

Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada

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Responses to Information Requests

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22 March 2016

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Ethiopia: The Oromo Federalist Congress (OFC), including aims and objectives, leadership, structure; information on how to become a member; treatment of members and supporters by authorities (2014 - March 2016)

Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, Ottawa

1. Overview

Several sources describe the Oromo Federalist Congress (OFC) as "Oromia's largest legally registered political party" (Human Rights Watch 7 Jan. 2016; IPS 26 Jan. 2016; Addis Standard 22 Jan. 2016). Sources indicate that the party is an "opposition" party (*The Washington Post* 15 Jan. 2016; Human Rights Watch 21 Feb. 2016). In correspondence with the Research Directorate, a researcher for Human Rights Watch who specializes in Ethiopia and Eritrea, stated that the OFC is only active in Oromia (11 Mar. 2016). Sources indicate that the OFC was created following the merger of the Oromo Federalist Democratic Movement (OFDM) and the Oromo People's Congress (OPC) (*PHW* 2015, 476; AI Oct. 2014, 6; Addis Standard 18 May 2015) in 2012 (*ibid.*; *PHW* 2015, 476). The OFC belongs to the Ethiopian Federal Democratic Unity Forum (Medrek), a coalition of four parties which together comprise "the largest opposition party in the country" (*The Reporter* 17 Aug. 2015). Human Rights Watch notes that the OFC participated in the May 2015 elections, but did not win any seats, as the ruling coalition won all 547 parliamentary seats (Human Rights Watch 7 Jan. 2016).

2. Aims and Objectives

According to the preamble to the OFC's platform, despite being the largest ethnic group in Ethiopia, the Oromo people "have been playing a minimal political role for centuries" and "like all other peoples of Ethiopia, have been denied [their] political, democratic and human rights for centuries" (OFC n.d.). The OFC platform indicates that their aim is "to struggle in a peaceful and lawful manner for the respect of the human, political and democratic rights of our people; to struggle for the respect of our peoples' economic and social rights; to struggle to bring about a genuine democratic system in the country" (*ibid.*).

3. Leadership

Sources report that the leadership of the OFC is comprised of the following individuals:

- Merera Gudina is the leader (or chair) of the OFC (*PHW* 2015, 476; *The Washington Post* 15 Jan. 2016). He founded the Oromo National Congress (ONC) in 1998, which was later changed to the OPC (*PHW* 2015, 476).
- Bekele Gerba is the deputy chairman of the OFC (Human Rights Watch 7 Jan. 2016; AI 17 Feb. 2016; Addis Standard 22 Jan. 2016). Sources indicate that he was imprisoned from 2011 to 2015 on charges of belonging to the banned Oromo Liberation Front (*ibid.* 18 May 2015; Human

Rights Watch 7 Jan. 2016), a charge that Human Rights Watch indicates is "often used to silence politically engaged ethnic Oromos who oppose the ruling Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF)" (ibid.).

- Bekele Naga is the Secretary General of the OFC (DW 13 Jan. 2016; Zehabesha 31 Dec. 2015).
- Dejene Tafa is described by one source as the party secretary of the OFC (AI 17 Feb. 2016) and by another as the chief legal counsel to the OFC (Human Rights Watch 11 Mar. 2016).
- Desta Dinka is the OFC Youth Wing Chair (Human Rights Watch 11 Mar. 2016).

4. Structure and Membership

Information on the structure and membership of the OFC was scarce among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response. According to the Human Rights Watch researcher, the structure of the OFC "seems to vary substantially," depending on the local area (Human Rights Watch 11 Mar. 2016).

The Human Rights Watch researcher stated that he was not aware of any restrictions that would prevent someone who resides in Oromia from becoming a member of the OFC, but noted that he was unsure of whether members were required to be ethnic Oromo (ibid.). The same source indicated that he had seen OFC membership cards in 2013 and/or 2014, but that he had not seen them more recently (ibid.). The researcher further expressed the opinion that "the granting of ID cards to members is quite inconsistent, particularly for new members, and particularly since the May 2015 elections" (ibid.). Further and corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

5. Treatment by Authorities

Amnesty International (AI) quotes OFC sources as indicating that in March 2014, an OFC supporter was targeted and shot dead by security forces for leading a demonstration against the police killing of a former Oromo opposition member that occurred on the previous day in Ginmir town in Bale (AI Oct. 2014, 76).

In April and May 2014, AI reports that there were protests in many universities and towns throughout Oromia against the government's "'Addis Ababa and Oromia Special Zone Integrated Development Master Plan'" because many Oromo considered it to violate the Constitution and feared it would lead to large scale evictions from land (ibid., 27). AI further indicates that security forces responded to the protests with "unnecessary and excessive force," including shooting at peaceful protesters in Ambo and Gudur towns and at Wallega and Madawalabu universities, and "beating hundreds of people during and after the protests" (ibid.). The same source notes that "thousands" of people were arrested in the wake of these protests, including OFC party members (ibid., 27-28). AI quotes OFC informants as stating that 350-500 of their members, including local party representatives and committee members, were arrested in May, June and July 2014 in Kelema Wallega, Gimbi, Ambo and Dembi Dollo; the OFC office in Dembi Dollo was also broken into and their membership list was taken (ibid., 40). Information given to AI by the OFC further indicates that in September and October 2014, over 200 additional arrests occurred, including some OFC members, and that as of October 2014, a number of local OFC party officials were detained incommunicado (ibid.).

Regarding the fate of OFC members who were arrested, the AI report states the following:

[b]y early October 2014, the OFC reported that some of its members who had been arrested in the wake of the protests had been released on bail, some had been released without charge, while others continued to be detained without charge. Some OFC members, as well as students and other people, had been convicted in rapid trials on charges relating to the protests. (ibid.)

According to AI, in the run up to the May 2015 elections, the police shot and killed an OFC/Medrek member, Gidila Chemeda, arrested 500 Medrek members at polling stations across Oromia, and physically assaulted 46 people (AI 23 June 2015).

Sources indicate that Ethiopian security forces violently suppressed protests throughout Oromia that began in November 2015 in response to the government's "'Master Plan'" to expand Addis Ababa into Oromia territory (*The Washington Post* 15 Jan. 2016; IPS 26 Jan. 2016; Human Rights Watch 21 Feb. 2016). According to sources, authorities arrested and detained a number of people in connection with the protests, including OFC leaders (AI 17 Feb. 2016; Addis Standard 22 Jan. 2016; Zehabesha 31 Dec. 2015). Security forces reportedly carried out killings, beatings and arrests (Human Rights Watch 21 Feb. 2016; IPS 26 Jan. 2016; *The Washington Post* 15 Jan. 2016), and shot at protesters (DW 13 Jan. 2016; Human Rights Watch 21 Feb. 2016; AI 17 Feb. 2016). According to AI, there were "thousands of people injured, mass arrests, enforced disappearances and hundreds dead" resulting from the state response (ibid.). Sources report that approximately 140 protesters were killed as a result of crackdowns (Human Rights Watch 7 Jan. 2016; IPS 26 Jan. 2016; Addis Standard 22 Jan. 2016).

Sources report that the OFC deputy chairman, Bekele Gerba, was arrested on 23 December 2015 and taken to a prison known for "torture and other ill-treatment" (Addis Standard 22 Jan. 2016; Human Rights Watch 21 Feb. 2016). According to Human Rights Watch, he appeared in court on 22 January 2016 and "prosecutors were granted an additional 28 days for investigation, suggesting he is being investigated under the abusive Anti-Terrorism Proclamation" (ibid.). The same source indicates that other prominent OFC leaders were "arbitrarily arrested" or "said to be under virtual house arrest" in December 2015 and January 2016 (ibid. 7 Jan. 2016). Sources report that other OFC leaders who were arrested around this time include Dejene Tafa (AI 17 Feb. 2016; Zehabesha 31 Dec. 2015; Human Rights Watch 11 Mar. 2016), Desta Dinka (ibid.; Zehabesha 31 Dec. 2015) and Adisu Bulala (ibid.). In a letter published on the Ethiopian opposition website Zehabesha, Bekele Nega wrote that on 31 December 2015, men who identified themselves as police, forced him into a car, beat him, and made death threats against him and his family if he left his house or spoke to the media (ibid.).

An article by the Ethiopian newspaper *The Reporter* quotes the OFC as stating that "more than 500" OFC members were arrested (*The Reporter* 30 Dec. 2015). The same source notes that none of the arrested OFC members were brought before the courts within 48 hours as mandated by the Constitution, although they were all eventually brought before the courts (ibid.). However, Bekele Nega stated in his 31 December 2015 letter published by Zehabesha that 4,000 OFC party members were arrested as part of the crackdown in Oromia (Zehabesha 31 Dec. 2015).

In February 2016, the Walta Information Centre, an Ethiopian news platform based in Addis Ababa, reported that the Minister of Ethiopia's Government Communication Affairs Office made a statement accusing the OFC of "using both legal and illegal means" during the protests, and of "instigating violence" (Walta Information Centre 26 Feb. 2016). Students who were detained reportedly told Human Rights Watch that they were accused of belonging to the OFC or other opposition groups during interrogations by authorities (Human Rights Watch 21 Feb. 2016). Human Rights Watch also quotes an Ethiopian intelligence officer as reporting that authorities were purposefully targeting "'respected Oromos,'" including Bekele and others with "'the ability to mobilize Oromos,'" as part of a deliberate government policy (ibid.).

The Human Rights Watch researcher explained the situation for OFC members and supporters as follows:

[t]he scale of the arrests in Oromia over the last 6 months are without precedent in Oromia's recent history. There are a variety of profiles of arrested individuals depending on location, but any individuals who are identified as not supporting the government and supporting opposition groups [including OFC] have been targeted. In some cases, this may involve OFC members with active membership, but that isn't the critical factor--what matters is the perception that you oppose the government, or that your family has had historical connections to groups that opposed the government [either lawful or unlawful opposition]. Students, farmers and others that were identified as being at the protests were also targeted, as were influential Oromos [teachers, artists, etc]. (ibid. 11 Mar. 2016)

This Response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Research Directorate within time constraints. This Response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim for refugee protection. Please find below the list of sources consulted in researching this Information Request.

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Internet sites, including: ecoi.net; Europa; Factiva; FIDH; International Crisis Group; IRIN; UN – Refworld; US – Department of State.

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