera was released upon the Amhara Regional Supreme Court's order of 30,000 ETB bail. Following his release, he requested authorities in Addis Ababa to return his seized property. He received his car back after 3 months of seizure however he has yet to receive his mobile phone. B.G. Tefera also said there is no formal charge instituted against him yet his 30,000 ETB bail remains seized.

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## **Blogger, Author and Human Rights Activist Assaye Derbie**

Assaye Derbie is a blogger, author and human rights activist. He is well known across social media platforms for his in-depth analysis of atrocities committed on Amhara residents across Ethiopia and other violations of civil liberties. His work takes a closer look at the organization of the federal and regional governments and critics their failure to protect human rights of citizens. Assaye was detained by federal government security forces on September 11, 2022.



**Figure 4:** Pictured is blogger, author and advocate Assaye Derbie.

Assaye gave AAA the following account:

*“On September 11, 2022, members of the federal police came to my house and arrested me. I asked why I was being arrested and they told me I was wanted for interrogation. They took my mobile phone and laptop without a court warrant as well.”*

After being detained for 33 days, the federal supreme court released Assaye on a 1,500 ETB bail. Assaye told AAA that he is yet to receive a court date or any of the illegally confiscated properties. The arresting authorities are also unwilling to refund Assaye’s bail.

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Assaye told AAA that he has requested the arresting officials to return his property on two occasions.

### **Journalist Meaza Mohammed**

Meaza Mohammed, a well-known journalist, human rights advocate and humanitarian has been arbitrarily detained several times since Prime Minister Abiy came to power. Meaza is the owner of a news platform called *Roha Media*. She is known for her coverage of human rights abuses and humanitarian issues including interviews with victims of war and violence. Her programming has also covered other issues such as the role of the regional and federal governments in the ongoing Amhara Genocide in Ethiopia along with the deliberate sabotage of Amhara Special Forces and Fano in Northern Ethiopia by federal and regional officials.



**Figure 5:** Pictured is humanitarian, journalist and founder of Roha Meda, Meaza Mohammed.

Meaza has been arrested on three occasions since late 2021. Her first arrest was on December 2021 and came after Roha Media aired interviews of Amhara women that were raped by members of the TPLF militia that had occupied northern parts of the Amhara Region. She was informally accused of “*transmitting messages that incite violence*”. Meaza was released on January 18, 2022, without bail and ever seeing a courtroom.

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Meaza was arrested again on May 28, 2022 and she was accused of “*inciting a riot*”. She was detained for 20 days and released on 10,000 ETB bail. Meaza’s third and most recent arrest was on September 7, 2022 when she was arrested by members of the federal police. She was detained for 37 days until the Federal Supreme Court sustained the decision of the Federal High Court and ordered her release on a bail of 10,000 ETB. During the arrest, her mobile phone was seized by government security personnel. Meaza told AAA that she is yet to receive a refund for both bail amounts and her confiscated property.

### **Journalist Gobeze Sisay**

Gobeze Sisay is a journalist and founder of media outlet *Voice of Amhara*. Gobeze is also a renowned human rights advocate for civilians impacted by attacks from various armed groups and the government negligence in protecting them. Government security officers detained Gobeze on two occasions since the beginning of 2022. The first detention came on May 2022 when government forces stormed Gobeze’s residence and arrested him without presenting a court-issued arrest warrant. He was detained incommunicado for about 9 days in an unknown place. During this time Gobeze was blindfolded and repeatedly interrogated by security personnel. Gobeze was released on the 9th day without being presented before a court of law or asked for bail.



**Figure 6:** Pictured is journalist and owner of media outlet Voice of Amhara, Gobeze Sisay.

Gobeze was detained for a second time on August 2022. The arresting officers yet again failed to communicate the reason for his arrest or provide an arrest warrant. During the arrest, the federal security forces seized 3 mobile phones from Gobeze’s home. One of the mobile phones belonged to Gobeze himself while the other two belonged to Gobeze’s wife and child. Gobeze was detained for about 64 days. He was charged with “*disclosing secrets of the national defense force*”. On November 10, 2022, the Federal Supreme Court ordered the release of Gobeze on a bail of 100,000 ETB. Gobeze has only received two of the three mobile phones the officers illegally confiscated.

### **Journalist Temesgen Desalegn**

Temesgen Desalegn is a Managing Director and owner of the weekly Amharic magazine Feteḥ. Early in 2022, Temesgen did a feature on B.G. Tefera Mamo, former commander of the ASF. The feature covered a detailed analysis of the federal government’s deliberate sabotage of the Amhara region’s defense mechanism, particularly the sabotage of the ASF on Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed’s orders. It criticized the ENDF for abandoning citizens and prosecuting Fano members during the invasion of the Amhara

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Region by TPLF forces.



**Figure 7:** Pictured is managing director of Fetehe Magazine, Temesgen Desalegn.

Temesgen was arrested on May 26, 2022, after being accused of disclosing national secrets to the public, inciting a riot, and creating public distrust in the ENDF. On July 4, 2022, the Federal High Court granted Temesgen 100,000 ETB bail. However, the Federal Supreme Court overruled the High Court's decision following an appeal by the prosecution. It was communicated that Temesgen should remain in prison for the duration of the trial to prevent him from sharing anymore national secrets. Temesgen was denied release even after posting the 100,000 ETB bail. Temesgen was released on November 16, 2022, after posting a 30,000 ETB bail.

### **The case of Ashara Media and Nisir International Broadcasting Corporation journalists**

On May 19 and 20, 2022, security personnel in Bahir Dar city of Ethiopia's Amhara Region raided the studios of two media outlets, Ashara Media and Nisir International. The



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officers arrested several reporters and administrative workers along with illegally seizing media and office equipment. Three Ashara Media journalists Gashaye Nigussie, Getinet Yalew, and Habtamu Melese were arbitrarily detained. In addition, videographer and camera operators Kelemu Gelagay and Daniel Mesfin were also detained by regional security forces. Nisir International Broadcasting Corporation journalists Haile-Mariam Tizazu, Yared Awoke, and another staffer were detained by security personnel from the Amhara Region.



**Figure 8:** Pictured are media staff of Ashara Media being transported to a detainment site.

The arrest comes after both media outlets reported on the government's recent crackdown on Fano members. They were accused of inciting violence against the government. They were detained for 49 days at the Gayint and Bahir Dar police stations of Ethiopia's Amhara Region. On the 49th day, the Amhara Supreme Court released them with a bail of 20,000 ETB each. Upon their release, the federal police instantly detained them again under similar allegations. The detained were transported to Addis Ababa. After being

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detained for a week on July 14, 2022, the suspects were presented to the Federal First Instance Court. The court granted a 20,000 ETB bail for each suspect. The federal public prosecutor appealed the decision to the Federal High Court. The Federal High Court sustained the decision of the First Instance Court and the prisoners were released.

### **Activist Tihitina "Tina" Belay**

Tihitina "Tina" Belay, is a human rights advocate, youth organizer, and businesswoman. She has been one of the faces of the widespread 2021 anti-government protests across the Amhara Region. She is a vocal critic of the Ethiopian government's failure to protect Amhara citizens and has openly denounced the government's complicity in the ongoing Amhara genocide in the Oromia Region. On May 19, 2022, Tina was detained by security personnel from the Amhara Regional Government. She was detained at the Bahir Dar police station for 49 days and released on a bail of 20,000 ETB. Along with Ashara Media and Nisir International journalists, she was rearrested almost instantly by federal police. Tina was transported to Addis Ababa and granted a 20,000 ETB bail again by the Federal High Court. Neither the federal nor regional court's bail money has been returned to Tina. The public prosecutors are also yet to establish a formal charge against her.





**Figure 9:** Pictured is human rights advocate and community organizer Tina Belay.

### **YouTuber Waltenigus Abeneh**

Waltenigus Abeneh (Waltenigus Zesheger), a media personality affiliated with Yeneta Tube, was arrested by government security personnel on September 21st, 2022. Members of the federal police accused Waltenigus of inciting religious violence in Ethiopia. He was detained in Bole Ararsa, Addis Ababa prison center for about 16 days. On the sixteenth day, the Federal First Instance Court released him on a 5,000 ETB bail. During the arrest, members of the federal police also seized his mobile phone. Following his release, Waltenigus has asked several times to have his mobile phone returned and bail money refunded. The security personnel remain reluctant to do so.



**Figure 10:** Pictured is media personality Waltenigus Abeneh.

### **Amhara Students Association (ASA) Leaders**

The President of the Amhara Students Association (ASA) Eshetu Getnet and ASA Executive Committee member Metages Tsega were arrested on December 16th, 2022, in Bahir Dar city (capital of the Amhara Region). After they were arbitrarily arrested, the arresting security forces took them to the Bahir Dar Zuriya Amhara Special Force camp located on the outskirts of Bahir Dar city. Until December 22nd, 2022, the whereabouts of these ASA youth leaders were unknown owing to the incommunicado detention of the individuals. On December 22nd, it became known the youth leaders were being held in a place called Gendawuha (West Gonder Zone, Amhara Region).



**Figure 11:** Pictured are leaders of the Amhara Students Association (ASA) including Es-hetu Getnet (pictured left) and Metages Tsega (pictured right).

On December 26, 2022, the prosecutor presented these individuals before the West Gonder Zone High Court alleging that they committed acts of terrorism. However, the court rejected the prosecutor's allegation in no case motion because such type of allegation is under the jurisdiction of the federal courts. Owing to this, after they stayed in prison at Bahir Dar and Gendawuha for 16 days collectively, they were released with bail money of 5,000 ETB each on January 2nd, 2023, following the procedure of habeas corpus for their release. AAA investigator has understood based on reasonable assessment of the circumstance that to ask such amounts of money with unfounded allegations and unexplained reasons of the arrest shows the ruling party has continued its policy of taxing political dissent and punishing Amhara advocates.

### **The case of Historian and Journalist Tadios Tantu**

Tadios Tantu is a prominent journalist, political analyst and historian born from the Welayta ethnic group. At the age of 73 years, Tadios has been a long-time government critic, human rights advocate and staunch opponent of revisionist history. He served in the

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free press for many years as a columnist and editor in Amharic newspapers such as *Yezareyitu Ethiopia*, *Ethiopia*, *Fiteh*, *Ethio Mehdar*, *Satenaw* and other local newspapers and magazines. During the reign of the TPLF-led EPRDF regime, he was detained at least five times. Following the 1997 Ethiopian election he was also sentenced to life but was later granted amnesty.



**Figure 12:** Pictured is historian and journalist Tadios Tantu.

Following his release, Tadios continued being vocal about human rights including addressing the ongoing genocidal campaign waged against Amharas by the new Oromo expansionist regime and has been known to challenge their political narratives with his vast historical knowledge. As a result, Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed and his OPP have detained him several times by weaponizing elements of criminal law which do not apply to his case. For example, Tadios was previously arrested on May 5, 2021, by federal security forces without reasonable grounds for his detention, in to his interview on the celebration of Ethiopian Patriots' Victory day. Following his detention, government security forces froze his bank accounts. This action resulted in serious financial problems for Tadios who struggled to help his family and was unable to withdraw money from his bank account. In June 2021, the court released him with the procedure of *habeas corpus*

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without paying bail money after a month of arbitrary detention.

On May 19, 2022, Tadios was rearrested by federal security forces which detained him in Addis Ababa city's 3rd police station for mere reason that he was exercising his freedom of expression in support of the Amhara cause. Following his arrest, on June 25, 2022, Tadios was presented before the Arada High Court Tezewawari bench. The bench allowed him to be released on bail with the amount of 10,000 ETB. Following the decision of the bench, the bail amount of 10,000 ETB was paid to the concerned body. However, after the money was paid police refused to release Tadios. The next day, the government prosecutor presented an appeal to the high court opposing the release of Tadios Tantu by bail. Following the appeal, the arbitrary arrest continued against Tadios despite payment of the bail. At the time of this report's compilation, the bail money has not been refunded to him nor used for his release during that time.

On August 2022, the Lideta High Court allowed for the release of Tadios Tantu with bail (yet again) this time in the amount of 15,000 ETB. In accordance with the request, the bail payment of 15,000 ETB bail was made to the concerned body. Unfortunately, police refused to release him after the bail money was paid. In subsequent days the prosecutor appealed the decision of the Lideta High Court and the Federal Supreme Court rejected the decision of the lower court by accepting the prosecutor for the prohibition of bail right to the accused. According to Tadios' defense attorney Taleme Gizachew, the bail money has not been refunded to the victim nor has he been released following the payment.

The arbitrary arrest of the elderly historian, failure to release him despite multiple bail payments indicates the continuation of the regime's taxation of dissent against those who advocate for Amharas. Presently he is in prison after the prosecutor instituted concurrent charges against him and his case is pending before the federal court. The charge includes

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inciting National Defense Force personnel to refuse orders from commanders, insulting the Oromo ethnic group, insulting the Tigrayan ethnic group and inciting other ethnic groups to hate the Amhara ethnic group by saying Ethiopian culture and history has been dominated by the Amhara people. Finally, they also instituted an indictment saying he was attempting to overthrow the constitutional order of Ethiopia that establishes the crime of terrorism.

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## About Amhara Association of America (AAA)

The Amhara Association of America (AAA) is a non-profit civic organization located in Charlotte, North Carolina that investigates and documents human rights atrocities and repression against Amharas in Ethiopia. AAA seeks to inform U.S. policymakers, international human rights organizations, media, and all Ethiopian stakeholders to pressure Ethiopian leaders to change laws, policies, and practices in Ethiopia so perpetrators are held accountable and victims receive justice. AAA also collaborates with Amhara organizations in the U.S., supports independent Amhara organizations in Ethiopia, and provides humanitarian aid for Amharas impacted due to targeted ethnic attacks. AAA's funding comes directly from members and supporters; the organization is not affiliated with any Ethiopian or American political or governmental entities.

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