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11 ANATOMIES OF PROTEST AND THE TRAJECTORIES OF THE ACTORS AT PLAY

ETHIOPIA 2015–2018

Alexandra M. Dias and Yared Debebe Yetena

Introduction

Africa has been undergoing a sizeable wave of protests in recent years (Mateo and Erro, 2020), which in many ways diverges from the hitherto insurgent movements with Marxist-Leninist leanings from the prior revolutionary waves (Bahru, 2014). To start with the contexts, the motivations, the strategies, and the outcomes vary widely (Larmer, 2010; Branch and Mampilly, 2015; Sanches 2022). Movements emerge out of material/economic issues, but also of deep dissatisfaction with the political order (Ibid.). Second, since the “Arab Spring”, there has been a shift towards the “virtual” dimension of protests with research highlighting the increasing role of information and communication technology (ICT) and social media on protests events both online and offline (Etzo and Collander, 2010; Stepanova, 2011; Wolfsfeld, Segev and Sheaffer, 2013). Indeed, in this new internet era the centre of political action is transferred from and through the social media to the streets, and protests which are local/national at their origin acquire global projection.

Ethiopia, our focus here, has been experiencing unprecedented protest levels since 2015, with varying motivations and outcomes. As much as the deep-seated grievances towards the Tigray People’s Liberation Front/Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front (TPLF/EPRDF) regime, the unfolding of handy political opportunities feed into a national outbreak of mass protests first in Oromia, later spread to Amhara and other ethno-linguistic regions.

The 2015 protests are part of a string events that have been ongoing since the early 2010s, when the authoritarian nature of the regime started to being exposed through cyber-activism, satellite radio, and television broadcasts. In 2014 after the publication of Addis Ababa City Expansion Master Plan (Addis Ababa Master Plan) which planned to evict Oromo farmers to create a new economic zone in the Oromia region, led to unprecedented youth protests (i.e. Qeerroo) that engulfed all of Oromia in 2015 and beyond (Pinaud and Raleigh, 2017). In 2016 the Amhara youth (i.e. Fano) joined the Oromo protest following the arrest of several members of the Welkait Identity Restoration Committee, and the attempted arrest of the Committee’s chairperson without a court order (John, 2021). The protesters demanded for Welkait self-determination, the recognition

of the identity of indigenous Amhara people from Welkait as Amhara, the release of political prisoners, further democratisation, and equal sharing of rights and economic benefits (John, 2021).

As the nation-wide protests grew, Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn (in power between 2012 and 2018) decided to resign, following a collective decision of the EPRDF politburo. This brought Abiy Ahmed (alias Team Lemma) to power in 2018 in an internal reform within the ruling EPRDF. At the time, these moves raised hopes of democratic transition, and long-term peace. It is, therefore, the purpose of this chapter to explore the outbreak of protest in Ethiopia focusing on the protests held in Ethiopia between 2015 and 2018 by drawing theoretical underpinnings from political opportunity structure approaches.

Protests in Ethiopia need to be understood within the framework of contested interpretations of state formation and nation building and the role that ethnicity has had in it (see Gudina, 2003; Messay, 2008; Bahru, 2014). Which means context really matters to understand how grievances have formed and crystallised over time. This chapter adds to this discussion by arguing that three political opportunity structures – the death of Meles Zenawi which led to divisions within the incumbent party, the alliance between Qeerroo and Fano groups, and the easy access to digital activism platforms – help explain the rise, intensity, strategies, and outcomes of protest in Ethiopia. In fact, while protests succeeded in bringing about leadership change and further democratic reforms in 2018, they did not prevent authoritarianism and relapse into conflict. In addition, the state response was brutal. To substantiate our arguments, we build on qualitative material collected during field work through semi-structured interviews, newspapers, and reports, in particular Gondar, Bahir Dar, and Addis Ababa.

This chapter contributes to the literature on protest in Africa in several ways. First, internet shutdowns have become a go to source to repress activism in authoritarian countries in Africa. However, a nascent literature shows that, activists fight back and find innovative ways to bypass internet shutdowns (Rydzak et al., 2020; Freyburg and Garbe, 2018). In Ethiopia “the social media shutdown in December 2017, targeting primarily the Amhara and Oromia regions amid ethnic tensions, completely failed to hinder the patterns of protest that led up to it” (Rydzak et al., 2020, p. 4273). Second, by focusing on the territorial dimension we were able to understand how a single event may vary across space and how forms of coalition between different groups emerge. Finally, Ethiopia is a relevant case to understand the rise and outcome of protest in inhospitable environments, that is authoritarian, and conflict societies.

This chapter starts by examining the role of political opportunities in political protest and by setting the framework for the analysis of the Ethiopian case. It then presents an historical overview of protest in the country. The following section depicts the actors at play in the 2015–2018 cycle of protests before discussing how political opportunities shaped mobilisation strategies and the political outcomes. Finally, the conclusion discusses the main findings and raises implications for further research.

Political opportunity structures and protest in authoritarian settings

The political opportunity approach focuses on how activists perceive and take advantage of breaches in the social, political, and discursive landscape to achieve their political goals (Meyer, 2004b; Tarrow, 2011; Sanches, 2022). There is no consensual list of POS variables, Tarrow (2011, pp. 164–165) for instance highlights access to participation for new actors; evidence of political realignment within the polity; availability of influential allies; and emerging splits within the elite, while Kitschelt (1986) and Jenkins (1995) look at political institutional variables such as openness or closeness in systems of government. In places where systems are closed, movements are likely to adopt confrontational, disruptive strategies orchestrated outside established policy channels (see also Almeida, 2003).

In authoritarian settings, the protests could be engendered through informal and formal organisational structures, i.e. sympathetic institutions, associational networks, and civic organisations (McCarthy, 1996). These organisations link previously unconnected collectivities, exchange resources and information, and ultimately launch protest campaigns (Minkoff, 1997; McAdam, 1999). Confrontational strategies of protest movements in authoritarian settings also emerge for the need to resist the state, i.e. repression and erosion of rights (Goldstone and Tilly, 2001; Goldstone, 2001). In this case, activists manipulate such threats as an opportunity to mobilise the mass through discrediting the decadence and heinous nature of the government. A threat-induced collective action will follow in such contexts (Almeida et al., 2022). According to Tilly (1978, pp. 134–135) “Assuming equal probabilities of occurrence, a given amount of threat tends to generate more collective action than the ‘same’ amount of opportunity”.

However, the rule of thumb to explain the nexus of protest and authoritarian regimes is that political opportunity seems to be less likely to exist. Instead, economic grievances, resource mobilisation and collective identity seem to have a stronger role in the outbreak of protests (Snow, 2013; Caren, Gaby, and Herrold, 2017). Yet scholars have shown that political opportunity such as elite competition, access to internet, alliance among diverse groups, and coupled with existing threats facilitates the emergence, development, and outcome of protest movements (Tarrow, 2011).

In this regard, protests have become ubiquitous in the most complicated settings in Africa. In places like Uganda, Sudan, or Eswatini ordinary citizens have gone to the streets to demand for further political/democratic reforms (Hassanain, 2020; Curtice and Behlendorf, 2021; Mutyaba 2022, Mthembu, 2022). Indeed, it is striking to observe that it is precisely in the most authoritarian countries that protest tends to be more recurrent. Indeed, in authoritarian settings protesters face higher levels of repression, media is usually controlled by the state, and access to internet is often restricted or cancelled. Despite facing harsher regimes, protesters have found resources and opportunities to engage in collective action. Almeida, Sá and Faria (2022) show that political transfers at the executive level can be a relevant opportunity for collective action in authoritarian post-conflict

countries. The new President elected in 2017 has experienced far more protest than its predecessor due to its more open and seemingly democratic rhetoric, but also because he largely failed on his reformist agenda. In the Democratic Republic Congo and in Mozambique international actors provided crucial support for local activists' demands. In the former, this happened in the context of the struggle against President Joseph Kabila third-term bid (Polet, 2022) and in the latter against the implementation of the agricultural program ProSavana which if implemented would have dire impacts on the rural communities of the North of Mozambique (Bussoti and Nhaueleque, 2022). The studies also seem to suggest that actors, resources, networks, and framing strategies also matter to explain the outcome and transformative impact of protest across different types of regimes (Jenkins, 1995; McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly, 1996; Tarrow, 2011).

Given this debate our analysis of the protest in Ethiopia in the 2015–2018 periods will focus on the political opportunities that may have helped boost protesters' claims. We also argue that the death of Meles Zenawi, and the subsequent vacuum of power and intra-party fighting, the access to digital activism platforms, and inter-ethnic synchronisation of the Amhara and Oromo shaped the repertoires of collective action and fierce anti-government resistance. Our analysis gives support to these claims but also shows that political opportunities may not be sufficient conditions for change. Indeed, after initial hopes of democratic opening the regime backslided to authoritarianism and political conflict.

Protest and resistance in Ethiopia: An historical perspective

Protest and resistance to the central government in Ethiopia is not a new phenomenon (Crummey, 1986; Bahru, 2014). In the twentieth century alone assemblage of the First Wayane Rebellion of the early 1940s, the Gojjam Peasant Uprising and the Bale Peasant Revolt of the 1960s challenged Haile Selassie I regime (Tareke, 1991). What is more, the celebrated Ethiopia Students Movement (ESM) of the 1960s and 1970s and the 1974 Revolution ended the longest serving and last Solomonic King of Ethiopia (Keller, 2014). Indeed, the reign of Emperor Haile Selassie I (1930–1974) was in line of continuity with his predecessor's pursuit of the modernisation of the state encompassing the reigns of Tewodros II (1855–1868), Yohannes (1872–1889), and Menelik II (1889–1913). Central to the students' activism based on their Marxist-Leninist ideology were two critical questions that led to the demise of the imperial state: land and the national question (Balsvik, 1985; Bahru, 2014). In 1965 the group that came to be known as the student movement engaged in a mass demonstration before parliament motivated by demands for democratic and land reforms (Keller, 2014, p. 69). The 1974 revolution brought the *Derg* (Geez for Committee), low ranked soldiers, to power. The *Derg* brought some radical and progressive changes like nationalising and redistributing rural and urban land and the reorganisation of political and administrative authority (Messay, 2008; Markakis, 2011).

The accession of the *Derg* continued to face, however since the beginning, armed insurrection from insurgent movements such as Eritrea People's Liberation

Front (EPLF), the ethno-nationalist Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), and the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF). Multi-national political organisations such as Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party (EPRP) also challenged the *Derg's* rule. The aforementioned insurgency movements eventually led to the downfall of the *Derg* in 1991. This marked the crackdown of the Military Rule for ethnic based social engineering and state-building that in practice was still based on a strong centralist and authoritarian policy. This phase heralded the beginning of another political project of state building put in place by the Transitional Government (1991–1994) which led to the creation of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (FDRE) from 1995 onwards based on ideals of a new revolutionary democracy. Each time, the violent overthrow of regimes, both of Haile Selassie's Imperial state from 1930–1974 and the *Derg's* revolutionary state from 1974–1991 costed many lives and, interestingly enough, was preceded by a cycle of protests (Crummey, 1986; Gilkes, 1975; Clapham, 1990).

The EPRDF's government publicly pledged its commitment to three radical reform objectives: first the decentralisation of the state; second, the democratisation of politics; and third, the liberalisation of the economy (Vaughan and Tronvoll, 2003). The designers of this new model of social engineering claimed that “they have found a formula to achieve ethnic and regional autonomy, while maintaining the state as a political unit” (Alem, 2003, p. 2). However, the TPLF/EPRDF regime was characterised by “divide and rule” tactics, one party dictatorship in the shadow of a dominant party system; and authoritarianism in all domains especially after the 2005 national elections. The dominant TPLF ruled Ethiopia with an iron fist with the baking of surrogate political parties such as the Oromo People's Democratic Party (OPDO) founded in 1988 and with the renaming of the multi-ethnic party Ethiopia People's Democratic Movement (EPDM) to Amhara National Democratic Movement (ANDM) in 1993 (Gudina, 2003; Semahagn, 2016). Competitive political parties were effectively ousted and paralyzed during the transitional period (1991–1994) namely: the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) and All Amhara People's Organization (AAPO) and the independent or opposition party elected representatives were not accepted. After the 2000 national elections these opposition candidates and their representatives were not only side-lined but also persecuted and intimidated (Abbink, 2005, p. 181). The post-1991 Ethiopian political landscape was characterised by a hesitant democratisation experiment in the run up to the 2005 national elections. In its aftermath the EPRDF/TPLF made sure to bring it to an end and replace it with the well-known model of contemporary competitive authoritarianism (Pinto, 2021, p. 52; Levitsky and Way, 2010) where political parties are not allowed to compete at all, and the parliament is not the real legislative body. In these cases, the reconsolidation of authoritarianism is the expected follow up to the preceding limited phase of democratisation. The Oromo and Amhara (collectively constituting more than 60% of the Ethiopian population) were either represented by a surrogate party or entirely left without due representation in the new political dispensation. With the ushering of the ethnic-based federal model and the euphoria of hope in settling the “century old” oppression of nations, nationalities and peoples; the

grievances (i.e. freedom and self-determination) of the Oromo towards the central government remained unaddressed. In the case of the Amhara, in contrast, “a burden of history” (Markakis, 2018) translated in the lack of representation in the Peace and Democracy Conference (during which the framework of the 1995 FDRE’s Constitution was laid out) (Admasu, 2010); and through ongoing societal security threats posed by the TPLF anti-Amhara policy based on the recognition of ethnic traditions in opposition to past Amhara domination and suppression (Abbinck, 1995, p. 176).

The TPLF/EPRDF faced three major anti-government mass protests (1991–2018): the post-2005 election protest (Arriola and Lyons, 2016); the 2011 Ethiopian Muslims protest (Awalia Mission Schools) (Omar, 2020); and the youth protest (2015–2018). The 2005 election was praised as the most democratic elections Ethiopians ever witnessed until the announcement of the election results; which led to major mass protests in the capital and other major towns (Messay, 2008; Arriola and Lyons, 2016). Like its predecessors, the TPLF/EPRDF managed the resulting tensions through some combination of coercion and political dexterity, in devising formulae through which the fundamental divisions of an enormously varied society could be held in some kind of check (Clapham, 2009). It worked to suppress and prevent future mass dissidents through tightening the intelligence, incarcerating prominent opposition political party leaders, and passing restrictive laws: the Anti-Terrorism Proclamation of 2009 and the Ethiopian Charities and Societies Proclamation of 2009. In addition, the TPLF/EPRDF dismissed protesters to use Meyer expression as “dysfunctional, irrational, and inherently undesirable”. The 2011 Ethiopian Muslims Protests, in turn, were an organised social media protest called through the “Let our Voices be Heard” social media platform. This was the first experience of digital activism in Ethiopia and was created to denounce Majlis’s wrongdoing and expose the government’s brutal responses to the Muslim questions (Omar, 2020). It was active from 2011 to 2015. Finally, the youth protest (2015–2018), our main focus here, had a strong anti-regime/government agenda, and united actors from different geographic and ethnic origins. The following section sheds light on the origins, processes, and outcomes of these protests, and analyses how political opportunities shaped these different stages.

Political opportunity structures and the outbreak of the youth protest in Ethiopia (2015–2018)

Two outstanding events set the precedent to the 2015 youth protest even if they did not result in mass scale demonstrations. The first was, Yenesew Gebre’s (schoolteacher and human rights activist) self-immolation outside a public meeting hall protesting against the detention of young suspects for fifteen days devoid of their right to bail. As mobilisation depends on informational resources, the state suppression and disinformation prevented the incident from causing havoc. The second event was created from the Ethiopian Diaspora. It was in May 2012

at the Food Security G8 Summit in Washington, D.C.; Prime Minister Meles Zenawi encountered a strong condemnation and humiliation from an Ethiopian journalist in the diaspora, Abebe Gelaw. Abebe shouted out:

Meles Zenawi is a dictator! Meles Zenawi is a dictator! Free Eskinder Nega! Free Political Prisoners! You are a dictator. You are committing crimes against humanity. Food is nothing without freedom! Meles has committed crimes against humanity! We Need Freedom! Freedom! Freedom!

The TPLF/EPRDF as a “competitive authoritarian” (Levitsky and Way, 2010) effectively banned the media, co-opted opposition political parties and used subtle forms of persecution to keep critics and opponents at bay. On top of this state of affairs, economic grievances, erosion of rights, and state repression (discussed in some detail in the following section) fuelled popular discontent. Facing a “closed and strong” regime the anti-government movements in Ethiopia adopted what Kitschelt, (1986, p. 66) calls “confrontational, disruptive strategies orchestrated outside established policy channels”.

The youth protest in Oromia (Queerroot) and Amhara (Fano), adopted a combination of both peaceful and confrontational strategies of protesting. Widely social media campaigns, marching, sit-ins, stay home, boycott, vandalism, and other strategies were used to express their dissent. The constellation of grievances and the government’s repressive policy towards people’s legitimate quests and peaceful demonstrations (in the beginning) ended up with the stepping down of the weak Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn; six years (2012–2018) after he had become the successor to the late strongman at the helm of the state. This brought Abiy Ahmed, i.e. “the reformer” to power in 2018. Reforming steps had been taken to address the central questions of the protesters, pardoned political prisoners, rapprochement with Eritrea, easing of restrictions on civil and political liberties (Verjee and Knopf, 2019). Under Abiy Ahmed’s leadership the TPLF would be increasingly side-lined and the EPRDF was transformed in November 2018 into the Prosperity Party. A Higher official of one of the ruling coalition’s partners, the Amhara Prosperity Party (APP), pointed out; “TPLF/EPRDF vehemently believed Ethiopians were not ready to embrace and live in democracy. The introduction of democratic rule in Ethiopia is believed to augment destructive outcomes” (Author’s own interview).

To better understand the emergence of youth protests, the following section explores three relevant political opportunities.

Leadership vacuum and intra-elite competition

On 21 August 2012, the longest serving Prime Minister Meles Zenawi died. The party lost a “big man” that maintained its cohesion and his death left a wide shoe to fill. The unexpected death of Prime Minister Meles engendered intra-elite competition on who should inherit his legacy. After a thorough deliberation,

the deputy Prime Minister Hailemariam was elected as Primer of Ethiopia, which for Mulugeta (2012, p. 2) marked;

... the dangers of a state built around one man, but he also leaves behind a formidable political machine. For Hailemariam the challenge is whether and how he can manage the machine. Members of competing elites may fight for control of this machine and ethnic movements on the periphery could be emboldened to exploit a perceived power vacuum.

The transition from a strong Prime Minister, Meles Zenawi, to a weaker one, Hailemariam Desalegn changed the ruling party's leadership style – from a one-man rule to a collective leadership characterised by greater consultation and consensus building. As a result, power was de-centred and dispersed between three deputy prime ministers along ethnic lines. However, collective leadership came with additional challenges to the ruling party's maintenance on power, leading to elite competition and inefficiency in the exercise of power (Rift Valley Institute, 2013). In due course the national intelligence and military would rise as key political players and began to challenge the Prime Minister. Tamrat Gebregiorgis, founding managing editor of the largest English weekly in Ethiopia, *Addis Fortune*, in a press briefing defiantly asked the Prime Minister: "Can you tell me who is in charge in the government?" (quoted in Lefort, 2014, par. 1).

The de-centring of power opened institutional access, fostered a rift between allies within the EPRDF's central committee and explains the unfolding challenge to the dominant TPLF. The discord was between the OPDO and ANDM – best known as Team Lemma – against the dominant TPLF. The competition within the incumbent party created space for the emergence of anti-government protests in Oromia and Amhara.

According to Piven and Cloward (2012) shifts in political alignments and heightened conflicts during times of crisis make dissenting elites more willing to support challenger movements. In this regard, Team Lemma has claimed its support to the Qeerroo and Fano protests since the beginning. Indeed, granting more freedom to protest with less tight security presence from the Amhara and Oromia regional government partly illustrates Team Lemma's support for the challenging youth movement. This line of interpretation was rejected by some analysts (Zekarias, 2019) that characterised instead as an act of hijacking the youth protest to build the legitimacy of a remnant partner in the TPLF/EPRDF ruling coalition.

Internet access and digital activism

In the social movement's literature, the nexus between digital activism and protests is construed either in terms of cyber-pessimism (Gladwell, 2010; Morozov, 2011) and/or cyber-optimism (Diamond, 2010; Shirky, 2011). In the Ethiopian case, with limited access to the internet, through the years of the 2010s digital activism has been effectively used by the activists and protestors alike to mobilise

resources, disseminate strategies, recruit members, and express dissent through social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and blogs.

Unlike the traditional media (TV and Radio) broadcasts such as Ethiopia Satellite Television (ESAT), Oromo Media Network (OMN), Voice of America (VOA), Deutsche Welle (DW), and others exposed the authoritarian nature of the regime and forged an alternative to the state-run media; the “liberation” media (Diamond, 2010) offered a versatile platform through digital anonymity to mobilise protests along ethno-linguistic lines. Activists living abroad widely used social media to set strategies and mobilise the youth in the anti-government protest. In this regard, Jawar Mohammed, a prominent Oromo activist with more than one million followers, and Bete-Amhara (House of Amhara) an Amhara Facebook page, to mention a few, played a paramount role in fundraising, mobilising, and organising rallies, bed-ins and boycotts (Workneh, 2021).

In addition to resource mobilisation, Twitter and Facebook hashtag #OromoProtest, #AmharaResistance, #OroMara campaigns to expressing dissent were widely employed to exert pressure on the regime. However, since the outbreak of the protest, the virtual dimension of protest was deterred due to total communications’ lockdown, including mobiles’ coverage and internet access in different parts of the country since July 2016 to quell tensions of anti-government protests. Above all the declaration of a state of emergency on 9 October 2016 (lasted for 10 months) imposed restrictions on telecommunications, media, and Internet shutdowns along with travel restrictions on diplomats and a dusk-to-dawn curfew (Human Rights Watch, 2017). Graffiti and printed flyers like the old days of the ESM (1960–1970s) were used to mobilise and disseminate information on the dates of protest events especially stay at home protests in major towns such as Gondar, Bahir Dar, Ambo, Jimma, among others.

The unprecedented Oromo-Amhara alliance

Since the accession of TPLF/EPRDF to power, an institutional caricature of enmity has been implanted among the Amhara and Oromo. The official narrative propagates that they are historically arch enemies, have unreconciled interests, and are destined to disagree. However, the protest held in Gondar (city in Amhara) has broken the enmity narrative through voicing “the blood of Oromo is ours too” and “free Bekelle Gerba” (prominent Oromo politician). The birth of the “OroMara” (abbreviation for Oromo and Amhara) movement takes its genesis from the Gondar protest. The solidarity between the once dubbed as “rival ethnic groups” further strengthened in the social media (Twitter and Facebook) activism, #OroMara.

To show their solidarity the Amhara joined the Oromo Irreechaa (thanks giving) celebration of 5 October 2016 in Bishoftu. The festive, however, left 55 people dead due to the security crackdown and ensuing stampede. On 9 October 2016 a six-month nation-wide state of emergency was announced. Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn said in a televised address: “We put our citizens’ safety first. Besides, we want to put an end to the damage that is being carried out

against infrastructure projects, education institutions, health centres, administration and justice buildings” (BBC, 2016).

The common enemy, TPLF/EPRDF, sustained the OroMara coalition. The brotherhood continued to be celebrated particularly during the formal visit from the presidents of Oromia Region and Amhara Region; who concentrated the meetings on strengthening the relationship of the two ethnic groups in Ambo and Bahir Dar, the capitals of the two Region’s States respectively (see Tezera, 2021). However, as time went by the OroMara coalition faded away. This begs a question on “why it faded away?”

The OroMara devised the coming of “Team Lemma” to power. Lemmea Megersa and Gedu Andargachew were behind the #OroMara and later unveiled they were backing the digital activism. The internal party struggle between TPLF versus ANDM and OPDO also contributed to quell the TPLF hegemony. The 2017 “deep renewal” of the TPLF/EPRDF brought individuals from the disgruntled ethnic groups to ministerial positions, albeit no policy, and ideological change was made (van der Beken, 2018).

Moreover, it goes without mentioning, the unprecedented rise and support of “Team Lemma” to the youth resistance and protest in Amhara and Oromia appears as more tactical than strategic. The youth movements never planned and had foreseen what kind of political scenario would prevail in the aftermath of ousting the TPLF/EPRDF. The members of “Team Lemma” as higher officials of the ruling party had done despicable acts in terms of corruption (with a lavish lifestyle) and the incarceration of youth protesters.

The OroMara movement, though despised by the TPLF as an “unholy alliance”, transcended the ethnic arch-rival discourse seeded during the Italian colonial rule and institutionalised in the ethnic federal Ethiopia of post-1991. However, the question of Addis Ababa, the attitude of “our turn to rule” from the Oromos, and the subsequent ethnic-based attacks to the Amhara living in Oromia faded away the momentum of the OroMara.

The course and actors at play

The actors and dynamics of the protest that flared up between 2015 and 2018 were multifaceted. The protests indulged the different age groups in Amhara and Oromia, the diaspora, political parties and others. The youth were the major groups at the centre of every protest undertaken in various towns and cities of the two regions, i.e. Qeerroo (Oromia) and Fano (Amhara). Collective identity played as an organising or mobilising cause of the protest. The contagious nature of the protest, the common enemy, and shared grievances against the TPLF/EPRDF fostered inter-ethnic cooperation.

Qeerroo: Youth in protest

Qeerroo (Oromiffa) designates a young bachelor, but according to Gardner (2018) it has acquired broader connotations, symbolising the Oromo movement. For

Mosisa, (2020) the origins of Qeerroo protest movement trace back to the establishment in April 2011 of the Qeerroo Bilisummaa Oromoo; an Oromo national Youth Network movement for Oromo Freedom and Democracy¹, while for Østebø (2020) it “emerged as a spontaneous grassroots social movement without any formal structures”. Qeerroo’s fame and influence came to the fore and was remarked in the political scene after the intermittent major protests of 2014–2015 incited by the publication of the Addis Ababa Master Plan, but also deep-seated “grievances over maladministration, corruption and human rights abuses, the protesters soon called for the overthrow of the government” (Østebø and Tronvoll, 2020, p. 6).

In the beginning, Qeerroo protests were commenced by high school students; later university students joined the dissident and engulfed the Oromia Regional State. The protesting strategies consisted of a combination of peaceful demonstrations (though “illegal”) and violent protesting that involved vandalism. The tempo of the protest had been subjected to the security or police or the notorious Agazi Commando’s countermeasures against the protesting youth. The repression succeeded in temporarily quelling the protest, albeit facilitated in harnessing mass support and sympathy for the Qeerroo.

To be precise, the forms of protesting included bed-in, strikes, chanting, blockade, boycott, vandalism. Towns such as Ambo, Jimma, Nekemete, Shashemene, Ciro, subsequently held protests in a coordinated manner. The protests were called and mobilised through social media (such as Facebook), short mail service (SMS) during internet blackouts, radio, and TV Channels (such as Oromia Media Network) (Worku, 2020). The TPLF/EPRDF labelled the Qeerroo as a clandestine terrorist group aimed at destabilising the country and controlling local administration. With al-shabab – Arabic for youth, next door, Qeerroo has been equated with the Somali counterpart. Qeerroo protest faced heavy handed suppression from the government resulting in death, mass arrest, physical assaults, and other authoritarian responses.

Fano resistance

An attempt to arrest a member of the Welkait Identity Committee, veteran Colonel Demeke Zewdu, in 12 July 2016 sparked the subsequent protests in Gondar, Bahir Dar, and other towns of the Amhara Regional State. The centre of the protest was the question of Welkait and the people’s right to identify themselves as Amhara. However, for different reasons during the war against the *Derg* regime the TPLF insurgent movement used this area as an outlet to Sudan and eventually declared it as part of Tigray in the front’s 1975 Manifesto. In the post-1991 Ethiopia, the people, and the territory of this area were forcefully annexed and administratively demarcated into the Tigray Regional State.

The creation of this Committee was a response to low intensity rivalry and conflicts between the Amhara and Tigray regions over the domestic border problems created with the new ethnic-based Federal model and the contested reconfiguration of domestic boundaries (Clapham, 1990, p. 272). When the EPRDF/TPLF came to power, the implementation of its new political project of

state, and nation-building aimed at redrawing domestic boundaries along ethno-linguistic lines. In the previous political projects of state-building Amhara as a region never existed. Before the administrative reform of 1987 the localities under dispute were either part of Gondar or Wollo and those living in the two districts incorporated in 1995 in Tigray Regional state were predominantly home to Amharic speakers as their first language (Markakis, 2021, p. 33). Tigray in order to guarantee external access incorporated parts of Northern Gondar and Wag in Northern Wollo (Clapham, 1990, p. 211). The redrawing of domestic boundaries in this case was justified on the basis of the argument that these districts had been under Tigray's administration in the 1940s, however, the majority of historians have not confirmed this claim.

On the opposing line of the argument, a map of TPLF's controlled areas during the civil war placed Welkait from Gondar and both Raya Azebo and Raya Kobo from Wollo within the TPLF-administered realm. Markakis (1987, p. 249) on his turn followed a slightly different line on a map of Tigray's administered areas during the civil war against the *Derg* placing Welkait and only Raya Azebo within TPLF administered areas. This is a matter of guaranteeing access to critical resources as land but more importantly under the new ethnic federal dispensation, put in place since 1995, became a matter of identity. Raya Azebo is home to predominantly Tigrinya-speaking groups and Raya Kobo is home to predominantly Amharic-speaking groups however those who identify their homeland as Raya tend to identify with the Ethiopian state and under the new dispensation with the Amhara Regional state and not with the Tigray Regional State as determined by the ruling party.

Since the herald of the TPLF/EPRDF era, the Amhara raised a persistent quest for representation in the federal government, curbing grave societal insecurities, the question of identity, democracy, and justice in different realms. The establishment of the All Amhara People's Organisation and the endeavour made to voice these questions remained in vain leading to the killing of the President of the party, Professor Asrat Woldiyes. The constellation of these collective grievances ignited the protests.

The Gondar protest unfolded a year late to the Qeerroo protest in Oromia. Activists and scholars in the Diaspora, according to Messay (2016) encouraged the Amhara to join the Oromo protest to once and for all end the TPLF/EPRDF authoritarian regime. Although the ongoing armed resistance to free Welkait in Gondar province had been waged early, the Fano resistance was ripened and only needed the 11 July incident to join the Qeerroo protest. Initially more spontaneous the Fano matured through the establishment of various institutions such as the Fano Association in Gondar, the Amhara Youth Association, and the Amhara Students Association. Further, the Diaspora's financial support for the Fano proved critical in fulfilling the necessary logistics.

The youth were the primary protestors in Amhara, Oromia and other places. However, Fano does not mean "youth" in a literal sense, rather it refers to a warrior who defends the sovereignty of his country (Ethiopia). Its history is traced back to the patriots who strongly fought the Italian colonial occupation (1935–1941) and the radicalisation of the student's movement appeal to the idea of Fano – freedom

fighter. The Amhara resistance, then, exhibits in a way youth militancy. The Head of the Central Gondar Zone Security Office (2020) remarked, “The culture of owning arms and the proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW) smuggling in Ethio-Sudan frontier contributed to Fano’s militancy”. However, during an interview, a member of Fano recalled “the TPLF/EPRDF strategy of downplaying an organized armed resistance such as that of the Fano, particularly in North Gondar of the Amhara region, classifying it as an act of banditry”.

The modalities of Amhara resistance, in addition to the aforementioned, expressed in peaceful demonstration, rallies, boycotting party affiliated company products (such as Dashen Beer), bed-ins, vandalism (destroying and burning local officials house and hotels affiliated to the ruling party), among other. Indeed, the Fano resistance has changed the course of history of Ethiopian politics coupled with the Qeerroo and other youth protests throughout Ethiopia. This is not only in terms of pressuring the incumbent party to look for viable options to stay in power but also exposed the authoritarian and heinous nature of the TPLF/EPRDF regime.

The state repressive response

Protests that unfolded in Oromia and Amhara encountered heavy handed repression and infrequent tolerance. In the face of the widespread protest, the government initially attempted to curb the protesting movement by suspending the Master Plan (which happened in early 2016) and detaining the Chairperson of Welkait Committee to stay in Gondar (Authors’ own interview). But the demands transcended the plain triggering factors to the point of regime change, so the youth went on protesting.

The state repressive response changed the course and strategies of protesting. When security forces tightened the space for rally, bed-ins were used as an alternative action for a week or so. In some circumstances, vandalism, or wanton destruction of local government offices and ruling party affiliated companies and individuals’ properties were targeted. In addition, more risky strategies have been adopted by the Qeerroo and Fano, costing the lives of thousands of protesters. The 7 August 2016 Bahir Dar and the 7 October 2016 Bishoftu (Debre Zeit) Ireechaa festivity incidents that costed the lives of hundreds of protestors illustrates such risky strategies². This has led to an emotionally charged, year on year, commemoration of the fallen protestors in Amhara and Oromia respectively. These incidents were used by activists “as empirical verifications of the unworthiness of state managers to rule as well as for motivational appeals within organizations and interorganizational units to participate in future protest actions” (Almeida, 2003, p. 353). A better coordinated protest movement that mobilised various resources and reduced risky confrontation with security forces was created in the aftermath of 2016 to 2018.

With the escalation of the protesting movements, the TPLF/EPRDF undertook various remedial measures. First, a State of Emergency was declared two times between 2016 and 2018. This has, however, further restricted civil and political liberties causing more criticism on the regime. Third, “deep renewal” (criticism and self-criticism) was undertaken in the party’s central committee to the grass

root level of government that brought new faces to ministerial positions from the disgruntled groups. This measure also failed to achieve the intended outcome. The third measure was an internal reform that elected a new Prime Minister: Abiy Ahmed. The coming of Abiy to power has marked a new beginning in the ruling party's history.

Conclusion

The cycle of protest under analysis in Ethiopia is revealing of the relevant role of contextual factors and political opportunities for understanding protest dynamics. The government intention to implement a policy (the Addis Ababa Master Plan) which would change the configuration of domestic boundaries both of the capital in relation to the Oromia Regional State and of administrative units between the Amhara and Tigray Regional States, triggered fierce and sustained protest, and unexpected political alignments between the protest movements associated with the two largest ethnic groups: Oromo and Amhara. The issues at stake – land, identities, rights, and grievances – echoed claims and unfinished businesses that resurface from time to time in the Ethiopian social and political landscape.

The centrality of the land question and the national question within Ethiopia's social engineering approaches and political projects of state-building is quite illuminating because of its unique trajectory in the African context: apart the Italian period of occupation between 1935–1941 Ethiopia's state trajectory forms part of non-colonial Africa. Ethiopia's difficulty and failure to resolve this dual challenge and the recurrence of protest across eras come as a portent reminder that whenever power is exercised without taking into account local demands and without creating space and opportunities for the peaceful demonstration of dissenting voices (and for the negotiation of conflicting interests) the regime is likely to be overthrown by violent means. This is a unique lesson to draw from non-colonial Africa and from a state where the legal and administrative institutions associated with the European state model did not take root. What is interesting in Ethiopia as the sole case of non-colonial Africa is the longevity of various forms of protest and the engagement of a plurality of social groups throughout different eras.

This cycle of protests in contrast to previous ones had in its origins a deep division within the traditional ruling elite from highland Ethiopia (the Amhara and Tigrayans) and had the differential outcome of leading to a reform within the ruling party that ultimately brought about a significant shift in the loci of power and exercise of authority: the sidelining of the dominant party within the ruling coalition and across the various key security state's institutions such as the intelligence and armed forces.

Furthermore, the protests in Oromia and Amhara unfolded in the aftermath of the 2015 election and not before because of the political opportunities related to internal elite discord, combined grievances related to the continuous reconfiguration of administrative boundaries and extended access to internet and social media platforms. In spite of the government's resorting to internet and communications' obstruction and blackouts as a means of quelling dissent the extended access to

internet, even if intermittently, offered alternative venues to mobilise collective action and amplify its significance beyond domestic and international borders; ultimately linking the 2015–2018 cycle of protest in Ethiopia to the transnational cycle protest in Africa and across regions marked by contemporary competitive authoritarianism and other types of authoritarian rule in the twenty-first century.

Extended access to the internet and social media enabled the forging of an alliance between movements that had emerged out of identity and resource-based grievances. Indeed, when we compare the ineffective outcome of collective action in the political crisis a decade earlier in the aftermath of the 2005 elections to the outcome of the 2015–2016 protests, this chapter confirms Meyer's contention that the extent of grievances, the viability of various strategies of influence and the perceived costs and benefits of various alliances all change over time both because of what social movements do and how authorities respond to them (2004a, p. 140). In the 2005 political crisis the claimants of irregularities during the elections missed the opportunity to forge an alliance on the basis of identity and resource-based grievances provoked by state policy, whereas in 2015–2016 these same grievances around state policies not only spurred mobilisation within ethnic-based regions and groups but also across. In the end, the political elite division and lack of a common vision, the cooperation between different groups (Qeerroo and Fano) and the widespread ICT access and digital activism rendered collective action effective in bringing about political reform.

In the aftermath of this research it becomes evident that more detailed and fine grained research needs to be carried on how face-to-face communication, peer-to-peer mobile communication, and social platforms' activism affect cooperative behaviour among and across different groups in different locations (including both the capital and remote/hardship areas) and how these different communication strategies are key to understanding ICT access and digital literacy as a political opportunity approach in face of the widespread authoritarian states' response with internet shutdowns and total communications blackout.

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Notes

1. Facebook page at <https://www.facebook.com/QeerrooB/> (Accessed: 20 September 2021).
2. See for example: 'Bahir Dar Protest, 7 August 2016' at <https://borkena.com/2016/08/07/bahir-dar-protest-august-72016/> (accessed 20 September 2021); "Fuel on the Fire" Security Force Response to the 2016 Irreecha Cultural Festival' at <https://www.hrw.org/report/2017/09/20/fuel-fire/security-force-response-2016-irreecha-cultural-festival> (Accessed: 20 September 2021).

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