

Protest and Political Change in Ethiopia: The Initial Success of the Oromo *Qeerroo* Youth Movement

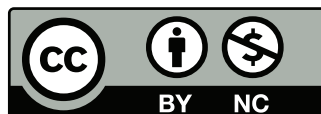
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Abstract

Ethiopia was until recently perceived to be a strong state, with a coherent governing coalition party, the Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front, dominated by its minority Tigrayan component party. The death of the party's strongman Meles Zenawi in 2012 created opportunities to challenge political power both from within the coalition and from outside by mobilizing public masses. An Oromo ethnic based social movement called *Qeerroo* ('youth') launched mass protests in 2014, calling for political accountability and an increase of Oromo representation and authority within the governing coalition. Widespread demonstrations ensued for several years, compelling the party leader and prime minister to step down in 2018 in order for an Oromo leader to emerge at the helm of power.

Drawing on social movement and political process theories, this article analyses the political opportunities seized and the mobilizing structures used by the *Qeerroo* movement in their struggle to transform Ethiopian politics. Exploiting unpopular political decisions and a weakened federal government, the *Qeerroo* employed an ethnic discourse, university campuses, and social media to mobilize mass protests against the Tigrayan dominated federal government. The *Qeerroo* movement was instrumental in enforcing a change in leadership in Ethiopia, resulting in the coming to power of Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed.



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Keywords: Social movement theory, political process theory, Ethiopia, Qeerroo, Oromo protest

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Disciplinary field

Social sciences; African studies

Introduction

Protests, rebellions, and revolutions have during modern times greatly impacted regime change in Ethiopia, from the fall of the Imperial order in 1974 to the overthrow of the military junta in 1991, and most recently in the 2015–2018 protests against the governing ethnic coalition, the Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), leading to its demise.

In this article we explain how it was possible for an Oromo youth movement, popularly called *Qeerroo*, to mobilize protests which were the key driver in the recent fundamental political changes in Ethiopia and in the ascent of Abiy Ahmed to power in 2018. The aim of the article is thus to explore how the *Qeerroo* protests eventually led to major shifts within the EPRDF, breaking down the consolidated political stance of the party.

The EPRDF government coalition was for 25 years perceived as an unbreakable front, admired and feared for its consolidated, ideologically anchored, and consensus driven development policies. The perception was that despite the diverse and historically conflict prone Ethiopian society, the integrity of the EPRDF maintained stability in the country and its authoritarian exhibition held opponents at bay (Hagmann and Abbink 2011). The *Qeerroo* movement challenged this status quo and led to changes of leadership and policy within the EPRDF coalition, with the rise of Abiy Ahmed, an Oromo leader, to power. Subsequently, in late 2019, Abiy Ahmed dissolved the EPRDF and replaced it with a new unitary party, the Prosperity Party – shedding the coalition's founding member and long-term leading elite, the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF).

In framing the case of the *Qeerroo* protests within political process theory, this article furthers our understanding of social movements in general, and political transitions in autocratic states in particular. Analyzing the political opportunities before and during

the time of protest, as well as the mobilization structures of the movement, we argue that the *Qeerroo* used ethnic discourse as a mobilizing tool, as well as actively employing social media platforms and the university campus as recruitment arenas. The article demonstrates how Ethiopian students and youth used the resources available to challenge the regime and its policies.

The question remains whether the impressive use of 'street power' shown during the time of protest represents more than one explosive blast. Even though the *Qeerroo* mobilized quickly and comprehensively, they were arguably not sufficiently politically organized and well-structured to sustain a mobilizing capacity. Their partial cooptation and demobilization after the immediate change of power within the ruling elite weakened their capacity as a long-term political actor able to provide checks and balances to sustained power abuse and maladministration, the principles they had originally mobilized against.

Methodology

We use a case study approach in this article, wherein the data collected is based on qualitative interviews and observations in Ethiopia (mainly in Addis Ababa and its environs) during 2017–18. Through multiple field visits by both authors, interviews were conducted with key informants among students and youth, as well as university faculty members, offering their take on the situation during the peak of the protest. Additionally, interviews with key political representatives from the EPRDF as well as from the Oromo opposition throughout the period of protest were also conducted.

To gain a broader understanding of the dynamics of mobilization, we selectively followed certain social media platforms and actors who were instrumental in the 'Oromo first' discourse. Particularly important here was the Oromo Media Network (OMN), originally established in the US by the Oromo activist-

turned-politician Jawar Mohammed. Much of the information disseminated on social media was in Afaan Oromoo (or Amharic), but a significant amount, especially around the time of key data collection in 2017–18 (a heightened time of protest), was in English.

Obviously, findings from a single case study will not be able to uphold general assumptions about social movements and how they play out. However, it will contribute with insight and knowledge to a topic that is under-represented in research, a situation very much due to its contemporariness.¹

The prelude to the protest movements

After the death of strongman Meles Zenawi, the long-term chairperson and Prime Minister of Ethiopia, in 2012, the EPRDF's coherence was increasingly cast in doubt, and questions about how this would impact the stability of the country started to surface (Aalen 2014). So much so that in the fall of 2016, long-term observer of Ethiopian politics, René Lefort, wrote that "There is every sign that Ethiopia is plunging into a crisis whole scale, intensity, and multiple and interdependent drivers are unprecedented since the founding of the regime in 1991" (Lefort 2016).

Popular protests against government power abuse, maladministration, and corruption began to simmer in Ethiopia's biggest regional state of Oromia in 2015. The protests, spontaneously organized in the beginning, became more coherently structured as they spread and grew in scope. The protests were most intense in urban centres across Oromia regional state, where tens of thousands of youth (*Qeerroo*) took to the streets to demand

a change in the incumbent EPRDF government leadership and its authoritarian practices. The Oromo protests were subsequently followed by an Amhara youth protest movement, called the *Fano*, calling for similar changes in Amhara regional state.

Internal differences within the EPRDF leadership and increasing protests and revolts across the country forced Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn to tender his resignation in mid-February 2018, as he acknowledged that only a new party leadership backed by a different power constellation could tackle the deepening crisis (Tronvoll 2019). This plunged the party into an intense power struggle for his successor, which further pushed the country to the brink of chaos, leading to the reintroduction of a State of Emergency and the establishment of military command post rule across the troubled areas.² After several weeks of high-level party deliberations, Abiy Ahmed, the Oromo representative, emerged victorious in the first ever competitive vote for the post; he took the helm of the party and became Ethiopia's third prime minister under EPRDF rule. Although the EPRDF party coalition remained in power, the change of chairperson would signal a major shift in the internal power balance and a total overhaul of party policies.

Oromo political elites had for a long time been in opposition to successive Ethiopian governments, due to their perceived political marginalization and cultural discrimination from the centre of politics; this was particularly humiliating as they are by far the biggest ethnic group in the country, constituting about 35% of the population (Østebø and Tronvoll 2020). Despite being represented within the EPRDF coalition and the government since 1991 with their own party, the Oromo Peoples Democratic Organization (OPDO, rebranded as the Oromo Democratic Party or ODP),

¹ Research on Oromo actors in knowledge generation in Ethiopian politics is also important in relation to counterbalancing the overrepresentation of studies from the core 'Habesha' highland perspective, hence contributing to a more nuanced perspective on Ethiopian politics and development

² See article "Ethiopia Declares State of Emergency" in Al Jazeera, 16 February 2018: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/2/16/ethiopia-declares-state-of-emergency-after-pm-quits> (accessed 05/11/2021).

the perception of alienation from power was maintained. Hence, the instigators and drivers of the protest movement, both inside the country and in the diaspora, built their arguments on an Oromo ethno-political platform.

At the heart of the protest movement were the *Qeerroo*³ – the Oromo youth. Their anger and frustrations were particularly directed towards the core power block within the EPRDF, the Tigray Peoples Liberation Front (TPLF), or, as they are popularly called, the *Woyane*.⁴ The TPLF had come to represent, in the eyes of the Oromo youth, the abuse of power, corruption, and the suppression of Oromo dignity and representation in the halls of power. Hence, the slogan “Down, down Woyane” was chanted by the Oromo masses throughout the years of protests, symbolizing their interest not only in wresting power away from the TPLF, but in permanently marginalizing them from the federal government in Addis Ababa.

Since its conception in 2014, students and youth calling themselves the *Qeerroo* demanded Oromo liberation and self-determination (EHRP 2018). A simultaneous shift in the leadership of the ODP, the Oromo component party of EPRDF, brought Lemma Megersa in as regional president of Oromia. Lemma became a symbol of hope for the Oromo movement, much due to his interest in listening to the grievances of the Oromo protesters and his ‘Oromo first’ rhetoric. This changed how the ODP was perceived in the region, from being a puppet of TPLF to being a genuine voice for the Oromo cause. When Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn resigned in February 2018, the Oromo movement wanted rising star Lemma as new prime minister. However, as the prime minister needs to be selected from the members of the House of Representatives,

of which Lemma was not a member, the Oromo leadership had to select another candidate for the top post in the country (Fisher and Gebrewahd 2018, 8). Hence, Lemma swapped positions with his deputy Abiy Ahmed, who was a member of parliament, which enabled Abiy Ahmed to be elected as the first Oromo prime minister in EPRDF, marking a major shift in political dynamics in Ethiopia.

The Oromo protest movement has been widely covered in the Ethiopian and international media;⁵ however, few attempts have been made to frame its origins and success in social mobilization theory. Through the application of political process theory, this article aims to analyze how the Oromo mobilization against the ‘old’ TPLF-controlled EPRDF unfolded, and the influence they eventually achieved on the new government dispensation in Ethiopia.

Theoretical perspectives

To answer how the *Qeerroo* benefited from the political environment at the time of protest and how they mobilized, social movement theory, and its co-concept of political process theory, is an apt framework within which to conceptualize how and why social movements develop and their possibilities for success or failure (Caren 2007).

In this article, two main concepts of political process theory will be used to analyze the *Qeerroo* movement: political opportunities and mobilization structures; these are the key elements in shedding light on how and why the *Qeerroo* managed to mobilize support and impact politics, as well as explaining the limits of their influence. Douglas McAdam defines political opportunities as “any event or

³ *Qeerroo* connotes ‘bachelor’ in Afaan Oromo.

⁴ *Woyane* means ‘revolution/rebellion’ in Tigrinya. The TPLF called themselves the Second Woyane, named to establish an historical link to the earlier Tigrayan rebellion in 1943 against political centralization by Emperor Haile Selassie, after the Italian occupation.

⁵ See for instance: <https://theconversation.com/why-the-oromo-protests-mark-a-change-in-ethiopia-political-landscape-63779>; <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2018/mar/13/freedom-oromo-activists-qeerroo-ethiopia-standstill> (accessed 05/11/2021).

broad social process that serves to undermine the calculations and assumptions on which the establishment is structured” (McAdam 1982, 41). Accordingly, a political opportunity must arise for a social movement to be successful. Political opportunity is described as what the protesters (challengers) lack under ordinary circumstances. They are excluded from decision-making processes because of their weak and marginalized position. However, any political environment is constantly shifting, and the particular set of power relationships defining a context can be challenged for a number of reasons. Political opportunity works indirectly in changing the degree of power inequality between the ruling and the suppressed groups. Among the events that can disrupt the political status quo are wars, industrialization, international political realignments, prolonged unemployment, and widespread demographic challenges (McAdam 1982, 40–41). Such an understanding of political opportunities is rather broad and ambiguous, however, making it susceptible to fitting any empirical case, and hence rendering its explanatory power impotent (Caren 2007). Nevertheless, it is still agreed that shifts in the political status quo that expose vulnerabilities, however they are caused, may facilitate political activism.

What is described as mobilizing structures in process theory are various types of social organizations which can be used as a vehicle of communication to reach a target audience for collective mobilization and recruitment to the cause (McAdam 1996, 3). These structures could be churches, universities, or local community networks, all of which are relevant to the current Ethiopian case.

To further contemporize mobilizing structures, the concept of *cyberactivism*, or online activism, is relevant. This term is frequently brought up in the literature on the ‘Arab spring’ movements, and more specifically, the Egyptian Revolution. Howard (2011) defines cyberactivism as “the act of using the internet to advance a political cause that is difficult to advance offline”. In this case, the

use of social media provided the incentive for people to rally and engage in collective action. However, Khamis and Vaughn (2011) argue that cyberactivism differs from mobilization. Mobilization focuses on planning, execution, and the facilitation of actions, whereas cyberactivism does more to help and promote civic engagement, which in turn, promotes various forms of mobilization. Cyberactivism can thus lay the groundwork for well-functioning mobilizing structures, and also provide direct platforms of communication that can be vital for a movement. Online activism will not be a key focus of our analysis. We acknowledge its potential for coordinating activities on the streets, but also its limitations in the Ethiopian context, primarily based on limited internet accessibility and penetration rates, as well as government shut-down of internet/4G capacity through the state owned telecom provider (Wilson et al. 2021). Online activism may, however, create ‘virtual worlds’ (Boellstorff et al. 2012) as spaces where people partly enact their lives and as sites of political activism that are particularly conducive to social and political analysis.

Oromo protest and the *qeerroo*

Who the *Qeerroo* are, and how they have helped bring one of Africa’s strongest and most autocratic governments to its knees, is only dimly understood (Gardner 2018a).

It is difficult to state exactly when the *Qeerroo* movement started, as it drew inspiration from the earlier Muslim protest movement⁶ in the country, was triggered by the inception of the Addis Ababa Master Plan, and was mobilized through tens of thousands of Oromo students and unemployed youth. The internationally recognized scholar on Oromo history and

⁶ A Muslim protest movement arose in Ethiopia in 2012, wanting to end governmental interference in religious practices and preferences.

politics Terje Østebø claims that “It emerged as a spontaneous grassroots social movement without any formal structures” (2020). Others have argued, however, that the *Qeerroo* was a well-planned and structured organization from its inception (Aga 2020; Burayu 2020). Here we focus on its broader mobilizing strategies during the protests; its inception and its formalization as an organization to start with are not key to our understanding of the movement.

Furthermore, exactly who the *Qeerroos* are is a question asked by many, both by those who wish to understand the movement and by those who wish to limit its influence and power. The movement does not seem to be formally organized or structured (Østebø 2020) and is as such a genuine social movement. On what appears to be an ‘official’ homepage of the *Qeerroo*, the movement is described in the following terms: “*Qeerroo* is the youth class of the *Gada* system, democratic and positive. They are the embodiment of what is good in Oromo society, warriors of peace and democracy and the guardians of Oromia.”⁷ The term *Qeerroo* is generally understood as ‘youth’, with reference to the age-segmented *gada* system. It is a male gendered term, also understood as ‘bachelor’. More recently, the female term *qarree* is also added, in the phrase *qeerroo fi qarree*, to make the terminology of the movement gender inclusive, as women also participate in it (Tola 2019).

During the protests, two anonymous *Qeerroos* described a system in which each district of a city has one *Qeerroo* leader with at least 20 subordinates, who are all responsible for sharing messages about upcoming strikes and other events (Gardner 2018a). In the same article, Bekele Gerba, an important Oromo opposition leader, shared that he did not know who their leadership were, and even if they had a central command. The structure of the movement is thus hard to define. It seems clear, however, that the extensive Oromo dias-

pora has become an important part of the protest movement.⁸ Some of the most influential leaders of the protest movement lived outside Ethiopia, contributing to the coordination of the movement through social media during the period of protest. Jawar Mohammed became a central figure in mobilizing the Oromo protest movement from diaspora through to social media activism and the coordination of activities. Jawar had a Facebook following of over 1.6 million people with a continuously updated feed on the situation in Ethiopia during the time of protest.⁹ Jawar Mohammed states that “we built the *Qeerroo*” with a strategic plan of forcing the ODP to transform itself to represent Oromia.¹⁰ After the opening of political space in Ethiopia following the coming to power of Abiy Ahmed, Jawar returned to his home country and later joined the Oromo opposition party Oromo Federal Congress in order to continue the struggle for political change and Oromo rights and representation. He was arrested in June 2018 and is currently on trial, at the time of writing, charged with destabilizing and terrorist activities.

⁸ See the interviews and assessments made by Heleluya Hadero in “The Struggle from America: How a Group of Young Oromo Activists led Opposition to the Ethiopian Government”, available at: <https://medium.com/@HaleluyaReports/the-struggle-from-america-how-a-group-of-young-oromo-activists-led-opposition-to-the-ethiopian-e4716eadd693> (accessed 10/09/2019).

⁹ Jawar Mohammed’s Facebook page at the time of protest has been taken down, however a temporary page is available at: <https://www.facebook.com/JawarAlternative> (accessed 11/11/2021).

¹⁰ See Addis Standard: «The Interview: You cannot have a democratic country without holding free and fair elections: Jawar Mohammed». Available at: <https://addisstandard.com/the-interview-you-cannot-have-a-democratic-country-without-holding-free-and-fair-elections-jawar-mohammed/> (accessed 11/11/2021).

⁷ Najat Hamza, “Who is *Qeerroo*? What is *Qeerroo*?”, available at <https://qeerroo.org/xalayaletters/who-is-qeerroo-what-is-qeerroo/> (accessed 05/11/2021).

The political opportunity for protest

Major political process theorist Douglas McAdam defines political opportunity as “any event or broad social process that serves to undermine the calculations and assumptions on which the establishment is structured” (McAdam 1982, 41). In the Ethiopian case, the death of Meles Zenawi provided political elites within Oromo and Amhara constituencies with the opportunity to challenge the TPLF hegemony over EPRDF and hence to shift the power balance within the governing coalition.

To understand the importance Meles Zenawi had as a political leader in Ethiopia, one has to understand his party, the TPLF, and the Tigray region’s position in the country. Tigrayans represent about 6% of the Ethiopian population and are thus often referred to as a minority group. However, throughout history, Tigrayan people have had high-standing positions in Ethiopian society and political life, which has been an important factor in how TPLF legitimates itself and its dominant role in EPRDF. As explained by a young Tigrayan intellectual and a political science lecturer:

Our balance of power depends on history, culture, and the 17 years of armed struggle, our sacrifice, through the peasant movement and student movement. In the [Ethiopian] student movement, the leaders were mostly Tigrayans. [...] So, in the student movement, in the peasant movement, in the armed struggle, in the civilization, Tigray is always there. Even though numbers are weak, we proudly own the state (interview, 24/02/2018).

The primary stated objective of the TPLF/EPRDF was to lift the country out of poverty. Meles argued that through economic growth, development, and the creation of wealth, democracy would be consolidated, and politics would be more than a zero-sum game (De Waal 2012). To reach this objective, however,

individual human rights and democratic principles were breached and ignored, as the focus was on advancing the collective developmental interests of the people (Tronvoll 2011).

Hailemariam Desalegn, who served as Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister at the time of Meles’ passing, was then selected as party chairman and Prime Minister, being a non-threatening compromise candidate from a small ethnic group from southern Ethiopia. Hailemariam Desalegn was selected to ensure the sustainability of Meles’ legacy and by implication the continued dominance of the TPLF within the government. The initial stable transition was an outcome of a robust institutionalization of the ruling party organization, in combination with strong economic growth (Aalen 2014). However, the stability did not last long, as the power vacuum left by Meles created opportunities for other actors to challenge the TPLF’s grip on the party coalition and government: from the outside, by the Qeerroos, and from within, by the Oromo and Amhara component parties, all of them wanting to end the TPLF’s dominance over EPRDF, the government, and the country as a whole.

The EPRDF leadership responded by putting the coalition party and the regional components through a process of ‘deep reform’, in order to relieve some of the pressure put on the regime. Although promising liberalization and political reforms, Hailemariam failed to deliver them (Ayele 2016). As the demands for change increased, he admitted defeat and resigned in February 2018, knowing that this would open the field for the creation of a new power constellation within the EPRDF that could take the reforms forward. With the Prime Minister’s resignation, the country faced a political crisis, as the government party was bogged down in an internal succession power struggle and the protests and violence escalated throughout the country, leading to the imposition of a new State of Emergency rule (SoE). The SoE in 2018 differed, however, from the one two years previ-

ously, as the Amhara and Oromo component parties in the government partly stood on the side of the protestors (Van Der Beken 2018).

The advent of the protest: Addis Ababa Master Plan

With severe restrictions on political and civil rights, arbitrary arrests, police brutality, ethnic violence, exploitation of economic and human resources, and high poverty levels, there were a number of reasons why the Oromos wished to see a change in the Ethiopian government.

Soon after the death of Meles, the weakened power of the central government was exploited by groups of Oromos. In the words of a local observer, a male legal scholar of mature age who had lived through the past two regime changes in the country:

They [Oromos] had to challenge the Prime Minister Hailemariam because he is relatively weak. So, they started a protest, but they directed their protest not against Hailemariam, but against TPLF. Because TPLF is considered as the king maker. [...] Then what comes is, you know, the regions become stronger, EPRDF becomes weak. Because Hailemariam is weak. Then, the chain of command become loose. Then the Oromo starts their emancipation (interview, 24/02/2018).

As the EPRDF's grip on power was weakened, political opportunities opened up for other actors, both informal and formal, such as youth protesters and regional state governments. The Oromo protest started as a direct response to the planned expansion of the capital city Addis Ababa into Oromo region. The 'Addis Ababa-Finfinne Integrated Development Plan' was developed in cooperation between Addis Ababa City Administration and the regional government in Oromia to cater for the huge increase in the population of the city. The pro-

testers claimed that the implementation of the plan would lead to the eviction of millions of Oromo farmers and families from their land (EHRP 2016, 5). The protesters claimed the Master Plan was a blueprint for the annexation of Oromia to enable the government to displace Oromo farmers, and thus increase control in the region. The government, on the other hand, insisted that the Master Plan would be beneficial to Oromo region too, as it would integrate towns and rural districts in terms of utilities, infrastructure, and better market access for Oromo people (Berhane 2016).

The first protest started peacefully at the University of Ambo in Oromia, but later turned violent as government security forces opened fire on the students, leading to multiple deaths and injuries. The protests subsequently spread to other large cities in Oromia and to smaller villages throughout the region, creating turmoil and destruction across Oromo region. The regional police and militia did not manage, or were unwilling, to quell the protest. The impression was that the regional government party, the ODP, was using the protest as a power leverage to position themselves in the race to control the EPRDF. The sustained protest hence led to the declaration of a State of Emergency in late 2015 (EHRP 2016).

The withering of federal government power

Preserving and advancing the 'Meles legacy' was initially stated as the unifying objective of the EPRDF; however, with his passing both the EPRDF party coalition and the federal government were severely weakened. The Amhara and Oromo component parties, who for a long period of time had tried to renegotiate the power relations within the EPRDF, utilized this opportunity. They used their regional state governments and component parties as mobilizing structures against the TPLF-dominated EPRDF. The coalition thus cracked as a result of poor leadership and discontent at the TPLF's dominance; its demise culminated

in statements made by the ADP and OPD leadership that they partly supported the ongoing protest against their own government (Ayele 2016).

At the same time, Speaker of the Parliament and key Oromo leader and figurehead, Abadula Gameda, submitted his resignation in public, “in protest over recent political developments including the federal security handling of the ongoing violence in eastern Ethiopia”.¹¹ The new Oromo leadership of Abiy and Lemma were seen as Abadula’s protégés, and the stance he took against his own government was significant in boosting the morale of the movement, legitimizing it, as well as questioning the EPRDF leadership from within. The Oromo movement was taken to the next level as Abadula, a former general and regional president of Oromia, known for his loyalties to the TPLF, criticized the party he had served for over 25 years (Tadesse 2017).¹²

Ethiopia experienced multiple crises during this period. There was a rift between the ADP and the TPLF, as the nascent Amhara protest movement was partly based on reclaiming territories (Welkeit and Raya) which were integrated into Tigray regional state in 1995. At the same time Ethiopian Somalis and Oromos were clashing over their regional state borders, leading to killings and the displacement of thousands; the Somali Liyu police were accused of the ethnic cleansing of Oromos living on Somali regional state territory (Dugo and Eisen 2018). Oromos claimed that the Somali regional government was wrongfully support-

ed by the federal government and that proper measurements against the violations perpetrated by Somali region security forces did not happen (Zelalem 2017). As political instability and violent conflict increased, the number of internally displaced people passed one million in 2017 (UNHCR 2018). At this time, expert on Ethiopian politics at Addis Ababa University, Assefa Fiseha, expressed his concerns about the situation: “No healthy country allows a mass displacement of this magnitude in the presence of a capable government”. As he explained, “what we have is rivalry among ethno-nationalist leaders who think the center is weaker than ever” (Schemm 2017).

This period of turmoil created the political opportunity, as pointed out by McAdam, to shift the power balance within EPRDF, contributing a change in the political environment from being closed, where people feared to speak about politics, to one where people increasingly dared to challenge power, articulate their grievances, and speak up for their rights. The support for the protest movements increased, in particular in Oromia and Amhara regional states. Strikes and sit-ins were organized, as well as an intense use of social media platforms, merging a variety of grievances and actors into a formidable force. How this opportunity was turned into mobilization will be further discussed below.

Mobilization structures to challenge power

The mobilizing structures of a social movement are essential in order to convert the interests of the masses into political agency and influence. McAdam defines mobilizing structures as “those collective vehicles, informal as well as formal, through which people mobilize and engage in collective action” (1996, 3). For example, university campuses and/or student organizations are central as mobilizing structures. Assessing the *Qeerroo* movement, the clearest elements are mobilizing through eth-

¹¹ See *Addis Standard*: “Abadula Gameda resigns as Speaker of the Federal Parliament”, 07/10/2017: <http://addisstandard.com/breaking-news-abadula-gameda-resigns-as-speaker-of-the-federal-parliament/> (accessed 10/09/2019)

¹² Abadula was the first high-ranking politician in Ethiopia to resign since the EPRDF seized power in 1991, making the resignation historic. Later, however, and being put under enormous pressure, he decided to retract his resignation, before being appointed to the position of National Security Advisor, a position he held for a few months before retiring in June 2018.

nicity, the university campus, and social media.

Ethnicity as a mobilizing structure

In considering the cultural terms in which political participation is the passport to membership of the ‘nation’, the significance of ethnicity is identified as the most potent force for political mobilization (Michael 2008, 7).

Since the EPRDF implemented the system of so-called ethnic (or multinational) federalism, the overall way of dividing, categorizing, and organizing Ethiopian politics has been through ethnicity (Aalen 2011; Abbink 2011; Kefale 2013; Van Der Beken 2012). Thus, political mobilization generally reflects ethnic identity.¹³ The Oromo, ever so fragmented, have a shared sentiment of victimhood and marginalization, and thus their wish for more political recognition and influence is a motive for mobilization. As ethnicity is recognized through social interaction where cultural differences are communicated, the heterogeneous cultural landscape of Ethiopia became an opportune political mobilizing ground. Political forces took advantage of the large masses of educated but unemployed youth, as it enabled them to challenge the centre and gain power. However, violence, large scale destruction of public and private property, hate crimes, and xenophobic sentiments undermined the social and political legitimacy of the *Qeerroo* movement in the eyes of many Ethiopians. It also enabled the government to label the movement as a rebellious group, legitimizing arbitrary arrests and the imprisonment of people associated with the *Qeerroo*. As such, the very foundations on which the *Qeerroo* movement

mobilized are potentially problematic, as ethnicity automatically excludes all other group formations/ethnicities from joining the protest. The ODP acknowledged the restrictiveness of ethnic mobilization and wanted to separate themselves from this line of thought, marked with a historic meeting in Bahir Dar with the Amhara governing party, the ADP (Gardner 2018b). The aim of the meeting was to unite the two largest parties within the EPRDF in opposing the dominance of the TPLF, and to create a broader and more sustainable movement, transcending the boundaries of ethnicity. Abiy Ahmed fulfilled this aspiration in December 2019 when he dissolved the EPRDF and replaced it with the unitary Prosperity Party, leading to the withdrawal of the TPLF from the government and eventually to the war against the TPLF launched by the federal government in early November 2020 (Tronvoll 2021).

The role of emotion is a powerful tool in politics, but it has been avoided in early social movement theory as well as political process theory. Neglecting to study emotion as a component for political behaviour stems from the sentiments that it is too personal and irrational for it to be modelled or measured in a scientific manner (Goodwin et al. 2004). However, as the ‘Oromo emotion’ is highly relevant for the *Qeerroo* cause and thus its mobilization capabilities, it has to be taken as a serious element in understanding the movement and its successes and failures. Emotion has been a vital part of Ethiopian politics, especially in the previous generations of student movements. These emotions can be categorized as longer-term affective commitments, often persisting through generations, and based on complex moral and cognitive understandings: “Our affects give us our basic orientations toward the world, especially telling us what we care most deeply about. They are the reason we bother to participate in movements at all rather than sit on the sidelines” (Goodwin et al. 2004, 418). Movements like the *Qeerroo* thus create an outlet and a political arena for such emotions

¹³ The vast majority of the political parties registered with the National Election Board of Ethiopia are ethnically based; only a few are ideological or pan-Ethiopian parties. See the NEBE webpage: <http://www.electionethiopia.org/>

to be articulated in the public domain. Oromo youth were flocking to the streets in all the urban centres across Oromia, demanding a stop to maladministration, corruption, and human rights abuses, as well as political representation and respect for Oromo political agency.

The university campus as a mobilization structure

The university campuses have a key role in mobilizing the youth, serving as an arena of political expression and organization. In Ethiopia, the student movement was instrumental in the downfall of the imperial regime in 1974, as well as in inspiring and establishing the many political movements of the 1970s, including the TPLF (Balsvik 1985). As the organizational structures of the *Qeerroo* are still ambiguous, the campuses provided a common meeting ground for possible participants, as well as vehicles and arenas for communication.

One of the key success stories of EPRDF development policies is the expansion of tertiary education. When the EPRDF took power in 1991, there was only one university in the country, graduating a few hundred post-graduate students annually. Today, there are hundreds of thousands of people registered and involved in the over 40 public universities located throughout the country, graduating tens of thousands of students each year. Most farmers have the possibility of sending at least one child to university, hence anchoring an urban-centred protest movement in the rural areas. Compared to social media, the university campus as a structure for mobilization provides a much deeper rural penetration than social media channels.

The university campus enables youth to meet people with similar political views and aspirations. Formally organized political youth parties do not exist in Ethiopia, so for students to engage as collectives politically, they can either become members of estab-

lished political parties or join protest movements, such as the *Qeerroo*. The function of campuses is that they thus become something of an arena for informally articulating political ideas and grievances. As public universities in Ethiopia are federal institutions, there is a mix of ethnicities at all universities, which in some cases has turned campuses into battlefields. There have been reports of several ethnic-based attacks and clashes at university campuses across the country since 2014 that have deteriorated to the point that federal security forces have needed to be posted inside the universities to restore calm and security. Hence, the campuses have not only served the function of uniting the likeminded, but also as a site of contestation and confrontation, sharpening the divide between ethnic and political actors and interests.

Social media

The use of social media has dramatically altered how social movements mobilize and operate. Like all technology, its rapid pace of development and utilization has exceeded that of legal frameworks and policymaking, which means that governments have lagged behind in regulating and restricting its use.

Ethiopia, like other countries, has experienced a radical increase in social media political activism (cyberactivism), challenging the incumbent government and its grip on political power (Gagliardone et al. 2019). This has led to government-imposed legal restrictions on freedom of expression on social media, as well as the adoption of extraneous limiting measures (Ayalew 2020). Some of the same challenges in using social media in the Ethiopian context are also expressed by a university student:

Taking the size of the country, which is very vast, and the population mix of the country, which is also quite diverse, I would say it is very small impact it [social

media] could have, eventually. Because look at how much percentage of the total population would use internet and social media, Facebook, and so forth [...] It is in the capital cities of the major regions of the country, so you will not have any deep penetration to the rural area where you have 85% of the population. Most of them cannot access internet and let alone social media (interview, 28/02/2018).

From earlier Arab spring cases and the Ethiopian case, it is clear that in a population where the majority lives with little access to electricity and the internet, a social movement cannot be solely anchored virtually (Wilson et al. 2021). It is an effective channel of communication in urban areas, but less so in rural districts. This was confirmed by *Qeerroo* representatives, who explained that social media made reaching out to the urban masses to organize protests much quicker than before, when they had to go door-to-door (Gardner 2018a).

Formalizing the *qeerroo* success

At what time has a social movement achieved its objective? And will it then cease to exist? Many social movements convert into formalized political platforms or organizations after achieving a certain level of prominence or influence for their agenda, in order to continue their struggle through the means of formalized politics. But by converting from a movement to a formalized political organization, the operational parameters of work will also change, and new political opportunities and mobilizing structures can be exploited to advance their overall objective. How did the *Qeerroo* movement actually influence formal politics through social mobilization in Ethiopia?

Neither the *Qeerroo* nor the Oromo protest movement as a whole had any chance, nor the objective, of capturing state power. Their aim was foremost to influence the power balance within the EPRDF, and to eject the TPLF

from office at the federal level. Thereafter, they articulated their demand for a genuine Oromo leadership at the centre of the Ethiopian State. As the protest movement did not have any formal party framework or official partnership with established parties, they used their power to influence internal party reforms within the Oromo component party of the government.

During the transition period between Hailemariam Desalegn's resignation and the appointment of a new EPRDF chairperson in the spring of 2018, the *Qeerroo* sustained its pressure upon the Oromo component party and the EPRDF coalition through demonstrations, in order to push for the selection of an Oromo leader. As a potential new government leader from the TPLF would have caused an uproar among large numbers of Ethiopians, and a leader from the south was leaving the post, only the Amhara and Oromo constituencies provided viable candidates. In the final process before the vote for a new party leader, the Oromo and Amhara representatives in the EPRDF understood that only if they voted together as a block could they eject the TPLF from power. The Amharas hence acknowledged the power of the *Qeerroo* movement and agreed to endorse an Oromo as the new chairperson and prime minister of the country.

After the TPLF's control of EPRDF was removed, the *Qeerroo*'s influence on the government increased. Several local *Qeerroo* leaders were appointed to official positions within the Oromo component party and the regional government of Oromia in the spring of 2018.¹⁴ This was also seen as the culmination of a longer 'rebranding' strategy of the ODP, where the new leadership tried to disentangle the Oromo party from its close political and historical relations to the TPLF, rejecting the Tigrayan control of the party and instead shifting their loyalty to the Oromo grassroots,

¹⁴ See "Oromia appoints high-ranking officials" in *The Reporter*, 18 April 2018: <https://www.thereporterethiopia.com/article/oromia-appoints-high-ranking-officials> (accessed 20/06/2019).

represented by the Qeerroo. Appointing Qeerroo leaders into formal political positions is definitely a sign of the success of the social movement. Concomitantly it was a wise strategic move of the government party, as it re-legitimized them in the eyes of the protesters, while they simultaneously made the most popular protest leaders directly accountable to the party and not to the grassroots and hence 'silenced' their continued protesting potential by deconstructing their mobilizing structures.

Conclusion: remobilization of the qeerroo?

Leaders of social protest movements have come into political positions before and lost their abilities or willingness to listen to the grievances of the broad masses that brought them to power. This is also what appears to be happening with Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed since assuming power in 2018. Soon after taking power on an Oromo nationalist ticket, he was obliged to speak more on common Ethiopian interests, as a Prime Minister, than to a narrow Oromo base. At the same time, Abiy Ahmed is accused of giving up on the key objectives of the struggle by turning into an Ethiopian nationalist himself. In particular, the dissolution of the EPRDF and the Oromo component party, and the establishment of the unitary Ethiopian Prosperity Party, has been controversial. With this move, and his policy of *medemer* ('synergy'), Abiy Ahmed has stated that he aims to reconcile ethnic divisions and to create unity in Ethiopia (Østebo and Tronvoll 2020). From the perspective of the Qeerroo movement, however, the creation of the new Prosperity Party and the talk about Ethiopian unity is perceived as a betrayal of their struggle. As articulated by the informal leader of the Qeerroo, Jawar Mohammed:

The people feel completely betrayed. They have totally lost faith in Abiy. The anger is rising. Also because he is

bringing back the worst thieves and corrupt killers. Old OPDO leaders are brought back into position. [...] We did not fight for this to happen (interviewed 16/01/2020 in Addis Ababa).

Jawar Mohammed, as well as other Oromo political leaders and Qeerroo representatives, reacted to the new centralizing policies of the government and started to remobilize protest once again in late 2019. Despite there being an Oromo prime minister in charge, the Oromo activist and acclaimed informal leader of the Qeerroo proclaimed: "We are preparing for two things: elections and protests," (Interviewed 02/03/2020 in Addis Ababa) as the country prepared for general elections in the fall of 2020.¹⁵

The coming of the coronavirus pandemic to Ethiopia, and the lack of proper preparations by the Ethiopian election board, compelled the government to postpone the elections indefinitely and institute a State of Emergency rule in the country in June 2020. This, together with the slaying of the popular Oromo artist Hachalu Hundessa in late June 2020, were triggering events which again sparked widespread protests across Oromia region. Jawar Mohammed, the Qeerroo leader, together with over 7,000 other Oromos, has been arrested by the government during a heavy-handed crackdown that left dozens of people killed and hundreds injured in protests in July and August 2020.

Since the power shift and installation of Abiy Ahmed as Prime Minister, Ethiopia has gone through rapid changes. Uprisings and

¹⁵ The general elections were supposed to be conducted at the end of May 2020, but due to the political reforms and law revisions undertaken since 2018, the National Election Board (NEBE) was delayed in preparing for the elections and hence the elections were postponed to 30 August 2020. With the coming of the pandemic, the elections were postponed indefinitely. They were eventually organized in June and September 2021 in some regions, but not in the Tigray Regional State and other constituencies affected by the ongoing civil war.

conflicts, most notably between the central government and Tigray Defence Forces (TDF) and Oromo Liberation Army (OLA), have plunged the country into an all-embracing

civil war. This will create new opportunities for social mobilization and protests, exploited by the *Qeerroo* or others, in their demand for reparations, reprisals, and political agency.

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