Winners Who Disappoint - Nobel Peace Prize to Ethiopia's PM

What is the issue?

- The Nobel Peace Prize for 2019 has been awarded to Ethiopia's PM Abiy Ahmed for resolving Ethiopia-Eritrea border conflict.
- In this context, here is an assessment of the fairness of giving the Nobel Peace Prize to sitting prime ministers or presidents.

What is the contention?

- Mr. Abiy until last year was hailed as a beacon for democratising Ethiopia and befriending Eritrea.
- It was in this backdrop that he was awarded the 2019 Nobel Peace Prize.
- But with ethnic tensions spiralling, Abiy resorted to violent means to manage the nationwide turbulence.
- He launched a large-scale military offensive against separatists in the Tigray province.
- This led to the deaths of possibly thousands and forced tens of thousands to flee as refugees.

Had there been any such instances earlier?

- **Juan Manuel Santos** - There was similar disappointment over President Juan Manuel Santos of Colombia failing to live up to ideals.
- Mr. Santos won the Peace Prize in 2016 for ending the decades-long civil war with FARC (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia) guerrillas.
- Despite his image as a peacemaker, Mr. Santos's presidency saw continuing paramilitary excesses and rampant human rights violations by agents of the state.
- **Barack Obama** - When the 2009 Peace Prize was given to U.S. President Barack Obama, it proved a controversial choice.
- Shortly after receiving the Prize, Mr. Obama ordered an American troop surge in Afghanistan, deepening a bloody war.
- In 2011, he also backed a disastrous military intervention in Libya and subsequently abandoned it when there was chaos.
- **Aung San Suu Kyi** - Another much-maligned Nobel Peace Prize winner is Myanmar's Aung San Suu Kyi.

- She was chosen in 1991 while in house arrest for her courageous activism against military dictatorship and her campaign for democracy.
- But she assumed the title of State Counsellor in 2016 under a power-sharing arrangement with the military in Myanmar.
- Soon after this, calls for revoking her Prize echoed in international public discourse.
- She teamed up with the repressive armed forces and defended her government at the International Court of Justice against charges of genocide of the Rohingya.
- This decision of her triggered a global uproar.
- Several other awards given to her have lately been rescinded, with Amnesty International slamming her for "shameful betrayal of the values she once stood for".

What is common to all of them?

- There is no question that Mr. Abiy, Mr. Santos, Mr. Obama and Ms. Suu Kyi have disappointed many of their admirers.
- But what is common to them is that they have been holders of executive state power.
- Their official position pushes these personalities to work under compulsions and make compromises.
    - Mr. Abiy has justified his war in Tigray as part of the Ethiopian government's "responsibility to enforce rule of law" and the writ of the state.
    - Should his regime collapse, there could be anarchy or a return to the authoritarian regime.
    - Ms. Suu Kyi feels she has no option but to cooperate with the military if Myanmar's democratisation transition has to eventually succeed.
    - If she openly challenges the military in the transitional period or steps down on conscientious grounds, the dream of full transfer of authority to civilian leadership could be lost.
    - Mr. Obama too rationalised that as a head of state sworn to protect and defend the nation, he believed that "force is sometimes necessary".

What does this imply?

- Giving the Nobel Prize to sitting prime ministers or presidents is inherently risky.
- These recipients should not be held to the gold standard of a Mother Teresa or Malala Yousafzai.
- An objective view would in fact reveal that all the problematic Nobel Laureates have done some good and some harm.

- Unless the Nobel Committee consciously avoids picking incumbent politicians altogether in the future, there will always be such disappointments.
- Understanding them in their political contexts and in particular moments may help reach a balanced final judgment.

Source: The Hindu

