

Challenges of Ethiopian Transition: Breakthrough or Brink of Collapse?

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Abstract

Anti-regime protests rocked Ethiopia from November 2015 to mid-February 2018. Two of the dominant Ethnic groups were at the forefront of the protests. The dissent was triggered by two mechanical events. But there were a variety of long-standing structural conditions setting the ground for the protest to germinate. The campaign succeeded in bringing together hitherto accusatorial groups and mobilized nationwide protest. Brute force was used by the regime security. Protesters, however, eventually succeeded in forcing the regime out of office and ushered in political reforms. As a result, the political space declared widened, long-shattered Ethio-Eritrean relation restored, and political prisoners released. The experience transformed the conventional notions of regime change. The reform shows there is a glimmer of hope Ethiopia may succeed in transitioning into democracy. However, there are also some shady areas with the potential to capitulate the entire process of transition. Some of these challenges came along with the reforms and have the potential not only to disrupt the process but also will jeopardize- Ethiopia's existence as a unified nation. The purpose of this article, therefore, is to analyze transitional challenges that require careful considerations. These include, but are not entirely limited to, historical reworking and meddling between and among identity-based references, feelings of periodic ethnic-power turn takings on the grounds of identity, social media elevated populism & adventurism, local territorial administrative and identity issues. Understanding these challenges is crucial to sustaining reforms and ease the process of transition.

Key Words: Ethiopian Civil Resistance, Political Reforms, Democratic Transitions, Transformation, Protests



Introduction

Waves of anti-regime protests rocked Ethiopia from November 2015 to February-March 2018. Two of the dominant Ethnic groups, Oromo and Amhara, were at the forefront of the protests. They used selected methods of nonviolent protest & persuasion, noncooperation, and nonviolent intervention to persuade the regime to come to protest terms. Although there had been long-reigning political and economic conditions simmering through the years and setoff the material conditions for the outbreak of the anti-regime protests, the 2015-2018 dissent was kindled by two separate trigger events. The first one is related to the regime's announcement to implement the Addis Ababa Master Plan in mid-April 2014 (Oromia)¹ and the second was as a response to the arrest of Wolqayet Amhara Identity and Self-Administration Committee members by security forces in July-2016 (Amhara)². Unable to curb the dissent through the unrelenting use of violence, the regime eventually gave up and Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn resigned from office in mid-February 2018.

Although initially, it was a local protest and lacks central coordination, later effective use of social media outlets and recruitment of few decentralized but very determined coordinators enabled it to create a sense of alliance between Amhara and Oromo anti-regime campaigners. They have been protesting separately ever since the introduction of ethnic federalism. Following the 2015 dissent, they, however, succeeded in staging sustained and broad-based protest against the regime. Along with other carefully selected nonviolent techniques, social media was one of the channels used to coordinate, organize, and mobilize nationwide Resistance. The movement was successful in forcing the regime to make changes. As a result, various reforms are underway since February-March 2018. It opened the concourse for discourses between interest groups that are concerned with the future of Ethiopia. However, few developments came along with the reforms and appear to have the potential to hinder the process of transitioning Ethiopia into a democratic state unless a careful examination of their long-term pickles is exposed. These developments seem to have crushing effects and a higher probability of dividing the country into many smaller but weaker nations. This article aims to discuss the imminent challenges Ethiopia will face while transitioning into a post-conflict democratic state. Being aware of these challenges is central in sustaining the reforms and transforming Ethiopia into a functioning state without sliding into an irreversible political blunder. The study has highly benefited from my PhD dissertation work titled "The Dynamics of Civil Resistance and the

¹ Ethiopia has a federal state structure with Nine federating units called Regional States (Tigray, Afar, Amhara, Oromia, Southern Nations Nationalities and Peoples, Benishangul-Gumuz, Gambela, Ethio-Somali and Harari regions, and Two City administrations (Addis Ababa and Dire Dawa). Oromia region, therefore, is the largest region accounting for about 34% of Ethiopia's demography (see CSA, 1994 & 2007)

² The second-largest region in Ethiopia accounting nearly 30% of Ethiopian demography (see CSA, 1994, 2007)



Management of Turbulent Peace in Ethiopia (2015-2018)” with a careful analysis of primary and secondary data.

Review of Empirical Studies

Civil resistance is one of the strategies used to oust intransigent governments and becoming a vital tool for political change in nondemocratic contexts (Nepstad 2013). It has been used as an alternative to challenge autocratic regimes. It overthrows autocrats quicker than violent methods (Cunningham, González, White, Vidovic, & Gleditsch, 2015). Traditionally, civil resistances as a strategy of popular mobilization was regarded by many as inactive and incapable of forcing out a highly entrenched opponent from office (Martin, 2015; Schock, 2003). People were concerned about the efficacy of nonviolent to challenging established regimes. However, first with the overthrow of highly divisive and ruthless dictators across the globe through the mobilization of ordinary people with the use of sagaciously selected nonviolent methods, a challenge regarding the efficacy is being excluded (Schock, 2003). Recently, there is a growing understanding that nonviolent is an efficient tool in the process of wielding power and sway away opponent's pillars of support (Sharp, 2010).

Second, moral or political *jiu-jitsu* is also another challenge in nonviolent resistance. Meaning, nonviolent movement often succeeds for the fact that it melts the heart of the opponent. Staying firmly nonviolent in the face of a repressive opponent for violence is inherently wrong (Smithey, 2018) as well as letting the opponent repress them for the supposition that the action backfires (Summy, 2009). It is related to the perception that protesters act nonviolently due to their conviction to an ideology or spirituality, not from the strategic importance of nonviolence to address structural injustices. This, however, has been proved wrong following the use of nonviolent for its strategic advantages (Helvey, 2004; Quester, Ackerman, & Kruegler, 1994). However, there is still no guarantee that all civil resistances end up nonviolent and result in similar outcomes (Nepstad, 2015). Some may fully succeed, others may partially succeed, and some may fail either during the course of the campaign or thenceforward. While people, for instance, saw in astonishment as the Berlin Wall came down almost nonviolently, the same year, a similar movement end up in the ruthless repression in Tiananmen Square (Calhoun, 1989). More recently, as the world was also witnessing the decay of rigid regimes in Tunisia, Libya, and Egypt in 2011 through nonviolent protests, similar movements in Bahrain, Yemen, and Syria resulted in backlashes and dissidents suffered from regime repression (Chenoweth & Stephan, 2014). These movements either cracked violently or transgressed into a full-blown civil war (Wolfsfeld, Segev, and Sheaffer 2013). Hence, not all nonviolent movements are successful (Nepstad, 2015). Again, no guarantee that those successful or partially successful movements equally succeed in sustaining changes and transform into a fully functioning democracy. For these facts, challenges of contemporary civil resistance shifted to entrenching the reforms. But before venturing into the task of listing the challenges, it

seems crucial to bring a brief review of the roots of such challenges in Ethiopia from selected empirical research undertakings in an assumption to demonstrate a clear picture of the discussion that follows.

Scholars have different views on the formation of modern Ethiopia³ (Bach, 2014), which roughly took place from the second half of Nineteenth to the dawn of the Twentieth Century (Zewde, 1991; Greenfield, 1965) in a combination of peaceful submission and forceful subjugation (Záhořík, 2017). Some see the process as part of the “nation-building” project. This school believes that the shape and form present-day Ethiopia occupies was created during the high tied period of colonialism and should be seen as a national pride⁴. Elites from the northern half (especially the Amhara) believed to support this “nation-building thesis” (Kebede, 2020). Later, many shifted to “national oppression thesis” because they saw the system as equally oppressive both to autochthonous and new tributaries (Levine, 2013). Off the most important proponents of this thesis includes the Tigray elites⁵. On the other extreme, there is a third perception *aka* the “colonial thesis” - characterizes the process as colonialism⁶ (Záhořík, 2017). This category believes principalities from the general south⁷ were self-governing entities prior to their forceful annexation into the Ethiopian empire (Jalata, 2004). For them, the process was nothing less but colonialism (Záhořík, 2017). There is also a recently growing debate that there were even genocidal acts perpetrated during the period (Campbell & Jalata, 1999). Elites from the newly incorporated areas seem to share this thought (Gudina, 2008). Of these, the Oromo are the leading (Záhořík, 2017).

Mutatis mutandis, all the thesis seems to have few characters in common. First, all of them perversely used “ethnicity” and “religion” as instruments of mobilization to resonate support for their unbridled ambitions to control and maintain power and grapple over the nation’s resources for the last half-a-century. Second, they also focused on narrating

³ Taking political centralization as an objective criterion (criteria used to define modernization may include labor division, specialization, increased productivity, mobilization, nation-building, equality & rights extension).

⁴ It was a period of harsh competition among European powers to scramble the continent among themselves. As a result, by the dawn of WWI, the entire continent (exception of Ethiopia and Liberia) was fallen under European control. Hence, if there was an African territory outside of the Ethiopian Empire, it was either British East Africa, the Anglo-condominium of Sudan, or French Somaliland. Several attempts, often by more than one European power tried to subdue Ethiopia. However, Ethiopia defended its territory and survived European colonialism (See Sven Rubenson, *The Survival of Ethiopian Independence*, 1976).

⁵ See the 1976 Tigray Peoples Liberation Front (TPLF) Manifesto.

⁶ Since the Ethiopian empire used both peaceful persuasion and forceful subjugation to create a unified state.

⁷ It includes areas that were incorporated into the Ethiopian empire during the second half of the 19th and dawn of the 20th century. These form the Southern, Eastern, South East, and South Western parts of Ethiopia.



Ethiopian history based on who controls power regardless of the objective reality. Accordingly, Ethiopian history was subjected to different narration and biased interpretations over time and characterized as one of the most complex topics to discern. Third, as a follow up to the second case, there have been traditions of forging alliances followed by instant meddling against some considerably powerful elite, religious or ethnic groups, especially after the demise of *Derg*⁸. Hence, there happened a history of creating ethnic hatreds and group adversaries. Fourth, they moved away from the notion of Pan-Ethiopianism (*Ityopiawinnet*) to ethnonationalism over the years (an exception being the 1998-2000 Ethiopia-Eritrean war), and very recently to a very radical tribal politics (since 2015) even in areas known for advocating Pan-Ethiopianism. This made the discussion relating to Ethiopia, Ethiopian politics, and history to become impassably difficult. Feelings of historic accusatorial-ness, ethnic faultiness, religious factions, and most importantly, elite rivalries contained in this discourse for the last half-century of imperial (until-1974), socialist (1974-1991), and federal (since 1991) Ethiopia. In the following section, the paper, therefore, aims to discuss the potential challenges Ethiopia need to seriously take for the already embarked political transition to work out.

Transitioning to Democracy?

Nonviolent resistance overturns autocratic governments. It has also proven preeminence over other tools to initiating political reforms and entrenching democratic systems (Cunningham, González, White, Vidovic, & Gleditsch, 2015). Yet, this does not guarantee that all movements equally succeed the moment they demise the older one. Sustaining changes achieved through popular protest is becoming more challenging than the process of toppling a functioning system (Putzel & Di John, 2012). Moreover, patterns of political transitions are highly contextual (Guo, Sujian & Stradiotto, 2014). Due to failure to understand contextual differences, many spent much time and expertise trying to copy from others, expecting similar results. These experiences, however, assured that every transition has a unique pattern. In multi-ethnic nations like Ethiopia, whose history is characterized by social disguise, political exclusions, and economic marginalization, it is often challenging to initiate political liberalization and democratization. Although the process of democratization, for instance, was started back in the 1990s in the so-called “decade of democratization” in the third world (Ottaway, 1995), political transition in Ethiopia has been a subject in disguise (Gudina, 2011; Waal, 1992). As observed from earlier transition periods (1974 & 1991), often, there was a rush to ascending to power

⁸ An adaptation of a geez word for a “committee” and used to refer to the Provisional Military Administrative Council (PMAC) – the military junta that deposed Emperor Haile Selassie I from power in 1974.



without consulting conditions vital to adopting democratization (Ottaway, 1995). Rapid and forced transformation often lacks content and appears to be a mere formality.

Similar to 1991, for instance, the same governing coalition (Ethiopian People's Democratic Party (EPRDF) by then, and now Prosperity Party (PP)) has close control of the recent transition. This, therefore, not only allows PP to come out as one of the significant power contenders but also as a resurrected EPRDF, forget the protection of human rights (where torturing and murder became almost ritual), there is no guarantee that they use the tradition to narrow the political space. More importantly, as observed in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), the forces that brought reforms through a combination of methods of peaceful protest, noncooperation, and nonviolent intervention may not necessarily continue befriending and work together (Gelderloos, 2013). They may go back to their historic enmity (Ghannam, 2011). As discussed below, there have been ethnic hatreds, religious factions, and elite rivalries on certain matters over the years, and people have been struggling independently on a local basis. The 2015-2018 public dissent brought widely different actors and interest groups to join forces against EPRDF. However, the alliance cultivated among various actors and interest groups is ephemeral. For this fact, there is a high probability that it crumbles and the actors go back to their original adversity. This will probably make the process of transitioning Ethiopia into a democratic society to fade away eventually.

Contested History and Politicized Identity

Issues still complicating peace and conflict dynamics in Ethiopia goes as far back as the period of nation-building (Abbay, 2009; Levine, 2013; Tusso, 1997). More importantly, the country came across what would be its "undoing" tradition of wrong historical narration against some groups, often sponsored by the state, aimed to seek blessing from the formerly "marginalized" groups (Toggia, 2008). This reworking made the "labeled groups" fully accountable for past injustices (Marzagora, 2017). Sustaining political power becomes only possible through coercion, infusing acrimonies, and at times, dampening all the political debacles of the past on one ethnic group, the Amhara⁹ to be exact, and state-sponsored meddling between groups that have crucial influence on Ethiopian politics. Inventing history became ethnocrats lucrative political economy. Consequently, people wrangled over such reworked history for decades (Tusso, 1997). It resulted in the

⁹ The second-largest demography – often connoted for its kinship with imperial Ethiopia and the *Derg*, when in fact, neither imperial Ethiopia nor the *Derg* benefited the Amhara for just being Amhara



development of competing visions about Ethiopia and eventually produced polarized groups on the basis of identity. The following details can sum up this argument.

First, EPRDF was well aware of the fact that if Oromo and Amhara came together and allied, they can create a different turn of situations for they jointly constitute over 60% of the demography (CSA, 2007). For this fact, there were many tantalizing strategies used by the regime to circumvent the Amhara-Oromo alliance¹⁰. The EPRDF saw this short-term solution as a political contraption to stay in power. Meddling between Amhara and Oromo relations and keeping them “mortal enemies” have become an unsurpassed state stratagem. Amhara-Oromo later avoided their adversity and allied in the process of pressurizing the regime since October 2017. This alliance was instrumental in bringing political reforms. However, it was only the shared grievances that brought them together than genuine relations¹¹. Hence, it is difficult to conclude that they continue befriending in transforming the country since ethnic hatreds reworked for decades are deeply entrenched. One of the biggest failures in nonviolent resistance is also related to the fact that protesters can be successful in toppling the regime by creating short term alliances. But may fail to institutionalize relations when the campaign is over (Pinckney 2018). It is apparent in various nonviolent movements, such as in Libya and Egypt in 2011. Alliances enchanted among different protest groups during the course of the campaign crumbled when the struggle is over. And, this led to the emergence of local militias competing for power and vying for resources (Pedde, 2017).

This coincides with ideas advocated by conflict transformation thinkers such as J. P. Lederach (1995) and J. Galtung (1996), who argued that one of the biggest failures in conflict resolution is often related to a focus on a quick fix to the problem when the conflict is over instead of carefully examining the process itself. It focuses on ends than processes to ends (Miall, 2004). In such a hurry, parties may be left out and end up being spoilers. Or some may claim their contribution is considerably high compared to others during the campaign and may wanted considerations accordingly. Since various groups struggled to bring reforms through (non)violent means, their roles and contributions become highly contested. Although almost all political oppositions, the youth (*Qeerroo*¹² and *Fano*¹³), the

¹⁰ Information obtained from Key Informant Interview KI-II-20 (Political Opposition), 12 July 2019, Addis Ababa

¹¹ Notes from FGD-2 (17 April 2019, Ambo), FGD-4 (21 June 2019, Woldiya)

¹² *Qeerroo* (for male) & *Qarree* (for female) in a literal Oromiffa represents the Oromo youth and is believed to originate from Oromo word *Qeerrensa* (Tiger) to characterize the “youth” as fast, fearless, energetic, powerful, and determined. Although inseparable from *Qarree*, people often use “*Qeerroo*”. For further information, See <https://qeerroo.org/resources-afaan-oromo-amharic-and-english/guidelines-of-qeerroo-bilisummaa-resistance/>

¹³ *Fano* – a word abridged from one of the protest songs used by the Ethiopian Students Movement (ESM) of the 1960 and 1970s, *Fano Tesemara* ende Ho Chi Minh *ende* Che Guevara (‘O Guerrilla, rise to arms like Ho Chi Minh & Che Guevara) mostly to inspire the youth to stand against social injustices in Ethiopia following the examples from Cuba and Vietnam. Since it is

social media activists, the armed groups, the diaspora media, and the Ethiopian diaspora community have contributed to the demise of the regime, they have different expectations out of the conflict. Subsequently, unsubstantiated claims of contributions and expectations to be considered accordingly will surface. This, therefore, creates another round of conflict, if not violent, and derails the transition process. Second, there has been a massive concentration on group reference since 1991 (Lashitw, 2019). Ethnicity was used as a referent object to calculate group gains (Young, 2007). It is in the mainstream glossary of Ethiopian politics for the last quarter-century. People used to pick-up their ethnic cards while claiming whatever they deserve. It perfectly worked for many and simultaneously red-flagged few. Hence, this shows that ethnicity still has significant explanatory repercussions to the entire reform process Ethiopia recently embarked on because of public pressure. People will continue calculating the success achieved through the mobilization of the mass on ethnic grounds. They try to exclude others on presumable ill-contribution or less-participation and so forth¹⁴. This is mostly the case in third world states where the “reference” about economic and political gains after a successful revolution is often seen from identity perspectives (Anthony & Kpundeh, 1996).

One of the driving forces that led people to organize a nonviolent struggle against EPRDF since 2015 is those who have done the dearly in the armed struggle to demise *Derg* (1974-1991) eventually established a dominant party state with impassable supremacy of fewer elites. In the beginning, there was growing public inference that whoever comes after the *Derg* could not be as unjust as the *Derg* (Berhe, 2001). This made people less curious that EPRDF could be as irrational as the one it toppled. In principle, all the political and economic transformations after the *Derg* supposed to benefit the majority. However, there were groups deliberately exempted from enjoying those rights¹⁵. Hence, there is no guarantee that this could be the case after the 2015-2018 civil resistance. Meaning, those who assume economically and politically marginalized in the past may think that they have done the lion-share in the civil resistance and may use this opportunity to establish a system closer to the one they toppled. Although research in nonviolent studies affirm that nonviolent is highly likely to usher dialogue between interest groups (Schock 2015) and has untapped potential to transform the state from a dominant party to a more democratic one, there is no guarantee it may turn Ethiopia into another chaos. Of course, many of the reforms that are taking place following the resignation of Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn in mid-February 2018 show that there is still little hope Ethiopia might transition into aspired reforms. However, there are also few areas on hold that include but not

the youth who is expected to take arms for struggle, the name *Fano* referred to the youth who rebels against social injustices. It is, therefore, a kind of a perceptive to rebel against an unjust system and does not specifically represent a defined age group in the society.

¹⁴ Information obtained from Key Informant Interview KI-II-10 (HPR Member), 20 June 2019, Addis Ababa

¹⁵ Data obtained from Key Informant Interview KI-II-17 (Political Opposition), 10 July 2019, Addis Ababa



limited to, the status of the city of Addis Ababa vis-à-vis Oromo special interest to it, issues related to official federal language/s, and the status of Amhara and Oromo living in either side¹⁶. These issues soon become a source of contention than cooperation between the two largest constituents of Ethiopian federalism.

Third, for the last quarter-century of Ethiopian politics, there was an official state enterprise of historical reworking. Extant public knowledge about Ethiopian polity and history suffers from new narrations and reinterpretations. Ethiopian history was branded as the history of the few and taken as nothing less but a history of Amhara dominance (Bach, 2011; Toggia, 2008). The regime engaged in such an enterprise due to TPLF's obsession to subdue the Amhara elite and put to an end what they thought was "Amhara domination". Merera Gudina (2008: 156) once claim that the Tigrayans armed struggle (1974-1991) was primarily rooted in *their* aspiration to restore the power they have lost to Amhara elites. According to EPRDF's narration, therefore, Ethiopian history that was characterized by social injustices, economic deprivation, and political exclusions, understood as if an Amhara transgression. Hence, the post-1991 political environment hinged on this fundamental principle - outlining "Amhara had taken comparative advantages". For this fact, Amhara was considered an oppressor. Consequently, in areas outside of the Amhara region, they were forced to leave from places they have lived for over a generation. Their private wealth and corporate establishments were confiscated and destroyed. Following the February-March 2018 reforms, there is also a growing tendency among the new power holders and the "people" at large to cling to similar historical reworking. However, this time it is against "Tigray" - by applying the same logic as if they have taken comparative advantage for the last quarter-century of Ethiopian politics at the expense of the mass. This is in connection to the fact that TPLF has taken the upper hand in the EPRDF coalition and occupied key national executive roles and positions¹⁷ - including the Office of Head of the Government (1991-2011), Foreign Affairs (1991-2016), Defense (1991-2018), and the National Intelligence and Security (1991-2018). Generally, there is a pattern that seamlessly repeating itself after the movement is over - excluding the Tigray region and Tigray people from the fruits of reforms.

Again, there is no guarantee that those who recently occupy key national positions following the reforms (February-March 2018) will face the same exclusion shortly if this historical reworking continues. It shows that the objective of the public dissent and subsequent reforms only concerned with changing the status quo. Hence, there is no guarantee that the protest that toppled EPRDF from power will establish a far better

¹⁶ According to the 2007 Central Statistical Report (one of the most debatable censuses ever made), there are over Three Million Amhara (10%) living in the Oromia region and about 400 thousand Oromo in Amhara region. Although the Oromo in Amhara region has the right to self-administration of their affairs under the limits of the ANRS and FDRE constitutions, the Amhara living in Oromia, have been denied such rights as well as continually subjected to rights violations and confiscations of their establishments.

¹⁷ Information obtained from Key Informant Interview (KI-II-20), 12 July 2019, Addis Ababa

democratic system from the one it toppled. It also contradicts general principles and, few legitimizing criteria of nonviolent movements- such as those who resigned from power for public demands have to be treated as friends and not enemies, and the outcomes of the reform need to be nontrivial (Bartkowski & Taleb, 2015). Again, the ultimate aim of civil resistance is also to claim legitimate authority and open windows of opportunities for people to establish a democratic order instead of just removing a functioning system.

Fourth, apart from problems of transition and historical adversarial-ness, there are also challenges related to identity and local regional administrative boundary (International Crisis Group, 2009). Such were used as key mobilizing factors to heighten the conflict in the course of the struggle. People also collectively and independently used to ask about these issues even before the outbreak of the 2015 dissent. Off these, regional administrative boundaries between Amhara and Tigray regions¹⁸ (Wolqaita-Telemet-Tegede & Raya) and the Qimante¹⁹ identity questions were among the few mobilizing factors. Although a national committee²⁰ is instituted to explore and provide recommendations to the highest political authority for such and similar issues, the reform seems to underestimate the seriousness of these issues. Instead, the focus shifted to a bit bigger national matter. However, such issues have enormous potential to galvanize similar movements in the future and hugely affect the transition. Due to the claims that the Amhara region has in the stated areas, for instance, relation between Amhara and Tigray regions soured, and subsequently, social cohesion between Amhara and Tigray people has shattered. The reform will be incomplete if it does not restore the shattered Amhara-Tigray relations as well as address long-lived administrative and identity claims all over the country where commonality is extant - because that is what transition into democratic society means and conflict transformation entails.

Social Media and Virtual Activism Related Challenges

No doubt the advent of social media has improved the process of mobilizing dissent against authoritarians (Howard et al., 2015). It is one of the growing avenues where people can join online networking platforms and publicize grievances against a corrupt regime. It waives one of the stiffest challenges classical protest movements used to stumble-on such as communicating intent to nationwide audiences that are separated by physical distance and found in different economic and social conditions so that people cannot wait any longer to publicize grievances (Wolfsfeld, Segev, & Sheaffer, 2013). It heralded the

¹⁸ Found in administrative boundary of former Gonder and Wollo sub-provinces respectively where majority of them were Amharic speakers. However, following the federal restructuring in 1991, incorporated in the newly reconfigured Tigray National Regional State.

¹⁹ An ethnic group found in Amhara region (Gondar) whose identity has been lost for quite sometimes.

²⁰ Administrative Boundaries and Identity Issues Commission Establishment /Draft/ Proclamation NO....2018



opportunity of winning with lesser humanistic and material costs (Kerton et al., 2014). Also, it enhanced public awareness about existing injustices within a short period (Dewey, Kaden, Marks, Matsushima, & Zhu, 2012). Civil resistances that toppled authoritarians ranging from Iran's "Twitter Revolution" to Egyptians "Facebook Revolution" could have been impossible (Kerton et al., 2014) without social media and instant connections bypassing the bounds of physical geography. In these movements, social media served as the most reckoned platform creating aggrieved people's sense of emotions and feelings of togetherness through the publication of shared grievances over the internet.

Following the outbreak of nationwide anti-government resistance in 2015, social media has played significant roles in creating awareness about the shared grievances and public resentments across a wide range of dissenters in Ethiopia. Although responded in brute force, cracking-down the EPRDF only took three years. Hence, protest coordinators who invested their time and resources in the process of popular mobilization - via the articulation of narratives about the existing social discriminations, political exclusion, and economic marginalization as well as continuous regime repression against peaceful protesters on social media platforms eventually cultivated millions of followers on Facebook, YouTube, LinkedIn, WhatsApp, and Twitter. As noted earlier, the civil resistance brought together groups known to have opposite interests concerning Ethiopia as a unified state (Gedamu, 2018). Cultivating such alliances and creating a sense of Pan-Ethiopian unity have been almost impossible for the last quarter-century.

This was especially unlikely to happen between Amhara and Oromo. The anti-regime protest (2015-2018) was the first turning point that brought Amhara and Oromo protesters together (Gedamu, 2018). Shared grievances published on online social media platforms and campaigns were among the reasons they choose to act together. They, for the first time, united their forces to address overarching national matters. There have been understandings over local issues too. They reached an informed consent that a joint movement is needed to sway EPRDF from its pillars of support. However, recently, there is a growing suspicion around the globe that people who have many followers on their social media pages do not necessarily represent what we call positive change agents (de la Torre, 2015; Postill, 2018). They may also cultivate followers or fan-clubs simply for speaking and publicizing hostile speeches against State, certain identity groups, or prominent individuals. Besides, Ethiopia is also a State where there is a growing dissection of people along identity lines. As seen in various conflicts, "ethnic entrepreneurs" often need support and protection of their "identity community". To galvanize support, ethnocrats engage in broadcasting identity-oriented speeches, articulate, post, and share ethnocentric statements against other identities or group references. The reference they use may range from secular to extreme sectarian ideology and invoke violence against the subjects. Followers, who in one way or the other, negatively affected by the existing system infer activists' plea as ingenious and spontaneously mobilized against the target for simple



fictitious cases. Hence, social media is also becoming a platform where some activists can recruit like-minded people to execute their vision of creating violence against groups whom they feel has to be jettisoned (Chukwuere and Onyebukwa 2018). They create wrong narratives and share them over the internet with their followers (Salik and Iqbal 2019).

This corresponds with the violence that rocked Ethiopia (October 2019) when Jawar Mohammed²¹ posted a statement over the internet claiming the national security is plotting an attack on him (Burke 2019; Lashitw 2019), and the rage following the murder of Hachalu Hundesa²² (June 2020). The regime officially denied Jawar's claim and announced that there was no attempt made by the security to incarcerate him or relinquish his security details. Swayed by activists' appeal and angered by the regime's disdain of the public, in both cases, people went-out in masses in different parts of Oromia and Addis Ababa. To unleash the anger, they used extreme violence against non-Oromo in major towns and peripheries of Oromia (Negari and Paravicini 2019) and Addis Ababa. In the former case, the violent outrage went on for four consecutive days (23-26 October 2019) and in the latter case for more than a week (June-July 2020) and shook the country to its core. In both carnages, over Three Hundred people were confirmed dead and many more injured (Lashitw, 2019). This shows how much people are concerned about identity oriented social media moguls than national reform-oriented activists, and primacy is given to locality than Ethiopianism.

On the other hand, social media is also a platform where people create dozens of accounts by some "con-name" with potential hundred thousand and millions of followers over-night as a result of the "name" and the influence attached to it without spotting that page belongs to that particular activist or group of influencers (Salik and Iqbal 2019). Due to the failure to distinguish between "official" and "fake" personal websites and social media accounts, people may be used by social media entrepreneurs for wrong missions. Sometimes the "fake" accounts of an individual activist who knows nothing about the existence of a different social media account by "his/her" name may have more followers than their "official" page. It increases the likelihood that messages posted and shared on "fake" social networks to be hate propaganda, xenophobic, and vengeful acts (Chukwuere & Onyebukwa, 2018). Such accounts are often created to counter-revolutions and mislead genuine national actions. Whatever the case may be, there is a rising number of people joining online activism every day. And since it minimizes the risk of physical repression

²¹ Oromo activist hitherto based overseas (USA) who came to Ethiopia following the reforms

²² A popular Oromo artist and notable revolutionary singer



from the police or regime security forces, there is a high possibility for people to publish xenophobic speeches and texts through their online networks. Envy by their online followers, there is a growing chance for social media activists to think they could do anything bypassing the normative and legal frameworks of a State²³.

Since there is also growing individual adventurism, some online activists may have more followers and virtual legitimacy than public politicians for posting and sharing hate speeches to their online fan-clubs. This would be a source for them to compromise with the regime to create an Oligarchy instead of public interest. In the case reported earlier, for instance, Jawar Mohammed's Facebook page shows that there were more than 1.2 million followers at the time of the violence that rocked Oromia against non-Oromo and undefined religious sects from 23-26 October 2019. His followers not only made outrageous violence against non-Oromo inhabitants in and around Oromia region, but they also organized collective protection around his residence, where he made public statements on presumably orchestrated attack. Since social media influencers are not accountable to any public responsibility in the sense of legality, and due to the reason they have extremist followers, their moral sense of integrity often get compromised. They do whatever is necessary to get out of the messy situation they entangled themselves in. They may be threatened to be killed or maybe attacked by their radical followers if they fail to deliver whatever they said so. Eventually, they see there is no going back unless they finish what they have started knowing the fact that the results will turn violent.

The major problem of such activists, however, is they focus on cultivating personal support than coming together and put pressure on the regime to introduce reforms²⁴. This assures the probability that they are preparing themselves and strengthening backups in their competition for power after the campaign is over²⁵ regardless of public demands. Hence, they can be major sources of obstructions in the post-conflict transformation. Some may not be happy with the political arrangements and may resort to using violence to address what they think is missing. Some are allowed to keep their active military wings as a reserve while they signed an agreement with the regime and came back to the country to participate in the reform (as a response to widening the political space). There is a high probability that they can be hindrances to the transition and transformation process (Ashenafi, 2019; Economist, 2020). Although social media made that freedom and equality no longer bounded by race, boundary, ethnicity, religion, and region globally (Kerton et al., 2014), in Ethiopia, however, there is a growing tendency to use it to promote far more local

²³ Activists and protest coordinators, for instance, ridiculed National School Leaving Examination in June 2016. They accessed the exam, published answers on social media and exchanged through regular text messaging as well as ransacked entire exam booklets in some. This resulted in cancelation of the national exam.

²⁴ Information obtained from Key Informant Interview KI-I-1 (Activist), 7 December 2018, Addis Ababa

²⁵ Information obtained from Key Informant Interview KI-II-2 (Political Critic), 21 December 2018, Addis Ababa



dismemberments based on ethnic origin, language (dialectic differences within the same language), region (place of origin) and religion (differences in practice). Hence, there is a tendency for social media moguls to use such gaps and generate ethnic or sectarian violence to weaken a functioning government.

Apart from the one-time success in conducting nationwide protests against EPRDF (2015-2018), there was no traceable commonality among various activists in Ethiopia. Some have cultivated their popularity years before the protest for sharing identity-oriented speeches and excerpts on their social media. They still are fixated on the traditional assumptions of social mobilization and used only like-minded people (emotional fan-clubs) to some narration instead of bypassing the bounds of space, time, race, religion, ethnic identity, and so forth. Moreover, it has a huge potential to derail the processes of transitioning Ethiopia into a democratic state. Undoubtedly, these problems will keep coming back in now and then to disrupt the process and can be major impediments Ethiopia has to endure not only in the process of transition but also to exist as an orderly entity. Hence, these may lead us to conclude Ethiopia has to take some time to sort out similar problems before going further into national election. Successive national dialogue and national reconciliation talks should be made in the presence of multi-level stakeholders to facilitate genuine discussions. Such discussions are key to help the country to get on the right track (Berghof, 2017). Experiences in MENA such as Tunisia, Yemen, Iraq, Afghanistan and in East Africa such as in Kenya, for instance, of course with varying degrees of success, shows national dialogue and national reconciliation sessions are important procedures in political transitions after a major conflict case is over.

Conclusion

The civil resistance broke chains of social injustices imposed by the regime for the last quarter-century of Ethiopian history. Although people are hopeful that it has the potential to transform Ethiopia into a far more democratic system, there are still some challenges that came along with the new developments. These developments seem to have far more divisive potential and a colossal impediment to the process. Transition to a democratic state is often a critical problem to States deeply dissected along identity lines. This shows there is a high likelihood Ethiopia might fumble back to authoritarianism unless some issues are dealt-with very carefully. These include, matters related to the city of Addis Ababa and the ambiguously stated issue of Oromo special interest, issues concerning federal official language/s, local boundary and administrative matters as related to Tigray and Amhara region over Wolqayet-Telemet-Tegede and Raya as well as Qimant identity question. Although some of these issues were among the primary triggers to the last civil resistance, apart from abrogating the Addis Ababa Integrated Master Plan, the subsequent reform agenda following the dissent did nothing to address these questions. They were not among the reforms the transition promised to address. Addressing these issues will at



least minimize the perils of transition if not fully transform them. More importantly, there are also specific developments came along with the reform that derail or fully capitulate transitioning Ethiopia into a democratic state. These are part of that structural issues that primarily set the material conditions for the civil resistance to germinate.

First, there appears to have a tradition of narrating wrong histories and creating enmity among groups as if they have taken comparative advantages at the expense of others. These groups have been treated as oppressors and subjected to different forms of rights violations over the years. Unless national accord is reached on avoiding such reworking, it leads the country to fall into many pieces. It will be an impediment not only to the political transition rather it will be a significant factor dissecting the nation into many smaller but weaker identity bounds. Second, there is also obsession to interpret everything on ethnic grounds. Identity-politics has been extremely hard-pressed beyond the limits and reached to the level where it can no longer tie-up people to stay together as a unified nation. Hence, the country will detonate if the reform fails to move beyond ethnic-based politics. Finally, the civil resistance thought to end problems of group aspiration “*terregninet*” on Ethiopian politics based on fuzzy logic of claiming that “some” as groups has contributed a lot in bringing whatever reform is concerned. It has been a post-1991 tradition where “Tigryan” elites had dominated entire politics for quarter-century claiming that they have done the dearly in the war against the *Derg*. Following the 2015-2018 civil resistance, the Oromo seem to apply same daunting logic and soar to power substituting the “Tigrian” to take their share (*terregninet*). The focus is on changing personalities into some group’s opportunity instead of focusing on the bigger national program of adopting sound reforms and transforming the state into a democratic order.

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