

# Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed accepts Nobel Peace Prize

Joe Williams

28 December 2019

Given that the Nobel Peace Prize was founded by an individual who postured as an anti-war activist at the same time he became obscenely wealthy by developing the most destructive mass-casualty weapons that existed at the time, it is fitting that the award has traditionally been used by the European powers to advance their imperialist interests and accumulate wealth under the guise of promoting peace and human rights.

This tradition continued on December 10, 2019, when Ethiopia prime minister and former military intelligence officer Abiy Ahmed became the latest to accept the award. He now joins a rogues' gallery of imperialists, militarists, petty bourgeois nationalists, ethnic cleansers, and war criminals that include Barack Obama, Menachem Begin, Shimon Peres, Yitzhak Rabin, Woodrow Wilson, Henry Kissinger, and F.W. de Klerk. It also includes Aung San Suu Kyi, who won the prize in 1991, but has recently returned to the headlines by defending the Burmese military's mass murder of Rohingya Muslims.

In a statement that thoroughly falsified Ahmed's brief tenure in power, the Nobel Committee claimed it was rewarding him because "he spent his first 100 days as Prime Minister lifting the country's state of emergency, granting amnesty to thousands of political prisoners, discontinuing media censorship, legalising outlawed opposition groups, dismissing military and civilian leaders who were suspected of corruption, and significantly increasing the influence of women in Ethiopian political and community life. He has also pledged to strengthen democracy by holding free and fair elections."

In reality, Ahmed has already begun to re-impose the state of emergency, beginning with the resumption of internet blackouts. He also criminalized new political groups to replace the ones he legalized, mostly affiliated with the Tigray ethnic group, and purged them from the government. Significantly, the Prize Committee endorsed this racist and anti-democratic crackdown, hailing the mass arrests and dismissals that have taken place without any due process as a war against "military and civilian leaders who were suspected of corruption."

The emptiness of Ahmed's supposed achievements was reflected in his acceptance speech. Unlike Martin Luther King, Jr., who saw the award for what it is and used his acceptance

speech to deliver an impassioned speech calling attention to the suffering of American blacks, Ahmed's speech completely ignored the immense suffering of the people of Ethiopia and Eritrea. Instead, he treated the audience to a 20-minute string of empty, simplistic platitudes, such as "Peace is a labor of love," "It takes only a few to make war, but a village and a nation to build peace," "nurturing peace is like planting and growing trees," "when our love for humanity outgrows our love for human vanity, then we will know peace," and on it went.

Unlike previous winners, Ahmed has declined to give press conferences or take questions from reporters about the award. This caused the ten days of festivities that normally precede the award ceremony to be severely truncated, with most events being cancelled, and others forced to go on with an empty seat instead of the guest of honor. Ahmed shocked even some of his own supporters by refusing to participate in an event sponsored by the Norwegian chapter of Save the Children, in which traditionally school children are invited to ask the winner questions, while the royal family looks on.

After initially defending Abiy's reclusiveness, the Nobel Committee was eventually pressured by the media into releasing a statement of disapproval. "The Nobel Institute and the Nobel Committee wishes Abiy Ahmed had said 'yes' to meeting Norwegian and international press. We have been very clear about this and have clarified that there are several reasons we find this highly problematic," the statement said.

A review of Abiy's political history makes it clear why he sees such a need to carefully vet media coverage of his award. Having come to power in April 2018 promising to end the despotism that has historically characterized Ethiopia's military-backed governments, Ahmed's tenure as prime minister has been dominated by tension between his government and the military.

Among Ahmed's promised reforms were expanded freedom of speech and expression, opening up the internet and limiting the military's role in the government. As a gesture of goodwill upon taking office, he released tens of thousands of political prisoners, ended the internet blackout imposed by the previous government of Hailemariam Desalegn and sacked over 100 generals and other high officers, mostly from the Tigray ethnic group that had dominated the previous regime.

However, this provoked a new round of unrest, both from officers who resent the military's loss of political power, and from those who see the sackings as a racist attack on the Tigray people. The Tigray are often seen to be collectively responsible for the crimes of the previous regime, and hundreds of thousands of Tigray have been driven from their homes due to racist violence since Ahmed's rise to power. Nearly 1 million ethnic Gedeos have also been forced to flee their homes in West Guji under Ahmed's rule. In both cases, the attackers belong to the Oromo ethnic group, of which Ahmed is a member.

Moreover, Ahmed has done nothing to stop the government's policy of privatizing state assets, and seizing land, usually from ethnic minority groups, and selling it to investors in China and the Arabian Peninsula, who use it for cash crops instead of food. These policies are deeply hated by the Ethiopian people, so Ahmed has been forced to re-impose the internet blackout instituted by his predecessor.

The Nobel Peace Prize is, and always has been, a political award given with the aim of promoting definite policies. The selection was made by a committee composed of five members of the Norwegian Parliament, and its decisions reflect positions prevailing within the European ruling elite as a whole. As the *World Socialist Web Site* has noted in previous years, it is used by the European powers to influence American internal politics, promote preferred leaders of developing countries, and to pressure rival powers like China, as it did with awards to Liu Xiaobo and the Dalai Lama in years past. Therefore, the fact that Ahmed's reforms are superficial and are already beginning to erode will have no impact on the European bourgeoisie's efforts elevate him to the status of a Nelson Mandela or Mahatma Gandhi.

From their perspective, Abiy Ahmed deserves to be glorified as a Christ-like peacemaker because he has the potential to stabilize the Horn of Africa, a critical nexus of regional trade and political conflict. Like the previous government, Ahmed's administration has provided basing for US drone operations and, along with Kenya, is propping up the US-backed regime in Somalia. He has been given credit for completing peace talks with Eritrea that were initiated by his predecessor and has intervened in Sudan to broker an agreement between warring factions. These actions have been invaluable to American and European conglomerates seeking to exploit the oil and mineral resources of the war torn and under-developed region.

At the same time, Ahmed has been wooed aggressively by China, which sees Ethiopia as a critical component of its "One Belt, One Road" initiative, which seeks to build a transportation and trade network that would fully interconnect China and Africa. The European powers likely intend for the Peace Prize to help deter Ahmed from embracing Beijing's advances.

In a 2012 comment referring to the 2009 decision to award the Prize to Barack Obama, the *World Socialist Web Site* stated

that:

The awarding of the prize to Obama three years ago was particularly bizarre. He had been in office for just nine months and had seamlessly continued the war-mongering policies of his predecessor. Comments at the time described the prize as a "symbolic boost" and "encouragement" for Obama to depart from the course of George W. Bush. In reality, the committee presented Obama with a *carte blanche*. It signaled that the commander in chief of the most powerful military machine in the world had the support of liberal European public opinion to do what he liked.

This has since been confirmed. Obama has continued the policies of his predecessor. Guantanamo remains open. The president uses drones to assassinate opponents of US imperialism. He has intensified the war in Afghanistan, authored a new war against Libya, and is preparing military intervention in Syria and war against Iran—with the support of virtually all of those who criticised the war policies of the Bush administration.

The gist of this statement could apply equally to Aung San Suu Kyi, who now openly defends mass murder and ethnic cleansing in Burma, a country with a history of ethnic violence and military repression similar to that of Ethiopia, or Ahmed himself. Given Ethiopia's history of brutal monarchies, dictatorships, war and civil unrest, it is no surprise that many Ethiopians have reacted positively to the chance to reunite with family in Eritrea and other limited reforms. However, Ahmed's image as a reformer is belied by his antidemocratic purge of the government, gradual re-imposition of internet blackouts and stoking of ethnic tensions, especially against Tigrays. Ethiopian workers must understand the decision to award him the Nobel Peace Prize as the grave warning that it is.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)**