

**ADDIS ABABA UNIVERSITY
COLLEGE OF LAW AND GOVERNANCE STUDIES
CENTER FOR HUMAN RIGHTS**



**Freedom of Expression and Social Movements in the Digital
Era: A Case Study of the 2015 Oromo Protest in Ethiopia**

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Declaration

I, Elsabet Samuel Tadesse, do hereby declare that this Doctoral Thesis titled: “Freedom of Expression and Social Movements in the Digital Era: A Case Study of the 2015 Oromo Protest in Ethiopia” is entirely my own work and that all the sources and thoughts I have used are duly acknowledged and clearly indicated by a complete reference.

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Table of Contents

List of Acronyms and Abbreviations.....	8
Acknowledgement.....	10
1. Introduction.....	11
1.1. Background of the Study.....	11
1.2. Statement of the Problem.....	13
1.3. Research Objectives.....	15
General Research Objective.....	15
Specific Objectives of the Study.....	15
1.4. Research Questions.....	16
1.5. Scope of the Study.....	16
1.6. Significance of the Study.....	17
1.7. Limitation of the Study.....	18
1.8. Organization of Chapters.....	18
2. Theoretical Framework and Literature Review.....	20
2.1. Discussing Political Protests and Social Movements in Context.....	20
2.2. Conceptualizing Freedom of Expression Online.....	22
2.3. Conceptualizing Communication Power in Social Movements.....	26
2.4. Understanding the Internet as a Digital Public Sphere: A Conceptual Positioning	28
2.4.1. The Internet as a Tool for Demanding Basic Human Rights.....	29
2.4.2. The Internet as a Safe Site of Political Resistance.....	30
2.4.3. Access to the Internet as a Fundamental Right.....	31
2.5. Freedom of Expression Online in Lights of International Human Rights Law..	34
2.5.1. The Legal Framework for Freedom of Expression and the Internet in Ethiopia	37
2.6. Review of Relevant Literatures.....	39
2.6.1. Popular Protests and the Media in Ethiopia: Overview of Selected Movements.....	39
2.6.2. State Ideology, the Internet and Free Expression Online in Ethiopia.....	42
2.6.3. The Internet and Social Movements in Ethiopia.....	46
2.7. Brief Background Note on the 2015 Oromo Protest.....	48
3. Research Methodology and Setting the Scene.....	52

3.1.	Research Design.....	52
3.2.	Case Study Method.....	53
3.3.	Data Collection Tools.....	54
3.3.1.	In-depth Interviews.....	54
3.3.2.	Focus Group Discussions.....	56
3.3.3.	Public and Experts Dialogue Forums on the Media Legal Reform.....	58
3.4.	The Study Setting.....	59
3.5.	Content Analysis.....	61
3.5.1.	Online Data Mining and Scraping.....	62
3.5.2.	Media Report.....	66
3.6.	Data Analysis and Interpretation.....	67
3.7.	Methodological Insights from the Fieldwork.....	69
3.7.1.	The Practicability of the Study Fieldwork.....	69
3.8.	Ethical Considerations.....	71
4.	Contours of the 2015 Oromo Protest: The Genesis, Movement Actors and Protest Infrastructure.....	73
4.1.	Background to the 2015 Oromo Protest.....	73
4.1.	Longstanding Grievances and the Identity Question.....	73
4.2.	The 2015 Oromo Protest: Framings and Agendas.....	79
4.2.1.	Movement Framings.....	79
4.2.2.	The 3Ls: the Oromo Movement Agenda.....	81
4.3.	Triggering the Oromo’s Anger and Unifying Their Causes: The Master Plan...87	
4.4.	The Emergence of Coordinated Protest Demonstrations.....	89
4.5.	Mapping Key Movement Actors and Their Discursive Practices.....	97
4.5.1.	The Leadership Structure of the 2015 Oromo Protest.....	100
4.6.	Outcomes and Contributions of the 2015 Oromo Protest.....	114
5.	The Internet as an Effective Tool of Political Mobilization.....	117
5.1.	Cross-Learning Process Across Local and Global Social Movements.....	117
5.1.1.	The Arab Spring and the 2015 Oromo Protest.....	117
5.2.	<i>Dimtsachin Yisema</i> : Diffusing Mass Mobilization Strategies Across National Protests.....	123
5.3.	Message Framing and Identity Formation of the 2015 Oromo Protest.....	131
5.3.1.	Deploying the Internet as an Effective Political Mobilization Tool.....	131
5.4.	Mobilizing the Offline Base: The Role of Legacy Media.....	137
5.5.	Supporting the Formation of Collective Identity Through the Internet.....	141

5.6.	The Internet as a Message Framing Tool During the 2015 Oromo Protest.....	145
5.6.1.	The Internet as a Default Communicative Position.....	159
6.	The 2015 Oromo Protest and the Legal Reform Process.....	166
6.1.	Nurturing Freedom of Expression Online: Lessons from the 2015 Oromo Protest	167
6.2.	Multifaceted Structural and Institutional Challenges Leading to the Amplification of the Demand for Freedom of Expression Online.....	172
6.2.1.	Political Factors: Silencing Dissent Through Controlling the Media and the Online Space.....	172
6.2.2.	Legal Factor: Repressive Laws Affecting the Exercise of Freedom of Expression Online During the 2015 Oromo Protest.....	178
6.2.3.	Technological Factors: Restricting Freedom of Expression Online Through Limited Internet Access.....	183
6.3.	Contours of Content Moderation and Transparency of Social Media Platforms	185
6.4.	“Internet is where we breathe”: The Influence of the 2015 Oromo Protest in Defending the Online Protest Sphere.....	188
6.4.1.	Enabling the Protection of Access to the Physical Internet Infrastructure Through the Legal Reform Process.....	191
6.4.2.	Overview of Internet Accessibility, Affordability and Reliable Connectivity Through the Eyes of Digital Policies and Institutions.....	197
6.4.3.	Protecting and Regulating Freedom of Expression Online as a Fundamental Right	199
7.	Concluding Notes and Ways Forward.....	203
	Bibliography.....	213
	Appendices.....	224
	Appendix 1: List of Key Informants.....	224
	Appendix 2: Focus Group Discussion Participants.....	227
	Appendix 3: Consent Statement for Interview and Focus Group Discussion.....	230
	Appendix 4: Interview Participation Request Letter.....	230
	Appendix 5: Semi- Structured Qualitative Interview Questions.....	231
	Appendix 6: Focus Group Discussion Guiding Questions.....	235
	Appendix 7: Public Dialogue Forums and Experts’ Meetings.....	236
	Appendix 8: Online Data Scraping.....	237
	Appendix 9: Journal Articles and Acceptance Letters.....	238

List of Figures and Maps

Figure 1 Proposed conceptual framework of the interaction between social movements, the Internet and freedom of expression online.....	33
Figure 2 The study sites.....	60
Figure 3 A code used by Oromo youth to show allegiance to OLF.....	76
Figure 4 Oromo protesters in Addis Ababa.....	80
Figure 5 Protest rally messages in Gondar and in the diaspora.....	81
Figure 6“Lafti lafe kenyaa”, demand for land rights campaign online and, on the road...82	
Figure 7 News clip from OPride.com. November 01,2016.....	86
Figure 8 The first protest rally in Ambo on April 25, 2014. Photo credit: The Guardian.89	
Figure 9 Ginchi protest on November 12, 2015 Photo Credit: Addis Standard.....	90
Figure 10 A teacher in an empty classroom, Oromia, taken from OromoProtests Facebook page.....	91
Figure 11 Mathematics exam leak and news from EBC about the leak.....	92
Figure 12 The rise of new protest demands and new hashtags.....	94
Figure 13 Excerpt from Feyisa Lilesa’s article for The Washington Post.....	96
Figure 14 Condolences message from Jimma University to the 2016 Irreecha stamped victims.....	104
Figure 15 Jawar’s complaint against his Facebook page.....	107
Figure 16 Factchecking report regarding the suspension of Jawar’s Facebook account.108	
Figure 17 Political self-criticism sheet for party cadres. Taken from social media.....	110
Figure 18 Oromia Police removed from some areas in Oromia.....	112
Figure 19 An OPDO member burning his ID card, taken from social media.....	113
Figure 20 #Beka online protest.....	119
Figure 21 #Didne! Campaign.....	121
Figure 22 “I too am Abubaker”: Muslims’ rally in the Ethiopian diaspora.....	125
Figure 23 #OromoRevolution tweet by Jawar.....	126
Figure 24 The three protests in context.....	128
Figure 25 Muslim’s protest: amplifying the deep-seated grievances across movements129	
Figure 26 Dimtsachin Yisema statement against the Irreecha stamped.....	130
Figure 27 Online exclusion of dissenting protest voices.....	135
Figure 28 Protest rally call in the diaspora, taken from social media.....	136
Figure 29 Announcement from OMN satellite and frequency change.....	139
Figure 30 Qeerroo hairstyle as a protest sign.....	144
Figure 31 Social media interaction between protest key actors and State authorities.....	145
Figure 32 Protest slogan during the Oromia Grand Rally in Addis Ababa.....	147
Figure 33 Twitter messages prepared for online campaigning.....	148
Figure 34 Twitter campaign call.....	150
Figure 35 Human rights related hashtags and profile pictures.....	151
Figure 36 Advertising international media coverage of the Protest through social media.....	152
Figure 37 Sample Facebook picture post to garner likes and shares.....	153
Figure 38 Example of social media shared messages “from inbox”.....	153

Figure 39 “Engaging by disengaging” tactic of movement actors.....	155
Figure 40 A sample photo used in more than 20 online stories of the Oromo protest....	158
Figure 41 Hacked websites of government institutions.....	161
Figure 42 Perceived characteristics of the Ko.Kas shared on social media.....	164
Figure 43 Excerpt from an online call for Grand Oromia Rally.....	168
Figure 44 Ethiopia, Google Search traffic between July and November 2916.....	168
Figure 45 Facebook post from Jawar’s alternative page.....	169
Figure 46 Zone 9ers: 500 days paid for demanding free speech.....	176
Figure 47 Court hearing: accused of giving an interview to “terrorist ESAT”.....	177
Figure 48 News from ESAT: Police confiscating satellite dishes and smartphones.....	177
Figure 49 Party cadres evaluated for accessing social.....	178
Figure 50 Guide on how to change access points during Internet shutdowns.....	182
Figure 51 Samples of tweets: Jawar’s Facebook page blocked.....	186
Figure 52 Government warning of social media use.....	187

List of Acronyms and Abbreviations

ABO	Adda Billisummaa Oromoo
ACHPR	African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights
AI	Artificial Intelligence
ANDM	Amhara National Democratic Movement
API	Application Programming Interface
BBC	British Broadcasting Company
BBS	Bultum Broadcasting Service
BITE	Bringing Internet to Ethiopia
DoS	Denial of Service
DPI	Deep Packet Interception
DW	Deutsche Welle
EBC	Ethiopian Broadcasting Corporate
EBS	Ethiopian Broadcasting Service
ECSA	Ethiopian Communications Service Authority
ECX	Ethiopian Commodity Exchange
EPLF	Eritrean People's Liberation Front
EPRDF	Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front
ESAT	Ethiopian Satellite Television
ETC	Ethiopian Telecommunication Corporation
FDRE	Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia
GCAO	Government Communication Affairs Office
H.RES. 128	Supporting respect for human rights and encouraging inclusive governance in Ethiopia
ICCPR	International Convention on Civil and Political Rights
ICESCR	International Convention on Economic Social and Cultural Rights
ICT	Information Communication Technology
INSA	Information Network Security Agency
IoT	Internet of Things
ITU	International Telecommunication Union
LJAAC	Legal and Justice Affairs Advisory Committee
MENA	Middle East and North Africa
MLRWG	Media Law Reform Working Group
MoCIT	Ministry of Communication Information and Technology
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
OBS	Oromia Broadcasting Service
ODP	Oromo Democratic Party
OFC	Oromo Federalist Congress
OLF	Oromo Liberation Front
OMN	Oromia Media Network
ONLF	Ogaden National Liberation Front
OONI	Open Observatory of Network Interference
OPDO	Oromo People's Democratic Organization
ORTO	Oromia Radio and Television Organization
OSM	Oromo Student's Movement

OTV	Oromia Television
PADISNet	Pan African Documentation and Information Service
PSOPM	Press Secretariate of the Office of the Prime Minister
QBO	Qeerroo Bilisummaa Oromoo
SEPDM	Southern Ethiopian People's Democratic Movement
TPLF	Tigray People's Liberation Front
UDHR	Universal Declaration of Human Rights
UN	United Nations
UNECA	United Nations Commission for Africa
USA	United States of America
VOA	Voice of America
VoIP	Voice over Internet Protocol
VPV	Virtual Private Network
WGIG	Working Group on Internet

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CHAPTER ONE

1. Introduction

1.1. Background of the Study

Social movements in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region began on December 17, 2010, in Tunisia and spread to Bahrain, Egypt, Syria, Jordan, Libya, Yemen and Morocco (Dewey, Kaden, Marks, Matsushima, and Zhu 2012). The movement widely referred to as “the Arab Spring” that took place in various countries of the Middle East and Northern Africa proved the importance of the Internet in informing and mobilizing citizens against dictatorial governments and introduced new academic debates on issues of communication, the Internet and social movements (Abdel Salam 2015; Brouwer and Bartels 2014; Graham and Dutton 2014; Dewey et al. 2012). The movement progressed into a revolution in countries like Tunisia and Egypt and toppled down autocratic governments (Dewey et al. 2012). In Morocco, the public unrest was calmed by promises of democratic reform, while the Bahraini government suppressed the public demand for political change (Brouwer and Bartels 2014; Sarihan 2014).

Several studies highlighted that the Internet made political engagement in the MENA region easier and faster (Mateos and Bajo-Erro 2020; Brouwer and Bartels 2014; Dewey et al. 2012). There also appeared to be a consensus among social science scholars that the protests in the MENA region were reinforced by the emergence and fast expansion of the Internet linked to other socio-economic factors such as globalization (Mateos and Bajo-Erro 2020; Dewey et al. 2012). Conversely, Abdel Salam (2015) argued that if it was not for the youth in the Arab world that chose to fight against unequal distribution of resources and corruption, the Internet could not provide tactics to overthrow dictatorial rules. The notion of the Internet as “a technology of freedom” is challenged by a counterargument that sees the Internet as a tool to spy on citizens and silence dissent (Benedek and Kettemann 2020; Marchant and Stremlau 2020; Abdel Salam 2015; Graham and Dutton 2014).

There is social and political diversity behind each country shaken by the Arab Spring, and countries responded to the new phenomenon differently (Abdel Salam 2015; Graham and Dutton 2014). The Arab uprising and the use of the Internet in promoting dissent against tyranny in the MENA region appeared to frustrate governments in Sub-Saharan Africa. Ugandan political leaders repeatedly claimed that the Arab Spring could not take place in Uganda as the social, economic and political contexts in their country are different from the MENA region¹. In Malawi, a lecturer was questioned for using the Egyptian uprising as an example during his classroom lectures. A former member of the Zimbabwean parliament and his colleagues were accused of treason for featuring a video clip of protests in Tunisia and Egypt². On March 28, 2012, in Ethiopia, journalist

¹ Buwembo, J. 29 August 2015. Uganda can't have an Arab Spring? So what about a Winter of Despair? The East African. Retrieved from <https://www.theeastafrican.co.ke/oped/comment/Uganda-cannot-have-an-Arab-Spring/434750-2850990-format-sitemap-pewmih/index.html> Accessed on December 20, 2020.

² Harsch, E August 2011. ‘Arab Spring’ stirs African hopes and anxieties Will popular upsurge in the north help spur reform south of the Sahara?. African Renewal.

Eskinder Nega was accused of “planning, preparation, conspiracy, incitement and attempt of terrorist acts” just for making a statement that Ethiopians will soon be on the roads to hold “Arab-like” uprising if the government continue to harass its citizens.³ Nevertheless, the debate about how the Internet shaped the way we understand freedom of expression and the socio-economic factors that may influence access to the Internet as a fundamental right and as a site of political resistance needs to be explained from different contexts (Graham and Dutton 2014).

In mid-2016, the #OromoProtest campaign on social media platforms went online. The campaign spurred the Ethiopian diaspora community and the urban elites to share pictures, audio and video about the 2015 Oromo protest, political messages, and tips on organizing the movement within Oromia and beyond (Mebratu 2021; Meseret 2020; Seifu 2019). Among the forefront political figures was Jawar Mohammed, who had been in the public eye for some years known for his active advocacy for the interests of the Oromo people (Ostebo 2020; Mosisa 2020; Seifu 2019). Jawar and his allies appeared to utilize the Internet to call for mass support following suit of other collective actions in the MENA region as well as the Muslims’ protest in Ethiopia that preceded the 2015 Oromo protest⁴. From the 2012 Muslim’s protest to the 2015 Oromo protest, courts in Ethiopia witnessed increased freedom of expression cases used as “conclusive evidence” to support accusations of committing acts of terrorism (Awol 2017, 168). Several disputes concerning online free expression and the use of the Internet to create, acquire, share, disseminate and interpret political information cropped up. Among such cases was the submitted case against the Ethiopian government before the African Commission on restrictions on freedom of expression and the right to vote⁵. The case submission to the African Commission includes freedom of expression and arbitrary shutdown of Internet services following the state of emergency. The situation further called for the African Commission to issue a resolution condemning the human rights violations in Ethiopia, particularly the illegitimate restrictions on fundamental human rights following the intensification of the Oromo protest in November 2015.⁶ This suggests ongoing efforts in Ethiopia’s attempt to protect and regulate freedom of expression online require thorough research examining the nature of the Internet, the power relationships of the State, individual citizens and the mass public. At the same time, there are pertaining questions to be addressed concerning the role of the Internet during and after the 2015 Oromo protest. Did the Oromo protest bring the Internet to the center of the debate about freedom of expression in Ethiopia? Does the Internet in any way influence the legal reform process as the government responds to the new form of protests that used the

https://www.un.org/africarenewal/magazine/august-2011/*arab-spring*-stirs-african-hopes-and-anxieties
Accessed on December 20, 2020.

³Eskinder Nega, Ethiopia, <https://pen.org/advocacy-case/eskinder-nega/> Accessed on December 23, 2020.

⁴ [How An Exiled Activist In Minnesota Helped Spur Big Political Changes In Ethiopia : NPR](#) Accessed on May 9, 2021.

⁵ Brice Martial Djeugoue. 25 October 2016. [Case against Ethiopia before the African Commission, on restriction to freedom of expression and the right to vote – IHRDA](#) . Accessed on May 22, 2022.

⁶ Resolution on the Human Rights Situation in the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia – ACHPR/Res.356 (LIX) 2016. Adopted by the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights at its 59th Ordinary Session held from October 21 to November 04 2016 in Banjul, Islamic Republic of the Gambia.

Internet as a site of political resistance? Crucial happenings that may probably be linked to the Oromo protest and the role of the Internet in social movements in Ethiopia's context should be examined to address these critical questions.

1.2. Statement of the Problem

In November 2015, the Oromia Regional State was rocked by unexpected public protest. Although the triggering factor of the protest was Addis Ababa's newly proposed urban master plan, the protest gradually embraced the popular demand for democracy and fair distribution of wealth and political power. The government's fierce response to the protest led to widespread unrest in the Oromia region, and support rallies in Amhara regional state (Ethiopian Human Rights Project 2016). Demonstrations held in Amhara regional state embraced and echoed popular demand for democracy and fair distribution of wealth and political power, as was the case across the Oromia region⁷. As the protest deepened in these two regions, grievances about lack of political space and inability to express dissent came to the forefront, instigating a large scale of public unrest and clear demand for freedom of expression, assembly and association. However, the State-owned media, which served as a propaganda tool to the government, did not provide adequate information about the protest (Habtamu 2017). On the other hand, the government accused private and diaspora-based media of spreading false information about the events in Oromia (Habtamu 2017). During this time, the activists have taken to the Internet with a #OromoProtests hashtag to call for mass support and advocate their political causes. As the #OromoProtests trended online, additional public demand for recognition and self-governance from different communities intensified. The cases of Wolqaiet, Agaw, Raya and Kemant people and unrest in the Konso zone of Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples' Regional State have also led to violence, loss of lives, and displacement of many (Human Rights Watch 2016). The protest rallies in various parts of the country forced the government to declare two consecutive states of emergencies for a prolonged time admitting "the situation posed a threat against the people of the country".⁸ This assertion by itself attests to the magnitude of the protest and how it affects the country's political and administrative governance system.

The first nationwide State of emergency was declared on October 8, 2016, in response to a year-long protest in Oromia and Amhara regional states (Awol 2017). Even though the government claimed order and stability as a result, the Ethiopian Parliament extended the State of emergency by another four months in March 2017, and it officially ended on August 4, 2017 (Awol 2017). Basic rights, including freedom of expression and information, were affected by the declaration of the State of emergencies (ibid). Both private and public journalists within Ethiopia were not allowed to report the protest. Only

⁷ Ethiopia: Mass protests 'rooted in country's history' Retrieved from <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/2/20/ethiopia-mass-protests-rooted-in-countrys-history> Accessed on May 9, 2021.

⁸"A state of emergency has been declared because the situation posed a threat against the people of the country," Prime Minister Hailemariam Dessalegn said in his TV message on Sunday, October 09, 2016. EBC Amharic News Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HDWOjqAacvE> Accessed on May 9, 2021.

More can be seen from the then-Attorney General explanation at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=46F05SgZ8EU>

diasporic satellite television and radio stations, specifically Ethiopian Satellite Television (ESAT) and Oromia Media Network (OMN), were regularly reporting about the Oromo protest in local languages relying on anonymous sources, experts in the diaspora, and journalists elsewhere (Seifu 2019). Even though the effort to jam selected international media and diaspora-based satellite television stations was contested by rights groups (Seifu 2019), the government started to block viewership of ESAT and OMN by explicitly prohibiting citizens from setting up satellite dishes in their private compounds.

Four points can be drawn from the happenings of the 2015 Oromo protest, which remain to be understood. First, the Oromo protest is not just a spontaneous political upheaval where the Internet played a role. Through time, the protest seems to evolve using similar approaches with other social movements in crafting political messages and using the Internet to organize the mass. Second, the 2015 Oromo protest is not the first social movement in Ethiopia to use the Internet to call for mass support and to advocate for political causes. Third, the use of the Internet by itself was not enough to organize the Oromo protest as the identity and credibility of key actors who provided online leadership and their discursive practices matters in political communication (Della Porta and Diani 2006). Fourth, although many agreed the Internet played a role in the Oromo protests, there is a need to know how collective movements, identity politics and the Internet interacted and resulted in government transformation in contexts where access to the Internet is minimal and expensive.

The proposed research examines the 2015 Oromo protest as Ethiopia's defining moment that highlighted the role of the Internet as a central informational linkage between the mass public, individuals, and the government, considering the context of the case study. Prior studies explained the role of social media in creating political dialogue during the Oromo protest (Meseret 2020; Tewodros 2020; Gagliardone, Stremlau, and Gerawork 2019; Biniam 2016). However, none have effectively explained and analyzed how the Internet, collective movements, and identity politics interacted and how a sense of common purpose and shared commitment was established between the urban-digital Oromo activists and the rural-offline protesters. More so, freedom of expression on the Internet is generally overlooked within the Ethiopian context and is yet to receive the devotion of lawmakers and academic researchers. Therefore, the proposed study examines the communication tactics used by the mass public to produce, acquire, store and disseminate political messages during the 2015 Oromo protest. This study attempts to identify key actors who provided online leadership and their discursive practices as it explores how the Oromo protest evolved to a decisive national public defiance.

The context of the case also shows that different researches on the constitutional order, social movement, democracy, self-determination and political communication have used the Oromo protest as a case point (Wilson, Staffan, and Tronvoll 2021; Tewodros 2020; Seifu 2019; Arora 2020; Awol 2017; Habtamu 2017; Kiefe Michael and Halefom 2015). However, this research differs from previous studies by shedding light on freedom of expression on the Internet as a contemporary human rights issue in order to investigate if there are changes and trends that the 2015 Oromo protest brought to the understanding of online expression both as a basic right and as a mechanism to advance human rights in

general and freedom of expression and information in particular. This research also scrutinizes the Oromo protest as a social movement that brought about new practices and new actors to the exercise of freedom of expression and information through its use of the Internet as an alternative communication platform and a site of political resistance.

The study draws on three underlying assumptions:

1. The Internet as an alternative communication platform and as a site of political resistance provides a fundamental informational linkage between the mass public, individuals and the government during the 2015 Oromo protest;
2. The Internet serves as a tool for demanding basic human rights and self-rule during the 2015 Oromo protest;
3. Access to the Internet and freedom of expression online arose as fundamental rights during the Oromo protest.

The stated perspectives assist in analyzing power relations in the global society that shape the way online expression is perceived and practiced by individuals. The assumption is that these three perspectives provide an opportunity to examine Ethiopia's experience, challenges, and prospects in protecting and regulating freedom of expression online in this digital era. Moreover, the perspectives help respond to the ongoing debate about the Internet's role in connecting all sorts of geographically dispersed societies for a common goal and as a technological force behind social movements.

Consequently, this research examines how the Internet was used as an alternative communication platform and as a site of political resistance during the 2015 Oromo protest. It also investigates whether the Oromo protest further emphasized the potential of the Internet as a tool for demanding basic human rights and prompted popular demand for access to the Internet and freedom of expression online as fundamental rights. Hence, this study that draws on the case of the Oromo protest helps to examine and understand Ethiopia's experience, opportunities, and uncertainties in protecting and regulating freedom of expression online in this digital age.

1.3. Research Objectives

General Research Objective

The general objective of this study is to understand how the Internet served as an alternative and effective digital space to organize a social movement based on freedom of expression and other corollary rights in the context of criminalization of dissent by a dominant party state.

Specific Objectives of the Study

- To identify key actors who provided online and offline leadership during the protest, their main agendas, their relationships and the various tactics in using the Internet as a communication platform to bridge the gap between the urban-digital Oromo activists and the rural-offline protesters.

- To explore if the use of the Internet in the 2015 Oromo protest, as an effective tool of political mobilization, relates to the actual cross-learning process across social movements that preceded it.
- To examine citizens' perception and practice of freedom of expression online by assessing as to whether the level of education and settlement pattern influences the use of the Internet, and how public understating of democracy and human rights has changed the course of political information creation, acquisition, storage, retrieval, interpretation and dissemination during and after the Oromo protest.
- To examine if the 2015 Oromo protest has influenced the protection and regulation of freedom of expression online within the fundamental obligations of the State to respond to the competing interests of main actors in Internet governance during the legal reform process.

1.4. Research Questions

The general questions that this study set to answer include:

1. Who are the key actors in providing online and offline leadership during the protest, and their agendas, the different aspects of alliance, competition and various tactics in using the Internet as a communication platform to bridge the gap between the urban-digital Oromo activists and the rural-offline protesters?
2. How does the deployment of the Internet, as an effective tool of political mobilization, relates to the actual cross-learning process across social movements?
3. What are the perceptions and practices of citizens about access to the Internet in political information creation, acquisition, storage, retrieval, interpretation and dissemination during and after the Oromo protest?
4. Does the 2015 Oromo protest in any way influence the government to protect and regulate freedom of expression within the fundamental obligations of freedom of expression that requires responding to the competing interests of main actors in Internet governance during the legal reform process?

1.5. Scope of the Study

This study is interdisciplinary research that draws its foundation from the disciplines of human rights and media studies to answer the stated research questions. This study limits itself to the discussion of freedom of expression and information online, taking the case of the Oromo protest. The study examines three dominant perspectives of freedom of expression online, i.e., the Internet as an alternative communication platform, as a tool for demanding basic human rights and as a fundamental right on its own through the case-based analysis of the use of the Internet during the 2015 Oromo protest.

The scope of this research project allows for in-depth scrutiny of the Oromo protest, how it evolved and key actors who provided online leadership through the use of available technology to encourage social interactions among the Oromos worldwide. This study also discusses fundamental principles of freedom of expression in light of international human rights law to examine Ethiopia's prospects and challenges in establishing legal formulation considering the role of main actors in Internet governance in protecting and regulating freedom of expression and information online. A comprehensive analysis of

media freedom is way beyond the scope of this study, but a brief overview is helpful to set the context for the understanding of the Internet in social movements and its regulation as a medium.

Even though this study recognizes the 2015 Oromo protest as a popular uprising, its geographical focus is limited within Oromia Special Zone towns surrounding Addis Ababa, specifically Sebeta, Sululta, Lege Tafo, Burayu and Alemgena and the capital Addis Ababa. Several factors inform this decision. First and foremost, the Oromia Special Zone towns were directly affected by the expansion of the capital city, which was the triggering factor to the 2015 Oromo protest. Secondly, these towns contain a mix of urban and rural population characteristics with fast-growing and diverse economic structures and comparative availability of digital communication infrastructure (Mebratu 2021; Yared, Heyaw, Pauleit, and Mengistu 2019). Thirdly, the selected towns host various domestic and foreign investors in the agriculture and manufacturing sector, which magnified the protest's call for equal distribution of resources and political power, with police often attempting to control the crowds and protect industrial zones, flowers and dairy farms and factories. Addis Ababa is also the capital city of the federal government, and its suspended Master Plan created tension between the State and the general public as essential public services such as drinking water supplies and waste disposal sites are located in the surrounding Oromia Special Zone towns. Besides, well-known online activists and bloggers who lived abroad during the protest are now back in Ethiopia; some prominent activists are settling in Addis Ababa.

The 2015 Oromo protest has evolved to reach its climax in 2018 and resulted in government transformation in 2018. Since then, there have been ongoing political changes that may influence the protection and regulation of online expression and the broader legal reform process. Thus, the study timeframe is set from the intensification of the unrest in 2015 to the government administration change in 2018. However, as one of the core objectives of this study relates to understanding the impact of the 2015 Oromo protest in the protection and regulation of freedom of expression on the Internet, this study addressed the ongoing legal reform process as a way of gaining an insight into the impact of the movement.

1.6. Significance of the Study

The proposed research contributes to the emerging and ongoing academic debate about online free expression and the role of the Internet in shaping the discourse of political participation and social movements in Ethiopia and beyond. This study provides an empirical basis to discuss Ethiopia's experience in promoting and regulating freedom of expression in this digital age. It also stimulates more academic research on the issue of Internet freedom, online expression and social movements in Ethiopia by providing context as to why it is necessary to understand the influence of the Internet from multiple perspectives. It also helps document the evolution of the Oromo protest and political information flow on the Internet during mass protests, which can serve as an initial stage for other researchers who want to study online expression, association and assembly. The study further serves as a steppingstone for future research about the contribution of social

movements in advancing freedom of expression on the Internet in contexts where draconian governments are in power.

1.7. Limitation of the Study

This study has a limited geographic scope that may probably affect the representativeness of data that does not give perfect generalization about Ethiopia's experience in promoting and regulating freedom of expression in this digital age. Two significant factors necessitated the importance of delimiting the study area. The first is an informed methodological decision intended to present a thorough examination in a limited area rather than spread thin by covering a wider area. Secondly, a pragmatic decision was required considering the structural problems related to the time limit of the PhD program to plan accordingly. However, the applicability of study findings depends on the persuasiveness of theoretical and conceptual frameworks presented in this thesis. Additionally, in-depth virtual interviews with diaspora activists, prominent offline opinion leaders, and content analysis of media reports help draw a broader conclusion about the influence of the Internet during the 2015 Oromo protest. Because the researcher does not speak Afan Oromo, linguistic competence will be one of the major challenges in this research process that impacts the overall understanding of the case study and the validity of the findings. However, data collectors and translators conversant with Afan Oromo, Amharic and English were trained and hired in all phases of data collection, interpretation and analysis stages. The researcher also made sure that the interpreters read the last manuscript of the dissertation to ensure that data is not distorted in the process of analysis and write-up. Moreover, online data that may probably be valuable to this study could be deleted or inaccessible by a third party. In such circumstances, the research team asked purposively selected interviewees to explain, if they had deleted content and the reason why they removed it from their social media posts during in-depth interviews.

1.8. Organization of Chapters

The dissertation is organized into seven chapters. Chapter One discusses the background and objectives of the research, laying down the foundation of the overall study plan and execution. It provides the reason why the research is important and the scope and limitations of the study. It also presents the areas of investigation for the case study and analysis with brief information about data collection and analysis mechanisms that could be used in the research.

Chapter Two presents a review of relevant literature. The literature reviewed in this chapter includes theoretical and conceptual frameworks related to freedom of expression online, the Internet and social movements. It also discusses the Internet as a communication platform, as a tool to advance other human rights and online expression as a fundamental right through literature related to the Internet and public protests.

Chapter Three discusses the general methodological approach, the specific study techniques used, and the justification for taking the 2015 Oromo protest as a single case study to examine freedom of expression online in Ethiopia's context.

Data analysis and research findings are presented from Chapters Four to Seven. It is designed to allow more room to address research questions in detail. Accordingly, an empirical chapter is dedicated to research questions one, two and four to explain how the Internet, as an alternative communication platform and site of political resistance, influenced the organization and leadership structure of the 2015 Oromo protest and the exercise of free expression. On the other hand, research question three will be discussed across all chapters serving as a crosscutting concept as the study seeks to understand the perception and practice of freedom of expression online among movement actors by assessing the use of the Internet in political information production and consumption and the demand for democracy and human rights.

Chapter Four discusses the background, framings, agendas, critical developments and outcomes of the 2015 Oromo protest. This chapter identifies key movement actors who played a significant role during the movement and their discursive practices in political content production dissemination. It also explains how the Internet helped structure the organization of the 2015 Oromo protest, its leadership, mobilization tactics and communication.

Chapter Five discusses the online strategy and the Internet-oriented social movement practices developed and utilized by the 2015 Oromo protest leadership structure to demand the protection of human rights and mobilize the mass. It further analyses the role of legacy media, cultural communicative songs and street actions in mobilizing the offline base and the counternarrative that the Ethiopian government used to curb the Oromo protests.

Chapter Six discusses the influence of the 2015 Oromo protest to bring about changes in the protection and regulation of freedom of expression on the Internet. The chapter sheds light on the framings of the 2015 Oromo protest to examine whether freedom of expression in general and online expression, in particular, were in any way among the protesters' demands. It proceeds to examine if access to the Internet and freedom of expression online arose as a fundamental right during the Oromo protest and the protest in any way influenced the ongoing legal reform process.

Chapter Seven is the concluding chapter. It presents significant empirical findings of the study by emboldening its academic contributions to the emerging and ongoing debate about freedom of expression online and the role of the Internet in shaping the discourse of social movements in Ethiopia and beyond. The last part of the chapter highlights the study's broader implications and suggests entry points and opportunities for future research.

CHAPTER TWO

This chapter has three subsections, whereby the first one presents theoretical and conceptual discussions on freedom of expression, social movements and the Internet. The second part focuses more on offering a brief overview of the legal frameworks of freedom of expression on the Internet. The third subsection presents empirical literature on relevant themes of freedom of expression, social movements and the Internet in Ethiopia. The chapter provides accounts of how state power and politics are exercised during mass unrests and political upheavals, primarily when the Internet is used to mobilize the mass against the government by exploring the 2015 Oromo protest as a case study.

2. Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

This section presents a brief review of the academic discussions on some key concepts of the study. It focuses on the theoretical discussions for freedom of expression online, social movements and the Internet. The section relates these concepts to the understanding of the Internet as an alternative and safe digital space to organize social movements and voice dissent in oppressive governments.

2.1. Discussing Political Protests and Social Movements in Context

Prior to the emergence and expansion of the Internet, social movements have been defined by Wilkinson (1971, 12) as “a series of actions and endeavors of a body of persons for a special object”. This definition of social movement as a series of activities of people for a defined cause did not exclude the use of violence, illegal action, revolution or withdrawal to attain a shared goal (Wilkinson 1971). However, framing violence as a tactic to advance movement agendas often results in cycles of contention by triggering “diffusion, extension, imitation, and reaction among groups” that were usually inactive and with fewer resources to organize social movements (Tarrow 2011, 205). Recurrent social movements are often violent, producing countermovement leading to civil war in fragile states (Della Porta, Donker, Hall, Poljarevic, and Ritter 2017). The favorable conditions supporting the emergence of social movements are considered political opportunities where social movement actors confront identified opponents. As such, movement framing is all about the ability of actors to state the problem in a manner that resonates with the longstanding demands of their social base and garner mass support. According to McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly (2001), effective use of political opportunities could result in the diffusion and upward scale shift of social movement by embracing new, actors, interests and values into the movement structure and agenda. On the other hand, Polletta (2007) suggested that future research should examine how digital communication technologies are influencing movement organization and participation.

“Scale shift is a change in the number and level of coordinated contentious actions to a different focal point, involving a new range of actors, different objects, and broadened claims” (McAdam et al. 2001, 33)

This study attempts to examine whether the 2015 Oromo protest can be considered as a social movement. According to Della Porta and Diani (2006), public protests have a minimal role in social movements that strive to result in cultural, economic, political or any type of change. Nevertheless, various forms of political protest, such as the practice of specific lifestyles, continuous demonstrations, the adoption of certain clothes or haircuts and other types of rituals that can be considered as protest or signs of protest, have become part and parcel of collective actions. Thus, protests can be considered social movements because protest demonstrations are used by actors as options when they feel their relative position in the political process is threatened (Della Porta and Diani 2006). As the Internet enables societies to act contentiously for their shared vision, unstructured political protests quickly transform into well-organized social movements by deploying communication technologies to facilitate distant mobilization (Tarrow 2011). Public protest in this dissertation is considered as an expression of popular responsiveness towards shared interest. However, acts of spontaneous responses to collective problems, providing public goods or claiming allegiance for moral values and virtues do not match the definition of social movements, in which this study is rooted (Della Porta and Diani 2006).

Collective identity is all about recognizing and establishing connectedness with an individual or a group with a sense of common purpose and shared commitment to a certain cause (Tarrow 2011). Collective identity building is considered to be one of the elements to differentiate between protests and social movements. Social movements involve actors who are able to establish connections between different occurrences, private and public, located at different points in time and space in a manner that is relevant to their experience and the experience is intertwined into a broader encompassing narrative (Melucci 1996a; Tarrow 2011). For Della Porta and Diani, social movement requires collective action of members to work together with a clear goal and specified target “articulated in social or political terms” to prevail (Della Porta and Diani 2006, 21). Social movement occurs only when collective identities develop through continuous information exchange and interaction, which go beyond organizing specific events and initiatives (Della Porta and Diani 2006; Tarrow 2011).

Conversely, Touraine argues that even when the sense of common purpose and shared commitment in a broader collective mobilization is not identical but surely compatible; it empowers individual activists and organizations to regard themselves as inseparably linked to other actors (Touraine 1981). This research identifies key actors of the 2015 Oromo protest, their internal contentions and communication tactics to mobilize the mass against the government. It is also wise to borrow the concept about how individual actors who are involved in collective action start to regard themselves as foundations of the process of change or resistance to transform through extensive communication and connection with the broader group on the Internet (Della Porta and Diani 2006; Touraine 1981).

The 2015 Oromo protest, in this study, is discussed as a social movement by observing its impact, motivations, strategies, diversity of participants and the degree of organization. According to Tilly (2011), the worthiness, unity, numbers and commitment of participants are essential to determine the success of a social movement. There is a debate whether the state is the enemy of social movements or not. Some scholars allude that state agencies could be either supporters or opponents of movements (Gale 1986). Although social movement theory seems to focus on contention as a major approach, this study argues that movements facilitate collaboration between the state and citizens to ensure fair distribution of resources and a decentralized governance system (Gale 1986; Fligstein and McAdam 2019; Krieger, Martins, Pozzebon, and Gonzalez 2021). Ultimately, contentious movements develop organized resistance against the state and become subversive, undermining the state's actions.

In some cases, movements conform with local authorities to assert citizens' rights through resistance, upholding their survival and relevance in people's day-to-day lives (Krieger et al. 2021; Fligstein and McAdam 2019; Gale 1986). As Della Porta and Diani explained, social movement requires "the identification of targets for collective efforts, specifically articulated in social or political terms" (Della Porta and Diani 2006, 21). Furthermore, social movements develop new ideas and values as they strive to serve as agents of change by giving meaning and context to a lingering social problem as a severe one that will attract the attention of the media to the social and political movements (Della Porta and Diani 2006).

This research contends that the Oromo protest is a simple collective action. The 2015 Oromo protest is described in this thesis as a social movement that used public protests online and offline as major sources of pressure against the political order in Ethiopia. This study further provides insight into the outcomes of using the Internet to communicate dissent in Ethiopia by illustrating the organization of other social movements that the 2015 Oromo protest modelled itself in mobilizing the mass, as well as crafting and disseminating political messages.

2.2. Conceptualizing Freedom of Expression Online

Conceptualizing freedom of expression online embraces the development of scientific, cultural, technological and social aspects that led us to postmodernity and the digital world, changing our experience (Feldman 2017). According to Flores (2007, 117), the Postmodern society is a global society that struggles for "maximal standardization of culture in all of its manifestations, from food culture to clothing, from the products of technology to religious exercise." The Postmodern age does not reject fundamental liberal principles of freedom of expression. Instead, the Internet age embraced the notions of the search for truth, self-fulfillment and self-governance by assimilating them all within the principle of self-emergence (Smolla 1992; Moon 1985; Scanlon 1972). The postmodern analysis of individual autonomy and the emergence of the online self also proves a direct relationship between freedom of expression online and fundamental individual rights. For this reason, the Internet can be considered as a platform where self is exercising its relational power with others (Flores 2017; Feldman 2017; Schauer 2017).

Samuels (2008) criticized the Postmodernist approach for putting too much emphasis on the social nature of new communication technologies without considering the contemporary dominance of automation and individual autonomy in the production of automodernity⁹. In this case, one can argue that the concept of individual autonomy central in modernist liberal thought underwent a renaissance with the emergence of digital technology in the postmodern era setting the scene for freedom of expression online. Continuous innovations in computer technology and digital communication created a new trend to independent and individualized use of computers to access knowledge and recognize individual autonomy in accessing information and expression of thoughts (ibid).

Postmodernists basically proclaim that self is socially constructed and cannot be free and autonomous as sociocultural forces create self (Feldman 2017). In this regard, the Internet could be considered one of the socio-cultural forces where the self exercises its relational power with others and expresses its autonomy. The kind of relational power one can develop on the Internet emanates from the “online self” that individuals create to establish relationships with other online selves (ibid). For Castells (2009), the self can be constructed both online and offline and what matters is how an individual is able to present his or her identity across varied digital, networked and offline forms of media. Therefore, the Internet plays an important role in social construction and the development of the relational self. At the same time, the individual’s choice to independently decide how to control the flow and intake of information “provides a strong antisocial and self-reinforcing sense of subjectivity” (Samuels 2008, 229). Autonomy in the digital era infers one’s capacity to actively participate in its own self-creation through social interactions where freedom of expression online is exercised in search of truth and self-actualization (Schauer 2017). This research observes Samuels’s (2008), articulation of the concept of individual autonomy in the postmodern era as being enhanced by the inventions of automated digital communication technologies that enabled individuals to express their autonomy.

Going back to the notion of democracy as a requirement of self-governance, we should look for a way to examine the principle of self-governance in light of the emergent self and how its foundation is perceived in this digital era. According to Trottier and Fuchs (2014), the relational approach of state and politics recognizes both theoretical and practical interdependency of the government, individual citizens, and other actors. The government is relatively autonomous to utilize the resource and its power, but then again, it has “distinctive liabilities or vulnerabilities, and its operations depend on resources produced elsewhere in its environment” (Jessop 2008, 6). The relational approach recognizes that the states are responsible for accessing, controlling and shaping political issues under their capacities, even though state capacity can be adequate based on links to “powers that exist and operate beyond the state’s formal boundaries” (Jessop 2008, 6). State capacity is contingent “on the structural relations between the state and its encompassing political system, on the strategic ties among politicians and state officials

⁹ “Automodernity represents an extension of postmodernity or a break from it” (Samuels 2008, 237).

and other political forces, and on the complex web of structural interdependencies and strategic networks that link the state system to its broader social environment” (ibid).

Hence, state power, corporate power, organizational power and the relational power of the self in social movements where the Internet is used to mediate interaction can best be understood through the theory of communication power. It guides the discussion of power relationships between major actors in Internet governance such as the government, the private sector, civil societies, and individuals from playing a role in ensuring their rightful place in Internet governance. As Graham and Dutton (2013, 14) argued, networked individuals are using the Internet itself to be involved in Internet governance issues by simply moving the balance of power to their advantage and holding a position of being the “Fifth Estate” role in holding governments accountable. This research refers to the State, individuals, nonstate actors and Internet intermediaries as main actors in Internet governance (Benedek and Kettemann 2020).

The nature of the Internet – its ‘hybridity’ of the old and new media- is still open for theoretical debate. However, the emergence of the Internet and digital communication technologies is the foundation of postmodern thoughts of freedom of expression online. This leads us to inquire about the position of the Internet in dominant communication and social science theories. Among working theories to the Internet that are currently influencing the discourse are Hjarvard’s (2008) Theory of Mediatization, Actor-network theory of Couldry (2012), and Castells’ (2009) Theory of Communication Power. Hjarvard (2008, 113) defined mediatization theory as “the process whereby society to an increasing degree is submitted to or becomes dependent on, the media and their logic”. He proposed that social differences should be mediated, even though he did not say much on which areas of social life must be mediatized. In mediatization theory, media is understood as being integrated into the day-to-day activities of the society as a significant tool that facilitates social interaction. Nevertheless, Hjarvard (2008) did not discuss how actors in social interaction should be perceived and analyzed in the postmodern world. On the other hand, Couldry’s (2012) Actor-network theory describes the Internet as new technology than a media platform despite its impact on media studies. According to Schroeder’s (2018) criticism, this theory focuses on the action of individuals and technological determinism. Actor-network theory is influenced by the notion that science and technology are shaped by specific local societal contexts, making it difficult “to generalize about the role of media or technology beyond individual contexts of contractedness or shaping” (Schroeder 2018, 3).

The theory of communication power scrutinizes the Internet as a communicative platform and a domain of political resistance, which helps to analyze freedom of expression and information online both as an important right by itself and as a means to advance other basic human rights by elaborating the power components of online expression (Castells 2009). Castells (2009) argued that despite its swift and broad effects, the online social network functions in a similar way that the offline network performs. Also, the online self’s existence depends on the communication power that outlines the capacity to control communication when others try to penetrate such control. In communication power theory, the Internet by its nature is not a mass media; instead, it is a platform where

individuals exchange information one-to-one, many-to-many, and many- to- one as the Internet cleared the old-style division between the sender and receiver in this digital era (Castells 2009; O'Donnell 2011). Therefore, there should be a way for the Internet to be perceived as both private and public sphere if one desires to discuss how the Internet as a communication domain deserves protection (O'Donnell 2011). The analysis of the Internet as a communication medium could take as back to the classical liberal thought that considers the rights and duties of the individual as a foundation of freedom of expression, at the Internet extended the way individual autonomy is being defined in the contemporary world (Castells 2016; Feldman 2017; Flores 2007). With its liberating effect as a means of communication and information, the Internet enhanced individual autonomy through self-communication.

The emergence and fast expansion of the new media are believed to conquer the traditional media as it becomes dominantly used and trusted, particularly among young people (DellaPrta and Diani 2006; Schroeder 2018). However, the mainstream media is still active in influencing the political information flow, especially during the social movements (McCurdy 2012; Couldry 2000; Whitten-Woodring 2009). According to Chadwick (2017), there is a need to understand the complementarity of traditional and new media by recognizing their side-by-side existence. Also, the 'hybridity' nature of the Internet should emphasize the changing media context (Chadwick 2017). Chadwick's (2017) hybridity notion is related to Castells' explanation that the media should be recognized as operating through their distinctive networks.

In this case, social movements can have different media approaches to get their representation appealing at the right time and platform, and some social movements may even prefer to abstain from interacting with the media (Whitten-Woodring 2009; Smolla 1992). However, there is limited research about how key actors in social movements communicate with the mainstream media. McCurdy has identified two general approaches that can help to explain the dynamics between protests and traditional media in scholarly works - representational and relational research approaches (McCurdy 2012). According to McCurdy (2012), many studies concentrate on the representational approach to analyze how the traditional media portray social movements and how the content production process facilitates the framing and representation of social movements. Others focus on a relational method that helps to understand the "asymmetrical relationship" between social movements and the media (ibid). The relational scholarship approach also examines the power contestation for media representation and media strategies of social movements to claim a platform to be heard (McCurdy 2012, 248).

Continuous innovations in information and communication technologies in the Postmodern era contribute to the structural changes in societies and the protection and regulation of the quest for freedom of expression and information (Graham and Dutton 2014; Dutton 2013). This claim is rejected by Nash (2013), who argued that although the Internet is serving the global community as a powerful communication platform, it is not practically helping the advancement of freedom of expression. Neither Dutton (2013) nor Nash (2013) provided a clear definition of freedom of expression online. In contrast,

Castells (2009) defined freedom of expression on the Internet as a change of communication platform into a controlled range of information to which subscribers to a particular service are limited and managed by network operators to fit into their business interests that imposes restrictions upon the expansion of the digital society. Nonetheless, this definition does not reflect on the importance of the Internet and its role in redefining free expression and information in social movements. Instead, it reflects on the power of Internet intermediaries and transnational business entities in influencing the regulation of the new technology. However, freedom of expression and information online in this dissertation is perceived as an act of engaging in the acquisition, storage, retrieval, interpretation, and dissemination of political information through blogs, websites, social media and or sharing Internet resources (Benedek and Kettemann, 2020; O'Donnell 2011). The research uses the terms freedom of expression online, online speech or online expression alternatively to refer to the fundamental right of freedom of expression exercised through the Internet.

2.3. Conceptualizing Communication Power in Social Movements

This section presents Manuel Castells' (2009) theory of communication power that can be applicable to the understanding of contemporary social movements and freedom of expression online in which the Internet is central in popular movements such as the 2015 Oromo protest. The study acknowledges that communication power theory is formulated through extensive exploration of social movements in different contexts to understand the link between society, the advancement of communication systems, and the political behavior of individuals (Castells 2015). The dissertation does not claim that communication power theory is a comprehensive analytical framework that can explain the research topic. However, comparing communication power theory with the theory of mediatization and actor-network theory discussed above, communication power theory provides the best-supported explanation of the Internet as a central informational linkage to organize social movements that brought about new practices and new actors to the exercise of freedom of expression in the digital era.

Communication power theory examines how the political power relationships between the State and citizens changed in the context of globalization and the emergence of digital communication technologies (Castells 2009). The communication power theory alludes that power relationships are constructed and exercised through the communication process management, and power relationships can be changed by actors who aim for social change by influencing the public mind (Castells 2009). The communication power theory argues that the Internet induced the emergence of new forms of societies, communication and social movement organizations (ibid). The Internet created a network society structured around digital communication technologies and characterized by space and time (ibid). Most dominant activities in the network society, such as financial markets and media networks, are organized and connected by communication power. Accordingly, Castells coined a new name for social movements in which the Internet is used to organize the mass, "networked social movements" (Castells 2015, 308). The dynamics of domination and resistance to network formation and network strategies aiming to reach constituencies are the characteristics of networked social movements in this digital era (ibid). Therefore, according to Castells (2009), there are four distinct

forms of power in the global network society: networking power, network power, networked power and network-making power. Each one of these forms of power defines distinctive supremacy exercises in the networked society.

The communication power theory accentuates that the network society is “built around the Internet and wireless communication” (Castells 2009, 4). The Internet is also defined as a network of computer networks, a network of networks where dynamic social movements are connected regardless of borders (Castells 2009). Later in his publication, he re-defined the Internet as “the lifeline of the interconnected global economy” that promotes freedom and the culture and practice of autonomy (Castells 2015, 259-262). However, he is criticized for presenting social movements as independent communication networks that are not affected by contextual matters such as Internet penetration, access to the service, and content of the information, as he defined the Internet and its role in social movements (Anttiroiko 2015). Because its scope and nature are vast, the Internet has been broadly defined in various literatures and lacks a standard theoretical approach to explain its role in society (Schroeder 2018; Dutton 2013). However, most scholars agreed that the Internet could be best understood as the network of networks that embraces any digital information and communication technology (Dutton 2013; Castells 2012; Schroeder 2018; Hick, Halpin and Hoskins 2000). Hence, the Internet in this research refers to digital communication technologies that are considered a socio-technical sphere where the communicative act is conducted to shape social choices, define behavior and encourage action (Graham and Dutton 2014; Castells 2015). This actually helps the study to respond to the arguments that there is a gap in theories of the influence of the Internet as a technological force in the process of social changes (Castells 2009; Schroeder 2018).

Communication power acknowledges the Internet as a vital component of power in the networked society. Castells illustrates the Internet as an effective and safe political space where social movement actors have the privilege to mobilize the mass while acknowledging the interference of transboundary Internet service providers in an effort to protect freedom of expression online (Castells 1997; 2009). According to Torres (2015, 151), the power relationship in contemporary society, which Castells propose, “promotes a reductionist and non-relational conception of power”. Thus, Castells’ approach in explaining the network society is in light of technological determinism. This dissertation does not necessarily advance Castells’s claim that technology alone boosts the formation and objectives of social movement. Indeed, communication power theory incorporates broader topics and levels of analysis about power relationships in the network society that are relevant in shaping this study. Yet, it does not explain how real-life identity-driven social networks are trying to adapt to the emerging digital landscape. This gap can be addressed by examining the Internet as a digital political sphere in organizing popular protests and by employing different analytical approaches to understand the role of social actors in social changes in the global south. Castells (2009) asserted that the Internet brought about a new communication model called “mass self-communication” whereby individuals communicate a personal message to the mass using the new media. Social movements are shaped by communicating messages via the structure of communication, which is accessible by the larger society (Castells 2009, 55).

Moreover, communication power theory can help examine how online speech relates to offline media content while discussing factors that motivated Oromo activists and nonactivists to access media coverage opportunities and the extent of owning media organizations. Aware of the debate about the role of the state in the network society and the analysis of existing literature in Ethiopia's context, this dissertation gives emphasis to the discussion about the role of the State in social movements from diverse perspectives. The study discusses how the State attempts to regulate freedom of expression online through the lenses of political ideology, its desire to promote economic development and advance communication technology. The study further attempts to examine how the limited access and availability of the Internet and the draconian nature of the State that basically silences dissent hinders online political interaction the organization of social movements. Prior literature (Habtamu 2017; Seifu 2019; Arora 2020; Meseret 2020) highlighted that the Internet-based political engagement during the 2015 Oromo protest was dominated by the urban-digital diaspora Oromos. Hence, the analysis of the Internet as a digital political sphere in this study focuses on examining the representativeness of political views on the Internet and online movement leadership structure.

The communication power theory acknowledges the combined deployment of digital and legacy media to organize transnational social movements when structural and instrumental resources, as well as cultural contexts, influence the use of the Internet during social movements (Graham and Dutton 2014). The structural and instrumental factors attached to the understating of social movements and freedom of expression online can best be explained through the dominant viewpoints stated in Chapter one i.e., the Internet as an alternative communication platform and digital political sphere, as a tool for demanding basic human rights, and access to the Internet as a fundamental human right. These three viewpoints are also central to conceptualizing communication power theory in light of the case study, the 2015 Oromo protest, in which the Internet was utilized to call for mass support and democratic change in the country. The structural factors discussed in this thesis include the political, social, economic, and cultural contexts in which key actors operate to organize and sustain movements. The instrumental resources and opportunities include the use of the Internet as an alternative communication platform and a site of political resistance to advance group interests and shared visions during social movements.

2.4. Understanding the Internet as a Digital Public Sphere: A Conceptual Positioning

This section presents a brief overview of the existing academic discussions about how the Internet, has been analyzed from the perspective of public sphere theory in order to understand its interaction with social movements and identity politics. This section identifies three generalized concepts that could contribute to the understanding of the Internet as a digital public sphere: the Internet as a tool for demanding basic human rights; the Internet as an alternative communication platform and digital site of political resistance, and access to the Internet as a fundamental human right.

2.4.1. The Internet as a Tool for Demanding Basic Human Rights

Conceptualizing the Internet as a tool for demanding fundamental rights in this study is anchored by the analysis of power relations and social movements in the digital age. Various scholars defined the Internet in different ways. The usual terms used by many to describe the Internet such as the New Media, the Net, the Website, Cyberspace, social media, do not provide a comprehensive explanation of the Internet (Hick et al. 2000). But the term “Internet” refers to all digital communication technologies available on the World Wide Web including web search engines, email, webpages, chatrooms, blog pages and social media platforms. The Internet “is a global pool of information and services, accessible locally through individual computer stations that are each part of a global system of interconnected computer networks” (Hick et al. 2000, 6). On the other hand, social media are Internet-based applications that facilitate the creation, sharing, storing and disseminating of ideas and opinions, and hence are just a single component of the Internet (Graham and Dutton 2014).

The emergence of smartphones and other digital gadgets such as tablets and interactive watches is complementing access to the Internet from wherever we are, making the Internet nearer and more central to our day-to-day life and work (Graham and Dutton 2014; Hagerty and Rubinov 2019). Mobile smartphones are becoming the most used gateway for accessing the web, joining network society, and deploying the technology into existing social conditions (Graham and Dutton 2014; Hagerty and Rubinov 2019). Likewise, the arrival of different types of digital technologies such as the Internet of Things and Artificial Intelligence influences the way people use the Internet either to promote or infringe basic human rights making them a dominant research focus for scholars who would love to investigate how the Internet influence society and cultural identity (Hagerty and Rubinov 2019).

The global trend shows that the Internet has changed the way human beings exchange information by redefining the speed and quality of communication, the number of speakers, and the size of the audience we interact with (Magee, 2002). Unlike previous times, we are now surrounded by technological gadgets and applications that provide us with the opportunity to access information, entertain and educate ourselves, create content and communicate our thoughts to others easily (Sarikakis and Rodriguez-Amat 2012). Additionally, the fast expansion of transnationalism and the Internet-mediated transboundary political mobilization of the African diaspora facilitate identity construction through frequent interaction with the host land and homeland communities (Maier, 2016).

The Internet served political groups as a campaign tool, yet little is known about its contribution in influencing individuals to develop a new political culture (Lilleker and Vedel 2013). There should also be an academic explanation of how online and offline politics interact to facilitate political participation in this digital era (Lilleker and Vedel 2013). For this study to proceed with its queries with regard to the influence of the Internet and Ethiopia’s experience in protecting and regulating online expression, there is a need to define both online and offline political engagement. For Morozov (2011) online political engagement is a delusion of having a meaningful impact in the society without

tangible contribution rather than joining a Facebook group. *Online political engagement* is described by Lilleker and Vedel (2013) as a new form of political involvement that is flexible, predetermined and influenced by moral issues while *offline political engagement* on the other hand is defined as a traditional political involvement, which is permanent, conceptual and that causes a threat to the wellbeing of participants (Lilleker and Vedel 2013). Morozov's understanding of the Internet seems to reflect the notion of techno-skepticism that perceives the role of new technologies in societies with caution (Morozov 2011; Graham and Dutton 2013). Assuming that the Internet has played a role during the 2015 Oromo protest, *online political engagement* in the context of this study comprises sharing of social media stories about the Oromo protest, commenting on blogs about government policies and statements, or posting opinions about government authorities and leaked official documents to one's personal page specifically about the mass unrest and the government change (Chadwick 2017). *Offline political engagement* is also defined in this study as a series of voluntary physical actions taken by individuals and groups of individuals to achieve a shared goal (Castells 2009).

2.4.2. The Internet as a Safe Site of Political Resistance

The key premise of this section is the role of the Internet as an alternative communication platform and site of political resistance from diverse academic perspectives. Some scholars argued that the Internet enables social mobilization that transcends time and space (Graham and Dutton 2014; Anttiroiko 2015; Trottier and Fuchs 2014). Other scholars like Barlow (1996) perceive the Internet as a digital communication platform that constitutes a considerable network of enlightened and equal citizens who are able to debate and discuss any issues in their experience without fear of interference from the government. However, Barlow's (1996) definition is ambitious and nonapplicable in societies where draconian governments operate, the digital literacy rate is low, and Internet penetration is very limited and expensive. Some scholars perceive the Internet as a platform that provides a faster and more accessible means of communication particularly for those in dire human rights abuse (Hike et.al. 2000; Sarihan, 2014; Graham and Dutton 2014). On the other hand, the Internet is perceived as a site of political resistance facilitating popular participation, and providing an alternative communication platform to voice dissent (Sarikakis and Rodriguez-Amat 2012). As the debate continues about the influence of the Internet on human rights, the Internet is acknowledged for its role in facilitating opinion formation and social movements in countries where dictatorial governments are in power (Mateos and Bajo-Erro 2020). According to Mateos and Bajo-Erro (2020), the Internet influenced the organization of social movements in Africa by creating collaborative networks at a continental level and encouraging regional interaction.

The use of social media platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter as platforms to communicate dissent and promote human rights made social mobilization and cross-learning processes easier (ibid). Thus, the Arab uprisings in the Middle East and North African (MENA) region have been taken as examples to explain the influence of the Internet in mass uprisings (Sarihan 2014). According to Sarihan (2014), the Internet is believed to enhance the effect of the Arab spring by allowing citizens to voice their political opinion freely. In fact, the study of freedom of expression online in Ethiopia has

been dominated by debates and cases from the MENA region, but the African experience in this digital age is not just confined to the northern part of the continent. Conversely, the role and influence of the Internet in societies is not always positive and towards promoting democracy and human rights. Kenya experienced electoral violence that has been aggravated by the use of the Internet to spread hate speech and misinformation during its 2007 and 2013 national election periods (Mutahi and Kimari 2017). In September 2019, false information about xenophobia violence erupted and spread through the Internet instigating attacks on foreigners in South Africa and against South African nationals living in Nigeria.¹⁰ The 2019 Sudan uprising was successful because the youth-led revolution used social media to organize protests.¹¹ The fear and anxiety of the Ethiopian government toward the Arab Spring were reflected in media reports. The former Prime Minister Meles Zenawi was quoted by The Guardian¹² saying “we are not worried that there will be a north Africa-type revolution in Ethiopia, it’s simply not possible. The circumstances for it do not exist.”

Experiences from the Arab Spring, South Africa, Kenya, and the recent Sudan uprising shows that the Internet can be used as an alternative communication platform and safe site of political resistance to organizing movements. Hence, this study discusses the Internet as an effective and safe site of resistance for groups and individuals to exercise their freedom of expression, association and assembly at times of discontent and defiance.

2.4.3. Access to the Internet as a Fundamental Right

The Internet is defined as one of the contemporary human rights issues in various international human rights documents.¹³ Some scholars however argued that the Internet can be protected as one of the means necessary to exercise freedom of expression, but it cannot be attributed as the right to the Internet (Magee 2002). As the debate continues on the study of the Internet and its impact on human rights, this study takes into account the assertions of Graham and Dutton that the Internet requires a multidisciplinary research approach to explain its role in shaping society (2014). This is very much linked with what Sarikakis and Rodriguez-Amat (2012) asserted about the emergence of the Internet that has influenced the way freedom of expression and its corollary rights have been perceived.

¹⁰Moeng, S. 05 September 2019. Misleading social media posts fuel tensions over xenophobic violence gripping SA. News 24., Retrieved from <https://www.news24.com/SouthAfrica/News/misleading-social-media-posts-fuel-tensions-over-xenophobic-violence-gripping-sa-20190905> Accessed on November 10, 2020.

¹¹ Aya Elmileik and Seena Khalil. 12 August 2019. ‘Tasgut bas’ to #SudanUprising: How social media told the story | Science and Technology News | Al Jazeera Accessed on September 28, 2021.

¹² David Smith, 27 May 2011. Ethiopia 'day of rage' hopes to oust Meles Zenawi from power | Ethiopia | The Guardian Accessed on November 21, 2020.

¹³ In May 2011, the UN Special Rapporteur on the Promotion and Protection of the Right to Freedom of Opinion and Expression used a phrase” human right to the ‘Internet”, which many States criticized and acclaimed. United Nations Report: ‘Internet Access Is a Human Right, L.A. Times (June 3, 2011), Retrieved from <http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/technology/2011/06/united-nations-report-internet-access-is-a-human-right.html>

The argument for access to the Internet as a human rights issue relates to the role of digital communication technologies in enabling societies to expose human rights abuses. At the same time, the digital communication technologies created loopholes for the State, non-state actors and international intermediaries to interfere with people's privacy through obtaining private data and applying technological barriers that may access to the Internet as means of attaining freedom of expression (Hick et al. 2000; Sarikakis and Rodriguez-Amat 2012; Rowland 2011).

The overall debate concerning the Internet as human rights revolved around freedom of expression, access to information and the right to privacy. The guarantee of freedom of expression and other corollary rights applies with particular force to the right to access the Internet, as peoples' right to seek, receive and share information cannot have a meaningful application without the use of modern media technology (Rowland 2011; Land 2013). The deployment of the Internet and other digital technologies to surveillance against citizens and access to private data is also becoming a concern that calls for coordinated efforts to protect and regulate physical access to the Internet infrastructure (Benedek and Kettemann 2020; Rowland 2011). There are ample reasons for protecting and regulating access to the Internet, including the need to expand education and access to social services. Most importantly, the Internet provides easy and fast access to official information to citizens. Castells claimed that when individuals can enjoy the greater autonomy that the Internet provides, "the greater the chances that new values and new interests will enter the realm of socialized communication, so reaching the public mind" (Castells 2016). In this case, the Internet can be considered as an instrument that helps to advance individual autonomy and democracy. It also facilitates political dialogue between citizens and the government, which may lead to the progression of the right to access to the Internet and freedom of expression online as fundamental human rights (ibid).

To sum up its discussion on issues concerning the Internet from different perspectives, this study avows that the influence of the Internet in the organization of social movements and upholding freedom of expression needs a thorough understanding of the technology. Furthermore, the influence of the Internet in organizing social movements cannot be fully explained without identifying movement actors and leadership structure in contexts where those in power repress freedom of expression. More so, issues related to the Internet cannot be explained by using a single theoretical perspective (Graham and Dutton 2014). Perhaps, it is for this reason Castells himself admitted that the theory of communication power only provides a "tentative empirical support" to understand the nature of power in the network society (Castells 2009, 416). Hence, this research additionally uses the insights gained from various theoretical approaches and literature reviews to understand social movements, the nature of the Internet, and the role and motives of movement actors aiming to analyze the three assumptions put forward in this dissertation. The following diagram presents a conceptual framework devised to understand the use of the Internet in social movements and its influence in advancing the protection and regulation of freedom of expression online based on a model suggested by Soares and Joia (2015).

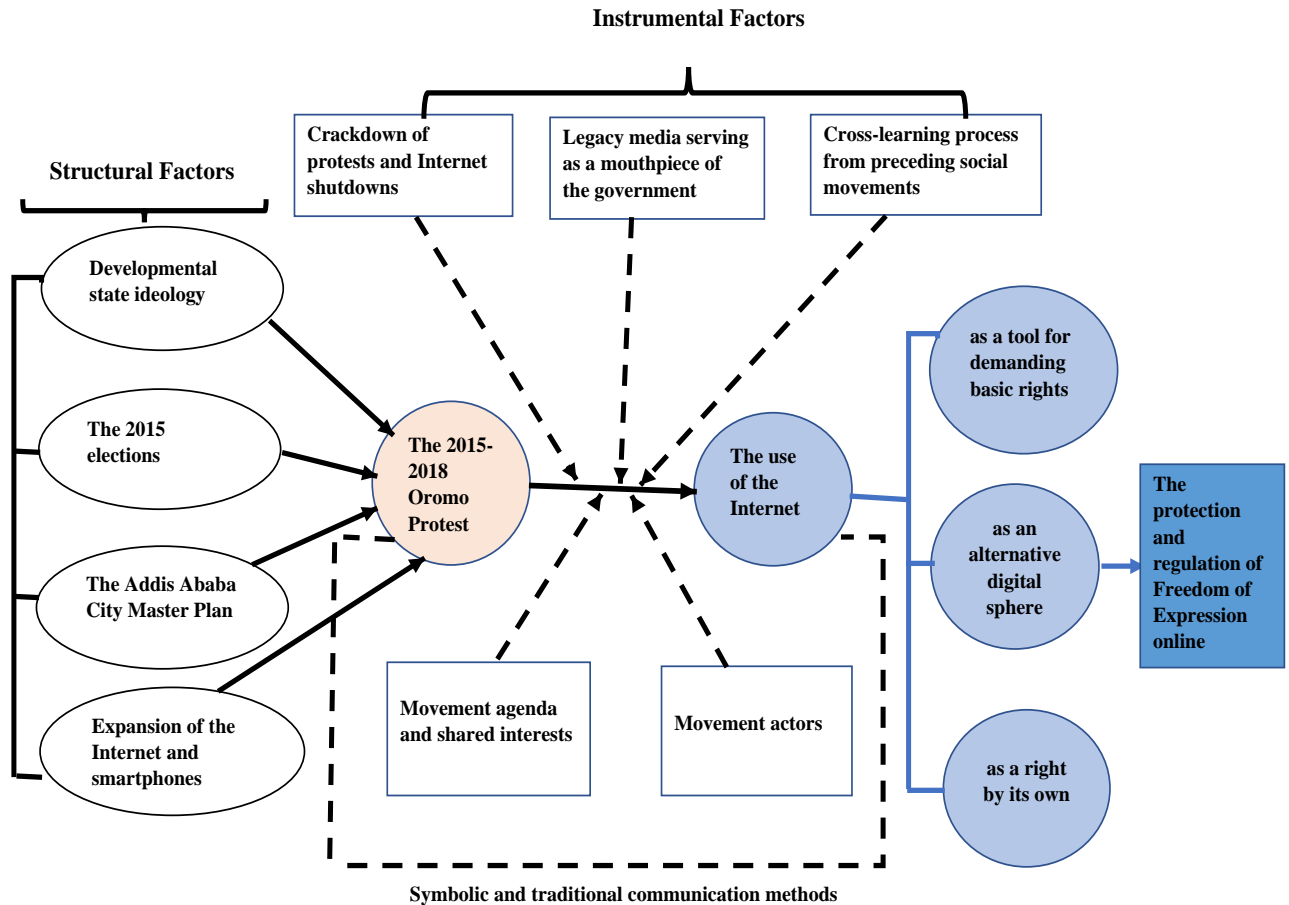


Figure 1 Proposed conceptual framework of the interaction between social movements, the Internet and freedom of expression online

The central point in this conceptual framework that might possibly deviate from the existing analysis of the relationship between social movements and the Internet is the emphasis given to the multidimensional interaction between social movements and the use of the Internet leading to the protection and regulation of freedom of expression online. Unlike the conceptual model of the influence of social media use in social movements projected by Soares and Joia (2015), the above framework depicts social movements at the center triggered by the use of the Internet in contexts where political repression occurs and when the legacy media is serving as a state propaganda tool. Equally, the political, technological, and socio-economic factors triggered the 2015 Oromo protest shaping the movement agenda and the transnational involvement of the diaspora community in domestic politics. The repeated Internet shutdown has also contributed to the intensified use of traditional communication platforms such as distributing handwritten flyers, mouth to mouth, and symbolic communication guided by cultural closings, hairdos and designated protest signs to produce, acquire and disseminate political information among key movement actors. Although the communication power theory seems to imply that the emergence of the Internet is the dominant resource to form social movements, the conceptual framework proposed in this

study asserts that collective actions influence the perception and practices of the use of the Internet in organizing the mass.

The proposed conceptual model helps to explain the Internet as a digital communicative and political resistance sphere during protests. The model supports the analysis of social movement demands for access to the Internet as a fundamental right in the context where dissent voices are silenced both offline and online. The characteristics of social movements such as the formation of collective identity shared interest and movement agenda, and movement organizational structure and leadership can also be examined through the instrumental factors indicated in the model, including movement agenda setting and cross-sectional learnings from movements that preceded the 2015 Oromo protest. Furthermore, the proposed conceptual framework supports the analysis of the influence of social movements in protecting and regulating freedom of expression online as a fundamental human right by linking the structural and instrumental factors to the 2015 Oromo protest and its perceived demands.

2.5. Freedom of Expression Online in Lights of International Human Rights Law

Freedom of expression is protected by international and regional human rights instruments. Article 19 of the Universal Declaration on Human Rights (UDHR), Article 19 of the International Convention on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), Article 9 of the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights (ACHPR), Article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights, Article 13 of the American Convention on Human Rights and Article 11 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union guarantee the right to freedom of expression.

Article 19 of the UDHR states that everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression without interference, including the right to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media, regardless of frontiers. The UDHR further stipulates that the freedom and rights granted under Article 19 shall be subject only to such limitations as are determined by law exclusively for the purpose of securing due recognition and respect for the rights and freedoms of others and of meeting the just requirements of morality, public order and the general welfare in a democratic society. Although the UDHR is not legally binding on states, many of its provisions, including Article 19, are widely accepted as customary international laws.

The ICCPR aimed to transform the UDHR on freedom of expression into a legally binding obligation through Article 19(1) (2) and (3),

1. Everyone shall have the right to hold opinions without interference.
2. Everyone shall have the right to freedom of expression; this right shall include freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media of choice.

Article 19 (2) of the ICCPR can be applied to the Internet, as both the ICCPR and the UDHR were drafted with the prudence to accommodate future technological advancements that help individuals enjoy their freedom of expression.¹⁴

advancements that help individuals enjoy their freedom of expression.¹⁴ In his report, Frank La Rue explained that states have a positive obligation to promote and protect the means necessary to enjoy the freedom of expression and that such means includes the Internet¹⁵. Thus, we can say that the use of the Internet as means of exercising one's freedom of expression is already acknowledged under international law. The other argument is that Article 19(2) also stipulates the forms of communication that are protected beyond verbal communication. It states that "all media acoustic, visual, electronic and other communication," including "radio and television, electronic media, film, photography, music, graphic and other arts...". Therefore, we can say that the media is defined in the ICCPR both as a form and as a channel of expression that leaves room for the nature of the Internet to be protected under Article 19 (2) of the ICCPR and other similar Clauses in international human rights system.

More so, social network platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and other applications that facilitate networking would also fall within the scope of "media" under Article 19(2). Article 19(2) is applicable not only to professionals such as journalists but also to every individual. The text in this article states that the right stipulated in is to "Everyone". Thus, every individual using the Internet as a means to send and receive information is also protected. The ICCPR recognizes that freedom of expression and information is not simply freedom of the press; rather, it deals with freedom of education, transfer of knowledge and science, freedom of artistic expression and the right to obtain information from all sources. Therefore, we can say that Article 19 (2) provides protection to "all kinds of" information regardless of its perceived value and impact. The ICCPR, which Ethiopia ratified on 11 June 1993, imposes formal legal obligations on State Parties to respect its provisions and permits no restrictions whatsoever on the "right to hold opinions without interference". It does, however, allow restrictions on freedom of expression and of information. But such restrictions are permissible on certain conditions and for limited purposes¹⁶. The conditions that lay down the restriction on freedom of expression under the ICCPR are: for respect of the rights or reputation of others, and for the protection of national security or of public order, or of public health or morals. More specifically, Article 19(3) requires that restrictions on the freedom granted must be in keeping with the principles of legality and necessity and as prescribed by law.

The International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, to which Ethiopia is a State Party, in its Article 4 stipulates that State Parties should take positive measures to eradicate all propaganda based on ideas or theories of superiority of one race or group of persons of one color or ethnic origin that attempts to promote racial hatred. Media by its nature is often used to incite racial hatred; the Internet, in particular, is making it easy for authors of hate speech to reach millions easily and unidentified. The role of hate media in the Rwanda genocide is an example of how media can be used to disseminate propaganda of hatred for the purpose of genocide (Thompson 2007). Considering the fast expansion of digital media in the global south, one can estimate how

¹⁴ Frank La Rue, Special Rapporteur on the Promotion and Protection of the Right to Freedom of Opinion and Expression, August 2011 La Rue Report, *supra* note 8.

¹⁵ *Ibid*

¹⁶ International Convention on Civil and Political Rights. Article 19, sub article3 (a and b).

devastating the Internet could be in spreading violence and hate among societies unless it is regulated by law. It is for this reason that governments should have the authority to enact legislation that restricts freedom of expression and of the media- the means- for the protection of national security or public order.

The African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights (ACHPR), which came into force in 1986, is one of the instruments applying to Ethiopia which guarantee the right of freedom of expression, as the country ratified this document on 15 June 1998. According to Olaniyan (2008), freedom of expression is closely related to freedom of conscience guaranteed under Article 8 of the ACHPR. Articles 8 and 9 of the ACHPR are often used together to protect citizens from suffering consequences for exercising their rights to freedom of expression (Olaniyan 2008). However, Article 9 of the Charter, which guarantees freedom of expression, "lacks the specificity" found in other international and regional human rights instruments (Olaniyan 2008, 220). Therefore, the African Charter has not operated as a useful source of standards and criteria to influence national approaches to legislation and policies regarding human rights in general and media freedom in particular. On the other hand, the Declaration of Principles on Freedom of Expression in Africa states that media should be protected against the interference of a political or economic nature and that editorial independence should be granted (Principle 6).¹⁷ It also emphasizes that a State monopoly over media is not compatible with the right to freedom of expression (Principle 5). These provisions can be used in the context of propaganda, as the basic aim of the Declaration is to promote and protect freedom of the press that can assist people to make informed decisions. Principle 13 of the Declaration stipulates that "States shall review all criminal restrictions on content to ensure that they serve a legitimate interest in a democratic society."¹⁸ This Clause indirectly allows restriction on content; it permits censorship that amounts to violating individual rights to express themselves freely. Hence, it can be said that the Declaration authorizes States to restrict content. Also, the Declaration stipulates that "Freedom of expression should not be restricted on public order or national security grounds unless there is a real risk of harm to a legitimate interest and there is a close causal link between the risk of harm and the expression". This Clause is very open for misinterpretation as to how a real risk of harm to a legitimate interest can be understood. We could therefore say that this Article can be a shield for governments who deliberately mute and distort alternative opinions both online and offline on the grounds of minimizing risk to public order and national security.

The United Nations General Comment Number 34 has also explained about online media and requested State Parties to take necessary measures to ensure the independence of the new media and citizens' access to the Internet.¹⁹ However, the features and characteristics of the Internet demand more actors than the government to protect the right to freedom of

¹⁷ The Declaration of Principles on Freedom of Expression in Africa, Principle 6 stipulates that State and government owned broadcasters should be transformed into public service broadcasters, accountable to the public. This implies that the government should not interfere in information acquisition, retrieval and dissemination process, so that the media will not be used to propagate governments agenda.

¹⁸ The Declaration of Principles on Freedom of Expression in Africa, Principle 13 (1).

¹⁹ General Comment No. 34, Article 19: Freedoms of opinion and expression, supra note 1.

expression online. States are mainly responsible for the protection as well as promotion of the right to freedom of expression. Looking into the way legal restrictions are imposed on traditional media and offline expression, one could understand that limitations on freedom of expression stipulated in international human rights instruments may not be effective in cyberspace. The basic features and characteristics of the Internet is universality, net-neutrality, nondiscrimination and pluralism (Land 2013). However, it seems to challenge States' power to regulate online communication by using legal instruments as the Internet is a dominantly privatized medium of communication. These four core principles of online space help us to better understand the relationship between the right to freedom of expression and online space. The characteristics of the Internet pressures States to redefine their role in protecting and promoting the right to freedom of expression online, considering that the Internet has brought about a second actor that can play a significant role in regulating freedom of expression online - the private enterprises. Nevertheless, international human rights instruments do not contain specific provisions about the obligations of private actors in protecting and promoting human rights in general, freedom of expression in particular.

Eventually, Ethiopia passed a new media law, which is inspired by media legislations of South Africa, Ghana and Kenya.²⁰ The new media law is crafted by observing the international human rights standards, the federal Constitution of Ethiopia, and the democratic principles of media regulation. Most importantly, there is a need to scrutinize if the new law considers the technological developments in the media sector to strike a balance between freedom of expression and legitimate restriction on the media. This study presents an analysis of the law-making process to describe how the 2015 Oromo protest in any way influence the ongoing legal reform process following the 2018 government change that aims to amend and enact proclamations concerning freedom of expression and the media.

2.5.1. The Legal Framework for Freedom of Expression and the Internet in Ethiopia

The Ethiopian Constitution, Article 29 is an identical copy of the ICCPR's Article 19. Therefore, all the elements and values we have discussed, freedom of expression, the Internet and its global trend, can be considered applicable in the Ethiopian context as well. The right of thought, opinion and expression are one of the democratic freedoms guaranteed in the 1995 Ethiopian Constitution.²¹ Article 29 of the Constitution provides citizens with the right to hold opinions, thoughts, and free expressions without interference. It also accommodates freedom of the press and mass media by ensuring the opportunity for access to information of interest to the public and prohibiting censorship. Under the Ethiopian Constitution, "legal limitations can be laid down in order to protect the well-being of the youth and the honor and reputation of individuals".²² Furthermore, it is stated in Article 29 (6) that any propaganda for war as well as the public expression of opinion intended to injure human dignity shall be prohibited by law. We can say that

²⁰ [New liberal media law in Ethiopia | International Media Support Accessed on September 22, 2021.](#)

²¹ Chapter Three, Part Two of the Constitution talks of Democratic rights in which the Right of Thought, Opinion and Expression is stipulated under Article 29, sub-articles 1- 7.

²² The Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia Constitution, 1994. Article 29 (6).

propaganda of war and incitement in the name of freedom of expression can be considered as an attack on human rights and humanity itself under the Ethiopian legal framework.²³ Attacking, censoring and jamming dissenting opinions is also an act of infringing fundamental human rights from the government's side. The Ethiopian government, until recently, has a history of blocking Internet connectivity and shutting down social media platforms in order to restrict opposing views that was considered as an act of propaganda for violence, citing the International Telecommunication Convention to which Ethiopia is a signatory."²⁴

Article 29 does not explicitly protect the Internet. However, the phrase "any media of his choice", which is incorporated under Article 29 (2) can be taken as having broad application to include protection of the Internet and other social networking technologies. The media in this regard can be understood as any technology that will help individuals to connect with information and also to express their own opinion to others. Therefore, the media clause in Article 29 (2) of the Ethiopian constitution can be taken as a basic foundation for the right to the Internet. This freedom to communicate on the Internet can also be explained as a protected right to seek, receive, and impart information "regardless of frontiers".²⁵ The term 'regardless of frontiers' implies that accessing and sending information is a right that embraces the use of technological developments such as the Internet, which goes beyond boundaries (Land 2013). The Internet is one of the most effective methods of connecting with others with the aim of seeking out information and ideas, and that the Ethiopian law implicitly protects it as "any media of choice" under Article 29(2).

According to the Ethiopian Constitution, anyone has the right to hold an opinion and has freedom of expression without interference. In essence, Article 29(2) protects freedom of expression, including the contents thereof (ideas of all kinds) and those to whom it is addressed (regardless of frontiers). "Idea of all kinds" includes political information, idea and opinion. Thus, anyone under this law has a right to hold an opinion and to express that opinion freely as he desired so long as he is not flouting with the limitation clause under Article 29(6). Despite the fact that legal limitation on freedom of expression is permissible, arbitrary jamming or minimizing access to technology hugely affect freedom of expression.

The anti-hate speech and disinformation proclamation was enacted in February 2020, but the application and effectiveness of the new bill in curbing online hate speech and the spread of fake news has been questioned by rights advocates.²⁶ The House of People's Representatives of Ethiopia approved a more liberal mass media law on February 02, 2021, which partly regulates online media. The Ministry of Justice is working to come up

²³ Ibid

²⁴ International Telecommunication Convention, 12 November 1965. International Telecommunication Convention Article 48, Number 303-305. The Delegation of Ethiopia only put a reservation with regard to "the right of its government to take any action it deems necessary to safeguard its interests should Members or Associate Members in any way fail to comply with the International Telecommunication Convention (Montreux, 1965) or should reservations by other countries jeopardize its telecommunication services.

²⁵ The Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia Constitution, 1994, Article 29 (2).

²⁶ [Ethiopia: Freedom on the Net 2020 Country Report | Freedom House Accessed on May 20,2021.](#)

with a comprehensive Internet Proclamation by amending the previous Computer Crimes Act. The debate in today's Ethiopia is, therefore, whether there should be a law protecting the means of expression- the Internet- from unlawful restriction, jamming and blocking. At the same time, as it is argued in chapter six of this dissertation, the discussion should focus on examining if there is a need to set out a lawful limitation on access to the Internet with the aim of prohibiting hate speech and ethnic slur online. The central point to depart is therefore accepting that there is a right to technology if one can read Article 19 of the ICCPR carefully. Being Article 29 of the Ethiopian Constitution a copycat of this document, it can be understood that the right to the Internet is also stipulated under the Ethiopian legal system.

2.6. Review of Relevant Literatures

2.6.1. Popular Protests and the Media in Ethiopia: Overview of Selected Movements

Ethiopia has experienced numerous social movements that resulted in public unrest during the past 50 years. This research selected three public unrests that have occurred during the past 50 years and that shared the collective movement characteristics – their impact, motivations and diversity of participants and the degree of organization and strategies- in order to understand the role of media on social movements and on the national political process for the last half a century. The 1970s' students' revolution, the protest against the 2005 "rigged" election and the 2015 Oromo protest can be considered major popular unrests even though their motivations differed. These contentions share the collective movement characteristics – their impact, motivations, diversity of participants, and the degree of organization and leadership that can help examine the role of social movements to ensure the rule of law, human rights and democratic elections in Ethiopia's context. Moreover, these three major protests appeared to be well-coordinated in mobilizing the mass and disseminating political information through the use of available media as a strategy to promote their political ideology and call for mass support.

The Ethiopian students' revolution flared up in 1974 (Abbink 2015). University students initially organized the Ethiopian Students' Movement against the ruling monarchy and the land-owning class (which was the basis of power, inequalities, and economic stagnation) as an approach to the demand for structural political change and equality. University students came out on the streets with the slogan "Land to the tiller" in 1974 to declare their commitment to radical social change (ibid). Students' rallies attracted urban workers and farmers who echoed their grievances against the monarchy despite the existence of the Censorship Board, established after liberation in 1941, to censor all the information delivered to the public to fit into the monarchy's interest (Wondwosen 2009). Traditional media, mainly print media, advocated for students' revolution and called for mass support. Periodical publications of student fronts, particularly "Democracia", the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party's bulletin was popular among the youth. The national press, in general, covered the revolution with vigorous condemnations against the monarchy leading to the Imperial stripped off its power on September 12, 1974.

One can understand that the fierce political struggle of the 1970s and 80s has changed the Ethiopian political tradition and practice through the use of available media.

Unfortunately, the students' revolution did not have a solid representative body to negotiate its demands and save it from an internal division that ended in insults and labelling one another (Andargachew 2014). Fierce name callings such as “petty-bourgeois”, “traitor”, and “national nihilist” were in pamphlets, bulletins and demonstrations. The weak leadership structure of the movement helped the military junta, the Derg, to sneak into power, which later resulted in tension and urban warfare. Young people labelled as “the enemies of the revolution” were killed in mass and forced into exile (Gebru 2008). In general, during the Derg era, the media was used to promote the communist ideology as the government's hegemonic agenda over the public, while at the same time ignoring issues of interest to the general public such as development, democracy and peace (Wondwosen 2009).

In 1991 the Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) came to power and promised the long-awaited development and democracy to prevail in the country. The Council of the Transitional Government of Ethiopia²⁷ was formed and took courageous measures that guaranteed freedom of speech, assembly and association. The first comprehensive press law in the history of Ethiopia was adopted in 1992, prohibiting censorship of the press and any form of unlawful restriction.²⁸ As a result, many privately-owned newspapers and magazines started publishing issues ranging from fashion to politics and human rights. The adoption of the Constitution in 1994 has also contributed to the country's recognition and practice of free expression.²⁹ Ever since the emergence of the EPRDF in power, Ethiopia held a series of elections, but the 2005 national election was exceptional (Terrence 2010), and all its features made it one of the major political happenings that galvanized public protest against the government. The 2005 election was the first and only democratic election Ethiopia has experienced (Abbink 2015). The election campaign involved the use of mass media in hosting radio and television debates between the opposition parties and the ruling party. The Ethiopian diaspora community managed to host various websites to entertain different contending political views that significantly influenced the 2005 election process. Ethiopians were also active in debating and discussing their political views both on traditional media as well as the use of newly available technology – mobile calls and SMS texting (Gagliardone and Pohjonen 2016). But, the overall political information flow through the use of media was not as legitimate as it should be. According to media reports, a week before the elections, both the government and opposition leaders accused each other of violating campaign rules and exercising hate speech.³⁰ The ruling party compared the opposition to Rwanda's Interhamwe militia that has instigated the Rwandan genocide in 1994 using state and party-owned media organizations. In contrast, the opposition called members of the ruling party ‘bunch of bush people who should deserve to go back to

²⁷ The Council served for 4 years and its main duty was to lay a foundation for the establishment of democratic government. Accordingly, it had approved the FDRE constitution on December 9, 1994, and then handed over its power to the newly elected government, on August 21, 1995.

²⁸ Proclamation No. 34/1992, Proclamation to provide for the Freedom of the Press, Article 3.

²⁹ Article 29 of the Constitution grants Freedom of expression without interference, including to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of border in any form and any media or one's choice.

³⁰ VOA report “2005 Ethiopian Election: A Look Back” aired on May 16, 2010, 8:00 pm

their bush home'.³¹ Such statement from opposition party leaders and supporters was reflected dominantly in privately-owned newspapers and magazines.

The voting process on May 15, 2005, was peaceful until Prime Minister Meles Zenawi came out on the evening to declare that his party had won a majority vote in four regions, which was enough to form a government despite the opposition's win all seats in Addis Ababa which made the opposition unhappy.³² The dispute over the announced results of the election led to mass demonstrations and post-election violence. According to the European Union Election Observation Mission to Ethiopia, the government took the opportunity to control the media and propagate against opposition party leaders and supporters. State-owned media only covered the ruling party's position without balancing dissenting voices.³³ The government labelled privately-owned press as a mouthpiece of the opposition party and started to initiate court cases against media organizations and journalists (Wondwosen 2009). Hence, both the opposition parties and the mass public used mobile calls and SMS texting to stand against the ruling party's announcement to form a federal government. The first measure from the government side was spreading misinformation about planned mass demonstrations and opposition plans via text messages (Bach 2011). And then, the government abruptly decided to shut down the text messaging system, which was being used to call for mass support and to expose the ruling party's propaganda tactics against the public protest.

The 2015 elections encouraged the Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) to use social media platforms to communicate its ideologies (Biniam. 2016). The government's online engagement was also accompanied by the deployment of online cadres who echoed the same development and double-digit growth claim (ibid). Then, the EPRDF claimed to have won 100 percent of parliamentary seats during the 2015 general elections (Arriola and Lyons 2016). As a result, the government actively "re-shaped Ethiopia's information space" by expanding telecommunication infrastructure and showing its control of the digital media system as part of its plan to build a revolutionary-democratic and developmental state (Gagliardone et al. 2019, 197). Information about achievements of government policies and projects such as the Grand Renaissance Dam and the rhetoric of double-digit economic growth dominated the net (Gagliardone et al. 2019). 2015 was a year that the EPRDF witnessed notable growth in political membership intending to enhance the already existing a person-to-person surveillance network (ibid). Against all the efforts made by the government to win the hearts and minds of its constituencies, online and offline disobedience of the public intensified (Awol 2017). Government authorities extensively used the legacy media to nullify demands from the widespread public protest and human rights violations claims from human rights defenders, activists and bloggers.³⁴ In contrast, the Internet, specifically

³¹ Bedru Kemal, an opposition leader speaking to supports rally in Addis May 7, 2005

³² EU Election Observation Mission Ethiopia 2005 6 Final Report on the Legislative Elections

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Amnesty International and Open Observatory of Network Interference (OONI), Ethiopia Offline: Evidence of Media Blocking and 'Internet Censorship in Ethiopia, AI Index AFR 25/5312/2016, at 13 (2016).

social media, was used by the public as an alternative platform to express political opinions and to call for mass support.

On October 8, 2016, the government openly declared a state of emergency, acknowledging that the situation is endangering the lives and properties of citizens in the country (Awol 2017; Skjerdal and Sintayehu 2020). Various websites owned by political opposition groups, human rights advocates, selected news outlets, and online forums were blocked as the 2015 Oromo protest intensified (Meseret 2020; Wilson et al. 2021). The Internet and mobile data package service were often blocked as the government banned social media from sharing information about the protest. However, new applications that allow users to surpass weak and supervised networks without being identified online were used to spread information about the Oromo protest (Meseret 2020, Tewodros 2020). This left the government unable to regulate content on the web and employ censorship on online publishers and individual bloggers (ibid). The last resort the government chose was the complete shutdown of the mobile Internet service in its territories, and deploying a Deep Packet Inspection (DPI) technology can negatively be used for mass surveillance and Internet censorship (Abiye 2011; Biniam 2016).

2.6.2. State Ideology, the Internet and Free Expression Online in Ethiopia

This section discusses how freedom of expression is perceived and exercised in a Revolutionary Democratic Developmental State ideology that Ethiopia was agreeably pursuing during the 2015 Oromo Protest. Even though the new Ethiopian government did not announce its political ideology to date, its political and economic reforms appeared to indicate the move towards classical political liberalism. There are arguments that the new administration seems to shift from the developmental State to developmental democracy (Melisew and Cochrane 2018). The two-volume book published by Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed titled “Medemer”³⁵ (an Amharic word for Synergy) is said to be an ideological explanation of the Premier’s political, economic and social development strategies to the country. However, there have been no explicit measures to mainstream a logical form of political ideology to the government’s political system. Whether the Ethiopian government develops a new political ideology or sticks with its inclination to classical political liberalism, the experiences from the developmental state philosophy could help us analyze the organization, sustenance and mobilization tactics of the 2015 Oromo protest.

The Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) advanced the Revolutionary Democracy ideology that shares the features of the socialist revolution originated from the Marxist-Leninist philosophy during the 17 years of civil war (Aalen 2019; Turton 2006). The EPRDF came up with two different policies under its revolutionary democratic ideology after it took power in 1991 - the ethnic federalism and the introduction of the developmental State that is oriented by the revolutionary democratic notion but locally customized to produce a program of action (Aalen 2019).

³⁵ The book's second volume is titled "Ye'Medemer Menged" which can be translated to "The Road to Synergy"

Ethnic federalism was announced in Ethiopia as a major revolutionary-democratic policy to respond to the long-standing question of nationalities for self-determination during the first couple of years of EPRDF's period aiming to establish a strong political base (Turton 2006; Bach 2011). However, the ethnic federalism structure only served the interests of the party-state to control national power rather than serve citizens' demand for self-rule and autonomy (Gagliardone 2014; Bizuayehu and Fesseha 2017).

It is not in the objectives of this study to broadly explain the influence of the ethnic federal structure on the protection and regulation of freedom of expression online or vice versa. However, it is important to understand the state ideology and its implementation in order to discuss the power relationship between citizens and the dominant party state. According to Dunleavy (2010), conceptualizing the dominant party state requires careful consideration of the political context. He argued that political parties might not necessarily become dominant by holding power for a long time. However, staying in the political domain for long has its advantage of outperforming rivals and sustaining a political base, specifically during elections (Mair 1998). On the other hand, Greene 2008 argued that dominance must be measured by diverse sets of criteria, including the level of support the party enjoys. This approach appeared to be accepted by Dunleavy (2010), who asserted that dominant party systems could be recognized by their voters as effective, as a choice of the majority and a unique ideology that no other competing party offers. The threshold for dominance can also be acquired by any means, not necessarily through a majority and the inclusion of opposition features to operate in favour of a dominant party (Aalen 2019; Southall 2014; Greene 2008). For Cox (1997), though, dominant party states have the capacity to successively control political power on their own or as a dominant partner of a political coalition. This study alludes that Cox's (1997) definition better explains the characteristics of the EPRDF as a dominant party. Aalen (2019) described the EPRDF government as procedurally a democratic coalition of different organizations along ethnic lines but fully controlled by the Tigray People's Liberation Front TPLF. This study supports Aalen's claim about procedural democracy that the EPRDF followed for a long, highlighting the fact that the party also introduced a pseudo-democratic culture into the Ethiopian political system to deter the emergence of political dissent through repressive civil and political rights. This study considers the diverse approaches in defining the dominant party system and the political context to highlight socio- ethnic-base, prolonged political power and full control over national resources to conceptualize the dominant party state. Hence, the study defines a *dominant party state* as a party system that promises multi-party democracy and holds regular elections, while a hegemonic party and its affiliates fully control political power and economic resources.

This study agrees with Aalen (2019) that both ethnic-based federalism and the implementation of the developmental State can be understood as political mechanisms to consolidate power in the hands of the dominant party state. However, this dissertation challenges Aalen's assertion that the EPRDF has changed its policy from ethnic federalism to a developmental state model to create an inclusive national economy. The developmental state ideology was implemented while the country was universally known for practicing ethnic federalism to date. The ultimate aim of the developmental state

ideology was to bestow the government with domination over the country's economic and development activities. Given that the right to self-administration was among the major demands of the 2015 Oromo protests, this thesis discusses the issue from the perspective that if the implementation of ethnic federalism opened the door for the ruling party to dominate the political and economic rights of people, which led to a popular protest in various parts of the country.

The Developmental State ideology was adopted in the late 2000s (Aalen 2019; Bizuayehu and Fesseha 2017). A developmental state refers to a State whose government plays an active role in the country's development affairs (Bizuayehu and Fesseha 2017). The developmentalist ideology avows that those late developers cannot develop through the free market unless the government participates in regulating the market and creating industries (ibid). More so, the developmental state ideology is about strengthening "the bureaucracy and reinforcing the power of the developmental elites together with its autonomy" (Leftwich 1995). However, the autonomous bureaucracy is expected to be linked with the private sector to prevent collective action and increase the competence of the developmental project (ibid). Leftwich (1995) argues that the developmental state ideology flourishes over the weakening civil society and the media. The establishment of the first-ever journalists' training center, Mass Media Training Institute, and the School of Journalism at Addis Ababa University can be taken as a positive contribution of the revolutionary party to the advancement of the media sectors in the country (Skjerdal 2013).

Nonetheless, the Ethiopian developmental State discards the role of the media to facilitate a democratic process and labels them as the western patronizing instrument (Endalcachew 2018). The developmental State intensified its repression of the independent and viable media by limiting access to official information and freedom of expression in the name of introducing developmental journalism. The developmental journalism approach does not allow journalists to be critical of the government and its officials as its role is to "create a better country" and to "mobilize for development" (Skjerdal 2013, 212). The mainstream media was reoriented to adjust itself to the government's needs and objectives, functioning as a mouthpiece of the State rather than serving the public's information need at large (Abiye 2011). Thus, the Ethiopian developmental state ideology generally focuses on creating the ability to reach a popular agreement on the rules of the political game and the supremacy of the developmental discourse by conveying a unified message to bond the diversified public around similar thoughts and principles (Gagliardone 2014; Bach 2011). It may not be easy to justify the government's commitment to invest in communication technologies observing its various tactics to decimate the media. Looking into how the developmental State was enthusiastic about promoting the economic growth and industrialization of the country, it is clear that the Information Communications Technologies (ICTs) were essential to bring about industrial development, structural transformation and job creation (ibid).

A case study report from the ITU indicates that the Internet was introduced in Ethiopia in 1993 by the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA) through its PADISNet,³⁶

PADISNet,³⁶ which was connected to an Internet gateway in London, United Kingdom. The UNECA was the only facility providing service for about 1200 users from non-governmental organizations, individuals and private companies at its peak (ibid). In 1994, the Medical Faculty at Addis Ababa University obtained a node from HealthNet, a USA-based NGO that provided email access to medical researchers through the HealthSat/VITA Low Earth Orbit (LEO) satellite (ITU 2002).

The first initiative to introduce the Internet to the Ethiopian government to help fasten its economic development ambition was undertaken by the former speaker of the House of People's Representatives, Dawit Yohannes, who was convinced by the proposal of the Bringing Internet to Ethiopia (BITE) movement organized by representatives of non-governmental organizations and professional associations in 1995 (Gagliardone and Golooba-Mutebi 2016; ITU 2002). However, the government turned down the proposal of the BITE initiative to introduce the Internet and regulatory standards practiced at the international level. In 1996, in collaboration with the Ethiopian Science and Technology Commission, the BITE movement came up with a national Internet proposal paving the way for Ethiopia to become connected to the Internet in January 1997. The Ethiopian Telecommunication Corporation (ETC) launched the service named "EthioNet" for its customers in February 1998 and had over 600 users at first (Solomon 2014, ITU 2002). According to ITU, by March 2001, there were about 3,500 Internet users in Ethiopia.

The Internet was recognized to have played a significant role in the developmental State of Ethiopia following the historic split of the Tigray Peoples' Liberation Front in 2001 (Gagliardone and Golooba-Mutebi 2016). The late Prime Minister Meles Zenawi, who came out to be victorious from the ideological split of his party, announced economic measures that were said to have helped the country revive from the burdens of the Ethio-Eritrean war and the long-standing poverty (Solomon 2014). Some projects introduced were Information, Communication and Technology (ICT) based to improve government service delivery system (Etzo and Collender 2010). The government solely ran the "Woredanet" and "Schoolnet" projects. Any partnership with the private sector and other non-state actors, which could have helped ensure the sustainability of the projects, was rejected (Smith 2007; Etzo and Collender 2010). These projects employed the Internet protocol closed for selected individuals to obtain information and express their opinion, as the very purpose of the government in this regard was to enable authorities and cadres to exchange political and administrative information (ibid).

Through its fund and technical involvement, China's assistance in strengthening the ICT infrastructure helped Ethiopia achieve its ICT goals that no other African country reached (Gagliardone and Golooba-Mutebi 2016). China assisted the Ethiopian model of advancing the Internet, which primarily focused on promoting development and shaping Ethiopia's information society (Abiye 2011). However, recent data shows that Internet penetration in Ethiopia is one of the weak in the world; only 19 percent of the population used the Internet in January 2020.³⁷ Mobile phone penetration is also low; only 41 percent of the total population has access to a mobile connection.³⁸ Ethiopia remains to

³⁷ Simon Kemp, 17 February 2020. [Digital 2020: Ethiopia — DataReportal – Global Digital Insights](#). Accessed on December 10, 2020.

introducing digital media to politically enlighten the mass in the homeland (Gagliardone and Pohjonen 2016).

In today's Ethiopia, the Internet facilitates transnational politics and the involvement of the diaspora serving as an alternative communication platform (Dereje 2012). Different religious groups in Ethiopia have also used the Internet to reclaim their positions in the public sphere by crafting and communicating compelling online political content (Dereje 2012). Similarly, Meron argued about the emergence of "cyber spirituality" in Ethiopia through extensive use of the Internet to strengthening religious activism (Meron 2015, 135). The Internet in general and social media, in particular, served as an alternative communication platform for the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahido believers to the extent of creating a "transnational religious community" regardless of geographic locations (Meron 2015, 151). Her study indicated that the online debate about religious freedom and other related matters are augmentations of issues debated offline (ibid). However, Meron (2015) did not confer how online believers and activists stay connected with their offline equivalents, specifically during religious activism. Similar to Meron (2015), Hafkin utters that the Internet helped to facilitate the creation of "transnational Ethiopian identity" by encouraging the diaspora community to embrace its culture and promote diversity instead of assimilating values in the country of destination (Hafkin 2006, 223).

For Hafkin, the Internet is a "diasporic medium", which provides a broader opportunity for the Ethiopian diaspora and the homeland to stay in continuous contact (Hafkin 2006, 221). The Ethiopian diaspora community is not only involved in social and religious matters in Ethiopia since the Internet created an online political space where they can easily interact with citizens within the country to advocate for the promotion and protection of human rights and to create shared interests in national politics (Biniam 2016). Domestically, the Internet encouraged participatory democratic debates among citizens on political matters without menacing the authoritarian government (Abiye 2011). However, this claim seems to be challenged by other studies that scrutinized the influence of the Internet as a site of political resistance in which citizens protested against the dictatorial ruling party and ensured their voice was heard (Dereje 2012). Citizens' engagement of online expression was significantly observed during the rise of "*Dimtsachin Yisema*" - Muslims movement, the #BoycottBedele online campaign, the 2011 Zone Niners' fever across the nation and beyond, and then the development of popular demand for self-government and equal share of resources and power in some regional states that contributed to the progression of the 20015 Oromo protests (Abdurahman 2020; Abbink 2014). It is necessary to reflect on the *Dimtsachin Yisema* movement and the #BoycottBedele online campaign as these directly influence the organization of the 2015 Oromo protest (Gagliardone et al. 2019).

The "*Dimtsachin Yisema*" literally means "Let Us Be Heard" Muslim's protest erupted on January 4, 2012, rejecting the government's interference in religious matters (Abbink 2014). In many parts of the country, the Muslim community demonstrated for more than three years citing that Article 11 of the Constitution, which stipulates "the State shall not interfere in religious matters and religion shall not interfere in state affairs" (ibid). The Muslim protesters were using "protest speeches, Muslim press and the Internet" to spread

their doctrinal attack against the Al-Ahabash teaching and the interference of the government in religious affairs (Abbink 2014, 354). The Muslim protest, in general, was peaceful, and the Internet was used to spread messages about upcoming demonstrations, information concerning arrested leaders and issues related to the Majlis through social media platforms and websites (ibid). Offline gatherings in Mosques and specifically in the compound of the Aweliya School in Addis Ababa served as places to voice the demands of Muslim protesters.

What are similar about the *Dimtsachin Yisema* movement and the Oromo protest is that they used available media and the Internet to advocate for their respective causes (Abdurahman 2020). The Muslim protest used what they call “silent protest”, where they crossed their hands during the Friday-after-prayers protest (Abdurahman 2020, 69). This symbol entails nonviolent, unarmed, and oppressed Muslim protesters under the authoritarian regime. The Oromo protesters later adopted the crossed hands over the head as a symbol of resistance. The symbol became more attached to the movement after the 2014 Olympic Marathon Silver Medalist Lelissa Feyssa passed the finish line at the Rio Olympics, crossing his hands in support of the Oromo protest (Seifu 2019). Abdurahman contends that the Muslim protest laid the foundation for the success of the Oromo protest to adopt similar movement organization and communication strategies (Abdurahman 2020, 58-67). He further argued that the Oromo protest is a continuation of Muslim’s protest that embraces a more comprehensive popular demand for civil and political rights (ibid). Abdurahman (2020) elucidates that the two movements share social and cultural context as “Muslims count a significant share of the Oromo population” and that many of the *Dimtsachin Yisema* movement leaders have “both ethnic and religious reasons to protest against the regime” (Abdurahman 2020, 68). This thesis agrees with Abdurahman’s (2020) assertion that the Muslim’s and the 2015 Oromo protests were not the same as both have different movement goals. As Abdurahman (2020) highlights in his study, understanding the relationship between Muslims’ protest and the 2015 Oromo protest requires further examination, which this thesis attempts to do in the following chapters. This study additionally examines if the communication tactics used during the Muslim protest were directly adopted and or upgraded by the 2015 Oromo protest actors. Identifying key actors in the 2015 Oromo protest, their leadership structure and discursive practices are among the objectives of this dissertation further to examine the cross-learning factors between the two movements.

2.7. Brief Background Note on the 2015 Oromo Protest

The Oromo protest is commonly termed the *Qeerroo* movement. The exact time of the start of the Oromo protest is still debatable (Ostebo 2020; Aga 2020; Wilson et al. 2021). Looking into the causes of protests, its continuity through the years, and how it was related with other movements, one can argue that the Oromo protest that has resulted in government change in February 2018 started in 1992 when the Oromo Liberation Front left the Transitional Government (Asafa 2020; Khisa 2019). The justification for being confident that the Oromo protest started in 1992 is the grudge of the Oromo people for the early departure of Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) from the Transitional Government and the grievance emanated from consecutive political happenings against the will and interest of the Oromo people. Some relate the beginning of the Oromo protest with the

relocation of the capital city of Oromia regional state from Addis Ababa to Adama that caused protests in 2000 (Khisra 2019). Others say the Oromo protest started in 2002 when high school and university students organized protests in fourteen districts of the Oromia region demanding the release of detained leaders of the Maaccaa-Tuulama Association who opposed the decision of the Oromia National Council to leave Addis Ababa (Arriola 2013).

Nevertheless, various articles and news reports marked the November 12, 2015, demonstration in Ginchi, a small town 80 kilometers away from Addis Ababa, as a marking date when the Oromo Protest intensified (Meseret 2020; Mebratu 2021; Wilson et al. 2021). The initial reason for the 2015 Oromo protest in Addis Ababa's newly proposed urban master plan was to expand its territory to surrounding Oromia Special Zone towns. The protest gradually embraced the demand for democracy and fair distribution of wealth and federal political power (ibid).

The happenings of the Oromo protest are scrutinized from various angles. Different researches on the constitutional order, social movement, democracy, self-determination and political communication have used the Oromo protest as a case point. However, the Oromo protest is not scrutinized as a social movement that brought about new practices and new actors to the political information flow through its use of the Internet as an alternative communication platform and site of political resistance. Awol (2017) discussed measures the government took to restrict access to the mainstream media and the Internet by declaring a state of emergency. He debated on theoretical and jurisprudential questions surrounding the two-state of emergency declarations during the 2015 Oromo protest. Awol's (2017) research did not aim to examine why the media in general and the Internet, in particular, was attracting the attention of the government and the way the public managed to trespass the weak network, and how jammed mainstream media came into transmission against the effort of the authorities to set them off. However, he argued about the nature and ownership structure of the telecom service in Ethiopia that has been serving the government to repress online dissent voices and enable surveillance of the opposition (Marchant and Stremlau 2020; Freyburg and Garbe 2018; Awol 2017). Nevertheless, one can ask if the Internet was dear to the government just for surveillance on the opposition, or as stated above, to use the digital media as part of its plan to build a developmental state.

Among recent literature on the 2015 Oromo protest is Arora's (2020) study on the "Oromo movement and Ethiopian Border-making using Social Media. Arora narrates how the Oromo people have made themselves visible through social media platforms, specifically Facebook and Twitter, to advance their cause for self-determination (Arora 2020). Similar to Meseret (2020), Arora's (2020) work described how the Ethiopian government controlled the mainstream media through regulations, censorship, ownership structures, and how the Oromo community used the Internet as a site of political resistance and alternative communication tool. Both Meseret (2020) and Arora (2020) argued that social media links the urban community and the digital diaspora. The connection of the "urban" and the "digital", each of them having their own rules of engagement, have contributed to the Oromo social movement online (Arora 2020, 3).

However, both Meseret (2020) and Arora (2020) did not discuss how digital activism was connected with the rural on-the-road protest in a country where Internet penetration is weak and access to smartphones is limited and highly restricted.

While this research attempts to understand how the urban-rural relationship was established by examining movement actors' communication and organizational tactics, it does not consider the spatial boundaries to define the interconnected economy, information flow, and social interaction. Instead, the study tries to understand the networked movement and its capacity to elucidate the balance of structural power, the construction of shared identity, and the role of actors. It does so by analyzing Rusta (2018), Touraine (1981) and Melucci (1996b) assertions concerning social boundaries that manifested in limited access and distribution of instrumental resources and opportunities in light of the Internet and other digital communication technologies.

Arora (2020) claimed that the longstanding Oromo fight for self-rule had been suppressed by the Ethiopian government resulting in displacement and exodus. Thus, the Oromo community in different parts of the world used the Internet as a virtual territory to organize itself and pursue its fight for freedom and justice. This assertion will leave us to wonder if Arora is refuting the very fact that the actual traditional territory of Oromia was non-existent or less responsive to the 2015 offline protest agenda. Hence, this research scrutinizes the influence of the Internet in diminishing the boundaries, space and time in hybrid social movements and respond to Arora's claim.

The Internet, specifically social media, was used by the public as an alternative platform to express political dissent and call for mass support during the 2015 Oromo protest (Mebratu 2021; Meseret 2020; Tewodros 2020). Seifu (2019) researched how Oromo activists synchronized Facebook posts with mainstream international media reports to communicate their political agenda to a local and international audience. Yet, his analysis did not answer if the Internet influences the way the domestic legacy media covered the Oromo protest. Consequently, there is a need to examine how the Oromo protest further emphasized the potential of the Internet as a tool for demanding fundamental rights and if the protest prompted popular demand for access to the Internet as a fundamental right. Studies on the Oromo protest by Wilson et al. (2021) and Habtamu (2017) argued that citizens used the new media to amplify their political concerns at times of government's control over the traditional media. These studies further explained how the government of Ethiopia used the Internet to spy on its citizens and silence dissent voices. Additional research about local Internet content in Ethiopia by Meseret (2020) and Solomon (2015) shows that limited availability and weak access to the Internet, inadequate skills, and high service costs affect local Internet content creation and dissemination. Although Solomon (2015) did not specifically discuss online political content creation and dissemination, Meseret's (2020) study help understand the general practice of online political engagement in Ethiopia. However, the contribution of the Internet to the organization of social movements in contexts where a dominant party state criminalizes dissent remains unanswered. Ketemaw (2019) conducted a quantitative study to examine youth online political participation, taking samples from purposively selected universities. He concluded that young people actively search and share political information through

social media platforms, specifically via Facebook. However, they cannot be considered political activists since their online engagement was found to be restricted in fear of persecution (Ketemaw 2019).

As a fundamental human right, freedom of expression on the Internet has not been emphasized from Ethiopia's perspective among previous studies examined for this thesis. Nevertheless, local studies describe the strengths and gaps of laws and proclamations used to regulate legacy media and the Internet in Ethiopia (Mesenbet 2016; Kinfu Michael and Halefom 2015). For example, Mesenbet (2016) analyzed the regulation of freedom of expression and the media in Ethiopia regarding free expression principles and international human rights law. Research by Kinfu Michael and Halefom (2015) examines laws and regulations concerning the Internet and cybersecurity. It is also worth mentioning that studies by Yonas and Berhanu (2021) and Awol (2017) conferred about freedom of expression online and offline concerning the state of emergencies declared during the Oromo protest to show how fundamental human rights were distorted to serve as "conclusive evidences" of support for committing an act of terrorism.

Nevertheless, the 2015 Oromo protest potentially contributed to the government transformation where the new administration has taken initiatives to advance freedom of expression that led to the revision of existing media laws and the enactment of new ones. Towards the end, this thesis reflects on the legal reform process and results in protecting and regulating freedom of expression online and offline. The legal reform process includes the amendment of existing laws and the enactment of new ones. Unlike the works cited, this study positions itself on rich first-hand data collected from primary sources through interviewing movement leaders, group members, key actors, and ordinary citizens.

CHAPTER THREE

3. Research Methodology and Setting the Scene

This chapter presents the methodological approach and research methods used in the study. In the process of gathering the relevant information, the study exhausted different research methods that enabled acquiring relevant data of a predominantly qualitative nature. The key conceptual framework of this study, communication power theory, informed the research methodology used. Communication power theory can help to link and unlink the concepts of social movement, media and human rights studies and to address the research perspectives that touches upon the influence of the Internet as an alternative site of political resistance in social movements and as a communication tool to demand access to the Internet as a right and to the fulfilment of fundamental human rights. This chapter explains why the qualitative research methodology is appealing and appropriate to examine Ethiopia's experience, opportunities, and uncertainties in protecting and regulating freedom of expression online in this digital era. Furthermore, it presents the various data collection tools and introduces the research setting.

3.1. Research Design

To understand the dynamics of the network society, Castells proposes a methodological approach that scrutinizes “the specific network configuration of actors, interests, and values which engage in their power-making strategies by connecting their networks of power to the mass communication networks, the source of the construction of meaning in the public mind” (Castells 2009, 430). The study adopts qualitative research methodology for a detailed understanding of Ethiopia's experience, challenges, and prospects in protecting and regulating freedom of expression online by taking the case of the 2015 Oromo protest. Qualitative research is a flexible and creative approach that emphasizes how to grasp the way people understand and make sense of their experiences and the social realities of others (Tracy 2020; Zohrabi 2013). It provides mechanisms to design effective methods to collect and analyze both offline and online data in various research settings by extensively describing the process of a given scenario in order to comprehend the stories of people that illustrate their life experiences, which this study attempts to do (Tracy 2020; Salmons 2017; Zohrabi 2013).

Qualitative research methodology is chosen for this study because of its interpretative and realistic approach that best fits into the exploratory nature of the research problem. The qualitative study approach also helps to investigate structural, instrumental and contextual factors that could probably influence people's experiences, relationships and social developments (Salmons 2017; Tracy 2020; Given 2008). Qualitative research methodology is appropriate to interpret people's perception and practice of freedom of expression online by investigating local knowledge and understanding of the Internet as a communication platform and effective digital political space to voice dissent. Qualitative research methodology also supports a detailed understanding of the Internet as a central informational linkage between the mass public, individuals and the government. The study draws on both primary and secondary sources of data to acquire rich data to retort to the research questions. Besides, giving potency to the information gathered through

primary data sources, the data acquired from existing literature and secondary sources of data helped to provide insight into theoretical and analytical frameworks relevant to the analysis of the material at hand.

3.2. Case Study Method

This study utilized a case study as a qualitative scientific method that helps to explain the development and results of a given phenomenon by using a comprehensive observation, analysis and reconstruction of the case under scrutiny (Ritchie and Lewis 2003; Baxter and Jack 2008; Rebolj 2013). A case study is often associated with qualitative research, even though it can also be used in quantitative research (Ritchie and Lewis 2003). Generally, a case study is defined as an act of exploring a phenomenon, a group or individual to identify variables, forms, sequences, interactions, and organizations between participants of a given circumstance (Harrison, Birks, Franklin and Mills 2017; Zohrabi 2013). According to Rebolj (2013), case studies are perceived by some scholars as qualitative research types, while others argue that case studies should be considered as a qualitative research method. Harrison et al. (2017) alluded that there is a need to understand the difference between case study research type and method to identify the appropriate approach for their studies.

Case study research type is defined as an extensive description of a particular unit or research subject rather than analyzing the specific unit within its context using various data sources (Baxter and Jack 2008; Stake 1995; Rebolj 2013). Case study as qualitative research type is vague as more emphasis is on the case, not on exploring and interpreting cases within their contexts. This will undermine the credibility and application of qualitative case study research type in social sciences and create more space for the researcher to be subjective and judgmental in the study process (Zohrabi 2013; Flyvbjerg 2011; Baxter and Jack 2008). Thus, the case study method is chosen because this study topic is a contemporary phenomenon within the actual context and where the researcher could not have control over occurrences related to the study topic (Yin 2003).

A case study method helps to investigate the multiplicity of perspectives that are rooted and surrounding the 2015 Oromo protests. According to literature, a specific context helps to build up a very detailed and in-depth understanding (Stake 1995; Flyvbjerg 2011). Thus, a case study as a qualitative research method is preferable for this thesis. It helps to analyze the influence of the Internet on the evolvement of the Oromo protest into a networked social movement and understand the historical explanations and outcomes of the case under investigation. It also supports the analysis of freedom of expression online and the changing perception and practice of political communication in the context of criminalization of dissent and limited access to digital communication technologies. A qualitative case study method helps address each research question by using multiple data collection approaches from multiple sources (Creswell 2009; Yin 2003). Accordingly, this method will help develop a holistic, comprehensive and contextualized understanding of freedom of expression online, social movements, offline political communication, and on-the-road demonstrations by addressing. The 2015 Oromo protest was chosen as the case study for this thesis based on various scholarly discussions on

selecting a case study for social science research (Creswell 2007; Kohlbacher 2006; Salmons 2017; Tracy 2020; Babbie 2001; Yin 2003).

The case study supported a comprehensive analysis of the influence of the Internet in organizing a networked movement against the state and different tactics and strategies movement actors utilized to challenge the administration. It is argued that a multiple case design is the best approach to examine the role of technology in social movements (Yin 2003; Salmons 2017; Tracy 2020). Establishing the research perspectives on a single case study is more appropriate to discuss the interrelated issues of human rights, social movements and media studies in a focused and detailed manner (Creswell 2009; Yin 2003; Tracy 2020). The major points considered while selecting the 2015 Oromo protest as a case study include the use of the Internet by key movement actors to organize protests and to call for transboundary mass support, the organization of the protest to demand fundamental human rights and self-rule both online and offline and its significant contribution to change the government administration.

The 2015 Oromo protest is a distinct case study because it possesses particular features associated with the study topic and perspectives. The protest helps to understand the influence of the Internet in social movements in creating an informational linkage between different actors. As argued in Chapter Two, the 2015 Oromo protest is a social movement that challenged the federal government to declare two consecutive and prolonged State of emergency to curb online activism and real-life protest. The protest contributed to the government administration change that promised and partly fulfilled the enactment and revision of media laws to protect and regulate freedom of expression online and offline (Melaku, Dereje and Mamo 2020). In this regard, the 2015 Oromo protest established itself as a case where social movement, human rights, media studies interacted.

This research positioned itself to examine Ethiopia's experience, challenges and prospects in protecting freedom of expression online in this digital age. Therefore, data collected with different data collection methods for this study are connected to the 2015 Oromo protest to understand how the Internet served as an alternative digital space to organize social movements and its role in protecting freedom of expression when a draconian state criminalizes dissent. Similar to previous national social movements such as the 1974 Student's revolution, the 2015 Oromo protest symbolizes a specific time and place in Ethiopia's political history where the mass exercised their free speech trespassing weak and supervised networks in a way redefining the exercise of freedom of expression in the digital era. It is worth mentioning that the 2015 Oromo protest was exceptional for its inclusion of people with diverse experiences and from different backgrounds.

3.3. Data Collection Tools

3.3.1. In-depth Interviews

A qualitative interview is an important data collection tool to obtain a detailed description of events and processes (Yin 2003; Creswell 2007; Hope 2016; Tracey 2020). Some scholars argued that qualitative interviews are biased of socially constructed

circumstances that the researcher targeted for a particular objective (Rubin and Rubin 2012; Sloan and Quan-Haase 2017). However, this limitation can be addressed by utilizing different data collection tools to enhance data reliability. The semi-structured qualitative interview allows interviewees to decide on the site, place and time of the interview as it helps keep the interview process focused (Yin 2003; Creswell 2009; Salmons 2017; Tracy 2020). Thus, different interview tools were developed in compliance with the research objectives and the respective key informants' profiles to obtain more information based on the informant's unique opinion, expertise, and experience. For example, the questions developed for people who participated in the revision and enactment of the media laws process included different questions than other sets of key informants. The interviews helped obtain relevant information that may not probably be addressed in a structured and more controlled interview. The study questions were also crafted to understand personal experiences and opinions about the influence of the Internet during the 2015 Oromo protest. It also permitted the researcher to interact with the respondents as the primary purpose of an in-depth interview was to encourage discussion rather than dictating the interview process. Through this data collection tool, the researcher was able to listen and learn the views and personal experiences of the different sets of actors in detail since this method, among others, providing opportunities for participants to describe the phenomenon in their own terms.

The primary goal of the in-depth interviews was to get an insight into the research problem based on the lived experiences and opinions of participants about their role during the 2015 Oromo protest. Hence, participants were generally asked about the background, history, objectives and outcomes of the 2015 Oromo protest, its key actors, and the influence of the Internet as a platform for demanding basic human rights and as a tool of political mobilization. Moreover, respondents were asked to explain their perceptions and practices about online political information creation and dissemination, cross-learning from previous social movements in Ethiopia, and mainstream media's role during the 2015 Oromo protest. Study questions about protecting and regulating access to the Internet as a fundamental right were raised to key informants who have specific knowledge and experience about the issue and those who directly participated in the media law enactment and revision process following the government change.

Qualitative data collection and analysis takes much more time than the quantitative approach, which is why qualitative interviews are based on a small number of respondents (Creswell 2009). Thus, in-depth interviews for this study were conducted with key informants from diverse backgrounds to provide particular knowledge, understanding and experience. The study participants were selected based on their acknowledged role, influence, and online and offline active stakes by observing the major #OromoProtests online threads and posts supported by informal discussions with people who have a certain degree of knowledge of the protest. Active participation was evaluated by the reactions of followers, i.e., retweets, shares and comments that demands action from participants to take a greater risk of government surveillance, detention, and loss of properties given the known reactions of the ruling party against online activists and journalists.

This research acknowledges the key role of informants in in-depth interviews to represent the voices of their communities excluded from official documents that only reflect the viewpoints of people in power and the historical accounts of the 2015 Oromo protest. Thus, the study captures ordinary citizens' knowledge and experience by highlighting people's everyday accounts through cross-examining facts during in-depth interviews and focus group discussions. In this regard, the researcher chose a diverse set of respondents from six categories: bloggers, activists, journalists, politicians, government officials, and opinion leaders. The first respondents of the research were those considered to be online and offline leaders of the 2015 Oromo protest, primarily identified by the researcher as study participants.

Online and offline activists and influencers who participated in key informant interviews and focus group discussions were selected using a snowball sampling technique. Snowball technique effectively assesses authentic social networks and hidden participants who can fulfil the study criteria if recommended by a friend or a colleague primarily identified by the researcher as a study participant (Ritchie and Lewis 2003; Creswell 2007; Tracy 2020). This selection process has helped trace possible key actors of the 2015 Oromo protest. First, key informants were asked to suggest potential respondents who have actively participated in organizing and leading the protest drawing on 61 in-depth interviews with key informants, out of which eight were from the diaspora community. However, it was necessary to conduct second round interview with targeted informants to encapsulate more detailed perspectives regarding movement actors and cross-learning issues between the 2015 Oromo protest and previous social movements that appeared to be controversial in the group discussions. All interviews with key informants in Ethiopia were conducted face to face in Amharic as all of the interviewees chose to use Amharic from alternative languages offered, i.e., Afan Oromo, Amharic and English.

The meetings were facilitated via telephone calls, emails, and mobile texting as desired. Most of the discussions were audio-recorded using tape recorders. Obtaining the full consent of respondents for recording is required in a study (Kohlbacher 2006; Leedy and Ormrod 2001; Salmons 2017). Accordingly, the consent of informants was secured before recording the interviews. The procedures followed in coding and analyzing data from interviews is discussed in detail under the data analysis section.

Key informant interviews took, on average, between 60 to 80 minutes. Because the study has a narrow sample of homogenous interviewees (people who participated in the 2015 Oromo protest) with diverse experiences, and a similar interview guide was developed for participants to follow, data saturation was reached even before all the planned key informant interviews were finalized. Data saturation and redundancy were claimed when interviews stopped producing new information informing research findings and objectives.

3.3.2. Focus Group Discussions

The purpose of group discussions was to gather unique viewpoints of people about the study topic and encourage group interaction to revitalize group memory about events and

happenings (Tracy 2020; Sloan and Quan-Haase 2017). In addition, the focus group discussions helped to trigger thoughts in identifying key actors of the 2015 Oromo protest, their internal contentions, consensus, and communication tactics used to mobilize ordinary citizens. As a self-contained method, FGD serves as a tool to collect relevant data. As a supplementary source of data, this tool enabled the researcher to cross-check the relevant information collected through other research methods. Furthermore, the interaction among informants generated relevant information since it provides an unrestricted platform for individuals to discuss their ideas and clarify each other's impressions and opinions.

Focus group discussions conducted in the study sites helped to understand groups' feelings about how political information during the 2015 Oromo protest reached the offline demonstrators from various experiences of study participants. Focus group participants were selected based on their age, gender, social status and occupations (i.e., farmers, civil servants, and high school and university students, employees working in Industrial Parks and unemployed youth). The reason for these criteria was the desire to obtain diversified data that help to examine the unique contribution, specific knowledge, and experience people may have to offer about the 2015 Oromo protest and freedom of expression on the Internet. Representative data from a socio-economically diverse population helped understand how the Internet's influence in public protests can be explained by people from different age groups, educational backgrounds, occupations, degree of exposure to global developments, and gender. Eight focus group discussions were conducted in which 44 participants took part.

The selection of participants in the discussions was based on their willingness to participate as well as the level of knowledge they possess on the topic. Discussion points were designed to examine how people who had little or no Internet access explain the influence of the Internet during and after the 2015 Oromo protest and contrast individual experiences. Most importantly, focus group discussion participants were able to get an opportunity to explain the different phases of the 2015 Oromo protest and their level of engagement in a collaborative manner.

Focus group discussions help to validate and extend key informants' experiences and personal stories through others' similar thoughts and practices (Hennink 2014; Tracy 2020; Sloan and Quan-Haase 2017). Therefore, focus group discussions for this research started after having some key informant interviews. The discussion questions did not require professional expertise to respond and encourage participants to reflect on their experiences and the researcher, facilitators, and translators to moderate the discussion process. It is worth mentioning that the focus group discussion questions were formulated to understand participants' involvement in producing, sharing and interpreting content from online sources to organize public demonstrations in their localities and beyond. Data from focus group discussions are not used to compare online and offline groups but to understand their organizational collaboration, informational linkage and shared vision towards the 2015 Oromo protest objectives.

Exploring how social movements are organized and sustained could be challenging unless the researcher can build trust with and in the discussion group (Hennink 2014; Tracy 2020; Sloan and Quan-Haase 2017). Initially, the group composition was intended to be homogeneous in designing these discussions. Homogeneity, in this case, is characterized by the similarity of the background of individuals involved in the discussions so as to create a comfortable ground for participants and encourage them to speak unreservedly. Additionally, the similarity and cooperativeness of participants with each other were thought to make this method fruitful and easier to undertake. The level of trust among the study participants was enhanced by the fact that discussion participants share commonalities in their participation in the 2015 Oromo protest and coming from the same geographic area. Providing alternative discussion languages (English, Amharic and Afan Oromo as options) plus having discussion facilitators from each special zone town contributed to increased trust among participants. The researcher presented the study's objective at the beginning of the discussions allowing participants to ask any question that they may have.⁴¹ The number of participants and length of the discussion matters in provoking diverse opinions that may not be gathered through in-depth interviews (Ritchie and Lewis 2003; Creswell 2009; Tracy 2020). Thus, some of the discussion groups comprised six people, while two had seven participants, and each FGD session took no longer than 90 minutes.

3.3.3. Public and Experts Dialogue Forums on the Media Legal Reform

The researcher attended and documented public dialogue forums and experts' consultative meetings on the media reform packages held organized by the Legal and Justice Affairs Advisory Council, which is mandated to lead the legal reform process. The Experts' consultative meetings brought together media practitioners, legal experts, ICT professionals, and digital rights advocate groups. Public dialogues were held with various sections of the society, such as professional associations, academics, political parties and civil societies, at different stages of the law drafting and amendment process. The experts' meetings and public dialogue forums attended by the researcher included the law-making and amendment processes of the media proclamation, access to information proclamation, and computer crimes proclamation. Data gathered through audio recordings and notes were used to understand the overall process and to gain further insight in relation to the study topic.

The data gathered from these consecutive conferences were analyzed to understand whether the 2015 Oromo protest contributed to the legal reform process in any way. The discussions were also used to examine the influence of the 2015 Oromo protest in protecting and regulating freedom of expression online as a fundamental right and its effect on the debate about Internet regulation and governance. The baseline assessment conducted by the Media Law Reform Working Group to understand the existing reality and guide the law-making process was also referenced in analyzing the contribution of the 2015 Oromo protest on the legal reform process concerning freedom of expression and the media. Furthermore, the author of this study moderated a public webinar organized by the Internet Society Ethiopia Chapter on the issue of the "Impacts of

⁴¹ For more information on the profile of the informants and the checklists, please refer to the Appendix.

Internet shutdown in Ethiopia and proposed solutions” from which critical data was used in this study regarding the overall understanding of freedom of expression on the Internet and how the general public perceives the government’s response to online political speech.

3.3.3.1. Secondary Data Sources

During the course of the study, dependable and relevant documents, both published and unpublished materials, were consulted to gather pertinent information for the study. Since the study is mainly of qualitative nature, the data obtained from these secondary sources were analyzed in an interpretive (qualitative) way. In addition to giving potency to the data gained through primary data sources, the data acquired from these already existing sources provided insight into theoretical and analytical frameworks relevant to the analysis of the material at hand. It is also worth acknowledging the use of data collected by the researcher through interviews, court documents, and media reports compiled for the purpose of writing a term paper on the issue of freedom of expression, public safety, and national security. All the secondary sources used in the study are duly cited in the dissertation.

3.4. The Study Setting

As Castells argued, geographic location is meaningless online; though, this feature is essential when local actions interact with the global response (2009). He further argued that networked movements could quickly expand their reach by connecting various geographic locations using digital communication technologies (Castells 2009). Similarly, study sites can exist virtually in the form of social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, where different sets of participants used hashtags to interact with each other (Tracy 2020, 12). However, in contexts where the real-time popular protests anchored networked social movements to galvanize support by utilizing digital and traditional communication technologies, careful selection of onsite sample locations is significant to ensure transparency of study findings (Ritchie and Lewis 2003). Therefore, this thesis selected its fieldwork locations based on their salience to the study topic and the case study.

The Oromia Special Zone includes eight towns – Burayu, Sebeta, Sululta, Lege Tafo, Gelan, Dukem, Holeta and Sendafa. Five of these towns, namely Burayu, Sebeta, Sululta, Lege Tafo, and Alem Gena, were purposively selected as study sites. Alem Gena is one of the renowned towns under the Sebeta Hawas area of the Oromia special zone.

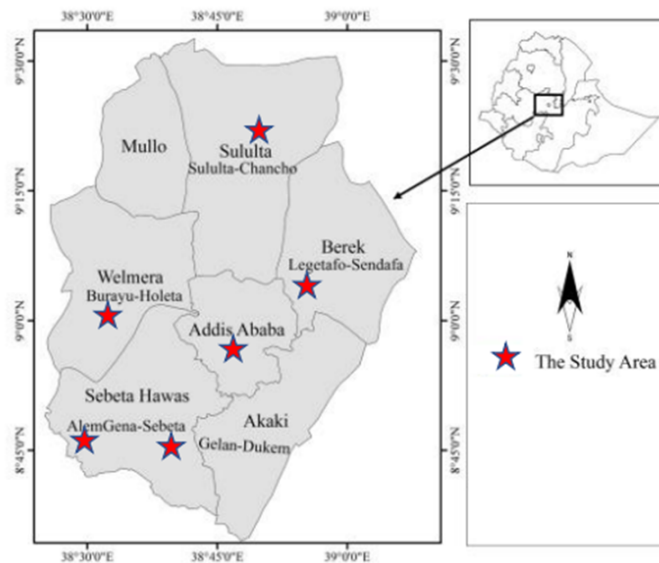


Figure 2 The study sites⁴²

Qualitative research requires a small number of geographical, community or organizational locations (Ritchie and Lewis 2003; Baxter and Jack 2008; Rebolj 2013). The research sample size is somehow guided by the context, resources and efficiency. Accordingly, the aforementioned places were selected not only because they are within the Oromia region, but these towns were directly affected by the expansion of the capital city, which was the triggering factor to the 2015 Oromo protest. Addis Ababa is the capital city of the federal government, and the initial reason for the 2015 Oromo protest was Addis Ababa's urban master plan. Another attribute of these towns is that they contain a mix of urban and rural population characteristics with fast-growing and diverse economic structure and availability of digital communication infrastructure (Yared et al. 2019). The migration of people from different areas of the Oromia region to the special zone cities has also expanded the geographic extent of the towns (Berhanu et al. 2020). Besides, well-known online activists and bloggers who used to live abroad during the protest are now back in Ethiopia; at least some prominent activists are settling in Addis Ababa, and these justifications qualified the city as one of the study locations.

The selected study sites were easily accessible with the limited resources available to the research. Although there were comprehensive data regarding pandemic prevalence rate and local infection control measures in Addis Ababa and its surrounding areas, it was difficult to acquire regular risk and vulnerability information at the regional level. Therefore, executing fieldwork in far remote regional towns with no means of testing was far less appropriate than conducting the study in Addis Ababa and Special Zone towns of Oromia regional state with rigorous contact tracing in place. Other towns within the Oromia region where the protests were intense, like Gelan, Dukem, Ambo, Ginchi, Nekemte, Assela and others, were not included in this study. Nonetheless, this study

⁴² Adopted from Asfaw and Hailu (2019).

acknowledges that the political dynamics in other parts of Oromia, specifically Southwestern Oromia, where there have been armed insurgencies, might produce additional insights into the case study. Southwestern Oromia has been presumed as a stronghold of the OLF. There has been an armed conflict between the Oromo Liberation Army, which is believed to be a military wing of the OLF and the government following the 2018 government administration change. The area experienced a targeted Internet shutdown in January 2020 as a response to the continued insecurity, disconnecting people from online political information access and dissemination that might yield a different understanding of the debate about contentious politics and the influence of the Internet on the Oromo movement. However, this dissertation analyses freedom of expression and Internet supported social movements extending beyond a single case and confined geographic location. Therefore, selecting the special zone towns of the Oromia region and Addis Ababa as study sites ensured the diversity and representativeness of the study sample composition needed in a qualitative study.

One of the anticipated challenges of the fieldwork was the sensitivity of the research topic. The study addresses issues of popular protest and human rights that are potentially facing scrutiny from authorities. In addition, media reports indicate that there have been communal conflicts and armed clashes between government forces and unidentified armed groups in various parts of the Oromia region where the 2015 Oromo protest was organized and sustained.⁴³ However, this dissertation does not exclude the relevant information on developments in other parts of Oromia. In-depth interviews were purposively designed to get hold of respondents who have the knowledge and information about the protests in many parts of the Oromia region. Moreover, some key informants selected for their role as online activists and bloggers happened to be involved in demonstrations held in one of Oromia towns that are not included as study sites. There were also focus group discussion participants who came from other parts of the Oromia region searching for job opportunities in the special zone towns.

The fieldwork plan initially embraces the nature of the 2015 Oromo protest, defined in the conceptual framework as a networked social movement, to help connect the actual geographic sites with the digital space where the Internet was used to organize the 2015 Oromo protest.

3.5. Content Analysis

This study uses qualitative content analysis as an approach to investigate data while applying a case study method to clarify complex issues, integrate contexts and evidence, and provide theory-guided analysis in qualitative research. Content analysis is defined by Babbie (2001, 304) as “the study of recorded human communications”. Qualitative content analysis is a thorough and systematic coding, interpretation, and examination of the contents of a particular body of materials both from offline and online sources to identify patterns, themes, or biases (Leedy and Ormrod 2001; Salmons 2017; Babbie 2001). Hence, qualitative content analysis can serve as a method of examining online and offline political information created, shared, and stored during the 2015 Oromo protest to

⁴³ Africanews. January 22 2020. [Displacements in Ethiopia's Oromia region amid recent fighting | Africanews](#). Accessed on October 12, 2020.

improve the validity and reliability of research findings of this study (Kohlbacher 2006; Salmons 2017). Qualitative content analysis of online political content, media reports from selected satellite television stations, and other secondary data sources are conducted to scrutinize the complementarity of traditional media and the Internet in diversifying sources and channels of information that enhance online activism and provoke offline political action.

Content analysis helps categorize and analyze the transcripts of key informant interviews and focus group discussions on reconstructing contexts, meanings, and actions (Kohlbacher 2006; Castells 2009). There are two types of content analysis: conceptual and relational content analysis with different objectives and outcomes when analyzing content (Sloan and Quan-Haase 2017; Given 2008). The conceptual content analysis focuses on detailed data to determine the number of times a certain concept, word, or phrase occurs in a set of data without interpretation (ibid). The relational content analysis aims to take a comprehensive approach by focusing on implicit data to understand the relationship between different concepts, words and phrases considering the context in which they appear (ibid). This study employs relational content analysis to explain the informational linkage between key movement actors during the 2015 Oromo protest. The analysis of political content provides an understanding of contextual codes and meanings beyond counting how many times a single hashtag and keyword has been used in online and offline communications (Kohlbacher 2006; Castells 2009; Tracy 2020). Therefore, the relational content analysis in this study focuses on examining structural, instrumental and contextual factors that may influence the production and sharing of political information from media reports and online posts. The study pre-identified hashtags and keywords, i.e., #Addis Ababa Master Plan, #OromoProtests, #2016Irrecha, #Irrechamassacre, #BoycottBedele, Irrecha stampede, Oromo protest, Feyissa Lelissa, Rio Olympics, and Ethiopia School Leaving Examination to kickstart harvesting data from online sources.

In general, qualitative case study method and content analysis is employed to test the assumptions articulated in this study: Internet served as an alternative platform and a site of political resistance during the 2015 Oromo protest; Internet served as a mechanism to promote basic human rights in the protest, and the Oromo protest prompted online expression and access to the Internet as fundamental rights.

3.5.1. Online Data Mining and Scraping

Online qualitative data that includes posts of text, images, media and other user-generated content about the 2015 Oromo protest was collected from Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, as these platforms were frequently used in Ethiopia during and after the 2015 Oromo protest.⁴⁴ A study by Ketemaw (2019) indicated that young people in Ethiopia preferred to access and share online information. Ketemaw's claim is also supported by Meseret (2020, 5), who asserted that "Facebook, Twitter and YouTube played a vital role for reporting the real problem" when the legacy media failed to provide political information. At the same time, these three different social media platforms are often used

⁴⁴ Social Media Status Ethiopia: Feb 2019-Feb 2020. (March 2020). Statcounter. Retrieved from <https://gs.statcounter.com/social-media-stats/all/ethiopia> Accessed on May 10, 2021.

in an interrelated manner to share web links, URLs, and redirect content, specifically during social movements and political activism (Mayr and Weller 2017; Tracy 2020). Movement actors often use content redirecting and social media cross porting to persuade followers that may not easily engage unless information from various social media platforms is obtained and cross-referenced (Mayr and Weller 2017; Sloan and Quan-Haase 2017). It was observed that actors in the 2015 Oromo protest shared YouTube video links on Facebook posts and redirected Tweets to their Facebook pages in order to provide the complete picture of stories. Therefore, this study combined two different sets of online data collection approaches: mining data from purposively targeted Facebook, Twitter and YouTube user accounts of bloggers, activists, journalists, politicians, government officials and opinion leaders with significant followers. The second approach was scraping data through hashtags and keywords concerning the 2015 Oromo protest from targeted social media pages and accounts.

The approaches support the effort to understand how people with similar objectives and expectations form shared goals online by examining the access, the content and the influence of the technology on shaping individuals' activities (Mayr and Weller 2017). Thus, the study extracted data from purposively targeted social media accounts to understand the collective dynamics of networked social movements capturing the communication patterns by identifying the sources and receivers of disseminated content on social media (Voss, Lvov and Thomson 2017). This study used hint-interviews with key informants to look for additional relevant social media posts, keywords and hashtags circulated during the 2015 Oromo protest online activism. #BoycottBedele, #RioOlympics, #AmharaProtests, #KonsoProtests #2016Irrecha, #Irrechamassacre, #Gondarprotest #EthiopiaRising, #OromoRevolution, exam leak, Muslim protest, *Dimsachin Yisema*, were repeatedly mentioned hashtags and key words. Thus, the identified hashtags and keywords were used to examine if the Oromo protest can be considered a widespread dissent against the government and related to other social movements.

It is essential to discuss the online data mining approach and associated social media population bias, access restrictions, and sampling partialities (Tracy 2020; Mayr and Weller 2017). It is challenging to know the demographic information of individuals active on social media and their political orientations to avoid bias and ensure data representativeness (Mayr and Weller 2017, 114; Voss et al.). It was more difficult in the context where online engagement is repressed, and people anonymize their online identities for fear of persecution. Because this study intends to examine the 2015 Oromo protest as a social movement and the influence of the Internet as an effective digital political sphere along with its effect on the political content making, sharing and storing, it is relevant to emphasize that online data could be biased and nonrepresentative of the protest. Therefore, as a remedy, this study collected data from the offline population who may possess similar political motives and experience in political message production, dissemination and consumption through interviews and focus group discussions on obtaining comprehensive data applicable to the general population. In addition, sampling bias related to online data mining was minimized by collecting and analyzing comments and observing likes and shares of a sample post about the 2015 Oromo protest from the

wider online population. Online real-time data (new data that refers to the 2015 Oromo protest but posted after the study timeframe) and data from past events (old data about the 2015 Oromo protest, but before the study timeframe) were considered and analyzed to enhance data quality.

The study used online data scraping, a manual process of collecting data from desired web pages through identified hashtags and keywords (Mayr and Weller 2017; Voss et al. 2017; Sloan and Quan-Haase 2017; Nielsen 2016; Bontcheva 2017). In most social media platforms, specifically Twitter and Facebook, the API (Application Programming Interface), which is used to access real-time data from an operating system and communication service platforms, does not help collect data retrospectively automatically (Voss et al. 2017; Bontcheva 2017). There are software applications that can perform data collection from social media. However, privacy, data protection, and continuous system and software change of social media platforms limit the data desired for academic purposes (Nielsen 2016; Sloan and Quan-Haase 2017; Given 2008).

It was also observed that data privacy policies and content moderation practices of Facebook and Twitter changed due to communal conflicts, which made it difficult to access information from personal pages.⁴⁵ Data can also be distorted, as computer applications may not detect the intent of some subtle human phrasing and local languages used to convey the message during the protest (Bontcheva 2017; Sloan and Quan-Haase 2017; Given 2008). This research utilized manual online content data collection by saving web pages, taking screenshots of posts, copying and pasting links of data interest to harvest data through the consent of the end-user and public accounts. Manual online data collection, known as “data scraping”, is an effective way of real-time and retrospective online data acquisition (Voss et al. 2017; Sloan and Quan-Haase 2017; Nielsen 2016; Bontcheva 2017). Manual online data collection helped to purposively diversify the sociodemographic profiles. Although manual online data collection can lead to unintended skipping of social media entries, it allows obtaining representative data available in local languages and idiomatic expressions. At the same time, manual data collection helped to document the context of online content production, examine the intention of content providers, and make sense of developing patterns and interactions through data collected from offline sources. The study attempted to maximize the effectiveness of manual data collection by reducing the number of data points, performing a selective data harvesting technique, and strengthening each data point’s thickness. Data thickening was achieved through online observation, conducting hint-interviews with key informants to map out online data sources and conducting manual data collection using hashtags and hint-words (Sloan and Quan-Haase 2017; Bontcheva 2017). Therefore, more focus was given to the #Oromoprotests that have diverse

⁴⁵ Frequent communal conflicts in various parts of the country and the war in Tigray that started on November 4, 2020, a day after the launch of fieldwork. See also David Gilbert, September 14, 2020. [Hate Speech on Facebook Is Pushing Ethiopia Dangerously Close to a Genocide \(vice.com\)](#). Accessed on April 19, 2021.

Eliza Mackintosh, October 25, 2021. [Facebook knew it was being used to incite violence in Ethiopia. It did little to stop the spread, documents show - CNN](#). Accessed on December 22, 2021.

Facebook hosts and Twitter handles so as to provide a broader understating of the research questions.

The researcher started online data mining and scraping on May 7, 2018. The study selected Facebook and Twitter accounts created with the Oromo protest name and hashtag. Individual tweets and YouTube videos containing messages about the 2015 Oromo protest using at least one of the abovementioned hashtags and keywords were also purposively targeted. One of the prominent Facebook pages concerning the Oromo protest, run by Jawar Mohammed, was suspended by Facebook Inc. In order to fill the gap by the suspension of this page with more than two million followers, the study used actual screenshots taken by the researcher earlier to the restriction of the page for this study purpose. Data was also taken from Jawar's alternative Facebook page with more than 162k followers.⁴⁶ Additionally, other researchers' findings of previously conducted content analysis were consulted to supplement already obtained primary data.

Websites and Paltalk platforms hosted by the government, party-affiliated organizations and activist groups such as OPride, Tigray Online, the dissolved Government Communication Affairs Office (GCAO), and the newly formed Press Secretariat of the Office of the Prime Minister (PSOPM) are taken as primary online data sources. The purpose of having these websites and Paltalk platforms as primary data sources was to obtain representative data that could help understand how the government counterframed and responded to the protesters' demands. Nonetheless, critical data from other online platforms such as Advocacy for Oromia⁴⁷ were collected and analyzed. The below description of the websites and Paltalk forums analyzed in this study justifies the selection rationale.

OPride is a website launched in 2008 with a vision to connect the Oromo diaspora through sharing their stories and to advocate for social justice in Ethiopia by providing information from the Oromo perspective.⁴⁸ The website has served as a platform for the Oromo elite and activists to reflect on socio-political issues that matter to the Oromo people most. Hence, this thesis considered OPride as an online data source to ensure data representativeness in analyzing the influence of the Internet during the 2015 Oromo protest and how the online diaspora activism was linked with the road rural protest in Ethiopia.

Tigray Online⁴⁹ was established in 2005 to provide a free platform for politicians and government bodies, among others, to connect with website visitors. People in power used the website to voice their political perspectives and concerns openly or using pen names and anonymously. Accordingly, Tigray Online is utilized as an online data source in this study to harvest data that can support to balance the representation of government

⁴⁶[Jawar Mohammed | Facebook](#) Accessed on August 7, 2021

⁴⁷ <https://advocacy4oromia.org/kaayyoo/the-grand-oromia-rally-for-freedom-justice-voice-and-peace/> Accessed on May 12, 2020.

⁴⁸ About Us. Retrieved from <https://www.opride.com/about-us/> Accessed on May 8, 2020

⁴⁹ About Tigray Online. Retrieved from (2012, September 27). Retrieved from <http://www.tigraionline.com/abouttol.html> Accessed on May 8, 2020.

officials who were less likely to voice their political stand with online and offline government communication channels due to the political tension and the war in Tigray regional state that made many of them unreachable.

The former GCAO used to be the only authorized government entity to provide information “between the government and the people” during the 2015 Oromo protest. Hence, the study scrutinized the office as an informational linkage between citizens, groups, and the government until 2018. The newly established PSOPM is also taken as an online data source for this study to examine changes in political information production, acquisition, dissemination and storage after the government administration change. In Ethiopia’s previous political tradition, party and government statements were produced by the same people at the GCAO. Political information and communication were centralized, with no room for government authorities to address the public with authentic information from their designated office. Thus, this study attempted to examine if there are changes that the political transformation resulted in protecting and regulating freedom of expression and access to official information.

This study acknowledged the role of encrypted end-to-end social platforms such as WhatsApp and Viber during the 2015 Oromo protest. However, the Voice over Internet Platforms (VoIP) was not used as sources of study data because they are naturally inaccessible by the third party. Key informants were asked to explain their online political engagement through encrypted platforms to understand their perception and practice of free expression on the Internet. Data collection from the social media sites, websites and Paltalk platforms was completed when data thickening was attained, meaning new information produces little or no change to the developing research findings and research objectives.

3.5.2. Media Report

Purposively selected samples of the media reports from Ethiopian Broadcasting Corporate (EBC), Oromia Media Network (OMN), Ethiopian Satellite TV (ESAT) in reference to the Oromo protest and online content about the social movement were taken as data to scrutinize the role of online activism in provoking legacy media reporting and offline political action. These media houses were selected as data sources considering their ownership structure. The EBC is a state-owned entity, which the government used to counterbalance claims of both online and offline activists. The OMN and ESAT are either owned by or affiliated with opposition political groups and individuals that have been active in the country’s political discourse.⁵⁰ Even though the OMN and ESAT were promoting different political ideologies that made them disagree on specific issues regarding the 2015 Oromo protest, both used to deliver intensive coverage of the Oromo protest from the ground and amplify content on the Internet (Freedom on the Net 2016). These media outlets were believed to have reached a wider audience with little or no access to the Internet during the protest (Habtamu 2017; Seifu 2019). Because the OMN

⁵⁰ Jawar Mohammed's red-carpet return signals Ethiopia's political sea change. (2018, August 20). The Guardian., Tom Gardner. Retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2018/aug/20/jawar-mohammed-return-ethiopia-political-change-oromo> Accessed on September 12, 2020.

and ESAT were based abroad during the 2015 Oromo protest, their offices in Addis Ababa did not manage to provide archival data. Ironically, the OMN office in Ethiopia was short-lived, accused of spreading hate speech. Thus, this study relied on data collected from their online news gallery. By taking OMN and ESAT as data sources, this study examined how ordinary citizens used the diasporic satellite media to organize themselves, promote their political interest, and align their activism with online political actors. The selection of OMN and ESAT was based on the fact that they were considered as alternative sources of information for the general public in the context where the state-owned media was silenced and had the negative reputation of reporting political matters.

Johnson and Onwuegbuzie (2004) argued that there is no definite set of rules for deciding on the size of the media sample. However, the number of sampling units for media content analysis can be limited to 13, considering the number of keywords and hashtags to have adequate data to understand the role of traditional media in a given phenomenon (Johnson and Onwuegbuzie 2004). The media report analysis helped to scrutinize the Internet as an alternative communication platform when the legacy media were captives of the ruling party. Therefore, employing more comprehensive media content analysis was redundant to understand how key movement actors reacted to the government's narrative of the 2015 Oromo protest. It was also adequate to produce a representative sample to examine how activists used legacy media to balance their communication power with the government. Data that helped support the media report analysis were also drawn from selected social media platforms, other online media platforms, key informant interviews, and group discussions. Data saturation was claimed when the media reports stopped producing significant or new information from which the researcher could develop themes, categories and codes based on the research objectives. It is worth mentioning that this dissertation used documents such as scholarly papers, books, dissertations, government proceedings and press releases to support primary accounts from both online and offline data sources.

3.6. Data Analysis and Interpretation

The study employed a qualitative data analysis method, aiming to respond to the research viewpoints regarding the influence of the Internet as a digital political sphere, a tool to communicate dissent and protect human rights, and access to the Internet as a fundamental human right on its own. Qualitative data analysis helps capture the influence of the Internet in social movements and understanding the power relationships of movement actors in contexts of dissent criminalization by a dominant-party state (Sloan and Quan-Haase 2017; Voss et al. 2017; Castells 2009; Given 2008). Moreover, qualitative data analysis is effective in helping to examine the network society, explaining the informational linkage between the government, individuals, the mass public, nonstate actors, including Internet intermediaries (Tracy 2020; Bach 2011).

According to Creswell (2009), adopting more than one qualitative data analysis method helps minimize the oversimplification of study results. Hence this research utilized the grounded theory approach and content analysis to make sense of the collected qualitative data about the study topic. The grounded theory approach effectively analyses and interprets data gathered through in-depth interviews and focus group discussions

concerning a social phenomenon (O'Reilly and Parker 2013; Yin 2003; Creswell 2007). It can also help build new theory tests and modify existing theories (O'Reilly and Parker 2013). The grounded theory follows three steps of coding, i.e., open, axial and selective coding, which supports the construction of concepts to be examined, compared and related to one another during qualitative data analysis (Tracy 2020; O'Reilly and Parker 2013; Creswell 2009; O'Reilly and Parker 2013). Therefore, the coding process in this study included categorizing data collected for this study by text, images, comments, likes and shares to scrutinize both online and offline events, the interaction between movement actors and to describe the case under investigation- the 2015 Oromo protest.

Data obtained through key informant interviews and focus group discussions were analyzed using a grounded theory approach to identify and connect categorized data and create meaning considering the study topic's structural, instrumental, and cultural contexts and theoretical framework. Interviews and group discussions were also coded to identify patterns and themes to facilitate easy data analysis against the research assumptions, research questions, and theoretical framework. Systematic steps that must be followed in the case study approach were observed to analyze data in themes and patterns to provide detailed descriptions of incidents, contexts, and individuals involved in providing online and offline data in relation to the 2015 Oromo protest. Interview and group discussion transcripts were organized thematically and categorized in accordance with the conceptual framework to ensure that the analysis provided evidence that could inform the study findings. Analyzing data collected through in-depth interviews started simultaneously with conducting focus group discussions. However, a thorough examination of the elements and structure of interviews began right after the fieldwork was completed on August 30, 2021.

Automated analysis is more consistent and accurate in coding and organizing data than manual data analysis. However, it does not perform a thorough data interpretation and analysis replacing the researcher (Tedder 2016; Creswell 2009). Therefore, this study applied manual human data analysis to categorize, segment, code, analyze and cross-tabulate data collected through in-depth interviews and focus group discussions. The decision to manually analyze data was made based on the size of the data, and methodological approaches followed to collect data from the field that emphasized capturing details of events, personal experiences, perceptions, and emotions that otherwise could not be explained.

The last data analysis step included determining the themes that have occurred repeatedly and their relation with structural and instrumental factors that may influence the political information flow online and offline. Analyzed data from online and offline content were also compared and cross-tabulated with the analysis of in-depth interviews and focus group discussions. The content analysis process was concluded when no new codes occurred in the data.

3.7. Methodological Insights from the Fieldwork

3.7.1. The Practicability of the Study Fieldwork

The primary task of the fieldwork was identifying purposively targeted bloggers, activists, journalists, politicians, government officials, opinion leaders with significant followers, offline activists and their supporters, as well as ordinary citizens (i.e., farmers, civil servants, university students and unemployed youth) who are perceived to shape and inform the political debate during the 2015 Oromo protest. This study combines primary and secondary sources of data. The primary data was collected through in-depth interviews and focus group discussions supported by content analysis of online political information and media reports produced and shared during the 2015 Oromo protest. Because traditional primary sources of data should be enhanced through online data in research that involves the Internet, posts of text, images, media and other user-generated content are taken as primary data sources in this thesis. Media report is also taken as primary data sources to understand the role of legacy media in enabling the government to interact with the mass public and empower online activists to stay connected with their offline equivalents.

The development of data collection guidelines preceded the fieldwork that started on November 03, 2020. A sequence of two pretest interviews and two focus group discussions were conducted to assess the effectiveness of the data collection tools and guidelines to address any limitations and menace to bias and management procedures before conducting the next phase of qualitative research. The preliminary test results identified two semi-structured questions that derive similar responses from participants. Corrective measures were taken by rephrasing the questions to proceed with the main fieldwork process. The pilot interviews and focus group discussions were included in the analysis as no significant change occurred to the data collection guideline and the semi-structured questions.

Among the anticipated limitations of the study is the linguistic competence of the researcher who does not speak Afan Oromo. Because linguistic competence can potentially impact the understanding of the case study and the findings of the thesis, corrective measures were taken to hire and train facilitators and translators conversant with Afan Oromo, Amharic and English who were present at all phases of data collection, interpretation and analysis stages. Most in-depth interviews and focus group discussions were conducted in Amharic based on the consent and interest of informants, and in a few cases, participants demanded the use of Afan Oromo for discussion. Informants were also given the option of holding the discussions either in Afan Oromo or Amharic, which was positively perceived and created an impression that one of the protest's demands - "making Afan Oromo one of the official working languages" – was being recognized by ordinary people. Another crucial remark from the fieldwork is that when the debate about key actors and the leadership structure of the protest is heated, participants accidentally tune to Afan Oromo even when they initially agreed to hold the discussion in Amharic. Other than that, participants often used Afan Oromo words, phrases, idiomatic and poetry expressions during discussions where the intervention of translators was needed for the researcher to capture personal feelings and emotions. The researcher cross-checked the accuracy of the translated manuscript among team members to ensure data was not

distorted in translation and meaning-making. It is also worth mentioning the surprising appreciation and encouragement from key informants to the research process despite prior concern how the linguistic incompetence would raise some sort of mistrust from informants.

One of the major contextual challenges encountered during the data collection process is the sensitivity of the research topic that has been affected by the ongoing political changes and communal conflicts in different parts of the country. Initially, the research topic generated discomfort for research participants and local authorities who were cautious about gatherings to discuss political issues and social movements. Establishing rapport with the key informants helped overcome this challenge and win their trust. Therefore, the researcher chose to establish personal contact and wait until trust evolved with both study participants and local authorities through presenting a support letter from the university that clearly states the objective and process of the study both in English and Amharic coupled with oral explanation in Afan Oromo, when necessary (through translators), regarding the role of the researcher and the importance of holding the discussions with study participants.

The killing of Hachalu Hundesa, a well-known Oromo singer and rights activist, on June 29, 2020, flared up popular protest across the study sites of this thesis. The unrest left about 177 people dead, hundreds wounded, and thousands arrested.⁵¹ Those arrested included Jawar Mohammed and Bekele Gerba, whom the youth in the study site idolized as key actors in the 2015 Oromo protest. Therefore, data collection was delayed due to destabilization and insecurity⁵² in the study sites and as a precaution to minimize participant/response bias. Furthermore, the satellite television OMN closed its office in Addis, and journalists were detained for alleged hate propaganda against other ethnic groups and spreading disinformation. On July 7, 2020, it was reported that Facebook deactivated Jawar Mohammed's account with nearly two million followers for security reasons⁵³. These happenings shed light on the informational linkage between individuals, groups and the government and the understanding of key movement actors and their communication practices. Thus, emphasis is given to specific study questions to explain the leadership structure of the 2015 Oromo protest rather than focusing on individual leaders.

Key informants with diverse backgrounds were contacted to suggest potential respondents in order to reduce potential bias and underrepresentation of study participants. It was observed that female participants spoke much less in heterogeneous focus group settings dominated by male counterparts even when the researcher managed to create space for women to speak. Therefore, a women-only focus group discussion was held, recruiting participants from each study location considering their background,

⁵¹ Human Rights Watch August 15, 2020. [Ethiopia: Opposition Figures Held Without Charge | Human Rights Watch \(hrw.org\)](#) Accessed on December 12, 2020.

⁵² The Guardian. February 17 2021. ['No way they'll back out': tensions rise amid Ethiopia opposition hunger strike | Global development | The Guardian](#) Accessed on June 18, 2021.

⁵³ Bekele Atoma. July 9, 2020, [Jawar Mohammed: The Ethiopian media mogul taking on Abiy Ahmed - BBC News](#) Accessed on April 17, 2021.

occupation, and degree of exposure to the 2015 Oromo protest. The level of participation by women-only respondents was very high to respond to the research questions as some respondents claimed to have led protest rallies and provided names of female movement leaders. The women-only discussion highlighted that the data analysis process about key movement actors and the leadership structure must highlight the role of women movement actors and their online engagement to defy the political power transactions in the relationship between men and women. Focus group discussions with small-scale farmers and less-educated men in fast-developing industrial towns produced similar data regarding the overall movement objective and organization with those in a better social and economic status. However, their online and offline protest engagement offered diverse perspectives.

Furthermore, the data collection plan of this dissertation was also impacted by the COVID-19 outbreak and restrictive measures taken on March 30, 2020, by four regional states, Oromia among them, banning public transportation to contain the spread of the virus. On April 8, 2020, the federal government declared a five months state of emergency that resulted in the closure of schools, hotels and other public places, gatherings were also banned, and security forces were deployed to enforce the regulations, leading to halting the fieldwork for some time due to lockdown measures.

Data collection started in November 03, 2020 under strict observance of COVID-19 preventive measures. The detailed measures taken are stated below under the ethical consideration section. Initially, the study planned to utilize in-depth online interviews with diaspora activists and movement actors, which was enhanced by the COVID-19 outbreak as virtual meetings become more frequent and natural in people's day-to-day lives. Participants from the diaspora were readily available to respond to virtual calls due to prolonged lockdown in their respective hostland. Furthermore, the extensive and easy use of virtual platforms during the pandemic shed light on how Ethiopians maximize the limited and expensive Internet connectivity to communicate, access basic information, exercise their freedom of expression at times of crisis, and treat online information, which is not political.

3.8. Ethical Considerations

This study was conducted with strict adherence to the ethical standards of social science research. Interview requests and focus group discussion invitations, and participants' consent statements were tailored to ensure voluntary participation, consent, and confidentiality. Informed consent was obtained from all key informants through an audio recording, while focus group participants granted their permission through a consent form. The researcher started virtual interviews with diaspora key informants by informing them of the consent statement online, asserting the desire to record conversations using platform recording options. All respondents were informed about the research objective and the interview process, including how long it would take, and this was stated in all types of communications sent out. The researcher provided an explicit declaration to

inform participants that there are no risks involved in the research process.⁵⁴ Interview and discussion sessions started with reminding participants about COVID-19 preventive measures they must follow during the gatherings. Permission was obtained to audio record in-depth interviews and focus group discussions, and the information is kept confidential. Respondents were also told that they were free to abstain from answering questions or withdraw their consent during the interview and discussion process. No participants withdrew from interviews and focus group discussions. As a way of protecting the informants, their real names were kept confidential in the write-up process of the journal articles and this dissertation. Accordingly, all the respondents' names are replaced with pseudonyms. Fellow discussants also declared to keep the secrecy of discussion points and discussants' identity for the safety and security of all participants.

Key informants and focus group discussants were given a chance to decide on the site, place and time of the interview in a manner that helps them to get some level of confidence in the process of their participation. In some research sites, local officials happened to offer their office compounds to hold discussions, although the researcher rejected this to obtain quality data and avoid potential interference and censorship. In some cases, the researcher communicated with informants through phone calls to inform them about the study and why the researcher was approaching them. In those circumstances where they cannot be reached by phone, email communication, mobile texting and Facebook messenger were utilized as an alternative to contact and approach study participants. Some key informants were approached in person to request their permission to participate in an in-depth interview in some incidences.⁵⁵

After carefully considering the COVID 19 situation, the researcher decided to use the University's COVID-19 prevention instruction and the Ethiopian Public Health Institute Infection Prevention and Control Interim Protocol as a benchmark to proceed with face-to-face data collection cautiously. The researcher and translators strictly followed relevant precautions and ethical considerations to plan travels to study sites and organize group discussions in order to avoid the risk of introducing the virus to study participants. Discussion facilitators played a remarkable role in choosing and arranging favorable discussion venues, observing the COVID-19 prevention protocol through their local knowledge, contact and language competence. Therefore, focus group discussions were held outdoor, strictly following physical distancing and sanitizing to minimize infection risk. Contact details of focus group participants were retained and kept safe with the researcher in case of infection requiring contact tracing. Participants were informed, and consent was obtained prior to attending focus group discussions about the process.

⁵⁴ Consent statements for key informants and focus group discussion participants can be found in the Appendices.

⁵⁵ The sample of interview participation request letters sent to organizations and individuals who wished to have formal communication to participate in the interview can be found in the Appendices.

CHAPTER FOUR

4. Contours of the 2015 Oromo Protest: The Genesis, Movement Actors and Protest Infrastructure

The discussions in this chapter examine how the Internet as an alternative communication platform and site of political resistance provided a fundamental informational linkage between the public, individuals and the government during the 2015 Oromo protest. This chapter answers fundamental question of the study: *Who are the key actors in providing online and offline leadership during the protest, and their agendas, the different aspects of alliance, competition and various tactics in using the Internet as a communication platform to bridge the gap between the urban-digital Oromo activists and the rural-offline protesters?*

The aforementioned general research question led to examining a set of sub-questions about the background, framings, agendas, critical developments and outcomes of the 2015 Oromo protest and mapping key movement actors who played a significant role during the movement. This chapter relied on the concepts of social movements to explain the organization of the 2015 Oromo protest, its outcomes, motivations, strategies, and the diversity of participants, referring to the analysis of various scholarly works discussed in the conceptual and theoretical framework presented in chapter two.

4.1. Background to the 2015 Oromo Protest

This section presents the historical and political chapters that the Oromo movement passed through to reach the point where it escalated as a popular protest in 2015. It explains the Internet and different mobilization episodes that helped structure the organization of the 2015 Oromo protest, its leadership, mobilization tactics and communication. The section further elucidates on outcomes and contributions of the 2015 Oromo protest to the 2018 government administration change political and legal reform agenda.

Longstanding Grievances and the Identity Question

The recent Oromo protests framed as a movement against inequalities and human rights abuse have been underway for almost five decades. Even though there is no consensus about the exact time of the start of the movement, some scholars argue that the 2015 Oromo protest started in 1992 when the OLF left the Transitional Government (Ostebo 2020; Aga 2020; Asafa 2020; Khisa 2019). However, the analysis of empirical data for this research indicates that the 2015 Oromo protest was the continuation of the popular anger that led to the establishment of the OLF in 1973. Movement leaders interviewed in this study described the period from the establishment of the OLF to the flareup of the 2015 Oromo protest as *finchila dida gebrummaa* translated as “defiance against slavery” (Natai 03/01/2021; Meti 03/11/2020).

“The Oromo people actively participated in overthrowing the monarchy in the 1974 revolution under the leadership of the OLF. During the ‘Land to the Tiller’ student’s movement, they sacrificed their young leaders. Nevertheless, the actual implementation of the land allocation and administration under the Derg regime

created an impression that the Oromo people continued to be excluded and treated as second-class citizens in the Ethiopian state, helping the OLF to broaden its popular base and intensified guerilla warfare in 1976”⁵⁶ (Diriba 22/09/2020).

The Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) was among military groups, i.e., the Eritrean People’s Liberation Front (EPLF) and the Tigrayan People’s Liberation Front (TPLF), that fought to overthrow the Derg regime. The OLF was engaged in a small-scale armed struggle when the Derg regime announced its 10-year development plan to relocate the rural population as part of its resettlement and villagization program following the infamous Ethiopian famine in 1984-85 (Raga 2018).⁵⁷ The OLF used Derg’s land reform and resettlement program that alienated the Oromo people from their ancestral land to recruit members (Diriba 22/02/2021). Secondary data support the informant’s claim that the villagization program in March 1984 resettled about 800,000 people from the northern highlands to distant areas of southwest provinces of Wollega and Illuababora (Steingraber 1987; Joireman 1997). The resettlement of many people into these areas placed an increased burden on the Oromo community. Often the Oromo ethnic inhabitants fled the newly created resettlement camp areas and became refugees in neighboring countries (Raga 2018).

The politically instigated communal conflicts during the villagization program in the early 1970s and the 2015 popular protest were deepened by the forceful eviction of Oromos from their ancestral land, which is the foundation of the Oromo people’s economic, social and cultural history (Diriba 22/02/2021; Raga 2018). Conversely, the Derg regime used the resettlement program to contain the escalation of OLF armed opposition in southwest provinces by militarizing the newly created communities to surveillance and punish OLF supporters and suspected members (Urgesa 28/05/2021⁵⁸; Raga 2018). The Derg cadres in resettlement camps recruited two types of militia groups, one to guard the food storage area and prevent people from leaving the camp; the other group is sent out to the surrounding communities to terrorize the Oromo community members alleged to support the OLF (Diriba 22/02/2021; Raga 2018). Although none of them seemed to answer the actual demand for freedom from eviction, OLF and the Derg were using the issue of land to hold political power over the Oromo people (ibid). Empirical findings show OLF campaigned against the Derg’s land appropriation and the resettlement program in southwest Oromia emphasizing the mass migration of Oromos to the neighboring countries and arguing these programs were political projects to create peasant communities in the dominantly pastoral Oromo communities (ibid). The study findings are in line with Asafa’s (2014) claim regarding the dispute between the Derg and the young Oromo nationalists who objected to the 1970s resettlement programs while the regime labelled them as secessionists and the enemies of the revolution.

⁵⁶ Diriba, Senior Central Committee member of the OLF. 2020. A statement was made during a national dialogue forum organized by the Center for Human Rights, Addis Ababa University. September 21 and 22, 2020 Sarem Hotel, Addis Ababa.

⁵⁷ Raga Raji, Senior Member of OLF. 2018. Tikur Engida. In Ke Ha Eske Pe weekly radio show. Radio Interview with Elsabet Samuel and Mesay Wendimienh. Aired 20 October 2018. Fana Broadcasting. Addis Ababa, 13:30-16:00.

⁵⁸ Urgesa, Ex-OLF fighter and Oromo Students Movement Association member., interview with the author, May 28, 2021.

Later following the fall of the Derg, OLF aspired to establish the transitional government with EPLF and TPLF. However, OLF was systematically pushed out of the first-ever election conducted in 1992, leaving the Oromo people without meaningful representation within the newly introduced federal structure (Olana 10/06/2021⁵⁹). The exclusion of OLF from transitional government exposed young people for incarceration, arbitrary killings and exile, leaving the Oromo people politically disempowered (Urgesa 28/05/2021; Kelbesa 03/11/2020⁶⁰; Wariyo 07/11/2020⁶¹). A statement by the Oromo Peoples' Democratic Organization (OPDO) indicated that its effort to work with OLF failed as the latter suffered from a loss at its base and lacked political commitment.⁶² According to key informants of this study, the EPRDF created OPDO to fill the void created by the absence of OLF, while other informants emphasized that the very objective of the EPRDF to form the OPDO was to suppress the popular support OLF enjoy throughout Oromia (Hassan 15/11/2020⁶³; Abdulhakim 06/11/2020⁶⁴). As one of the informants illustrated, the emergence of the OPDO “was like a stranger walking on the aisle to ask for the bride’s hand when she was impatiently waiting for her own groom to come” (Wariyo 07/11/2020). The late President of Ethiopia, Negasso Gidada (1995-2001) who was also a senior member of the OPDO, dismissed the idea that his party was created to decimate the OLF.⁶⁵ Negasso argued that the genesis of the OPDO starts from the active participation of its members in the final military battles against the Derg regime where the OLF and EPRDF used to be allies. He refers to a historic incident in 1991 in which the OLF and EPRDF had jointly fought Derg in western Ethiopia. The rebel armies led by Abaa Duulaa of EPRDF and Abbaa Chaalaa of the OLF liberated the town of Dembi Dollo, and the two leaders reached an agreement that the OLF would take over the administration of the town while OPDO opens its offices in other major towns of western Wellega. According to Negasso, the claim OPDO lacks the political legitimacy to represent Oromos is baseless, and it shares the strengths and weaknesses of other EPRDF coalition members. Nevertheless, the OLF enjoyed popular support as it was considered as the Oromo people’s “emancipatory power” from systematic oppression (Hassan 15/11/2020).

“I grew up seeing my parents and others in the neighborhood longing to see OLF in power. We used to write ‘430’ on our shirts, walls, and any place possible to paint the numbers; 4 represents A, 3 is for B and 0 for O – ABO. The number is the code for us to show allegiance to OLF as OPDO cadres prohibited us from showing the liberty flag” (Bedaso 18/07/2021⁶⁶).

⁵⁹ Olana, journalist and activist, interview with the author, June 10, 2021.

⁶⁰ Kelbesa, diaspora activist, diaspora returnee, interview with the author, November 03, 2020.

⁶¹ Wariyo, Local activist, civil society leader, interview with the author, November 07, 2020.

⁶² www.tigraionline.com/opdo-25th-anniversary-dc.pdf Accessed on September 7, 2021.

⁶³ Hassan, Ex-OPDO official, protest leader, interview with the author, November 15, 2020

⁶⁴ Abdulhakim OPDO cadre, protest leader, interview with the author, November 06, 2020.

⁶⁵ Kalkidan Yibeltal and Tesfalem Weldeyes. [OPDO: Lost, confused and at a crossroads - Addis Standard](https://www.addisstandard.com/opdo-lost-confused-and-at-a-crossroads) Addis Standard. August 15, 2016. Accessed on September 7, 2021.

⁶⁶ Bedaso. 2021. Blogger and Activist, medical doctor, interview with the Author. July 18, 2021.

“ABO” stands for *Adda Bilisummaa Oromo*, an Afan Oromo name to the OLF. The Oromo liberation flag, also called the OLF flag, was among the symbols of the 2015 Oromo protest.

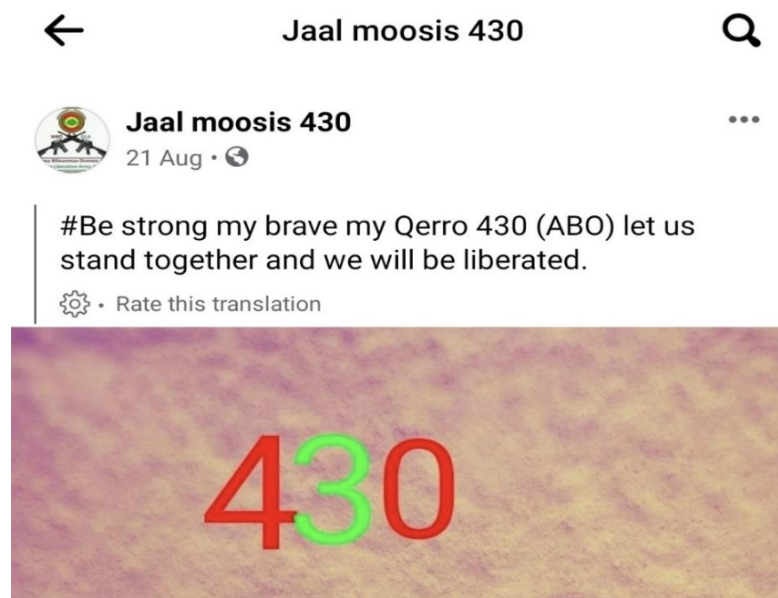


Figure 3 A code used by Oromo youth to show allegiance to OLF

Conversely, other informants who served as OPDO party cadres argued that the creation of the OPDO served the Oromo people to gain “limited and supervised” access to political power within the federal state structure (Abdulahakim 06/11/2020). An informant said, “no one can deny that the OPDO was toothless within the EPRDF powerhouse, but it was better than nothing” (Abdulahakim 06/11/2020).

Girma Birru’s assertion supports the above quote by Abdulhakim during the 25th Anniversary of the founding of the OPDO. Girma Birru, OPDO Central Committee member, argued that his organization succeeded in representing the Oromo people’s interest and leading the struggle for human rights and democracy ever since its establishment.⁶⁷

One thing commonly reflected during in-depth interviews and focus group discussions is the existence of organized antigovernment movements in various parts of the Oromia region since the departure of the Oromo Liberation Front from the Ethiopian Transitional Government in 1992. The OLF organized popular dissent, challenging the ruling party’s legitimacy through media campaigns. Radio *Sagalee Ummata Balaa* (the Voice of the People) *Sagelee Bilisummaa Oromoo* (the Voice of Oromo Liberation) have been repeatedly mentioned by informants as medias amplifying the concerns of the Oromo people before the Internet was mainstreamed into the Oromo movement. Informants further highlighted that the government often jammed these two radio transmissions.

⁶⁷ No name and date. Retrieved from tиграionline.com. [opdo-25th-anniversary-dc.pdf \(tigraionline.com\)](#) Accessed on September 7, 2021.

Research respondents highlighted that the establishment of the *Macha-Tulama* Self-Help Association marked the emergence of the revival of the Oromo identity – *Oromumma* (Abdirashid 12/12/2020⁶⁸). A study by Asafa (2020) supports this finding by affirming that the *Macha-Tulama* and the OLF organizational structures shared the Oromo traditional self-rule approach to mobilize the Oromo people against suppression in a way advocating for the values of Oromoness. Informants emphasized that framing the 2015 Oromo protest agenda and the mobilization approach was well thought out and designed (Terefe 12/01/2021⁶⁹).

The study data shows that the Oromo solidarity heightened whenever the government imprisoned leaders who advocated for the Oromo cause. For example, the Oromo people protested when the then *Mecha-Tulama* movement leaders Tadesse Birru and Mamo Mezemer were detained in the 1970s, claiming that Oromos were targeted for defending their people. In 2002, the Oromo students protested across the Oromia region when the *Macha-Tulama* leaders were detained for protesting the government’s decision to move the capital city of Oromia to Adama, asserting that Oromos are pushed out of *Finfinnee*,⁷⁰ their ancestral land. The issue of identity elevated to another level during the 2015 Oromo protest (Ketim 10/12/2020⁷¹; Wariyo 07/11/2020).

“The Oromo people protested against the government for decades with no major result. Later in 2015, the unity of all Oromos throughout the world made the protest successful; because we stood together as Oromos” (Morka 10/04/2021⁷²).

Study respondents were asked to describe factors that may have influenced them to support or oppose the Oromo protest. Participants in in-depth interviews and focus group discussions claimed to support the protest. Miresa (12/05/2021⁷³) asserted that “I am not sure if I could recall a single Oromo individual who did not participate in the protest.” Conversely, some focus group discussants avowed that they had participated in the 2015 Oromo protest because they wanted to remove the TPLF-led government from its power and replace it with a representative and democratic administration that serves the interest of the Oromo people (Naol 03/01/2021⁷⁴; Godana 29/12/2020⁷⁵; Abdi 31/12/2020⁷⁶; Keno 16/03/2021⁷⁷).

The Oromo movement echoes the notion of a collective reconstruction of identity and consciousness-raising discussed by Melucci (1996b). The historical background analysis of the Oromo resistance depicted the emboldened Oromo identity, *Oromumma*, which influenced members’ self-consciousness about their common values and shared goals. Based on data collected, it can be argued that *Oromumma*- Oromoness started to revive

⁶⁸ Abdirashid, diaspora activist, virtual interview with the author, December 12, 2020.

⁶⁹ Terefe, Qeerroo leader, Alemgena, January 12, 2021.

⁷⁰ An Oromo name of Addis Ababa

⁷¹ Ketim, diaspora activist, shelter supervisor and translator, virtual interview, 10/12/2020.

⁷² Morka, local activist, civil engineer, interview with the author, April 10, 2021.

⁷³ Miresa, high school teacher and Qeerroo leader, interview with the author, May 12, 2021.

⁷⁴ Naol, teacher, Addis Ababa, January 03, 2021.

⁷⁵ Godana, health officer, focus group discussion, Alem Gena, December 29, 2020.

⁷⁶ Abdi, casual worker, Burayu, 31/12/2020.

⁷⁷ Keno, Qeerroo leader, self-employed, focus group discussion, Sebeta 16/03/2021.

during the early 1970s in response to the injustice Oromos encountered. Thus, the issue of identity was integrated into the organization of the 2015 Oromo protest tacitly and overtly aiming to reclaim an equal share of resources and political representation within the Ethiopian state, situating the demand to make Afan Oromo one of the official languages of the country at the center.

The journey of the Oromo resistance until the announcement of the Addis Ababa and Surrounding Oromia Special Zone Town Integrated Master Plan is full of political happenings that have contributed to the intensification of the 2015 Oromo protest. According to informants of this research, the period from the 2015 Oromo protest to the 2018 government change is called “*finchila xumura gabrummaa*”, translated as “protest movement to end oppression” (Natai 03/01/2021⁷⁸; Meti 03/10/2020⁷⁹). The study findings depict that there has never been discontinuation between the Oromo national question in the 1970s and the recent movement that has contributed to the government administration change in 2018. However, what lies in the middle is political fragmentation and disagreement on social movement organization approach among the Oromo political leaders, activists, and academics (Sifan 09/12/2020⁸⁰; Kelbesa 03/11/2020; Garoma 05/08/2021⁸¹). The dominance of the OLF within the Oromo’s political landscape has also contributed to the stagnant and declining years of the movement (Wariyo 07/11/2020; Raga 2018). Study data shows that disagreements among the Oromo elite often revolve around movement agenda framings, approach and leadership. So much so, OLF became the “proprietor” of the Oromos freedom flagship agenda – “*Hiree Murteeffannaa*” (secession), leaving no room for alternative political views to flourish. Those with new movement agenda, specifically advocating self-administration of the Oromo people within the Ethiopian State, were antagonized (Wariyo 07/11/2020; Robsan 16/07/2021⁸²).

“I joined OLF with a strong belief in the Oromo cause. I fought in the bushes for years and contributed to the organization’s political and public relations wing. Then I began to see irregularities, some people building a cultlike leadership, operating the organization as their own company. Then I raised my concern to the high-level people. I asked them why we were fighting and what the prospect of the armed struggle could be? That was the day they made me a fugitive” (Raga 2018).

Study findings show that there have been political splits among the OLFites based on ideology and organizational differences. Because the OLF factions and emerging groups did not articulate their objectives and the oppression on the ground, the mass public contained its political desire (Wariyo 07/11/2020; Urgesa 28/05/2021). It took committed young leaders to deliberate on the failure and success of the past half a century struggle of the Oromo people to resume the movement (Urgesa 28/05/2021; Raga 2018).

⁷⁸ Natai, Qeerroo, QBO founding member, interview with the author, January 03, 2021.

⁷⁹ Meti, activist, interview with the author, November 03, 2020.

⁸⁰ Sifan, activist, international nongovernmental sector, interview with the author, December 09, 2020.

⁸¹ Garoma, blogger and activist, international nongovernmental organization employee, interview with the author, August 05, 2021.

⁸² Robsan, protest leader and activist, medical doctor, interview with the author July 16, 2021.

The next sub-section of the chapter attempts to answer how the 2015 Oromo protest was mobilized and achieved its objectives, unlike preceding attempts by political parties, armed struggles and popular disobediences.

4.2. The 2015 Oromo Protest: Framings and Agendas

4.2.1. Movement Framings

The 2015 Oromo protest framings reflected the core demands of the Oromo people ever since the 1970s. The objectives and main agendas of the 2015 Oromo protest were framed through consecutive dialogue between the diaspora activists and movement actors on the ground (Kelbesa 03/11/2020; Wariyo 07/11/2020; Robsan 16/07/2021). As part of planning sessions, the Oromo diaspora activists and local activists held a conference in mid-2014 to mutually agree on the framings of the objectives, agendas and messages of the 2015 protest (Kelbesa 03/11/2020; Robsan 16/07/2021). The discussions were via VoIP (Voice over Internet Protocols, mainly Skype, Viber and WhatsApp). In some cases, work and education-related travels to other countries were used by urban digital activists as meeting opportunities with diaspora activists to evaluate and plan the movement's next steps (Ali 19/11/2020; Robsan 16/07/2021; Jabessa 14/04/2021). Activists from Ethiopia joined via Skype and WhatsApp participated in the discussion that resulted in setting up the objectives and main agenda of the 2015 Oromo protest.

The Oromo protest has one objective, and that is reclaiming Oromo's national identity and country ownership - *Abbaa biyyummaa*" (Bedaso 18/07/2021). The claim for "*Abbaa biyyummaa*", roughly translated as "country ownership", was also repeatedly mentioned during focus group discussions. From the essence of the phrase, "country ownership" refers to the full participation and representation of the Oromo people within the state (Bedaso 18/07/2021; Sifan 09/12/2020; Terfasa 20/01/2021⁸³). Conversely, Key informants of this study asserted that the ultimate objective of the 2015 Oromo protest was to ensure self-determination, the rule of law and democracy (Jabessa 14/04/2021⁸⁴; Kitata 13/12/2020⁸⁵). However, the notion of self-determination seems to be contested among key movement actors as some claimed that the movement failed to achieve its primary objective of establishing an independent democratic Oromia state. In contrast, others asserted that the movement aimed to reestablish a democratic Oromia state within the multicultural national context.

"The major objective of the 2015 Oromo protest was ensuring self-determination-to fully participate in the political, economic, social and cultural issues, and together with other nations and nationalities to build an all-inclusive democratic Ethiopian state" (Robsan 16/07/2021).

Bedaso supports the above statement that the 2015-2018 Oromo protest did not intend to establish an independent Oromia state.

⁸³ Terfasa, Qeerroo leader, Pastor, January 20, 2021.

⁸⁴ Jabessa, blogger and activist, local nongovernmental organization employee, April 14, 2021

⁸⁵ Kitata, opinion leader, activist, university lecturer, interview with the author, December 13, 2020.

“I have never heard of a single Oromo activist, prominent leader or academician who advocated for an independent Oromia state during the 2015-2018 Oromo protest. Our agenda was to ensure that the Oromo people are equally represented within the political structure of the Ethiopian state” (Bedaso 18/07/2021).

Based on empirical data, it can be argued that the framing of the 2015 Oromo protest “*Abbaa biyyummaa*” (country ownership) challenged the longstanding agenda of the OLF, “*Hiree Murteeffannaa*” (secession) and that the new generation of Oromos moved away from the secessionist agenda and promoted a federalist state in order to gain the support of other groups within the FDRE. Hence, the long-term objective of the 2015 Oromo protest was to establish a multicultural democratic state of Ethiopia by primarily addressing the longstanding Oromo demands, i.e., land ownership, the right to language and equal distribution of national resources and political power.



Figure 4 Oromo protesters in Addis Ababa

The photograph in Figure 4 shows⁸⁶ the framed movement messages regarding the demand for self-rule and to halt land grabbing displayed during the protest in Addis Ababa as part of the Grand Oromia Rally in August 2016. The majority of interviewees and discussion participants affirmed that the immediate objective of the protest was to overthrow the TPLF regime⁸⁷ that openly practiced nepotism and corruption, leading to inequalities, unemployment and poverty in Oromia and other parts of the country. Furthermore, the study respondents indicated that the 2015 Oromo protest desired to end the arbitrary arrests and forced disappearances of the Oromo youth, political leaders and

⁸⁶ DW News. 08 August 2016. [Dozens killed in weekend protests across Ethiopia | News | DW | 08.08.2016](https://www.dw.com/en/dozens-killed-in-weekend-protests-across-ethiopia/a-37811111) Accessed on June 24, 2020.

⁸⁷ Majority of interviewees and focus group discussion participants prefer to call the EPRD-led government as “TPLF regime” to infer the dominance of one of the EPRDF member groups – the Tigray Peoples’ Liberation Front.

public figures. The immediate objectives of the movement were framed and chanted widely by protesters in the form of slogans against arbitrary killings and demanding the release of political prisoners. The messages in Oromia, Amhara and diaspora protest demonstrations reflected the short-term objectives of the movement. Figure 5 portrays the immediate demands of the protesters.⁸⁸



Figure 5 Protest rally messages in Gondar and in the diaspora

The following section elaborates on the Oromo movement agenda framed to respond to the demands of land ownership, the right to language and political representation and participation.

4.2.2. The 3Ls: the Oromo Movement Agenda

4.2.2.1. Land (Lafa)

As one of the focus group discussion participants put it, the 2015 protest against land grabbing and the eviction of Oromo farmers from their ancestral land was not just a demand for the protection of peoples' economic rights. "It was all about *Baattoo*; the mother earth that carries us all as Oromos" (Dibaba 18/01/2021⁸⁹). Dibaba's assertion relates to what Gemetchu (2005, 68-79) called the "Oromo worldview" that explains, among other religious and philosophical worldviews, how Oromos perceive land. For Oromos, land is not just an economic commodity. It is instead the core of their existence and realm. Hence, the right to land administration has been their main movement agenda since the 1970s intertwined with shared identity calling for collective action.

Data analysis highlighted the occurrences of irregularities in terms of land administration and appropriation in the region. According to key informants, the issue of land is often politicized, curtailing equal access to natural resources and the right to property in the Oromia region. There has been rampant corruption by state officials and party cadres who were openly selling, endowing and exchanging plots of lands throughout Oromia.⁹⁰

⁸⁸ Zecharias Zelalem. 23 February 2018. [Amhara protest stalwarts released but government remains mum on Welkait issue - OPride.com](#) Accessed on July 24, 2020.

OPride Contributor. 28 October 2014. [Because I am Oromo: a sweeping repression in Oromia, Ethiopia - OPride.com](#) Accessed on July 24, 2020.

⁸⁹ Dibaba, self-employed, focus group discussion, Lege Tafo, January 18, 2021.

Additionally, the federal government was directly involved without local communities' will and full participation in distributing land to foreign investors. Therefore, land administration rights and Oromia's regional territory within the federal structure arose as a significant concern igniting the 2015 Oromo protest.



Figure 6 “Lafti lafe kenya”, demand for land rights campaign online and, on the road

The Oromo people describe the value of land in their identity through the saying “*Lafti lafe kenya*”, loosely translated as “Land is our bone” (Sifan 09/12/2020; Nahim 14/11/2020⁹¹; Bedaso 18/07/2021). The slogan in Figure 6, “*Lafti lafe kenya*” implies that land among the Oromo community is not just an economic commodity rather the core of their existence, livelihood and dignity. The following assertion from a key informant sheds light on how the notion of *Lafti lafe kenya* reinforced the freedom from eviction as one of the 2015 Oromo movement flagship agendas.

“*Lafti lafee keenya* was among the important messages framed by movement leaders. It has the element of ‘Land to the Tiller’ slogan of the 1974 students’ revolution, but then again, *Lafti lafee keenya* resonates to the understanding of the Oromo people – land is our bone - the core of our existence” (Bedaso 18/07/2021).

Empirical data of this study support Bula’s (2020) claim that the issue of the master plan was beyond the issue of land rights and economic benefits of the Oromo people. This study further elucidated that the issue of land relates to identity and belongingness and that the 2015 Oromo protesters claimed for autochthony, connectedness to the land they possess by virtue of birth. Empirical data from fieldwork confirmed that the Oromo historical questions to the land use right and freedom from eviction were intertwined with the collective identity of the Oromos linking key movement actors and the public at large to establish collective action. Therefore, major demonstrations in the Oromia region voiced the public demand for land use rights illuminated by a shared message, “the land belongs to the Oromo”, depicting that the Oromos are considered second-class citizens on their own land. Such message framing helped the 2015 Oromo protest to be acclaimed by the grassroots as the “peoples’ movement” (Soreti 02/01/2021; Morka 10/04/2021).

⁹⁰The Guardian, January 18, 2016. [In Ethiopia, anger over corruption and farmland development runs deep | Governance | The Guardian](#) Accessed on October 23, 2020.

⁹¹ Nahim, protest leader and activist, University lecturer, interview with the author, November 14, 2020.

“That was peoples’ movement. We protested against expulsion from our ancestral land, which defines our identity, and that is the reason we stood together and died together” (Morka 10/04/2021).

Empirical data of this study shows that the continued eviction of people and the fast expansion of Addis Ababa was discussed in relation to past historical incidences such as the imperial’s land tenure system and the Derg’s land appropriation and resettlement programs.

4.2.2.2. *Language (Afaan)*

Data collected for this research indicates that the demand for the recognition of Afan Oromo as an additional federal working language was one of the movement agendas that the key actors framed. The demand for language rights was guided by the desire of the 2015 protest to promote equal participation of the Oromo people in the Ethiopian state’s political, social, economic, and cultural affairs. More so, the demand for the recognition of Afan Oromo as an official language along with Amharic was a profound move to symbolize the “one-ness” of geographically dispersed Oromo people embedded within the shared value of “*Orommuummaa*” that reflects the collective identity (Nahim 14/11/2020; Kitata 13/12/2020). On the one hand, the ability to articulate and act towards the movement objectives carrying the language agenda was framed by key actors to embrace Oromoness. On the other hand, protesters’ demand for Afan Oromo to be considered as an official language in the federal structure can be understood through the constructionist perspective. The constructionist perspective claims that collective identities ascend within an interactive environment where power relationships legitimize, resist and project collective identities (Della Porata 2006). In this regard, the 2015 Oromo protest was about legitimizing Afan Oromo as a federal working language, a political demand from the dominant party state, while resistance and projecting Afan Oromo as a symbol of Oromoness is a tactic to valorize the language within the broader Ethiopian society.

“I was born and raised in a small village near Dembi Dolo speaking Afan Oromo, and being nurtured as any Oromo child. I learned Amharic as one of the subjects in my high school and scored good grades, but it was not my daily mode of communication, be it in school or within the community. Later I joined Addis Ababa University for my bachelor’s degree and immediately realized life was becoming challenging, even to get a haircut without speaking Amharic. My friends who speak both Afan Oromo and Amharic helped me to learn to speak Amharic fluently. I would not have survived life in Addis Ababa if not for good friends. That is why the Oromo quest for language rights is my mission. I do not want to see my younger siblings be humiliated because they speak Afan Oromo and marginalized by others for not speaking Amharic” (Nahim 14/11/2020).

The Oromo demand for linguistic rights complies with other contemporary social movements that call for language reforms and help shape societal values, beliefs, and identity embedded within language. Tarrow (2011) explained that language in contentious social movements could inspire trust that will last beyond the protest

moment. Data collected for this research supports Tarrow's claim by presenting Afan Oromo as the source of trust, specifically among *Qeerroo* leaders.

“One thing TPLF did us good is making Afan Oromo an instructional language in primary schools. We are the *Qubee* generation. That was what enabled us to discuss societal grievances freely; for sure, I know my fellow *Qubee* generation feels the same about the cause of the movement” (Koket 16/07/2021⁹²).

The above quote from one of *Qaarree* leaders (female movement leader) conforms to Tarrow's assertion about how language facilitates trust among movement actors. What is not captured by the broader literature is the context in which movements that framed language rights as an agenda in the postmodern era potentially form an exclusive identity within the broader collective identity. In the case of the 2015 Oromo protest, the issue of language was the shared goal among the mass public, but the ability to speak, write and read Afan Oromo fluently created a distinct group within the Oromo community, which is called “the *Qubee* Generation”, who fearlessly spearheaded the protests. Data from the field shows that most active movement members, both online and offline were renowned as “the *Qubee* Generation” – young people taught in Afan Oromo during their junior and secondary schools. Thus, the primary communication language of the protest was Afan Oromo, although Amharic and English were used to broaden the reach of potential supporters and sympathizers of the 2015 Oromo protest. As Castells (2009; 2016) argued, communication power can be exercised when the communicative act is transparent to articulate the shared objectives of movement actors in which language is crucial to encourage action. Within the postmodern notion of freedom of expression, language remains a tool to provide individuals participation in the production, dissemination, and consumption of content (Tarrow 2011; Balkin 2004). In the 2015 Oromo protest, language served a multirole. Speaking, writing and reading Afan Oromo in Latin alphabets was an identity, a communication tool to advance the movement agenda and a human right quest shared by movement members.

Arora (2020) explained that the use of social media platforms created a digital political culture that connected the urban community and the digital diaspora without further examining how the Oromo digital activism managed to stay connected with the rural on-the-road protests. Based on empirical data collected for this study, common language - Afan Oromo- was an essential element that connects the digital diaspora activists and the offline road protesters in Ethiopia. As one of the focus group discussants put it: “I trust the diaspora activists because they understand my pain as a young Oromo, and they speak my language to voice my concerns” (Solan 29/12/2020).⁹³

Thus, the advancement of Afan Oromo as an instructional language in primary schools and the emergence of the *Qubee* generation facilitated the articulation of the movement agenda to the grassroots in a manner the availability and access to the Internet by itself could not influence protest communication. The advancement of Afan Oromo can be associated with the decision of the Transitional Government of Ethiopia during the 1991 Peace and Democracy Conference, where the OLF actively participated in the provision

⁹² Koket, Qaarree Finfine, interview with the author, July 16, 2021.

⁹³ Solan, Qeerroo leader, unemployed, focus group in Alem Gena, December 29, 2020.

of primary education through five major ethnic languages, including Afan Oromo (Raga 2018). Moreover, language advancement protects freedom of expression as stipulated under Article 29 of the Federal Constitution and Article 19 (2) of the ICCPR, to which Ethiopia is a state party.

4.2.2.3. Leadership (Angoo)

The Oromo people, who constitute the large population in the country⁹⁴ have been demanding equal and meaningful representation since the OLF left the transitional government in 1992. According to Asafa (2020), the Oromos were systematically denied equal access to political resources of the country, which contributed to the escalation of the 2015 protest. Empirical data from the field further shows the perceived political marginalization of Oromos from the State structure.

“The Oromo people were not truly represented in the political system. Those Oromo individuals who used to occupy political office played a puppet role to the TPLFites. So, the protest was to demand meaningful representation of the Oromo into the political powerhouse” (Chali, 16/06/2021⁹⁵).

The above assertion summarizes the study findings regarding the protesters’ demand for political representation. All key informants of the study claimed that the Oromos were systematically marginalized from the state’s political organization, which was dominated by the TPLF, leaving no room for meaningful representation and power exercise of other ethnic groups within the Ethiopian state. ‘Leadership’, as coined by movement leaders, was elevated to another level during the 2015 Oromo protest as the key actors were using the 3Ls card interchangeably to assert their movement agenda (Meti 03/11/2020; Bedaso 18/07/2021). Even when the government announced the cancellation of the master plan in January 2016, the protesters revived ‘leadership’ as a primary movement agenda without undermining the remaining two, land and language, to continue the demand for an inclusive and genuine political reform and ensure meaningful representation of Oromos into the political organization of the country (Robsan 16/07/2021; Wariyo 07/11/2020).

Content analysis of this study shows that the government reshuffled its cabinet in a manner that appears to respond to the protesters claim. The former Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn (August 2012 to February 2018) said that the 21 newly appointed officials were chosen “based on competence and commitment than party loyalty”⁹⁶. Content analysis shows protesters largely rejected the appointments claiming it was based on ethnic background, political loyalty and systematic control of the TPLF referring to the two Oromo officials who were appointed as Minister of Foreign Affairs and Minister of Communication replacing Tigrayans⁹⁷ as seen in Figure 7.

⁹⁴ The Ethiopian National Census conducted in 2007 shows that the Oromo people constitute 34.5 percent of the general population in the country.

⁹⁵ Chali, activist and journalist, interview with the author, June 16, 2021.

⁹⁶ Tigray Online. 01 November 2016. [Ethiopian Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn introduces new cabinet ministers \(tigraionline.com\)](https://www.tigraionline.com) Accessed on February 02 2020.

EBC. 01 November 2016. [/ጥቅምት 22/2009/ አዳዲስ የካቢኔ አባላት ሹመት ጸደቀ:: - YouTube](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=...) posted on November 01, 2016 EBC live. Accessed on July 31, 2021.

⁹⁷ OPride. 01 November 2016. GCAO Minister Getachew Reda, a Tigrayan was replaced by a university lecturer Negeri Lencho, as Werkeneh Gebeyhu, an Oromo, was promoted to Minister of Foreign Affairs

The Foreign Ministry is one of the offices controlled by minority Tigrayans since 1991. Workineh's appointment ostensibly takes that key sticking point away from the opposition. However, the former federal police chief is himself partly of Tigrayan heritage, which only deepens the lack of trust among majority Oromo. Besides, the debate over Workineh's ethnic background makes little difference. As former three-time minister Juneydi Saddo told OPride recently, for every non-Tigrayan minister, TPLF often appoints a shadowy but powerful deputy that controls the higher official and runs the office from behind.

Figure 7 News clip from OPride.com. November 01, 2016

Leadership as one of major movement agendas crept to the protests following the broadcast of the alleged leaked audio where the then Advisor to the Prime Minister, Abay Tsehaye, was heard threatening officials in surrounding Oromia special zone towns for deliberately delaying the implementation of the master plan.⁹⁸ As the 2015 national election was also approaching, movement leaders warned that the bold threat from the government official could potentially lead to election-related violence and crackdown on Oromo leaders and human rights activists (Kelbesa 03/11/2020; Hassan 15/11/2020). The claim was supported by an online campaign #StopAbayTsehaye followed by a second-round audio leak in February 2015 to which Abay Tsehaye is quoted “Why did they misrepresent the aim of the master plan, because – if it goes into effect – it would bring to light those shady land deals and the actors involved.”⁹⁹

The counter framing of the protesters demand from the senior advisor to the prime minister did not achieve its objective of threatening the OPDO officials from inclining to support the cancellation of the master plan. Instead, the younger party members announced support in the coming months of 2016 as the protest keeps its momentum. The issue of self-rule and equal access to the country's political, economic, social and cultural resources took center stage to enhance the framings of the 2015 Oromo protest. Again, the ruling party was forced to respond to the continuing demand of the Oromo people by announcing a draft proclamation to ensure the Oromia's special interest in Addis Ababa as stipulated in the Federal Constitution Article 49 sub-article 5.¹⁰⁰ The statement from

replacing Tedros Adhanom. [Ethiopia's cabinet reshuffle may be too little, too late to quell protests - OPride.com](#) Accessed on July 6, 2021.

⁹⁸ OMN. News 8'50''- report by Befekadu Moreda. [OMN Leaked Audio - Abay Tsehaye of TPLF warns OPDO officials on #OromoProtests | January 2016 - EthioTube](#) Accessed on May 08, 2020.

⁹⁹ Daniel Berhane. 23 January 2016. [Exclusive| Abay Tsehaye: Oromos know who robbed, maltreated them ~ Horn Affairs - English](#) Accessed on May 20, 2020.

¹⁰⁰ Tullu Firew. 22 July 2021. A statement from the Council of Ministers on the EBC. <https://www.facebook.com/1851333433/videos/1726566547551893/> Accessed on September 12, 2021.

the Council of Ministers read on the EBC indicated that Afan Oromo will be a working language in Addis Ababa as farmers and residents of surrounding Oromia special zone towns employed by Oromia regional state offices will directly benefit from the cultural, social and economic sectors of the capital city.¹⁰¹ However, the draft proclamation was fully rejected by movement actors on the ground that the draft proclamation would not make Afan Oromo the federal working language, and Addis Ababa's name will not change to *Finfinee*.¹⁰² Interestingly, the content analysis of the study captured an article from Tigray Online rejecting the draft proclamation on the ground that it would create discriminatory practices among the city residents and ethnically divided city population.¹⁰³

4.3. Triggering the Oromo's Anger and Unifying Their Causes: The Master Plan

The issue of the master plan often referred to as the triggering factors of the 2015 Oromo protest seem to be the most debated one. Empirical findings of this study support the arguments of previous literature regarding the Addis Ababa Master Plan as an immediate triggering factor of the 2015 Oromo protest (Wilson et al. 2021; Tewodros 2020; Seifu 2019; Meseret 2020). At the same time, the research claims that the Addis Ababa Master Plan was not just an immediate cause of the protest but a unifying factor to the 2015 Oromo protesters whose anger was triggered by a chain of events related to land grabbing, arbitrary detentions, extrajudicial executions, and the general exclusion of Oromo peoples' interests from social, economic and political arenas. This study argues the 2015 Oromo protest actors did not settle for finding factors that triggered the grievance of the people; they also needed a reason that could bond the movement. This relates to the existing literature regarding social movement actors' characteristics. According to Melucci (1996a) and Tarrow (2011), successful movement actors play a pivotal role in connecting different occurrences located at different points in time and space to make them relevant to their experiences with the broader movement narrative.

Identifying the Master Plan as a unifying factor refers to the theoretical analysis of the study that deals with shaping the movement agenda and sharing political messages around collective identity. The capacity to frame values and connect diverse society experiences in different contexts to establish a common agenda and call for collective action needs constant cooperation between movement actors (Tarrow 2011; Della Porta and Diani 2006; Melucci 1996b). In this case, the issue of the master plan was an experience that the mass protesters throughout Oromia relate to and articulate as a unifying force reaffirming the unity of the Oromo people. The Addis Ababa master plan was neither the first in the city's development history nor the only initiative during the EPRDF era. Hence, brief background information on how the master plan became at the center of the 2015 Oromo movement would help us understand its unifying features.

¹⁰¹ Ibid

¹⁰² OPride. 01 July 2017. [Oromia Special Interest Law: Who owns Addis Ababa? - OPride.com](#) Accessed on September 12, 2021.

¹⁰³ Tigray Online. 30 December 2017. [A Draft Proclamation that Would Potentially Infest Addis Ababans with Ethnic Viruses \(tigraionline.com\)](#) Accessed on September 12, 2021.

The first attempt to revise the city's master plan after the fall of the Derg regime was in 1999. The 1999 master plan revision was the base that paved the way for the 2004-2014 structure plans. Then, the structure plan was replaced in June 2013 by the Surrounded Oromia Special Zone Integrated Development Plan for the period 2014-2038. Initially, the announcement of the 2014-2038 Master Plan did not seem to attract the attention of activists until the General Manager of the project, Mathewos Asfaw, gave an interview on April 20, 2014, stating that his office is ready to start implementing the Master Plan aiming to benefit the surrounding areas of Addis Ababa.¹⁰⁴ At this time, movement leaders decided to take the Addis Ababa and Surrounding Oromia Special Zone Town Integrated Master Plan as a case of frame alignment. The Master plan elucidated the relationship between the movement's advancement and the existing contexts by integrating interpretations of reality formed and the beliefs of diverse social groups that might otherwise remain separated. The action of movement leaders goes beyond movement agenda setting and relates to what the literature states regarding social movement framing theory (Melucci 1996b; Della Porat and Diani 2006; Tarrow 2011; Tilly 2011). Social movement framing is all about giving meaning to events, actors, and places to carefully organize experience by instigating contestation and entry point for negotiation in order to guide action.

According to key informants, the framing of the master plan to symbolize the inequalities and marginalization of the Oromo people was a point of contestation among movement leaders of the 2015 protests (Jigsa 16/02/2021;¹⁰⁵ Robsan 16/07/2021). Perhaps, such an internal contestation was a reason movement leaders preferred to wait until the Ginchi protest to construct meaning that appeals to the longstanding interests of the Oromo people. Some movement leaders with active online engagement and better educational background indicated that the master plan was meant to improve the lives of residents in Addis Ababa and Oromia Special Zone towns by devising an integrated public service and providing a proper waste management system (Jigsa 16/02/2021; Robsan 16/07/2021; Badaso 18/07/2021). Nonetheless, they protested the master plan merely to advance the claim of freedom from forceful eviction as a powerful message to call for mass support. Other movement actors fairly educated and with some degree of acceptance by locals opposed the government's move to expand the capital city into the Oromia region, claiming it was unconstitutional and looms the socio-economic fabric of the Oromo people (Kumsa 30/12/2020; Gemechu 10/05/2021;¹⁰⁶ Terfasa 20/01/2021). Finally, movement leaders agreed that in the context of having an exploitative political system, the expansion of Addis Ababa into the surrounding towns must be framed as "land grabbing that threatens the existence of the Oromo people" (Bedaso 18/07/2021). Prior studies appeared not to see such internal contestations and gave the impression on the consensus of actors on the impact of the master plan on the surrounding towns (Seifu 2019; Mebratu 2021; Wilson et al. 2021; Habtamu 2017). On the other hand, the findings of this study show that there were different interpretations and reactions of key actors to the master plan based on knowledge and experience.

¹⁰⁴ EBC. 20 April 2014: Meet ETV with Tefera Gedamu. Interview with Mathewos Asfaw.

¹⁰⁵ Jigsa, diaspora activist, virtual interview with the author, February 16, 2021.

¹⁰⁶ Gemechu, youth leader, Alem Gena 10/05/2021

Moreover, it was agreed that the Oromo people question about Addis Ababa is a constitutional question that has nothing to do with the protest. Therefore, the protest was framed and articulated against the Addis Ababa and Surrounding Oromia Special Zone Towns Integrated Master Plan, widely known as “the master plan”. The master plan served as a symbol of the Oromos demand for land, leadership and language through amplifying land use rights, freedom from eviction, meaningful participation and decision making in development projects (Sifan 09/12/2020; Garoma 05/08/2021). The study further argues that the Addis Ababa master plan served as a powerful unifying symbol for the Oromo rights activists with diverse interests and backgrounds. Accordingly, research data shows that the master plan reinterpreted the Oromo nationalism to embrace the diverse ideas and orientations reflected within the movement structure.

4.4. The Emergence of Coordinated Protest Demonstrations

On April 20, 2014, the Addis Ababa Master Plan was announced, followed by protest rallies in Ambo, Nekemte, Jimma, Meda Welabu, and other towns of Oromia. As seen in Figure 8, Ambo University students went out to the road on April 25, 2014, protesting against the master plan. Based on data from key informant interviews, the protests were organized by activists in Ethiopia who worked closely with *Qeerroo* leaders in different parts of the Oromia region. According to key informants, the first coordinated protest against the master plan was on April 30, 2014, organized by Ambo university students and spread to other Oromia towns (Abdireshid 12/12/2020; Jarso 28/12/2020). Police brutal crackdown on that day resulted in the arrests and the killings of at least nine people.¹⁰⁷



Figure 8 The first protest rally in Ambo on April 25, 2014. Photo credit: The Guardian

“I cannot forget that day... My friends and I heard that some students in the university were about to go out to the roads to protest a master plan that will evict Oromos from towns surrounding Addis Ababa, including my birthplace. It was so

¹⁰⁷ Paul O’Keeffe [Ethiopia crackdown on student protests taints higher education success | Governance | The Guardian](#) Accessed on November 10, 2020.

personal for a friend of mine from the same locality and me. We were the first to go out to the roads and yell against the eviction” (Jarso 28/12/2020¹⁰⁸).

The #OromoProtests hashtag on Twitter and Facebook followed the protest in Ambo. Content analysis of this study purposively captured the #OromoProtests tweet on May 01, 2014; the tweet was not shared, liked or commented. However, it shows the initial attempts of movement actors to use the offline protests to initiate online political engagement against the master plan.

Data analysis of the study clearly shows that the Ambo protest rally against the master plan precedes the November 12, 2015, Ginchi protest that is by and large considered the marking date where the Oromo Protest gained its momentum. One of the movement leaders interviewed for this study confidently asserted that “the small protest in Ginchi was amplified online to bolster the movement agenda against land grabbing” (Robsan 16/07/2021). Also, the picture in Figure 9 shows that the Ginchi protest became an iconic image of the Oromo movement.¹⁰⁹



Figure 9 Ginchi protest on November 12, 2015 Photo Credit: Addis Standard

Nonetheless, this research argues that the university students rally in Ambo encouraged movement leaders to synchronize the off-the-road protests with online activism. As data of this research highlights, two days after the Ambo protest rally, the first organized online activism platform, #OromoProtests Facebook page, was created on May 02, 2014, managed by three people (two from the United States and the other from Australia). The first #OromoProtests post on the page can also be traced to May 10, 2014, attracting 13 likes, a comment, and 47 shares for its YouTube video about a protest rally in Melbourne, Australia.¹¹⁰ One can also argue that movement leaders deliberately sidelined the Ambo rally to wait until protest messages are well framed. On the other hand, this study confirms that the Ambo university students’ protest rally in April 2014 marked a

¹⁰⁸ Jarso, protest participant, former Ambo university student, focus group discussion in Sebeta.

¹⁰⁹ Addis Standard. 16 December 2015. [Oromo protests: defiance amidst pain and suffering - Addis Standard](#) Accessed on November 11, 2020.

¹¹⁰ <https://www.facebook.com/OromoProtests/> Last Accessed on August 1, 2021. The page has 34,842 likes and 37,855 follows

significant upheaval of the Oromo protest to organize and communicate dissent in the face of state authorities capable of crackdown and Internet surveillance. Conversely, the Ginchi protest has its own marking in the development of the 2015 Oromo protest as it has enabled the diaspora community to recruit local people who can serve as a focal point in organizing the movement on the ground (Jigsa 16/02/2021; Kelbesa 03/11/2020).

These recruits were selected from some Oromia towns, including Ambo, Ginchi, Kofele and other places and were tasked with organizing the mass and plan on the road protests through the financial support and guidance of the diaspora activists (ibid). After the Ginchi protest, youth across Oromia continued to demonstrate regardless of the police crackdown instigating the closure of schools in the region for about two months. According to focus group participants, boycotting schools was discussed with local *Qeerroo* leaders, leading to the declaration “Schooling after Freedom” (Hundesä 29/12/2020; Guta 12/12/2020¹¹¹; Monera 03/01/2021¹¹²). One of focus group participants said: “we were not going to school; I would say protesting became our full-time job ever since we heard about the Ginchi protest” (Yeron 03/01/2021¹¹³).

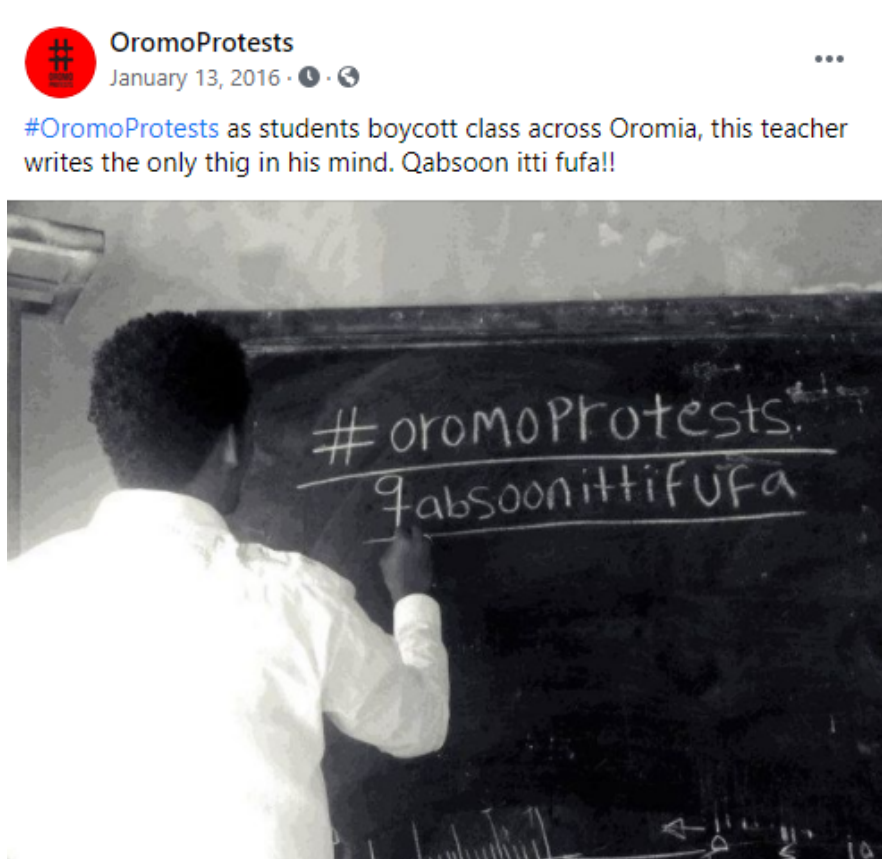


Figure 10 A teacher in an empty classroom, Oromia, taken from OromoProtests Facebook page.

¹¹¹ Guta, farmer, focus group discussion, Burayu, December 12, 2020.

¹¹² Monera, activist, self-employed, focus group discussions, Addis Ababa, January 03, 2021.

¹¹³ Yeron, protester, university student, focus group discussion, Alem Gena, December 29, 2020

According to key informants, the first round of protests in different parts of Oromia, including Ambo, Mendi, Nekemte, Bale, Harer, Jimma, and Arisi, were primarily attended by students later joined by locals from different walks of life. The shared message throughout the protests was “No to *Finfinne* Master Plan”, with a hashtag on social media.¹¹⁴

“The incarceration, the killings and the daylight robbery of our land, forest, and all... true, it was painful. Of all things, though, I could not tolerate seeing these young students who were defending our rights being killed by the *Liyu* police (special police) in front of their parents. That is the reason I went out to the roads with them” (Soreti 02/01/2021).

In May 30, 2016, Jawar Mohammed, whose name was repeatedly mentioned by study participants among the movement’s prominent leaders, urged the government to postpone the annual school-leaving examination as Oromo students who had been protesting for long were not ready to sit for the exams. Days later, Jawar disclosed over social media that the national exam is leaked, although the Higher Education Agency released a statement saying it was false. Soon after, copies of exams started to circulate on Facebook, forcing the government to postpone the exam, although the protests continued.

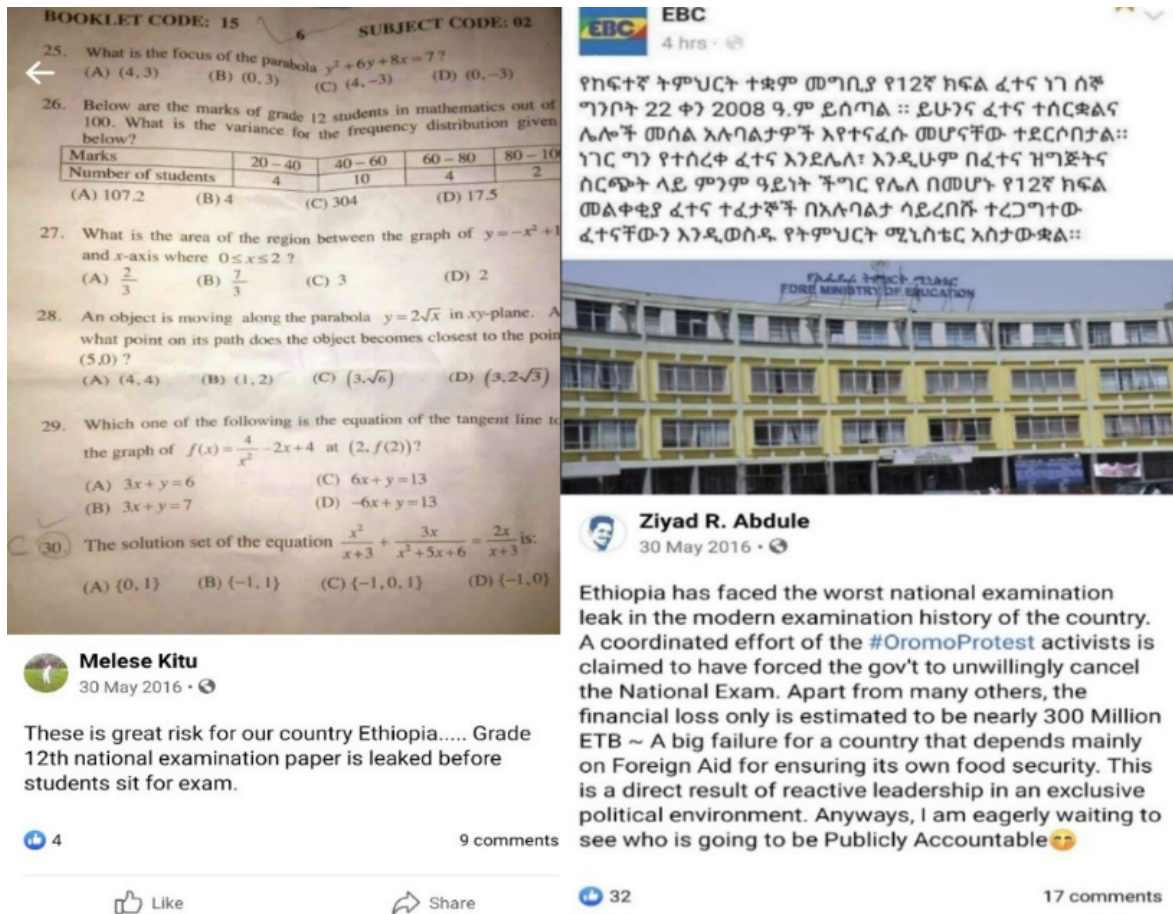


Figure 11 Mathematics exam leak and news from EBC about the leak

¹¹⁴ <https://twitter.com/GadissaHoma/status/669542195561525248?s=03> Accessed on December 15, 2020.

The exam leak clips in Figure 11 relates to the argument made by Sarikakis and Rodriguez-Amat (2012) regarding the significance of smartphones and the Internet in providing a secured platform to movement leaders. The 2015 Oromo protest further proves the influence of the Internet to create a sphere for supporters and amplifiers in pressuring the state to respond.

Worsening the case, the government rescheduled the national exam during the Eid-al-Fitr Muslim's holiday.¹¹⁵ This added fuel to the grievances of the already protesting Muslim mass demanding religious freedom. Muslim informants asserted that they have never considered their Oromo identity separated from their Muslim identity.¹¹⁶ They protested oppression against the Oromo people from 2011 until the end of the TPLF rule, implying that the *Dimtsachin Yisem* Muslims protest is a forerunner of the 2015 Oromo protest. Hence, the announced date of the rescheduled national exam infuriated them as Oromos, whose demand for the postponement of the national exam was obscured by the government (Hassan 15/11/2020). The government blocked social media sites throughout the country until the rescheduled exam was administered. By then, social media was the primary source of information about the Oromo protests as the mainstream media became the government's captive. Additionally, the leaked exam saga, repeated road blockaded and market strikes and the intensified repressions against Oromos became a national agenda inspiring support rallies in Amhara regional state instigating additional public demand for recognition and self-governance of Wolqaiet and a call for a regime change in Ethiopia (Ethiopian Human Rights Project 2016). As the protest deepened in these two regions, grievances about lack of political space and inability to express dissent came to the forefront, instigating a large scale of public unrest and clear demand for freedom of expression, assembly and association.

¹¹⁵ The national exam was rescheduled from 3 to 06 July 2016.

¹¹⁶ The informants statement relates to Ostebo's argument on the intertwined identity of *Oromumma* and *islamumma* "Being young, Being Muslim in Bale" in the book *Muslim Ethiopia: The Christian Legacy, Identity Politics, and Islamic Reformism*. 2013. New York: Palgrave-Mac pages 47-69.

Tweet

Zecharias Zelalem  @ZekuZelalem · Jul 31, 2016

Salute of solidarity from the [#AmharaProtests](#) to the [#OromoProtests](#)

Truly unsarcastic use of [#EthiopiaRising](#) here.



 3

 11

 10



Figure 12 The rise of new protest demands and new hashtags

Figure 12 portrays the solidarity rallies in the Amhara region, Gondar town and new campaign hashtag, [#EthiopiaRising](#), indicative of a national uprising against the ruling party. The support rallies in the Amhara region, specifically in Gondar, Debre Markos and Bahir Dar, have shown similarities in displaying popular discontent against the ruling party. The protests involved rallies, lockdowns, strikes and demonstrations. Based on content analysis and as seen in the above picture, a hashtag equivalent to the [#OromoProtests](#) was created as [#AmharaProtests](#) shared dominantly by Oromo activists.

The Grand Oromia Rally was organized on August 6, 2016, throughout Oromia, Addis Ababa, and major western cities such as Minnesota, Toronto, Melbourne, London, and Geneva with significant Ethiopian diaspora communities to voice the grievances of the Oromo people. Perhaps this was the first time Addis Ababa hosted an organized 2015 Oromo protest rally at Meskel Square, succeeding to the protest demonstration organized by Oromo students of Addis Ababa University in front of the United States Embassy in March 2016, critical to the brutal crackdowns of the government against the Oromo protesters elsewhere in Oromia region. The announcement of the grand rally came from the diaspora community requesting protesters to stay connected using the Internet, mobile technologies and social media platforms to stay up to date with the planning and execution of the demonstrations.

The study online content analysis found out that the rally organizers created a Facebook community page on August 5, 2016, named “Grand Oromo Rally August 6”, which is still managed by two people from Ethiopia and one from the United States¹¹⁷. The Facebook page posted photographs from various rallies that occurred on August 6 and live-streamed Oromia Media Network coverage of rallies accompanied by a message from Jawar Mohammed that has attracted more than 124k views.¹¹⁸ It demonstrates the involvement of on the ground actors in digital activism and online movement organization, enhancing the claim that the online sphere of the 2015 Oromo protest was not merely planned and managed by the diaspora activists. However, the 2015 Oromo protest attracted a global spotlight when Feyisa Lilesa, an Olympic marathon runner who won a silver medal on August 21 2016, crossed his arms above his head to support the Oromo movement. As Gelan, a diaspora activist said, “what Feyisa Lilesa did during the Rio Olympics moved the Oromo movement to the international arena” (Gelan 03/03/2021).

Diaspora Oromo activists compared Lilesa’s protest to the silent protest against racial discrimination performed by American athletes Tommie Smith and John Carlos at the 1974 Olympics, which bought them international media coverage.¹¹⁹ Content analysis of this study highlights that Feyisa’s deed inspired Ebisa Ejigu, who performed a symbolic sign of the Oromo protest when he won the Quebec City Marathon on August 28 2016. The sportsmen action during the Rio Olympic and Quebec Marathon redefined the diaspora community’s involvement that has been associated with the online protest. The athletics incidents revealed the 2015 Oromo protest as a transnational movement whereby the diaspora activists used various communication tactics to influence domestic politics and the country’s foreign relations agenda.

¹¹⁷ Grand Oromia Rally. 06 August 2016. <https://www.facebook.com/Grand-Oromo-Rally-August-6-1839773402917393/?ti=as> Accessed on August 5, 2021

¹¹⁸ OMN 06 August 2016. <https://www.facebook.com/OromiaMedia/videos/1797491983796994/> Accessed on August 5, 2021.

¹¹⁹ Hugo Williams. 28 December 2016. [Africa's top hashtags of 2016. Available on: https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-38316555](https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-38316555) Accessed on July 20, 2021.

By **Feyisa Lilesa**
September 13, 2016

Feyisa Lilesa is an Ethiopian Olympian and winner of a silver medal in the men's marathon at the Summer Olympics in Rio de Janeiro.

My country is an important ally of the United States. We in Ethiopia and people around the world see America as a beacon of democracy and promoter of human rights. Allies should not let allies commit the abuses that happen in Ethiopia every day. I don't think that the United States wants Ethiopia to disintegrate. I am asking the U.S. government to demand an explanation from Ethiopia and to condemn the brutal and unfair actions of the government. The United States needs to push hard for democracy in Ethiopia. I think that is the only thing that will keep my country together.

Figure 13 Excerpt from Feyisa Lilesa's article for The Washington Post

The newspaper clip¹²⁰ in Figure 13 is a personal reflection of Feyisa Lelisa about his experiences of the 2015 Oromo protest. Feyissa used the opportunity to amplify the Oromo movement's objective as an international human rights agenda. Feyisa's Olympic claim was picked by the international media and human rights advocacy groups because the diaspora community used the case to strengthen their lobbying against the Ethiopian government, framing the incident with gross human rights abuse against the Oromo people (Abdirashid 12/12/2020). Mohammed Ademo, a Columbia University Journalism graduate, who was keen to amplify the Oromo movement to the international audience, offered Lilesa help with his first press release after the Olympic protest gesture.¹²¹ In just two days, there were 86 news reports about Lilesa and his cause.¹²² At the same time, the compassion and care the diaspora exhibited to the runner helped the movement to encourage similar action from others on international podiums like Ebisa and to earn the trust of on the road protesters who started to consider the diaspora as an undefeated force to rescue the Oromo cause (Gelan 03/03/2021; Gemechu 10/05/2021).

October 02 2016, *Irreecha* festival stampede in Bishoftu was an event that changed the trajectory of the Oromo protest. The government admitted that 55 were killed during the holiday festival, although Oromo activists disputed the number saying more than a hundred people died as they fled ammunition and teargas. The next day, October 03, the government declared national mourning of *Irreecha* stampede victims. However, the protest continued as people tried to gather in Bishoftu, demanding the release of people arrested during and after the celebrations. More than 1,680 people from various parts of

¹²⁰ Feyisa Lilesa. 13 September 2016. [Olympian Feyisa Lilesa: From Rio to America, I will keep fighting Ethiopia's oppression - The Washington Post](#) Accessed on April 02, 2021.

¹²¹ Abdi Latif Dahir. 25 October 2016. [The diaspora media movement shaping the coverage of Ethiopia's Oromo and Amhara protests — Quartz Africa \(qz.com\)](#) Accessed on October 5, 2021.

¹²² Ibid.

Oromia and Addis Ababa were arrested.¹²³ Despite the three-day national mourning declared, the protests erupted in many parts of the region, including West Arsi, Holeta, Wonji, Dire Dawa and Sebeta, where the protesters burned factories and government vehicles. Protesters targeted local and foreign investments, like the Turkish textile firm in Sebeta because locals considered factories and real estate as landgrabbers.¹²⁴ In Jimma, university students held protest demonstrations and candle vigils for the victims of *Irreecha* stamped (ESAT News October 05, 2016).¹²⁵ Committee to Protect Journalists stated On October 04, 2016, that the government security forces arrested bloggers and social media activists Natnael Feleke and Seyoum Teshome, who were critical of the ruling party in an attempt to silence dissent online. On October 09, 2016, the government openly declared a state of emergency, acknowledging that the situation is endangering the lives and properties of citizens in the country.¹²⁶

The data analysis for this study indicates that the 2016 *Irreecha* holiday festival promoted the Oromo pride in their culture and unity more than ever. Nonetheless, the stampede on the same day ignited widespread anger bringing the Oromo protest to revolution, ostensibly reducing protesters' fear to brutal crackdowns. The next section of this chapter focuses on mapping key movement actors involved in organizing and sustaining the 2015 Oromo protests.

4.5. Mapping Key Movement Actors and Their Discursive Practices

Searching for the key movement actors of the 2015 Oromo protest was not an easy task during the course of the study. The question “who were the key actors that played a significant role during the 2015 protest?” often leads to an abrupt silence during interviews and focus group discussions and takes courage of a participant to respond “*Hin beekaman*” to say “no one knows them”. Data analysis of the study implies that such repeated response resulted from the previous experience of the crackdown, mass arrest and killings of movement members so that respondents are still keen to protect their comrades and leaders from unforeseen attacks. However, informants were also vocal about the leadership structure, movement participants, and their role after developing trust with the researcher. Respondents classify movement actors during the 2015 Oromo protest in four groups: local activists, the diaspora, *Qeerroo* and the OPDO faction, widely known as the “Team Lemma”.

In addition to the identified leadership structure, empirical data shows the indirect participation of some individuals who bring in different resources including financial resources, networking and connections with international organizations in sustaining the movement.

¹²³ BBC News. 20 October 2016. [Ethiopia 'detains 1,600' under state of emergency - BBC News](#) Accessed on September 18, 2021.

¹²⁴ Aaron Maasho. October 5, 2016. [Crowds attack Turkish-owned factory in Ethiopia as protests rage | Reuters](#) Accessed on September 22, 2020.

¹²⁵ ESAT News. 05 October 2016. [Ethiopian protests descend into violence – The Ethiopian Satellite Television and Radio \(ESAT\) \(ethsat.com\)](#) Accessed on November 04, 2020.

¹²⁶ Awol Allo 21 November 2016. [The Oromo protests have changed Ethiopia | Human Rights | Al Jazeera](#) Accessed on February 2021.

“There are some individuals who are invisible, but who make incredible support at a critical time. Some are very educated people working for international organizations, others are people with the money and fame, but very committed to the Oromo cause” Gelan (03/03/2021).

Key informants highlighted the incidental but key contributions of the activists who make significant but indirect contribution in translating human rights norms and brokering political information between protesters and the international community. Indirect activism can have vertical and horizontal approaches to influence the scale shift and diffusion of social movements (Fligstein and McAdam 2019; Tarrow 2011). In the case of the 2015 Oromo protest, the indirect activists influenced the scale shift of the movement by targeting and enabling grassroots protesters to access the Internet through the provision of smartphones and airtime vouchers. The support such activists provided during the protest goes beyond mere protest sponsorship and support. Instead, it was anchoring the harmony between the online and offline protesters.

Moreover, the composition of leaders of the 2015 protest includes people with diverse socio-economic backgrounds, education, social status, religion, age and gender emphasizing that there was no gender difference in the leadership structure. Key informants discussed the role of female movement leaders in setting movement agendas, framing actions and leading protest rallies on the ground (Sifan 09/12/2020; Koket 16/07/2021; Robsan 16/07/2021).

“You can take women in Awday, East Harerge. They even organized women-only protests to systematically reduce police crackdown against protests – who would have the gut to fire on mothers anyway?” (Sifan 09/12/2020).

Empirical data depicted that the 2015 Oromo protest intensified when women protesters and movement leaders are attacked, killed and arrested. Names of women movement leaders in the diaspora had been mentioned during in-depth interviews and focus group discussions.

The common narrative for the blurry image of the leadership structure of the 2015 Oromo protest was its peculiar organization influenced by the political context and the fast expansion of the Internet in Ethiopia. It is also worth considering Asafa’s (2020) claim about the influence of the Oromo traditional self-rule approach that promotes equal participation, liberty and trust among of movement actors. Data from the field shows that respondents appeared to claim ownership of the movement and consider themselves responsible to uphold the protest, which implies the notions of equal participation and shared responsibility of the Oromo traditional self-rule. A quote by Gemechu depicted the sense of movement ownership well: “I am the leader. I believe I have contributed my share to the success of the protest both online and offline” (Gemechu 10/05/2021).

The restriction on freedom of expression, association and assembly during the EPRDF era and its effect on weakening the opposition parties from mobilizing the mass discouraged key actors from establishing a formal movement structure. Research informants accentuated that they often were forced to join the ruling party organized

“One-to-Five” network used to surveillance and report individuals’ movements at the locality level, which was capable of disbanding the movement. However, the government claimed that one-to-five networks were designed to promote “deep participatory democracy.”¹²⁷ According to one of the movement leaders, the 2015 Oromo protest adjusted its organizational structure to utilize the government’s established one-to-five network and succeeded in operating safely within communities. Conversely, the 2015 Oromo protest actors infiltrated and imitated the government’s one-to-five network to expand their support base (Terefe 12/01/2021, Humnesa 06/03/2021¹²⁸).

“I was among the four Oromo *Qeerroo* leaders who campaigned against Bedele Beer when they decided to sponsor Tedy Afro’s Tikur Sew concert. We established a network where one member recruits five more and sends text messages urging Oromo beer drinkers to abandon Bedele products, and we succeeded” (Natai 03/01/2021).

Research data shows that the 2015 Oromo protests organization adapted to a restricting political context by forming an informal organizational structure with arranged communication tactics and transnational movement agenda to protect the movement from infiltration of the ruling party. The 2015 Oromo protest movement actors appropriated the Internet to protest against the ruling party and exchange multimedia messages on the web. The Internet was a digital sphere for Oromo protesters to voice dissent against the system. The movement actors seem to understand that going out on the roads to demonstrate protest was not enough unless it is supported by the digital space that is capable of creating a linkage between the diaspora, the urban digital activists and the rural on the road protesters.

“We were determined to infiltrate the one-to-five chain to protect the movement. We also decided from the outset to use the Internet to speed up the movement... I would say the office of the movement was on the Internet” (Hundesha 29/12/2020¹²⁹).

Study data shows that Tarrow’s (2011) explanation about the flexible organizational structure of social movements that determines their ability to function in contexts where draconian governments are operating is reflected in the 2015 Oromo protest structure. The 2015 Oromo protest used a hybrid strategy to sustain its organization and exploited the Oromo traditional self-rule integrated into the Gada system to convince members of the one-to-five network to consider them as theirs (Olana 10/06/2021; Garoma 0/08/2021; Nafiyad 03/01/2021). The 2015 Oromo protest simultaneously employed a technology-supported hybrid tactic with a traditional leadership style that did not conform with the conventional vertical versus horizontal social movement organization approach. Therefore, it can be argued that the 2015 Oromo protest was a networked social movement that utilized the Internet to form a distinct and multilevel segmented movement structure influenced by the Oromo traditional leadership culture.

¹²⁷ USAID/Ethiopia Cross-Sectoral Youth Assessment Situational Analysis. 2018. Making Cents International. Washington DC. Page 16.

¹²⁸ Humnesa, Qeerroo leader, elementary school teacher, interview with the author, March 06, 2021.

¹²⁹ Hundesha. Qeerroo leader, university graduate, focus group discussion, Alem Gena, December 29, 2020.

4.5.1. The Leadership Structure of the 2015 Oromo Protest

A recent study by Ostebo (2020) concluded that it is complicated to verify the leadership structure of the 2015 Oromo protest and that the protest was a spontaneous grassroots social movement without any formal structures. By emphasizing the word spontaneous, Ostebo implies that the Oromo protest is leaderless, to which key informants of this study argue against.

“The 2015 Oromo protest has leaders; it was not an angry mob. If not, how does a leaderless crowd sustain the movement for at least three years maintaining its nonviolent character, focusing on the framed objectives and achieving a government administration change” (Wariyo 07/11/2020).

The above quote conforms to Polletta’s (2007) claim regarding the characteristics of new social movements that tend to form a nonhierarchical, autonomous and participatory leadership structure. Perhaps the 2015 Oromo protest provides an alternative social movement leadership structure uniquely influenced by the political, cultural and technological contexts of it was formed and sustained.

The research findings show that the 2015 Oromo protest had a multilevel informal organizational structure with a segmented character, providing an opportunity for the movement to mobilize the mass both online and offline. Unlike other social movements with an informal organizational structure, the 2015 Oromo protest was an organization with segmented groups, i.e., the local activists, the diaspora, *Qeerroo* and the Team Lemma, which played an essential role in forming and sustaining a hybrid movement structure where the Internet served as a safe site of resistance and communication platform (Bedaso 18/07/2021; Kelbesa 03/11/2020; Kooluu 29/01/2021¹³⁰). Based on data for this study, each cluster can be considered an independent movement actor with a significant degree of liberty to initiate protest events linked at the national, regional and transnational level to encourage continuous individual member participation online and on the road. Similar to what Gale (1986) and Tilly (2011) described, the organizational structure of the 2015 Oromo protest rejected centralized, top-down command and control in favor of participatory and democratic movement structure. It has also established a centralized communication structure aiming to link leadership across the groups and mitigate counter-framing of the movement agenda by the ruling party. The remaining question to be addressed in this research is the effectiveness of centralizing the production and dissemination of information in this digital era where every movement actor has the opportunity and capacity to communicate through the Internet.

“The protest (2015 Oromo protest) had an informal organization; I say informal because we did not register or run an office as a political party or any civic society. Otherwise, the movement had its structure where each movement group has a governance role to play and a leadership style where communication is centralized” (Kelbesa 03/11/2020).

As clearly described in the above statement, the networked movement organization of the 2015 Oromo protest exhibited a balance of structural power by defining the social

¹³⁰ Kooluu, Qeerroo, civil servant, interview with the author, January 29, 2021.

boundaries of each movement cluster to effectively utilize structural opportunities and instrumental resources. This is related to the discussion by Tourani (1981) and Melucci (1996b) about defining social boundaries and structural opportunities in organizing social movements. Moreover, the overall organization of the Oromo protest applied the elements of the networked movement where no individual or group dominates other movement actors. What is peculiar about the 2015 Oromo protest is its mixed-use of the Internet as a digital political sphere to coordinate the movement online and its multilevel segmented organizational structure to operate offline. Literature depicted the Internet as a mechanism that transnational movements use to decentralize leadership (Tarrow 2011; Della Porta and Diani 2006; Hagerty and Rubinov 2019). However, the 2015 Oromo protest utilized the Internet as a tool to centralize campaign coordination and information flow.

As indicated in Chapter three, fieldwork has influenced how this study approaches the examination of the leadership structure of the 2015 Oromo protest. The study refers to the work of Della Porta and Diani (2006) to interpret leadership as a comprehensive process of organizing a movement and focuses on discussing the leadership structure of the 2015 Oromo protest than about personalities. While discussing the existence of movement leaders on the ground, some names have been dropped during interviews and focus group discussions, and this study refrained from mentioning the names and locations where the 2015 Oromo protest leaders operated. However, it could be essential to indicate that the names of individuals whom study informants acknowledged as leaders of the recent movement fall in one of the movement leadership structure groups or clusters discussed below. The following section further illustrates the structure, member base and role of each movement cluster during the formation of the 2015 Oromo protest and their contribution to the continuation of the movement.

4.5.1.1. Qeerroo

Informants of the study highlighted the role of *Qeerroo Bilisummaa Oromoo* (QBO) as an organization that gave birth to *Qeerroo*. The finding of this study is similar to Mosisa Aga's (2020) argument that the *Qeerroo Bilisummaa Oromoo* (QBO), translated as "Youth for Oromo Freedom", emerged in April 2011 as the Oromo Students Movement (OSM) transformed itself into a formal Oromo movement organization. The OSM coordinated several protest demonstrations in the early 2000s, including the protest against the Bale Forest wildfire and the transfer of Oromia Chaffee from Addis Ababa to Adama (Morka 10/04/2021). According to informants, the Oromo students' committee that launched a national campaign to quench the Bale Forest wildfire was led by the late Tesfahun Chemedo,¹³¹ who is also credited for organizing the OSM. An additional piece of information the study draw compared with that of Mosisa Aga (2020) is about the transformation process of the OSM into QBO that involved a secret meeting of representatives of Oromo university students from 21 campuses throughout Ethiopia that took place in 2011 in Addis Ababa, Gojjam Berenda area (Nafiyad 03/01/2021¹³²;

¹³¹Tesfahun died on August 24, 2013 of an unknown cause at Kaliti prison in Addis Ababa where he was serving a life sentence under concocted charge of plotting to overthrow a constitutional government. [Oromo activist, Tesfahun Chemedo, dies in prison while serving life sentence - OPride.com](#) Accessed on May 21 2020.

Wariyo 07/11/2020; Natai 03/01/202). According to informants, the QBO was the outcome of the Gojjam Berenda meeting led by students from Addis Ababa University.

“We invited two Oromo student representatives from 21 universities throughout the country and managed to gather 17 students to attend the first meeting held in *Finfinnee* around Gojjam Berenda. We got support from OLF to facilitate the meeting and started to mobilize the youth using pseudonyms, which is a culture in OLF’s structure and also for security reasons” (Natai 03/01/2021).

The study findings provided evidence of the contribution of the two organizations, OLF and Oromo Federalist Congress (OFC), to politically enlighten the youth about the deep-rooted Oromo grievances but neither OLF nor OFC provided leadership to the 2015 Oromo protest (Natai 03/01/2021; Nafiyad 03/01/2021). Among contested issues during the focus group discussions was the organization of QBO, where both OLF and OFC were credited for supporting its formation. According to Diriba (22/09/2020), “the OLF managed to mobilize the Oromo youth through its popular base to organize QBO under the OLF youth wing.” On the other hand, OFC, Oromia’s legally registered opposition party during the protests, claimed to have organized the Oromo youth under its political structure (Berhanu).¹³³

“This I can say with confidence, none of the Oromo political parties led the recent movement which was basically organized online. You tell me if you know an OLF or OFC leader who is active on the Internet! All are not updating to the contemporary political context that is very much influenced by social media” (Wariyo 07/11/2020).

Empirical data shows that there has been leadership claim of the 2015 Oromo protest from various parties and individuals, but there is a gap between the movement actors’ perception of their leaders and the leadership quality the claimants possess. According to informants, during the 2015 Oromo protest, OLF and OFC called protest rallies, and some of their calls fell on deaf ears. It was also the same with Jawar, who, according to informants, experienced the same rejection as OLF and OFC, but every time the call is made from *Qeerroo*, people are hitting the road. Nevertheless, the role of OLF in enlightening the youth against tyranny was frequently pronounced during key informant interviews and focus group discussions (Nafiyad 03/01/2021; Wariyo 07/11/2020).

Data analysis of the study found out that the QBO has a formal organizational structure with departments to coordinate its movement activities, including political affairs, foreign relations, income administration, military, and art departments. Each section of the organization has its own designated role and responsibility. For example, the art department produced political songs and air *Sagalee QBO*, a shortwave radio known as *Sagalee Qeerroo* (voice of the *Qeerroo*). According to informants, *Sagalee Qeerroo* broadcasted from Ethiopia and shared multimedia content online by frequently changing its social media page name and website domain.¹³⁴ However, its latest and active

¹³² Nafiyad, Qeerroo, journalist, focus group discussion, Addis Ababa, January 01, 2021.

¹³³ Berhanu, OFC representative commentary. 2020. A statement was made during a national dialogue forum organized by the Center for Human Rights, Addis Ababa University. September 21 and 22, 2020 Sarem Hotel, Addis Ababa.

Facebook page has four admins from Ethiopia and one from the United States.¹³⁵ The QBO led university strikes and on-the-road movements as the protests intensified in 2015 (Kelbesa 03/11/2020, Wariyo 07/11/2020). According to focus group discussants, the QBO was not merely an organization of Oromo university students; it also embraced young people from all walks of life, earned them the name *Qeerroo*. Therefore, the 2015 Oromo protest is known as the *Qeerroo* movement, to acknowledge the role of young people in the protests, but not to overshadow the fact that the whole society protested against repression (ibid).

“People who have no clue about *Qeerroo Bilisummaa Oromoo* attempted to call themselves as leaders of the Oromo movement. The QBO is the leader of the Oromo youth with its structure and leaders operating within the country. The Oromos struggle past obstacles to reach this point. We knew Jawar lately, after his “I am an Oromo First” interview. Jawar was receiving information from *Qeerroo* leaders. Another thing, fearless local activists confronted death to campaign for the Oromo cause through social media and on the ground. These people who provided the leadership under QBO are still in the country, and we cannot disclose their identities for security reasons” (Nafiyad 03/01/2021).

4.5.1.2. Local Urban Digital Activists

Study data shows that many local Oromo activists were either members or supporters of the OSM during their university and high school time. Thus, the local activists have a strong relationship based on trust with *Qeerroo* leaders operating in every corner of the Oromia region. The local activists are primarily urban dwellers with better Internet access and educational background. They were in a better position to recruit other educated urban-based Oromo elites to join the movement, again based on trust, shared identity and objectives of the educated Oromo youth to liberate the Oromo people from the protracted oppression (Sifan 09/12/2020, Robsan16/07/2021; Jabessa 14/04/2021).

The urban-based local activists do not identify themselves with a specific name, but some interviewed for this research tend to associate their role with that of *Qeerroo*. The local Oromo activists were actively campaigning online for the cause of the 2015 Oromo protest, some openly and some with pseudonyms. Data gathered from the field shows that the urban digital activists were geographically dispersed in the country dominantly living in relatively bigger towns of Oromia regional state. Key informants mentioned Nekemte, Meda Wellabu, Ambo, Jimma, Moyallee, Haramaya, and Goba universities as online hotspots of the 2015 Oromo protest (Sifan 09/12/2020; Nahim 14/11/2020). Nonetheless, they appear to know each other. One of the respondents said, “if I did not meet that person somewhere or during my college time, I am his Facebook friend working for the same cause” (Nahim 14/11/2020). Such assertion emboldens the role of the increased number of universities opened in Oromia and elsewhere in Ethiopia and the expansion of the Internet in connecting the *Qubee* generation and exchanging information about the protest. So much so, Figure 14 shows that universities did not shy away from amplifying community voices at times of violent crackdowns and that attacks against university

¹³⁴ [QEERROO | The National Youth Movement for Freedom and Democracy](#) Accessed on August 7, 2021

¹³⁵ [Sagalee Qeerroo Bilisummaa Oromoo - Oduu Sagalee Qeerroo | Facebook](#) Accessed on March 2020.

professors and staff members intensified from 2013 to 2017 (Koket 16/07/2021; Nahim 14/11/2020).

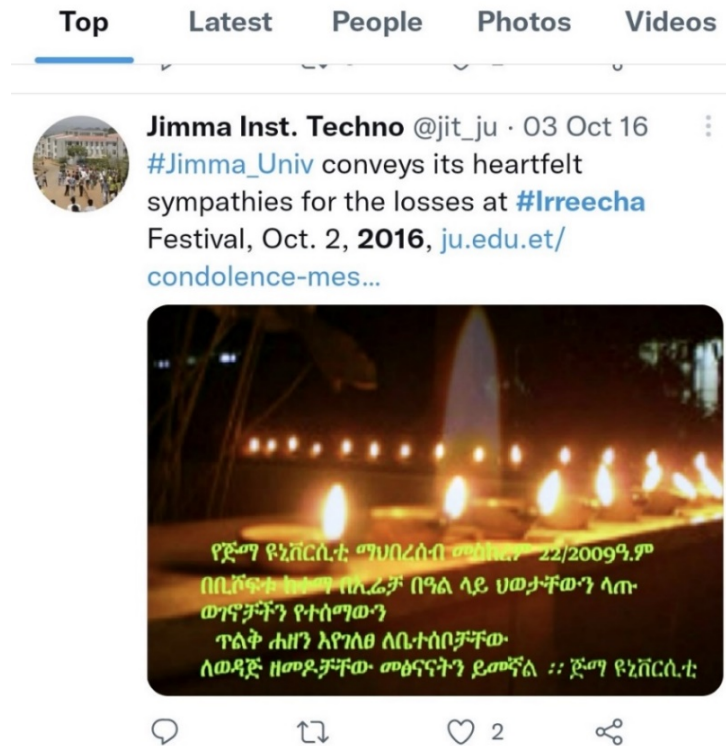


Figure 14 Condolences message from Jimma University to the 2016 Irreecha stamped victims

Key informants of this study who were directly involved in the leadership structure of the 2015 Oromo protest through their online and offline engagements asserted that they never identified themselves as leaders of the movement. According to Mosisa (2020), even Jawar Mohammed, who is often presented as the 2015 Oromo protest leader in various settings, has never claimed a leadership role; rather, Jawar emphasized that *Qeerroo* are the leaders of the movement. The absence of individual leaders of the 2015 Oromo protest from the public space can be understood as an act of protecting the movement from government crackdown and because of the nature of the organizational structure that adopted a cluster-based approach. The analysis of empirical data to this study provides an alternative explanation for why the mass perceived Jawar Mohammed as a movement leader, while the leadership structure appeared to have several individuals with leadership roles. First, many movement actors in the country and overseas seemed to have no or minimal television appearance because the traditional media in Ethiopia were silenced by the government and the diasporic media were captives of individual interests (Abdireshid 12/12/2020; Ali 19/11/2020). Content analysis of the study shows that although some of the diaspora movement leaders had been invited on OMN satellite televisions to discuss the movement, it was not as frequent as the airtime Jawar Mohammed had. The communication power Jawar obtained on OMN could be associated with his status as the founder and executive director.¹³⁶ Therefore, this study argues that

¹³⁶ The Oromia Media Network was inaugurated On March 1, 2014 in United States.

Jawar is a movement entrepreneur who systematically managed to build his reputation on the Internet and satellite diasporic media for his name to be recognized as a leader.

In the early 2000s of the Oromo protests, it was *Qeerroo* leaders led by the late Tesfahun Chemeda and his friends¹³⁷ who organized the mass on the ground. In mid-2014, the local digital activists appeared to hold the decision-making role within the multilevel organizational structure, whereas the diaspora came to the forefront following the Ginchi protest in November 2015 to play a supervisory role through the use of communication as its power tool (Jigsa 16/02/2021; Miresa 12/05/2021¹³⁸). However, the offline interaction between the diaspora, *Qeerroo*, and Team Lemma was facilitated by local activists who got the privilege of networking themselves to the transnational digital diaspora and off the road rural protesters (Robsan 16/07/2021). The local activists have also coordinated movement resource linkage between the diaspora and *Qeerroo*, aiming to enable *Qeerroo* leaders at the grassroots to take the leading role in organizing protest events, strikes and one-to-five discussion sessions (Kelbesa 03/11/2020; Terefe 12/01/2021).

“We work with local activists to trace the identity and contact details of *Qeerroo* leaders in far remote areas through local activists who have a strong connection with us. Primarily, we send them money to mobilize the mass, support the families of the imprisoned and diseased comrades and care for the wounded. We also send Thuraya satellite phones for us to directly communicate with *Qeerroo* leaders when the security situation is dangerous, and the Internet is down to reach to local activists” (Kelbesa 03/11/2020).

In essence, the above assertion suggests that leadership in the 2015 movement is structured and that leadership is exercised with liberty to overcome structural and instrumental challenges that may arise in due course of the movement.

4.5.1.3. The Diaspora Activists

The Oromo diaspora shares the identity and experience of its homeland community; they have not lost contact with the everyday struggle of their people under tyranny. For a long time, the Oromo diaspora has been actively promoting its culture in receiving societies and creating support organizations to help improve health, education, and development in their homeland (Hamda 22/02/2021¹³⁹; Kitata 13/12/2020). Although there were political initiatives to support the OLF military activity and the work of opposition political parties operating in Oromia, the efforts of the diaspora to influence politics in their homeland seemed unreachable (Gelan 03/03/2021¹⁴⁰). The new generation of the Oromo diaspora that fled the country during the EPRDF era was determined to denounce the Oromo diaspora’s half a century-old political interventions approach.

The new generation diaspora shared perception regarding diaspora based political organizations, specifically all factions of the OLF, was reflected through a critique¹⁴¹

¹³⁷ Other names mentioned as *Qeerroo* leaders are deliberately omitted as they were key informants of this study.

¹³⁸ Miresa, activist, *Qeerroo*, high school teacher, interview with the author, May 12, 2021.

¹³⁹ Hamda diaspora activist and journalist, virtual interview with the author, February 22, 2021.

¹⁴⁰ Gelan, diaspora activist, virtual interview with the author, March 03, 2021.

written by Jawar Mohammed in June 2009, widening the gap between the two generations of the Oromo diaspora (Gelan 03/03/2021; Kelbesa 03/11/2020). The old diaspora generation was unhappy that youngsters are attacking the giant Oromo organization, an indication of the youth abandoning their Oromo identity and deserting the longstanding demands of the Oromo people (Jigsa 16/02/2021).

After some years, On June 26, 2013, Jawar Mohammed was invited to talk about why the Oromo people are facing persecution by their government in which he asserted, “I am an Oromo first..., Ethiopia is imposed on me..., because we are forced to denounce our identity, we ended up to reaffirming and reasserting our identity”.¹⁴² Jawar’s assertion reignited the debate about ethnic identity and later became a political signature to mobilize the Oromo people to reclaim their Oromoness (Wariyo 07/11/2020; Robsan 16/07/2021).

Key informants of this study referred to the quote “I am an Oromo first” set a new chapter in the Oromo movement to promote the identity of Oromo people without denying their Ethiopian heritage, but challenging the notion of Ethiopian-ness (*Ethiopiawinet*), which is exclusionary of the Oromo and other nationalities in the south (ibid). According to diaspora key informants, this was an assertion that reunited the Oromo diaspora to change the course of its involvement in the politics of its homeland as Jawar’s statement inflamed the unitarist (Ethiopian-ist) wing (Yesuf 10/02/2021¹⁴³; Jigsa 16/02/2021; Ketim 10/12/2020). That was when the Oromo diaspora reconfigured its role in political affairs and became increasingly visible during the 2015 Oromo protest (Ketim 10/12/2020).

Data analysis shows that the communication power built by the diaspora community strengthened the foundation of the 2015 Oromo protest by integrating the decentralized decision-making process of different clusters with a centralized communication structure. The diaspora activists positioned themselves in the movement leadership organization with their possession and capability of organizing the 2015 Oromo protest communication structure online and through the satellite television, they run (Yesuf 10/02/2021). Any information regarding the protest was centralized to avoid the counter-framing of movement messages by the government and opposing groups (Yesuf 10/02/2021; Kelbesa 03/11/2020). In line with movement message frames, media content production was coordinated by on the ground *Qeerroo* and sent to the diaspora via the Internet (ibid). A good example could be the slogan that become an emblematic chant of the Oromo protest “Down Down Weyane” chanted during the 2016 *Irreecha* celebration.¹⁴⁴ The recorded video of the chant was sent to the diaspora via the Internet

¹⁴¹ Jawar Mohammed. 29 July 2009 [Failure to Deliver: The Journey of the Oromo Liberation Front in the Last Two Decades - OPride.com](#) Accessed on October 02, 2020.

¹⁴² Do the Oromo have a voice in Ethiopia? – The Stream-Al Jazeera (June 26, 2013) [The Stream - Oromos seek justice in Ethiopia - YouTube](#) minutes from 18’04’ to 18’29’.

¹⁴³ Yesuf, diaspora activist in the Oromo Protest and Dimtsachin Yisema, interview with the author, February 10, 2021.

¹⁴⁴ OMN interview with Gammadaa Waariyoo about the chant he led during the 2016 *Irreecha* celebration and his participation in the protests. [OMN: Gaafii fi Deebii dargaggoo Gammadaa Waariyoo\(Down Down Woyane/TPLF/ \) \(Sad 25,2016\) - YouTube](#) Accessed on July 24, 2020.

from a professional journalist working for one of the television stations in the country (Jigsa 16/02/2021; Tolera 10/06/2021).

Diaspora activists were given the authority to fully control and decide on the messages that were posted on thematically created Facebook pages and Jawar Mohammed’s personal Facebook page, which many key informants of this study called “the movement page” (Yesuf 10/02/2021; Ketim 10/12/2020; Kelbesa 03/11/2020). It was challenging to cross-check the claims made about the content and administration of Jawar’s page, as Jawar was in prison during this study fieldwork, and he was released in amnesty on January 07, 2022.¹⁴⁵ However, his Twitter claims in Figure 15 about Facebook banning his account for posting too fast point toward other movement leaders’ assertion regarding “the movement page”.



Figure 15 Jawar’s complaint against his Facebook page

According to news sources and Jawar’s complaint about Facebook blocking him for “posting too fast”, the page was suspended at least three times during the last months of the 2015 Oromo protest.¹⁴⁶ Following the repeated ban, Jawar re-introduced a Facebook page created on July 23, 2013, and administered by him with more than 162k followers¹⁴⁷. The re-introduced Facebook account is still active while the other with about 2 million

¹⁴⁵ Declan Walsh. 07 January 2022. Ethiopia Frees Prominent Political Prisoners, Calls for Reconciliation. Retrieved from [Jawar Mohammed to Be Released From Prison by Ethiopian President - The New York Times \(nytimes.com\)](https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/07/world/africa/ethiopia-prisoners.html) Accessed on February 13, 2022.

¹⁴⁶ Africanews, 07 March 2018. [Top Ethiopian activist blocked by Facebook for 'posting too fast' | Africanews](https://www.africanews.com/2018/03/07/top-ethiopian-activist-blocked-by-facebook-for-posting-too-fast/)

¹⁴⁷ [Jawar Mohammed | Facebook](https://www.facebook.com/jawar.mohammed) Accessed on August 7, 2021

followers, labelled as “the movement page”, is blocked following the assassination of Hachalu Hundessa and the arrest of Jawar Mohammed in July 2020. On September 24, 2020, Ethiopia Check reported, as seen in Figure 16, Jawar’s Facebook account was “suspended for safety and security reasons”.¹⁴⁸



Figure 16 Factchecking report regarding the suspension of Jawar’s Facebook account

The statement from Facebook and the below quote from one of the study informants indicate that there were people who used to access Jawar’s page and that Facebook knew about it. The statement appeared to simply prevent people from accessing Jawar’s account without authority.

“There were individuals from different parts of the world posting on Jawar’s page. You can notice the posting speed and diverse writing style that comes with the background of page admins” (Ali 19/11/2020).

It is crucial to describe how Facebook defines “posting too fast” to understand diaspora activists’ claims regarding the ownership, access and administration type of Jawar’s Facebook. According to Facebook community standards, group and, personal Facebook accounts could be blocked for posting too fast.¹⁴⁹ Among the reasons are posting pictures and video without interval, using a Facebook Creator Studio to schedule posts, using different gadgets and geographic locations to post simultaneously. Hence, fast posting activities are being treated by Facebook community standards as an action performed by a bot or by an imposter.¹⁵⁰

¹⁴⁸ Jawar Mohammed was released from prison on January 2022 in amnesty. His first Facebook post after his release was on January 19, 2022, condolence of Nuho Gobana, an Oromo singer and freedom fighter on both Facebook pages he runs.

¹⁴⁹ [Community Standards | Facebook](#) Accessed on December 14, 2020.

The study findings illustrate that in the process of centralizing movement information, Jawar Mohammed appeared as the spokesperson of the diaspora activists in particular and the 2015 Oromo protest in general. Jawar described himself as “the Oromo microphone”, who also proclaimed that the diaspora liberated the airwaves of Oromia through establishing OMN as an independent Oromo media.¹⁵¹

“Jawar studied social movements. He knows how to mobilize and demobilize. He is fast and furious to convey messages that the mass on the ground needs to hit the roads. There are somethings he can, which we cannot do... exaggerating things and creating stories when the movement seemed to lose momentum” (Kelbesa 03/11/2020).

Jawar graduated with a political science degree from Stanford University and a masters degree in human rights at Colombia University. His study in Singapore paved the way for him to enrich his exposure and experience.¹⁵² The face of the 2015 Oromo protest is Jawar Mohammed. However, Ostebo’s (2020) analysis of the organizational structure of the Oromo movement that concludes “there existed very limited horizontal structures” and “key were the vertical structures wherein Jawar Mohammed was – and still is – the main hub” does not seem to apprehend the Internet supported the multilevel segmented organizational structure of the 2015 Oromo protest. The movement structure provided Jawar with the communication power through his media possession and online tenure cultivated by other movement companions. Based on data from this study, one can safely argue that the organizational structure of the 2015 Oromo protests deliberately clandestine its leaders by allowing a credible symbol to its leadership that can possess specific attributes to the movement structure to emerge and be the face of the leadership.

4.5.1.4. Team Lemma

The involvement of the OPDO in the 2015 Oromo protest leadership structure has three different stories. The common fact about the three possibilities as to why Team Lemma supported the 2015 Oromo protest is the conducive internal political environment that was swinging the EPRDF member organizations to balance power within the coalition (Abdulahakim 06/11/2020). Some informants believed that the OPDO faction was a group of young leaders who shared the experience and the identity of the Oromo youth (Sifan 09/12/2020; Robsan 16/07/2021). Most of them are the products of the new education system, and are the *Qubee* generation. They experienced incarceration, exclusion and human rights violations similar to other youth leaders and hence were very keen to support the protest (ibid).

“I cannot mention names, but some are our sons. Some participated in the QBO structure as well, but fate separated us for good or bad” (Keno 16/03/2021).

¹⁵⁰ Facebook Help Community [How am I temporarily blocked from misusing a feature by going to fast to post | Facebook Help Community | Facebook](#) Accessed on December 14, 2020.

¹⁵¹ Bekele Atoma. 09 July 2020. [Jawar Mohammed: The Ethiopian media mogul taking on Abiy Ahmed - BBC News](#) Accessed on January 03 2021.

25 September 2020. Addis Ababa AFP. [Ethiopia's Jawar Mohammed: From Abiy ally to terror trial - France 24](#) Accessed on August 7, 2021

¹⁵² [Jawar Mohammed Biography: The Interesting Profile of an Influential Man — allaboutETHIO](#) Accessed on October 02, 2021.

Some informants believed that the growing tension of the protest forced the ODP faction to sustain its political power by responding to the popular demands before the movement is washing them away (Ebsa 04/05/2021¹⁵³; Wagari 01/11/2020¹⁵⁴). Other interviewees emphasized that the 2015 Oromo protest actors pressurized Team Lemma ally with the people (Kitata 13/12/2020; Kooluu 29/01/2021).

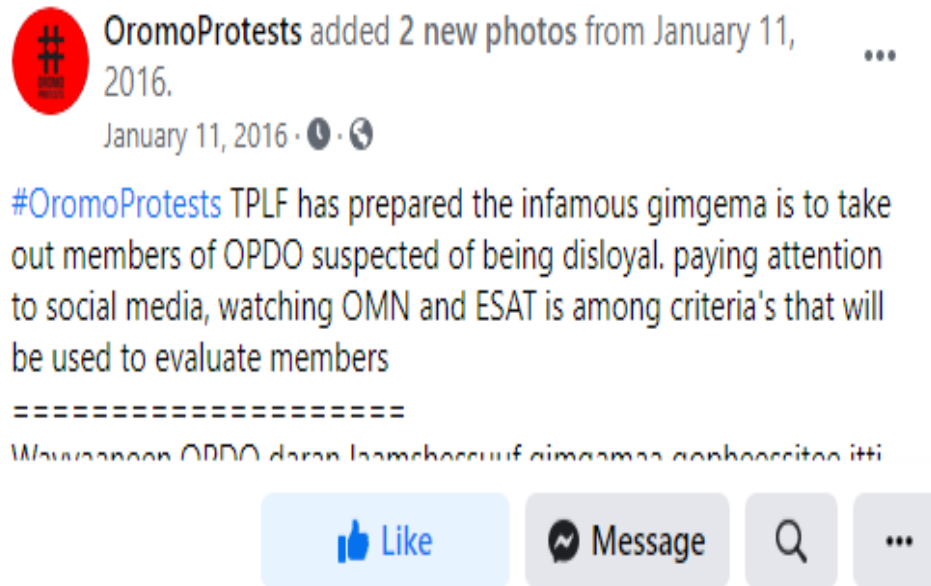


Figure 17 Political self-criticism sheet for party cadres. Taken from social media

The screenshot in Figure 17 illustrates the use of political self-criticism as a coercive measure to influence party cadres to gain compliance with the EPRDF's status quo. For long, the OPDO officials faced distrust from their constituencies and intimidation from their TPLF masters, yet the OPDO controlled the political offices in Oromia (Hassan 15/11/2020). A farmer interviewed for this study asserted that he and his friends were detained, tortured and abused under the leadership of OPDO for being suspected of supporting OLF and political dissent (Guta 12/12/2020). The OPDO leadership had never got the trust of the ruling party either. Years back, Meles Zenawi labelled OPDO cadres as OLF infiltrators (Hassan 15/11/2020). The OPDO leadership started to challenge the ruling party coalition EPRDF following the death of Meles Zenawi as the senior EPRDF members primarily left their chair to the power transfer scheme of the party to bring in young leaders into public office (ibid). In the process, Hailemariam Desalegn from the SEPDM became the Prime Minister creating the opportunity for EPRDF member organizations, specifically OPDO and Amhara National Democratic Movement (ANDM), to contest an equal share of political power within the coalition. The OPDO young leaders, widely known as the "Team Lemma", started to respond to the needs of the Oromo people and eventually picked the issue to show its allegiance to the Oromo

¹⁵³ Ebsa, police officer, interview with the author, May 04, 2021.

¹⁵⁴ Wagari, farmer, focus group discussion, Sululta, November 01, 2020.

people (Hassan 15/11/2020; Robsan 16/07/2021). On November 30, 2015, the Speaker of the Oromia Regional Assembly, Lemma Megersa, delivered a public speech in Burayu.

“As for the Integrated Addis Ababa Master Plan, even if it is for the benefit of the Oromo people, even if it were to pour gold on us, it will not be implemented if rejected by the public...” (Lemna Megersa 2016).¹⁵⁵

Lemna’s speech was warmly welcomed by the Oromo people, although the senior leaders of the OPDO (renamed Oromo Democratic Party, ODP by then) were advocating for implementing the Integrated Master Plan. The 2015 Oromo protest leaders were not easily convinced by Team Lemma’s move to embrace the Oromos’ longstanding demands. However, the cluster leaders of the movement did not shy away from the emergence of the ODP faction that caught the public’s attention at large. The 2015 Oromo protest leadership deliberated on the matter and agreed to provide cautious support to Team Lemma. The 2015 Oromo protest leaders used to get information about the internal contestations of ODP regarding the protest, and it was primarily projected that an allied group would somehow emerge within the government structure (Robsan 16/07/2021; Sifan 09/12/2020; Meti 03/11/2020). The local activists were near the community and able to follow every activity of the ODP, so they quickly developed trust in Team Lemma (Robsan 16/07/2021). The diaspora activists split into two; some agreed to treat the faction with care while others declared reservation on the matter (Hassan 15/11/2020; Yesuf 10/02/2021). For *Qeerroo* leaders, the experience was different, as ODP was the most reviled and cruel organization that they cannot trust (Kumsa 30/12/2020; Koket 16/07/2021).

“At first, it was difficult to understand why the government officials started to show support to the protest. I was like... these people might have an evil agenda as always. But then, things changed on the ground, especially with the *Liyu* (Special) Police. They stopped firing at us and jailing us. They have become our allies, to the extent of telling us ahead to hide when *Agazi*¹⁵⁶ raids” (Kumsa 30/12/2020¹⁵⁷).

Content analysis of this study captured a post by Jawar Mohammed¹⁵⁸ regarding Oromo police officers arrested in different towns of Oromia. Jawar said the police officers were arrested because they were the greatest commanders implying that their arrest is instigated by their support to the movement. A screenshot in Figure 18 supports Jawar’s claim on his Facebook page.

¹⁵⁵ No name, no date. <https://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/ethiopia/lemma.htm> Accessed on July 01, 2021.

¹⁵⁶ Agazi Commandos are federal forces usually deployed in counterterrorism operations in Somalia and border security issues. [Agazi Commandos \(globalsecurity.org\)](https://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/ethiopia/agazi.htm) Accessed on July 01, 2021.

¹⁵⁷ Kumsa, Qeerroo leader, 30/12/2020.

¹⁵⁸ <https://www.facebook.com/OromoProtests/posts/1228154050545288>. Accessed on October 02, 2021.



OromoProtests

January 12, 2016 · 🌐 · 📍

...

#OromoProtests Oromia Police have been completely removed from the ongoing operations in and around Haromaya University. This follows last night's gimgema of commanders of Oromia police whereby they were accused of sympathizing with students. Now federal police are in charge of the compound while the army is terrorizing farmers around the university. The army is in command of all security operations.

=====

Poolisiin Oromiyaa guutuu guututti mooraa Yunivarsitii Haromaayaatiifi naannawa sanirraa kaafamanii jiran. Yeroo ammatti tarkaanfii barattootaafi ummatarratti fudhatamu. Halkan kalee ajajoonni poolisii Oromiyaa gimgamaa galfamanii barattootaaf naatoo agarsiifan jedhamanii turan.

Figure 18 Oromia Police removed from some areas in Oromia

As the protest intensified, Team Lemma started to speak the language of the protesters. In April 2016, Takele Uma, one of the young members of *Coffee Oromia*¹⁵⁹ said:

“The issue of the Integrated Addis Ababa Master Plan is not simply the question of the surrounding cities. It is rather the issue of identity. When we raise the question of identity, it is again about the foundation of the Oromo people that can advance or regress... the culture, basic human rights and political representativeness... I personally do not want a master plan that evicts the farmers”¹⁶⁰ (Takele Uma 2016).

The assertions by Lemma Megersa and Takele Uma were an indication for movement actors that the ODP, as a regional ruling party, is liberating itself, and some “young” members are becoming the Oromo movement supporters if not actors (Dabesa 15/11/2020¹⁶¹; Bedaso 18/07/2021). Informants said, even after the immediate cause of the protest, the master plan, became at the center of the political discussion, local activists continued to use protest events and tactics to pressurize Team Lemma to support their demands and retain them from returning to their old habits (Hassan 15/11/2020; Abdireshid 12/12/2020).

“We put Team Lemma in a dilemma in many circumstances. For example, we worked with the detained political leaders – Wariyo Gerba and Co., to list Lemma, Abiy, Aba Dulla and the Prime Minister himself as witnesses in the court case. We did this because we know if Team Lemma members testify, they will clash with their TPLF masters; if not, the Oromo people will turn against them” (Abdireshid 12/12/2020).

¹⁵⁹ Oromia Regional Council.

¹⁶⁰ Television report by Oromia TV, 16, April 2016. online streamed by Oromia Media Network [The speech that sparked #OromoProtests against Addis Ababa Master Plan - YouTube](#) Accessed on July /2/201

¹⁶¹ Dabesa, blogger and activist, interview with the Author, November 15, 2020.

According to the informant, the case of Wariyo Gerba and Co. was one of the contested issues by the movement actors (Abdireshid 12/12/2020). The Diaspora activists and *Qeerroo* leaders wanted the officials to testify before the court, but the urban digital activists argued against stating that what matters is getting the detainees released in any case (Robsan 16/07/2021, Abdireshid 12/12/2020). Content analysis of the study shows that the high-level officials called to testify by the Federal High Court failed to appear repeatedly.¹⁶² Later on, the Prime Minister’s Office sent a letter to the court stating that the reason for the absence of the Prime Minister is a “busy schedule”. Similarly, the OPDO central committee sent a letter requesting a new court hearing date for the called high-level officials to present themselves to the court. Nonetheless, the court decided to reverse its own decision to summon high officials as witnesses, which angered the defendants and interrupt the court proceedings singing protest songs and chanting slogans that led to a contempt of court charge and a three-day social boycott declared by *Qeerroo* (Abdulkakim 06/11/2020; Terfasa 20/01/2021).



Figure 19 An OPDO member burning his ID card, taken from social media

Figure 19 shows a defiance of EPRDF loyalists as local activists became in a position to establish close collaboration with Team Lemma. They exchanged information through the Internet supported platforms, in person and via telephone. The communication line

¹⁶² Mahlet Facil. January 11, 2018. [News: Federal high court reverses decision to summon gov. officials as defense witnesses, angering defendants; sentences seven on contempt of court - Addis Standard](#) Accessed on July 20, 2021.

between the two clusters was anchored by mutual trust based on shared objectives and supported by digital communication technologies. Enabling communication and collaboration between the state and citizens is one of the dominant social movement organizations models (Fligstein, and McAdam 2019; Krieger et al. 2021). This model is visibly reflected in the formation of the 2015 Oromo protest where the three actors, i.e., local activists, diaspora activists, and *Qeerro*, primarily launched the protest as they permitted Team Lemma to join the leadership structure afterwards. Team Lemma served the 2015 Oromo protests as a power shield to gain momentum and sustain the movement through difficult times.

It is worth mentioning that the absence of formal structure for the movement clusters to discharge their obligations challenged the interaction of actors during the last months of the movement. The diaspora and local activists resumed the debate about the role of Team Lemma in the upcoming government structure when it was inevitable that TPLF is collapsing and that the movement must take over political power. As one of the diaspora informants put it, the diaspora community were skeptical of the capability of Team Lemma to take over power, “after all, they were the remnants of the EPRDF”, said the informant.

“We had a fierce debate about what kind of political administration we need to put in place and whom to coronate. The diaspora activists submitted to the decisions of local movement leaders as the protest reached its climax and the Prime Minister resigned, there was no time left to continue debating on who must control office” (Robsan 16/07/2021).

In a few days, the movement actors witnessed the government administration change that they were yearning for years.

4.6. Outcomes and Contributions of the 2015 Oromo Protest

The urban digital activists believe that the government administration change within the EPRDF that brought about Abiy Ahmed to the political power is in agreement with one of the immediate objectives of the 2015 Oromo protest, which was to end the TPLF rule in Ethiopia (Dabesa 15/11/2020; Garoma 05/08/2021; Toltu 03/04/2020¹⁶³). Above all, for the first time, in 2018, the Ethiopian state acknowledged the Oromo cause and its struggle for freedom and the protection of human rights (Wariyo 07/11/2020). Other key informants of this study believe that the newly approved language policy to add four more official languages (Afan Oromo, Afar, Somali and Tigrigna) to Amharic¹⁶⁴ resulted from the government’s effort to respond to the popular demands of the 2015 protest (Humnesa 03/03/2021; Kooluu 29/01/2021).

Informants argue that the protest played a significant role in the political and legal reforms that took place in post 2018. Series of political and legal reforms were introduced by the new Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, including the revision of the mass media law and the enactment of the disinformation and anti-hate speech law (interview with legal

¹⁶³ Toltu, online activist, civil servant, interview with the author, April 03, 2021.

¹⁶⁴ Samuel Getachew. March 03,2020. [Ethiopia adds Afan Oromo, Somali, Afar, Tigrigna languages to Amharic — Quartz Africa \(qz.com\)](https://www.quartz.com/story/20200303-ethiopia-adds-afan-oromo-somali-afar-tigrigna-languages-to-amharic). Accessed on May 20,2020.

expert 29/08/2021). Moreover, local movement leaders asserted that the 2015 Oromo protest empowered the general public to realize the possibility of organizing the mass using the Internet as a communication tool and a safe political sphere to voice dissent (Kelbesa 03/11/2020). The protest further redefined and re-narrated the relationship of ethnic groups, specifically between Oromo and Amhara. According to informants, the “Oromara” and *Xaanaan Keenyaa* (Tana is ours) initiatives are good examples of the enhanced connection between the two (Kelbesa 03/11/2020; Wariyo 07/11/2020; Gelan 03/03/2021). Oromara was an initiative introduced by the OPDO and ANDM to promote Oromo-Amhara interconnectedness for building a democratic Ethiopia. *Xaanaan Keenyaa* is also a campaign, in which Oromia sent its youth to help fight invasive water hyacinth on Lake Tana, in the capital of Amhara regional state. Team Lemma portrayed a bold relationship with ANDM through these initiatives during the OPDO-ANDM forum in Bahri Dar in November 2017. The forum further recommended Afan Oromo to be taught in Amhara and Amharic in Oromia. The Bahir Dar conference resolution on language entails positioning language as a core issue during the 2015-2017 Oromo protest.

The political reform process paved the way for the legal reform process that sought to amend and enact laws aiming to protect human rights, facilitate democratization and rule of law. The protest led to the acceptance of banned political parties back into Ethiopia, and peace agreements were signed with OLF, Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF) and *Arbegnoch-Ginbot 7*, enabling these organizations to openly operate, display their symbols and flags without restrictions in Ethiopia (Robsan 16/07/2021). Also, the new administration released political prisoners and journalists, reaffirming freedom of expression, association and assembly, and invited ESAT and OMN to open offices in Ethiopia, which they did. In July 2020, the government banned OMN for inciting violence following the killing of Hachalu Hundessa, a famed Oromo singer; ESAT is still operating in the country (Chali 16/06/2021).

The visit of Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed to the diaspora community in July 2018 revealed the support of the diaspora to the new government administration’s accomplishment, including the start of peace talks with neighboring Eritrea. Respondents of this study agree that the visit of the Prime Minister to the diaspora community in the United States “is the first of its kind in the modern political history of the country” to have met with support rather than protest (Gelan 03/03/2021; Yesuf 10/02/2021). The well-known vocal diaspora activities were enthusiasts of the new administration and its achievements to ensure peace and justice in the country and the Horn Africa region, to the extent of exerting effort to nominate the Prime Minister to the Nobel Peace Prize (ibid). Despite similarities in their stance to the achievement of the 2015 Oromo protest in overthrowing the TPLF administration, the diaspora activists somehow reflected discontent regarding the political developments after the government change (Yesuf 10/02/2021; Robsan 16/07/2021; Kelbesa 03/11/2020). Some key informants believe that the new government did not start addressing the Oromos’ grievances’ root causes (Garoma 05/08/2021; Humnesa 06/03/2021; Kumsa 30/12/2020).

“The performance of the old EPRDF was better than the new administration. It had at least acknowledged and promised to address the movement agendas. The

Oromo land, language and leadership issues were better articulated during the Hailemariam era, but the new administration quietly abandoned the Oromo cause” (Wariyo 07/11/2020).

It is beyond the scope of this study to discuss the active reservations and grievances towards the current administration and the role of the diaspora any further. However, it could be of interest for other researchers to investigate the role and limits of the diaspora in their homeland political affairs. Empirical data about the 2015 Oromo protest confirms the assertion that movement leaders cannot successfully form collective action only by agitating deep-seated grievances unless collective identity develops through continuous interaction to reinforce communal solidarity for a certain cause. Hence, in the context of Ethiopia, effective message framing and communication tactic coupled with the deep-rooted grievances and shared identity formed a movement organization that has achieved its desired outcome of changing the government administration. The outcomes and contributions of the protest include recognizing the power of communication in sensemaking of the longstanding grievances of the Oromo people to enable popular action. By making the Internet the central component of the movement, as an effective communication platform and a safe digital political sphere, the 2015 Oromo protest helped to increase the political consciousness of the new generation to stand in defense of human rights and democracy.

CHAPTER FIVE

5. The Internet as an Effective Tool of Political Mobilization

This chapter discusses the online strategy and the Internet-oriented social movement practices developed and utilized by the 2015 Oromo protest leadership structure to demand human rights protection and mobilize the mass through Internet-based political campaigns. The chapter provides insights into the diffusion of protest tactics from the *Dimtsachin Yisema* Muslims' protest to the 2015 Oromo protest. It further reflects on the influence of the Arab Springs in mobilizing the mass and framing movement messages through the use of the Internet and the counternarrative that the Ethiopian government used to curb both *Dimtsachin Yisema* and the Oromo protests. These social movements were chosen for discussion, considering three key common features they shared. One of the key features is the Internet's central place in the organization of these three movements. The second feature of commonality is the pivotal role young people played in these movements. The third factor was the timeline when all happened as the turn of events in post-2010 developments. This chapter answers one of the key questions: *How does the use of the Internet, as an effective tool of political mobilization, relate to the actual cross-learning process across social movements such as between the Oromo protest and the Muslim protest?*

The chapter examines communication power and relationships between the 2015 Oromo protest movement actors within a distinct multilevel segmented movement structure whereby the deployment of the Internet served the clustered leadership to coordinate effective political mobilization, check and control action. The chapter capitalizes on data collected through key informant interviews, focus group discussions, and online content analysis from media reports, academic research, social media posts and hashtags to answer the research question.

This chapter elucidates that the 2015 Oromo protest is distinct in its mixed-use of the Internet as a digital political sphere to coordinate transnational movement online and as a tool to centralize campaign coordination, communication and political information flow. Hence, the chapter considers the Internet as a political mobilization resource and an asset supporting the formation of the collective identity of movement members, a movement message framing tool and a default position in the context where the dominant party State silenced dissent, freedom of association and assembly.

5.1. Cross-Learning Process across Local and Global Social Movements

5.1.1. The Arab Spring and the 2015 Oromo Protest

The Arab Spring erupted in December 2010 in Tunisia, and in early 2011 it engulfed other parts of the Middle East and North African countries (MENA). The Arab Spring was a pro-democratic protest, supported by the Internet to spread rapidly to the MENA region and overthrow the governments in Libya, Tunisia, Egypt and Yemen. It also challenged autocracies in Algeria, Bahrain, Syria and Oman. During the course of the study, key informants accented on how the spread of the Arab uprisings into the MENA

region appeared to inspire *Dimtsachin Yisema* and the 2015 Oromo protests (Hassan 15/11/2020; Abdi 31/12/2020). Informants emphasized that the escalation of the Arab Spring coincided with the establishment of QBO clandestine organization in April 2011 and the launch of a short-lived online protest campaign #ቢቃ! – (translated as #Enough!). The Ethiopian Muslim protest started a year after the Arab Spring in December 2011, deploying social media as its primary site of resistance against the government's interference in religious affairs. This study collected and analyzed data about the cross-learning issues between the Arab Springs, the Ethiopian Muslims protest and the 2015 Oromo protest to understand the Internet's influence in designing and implementing the 2015 Oromo protest political mobilization and communication tactics. The study acknowledged the different structural, institutional and contextual factors while examining the similarities and differences between the three social movements while presenting its findings. Study data suggests a reflection on arguably the first online campaign message against the EPRDF rule to understand the trends of online political engagement and messaging in Ethiopia and cross-learning factors across the selected social movements.

The first online Ethiopian protest campaign that bears resemblance with the Arab Spring message framings “#Beka!” was launched in May 2011. Content analysis of this study captured “Beka!” with its Amharic writing “ቢቃ!” that can be translated as “Enough!”. The findings of this study support Skjerdal (2016) claim about the preparations on the ground to organize similar protests of the Arab Spring in Ethiopia. This study argues that “ቢቃ!” served as an equivalent of the famous Tahrir Square chant “Irhal!”. According to Srage (2013), “Irhal!”, which is translated as “Go out” or “Leave”, was used in various cities of the MENA region with slight slung changes but in a self-sufficient manner to deliver the message about the anger of the public. This study argues that the group behind “ቢቃ!” used a similar technique to frame a single word with a tone that voices public anger – “ቢቃ!”. At the same time, the word “ቢቃ!” appeals to all with political demand regardless of social class and religion.

According to informants of this study, the word *Beka* refers to the prolonged dictatorship and the exaggerated results of the 2010 election results announced in May 2011. One of the informants said: “I remember the #Beka Facebook campaign, although I am not sure who launched it. But it does not matter who launched it; the message was for all of us” (Morka 10/04/2021).

Online content analysis of this study agrees with Skjerdal (2016, 83) that the goal to mobilize the mass through social media and turn Meskel Square into an “Ethiopian Tahrir Square” did not materialize due to Internet shutdown and heavy crackdown against activists, opposition parties and journalists. Nonetheless, the effort evidenced that the Arab Spring message framing techniques migrated via the Internet and shaped the advent of “ቢቃ!” online campaign. #ቢቃ! did not last long but attracted the attention of the international media,¹⁶⁵ and left behind the metaphor “the Arab Spring produced Ethiopian Winter” (Hamda 22/02/2021).

¹⁶⁵ [Ethiopia 'day of rage' hopes to oust Meles Zenawi from power | Ethiopia | The Guardian](#)

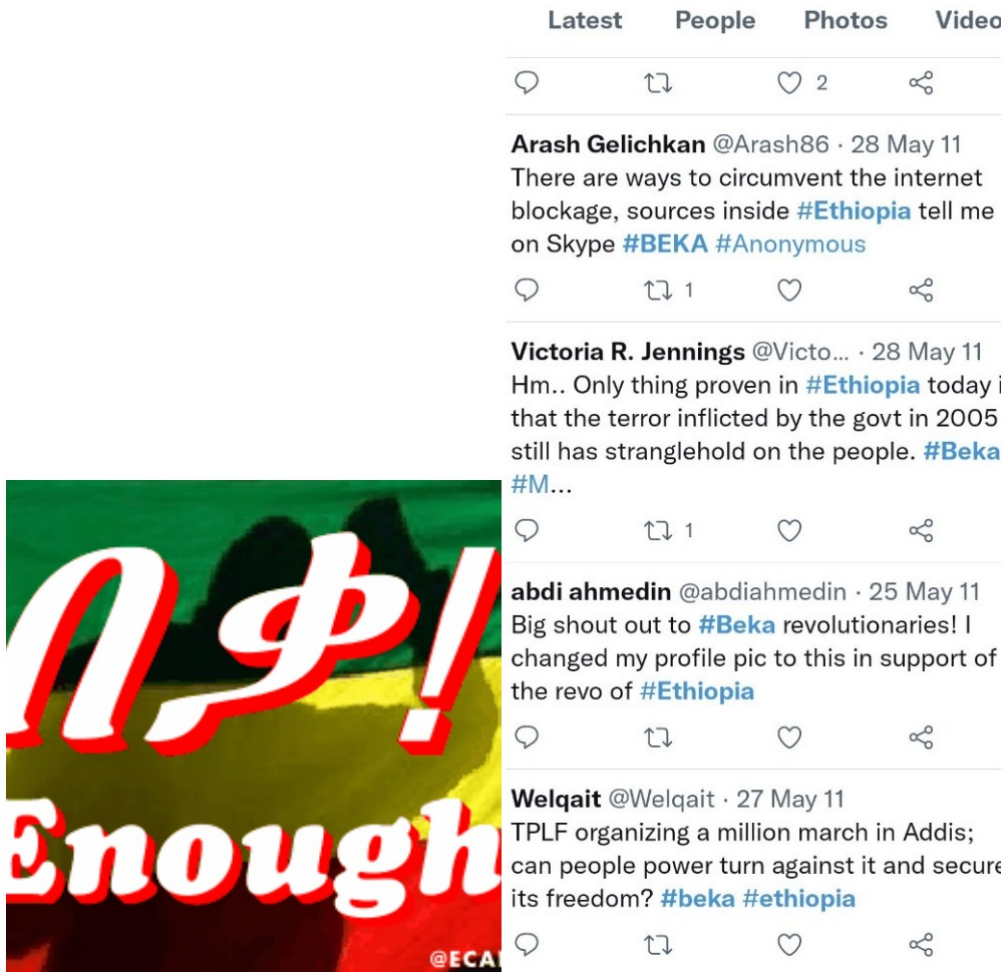


Figure 20 #Beka online protest

The screenshots in Figure 20, from the early #Beka! Movement called upon the mass to oust Meles Zenawi.¹⁶⁶ There are different perspectives regarding the organizing body of the #Beka movement. Some study informants asserted that unknown groups online launched a Facebook campaign #በቃ!, demanding the end of the 20 years of tyranny in Ethiopia (Wariyo 07/11/2020). Other interviewees argued that a local activist’s group planned to organize similar protests. But the government was convinced that the diaspora launched #በቃ!, a claim supported by online content analysis of this study (Sifan 09/12/2020). Looking at the first lines of Figure 20, one can also understand the diaspora’s involvement in the organization of the online campaign. At the start of the #Beka campaign, the government negatively engaged with the diaspora portraying them as “noxious”, who “must have been boiling with rage” to witness a colorful 20th anniversary of the coming power of the EPRDF for calling the mass protest.¹⁶⁷ Later on, the government initiated an outreach program to positively engage with the diaspora by

¹⁶⁶ Robel Ababiya. May 03, 2011. A few smart moves to ousting the Meles Zenawi regime – [Outburst of joy in the USA over the killing of Bin Laden \(ecadforum.com\)](http://ecadforum.com) Accessed on September 10, 2021.

¹⁶⁷ [Twenty years and counting \(tigraionline.com\)](http://tigraionline.com) Accessed on September 10, 2021.

introducing the first draft of the Diaspora Policy, ¹⁶⁸ which was tabled for discussion in 2011 and ratified after two years. The policy bestowed the diaspora with more liberal participation in the country's social, economic, and political affairs.¹⁶⁹ However, the diaspora did not cease its support to opposition parties and protest in their homeland.

The Amharic word “ብቃ!” became among the first slogans of the *Dimtsachin Yisema* movement to protest against the government's interference in religious affairs. As the 2015 Oromo protest ripened in 2017, the Afan Oromo word #Didne! with a similar message framing of the Arab Spring and #Beka!, appeared. According to Seifu (2019), *Didne!*, translated as “We say No”, was among the famous on the road protest slogans during protest demonstrations in Oromia. Study informants accentuated that the 2017 *Irreecha* celebration came up with a *chant Didne Gabruma*¹⁷⁰ translated as “We say No to Slavery”, followed by a protest mobilization song by Urgesa Eshetu, *Didne Gabruma* that was also released in October 2017.¹⁷¹

¹⁶⁸ The 2013 Diaspora policy could be considered as an enhanced Proclamation No. 270/2002 of 2002, providing Foreign Nationals of Ethiopian Origin with Certain Rights to be Exercised in their Country of Origin.

¹⁶⁹ The Diaspora Policy was ratified in 2013.

¹⁷⁰ <https://twitter.com/i/status/914412014247796736> Accessed on September 12, 2021.

¹⁷¹ [Didne gabrummaa Urgeessaa Isheetuu New oromo music - YouTube](#) Accessed on September 12, 2021.

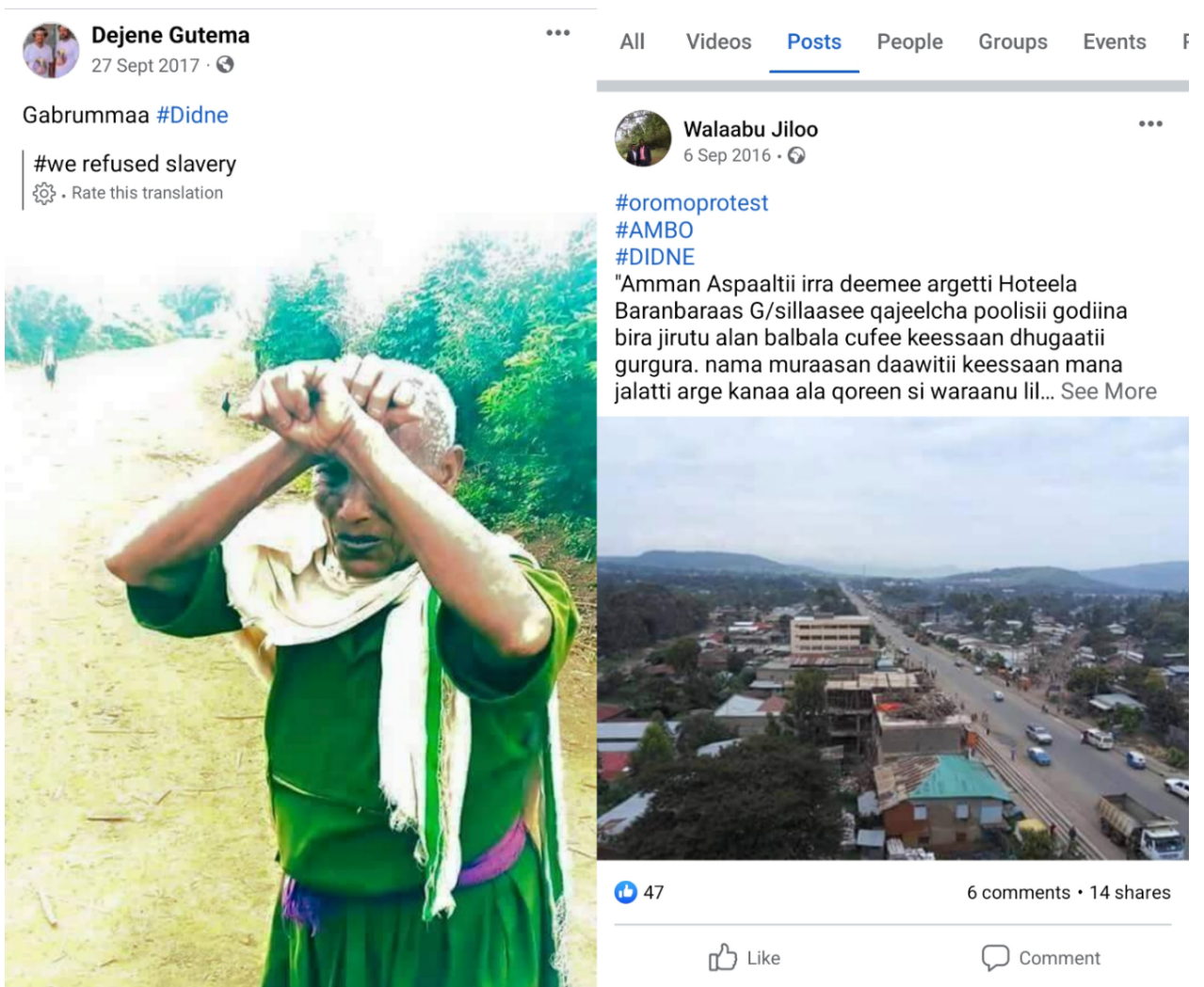


Figure 21 #Didne! Campaign

This study acknowledges that other countries’ political, technological and cultural contexts could not be similar to contrast each protest’s formation, escalation, and outcomes. However, empirical data from the field shows that the 2015 Oromo protest adopted movement message framings of the Arab Spring and #Beka online campaign. At the same time, Oromo activists got inspiration from the Arab Spring on how to deploy the Internet as a political mobilization tool (Wariyo 07/11/2020; 12/12/2020). Previous studies examined the 2015 Oromo protest through the lenses of the Arab Springs to understand the role of the Internet in organizing non-violent movements, mobilizing the mass, and as a source of direct democracy in Ethiopia (Mebratu 2021; Seifu 2019; Habtamu 2017). However, informants of this study contested that the Oromo movement was inspired by its own popular grievances and organizational approach (Garoma 05/08/2021; Humnesa 06/03/2021). Sifan asserted: “I believe the protest was inspired by my experience as an Oromo, not by the Arab Spring or any other movement” (Sifan 09/12/2021).

Informants further argued that the 2015 Oromo movement was more organized than the Arab Springs that they believed did not have a “leadership structure and long-term objective” (Garoma 05/08/2021; Humnesa 06/03/2021). Nevertheless, Habtamu (2017) emphasized that the Tunisian and Egyptian protests were better organized to topple down tyranny faster than the Oromo protest that took more than three years to end the TPLF regime. Data analysis for this study confirms Habtamu’s claim by emboldening that the Arab Spring in Tunisia and Egypt made the Ethiopian government anxious to attack dissent and even to impose an Islamic ideology that the Ethiopian Muslim community does not subscribe to (Jigsa 16/02/2021; Hassan 15/11/2020). As the Arab uprisings intensified in 2011, the Ethiopian diaspora activists were keen to understand if the political and technological context in the country would allow for the emergence of the “Arab-like” protest (Ketim 10/12/2020; Kelbesa 03/11/2020). During an interview with a US-based media, Jawar confirmed that he spent time examining nonviolent movements and paid careful attention to the Arab Springs to learn more about organizing an effective movement in Ethiopia.¹⁷²

Study findings show the circulation of a translated work of Gene Sharp, “From Dictatorship to Democracy” in the Oromo language¹⁷³ among the urban digital activists and the diaspora to deliberate more on how to organize nonviolent movement in the context of Ethiopia where “free press and freedom of speech are non-existent¹⁷⁴” (Nameen 04/02/2021; Benti 04/02/2021¹⁷⁵). The book was translated by three Oromo activists, Abdulsamad M. Yusuf, Boruu Barraaqaa and Jawar Mohammed with the goal to end the “Meles Zenawi’s decades of tyranny”¹⁷⁶ through accelerating the “tension between students and government forces at major universities”.¹⁷⁷ Mebratu (2021, 56) argued that on top of knowledge from the Arab Spring, the 2015 Oromo protest leaders used “mechanisms of non-violent struggle” presented in this book to organize the protest. Empirical data of this study shows additional perspectives to Mebratu’s claim. Although urban digital activists and the diaspora activists seemed to be informed about the translated book and the attempts to produce study guides and videos, *Qeerroo* leaders interviewed for this study appeared uninformed about the book and the study guides. However, most of *Qeerroo* leaders, urban digital activists and bloggers interviewed for this study highlighted a blog article written by Jawar Mohammed criticizing the OLF as a failed organization to deliver on its promises¹⁷⁸ laying a steppingstone to re-organize the Oromo movement. In his “failure to deliver,” article Jawar urged the new generation to

¹⁷² NPR. 2018. How An Exiled Activist In Minnesota Helped Spur Big Political Changes In Ethiopia. December 6, 2018. [How An Exiled Activist In Minnesota Helped Spur Big Political Changes In Ethiopia : NPR](#) Accessed on September 4, 2021.

¹⁷³ “Abbaa-Irreetirraa Gara Dimokraasii-Wixina Qabsoo Bilisummaatiif”. It can be accessed from <https://www.yumpu.com/xx/document/read/9157962/abbaa-irreetirraa-dimokraasii-albert-einstein-institution>

¹⁷⁴ OPride. April 19, 2011. [From Dictatorship to Democracy in Afaan Oromoo - OPride.com](#). Accessed on February 22, 2021.

¹⁷⁵ Benti, activist and protest leader, personal communication, February 04, 2021

¹⁷⁶ OPride. April 19, 2011. [From Dictatorship to Democracy in Afaan Oromoo - OPride.com](#) accessed on February 22, 2021.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid.

¹⁷⁸ [Failure to Deliver: The Journey of the Oromo Liberation Front in the Last Two Decades - OPride.com](#)

free the Oromo people from “dependency on exiled politics, a hostage organization, and incompetent leadership”.¹⁷⁹

Furthermore, study findings depicted two points regarding the translation of the “From Dictatorship to Democracy” book. First, the draft copy of the book was discussed and commented on within a small circle of diaspora and urban digital activists. Second, the timing of book translation and objective appeared to capitalize on initial local protest episodes as the Arab Spring flared up in the MENA region and signs of protest were observed around sub-Saharan Africa. It was also around the same time as the launch of “ቢቃ!”, the intensification of *Dimtsachin Yisema* and the government tightened its crackdown against activists and oppositions. Most importantly, this study argues that Gene Sharp’s book perhaps guided the 2015 Oromo protest’s communication approach with the wider audience through mass media.

The book details persuasion mechanisms where legacy media and symbolic public acts are important to attract movement support (Sharp 2010, 79). Nevertheless, the book does not acknowledge the influence of the Internet in movement organizations under dictatorship. Conceivably, this could be the reason for the 2015 Oromo protest’s distinct nature of deploying a satellite television to mobilize the mass in the context where free media and freedom of expression is muzzled. Sharp (2010,19-60) argued that means of communication are necessary sources of political power that movement actors must decide on which communication system works well to their leadership structure and to initiate action. In line with this, empirical data of this study shows the establishment of diasporic satellite television and radio stations fully funded by the diaspora community with a direct media content feed from the ground. According to Alrmizan (2020), a regime-critical Arab diasporic media is just developing in the post-Arab spring period, dominantly based in Turkey. Therefore, it could be futile to claim that the overall mass mobilization and communication tactics of the Oromo protest were learned from the Arab Spring, instead, this could be taken as an inspiration from Sharp’s book.

5.2. *Dimtsachin Yisema*: Diffusing Mass Mobilization Strategies across National Protests

Study participants were asked to identify social movements that they can resonate with the 2015 Oromo protest to which they have primarily listed the *Dimtsachin Yisema* Muslims movement. However, some informants see the Muslims’ movement as separate from the Oromo protest arguing that *Dimtsachin Yisema* was entirely a religious movement (Meti 03/11/2020; Gemechu 10/05/2021). In contrast, others who were involved in the two movements argued that the Oromo protest is a continuation of Muslims’ protest as many of its movement actors participated in the leadership structure of the 2015 Oromo protest (Hassan 15/11/2020 and; Aymen 28/04/2020). Study informants who argued about the discrete characteristics of the 2015 Oromo protest and *Dimtsachin Yisema* movement emphasized that the 2015 Oromo protest was a popular secular protest demanding for political and democratic rights of the Oromo people, whereas the Muslims protest was framed to claim religious freedom (Garoma

¹⁷⁹ Ibid

05/08/2021; Terfasa 20/01/2021). Other study informants articulated that the shared leaders, similar movement strategies, and communication tactics deployed during the *Dimtsachin Yisema* and Oromo protests made the two inseparables (Gelan 03/03/2021; Solan 29/12/2020). Informants provided examples where the two movements had similarities in using shared protest symbols including using the crossed fist over the heads and online communication tactics (ibid).

According to the International Crisis Group (2016) report, Muslims, specifically in Addis Ababa, held protest demonstrations every Friday between January 2012 and August 2013 against the government's interference. With its fear of the "Arab-like" protest, the government witnessed the coming of the Muslim Brotherhood to the political scene in Egypt, winning almost half of the parliamentary seats¹⁸⁰. Just around that time, the government closed down the Addis Ababa Awolya School, alleging that it was promoting Wahhabism, and pushed for an Islamic sect known as Al-Ahbash as it also interfered in the Majlis election affairs. As a result, the *Dimtsachin Yisema* escalated against the government's interference in religious affairs while the ruling party associated Muslim protesters with al-Qaeda in neighboring Somalia with a plan to disintegrate the country

¹⁸¹

The findings of this study agree with an assertion by Tewodros (2020), who proclaims that the *Dimtsachin Yisema* movement challenged the EPRDF rule that was perceived as untouchable by citizens and inspired other organizations to form. According to Abadir and Awol (2012), the *Dimtsachin Yisema* movement proves that religious groups demand secularism by organizing a peaceful protest demonstration instead of a radical Islamist agenda. However, in some places, the government framing of the movement as a terrorism act to arrest and charge 29 protesters turned the situation violent, specifically in dominantly Muslim areas of the Oromia region. For example, in April 2012, a clash between police and Muslim protesters in Arsi zone, Assasa town resulted in the killings of ten people (International Crisis Group 2016). Study informants highlighted that Oromo protest rallies specifically in Bale, Arsi, Jimma and Harar, interacted with the Muslim movement agenda (Hassan 15/11/2020; Robsan 16/07/2021). Thus, the government labelled all protesters as terrorists who "had formed clandestine al-Qaida cells in the southern part of the country"¹⁸² as it continued to propagate about attempts by foreign elements to organize an Egyptian style protest in Ethiopia.

This study argues that the spread of the *Dimtsachin Yisema* movement in different corners of the country and the revival of the Oromo protest with similar protest tactics shook the EPRDF. Additionally, similar movement message framing strategies were observed between the Arab Springs, *Dimtsachin Yisema* and Oromo demonstration rallies domestically and in the diaspora.

¹⁸⁰ [Muslim Brotherhood's Mursi declared Egypt president - BBC News](#) Accessed on September 12, 2021.

¹⁸¹ The first organized protest demonstration was in January 04, 2012

¹⁸² Peter Heinlein. May 21, 2012. [Ethiopian Government, Muslims Clash about Ideology \(voanews.com\)](#) Accessed on August 10, 2021.



Figure 22 “I too am Abubaker”: Muslims’ rally in the Ethiopian diaspora

The photograph in Figure 22, shared on *Dimtsachin Yisema* Facebook page,¹⁸³ framed its rally message in the same fashion with the famous Tahrir chant “Irhal!” and the “We are all Khaled Said” banner. According to Hindawy and Asaad (2015), the Arab Spring participants organized an event where all dressed in black and stood in silence in support of the “We are all Khaled Said” campaign on Facebook and along the Nile River. Khaled was an Egyptian entrepreneur who was beaten to death by the Egyptian police and whose story was used to create the famous movement Facebook page to galvanize the protest against the Egyptian government (ibid). As seen in Figure 20, the same Amharic word “በቃ!” was used during the *Dimtsachin Yisema* movement together with “እኔ አቡ-በከር ነኝ”, translated as “I too am Abubaker”, which is similar to the “We are all Khaled Said” message framing. Abubaker was the face of the *Dimtsachin Yisema* movement and served as the chairman of the Ethiopian Muslims Arbitration Committee, delegated by the protesters to negotiate the demands of Muslims with the State. Abubaker was incarcerated and portrayed as a terrorist on national television for defending religious freedom.

Based on interviews and focus group discussions, the significant finding of this study that must be highlighted regarding the organization of the *Dimtsachin Yisema* and 2015 Oromo protest is that both were secular movements demanding the protection of basic human and democratic rights in the country. The study finding backs Abadir and Awol (2012) assertion that the Muslim protest in Ethiopia was a secular movement that promoted noninterference of the government in religious affairs. This study further argues that cross-learning factors are related to the deployment of the Internet in movement organization, mobilization and communication tactics. According to some informants who participated in both *Dimtsachin Yisema* and Oromo movements,

¹⁸³ [ፎምቶችን ይሰማ - Let Our Voice be Heard - Posts | Facebook](#)

Muslims’ protest was peaceful and well-framed to articulate its objectives and messages online and offline (Kelbesa 03/11/2021; Hassan (15/11/2020).

“We used the crossed fists to symbolize it was a peaceful protest, and we all are in this together- we are one, no division. The meaning was the same across the two movements” (Hassan 15/11/2020).

This assertion is similar to what Abdurahman (2020) highlighted about the organization and nonviolent approaches the 2015 Oromo protest adopted from *Dimtsachin Yisema*. Nevertheless, content analysis of social media posts and media reports shows that the 2015 Oromo protest became violent following the 2016 *Irreecha* stamped.¹⁸⁴ The *Irreecha* 2016 stamped saw the coming of separate Facebook pages¹⁸⁵ and Twitter account¹⁸⁶ with a central moto and hashtag #OromoRevolution claiming the Oromo protests shall continue despite the government’s efforts to stir fear among protesters through the declaration of the state of emergency.



Figure 23 #OromoRevolution tweet by Jawar

Figure 23 is an example of how protest leaders responded to the government crackdown and the declared state of emergency. Data analysis of this study shows that the use of the word “revolution” among the Oromo movement actors appeared to be deliberate, indicating that the previous nonviolent nature of the 2015 Oromo Protest has changed to a revolution where violence is used as an option to advance the movement’s cause within the restricted political sphere following the declared state of emergencies. The 2015 Oromo protest framing change into uprising confirms that social movements use of revolution as options when the actors’ relative position in the political process is threatened (Della Porta & Diani 2006). The protest trajectory to revolution was also

¹⁸⁴ [Ethiopian protests descend into violence – The Ethiopian Satellite Television and Radio \(ESAT\) \(ethsat.com\)](http://ethsat.com) Accessed on September 18, 2021.

[Oromia Media Network - Posts | Facebook](#) Accessed on September 18, 2021.

¹⁸⁵There are four active public Facebook Pages with the name Oromo Revolution, each having many followers.

¹⁸⁶There are two similar Twitter handles names #OromoRevolution. One was created in 2019; the other was created in October 2016 and was interactive, retweeting and liking active movement members tweets only until October 16 2016, with 124 followers and zero following.

reflected on individual social media posts encouraging protests to use violent techniques.¹⁸⁷ It is also worth mentioning that Jawar Mohammed admitted the challenges of organizing a nonviolent movement given the government's brutal crackdown against protesters and that he fears "armed struggle might become the permanent form of response" if the repression continues.¹⁸⁸

This research shows that there was cross-movement networking between the two movements in terms of organizational leadership overlap. Mohammed Ademo, Awol Allo and Jawar Mohammed, who later joined the 2015 Oromo protests leadership structure, were among the diaspora *Dimtsachin Yisema* actors (Abdirashid 12/12/2020; Kelbesa 03/12/2020). According to Kelbesa (03/11/2020), *Dimtsachin Yisema* protesters' peaceful demonstrations, the deployment of social media, and the diaspora involvement inspired the 2015 Oromo protest leaders to take the same path. Similarly, the Oromo movement stirred the Amhara and Sidama movements and revived the Konso movement towards a similar organizational approach. Data from the field shows *Dimtsachin Yisema* movement obtained broader support from non-Muslim Oromo elites who also had an active stake in the organization of the 2015 Oromo protest.

"The Muslim protest was beyond the matter of ethnicity and religion. It was all about the right to religion that we all must in any way defend. So, I am not Muslim, but supported the cause and campaigned for *Dimtsachin Yisema* movement then participated in developing similar peaceful movement framing tactics to the 2015 protest" (Kelbesa 03/11/2020).

The above quote is a testament that the leadership intersection between the movements was not based on religion but on the cause to promote basic human rights. More so, the study findings show that there were Muslim personalities within the *Qeerroo*, urban digital activists, and Team Lemma leadership structure who participated in the two movements (Jabessa 14/04/2021; Hassan 15/11/2020). However, the involvement of Muslim Oromos in the leadership structure could not be taken as an indication that the movement was the continuation of the *Dimtsachin Yisema* protest, as argued by Abdurahman (2020). The same works for leaders with any religious background because the collective identity of the 2015 Oromo protest is based on *Oromumma*- Oromoness in which the Oromo movement rooted itself. Because the time when the 2015 Oromo protest escalated and the beginning of the *Dimtsachin Yisema* movement overlapped, there was a synergic effect between the two later influencing the characteristics of support rallies in the Amhara region (Kelbesa 03/11/2020; Bedaso 18/08/2021). The interconnectedness of the three protests was reflected with the application of similar movement symbols and shared characteristics in using the Internet to mobilize the mass and organize a safe and nonviolent movement.

¹⁸⁷ [The Irreecha celebration massacre. | Facebook](#) The Facebook post teaches protesters how to make and use petrol bombs during protest demonstrations. Posted on October 05, 2016. Accessed on September 21, 2021.

¹⁸⁸ [Oromo nationalism on the rise in Ethiopia | Human Rights | Al Jazeera](#) Protests and online activism in recent months have brought a resurgence of ethnic Oromo nationalism in Ethiopia. William Davison August 01, 2014.



Hallelujah Lulie @halelule · Jul 31, 2016

The Crossed Arms Resistance #DimtsachinYisema #OromoProtests #AmharaProtests #Ethiopia via @MerfeQulef



Figure 24 The three protests in context

The Twitter screenshot in Figure 24 was shared by an activist who was vocal on human rights and democracy issues during the protest. His tweet depicted *Dimtsachin Yisema*, the 2015 Oromo protests and the Amhara protests, respectively showing the crossed arms over the head sign to convey the nonviolent and unarmed nature of the movements. The three protests intersected to the sequences of human rights demands forecasting the upward scale of traversed movements that resulted in government administration change (Miresa 12/05/2021, Tolera 10/06/2021). This study contends that the upward scale shift resulted from active interaction between collective actors, the use of social media and the intersectional nature of the repression.

Dimtsachin Yisema movement was generally nonviolent and mainly on social media. The movement page, created on February 12, 2012, has more than one hundred fifty-seven thousand seven hundred followers.¹⁸⁹ Its #DimtsachinYisema Twitter campaign was also liked and shared widely. The arguments about the relationship between the Muslim movement, the 2015 Oromo protest and the Amhara protest is well captured by the below screenshot from *Dimtsachin Yisema* Facebook page.

¹⁸⁹ [ጅምዳችን ይሰማ - Home | Facebook](#) Accessed on August 29, 2021.



Figure 25 Muslim’s protest: amplifying the deep-seated grievances across movements

This screenshot, in Figure 25, took us back to 40 years ago when the first Muslim protest was organized, demanding equal recognition in the State’s system to depict the longstanding demands of the Muslim community. The political message, which says “the government that does not acknowledge popular critique could not sustain its power for long”, along with the mentions of ongoing parallel protests, #OromoProtests and #AmharaProtests, shows the solidarity between the three movements. Literature shows that the intersectional solidarity of movements can be explained as a context where the disadvantage is conditioned by diverse interacting systems of subjugation and the subjugator tends to be a common figure (Tormos 2017; Torres 2015). Thus, it can be argued that the intersectionality of the three movements resulted from the broader human rights violations people experienced and are devoted to change the circumstances. The study data analysis indicates that the suppression Muslims experienced and wanted to change was different from the suppression Oromos and Amharas experienced based on their respective religious and ethnic identities. However, the different experiences of movement members seemed to be understood by the Muslim protest leaders as they managed to show the overlapping nature of the repression that the Ethiopian people had gone through in their online campaign. Moreover, the *Dimtsachin Yisema* movement leaders were keen to show the general public that the movement is inclusive and responsive to its members and sympathizers. Figure 26 illustrates how the Muslim protest utilized the #IrreechaMassacre as an advocacy resource, as the following photograph portrays the diffusion of interconnected demands for the right to religion, ethnic identity and human rights across the Muslim and Oromo protests.


ድምፃችን ይሰማ
 October 5, 2016

#OromoProtests #IrreechaMassacre #EthioMuslims
 #EthioMuslimsPeacefulStruggle
 በቢሽፍቱ በሰላማዊ ዜጎቻችን ላይ መንግስት የወሰደውን እርምጃ በጽኑ እናውግዳለን!!!!
 በወገኖቻችን እልቂት የተሰማንን መረር ሐዘን እንገልጻለን!!!!
 ለተገጂ ቤተሰቦቻችን ለመላው ኢትዮጵያውያን መፅናናትን እንመኛለን!
 ግፍ ማለፍ ብቻ ሳይሆን ድልን አስከትሎ መመጣቱ አይቀርምና ኢትዮጵያዊያን ለፍትህ፣
 ለነጻነት እና ለሰላም የምናደርገው ትግል ተጠናክሮ ይቀጥላል!!!!
 ረቡእ መስከረም 25/2009

ከመንግስት በርካታ ጋላፊነቶች መካከል የአገርን ህልውና እና የህዝብን ሰላም ማስጠበቅ
 ቀዳሚያዎቹ ናቸው። በአገራችን ያለው ግን ከዚህ በተቃራኒ ነው። በሚያዝን መልኩ በአገራችን
 እየተከሰቱ ያሉ ሰላም የሚያደርጉ ህልውናችንን አይጋ ላይ የሚጠሉ ክስተቶች በሉብዛኛው
 ምንጭቸው መንግስት ሆኖ እናገኘዋለን። ከሰሞኑም ጋላፊነት በጎይላው የመንግስት እርምጃ
 በርካታ ዜጎቻችን በአስቃቂ ሆኔታ ለሞት ተዳርገዋል። ይህ ድርጊት በየትኛውም መመዘኛ
 በጽኑው የሚወገዝ ሲሆን ስርዓቱ ምንግዜም ከስህተቱ የማይሞር፣ ሰላማዊ ጥያቄን ከሚያስቡ
 ዜጎች ጋር ለመግባባት ከጋይል እና አፈሙዝ ውጭ ሌላ ቋንቋ እንደሌለው በግልጽ የሚያሳይ
 ነው። የዜጎችን መብት በጋይል ረግጦ እና ፍላጎታቸውን እፍኖ ለመያዝ የሚታችር ስርዓት



Figure 26 Dimtsachin Yisema statement against the Irreecha stamped

This study asserts that the Oromo protest leadership applied the same intersectional approach by recognizing and representing Muslims, Amhara and Konso¹⁹⁰ protesters affected by the interconnected repression while prioritizing their own movement agenda.

“The ruling party depicted the Muslim Oromos as extremists, and the media repeatedly reported that we protested to establish an Islamic government in Ethiopia. Also, the Christina Oromos were dubbed as Amhara. This is how the government made us fight each other for long, which we overcame during the *Qeerroo* movement by coming out together as Oromos” (Miresa 12/05/2021).

The above assertion highlights that Muslim Oromos and Christians stood together to demand political and democratic rights regardless of religious divide during the 2015 Oromo protest. Key informants acknowledged the role the 2015 Oromo protest played in mending the religious and geographic division created by the government implanting qualm within the Oromo society (Miresa 12/05/2021; Jabessa 14/04/2021). The 2015 Oromo protest responded to the overlapping forms of oppression that Oromos faced by organizing coalitions across social and religious groups. Movement leaders convinced the mass public that the longstanding grievances of the Oromo people are shared among all regardless of religion, social status and geographic location by highlighting major issues related to freedom from eviction, the right to language and cultural identity, and equal share of national resources and political power. In conclusion, *Dimtsachin Yisema* enabled collective protest against tyranny by diffusing the Internet as a mass mobilization tool and influenced the incorporation of fundamental human rights issues as core messages across mobilization episodes of the 2015 Oromo protest. Conversely, empirical data of this study shows that the 2015 Oromo protest brought about new perceptions and practices of forming a collective identity, social mobilization and message framing tactics under mounting pressure from political and technological barriers by taking the Internet as a default position.

¹⁹⁰ [OromoProtests - Posts | Facebook](#) #KonsoProtests continued with this mass rally today March 18, 2016. Accessed on September 14, 2021.
 The Guardian. 08 April 2016. [Ethiopia's clampdown on dissent tests ethnic federal structure | Governance | The Guardian](#) Protests sparked by the arrest of Konso leader Kala Gezahegn underlined growing tensions between Ethiopia’s central government and many ethnic populations. Accessed on September 18, 2021.

5.3. Message Framing and Identity Formation of the 2015 Oromo Protest

5.3.1. Deploying the Internet as an Effective Political Mobilization Tool

Deploying the Internet to the movement's mobilization strategy was inspired by the Arab Spring and the *Dimtsachin Yisema* protests. In 2011, the Oromo diaspora community members invited an Oromo opposition political leader from Ethiopia to discuss the possibilities of organizing the "Arab-like" revolution in Ethiopia (Kelbesa 03/11/2020; Jigsa 16/02/2021). The meeting in Amsterdam saw an intense debate between the opposition political leader and a diaspora activist as to whether the surge of sudden protest would happen in Ethiopia inspired by the Arab Spring (ibid). The debate ended, concluding that though the popular discontent against the ruling party is ripping, the Internet penetration rate and mobile phone usage in Ethiopia were minimal for a popular uprising to happen (ibid). According to data from the National Bank of Ethiopia, the Internet penetration rate during that time was 0.3.¹⁹¹ Internet penetration improved to 5.2 by the year 2012/2013 Ethiopian Fiscal Year.

After four years, in 2015, Ethiopia was set to hold the fifth national election while the two debaters met again just before the election in the same place to discuss the political situation in the country. During that time, Ethiopia's access to the Internet and mobile phones increased to a total of 9.4 million Internet data users, showing a 53 percent increase compared to the 2013/2014 Ethiopian Fiscal Year.¹⁹² Similarly, Habtamu (2017, 61) argued that only "three million" Facebook and Twitter accounts existed in Ethiopia as the Oromo protest escalated in 2015. Besides, the rampant unemployment, repression and social control over the general population were agitating the deep-seated grievances encouraging people to support the opposition parties, specifically OFC in Oromia, during the election campaigns. Nevertheless, the election turnout was meagre. The diaspora activists were sure about the coming of "Arab-like" popular protest while the opposition political leaders in Ethiopia rejected the claim.

Diaspora activists were closely studying the online sphere to understand the progress of Internet usage and the online habits of young people in Ethiopia ever since the Arab Springs (Ketim 10/12/2020; Kelbesa 03/11/2020). By the end of 2013, the diaspora received information from local activists on the ground about launching a boycott campaign against the announcement of Heineken NV, Bedele, to provide a yearlong exclusive sponsorship to Teddy Afro's Tikur Sew concert¹⁹³ (Robsan 16/07/2021; Kelbesa 03/11/2020). *Qeerroo* leaders used social media, mobile texting, approaching Oromo beer drinkers and using one-to-five networking during the boycott campaign. In

¹⁹¹ National Bank of Ethiopia. Annual Report 2012/13. [Annual Report 2012-2013.pdf \(nbebank.com\)](#)
Accessed on January 2, 2022.

¹⁹² National Bank of Ethiopia. Annual Report 2014/15. [Annual Report 2014-15.pdf \(nbebank.com\)](#)
Accessed on January 2, 2022.

¹⁹³ The boycott campaign coordinators claimed that the song "Tikur Sewu" and Teddy Afro's other musical works valorizes Emperors and Kings of the previous Ethiopian empire, whom they considered 'colonialists' More information can be found at [Boycott Bedele campaign catches fire on social media – OPride.com](#)

consultation with activists in Ethiopia, the diaspora launched the #BoycottBedele online campaign using Jawar Mohammed's Facebook page as a collaborative platform. It was mentioned by diaspora key informants that at the beginning of the online protest, whatever was posted on Jawar's page¹⁹⁴ was primarily discussed and agreed by movement leaders, and some call Jawar's page "the movement page" (Ketim 10/12/2020; Kelbesa 03/11/2020; Jigsa 16/02/2021).

"When we launch the #BoycottBedele campaign, Jawar's page had around 4500 friends and 6 thousand followers. When we completed the #BoycottBedele campaign, Jawar reached about 12 thousand followers" (Kelbesa 03/11/2020).

On December 28 2013, the diaspora group created a separate Boycott Bedele Facebook page planning to get five thousand likes, comments and shares per week for a content they post. However, they got more than expected. According to a diaspora informant, what forced Heineken to concede and cancel its concert sponsorship was the increased social media interaction against the *Tikur Sew* concert that achieved to get more likes, comments and shares per day than expected (Kelbesa 03/11/2020). The Boycott Bedele Facebook page is not currently accessible to analyze its content and support the informants' claim with evidence regarding the number of online interactions it generated during the campaign period. The diaspora activists further emphasized that the #BoycottBedele¹⁹⁵ campaign proved that young people's online habit and Internet use in Ethiopia was changing for the movement's good and decided to mobilize the mass on the Internet supporting the effort with offline communication tactics Natai 03/01/2021; Kelbesa 03/11/2021). Therefore, based on empirical data, it can be argued that the Oromo movement key actors considered the Internet as an alternative communication platform, effective political mobilization tool and site of resistance with careful investigation of the context on the ground.

Study data revealed that the Internet use during the 2015 Oromo protest did not override the offline organization, communication and mobilizing action (Tolera 10/07/2021; Kooluu 29/01/2021). However, the advent of the Internet coupled with the emergence of educated Oromo youth and a unified diaspora community influenced the organization and mobilization tactics of the movement (Hassan 15/11/2020; Robsan 16/07/2021; Kelbesa 03/11/2020). The online organization of the 2015 Oromo protest fulfils Castells's (2011; 2009) theory of communication power in which the networking power, network power and network-making power of the segmented groups of the movement are clearly designed and implemented while the networked power seems to be distributed among the four major leadership clusters in the multilevel hybrid structure of the 2015 Oromo protest. In this regard, the diaspora possessed network power as local digital activists controlled the network-making power.

¹⁹⁴ <https://www.facebook.com/215693/posts/10105553025214753/> Accessed on 30 July 2020. This post was among the last before Jawar's page was suspended by Facebook in July 2020. The Content of the post calls upon Qeerroo to protest against the death of Hachalu Hundessa.

¹⁹⁵ <https://m.facebook.com/groups/265044716979775/permalink/265108606973386> broken link. Last checked on August 1, 2021.

Qeerroo had the networking power with valuable resources to exercise its gatekeeping power to either allow or prohibit members to the movement (Graham and Dutton 2014; Castells 2011; 2009). The 2015 Oromo protest online structure bestows the networking power to *Qeerroo* because the group had a face-to-face interaction and physical presence within the community, which is more effective than online mobilization. At the same time, *Qeerroo* started hosting its own website, shortwave radio and Facebook page earlier and established credibility enough to garner movement members who do not know each other in the real world but can discuss movement agendas that add value to the movement network. Potential movement members would start to interact with one another based on trust developed through *Qeerroo*'s website and Facebook and discuss the common agenda freely. Conversely, local digital activists displayed a network-making power, which allowed them to assign goals and tasks of networks and the capacity to organize cooperation between segmented leadership groups and online movement members.

Qeerroo extensively used personal physical links; it also appropriated the government's one-to-five networking to recruit members who could also join the online discussion (Humnesa 06/03/2021). Conversely, the diaspora community convenes online through various websites and social media platforms coupled with a series of conferences and town hall meetings to encourage participation. According to informants, the networked power that facilitates real-time communication among the 2015 Oromo protest leadership and online movement members seem to be shared among leadership clusters. Study data shows that separate online links were shared to lead participants to "another place" where trusted actors openly discuss and plan movement episodes (Humnesa 06/03/2021; Wariyo 07/11/2020). To access the landing page of 'the other place', one must be trusted and have something valuable to contribute to the movement.

"You do not know each other online, but you share a common goal. Still, you need time to examine the honesty of the individual before sending him a separate link to join a messenger or a Viber group" (Wariyo 07/11/2020).

Qeerroo and local digital activists work hand in hand to assess the background of individuals to be permitted to access the next online link; one of the formalities is loyalty to the Oromo cause, which is reflected on her or his social media posts and interactions (Garoma 05/08/2021; Kumsa 30/12/2020). As one of the leaders put it, "one must be fearless to defend the Oromo cause even when using their real names on Facebook" (Garoma 05/08/2021). In this process, local activists are responsible for facilitating members' online interaction and helping develop a shared vision while avoiding competition among movement network actors. Thus, the mobilization tactic involves the securitization of information and the exclusion of individuals who may jeopardize the movement.

The Internet was not the only mobilization tool used during the 2015 protest; *Qeerroo* members travelled to areas where Internet and Satellite TV were not reaching to introduce the movement's objectives and organize the grassroots for the upcoming protest rallies (Soreti 02/01/2021; Kumsa 30/12/2020). They also post written notice and distribute leaflets through the existing one-to-five networking, face to face meetings and marketplaces and community gatherings in far remote rural villages to mobilize the mass.

Empirical data shows that local authorities collaborated and provided protection for *Qeerros* as they campaigned (Keno 16/03/2021; Qabso 01/11/2020). Team Lemma tends not to own a constant power stake within the online protest structure due to the government's surveillance against its citizens. Nonetheless, Team Lemma's access to the government's internal political information and the capacity to provide protection on the ground enabled it to share networked power with other movement leadership groups. It can also be argued that the mobilization resource *Qeerroo* possesses its interpersonal relationship with the community, reliability of their character and commitment to strengthen their offline and online engagement simultaneously.

Data from the field indicates that the diaspora activists held a network power in which they were empowered to design and implement movement coordination and communication with certain online practices of movement members to sustain the 2015 Oromo protest. According to Castells (2009), network power is exercised by imposing different rules that ensure inclusion within the networked society. The diaspora activists' network power is somehow reflected in Seifu's dissertation as he argued that the Ethiopian diaspora community played a significant role in building relationships with international media in bringing the Oromo protests to the international community's attention (Seifu 2019). Based on empirical data, this study argues that the network power of the diaspora activists emanates from their ability to have more safety, freedom and access to the Internet to take the responsibility of facilitating the 2015 Oromo movement communication. Thus, the diaspora activists considered the Internet as a mobilization resource to invite and add (include) members interested and fulfil the inclusion criteria to join the movement. The inclusion criteria into the 2015 Oromo protest online sphere are active participation in posting, sharing, commenting, and liking movement-related messages widely accepted by the online mass (Dabesa 15/11/2020; Jabessa 14/04/2021). Moreover, displaying the Oromo values through pictures and video endorses one's ability to be acknowledged as a movement member and or leader.

The online inclusion criteria seemed to be steered by the diaspora activists who often advise movement members to follow online activists abiding by the inclusion criteria or unfollow those who do not comply with movement rules. However, empirical data shows that *Qeerro* and digital activists too applied the online exclusion principles, including labelling, name-calling and spreading hate based on one's opinion, chasing the online persona from one platform to the other, and blocking him or her from known Oromo movement social media spheres (Hundesaa 29/12/2021; Olana 10/06/2021; Kelbesa 03/11/2020). Such practice seemed to continue until recently.



Oromo Protest

February 22, 2020 · 🌐



Ergaa Ariifachiisaa

Duulli Kaadiree Bilxiginnaarratti Goonu Itti Fufuu Qaba. Kaadiree Maallaqa Nyaattee Nutti Wacaa Ooltu akka Afaan Cuqqaallattu Gochuuf

1. Warri #Add Isaani Jala Jirtan #Unfriend Godhaa
2. Warri #Follow Gootan #Unfollow Godha... See More

See Translation



Figure 27 Online exclusion of dissenting protest voices

As seen in Figure 27, movement actors organize online campaigns against individuals urging members to unfriend, unfollow, and unlike those perceived to be against the movement's shared goal. Movement members are also asked to report any text and video posted by the excluded individuals as hate speech so that the individual will be blocked from Facebook within two weeks. As a result, the 2015 Oromo protest social media platforms lack diversity of ideas and political debates among movement members; even flashed comments from opponents are quickly attacked or deleted from social media platforms (Olana 10/06/2021; Kelbesa 03/11/2020).

Movement leaders described the Internet as a significant resource that helped mobilize members, fundings, and leadership capacity to transform the movement into a transnational action (Wariyo 07/11/2021; Jigsa 16/02/2021). It also served as a common protest site where Oromos in different parts of the world meet to voice their concerns together regardless of the time and space difference (ibid). The best example could be the Grand Oromia Rally that took place on August 06, 2016. The screenshot in Figure 26 about the Grand Oromia Rally shows how the Internet was appropriated to serve as a mobilization tool and a safe site of resistance.¹⁹⁶

¹⁹⁶ Advocacy for Oromia. 05 August 16. [THE GRAND OROMIA RALLY FOR FREEDOM, JUSTICE, VOICE, AND PEACE!!! | Advocacy for Oromia \(advocacy4oromia.org\)](https://advocacy4oromia.org) Accessed on September 17, 2021.



Figure 28 Protest rally call in the diaspora, taken from social media

The screenshot in Figure 28 encouraged diaspora protesters in the USA to join the Oromia Grand Rally. The essence of the message is to create a sense of solidarity by reminding the diaspora that the rural protesters in their homeland confronted bullets while providing them with framed protest slogans, as indicated in the second Twitter thread. The 2015 Oromo protest shows how the Internet changed the conventional mass mobilization structure in recruiting members, planning and executing communication tactics in the context where access to the Internet is minimal and expensive. The following quote from one of the focus group participants indicates that protesters who claimed to access information about the 2015 protests online are more anxious about the frequent Internet shutdowns than the service cost they paid.

Research by Meseret (2020) argues that the diaspora community used social media sites to strategize and mobilize the youth against the ruling party. However, it was not only social media sites used to mobilize the mass during and after the Oromo protests, as it includes legacy media and other traditional communication tactics, as to be discussed below. According to informants of this study, the hybrid mobilization tactic facilitated easy consensus-building and action mobilization to organize protest demonstrations online and offline (Tolera 10/06/2021; Kumsa 30/12/2020). Moreover, the diasporas were not the only and with the special privilege to deploy the Internet as a mobilization tool. *Qeerroo* leaders and local digital activists used the Internet to exercise their designated power and role in the 2015 Oromo protest leadership structure. What was distinct to the diaspora movement leadership was its ownership and control of satellite television and radio stations deployed to mobilize the grassroots with no and limited access to the Internet and political information through legacy media operating in Ethiopia.

5.4. Mobilizing the Offline Base: The Role of Legacy Media

The strategy of having a free media platform that can reach the masses across Ethiopia and beyond is inspired by Ethiopia's existing political and technological barriers. The importance of legacy media in social movements is crucial in a country where most of its population is uneducated, Internet and mobile phone penetration is very low, and the majority of people are still dependent on radio and television transmission to access political information where over eighty percent of the population lives in rural areas. More so, the sub research questions asked to respondents include "how did you access information about the 2015 Oromo protest during Internet shutdowns?" The sub research question surfaced common response regarding the dissatisfaction of respondents in the state media. Study participants said they had been fed up with how the state media overlooked reporting the protests and manipulated facts. The diaspora community appeared to understand the lack of press freedom in their homeland as they established satellite televisions and radio stations (Chali 16/06/2021; Jabessa 14/04/2021; Bedaso 18/07/2021).

The diaspora satellite television stations, specifically Oromia Media Network (OMN),¹⁹⁷ *Bakkalcha* TV¹⁹⁸ and *Bultum* Broadcasting Service (BBS)¹⁹⁹ to access political information. OMN was launched on March 1, 2014, headquartered in USA, Minneapolis with a fund collected "through voluntary donations, targeted advertising, and external grants" aiming to "connect the Oromo diaspora to its homeland using innovative digital tools and people-centered storytelling techniques".²⁰⁰ The OMN became a preferred channel by many to access information during the peaks of the 2015 Oromo protest²⁰¹ (ibid). Informants have also mentioned that Oromia Broadcasting Service (OBS),²⁰² a private satellite television based in Ethiopia, provided credible information about protest rallies in various parts of Oromia. ESAT also has its fair share view among people who proclaimed to be active movement members. *Sagalee Bilisummaa Oromoo*,²⁰³ *Shiabia* Radio, Voice of America, Deutsche Welle radios were listed by movement members as credible sources of political information. Focus group discussants mentioned *Lallo*, an Afan Oromo local newspaper printed and circulated in secret as a credible source of protest news. According to some informants, the regional state-owned Oromia Radio and Television Organization (ORTO) started reporting the Oromo protests in late 2015 (Garoma 05/08/2021; Sifan 09/12/2020). According to informants, OTV started to get the trust of its viewership when it broadcasted a press statement by the then communications affairs Minister Getachew Reda branding Oromo protesters as "terrorist" and "demonic"²⁰⁴ (Hamda 22/02/2021; Olana 10/06/2021; Tolera 10/06/2021).

¹⁹⁷ OMN has television and radio broadcasts. See [\(2\) Oromia Media Network - Posts | Facebook](#) Accessed on September 26, 2021.

¹⁹⁸ [Bakkalcha TV | Facebook](#) Accessed on September 24, 2021.

¹⁹⁹ [About us – Bultum Media](#) Accessed on September 24, 2021.

²⁰⁰ <https://oromiamedia.com/about/> Accessed on September 24, 2021.

²⁰¹ OMN's Facebook page has close to two million followers [\(2\) Oromia Media Network | Facebook](#). Accessed on September 26, 2021.

²⁰² [Oromia Broadcasting Service - OBS | Facebook](#) Accessed on September 24, 2021.

²⁰³ [Sagalee Bilisummaa Oromoo | Facebook](#) owned by the Oromo Liberation front. Accessed on September 24, 2021.

“I sometimes watch OTV ever since I have realized that they were trying to challenge the government’s control imposed on them. Of course, I choose programs produced by journalists known for their genuine regard to the Oromo cause” (Sifan 09/12/2020).

The radio and television stations frequently used Facebook to advertise upcoming programs and satellite frequency channels. Study data further shows that the Oromo elites and protest leaders trust Addis Standard for its news and analysis of the Oromo protest (Robsan 16/07/2021; Sifan 09/12/2020). The educated movement actors appeared politically conscious of producing, sharing, retrieving, and storing political information online as the country’s legacy media lacks an independent platform for civilized dialogue on political matters. Thus, Addis Standard, the online English magazine, served movement actors as “the only” local medium to share their views and debate with like-minded people and inform the international community in Ethiopia about the Oromo protests (Jabessa 14/04/2021).

Seifu (2019) discussed the role of international media during the Oromo protest without providing a comparative perspective of local media producing content in international languages like Addis Standard served as a local news source to international media organizations.²⁰⁵ The content analysis process of this study shows that Addis Standard stored more stories of the 2015 Oromo protest than any other local media organization. However, it should be noted that the magazine’s operation was not smooth. The government’s repressive acts during the 2015 Oromo protest pushed the magazine from copy publication to the online space. In October 2016, after publishing the *Irreecha* massacre story, Addis Standard took the Internet as its sanctuary to stay the “independent voice from within Ethiopia”, and its decision garnered international media reports on the status of the magazine as well as freedom of the press in Ethiopia.²⁰⁶ Similar to Addis Standard, OMN and ESAT televisions were repeatedly jammed from broadcasting news in Ethiopia. Study informants highlighted that OMN and ESAT worked to promote the causes of the 2015 Oromo protesters and expose violations of rights in Ethiopia (Hamda 22/02/2021). It is also worth mentioning the frequent imprisonment of OMN and ESAT local reporters citing the Anti-terrorism law (Ibid).

On March 16, 2017, OMN reported that the government banned anyone in Ethiopia from viewing its broadcasts quoting the prime minister who stated, “we have agreed with the Egyptian government to terminate the satellite transmission of OMN and other similar TV stations”²⁰⁷. However, their coping mechanism was Facebook live streaming and changing their transmission frequencies. The mix of satellite TV and social media as

²⁰⁴ Government Communication Affairs. 2015. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1P1tJDAkTYo> (Getachew Reda Presser on Oromo Protests movement - YouTube) December 17, 2015. Accessed on August 15, 2020.

²⁰⁵ Some Addis Standard reports republished by international media i.e., [Ethiopia officials say pro - Jawar Mohammed protesters killed in Oromo cities | Africanews](#); [Ethiopian reunited with long-lost daughters in Eritrea after 16 years - BBC News](#); <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/1/17/ethiopia-frees-opposition-leader-merera-gudina> All accessed on April 23, 2021.

²⁰⁶ [Addis Standard: Ethiopia news portal that diversified to report 'the news' | Africanews](#) Accessed on September 24, 2021.

social movement mobilization resources appeared to be a distinct practice of the 2015 Oromo protest that emanated from the limited Internet penetration, expensive service and low digital literacy in Ethiopia. Facebook served as an interaction platform with viewers, an alternative channel to Livestream stories and to notify viewers about repeated frequency changes imposed by the government’s jamming. The Facebook announcement from OMN²⁰⁸ in Figure 29 concerning transmission frequency change is an example of how diasporic satellite televisions thrive on averting jamming.



Figure 29 Announcement from OMN satellite and frequency change

The state media in Ethiopia depicted the Oromo protesters as “terrorists”.²⁰⁹ According to Amnesty International, the Anti-terror narrative was to intensify crackdown against the Oromo protesters.²¹⁰ Given that some individuals considered key actors of the 2015 Oromo protest movement, such as Jawar Mohammed, were tried in absentia and sentenced to life imprisonment, state media reports have used this as ultimate evidence to portray the protest as treason. Primetime news was retrieved through content analysis of the 2015 Oromo protest in which the government used the state media to nullify the demands of the protest.²¹¹ However, no state media report was found that covers the protester’s demands during content selection and analysis. According to key informants, there was no direct interaction with protesters and identified key actors who were active in organizing the movement, as journalists fear to report on the matter, which the government prohibited (Hamda 22/02/2021; Tolera 10/06/2021; Chali 16/06/2021).

²⁰⁷ Press briefing. Hailemariam Desalegn with Ethiopian News Network

²⁰⁸OMN. https://fb.watch/7_43s_QRgM/ Accessed on July 04, 2021.

²⁰⁹ Awol Allo, [Oromo Protesters Reject Authoritarian Growth Model | Al Jazeera America](#) December 19, 2015. Accessed on August 22, 2020

²¹⁰ [Ethiopia: Anti-terror rhetoric will escalate brutal crackdown against Oromo protesters – Amnesty International USA \(amnestyusa.org\)](#) Accessed on August 16, 2020.

²¹¹ EBC news. 23 February 2016. Government will take merciless action against anti-peace forces.. <https://fb.watch/8fOeu1PorZ/> Accessed on September 26, 2021.

Seifu (2019) argued that media content about the 2015 Oromo protest was framed by international media organizations and online platforms owned and run by identified key actors of the protest. The findings of this study confirm Seifu's (2019) argument that the Oromo protest leaders have used the international media as well as diaspora based "satellite television stations they control" as a tool to amplify their political demands. According to Seifu (2019), media messages were framed to call for mass support, share information with the general public, and express grievances and hopes. The findings of this study offer an outlook that the diasporic satellite media framing and representation of the 2015 Oromo protest included framings of the Oromo identity as a transboundary factor²¹². For instance, OMN extensively covers *Irreecha* celebrations²¹³ and the Oromo annual sports event in the diaspora (Hamda 22/02/2021). Hamda's claim is in line with Asebe and Meron (2014) who highlighted the importance of the two events in the Oromo diaspora to celebrate their culture and interact with one another as they assert their membership in their community of origin. Informants of this study highlighted that the establishment of diasporic media organizations was not just to get adequate and positive representation or relation on and with the media; instead, it was to develop the capability to communicate the movement's agenda (Robsan 16/07/2021; Kelbesa 03/12/2020; Hamda 22/02/2021). As articulated by one of the informants, "the undoubted consensus among Oromo activists was the belief that information is the power we have to share our knowledge with like-minded Oromos" (Wariyo 07/12/2020).

Wondwosen (2009) emphasized the important role of traditional media to mobilize collective action in previous social movements in Ethiopia. His assertion can help to argue that the 2015 Oromo protest leadership considered the diasporic satellite media as a site of political resistance for the mass public with no or limited Internet access learning from preceding collective actions. Accordingly, it is worth mentioning of another similarity between *Dimtsachin Yisema* and the 2015 Oromo protest in terms of using diaspora media to call for mass support. Empirical data of this study shows that the Muslim protesters run an online radio called Radio Bilal with offices on Washington, London, Johannesburg and Addis Ababa.

The deployment of diaspora-based satellite media to advance the Oromo movement cause complies with the notion of power contestation for media representation and social movement strategy to access a platform to be heard (McCurdy 2012). What is distinct about the 2015 Oromo protest is the ability to establish, control, and sustain a satellite television and radio to contest power and challenge the repressive government in their homeland.

This thesis further argues that social movement leaders of the 2015 Oromo protest used diaspora-based satellite television and radio to interact with their supporters. Such a new approach to own media has facilitated autonomous production, dissemination, acquisition, and storage of political content and dual communication modes both vertically and horizontally, as explained by Castells (2009, 70). According to study informants, the unique feature of diaspora-based satellite media ownership and funding

²¹²OMN live. *Irreecha* 2017. <https://fb.watch/8fZBliXtDK/> Accessed on September 26, 2021.

²¹³ *ibid*

strategy created a homogeneity of content, presentation and information source that can help mobilize the mass (Kelbesa 03/12/2020; Kooluu 29/01/2021, Robsan 16/07/2021; Bedaso 18/07/2021). On the other hand, such media ownership and administration type potentially left out those with views that could not fit into the desires of media owners and managers, indirectly discouraging the movement from developing a formal organizational structure (ibid).

5.5. Supporting the Formation of Collective Identity through the Internet

The formation of collective identity is practically the result of social mobilization and, at the same time, a mobilizing frame to encourage member participation (Melucci 1996b). Similar to Seifu (2019), the findings of this study shows that the Oromo collective identity formation revolved around their shared understanding of being Oromo and the longstanding grievances that helped the 2015 Oromo protest develop. The major identity framing of the protest revolved around rejecting the foundation of the Ethiopian empire that movement leaders asserted as not inclusive of Oromos identity, language, and culture (Wariyo 07/11/2020; Nahim 14/11/2020). Movement leaders believe that other ethnic groups dominate the national political, social and cultural narratives and that the revival of Oromoness, *Oromumma*, is the key to addressing the deep-seated grievances of the Oromo people (ibid). Data from the field shows that the Internet served as a communication tool to “rectify the dominant narratives” that defocused the Oromo political history and position in the Ethiopian State (Wariyo 07/11/2020; Nahim 14/11/2020; Sifan 09/12/2020).

According to study informants, social media, specifically, Facebook created a space for young Oromos to experiment and reinforce their political and cultural identities and secure legitimacy for their online and offline political perception and practice (ibid). The assertion is in line with Della Porta and Diani’s (2006, 111) explanation that collective identity formation is conditioned by political variables. In the case of the 2015 Oromo protest, this could be the suppression of freedom of expression by a draconian government where any symbolic expression of individuals is interpreted as dissent by party cadres.

“I remember an incident when our neighbor’s Oxen disappeared from the herd, and he screamed for help. We went out in a group to help him search, yelling to alert others if they saw the Oxen mixed with their cattle; that is what we do in our culture. It did not take long for the *Liyu* police to arrive and harass us, saying we were protesting. Then, we immediately started to chant protest slogans” (Wagari 01/11/2020).

The above quote illustrates the collective consciousness of the grassroots on how to utilize opportunities to advance the Oromo cause and respond to intimidations by authorities. This study further argues that the Internet provided a safe platform for movement members to cultivate an individual movement persona, create a sense of solidarity with other members, and show their commitment to the broader society to advance the movement agendas.

“Facebook helped to inculcate the youth about the Oromo cause and motivate them to own the agenda and participate in protest rallies, be it on social media or on-the-road without fear” (Wariyo 07/11/2020).

This study’s findings agree with Tewodros (2020) claim that “social media platforms are likely to increase ingroup political participation but chronically diminish outgroup engagement”. This research further argues that the 2015 Oromo protest used collective identity as an inclusion criterion to join the online and offline political sphere. For instance, a coterie communicative action was shaped through Afan Oromo as the “only members” language while Amharic and English were not rejected to communicate with movement sympathizers. The use of Afan Oromo as a protest language bases itself on the framed movement agenda regarding the demand to make Afan Oromo one of the State’s official languages. In addition, the ability to read and write Afan Oromo in Latin alphabets become a common identity for young Oromos to start a discussion about the movement and shared narratives of longstanding political grievances (Gemechu 10/04/2021; Tolera 10/06/2021).

This study proclaims that the 2015 Oromo protest did not start using the Internet at the early stage of the protest; instead, artistic works, religious places, schools and cultural ceremonies, weddings and funerals served as platforms to form a collective identity, which include the desire to revive the Oromo identity - *Oromumma* and express popular responsiveness towards the objectives of the movement. According to Habtamu (2017), the Oromo protest actors used leaflets, “human voices”, and “traditional street actions” along with social media platforms to cultivate collective identity, which was also captured by this study. “We do *geerarsa*, which is a protest song to communicate our grievances and sometimes propose actions and solutions” (Geda 15/01/2021²¹⁴).

An elaborative ethnographic work on Oromo resistance poetic by Assefa (2015, 254) validated the cultural role of *geerarsa* (protest songs) and *farssa* (commemorative songs) among the Salale Oromos to mobilize the mass against repression. Informants of this study confirmed that *geerarsa* songs the youth chant during the 2015 Oromo protests were about the effects of land grabbing, Oromos life and their anger about the arrests, killings and disappearance of individuals. Even though Assefa (2015, 255) did not discuss the *geerarsa* and *farssa* songs of the 2015 Oromo protest, his explanation of the theme of “contemporary *geerarsa*” include “displacement, prison, poverty and breakdown of the family” fits the articulation of study informants about songs they used for mobilization. Unlike Assefa (2015), who has only discussed the verbal art of *geerarsa* and *farssa* in Oromos day to day lives, this study claims that the verbal art of *geerarsa*²¹⁵ and *farssa*²¹⁶ were deployed online to convey protest messages and instigate longstanding grievances of the Oromo people.

²¹⁴ Geda, a farmer in Sululta area, interview with the author, January 15, 2021.

²¹⁵ See an example of a *geerarsa* at [\(1\) Walaloo Oromoo - Posts | Facebook](#) Accessed on September 24, 2021.

²¹⁶ See an example of a *farssa* [\(1\) Facebook](#) Accessed on September 24, 2021.

In addition, songs like *Gidiraa*²¹⁷ by Jambo Jote served were popular in 2015 among protesters. Secondary data shows that social gatherings like wedding ceremonies were also places to show disobedience. On February 12, 2016, a wedding ceremony in West Arisi zone, Aje town, turned violent when police responded to a song it claimed was a call for violence. The police fired live bullets at a bus transporting wedding goers and killed four people²¹⁸. Informants cited various religious songs (mainly from Protestant Churches) used to encourage the public to protest and endure crackdowns.

“Christian singers produced songs that could serve the Oromo struggle. Some of the songs were so powerful than worldly music. I remember Bilise Karasa’s song “*Amman gubaa garaa diina koo*”²¹⁹. Arrested protesters sang this song as they were taken to the prison” (Toltu 03/04/2021)

Focus group discussants in places like Lege Tafo and Addis Ababa mentioned Churches and pastors preaching about humanity and equality citing Biblical verses. Hirpha (18/01/2021)²²⁰ recalls teaching about “God’s power to overthrow corrupt and deceiving governments if people pray and fight, in God’s grace, to demand their Godly given rights.” Informants indicated Biftu Bole and Gulele Protestant Churches in Addis Ababa, serving as major sanctuaries for protest leaders and those endangered by security forces for their involvement in protest rallies in surrounding Oromia special zone towns. Others used gatherings like Meskel as an opportunity to voice up their anger because they were not allowed by the government to hold peaceful political demonstrations” (Feyisa 31/12/2020).

Study data shows the 2015 Oromo protest added specific symbols to its mobilization tactics simultaneously with its utilization of the Internet to call for mass support. For example, putting on black attire and shaving the head were practiced ingroup to express anguish ensuing mass killings and crackdowns while growing the hair in an Afro style but with a shape resembling the *Odaa*²²¹ tree represents one’s determination to the movement. The *Odaa* Afro hairstyle confirms Asafa’s (2020, 107) statement that the Oromo nationalists committed to advancing the movement and galvanizing support should portray the Oromo culture and civilization that still lives in the hearts of ordinary Oromo. Young people with the *Odaa* shaped Afro hairstyle were intrinsically acknowledged as trusted local *Qeerroo* leaders, while diaspora youth with the same hairstyle enjoy the recognition as one who honors his Oromo identity (Toltu 03/04/2021; Kumsa 20/12/2020; Terfasa 20/01/2021; Jigsa 16/02/2021). Using hairstyle to symbolize resistance is common in black movements such as the African Americans and Ras Taffarians. Hairdo is a source of political information that illustrates agency that refused to be silenced (Tate 2017; Sunil and Henderikus 2005). Similarly, *Odaa* Afro symbolized

²¹⁷ Gidiraa, 18 July 2015. [Gidiraa by Jambo Jote - YouTube](#) with more than 625 thousand views online. Accessed on October 21, 2021.

²¹⁸ Mahlet Fasil. [Oromo Protests: Dozens die in West Aris protests; situation “extremely volatile” – police officer - Addis Standard](#) February 16, 2016. quoting Jawar Mohammed’s Facebook page. Accessed July 11, 2021.

²¹⁹ Roughly translated as “I will burn my enemies soon.”

²²⁰ Hirpha, Self-employed, focus group discussion in Lege Tafo, 18/01/2021.

²²¹ Odaa is a tree that symbolizes the Oromo nation. [Oda Tree for Oromo Society - ODA BULTUM Hararghe](#)

protest signs that became popular through social media posts and interpersonal communication methods (Toltu 03/04/2021; Kumsa 20/12/2020).



Figure 30 *Qeerroo* hairstyle as a protest sign

The group picture in Figure 30, portrayed *Qeerroo* Minnesota members in varieties of protest hairstyle and Oromo traditional outfit.²²² Figure 31 further attest the influence of the Internet in shaping the transnational collective identity of the 2015 Oromo protest actors, which was reflected through established cultural symbols, clothing and hairdo. This conforms Tate (2017) and Sunil and Henderikus (2005) argument about the importance of standardization of culture in modern social movements. According to informants, young people with *Odaa* Afro enjoy acceptance in the society domestically and in the diaspora (Abdireshid 12/12/2020; Nahim 14/11/2020; Gemechu 10/05/2021). Study data further depicted that, unlike their diaspora *Qeerroo* counterparts, local *Qeerroo* seemed to be easily traced and harassed by local authorities. The first measure police took during crackdowns included forcing young men with *Odaa* Afro to shave their hair in an attempt to disgrace them in front of the public, to reduce their visibility and to control the spread of protests (Negera 01/02/2021; Humnesa 06/03/2021; Kumsa 20/12/2020).

According to Rohlinger and Bunnage (2018) organizational structure and communication tactics facilitate the formation of collective identities in the digital age, which the empirical findings of this study support. Additionally, data for this study depicts that the 2015 Oromo protest leadership appropriated the online sphere to form and maintain movement members' identity and negotiate public status that helps them organize the mass on the ground. Unlike Rohlinger and Bunnage (2018) claim, this study argues that collective identity formed with the assistance of digital technologies appeared to take faster and in a more similar fashion. Thus, this study argues that deploying the Internet in social movement organizations facilitates the creation and maintenance of transboundary identities. Similar to Rohlinger and Bunnage (2018), this study found out that individual interest and emotions contribute to the cultivation and sustenance of collective identity in networked movements. The study further elucidates that the 2015 Oromo movement actors used the Internet to facilitate collective identity formation by providing space to share multimedia content that reflects individual and group experiences and encourage others to engage and relate to what is posted (Keno 16/03/2021; Abdireshid 12/12/2020).

²²² (2) [Qeerroo Minnesota | Facebook](#)

5.6. The Internet as a Message Framing Tool during the 2015 Oromo Protest

The Addis Ababa and Surrounding Oromia Special Zone Town Integrated Master Plan was used as a general movement frame alignment to call for action (Kelbesa 03/11/2020). The master plan issue was appropriated to convey movement messages in human rights language that reflected the core demands of the Oromo people (ibid). Therefore, freedom from eviction, meaningful representation and participation in the country's social, economic and political affairs, and language rights were movement message framings. Content analysis of the study attests that the master plan was among the most debated protest messages on social media that facilitated interaction between movement actors and government officials online.



Figure 31 Social media interaction between protest key actors and State authorities

The screenshot in Figure 31 shows how the master plan issue was associated with land grabbing to attract the attention of international media, and how the master plan facilitated discussion between movement actors and government officials who otherwise are inaccessible to respond to popular demands. The screenshot further shows the

solidarity of some non-Oromo activists in demanding authorities to halt violence and start a discussion on the master plan issue. The research findings clearly show that the State and its authorities were simply actor-players in the network power relationship while the Internet formed an informational linkage between individuals, the public and the State during the 2015 Oromo protest. The Internet as a message farming tool served the 2015 Oromo protest to positively engage with state authorities capable of counter framing movement narratives.

The central message framings primarily used by *Qeerroo* to organize the first master plan protest demonstrations in Ambo, Jimma, Nekemte, and Meda Welabu, specifically “No to Finfinnee Master Plan”, “the land belongs to the Oromo”, “the prison speaks Afan Oromo, not the state” continued to be used by protesters. Study informants uttered that these messages were commended by the grassroots and encouraged popular participation and collective action (Abdi 31/12/2020; Godana 29/12/2020). According to study informants, the Internet transformed the 2015 Oromo protest into a networked transnational movement with an international human rights agenda influencing how road demonstrations were organized in Ethiopia (Kelbesa 03/11/2020; Robsan 16/06/2021). On the other hand, the government continued counter framing movement messages asserting that the demand for democracy and human rights is sponsored by “external actors” to destabilize the country’s double-digit economic growth. For example, in March 2016, Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn told the parliament that the protests in Oromia turned violent because “anti-peace forces” distorted the people’s legitimate questions.²²³

²²³ BBC news, March 10, 2016. [Ethiopia's Oromo protests: PM Hailemariam Desalegn apologises - BBC News](#) Accessed on August 20, 2021.

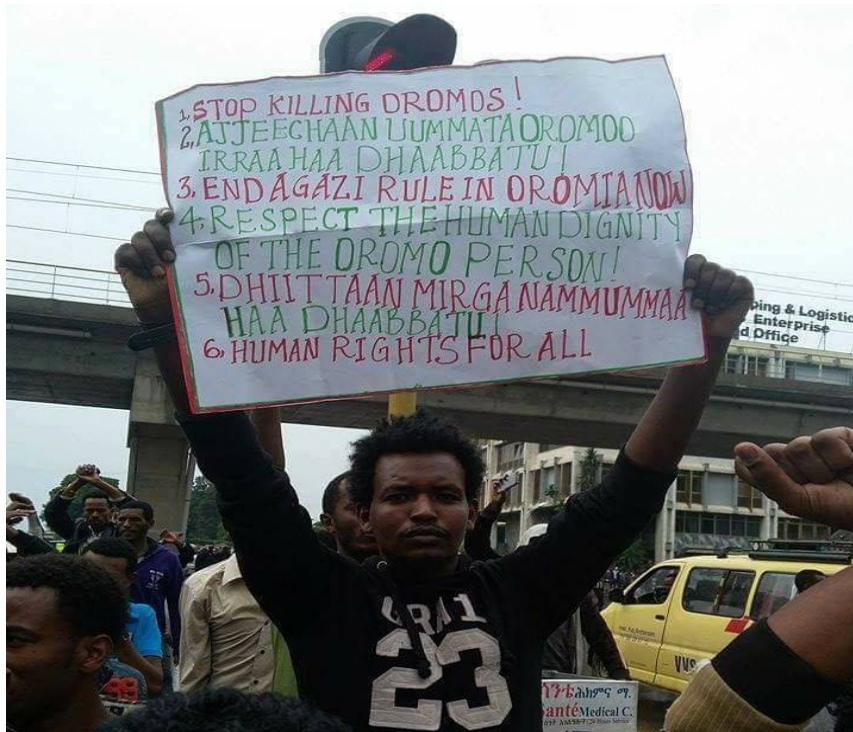


Figure 32 Protest slogan during the Oromia Grand Rally in Addis Ababa

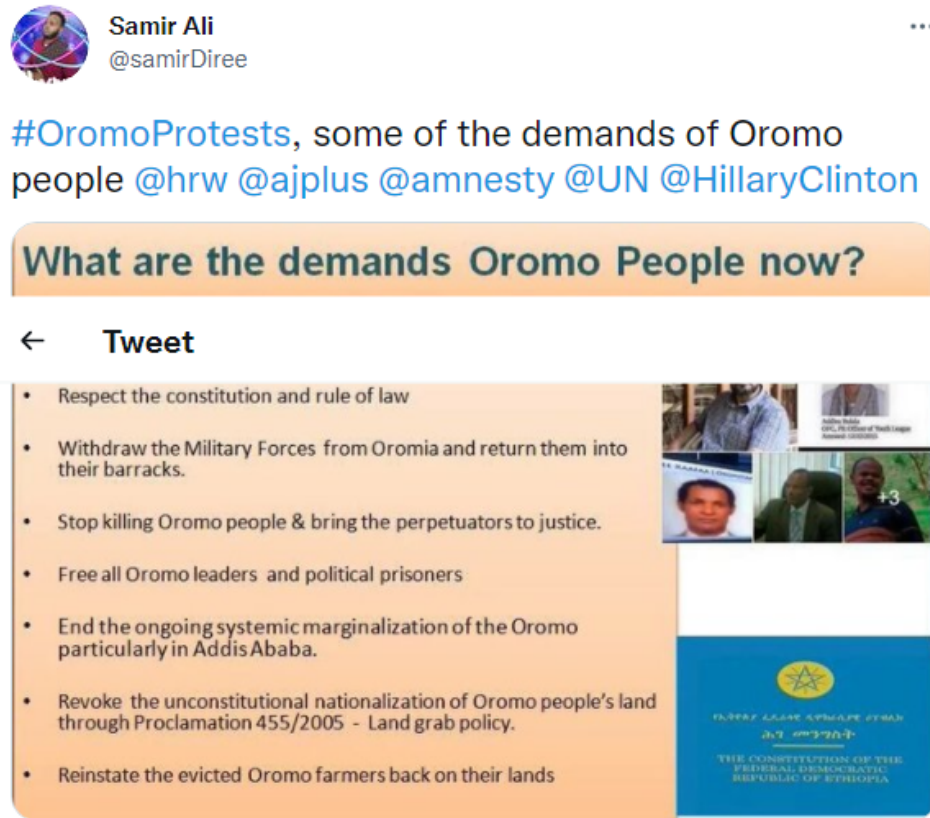
The photograph in Figure 32 taken in Addis Ababa²²⁴ conveys messages that show human rights issues were among the major demands of the 2015 Oromo protest. The banner messages request the government to stop killings and respect the human dignity of Oromos together with a pursuit for human rights for all. According to informants, Oromos and supporters working for international organizations and western embassies in Ethiopia have also contributed to the framings and narratives of the 2015 Oromo protest agenda.

“Let me tell you my experience on the next day of the 2016 *Irreechaa* massacre. I used to work for an international organization with opportunities to meet with ambassadors and influencers. I went to office with my Oromo cultural outfit purposively to join a Monday morning briefing session. It was an office meeting with (high level) presence; I grabbed the opportunity to explain what happened in Bishoftu on 2nd of October and how we (Oromos) were denied of a basic right to express our cultural identity” (Sifan 09/12/2020).

Sifan’s assertion highlights the importance of local human rights understandings and narratives in shaping the image and acceptance of the 2015 Oromo protest as a transnational movement against repression. The study findings embolden the claim by Dibbets and Eijkman (2018) about the role of local actors with human rights awareness and resources in translating norms and practices of human rights. The study further alludes, in the case of Ethiopia, protest members seemed to engage in accessing the global arena and serving the 2015 Oromo protest as information brokers between

²²⁴ <https://www.facebook.com/1839773402917393/photos/a.1839789812915752/2035662586661806>
 Accessed on September 17, 2021.

politically locked society and the international community. More so, they have played significant role in translating transnational human rights ideas to local situations by positioning themselves closer to the issue and with effective intervention ideas.



1:12 AM · May 13, 2016 · Twitter for Android

Figure 33 Twitter messages prepared for online campaigning

The Twitter campaigning messages²²⁵ in Figure 33 calls for the protection of human rights and respect to the rule of law mentioning human rights organizations, international media, the UN and the USA Secretary of State. The aim is to directly address the international community using human rights discourse. Content analysis of this study captures consistent human rights violation reports²²⁶ that could be associated with the success of protesters in effectively using social media and local human rights translators (Garoma 05/08/2021; Jabessa 14/04/2021; Abdirashid 12/12/2020). In contrast, government’s response to human rights reports is minimal, although the study found out attempts to respond to international media requests when the pressure from international human rights actors intensifies. At the same time, the government’s online engagement to counter frame human rights violations claims of the protesters is fragmented and

²²⁵ Samir Ali on Twitter: "#OromoProtests, some of the demands of Oromo people @hrw @ajplus @amnesty @UN @HillaryClinton <https://t.co/9uEKgPvMTV>" / Twitter Accessed on September 19, 2021.

²²⁶ Content analysis shows frequent human rights reports from various international organizations, including Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, Minority Rights Group, Freedom House and International Peace Institute.

inconsistent (Jabessa 14/04/2021; Yirga 21/11/2018). However, when it is decided as deemed necessary, the government engages with international media and counter frame messages from both protesters and international human rights defenders as lies and attacks to the developing democracy in Ethiopia (Yirga 21/11/2018; Amanyihun 19/01/2021). For example, Getachew Reda told the BBC that Human Rights Watch consecutive reports on Ethiopia are invalid as the organization does not have physical offices in the country to first hand witness the context. He called the report “absolute lie”²²⁷

Also, it can be argued that the Internet as a medium created a new form of communication between the global influencers and among dominant Ethiopian diaspora ethnic groups, i.e., the Oromo and Amhara. For example, major diaspora groups and international human rights organizations that advocated for human rights and inclusive governance in Ethiopia, including the Amhara Association of America, the Oromo diaspora community and Human Rights Watch, came together to defend fundamental human rights in Ethiopia. The declaration of support by the United States Congress on February 15, 2017,²²⁸ amplified international support to the Oromo movement acknowledging their demand for accountability for human rights violation, justice and democracy. The resolution enjoyed the full support of diaspora-based groups and international human rights organizations to its passage. The declaration was publicized by a joint press statement from diaspora supporters through regular international media coverage. Moreover, the Oromo and Amhara diaspora members joint appearance before the Congress to testify against the Ethiopian government’s oppression against the Oromo and Amhara people²²⁹ were categorized by the ruling party as an act of “mad dogs unleashed against the EPRDF government if it refuses to eject the Chinese from its land”²³⁰

The joint press statement of diaspora groups and international human rights organizations and frequent reports of the bill’s declaration and approval was a testament that movement actors used legacy media and the Internet to portray the 2015 Oromo protest promoting human rights as the global culture. The allied support from diverse organizations to the H.RES.128 bill shows that the 2015 Oromo protest organizational strategy was not only horizontal between different actors within the Ethiopian border, it was also vertical using a common language to coordinate transnational actors support the movement agenda. The involvement of the Amhara and Oromo diaspora group organizations in support of the bill denotes the reprogramming of communication networks centering on the shared value of human rights and democracy, which is also the ultimate agenda of international human rights organizations and media outlets. This relates with Castells (2009) assertion about reprogramming communication networks to appeal to the global democracy and

²²⁷ BBC News February 22, 2016. [Ethiopia says Oromia protests crackdown claims are 'lies' - BBC News](#) Accessed on September 20, 2021.

²²⁸ H.RES.128. Supporting respect for human rights and encouraging inclusive governance in Ethiopia. February 15, 2017. 115th Congress 1st Session.

²²⁹ <https://youtu.be/pvMOUI-ZSYY> . Opride. Posted on March 15, “Seenaa Jimjimo: Ethiopia has become an open prison for so many Ethiopians, particularly Oromos”. Accessed July 6, 2021.

²³⁰ [HR 128 more about controlling Ethiopia than human rights and democracy \(tigraionline.com\)](#). Accessed on September 24, 2021.

human rights agenda. The issue of H.RES.128 bill brought about new counter framing of the 2015 Oromo protest by Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn emphasizing” Ethiopia’s historical enemies” who want to destabilize the country through “diaspora extremists”. However, his statement, as quoted below, had minimal effect on online public opinion.

“...our historical enemies, specifically those who do not want to see us using our natural resources, are distributing sack of money to the diaspora extremist groups have been working to destabilize the country. We have evidence that the extremists are sending in money to protest leaders in the country, which the government cannot ignore... we will work to hold these people participating in this sabotage and ensure the rule of law... I hereby order law enforcement agencies to take necessary measures to ensure the rule of law.”²³¹

The Prime Minister’s comment on EBC on the protest rallies and the support protesters were getting from the diaspora had 68 dislikes, triple fold as much as 21 likes it had gotten. It is evident from the content analysis of this study that key human rights messages during the 2015 Oromo protest were framed in the form of hashtag activism as in the Arab Springs and *Dimtsachin Yisema* movement. Selected messages framed as hashtags were stored as TinyURLs to help people access and cross-post messages quickly and effectively on various social media platforms as seen in Figure 34.

OromoProtests - Home | Facebook

TWITTER CAMPAIGN TODAY, starting in 4 hours! 12pm EST/2:00 local time Oromia/ETH.

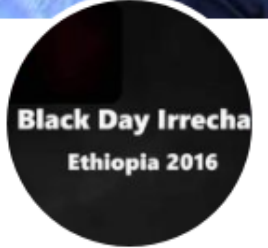
Click-to-tweets will be available at this link: tinyurl.com/OromoProtests.

Figure 34 Twitter campaign call

According to Tewodros (2020), hashtag words and changing profile pictures depicted movement messages during and after the 2015 Oromo protests. The findings of this research confirmed Tewodros’s (2020) assertion about the deployment of hashtags and profile pictures during the 2015 Oromo protest. Also, this study highlights that hashtag were produced tying keywords with human rights and democracy issues while changing profile pictures on social media accounts to convey movement messages to members and supporters and mainly to reach out to the transnational community. Figure 35 show hashtags that reflect human rights messages and widely shared profile picture during the *Irreecha* stampede.

²³¹ [Ethiopia - Prime Minister Hailemariam Dsealegn's comment on recent Ethiopia Protests - YouTube](#)
Accessed on July 6, 2021. Report by EBC 31 August 2016. 4:01-5-34.

#Bishoftu #Ethiopia #HRW #Human Rights #Irreecha #oromia
#oromo #security forces #tear gas



Black Day Irreecha
Ethiopia 2016

Figure 35 Human rights related hashtags and profile pictures

The diaspora activists initially introduced the 2015 Oromo protest hashtag activism as the ultimate objective was to create a sustained engagement of the diaspora movement members, supporters and international media and human rights groups (Yesuf 10/02/2021; Robsan 16/07/2021). As a result, the Internet created a mechanism to attract the attention of international human rights organizations and media corporations to amplify the movement agenda (ibid). The findings of this study support Seifu's (2019) argument that the Oromo protest deployed a clear engagement strategy with the international media by using social media and media interviews to provide information about the protest. However, it should also be noted that empirical data for this study captures several movement actors from the diaspora who appeared to contribute op-ed pieces to internationally acclaimed media organizations, which was in scares from the ruling party side.

“I believe the diaspora Oromo leaders were well conversant in the English language to explain the objectives of the protest. Government officials were not as such present to talk to international journalists” (Bedaso 18/07/2021).

Content analysis of this study further shows that systematic campaigning from the diaspora movement actors who deliberately share their media engagement with the #OromoProtests hashtag as an online identification of the 2015 Oromo Protests. By the end of 2016, the BBC compiled Africa's top hashtags of the year where the #OromoProtests and #AmharaProtests became the most popular hashtags.²³²

²³² Hugo Williams. 28 December 2016. [Africa's top hashtags of 2016 - BBC News](#) Accessed on September 12, 2021.



Figure 36 Advertising international media coverage of the Protest through social media

The Twitter screenshot in Figure 36 is from a person whose name was repeatedly mentioned among the diaspora leaders during data collection.²³³ Awol Allo has been on major international media,²³⁴ the Aljazeera explaining the Oromo cause and contributing content to international and local media organizations published in English. For example, the content analysis of this study found eighteen op-ed pieces regarding the Oromo protest published in Aljazeera English during the timeframe of the study (2015 to 2018) without including his news analysis and joint debate appearances on the same channel.

Findings of this study show that although the communicative act was centralized within the 2015 Oromo protest leadership structure, the Internet provided individual members to regularly produce, disseminate, share and interpret information that could become collective frames. Also, the individual member's involvement in movement content production and dissemination created competition for visibility and acceptability of an online spot (Lelisa 09/02/2021²³⁵; Chali 16/06/2021). According to informants, the first step is obtaining an original image and video either from protest demonstrations that

²³³ [Awol Allo on Twitter: "#OromoProtests my AJ piece The Oromo protests have changed Ethiopia @AJEnglish https://t.co/58BEX8NM0G @AfricaAtLSE @LSEHumanRights @OPride" / Twitter](#)
 Accessed on September 21, 2021.

²³⁴ Awol Allo had interview appearances with the BBC and CNN in 2015-2017. His piece on CNN from 2016 was quite remarkable *Oromo Protests: Why US must stop enabling Ethiopia*. 2016. CNN <http://edition.cnn.com/2016/08/09/africa/ethiopia-oromo-protest/>

turned violent or leaked speeches and documents from government officials attacking the movement agenda and, in some cases, self-portraits that depicted a sense of belongingness to the broader Oromo community as portrayed in Figure 37.



Figure 37 Sample Facebook picture post to garner likes and shares

The second stage is interpreting or redefining the message of an original post through sharing, captioning, tagging, commenting and liking, while the third step is to use online content to attract more members and sympathizers to the cause of the movement.

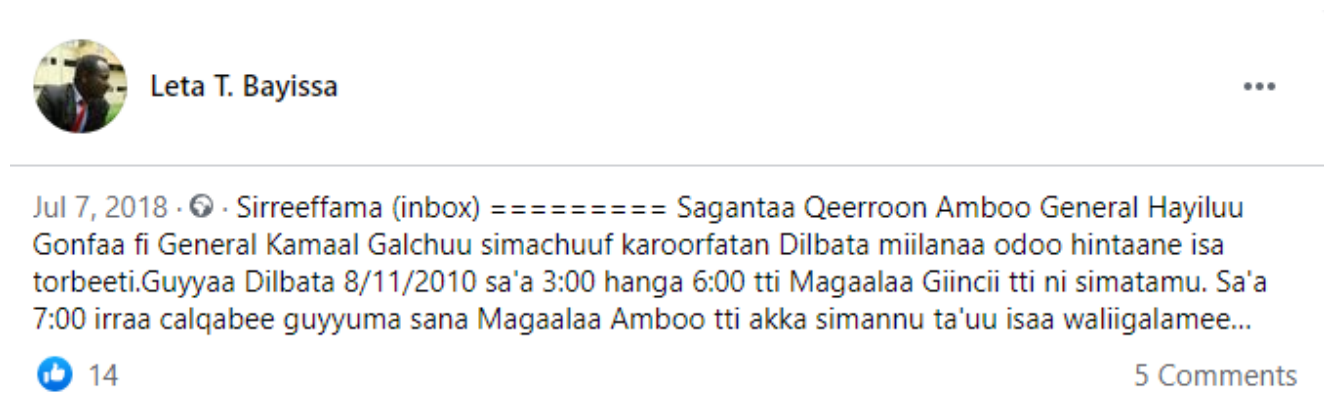


Figure 38 Example of social media shared messages “from inbox”

²³⁵ Lelisa, Computer Programmer, interview with the author, February 09, 2021.

As seen in Figure 38 often, influential online actors use #inbox to amplify messages from individuals who may feel threatened to post on their page or are eager to reach out to a more significant number of social media users.²³⁶ The overall process of message framing observed during content analysis for this study complies with Chadwick's (2017) definition of online political engagement of citizens, which includes amplifying, commenting, reposting, sharing and liking of other peoples' opinions as well as leaked or transferred documents. Nonetheless, the 2015 Oromo protest illustrated movement leaders' technique of engaging online members by disengaging from an ongoing political discussion. According to informants, movement actors are often attacked by the adversary mass commenters for the messages they post. In such circumstances, the activist would stay silent, leaving the fight to the opposing voice and supporters defending the initial post to create a sense of participation and inclusion. The following post illustrate the engaging by disengaging tactic of movement actors²³⁷.

²³⁶ <https://www.facebook.com/leta.bayissa/posts/10215587923469677> Accessed on September 23, 2021.

²³⁷ (1) Facebook Accessed on September 23, 2021.

The screenshot in Figure 39 states that some Tigrayans are implicated in distracting protest demonstrations in Oromia. The writer asserted this is a fact that no one can hide and that the solution is to tell the distracters to refrain from their act before the situation grows from a political party affair to a public affair. The post entertained diverse points of view coupled with some offensive and derogatory remarks against the first speaker and other commenters. In contrast, some commenters argued that Tigrayans in Oromia are being physically attacked and killed by protesters, while others accused the first speaker of promoting unfounded claims to aggravate hate among people. Figure 38 clearly shows that the page owner did not respond either to opposers or supporters regarding his post about rumours Tigrayan people in Oromia are engaged in disrupting peaceful protest rallies in Oromia. The overall conversation was between supporters and adversaries attacking each other, blaming and labelling the original speaker as some commenters attempted to protect and advise the page owner to ignore those who opposed him. In contrast, the post attracted active participation without the original speaker moderating content on his page.

Some prior studies including Tewodros (2020), Meseter (2020), Skjerdal and Sintayehu (2020), Wilson et al. (2021) did not discuss the influence of the Internet in terms of message framing collaboration between online activists and on the road protesters. This study claims that the Internet helped the offline protesters to build trust in the movement agenda and action as it has created a means to ensure that Oromos in different parts of the world were also standing with them. At the same time, the regard people on the ground had to the diaspora movement actors seemed to be associated with the use of the Internet and the message that comes through it.

“Whenever we agree to organize a market boycott, my friends and I go to rural places to tell people that they should not come to towns to sell and buy things and that the road to the market will be closed. The first thing they asked was ‘*Biyya alaa warri jiran maal jedhan?*’ to say ‘what does the diaspora say?’, and some people ask like ‘what is on Facebook?’ Then we will tell them what is on social media” (Humnesa 06/03/2021).

Data from the field shows that the trust offline protesters put on the online sources of information eases Qeerros’ mobilization work. Thus, the Internet narrowed the distance between diaspora-urban digital activists and rural protesters by facilitating the creation of a network of trust. In this case, *Qeerroo* leaders with some degree of socio-economic background played a conduits role to facilitate information flow between the diaspora-urban digital activists and the local people. Informants acknowledged the importance of teachers, Development Agents,²³⁸ and Church leaders in diffusing protest information (Humnesa 06/03/2021; Miresa 12/05/2021; Geda 15/01/2021; Soreti 02/01/2021). This study avows that the limited availability and expensive access to the Internet in the context where freedom of expression and other corollary rights are suppressed will not hinder the transformation of a national protest into a transnational movement if trust developed among movement actors. Therefore, the viable mobilization resource deployed to organize a transboundary movement where the diaspora community, local activists and

²³⁸ Development Agents are extension workers in the agriculture sector, considered as pillars in the rural transformation and food security efforts of Ethiopia. [Performance Incentives for Development Agents in Ethiopia: Policy Direction for Rural Transformation Efforts | Agrilinks](#). Accessed on April 24, 2021.

on the road protesters and *Qeerroo* leaders stand in solidarity was social capital. Had it not been for the trust between movement actors and the commitment they portrayed to the general public, the 2015 Oromo protest would not have been sustained for years campaigning for its agenda.

Study data presents an explanation for why Facebook was more utilized than other social platforms as a site of resistance and communication platform during the 2015 Oromo protest. According to key informants, the 2015 Oromo protest leadership found out from the #BoycottBedele experiment that young Oromos preferred to use Facebook to access political messages than other platforms, although the elites used Twitter at times intersecting social media platforms such as YouTube and Instagram for easy content posting and sharing (Kelbesa 03/11/2020; Robsan 16/07/2021). However, the Oromo protest had no Twitter handle until the assassination of Hachalu Hundessa in July 2020, which led to Oromo political leaders' arrest. The new @OromoProtestsHQ Twitter handle has more than nineteen thousand four hundred followers with active thread update²³⁹. Content analysis of this study shows that there are seven Twitter handles with a minor change on the Oromo protests phrase but adding numbers while three people using the phrase as a Twitter handle.

Moreover, the sub research question asked to focus group participants of this study regarding the kind of social media sites young people used during the Oromo protest illustrates that Facebook has an unmatched role in availing information access and creating a sense of freedom to express a political opinion. The popularity of Facebook as an alternative broadcast and print media among the Ethiopian youth in selected regional capital cities, i.e., Bahir Dar, Mekelle, Jijjiga, Harar and Hawassa, was discussed by Sileshie (2014). Data analysis of this study adds to Sileshie's (2014) claim that Facebook was also serving as an alternative communication platform in its study sites. Study findings of this dissertation highlights that through time, Facebook has also become extensively used as a source of business information and political participation. This finding is against Sileshie's (2014) conclusion that Facebook is less used for information, discussion and education. Furthermore, YouTube is widely used to access multimedia political content, with a limited number of study participants using it to post and share information. WhatsApp and Viber were mentioned as VoIP platforms deployed by on the road protesters to send and receive political messages, while Skype and WhatsApp were repeatedly mentioned as a communication medium among urban digital activists and the diaspora. The deployment of Telegram as a political communication platform during the protest was also mentioned in some instances.

Unlike the findings of previous researches conducted to understand the role of social media and digital technology in political communication (Wilson et al., 2021; Meseret 2020; Tewodros 2020; Skjerdal and Sintayehu 2020; Seifu 2019; Habtamu 2017; Gagliardone and Pohjonen 2016), this study found out that Facebook was also used as a search engine. Focus group discussion participants explained that they used Facebook "to google information about the Oromo Protest" (Hirpha 18/01/2021). According to study participants, they use Facebook to search for news regarding the protest and people

²³⁹ Accessed on September 23, 2021.

actively participating in the protest (Amede 18/01/2021²⁴¹; Belina 15/01/2021²⁴²; Hunde²⁴² 03/01/2021).

“I search for information about the Oromo protest on Facebook. I do find relevant pieces; at times, it disappoints me by not providing what I need and overflowing me with information unrelated to what I was searching for” (Feyisa 31/12/2020²⁴³).

On the other hand, the 2015 Oromo protest online world was affected by the government’s surveillance system and counter framings of movement messages and the leadership by portraying the Oromo movement as a criminal organization using technology to destabilize the national political order (Kelbesa 03/11/2021; Gelan 03/03/2021). Thus, the 2015 Oromo protest leadership decided to centralize mobilization messages without compromising its ability to galvanize the mass towards the common agenda (ibid). According to informants, the movement leadership noticed the circulation of fake photographs and news about protest rallies that the government cadres counter framed to attack the movement and create doubt about its online messages (Kelbesa 03/11/2020; Wariyo 07/11/2020). Some photographs and stories about the 2015 Oromo protest were repeatedly used out of context; Figure 40 could be one among many.



Figure 40 A sample photo used in more than 20 online stories of the Oromo protest

Content analysis of this study captured the above picture on Tineye²⁴⁴ search with 24 different story entries related to the 2015 Oromo protests. The photograph appeared on social media, legacy media reports and human rights advocacy documents from December 31, 2016, to January 25, 2020.²⁴⁵ Such online practices costed the movement

²⁴¹ Amede, unemployed, focus group discussion participant, Lege Tafo , January 18, 2021.

²⁴² Belina, College student, focus group discussion, Sululta, January 15, 2021.

²⁴² Hunde, unemployed, focus group discussion, Addis Ababa, January 03, 2021.

²⁴³ Feyisa, government employee, focus group discussion, Burayu, December 31, 2020.

²⁴⁴ TinEye is an image recognition and tracking tool.

as the government repeatedly jailed Oromo students, journalists and activists on accounts of “inciting the public through false rumors.”²⁴⁶

The blame on false rumors on social media made it to the United Nations’ podium on September 21 2016, when Ethiopia’s Prime Minister Hailemariam Dessalegn took the stage to address the general assembly. His attempt to counter-frame the 2015 Oromo protest agenda on the international stage was overshadowed by the diaspora community’s continued protest demonstrations in Europe and the United States actively using social media sites to denounce the ruling party’s claim about the use of the Internet to disseminate hate and violence. Hailemariam argued that social media was the key factor enabling the protests in Ethiopia without mentioning the root causes of the popular unrest and actual triggering factors to the 2015 Oromo protest. However, he mentioned that “genuine concerns of the people” were manipulated to disseminate hate and disinformation, trying to justify the Internet blackout in the country before the UN.²⁴⁷

5.6.1. The Internet as a Default Communicative Position

Using the Internet to mobilize the mass was not a new phenomenon in Ethiopia. The Ethiopian diaspora used websites and Paltalk to organize political discussions during the 2005 national elections in their homeland (Habtamu Dugo 2017). Gagliardone and Pohjonen (2016) argued that the rise and detention of the Zone9 bloggers at the first months of the 2015 Oromo protest could also offer insights into the opportunities and challenges of transboundary digital activism in the context where a dominant party is silencing dissent. Also, the *Dimtsachin Yisema* Muslims’ movement deployed the Internet to frame movement messages and inform the general public about its objectives and plans. According to Skerdal and Sintayehu (2020), social media, specifically Facebook, served as an alternative platform for political communication when the dominant party state has controlled the media in Ethiopia. Conversely, Ketemaw (2019) emphasized that political activists engage in online protest because of the fear of persecution and that social media granted them anonymity to voice their concerns safely.

The findings of this dissertation support the analysis given by scholars mentioned above and provide an alternative explanation that the 2015 Oromo protest movement leaders deployed the Internet as a default position in the context where the dominant party state stifles freedom of expression, assembly and association through legal, political and technological means. It further argues that using the Internet as a safe site of political resistance was a matter of survival for the Oromo movement actors and that the Internet was utilized as a default choice to the movement leadership structure that seeks to protect itself from the government’s imminent attacks. Key informants of this study argued that the Oromo protest might have had a formal, visible structure had it not been for the political context that forced them to consider the Internet not only as an alternative

²⁴⁵ [24 TinEye search results](#)

²⁴⁶ Human Rights Watch. 15 July 2016. [Killings and Arrests in Response to Ethiopia’s Oromo Protests | HRW](#) Accessed on September 23, 2021.

²⁴⁷ Paul Schemm. 14 October 2016. [In Ethiopia’s war against social media, the truth is the main casualty - The Washington Post](#) Accessed on July 6, 2021.

communication platform but also an essential movement resource to situate themselves safely to confront tyranny (Wariyo 07/11/2020; Kelbesa 03/11/2020; Jigsa 16/02/2021).

The Internet availed the 2015 Oromo protest leadership to maintain their communications internally and externally with their supporters and opponents safely and effectively (ibid). The Internet was not just a mobilization tool; it was also a default choice to organize a movement equivalent to and compatible with offline activism (ibid). Thus, such a pragmatic move revolves around self-protection and finding a “safer” space.

“QBO looks as if it is a legally registered organization on its Facebook page and Jawar as the leader of *Qeerroo*. When you go through online posts, you feel like a huge physical conference was held that resulted in critical decisions. Yet, the 2015 Oromo protest was formed by people who have never met, living in different parts of the world with a shared vision” (Wariyo 07/11/2020).

The 2015 Oromo protest supported its clandestine organization and movement activity by deploying a hybrid movement structure using the Internet since the establishment of the QBO in April 2011. The Internet strengthened the movement’s ability to create a public space to meet up with supporters and sympathizers (Hundesaa 29/12/2021; Wariyo 07/11/2020). This study contends that the Internet was also an important asset that the protest leadership acquired to trespass political and technological barriers to call for mass support and mobilize resources.

“Social media, specifically Facebook, was a blessing for the Oromo activists who used to be silenced by the (legacy) media from reflecting their opinion. It was through Facebook that we managed to explain our objectives... as if we were holding a public rally at Meskel Square” (Kooluu /2021).

The above quote illustrates that the 2015 Oromo protest positioned itself online because of the political repression on the ground. This is directly related to the claim made by Ruijgrok (2017) regarding the use of the Internet aiming to increase access to information in authoritarian regimes despite governments’ attempts to control the online space. Key informants within the leadership structure argue that the Internet created a broader and safer sphere to share information and interact with movement members and supporters who become willing to take online and offline action. The study finding conforms to Trottier and Fuchs’s (2014) idea that the online sphere created an opportunity that transcends time and space for politically active groups who have never met to organize a protest demonstration online, similar to an on-the-road rally. The characteristics of the Internet helped the 2015 Oromo protest to minimize control and censorship as they strive to shape the narratives of the Oromo people social, economic and political quest. Informants also noted that the online sphere allowed them to behave as aggressive as those protesting on the road.

“Our online protest was not as peaceful. Aside from spreading hate against individuals and groups who are opposing our movement agenda, there were times we have succeeded to hack government website domains and disrupt official information” (Keneni 26/12/2020).

According to key informants, the online protesters deployed hacktivism, which is a mix of online activism with website hacking (Lelisa 09/02/2021; Keneni 26/12/2020). In consultation with the diaspora members, the urban digital activists led hacktivism to intrude government websites illegally (ibid). Movement actors claimed that it was easy for them to attack websites of higher education institutions for two reasons. One is that they had got members willing to provide initial information that helped to hack the websites unnoticed, and at the same time, hackers observed that universities and giant government ministries had weak passcodes that were shared with several people that made them an easy target to the hackers (ibid). The claim made by Lelisa and Keneni, who are both IT experts and were actively involved in the hacktivism of the movement, complies with data obtained through content analysis of media reports. The Oromo hacktivists, who call themselves “Oromo Anonymous Hackers”, have had their online space (Facebook page) active since December 14, 2015, to exercise their power with the motto “We hack for freedom!”²⁴⁸.

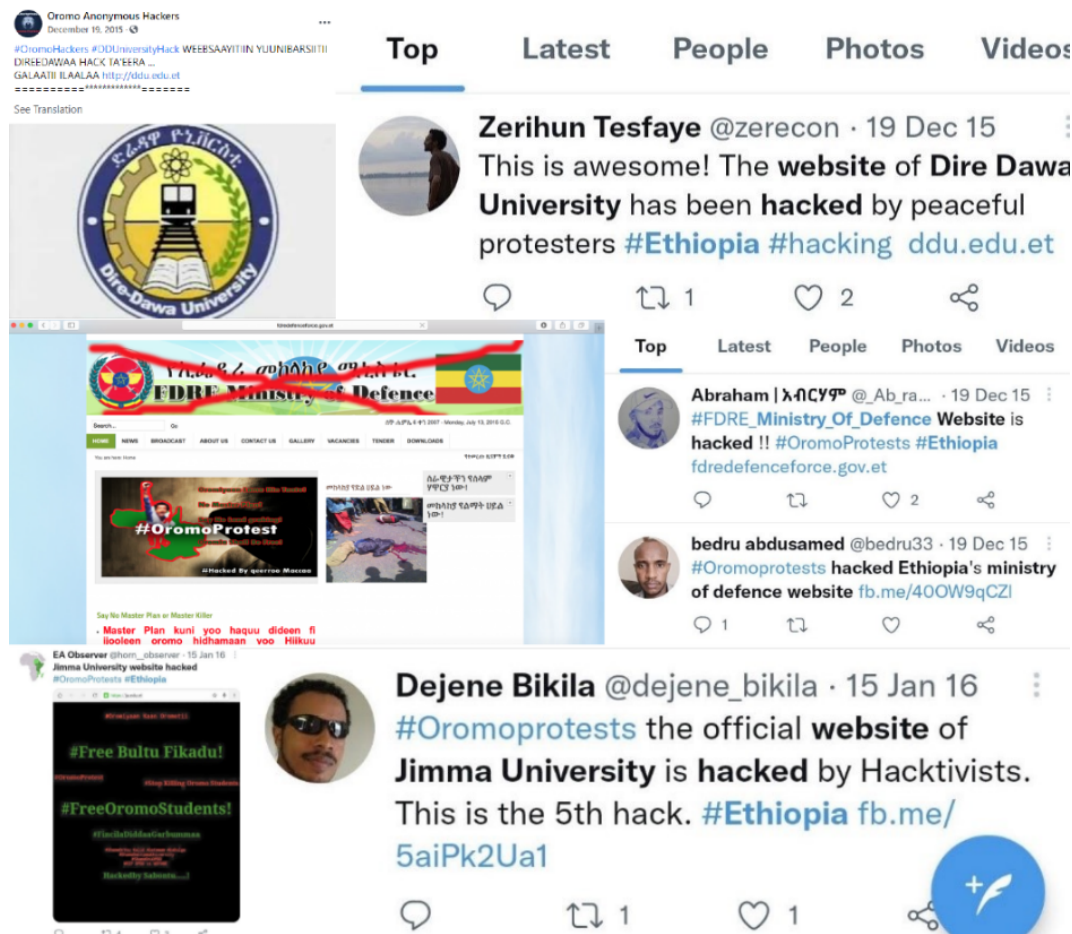


Figure 41 Hacked websites of government institutions

The screenshots on Figure 41 show that the Oromo Anonymous Hackers hacked Jimma and Dire Dawa universities and the Federal Ministry of Defense²⁴⁹ websites from

²⁴⁸ [Oromo Anonymous Hackers | Facebook](#) Accessed on September 19, 2021.

December 2015 to February 2016. However, these were not the only pages attacked by We hack for freedom! Addis Ababa University and Woredanet network were among online platforms hacked by the protesters. According to key informants, Woredanet²⁵⁰ was meant to facilitate local administration although it was used by authorities in regional states to control the lower administrative body.

“I served as a district chairman in my area. At first, it was confusing how to use the system. Apparently, we were not encouraged to use it; but it has everything, you can make a call, send emails or video conference within the system. I was not aware when *Qeerroo* break into the system, I heard about it from other colleagues later on” (Qabso 01/11/2020²⁵¹).

Woredanet was among identified technological infrastructures hacked by the Oromo protest hackers (Lelisa 09/02/2021; Keneni 26/12/2020²⁵²). Informants claimed that the hackers seized control of the system to disseminate information about the protest to the people living in far remote rural areas. Although this study did not capture the delivered message through hacked Woredanet system, media reports show that the Woredanet web portal is hosted on the central data system located at the Prime Minister’s office when it was hacked.²⁵³ The attack on Woredanet exposed the central data system as hackers gained access to the national biometric data, specifically fingerprints collected by the INSA.²⁵⁴ The Woredanet hack shows that the ruling party administered and stored private and public data altogether. More importantly, it shows the absence of necessary technological and legal mechanisms to protect private data. The findings of this study are supported by an article published on Addis Fortune that Oromo protesters indeed conducted hacktivism to pressurize the government in a manner that threatens individual privacy and national security interests.²⁵⁵

As the Oromo protesters attacked its online platforms, the ruling party barred mobile Internet four times following the state of emergency declaration on October 9 2016. According to informants, Facebook and Twitter were banned intending to control online and offline protests. The Ethiopian government monitored phone calls in the country and hired hacking firms to spy on selected diaspora members, journalists and media organizations, specifically ESAT.²⁵⁶ The case was taken to the United States Court for intruding on the personal computers and accounts of diaspora activists who hold US citizenship.²⁵⁷ The government featured on OONNI, and Human Rights Watch reports for deploying spyware with the support of firms and Hacking Team in Italy, Germany and

²⁴⁹ The screenshot of the Ministry of Defense hacked website was taken from [Hacktivists Vandalize Ethiopian Government Website \(thehornpost.com\)](#) Accessed on September 19, 2021.

²⁵⁰ Woredanet is a Wide Area Network that connects six hundred *wereda* administrative units throughout the country.

²⁵¹ Qabso, Woreda chairperson, interview with the author, 1/11/2020

²⁵² Keneni, IT specialist, Diaspora returnee, interview with the author, December 26, 2020.

²⁵³ Yohannes Anberbir. April 2, 2016. [Cyber-attack targets PM’s office | The Reporter Ethiopia English](#) Accessed on November 15, 2021.

²⁵⁴ Ibid.

²⁵⁵ Kinfemicheal Yilma. February 14, 2016. [Hacktivism: A New Front of Dissent, Regulation \(addisfortune.net\)](#) . Accessed on September 19, 2021.

²⁵⁶ [How Ethiopia Spies on Its Diaspora in Europe | Human Rights Watch \(hrw.org\)](#) Accessed on September 23, 2021.

Britain.²⁵⁸ Internet surveillance was not started during the 2015 Oromo protest. The USA National Security Agency documents leaked by Edward Snowden indicated that Ethiopia received digital surveillance technologies from the USA as part of regional counterterrorism efforts. However, the intelligence operation centers in Ethiopia that were supposed to intercept communications from Somalia, Sudan, and Yemen had local language capabilities for surveillance.²⁵⁹ Therefore, the technology was used to spy on its own citizens and the diaspora community (Abdulahakim 06/11/2020).

The government's effort to control the platform through the complete shutdown of the Internet during the protests was criticized by human rights defenders as denying citizens access, retrieve, store, and impart information as enshrined in international and national human rights instruments. Moreover, the government deployed online party cadres to centralize political information and spread disinformation (Abdulahakim, 06/11/2020; Morka 10/04/2021). Online cadres were given the role to ensure the ruling party had maximum control over Internet communications (Hassan 15/11/2021). They helped the government disseminate information about its achievements, policies and projects such as the Grand Renaissance Dam and the rhetoric of double-digit economic growth through the Internet (ibid).

“The government's online engagement accompanied by the deployment of “online cadres” who were echoing the same development and double-digit growth claim was received with huge skepticism” (Keneni 26/12/2020).

The following diagram from Facebook depicts how the online public perceived government-sponsored activists. Generally, they were categorized as people who watch ETV news every day, support everything the EPRDF says, and if they finish high school, their university education fee is paid by the ruling party. Figure 42 depicts the characterization of *Ko.Kas* widely circulated on social media. *Ko.Ka* is an abbreviation for Amharic name *Kotetam Kadre*, roughly translated into English as “riff-raff cadre”.

²⁵⁷ [American Sues Ethiopian Government for Spyware Infection | Electronic Frontier Foundation \(eff.org\)](#) accessed on September 23, 2021.

²⁵⁸ A firm called Gamma International was accused of hacking into computers of the Ethiopian Diaspora in Europe and United States.

²⁵⁹ Felix Horne, October 3, 2017. [How US Surveillance Helps Repressive Regimes—the Ethiopia Case - Just Security](#) Accessed on July 11, 2021.

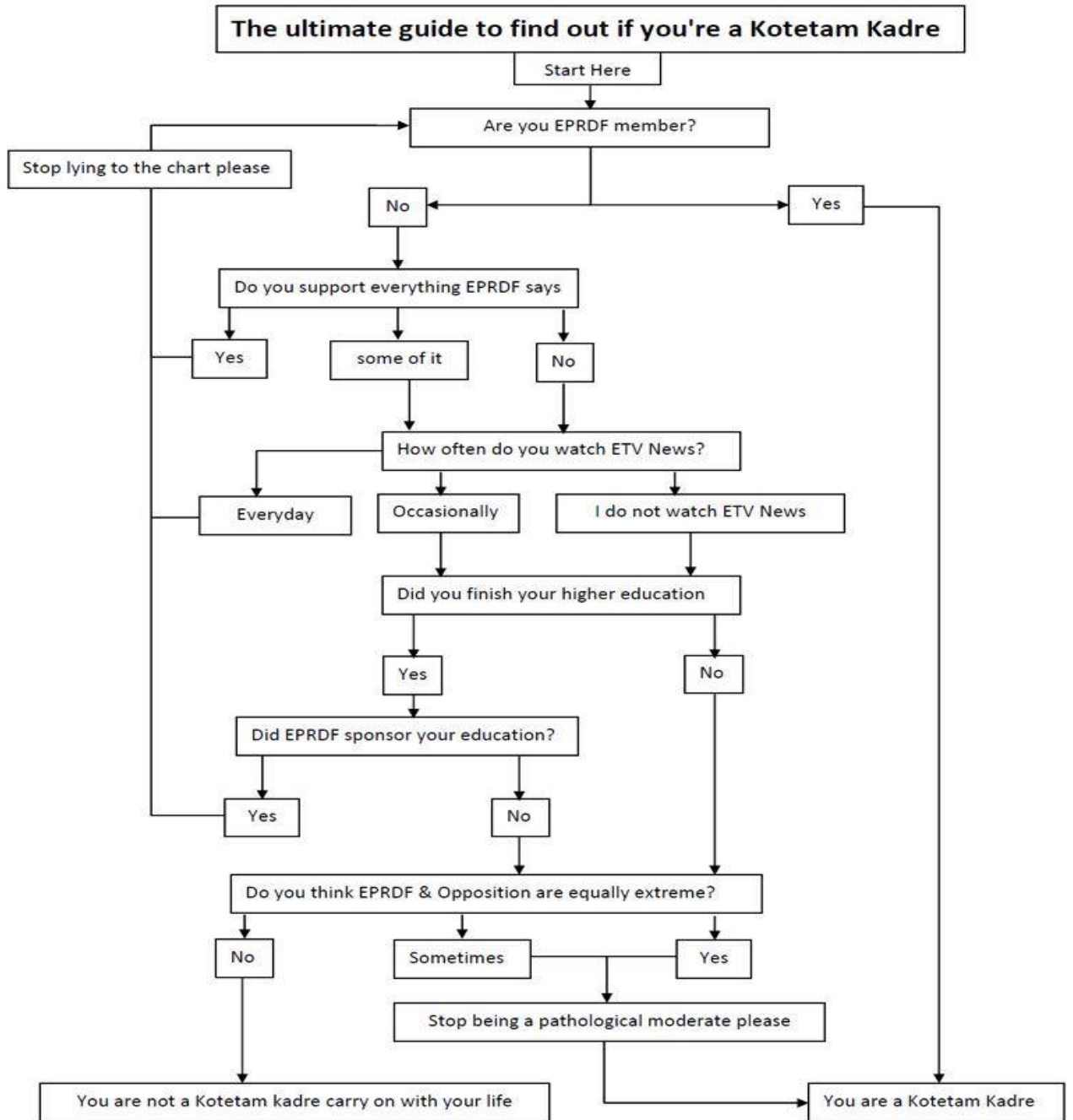


Figure 42 Perceived characteristics of the *Ko.Kas* shared on social media

The ruling party leaders and government officials who were active online were ridiculed as “zombies” while the digital squad was scorned as *Ko.Kas*. The *Ko.Kas* used the Internet to spread hate and propaganda against individuals and groups actively supporting the public protest and its political causes (Garoma 05/08/2021). Study informants claimed that *Ko.Kas* were trained and deployed by the Government Communication Affairs Office to distract political debate online and spy on those politically active (Olana

10/06/2021; Kitata 13/12/2020). The Ko.Kas were also active in disseminating information about economic development and party program (ibid).

The Federal Government Communication Affairs Office Twitter handle @Gcao2014 dominantly posted issues related to economic and social development, international relations and the ruling party support base, i.e., one-to-five networks, health armies and model farmer families. The @Gcao2014 streamed EBC's primetime news without hashtags. Among purposively selected 100 tweets, only two were related to the protest in the Oromia region. The first one reported about the ongoing "deep rehabilitation" *Tehadiso* process in the Oromia zonal towns and the appointment of new local administrators²⁶⁰. The second Tweet quoted the then regional president Lemma Megersa calling upon religious leaders to work with the regional government for the continuity of prevailed peace in the region.²⁶¹

The overall online strategies of the 2015 Oromo protest portrayed cross-learning processes that the movement gained from the experiences of the Arab Spring and the *Dimtsachin Yisema*. This chapter highlighted the important role *Dimtsachin Yisema* movement played in diffusing Internet-oriented social mobilization strategies across movements. The movement message framing and symbolization similarities between the Arab Spring, *Dimtsachin Yisema* and the 2015 Oromo protest entails the role of the Internet in facilitating opinion formation and social movement organization in the contexts dictatorial governments operate. In addition to its role in mobilizing the mass, the Internet was a default position for the Oromo protesters to seek refuge from the government's attack.

Accordingly, the intersectional social movement approach that the 2015 Oromo protest utilized diminished the ethnic and religious lines between protesting groups to represent each other and stand together against the ruling party. Study data further indicated that as much as the Internet played a pivotal role to organize the protest, it did not refute the importance of legacy media and offline communication tactics in mobilizing action in contexts where Internet penetration is limited. The chapter underscored the role of interest groups indirectly supporting the social movement in generating movement resources, including finance, contact and translating local protest agendas into the universal human rights language. The discussion in this chapter underscored the government's inability to counter-frame the 2015 Oromo protest and its limit to the deployment of local media in the digital era. The government authorities seemed unapproachable by the international media, and they appeared to be not self-expressive when they did. Furthermore, this chapter discussed the different online communication tactics of the movement actors, i.e., engaging by disengaging and online sharing of legacy media reports about the protest. It is also worth mentioning that disinformation, online hate speech, bullying and labelling were used to encourage or discourage movement membership.

²⁶⁰ <https://t.co/BeLxs0lA7y> Accessed on July 11, 2021.

²⁶¹ <https://t.co/80RoNnOSJ0> Accessed on July 11, 2021.

CHAPTER SIX

6. The 2015 Oromo Protest and the Legal Reform Process

This chapter discusses the influence of the 2015 Oromo protest to bring about changes in the protection and regulation of freedom of expression on the Internet. The discussion focuses on how the 2015 Oromo protest influenced the revision and enactment process of the Media Proclamation, Hate Speech and Disinformation Prevention and Suppression Proclamation, the draft Access to Information Proclamation, and the draft Computer Crime Proclamation. The chapter underpins the discussions made in Chapters Four and Five about the influence of the Internet as a communication platform and site of political resistance during the 2015 Oromo protest. Most importantly, this chapter sheds light on the framings of the 2015 Oromo protest to examine whether freedom of expression in general and online expression, in particular, were in any way among the protesters' demands that later influenced the current administration to protect and regulate freedom of expression online and the physical access to the Internet. The chapter is accordingly guided by the general research question, *“Does the 2015 Oromo protest in any way influence the government to protect and regulate freedom of expression within the fundamental obligations of freedom of expression that requires responding to the competing interests of main actors in Internet governance during the legal reform process?”*

The research question leads to the discussion of a set of sub-questions that can help to elucidate the assumption that access to the Internet and freedom of expression online arose as a fundamental right during the Oromo protest. The law-making and amendment process, public dialogues and experts' analysis concerning hate speech and disinformation prevention and supervision proclamation, the media proclamation, access to information proclamation, and computer crimes proclamation are hence analyzed to understand whether the 2015 Oromo protest promoted freedom of expression online as a fundamental right and influenced the debate about Internet regulation.

The author of this study moderated a public webinar organized by the Internet Society Ethiopia Chapter on the issue of the “Impacts of Internet shutdown in Ethiopia and proposed solutions” from which critical data is used in this chapter. The chapter answers the research questions by analyzing empirical data collected through key informant interviews, focus group discussions, media content analysis, and consultative meetings held by the Legal and Justice Affairs Advisory Council working to coordinate the legal reform process. The researcher documented consecutive meetings, experts' discussions and public dialogue forums on the media reform packages to understand the overall process and gain further insight. Experts' consultative meetings included media practitioners, legal experts, ICT professionals, and digital rights advocate groups. Public dialogues were held with various sections of the society, such as professional associations, academics, political parties and civil societies, at different stages of the law drafting process. Key informant interviews, court documents, and media reports collected to write a term paper on the issue of freedom of expression, public safety, and national security are also used.

6.1. Nurturing Freedom of Expression Online: Lessons from the 2015 Oromo Protest

For many activists within the 2015 Oromo protest, freedom of expression on the Internet was nurtured as a fundamental human right through the formalization process of the protest organization (Kelbesa 03/11/2020; Wariyo 07/11/2020; Yesuf 10/02/2021). As the movement escalated, restrictions tightened on the right to seek and disseminate political information through legacy media, digital platforms and interpersonal meetings, which reshaped the movement's online approach (Yesuf 10/02/2021; Dabesa 15/11/2020). Accordingly, the government devised its tactic to control the digital platform, positioning freedom of expression on the Internet at the center of the contestation with the protesters. A study by Freyburg and Garbe (2018) asserted that governments in Africa such as Uganda, Equatorial Guinea and Ethiopia used Internet shutdowns to block online information during election periods. However, the findings of this study further indicated that the government's tactic to interrupt political information sharing through the Internet shutdown was accompanied by new practices. The government practiced Internet shutdown, online censorship and bullying by deploying online cadres to control information flow on the Internet. Nonetheless, the protesters used these same tactics as countertactics to advance freedom of expression online and access to the Internet as fundamental rights (Tolera, 10/06/2021; Hassan 15/11/2021).

Key informants witnessed five major protest incidents where the Internet was fully or partially shut down nationwide. These were the Ginchi protest in November 2015, the national school-leaving exam leak in May 2016, Amhara support rallies in July 2016, the Grand Oromia Rally in August 2016 and the *Irreecha* stamped in October (Hiyab 13/05/2021²⁶²; Chala 18/01/2021²⁶³; Abdulhakim 06/11/2020).

“For me, the Grand Oromia Rally was remarkable. We suspected that the government could shut down the Internet from the start. There were repeated posts on social media for protesters to stay connected online and check their Facebook frequently for updates, which disarrayed the government. The Internet was blocked, but the Grand Rally was all over Oromia and beyond, from Ambo to Hirna, Finfine, Australia, Canada, England, name it. Of all, international media and human rights organizations widely condemned the Internet shutdown” (Jigsa 16/02/2021).

Study data shows that the issue of freedom of expression online cropped up as a popular demand following a complete Internet shutdown in early August 2016 when support rallies in the Amhara region started and Oromo movement leaders made a call for the worldwide Grand Oromia Rally (Chala 18/01/2021; Abdulhakim 06/11/2020). Content analysis of this study captured a press statement, dated August 5, 2016.²⁶⁴

²⁶² Hiyab, university lecturer, interview with the author, May 13, 2021.

²⁶³ Chala, software developer, interview with the author, January 18, 2021.

²⁶⁴ <https://www.facebook.com/100000994872037/posts/1136968999679585/> Accessed on September 19, 2021.

This Grand Rally is going to be staged in all the major cities and district towns of Oromia. This rally is a peaceful rally expressing the people’s general yearning for a just peace.

During this planned Grand Oromia Rally, we expect the Oromo people to remain connected using the Internet, mobile technologies and social media platforms. We strongly urge the government to refrain from blocking communications channels, using tactics of fomenting conflicts, provoking and meting out violence and mass arrest in order for it to disrupt and restrict lawful assembly and peaceful protest. Hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of Oromo and non-Oromo citizens are ready to gather across more than 200 districts, over 20 zonal cities and in the Capital, Finfinnee (also called Addis Ababa), to join in this peaceful protest as a part of the grassroots Oromo movement.

Figure 43 Excerpt from an online call for Grand Oromia Rally

The above screenshot in Figure 43 proves that the movement organizers were well aware of the influence of the Internet to stay connected with the broader protesters in every corner of Oromia and beyond to keep the mobilization momentum by deploying the Internet as a political communication platform and effective mobilization tool. At the same time, the organizers openly urged the government not to shut down the Internet because the government had the habit of blocking the Internet. It also implies that the protesters embraced access to the Internet as a popular demand during the protest. However, the government responded contrary to what the protesters asked for. The following data in Figure 44, taken from OONI,²⁶⁵ shows an active Internet connection until August 5, the day the rally organizers presser was released, and a complete Internet shutdown suddenly occurred on August 5 and continued through August 8, 2016.

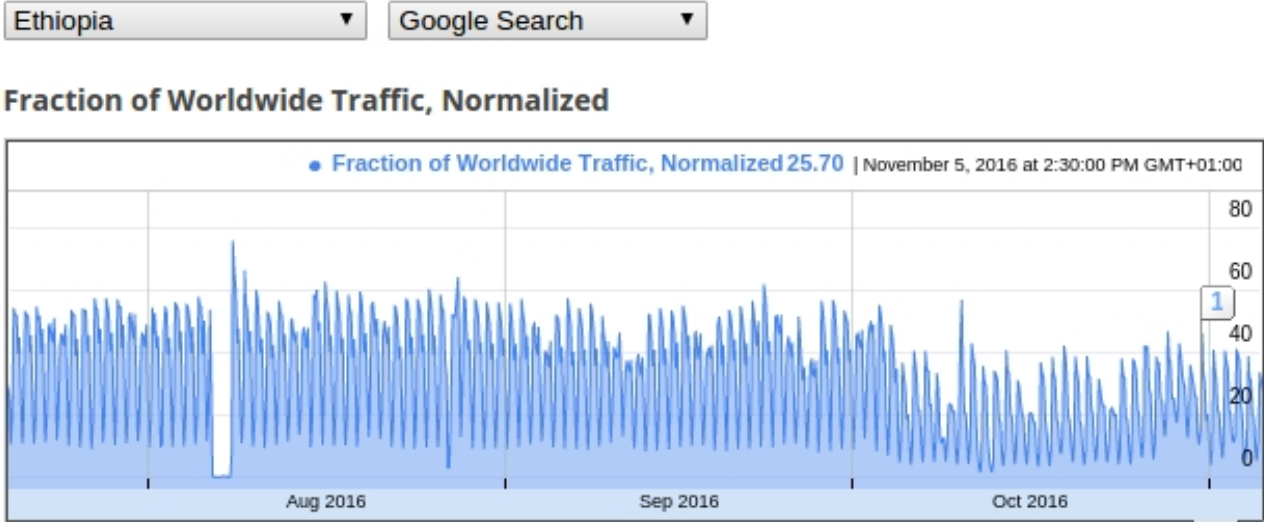


Figure 44 Ethiopia, Google Search traffic between July and November 2016

²⁶⁵ Maria Xynou and Arturo Filasto. 14 December 2016. Ethiopia: evidence of social media blocking and ‘Internet censorship’ <https://ooni.org/post/ethiopia-report/> Accessed on December 11, 2020.

Another factor that reshaped protesters online political engagement was online censorship and bullying. As discussed in Chapter Five of this dissertation, online cadres *Ko.Kas* were deployed across social media platforms to ensure the ruling party's maximum control over Internet communications. A previous study by Halefom (2017) claimed that blocking the free flow of online information by deploying the "Social Media Army" was an effective Internet regulatory model to avert extremism, hate speech and disinformation online. This study challenges Halefom's claim based on empirical data, which indicates the "Social Media Army" were those described as *Ko Kas* who have nothing to do with legitimate content regulation on the Internet.

"It was beyond intimidating. I received death threats via Viber and Facebook messenger for my posts. Often assailants claim to know my whereabouts and family details. They say you will be rotten in jail. I will make your collaborators learn their lessons from your grave misdeeds" (Tolera, 10/06/2021).

Study informants stressed that it was not only the government and its cadres who attempted to control political content online; individual citizens and groups were also involved in bullying Oromo activists online. Online censorship and bullying include organizing petitions to get social media accounts blocked, to file court cases against diaspora activists in the countries of settlement and threats to physical attack (Gelan 03/03/2021; Koket 16/07/2021; Ketim 10/12/2020). The screenshot on Figure 43 portrays how online diaspora activists responded to online bullying from individuals and groups.

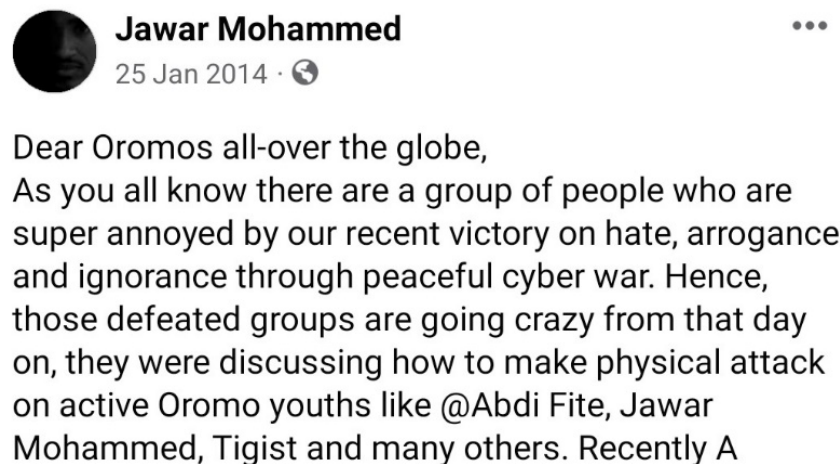


Figure 45 Facebook post from Jawar's alternative page

Online censorship and bullying in the Ethiopian context have distinct features that involve physical checking on individuals' mobile apparatus and offline bullying. For offline protesters and *Qeerroo* leaders in Oromia, it used to be normal to surrender their mobile phones to the police at checkpoints and whenever they were asked. Police officers and local authorities gaze through the contents of mobile phones to find information about the Oromo protest. Often, *Qeerroos* delete sensitive information from their phones, but they might not escape the physical inspection that involves going through the list of contacts, uploaded music, recorded video and even ring tones.

“On a cursed morning, my phone rang as I was passing by two *Agazi* (federal police) officers. I used Hachalu’s *Maalan Jira* as a ring tone; it was very famous then. They stopped me, confiscated my phone and took me to the police station” (Godana 29/12/2020).

Maalan Jira, translated as “what existence is mine”, was released in 2015 right after the announcement of the master plan. The song referred to the forceful eviction of Oromos from Addis Ababa and Oromia special zone towns; Awol (2015) stated that this specific song became the soundtrack to the 2015 Oromo protest.

According to informants working in government institutions, offline bullying to control online political engagement includes exposing colleagues who acquire and share political content from online sources (Miresa 12/05/2021; Feyisa 31/12/2020; Toltu 03/04/2021). Office meetings and one-to-five office networks were used to intimidate citizens for accessing political content online. Nevertheless, civil servants developed their online security mechanism, as they consider the office Internet access is safer than mobile data and in town cyber cafes (ibid).

“Many of us used the office Internet service to access news about the protest because it was quite safe. No one would suspect us to open Facebook in the presence of others. Of course, it saved us money. So, we open Facebook and any post, usually *Mogachoch* (the famous Amharic drama by then), in separate windows, and we cautiously switch to the Amharic page when we see one-to-five supervisors get into the office” (Sena 15/01/2021²⁶⁶).

Mogachoch was a television series drama played on Ethiopian Broadcasting Service (EBS), a privately-owned outlet, from September 2014 to August 2019. Because Afan Oromo was perceived as the primary communication language of the protest, protest participants and supporters protected themselves using online Amharic content as a security shield to access political information online. The experience of Sena (15/01/2021) and other focus group discussion participants demonstrate how the use of Afan Oromo on the Internet was framed automatically as political dissent. As one of the respondents put it, “whoever hears Afan Oromo phone conversations and see *Qubee* on your desktop screen, whether they speak the language or not, they take it for granted that you are politically active” (Feyisa 31/12/2020). Study data shows that accessing the Internet in government offices during the 2015 Oromo protest was highly associated with “seeking online security” than minimizing the cost of personal airtime consumption. On the other hand, key informants working for international organizations confirmed that they benefited from uninterrupted and uncensored access to the Internet from their workplaces (Garoma 05/08/2021; Jabessa 14/04/2021).

Empirical data from the field shows the influence of the 2015 Oromo protest on the legal reform process was not unidirectional. This is evident in Wariyo’s recollection; “we did not have a detailed plan for legal reform post-government change. In fact, things were really fast for most of us to comprehend” (Wariyo 07/11/2021). However, the protest seemed to provide a strong evidence base to build on existing local experiences and

²⁶⁶ Sena, government employee, Sebeta, focus group discussion, Addis Ababa, January 15, 2021.

secure political commitment at the highest levels. Key informants viewed the 2015 Oromo protest as a struggle that led to a political solution by overthrowing the regime and replacing it with a democratic government structure. Therefore, the general perception was that the political transformation would nurture the protection of human rights and democracy through legal reforms (Abdirashid 12/12/2020; Kelbesa 03/11/2020; Nahim 14/11/2020). Therefore, the argument that the 2015 Oromo protest helped build the evidence base for the legal reform can be supported by the analysis of Mesenbet and Solomon (2020). They accentuated that the law reform aimed to support the political transition process by improving the protection and regulation of freedom of expression and the media.

The legal and justice reform prospect came into light when the new Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed took office on April 02, 2018. In his inaugural speech, the Prime Minister promised to ensure the rule of law by filling the justice administration gap through necessary reforms. He promised to respect and protect human and democratic rights, including free expression, assembly and organization, upholding the federal constitution.²⁶⁷ This study argues that Abiy's promise for legal reform capitalized on the existing political momentum created by the movement.

Informants of this study argued that the 2015 Oromo protest resulted in a political and law reform process because one of its leadership groups, Team Lemma, managed to take over power and worked hard to deliver on the 2015 Oromo protest demand for lasting reform in the country (Jarso 28/12/2020; Robsan 16/07/2021). According to Robsan, as one of Team Lemma members, the prime minister has close contact with local digital activists and *Qeerroo* leaders. Robsan claims:

“He (Abiy) believes in free expression; he also knew when and how to amplify the movement's demand. Perhaps that was the reason he prioritized the importance of the right to freedom of expression and assembly in his 2018 inaugural speech” (Robsan 16/07/2021).

Study data indicate that the law reform process following the 2018 government change complies with the State's duties and responsibilities stipulated in Art 19 (3) of the ICCPR²⁶⁸ to protect and regulate freedom of expression. From key informants' perspective, the reform process emboldened online expression as a fundamental human right to be protected in the same way offline rights are protected (Welde 29/08/2021²⁶⁹; Jamal 05/05/2020²⁷⁰). In light of this, the revision of laws on freedom of expression, access to information and media were to uphold human rights and promote democracy in Ethiopia per the international human rights law. As a result, the political and legal reform process was said to be “one of the biggest transformations in media freedom anywhere in the world in recent years.”²⁷¹

²⁶⁷ ETV. 2 April 2018. [Ethiopian Prime minister Dr Abiy Ahmed inauguration speech - YouTube](#) Accessed on January 3, 2022.

²⁶⁸ ICCPR Art. 19 (3).

²⁶⁹ Welde, lead member of the Media Law Reform Working Group. Interview with the author, August 29, 2021.

²⁷⁰ Jamal 05/05/2020 virtual interview with a lead member of the LJAAC.

6.2. Multifaceted Structural and Institutional Challenges Leading to the Amplification of the Demand for Freedom of Expression Online

Empirical data from the field shows that prior studies on the 2015 Oromo protest tended to make a noncausal claim by simply stating the political, legal and technological factors and packing specific aspects of various factors within the broader concept of politics (Mebratu 2021; Yonas and Berhanu 2021; Meseret 2020; Tewodros 2020; Seifu 2019; Awol 2017; Habtamu 2017). For instance, Mebratu (2021) touched on economic, cultural, social and political factors that contributed to the 2015 public unrest. Nevertheless, he did not articulate about the institutional and structural challenges that led to the demand for freedom of expression and corollary rights.

Study participants response to sub research questions regarding factors curtailing the involvement of citizens in creating, acquiring and disseminating political information during the Oromo protest suggested that the demand for freedom of expression has been nurtured throughout the history of the Oromo movement. Nonetheless, the popular demand for freedom of expression intensified and was reframed during the 2015 Oromo protest due to multifaceted structural and institutional challenges the movement faced in organizing, sustaining and amplifying its demands. These factors can be broadly divided into political, legal, and technological factors that reframed the longstanding demand for freedom of expression into the demand for freedom of expression on the Internet.

6.2.1. Political Factors: Silencing Dissent through Controlling the Media and the Online Space

This study argues that one reason for appropriating the Internet as a site of political resistance and safe communication platform during the 2015 Oromo protest was repression and violation of freedom of expression and the media. Even though freedom of expression and the media is granted in Article 29 of the federal constitution,²⁷² the Ethiopian media system was generally authoritarian. The government silenced dissent by assigning party loyal media managers, editors and reporters to hinder criticism against the ruling party. “Olana”²⁷³ asserted that the absence of free media during the protest felt like “having nowhere to go to speak” as the government entirely controlled the media industry and deployed party cadres into the media system (Olana 10/06/2021). The study findings regarding the government’s complete control over the online space and offline media resonate with prior research conducted by Grinberg (2017). He argued that the EPRDF sought to realize economic development while silencing online dissent through censorship, intimidation and surveillance (ibid). On the other hand, empirical data of this study shows that the government’s control over the legacy media coupled with its digital tyranny muzzled dissent and exacerbated unrest.

“We did not hear anything from the radio, and when we do, the truth of the matter is entirely distorted! If they are lying about what we actually know, how do we

²⁷¹ Jamie Wiseman. 04 December 2019. [Troubled transition: cracks appear in Ethiopia’s media reform project - International Press Institute \(ipi.media\)](#) Accessed on December 30, 2021.

²⁷² The Federal Constitution of Ethiopia Article 29 (1-6)

²⁷³ Olana, journalist and activist, interview with the author, June 10, 2021.

trust them? Also, they pick stories after we have already moved to another issue. It looks like they equally hear about the protest with us, and often very late. As for me, I do not believe that there is a real journalist in this country” (Yeron 29/12/2020).

Yeron’s assertion is supported by Olana (10/06/2021), who argued that journalists were silenced from reporting about the 2015 Oromo protest, and the media acted as an organ of the executive branch of the government. Both arguments show the extent of media repression from content consuming and content making perspectives. Conversely, study data shows that the deployment of the Internet and diasporic satellite broadcasting influenced local legacy media to consider reporting the 2015 Oromo protest. For example, the Ethiopian Broadcasting Corporate (EBC) never reported the protest until it reached the climax, and the prime minister resigned. Content analysis of this study shows EBC’s first-ever report about protests was on March 5 2018, regarding transport and trade boycott across cities of the Oromia region, which satellite and online media platforms picked as “a surprising progress”.²⁷⁴

The EPRDF government introduced structural changes through cabinet reshuffles to respond to injustice and political exclusion claims. It also announced the establishment of the “Anti-Terrorism Special Task Force” and the “Oromia Command Post” to control terrorist acts in the Oromia region.²⁷⁵ The appointment of Getachew Reda as Director-General of the Government Communication Affairs Office in the October 2015 cabinet reshuffles,²⁷⁶ caught the attention of many in the Oromo protest leadership structure who hoped for free media (Hiyab 13/05/2021; Hamda 22/02/2021; Tolera 10/06/2021).

“We hoped for a fairly open media because some of our comrades knew him personally and said he is open for discussions compared to old TPLF officials. Yet, he was the first labelling protesters demons” (Hamda 22/02/2021).

Getachew Reda called Oromo protesters “demonic” during the same press conference where he communicated the formation of the “Anti-Terrorism Special Task Force” and the “Oromia Command Post” to control illegal activities as a continuation of the Ginchi protest in late November 2015.²⁷⁷ The action confirms Castell’s (2016) argument that when government’s encounter increased institutional crises, the officials will often be forced to create new political forms of domination, representation, and governance.

²⁷⁴ Tena Adam. 2018. [Ethiopia - EBC Breaking News March 5 2018 - YouTube](#) Accessed on January 5 2021.

²⁷⁵ Henok Gabisa. 25 January 2016 [Opinion: Oromo Protests: Marking the next Ethiopian political chapter - Addis Standard](#) Accessed on November 17, 2020.

²⁷⁶ Daniel Berhane. 02 November 2016. [Takeaways from PM Hailemariam's new cabinet appointments | Horn Affairs](#) Accessed on December 29 2020.

²⁷⁷ Government Communication Affairs. 2015. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1P1tJDAkTYo> (Getachew Reda Presser on Oromo Protests movement - YouTube) December 17, 2015. Accessed on August 15, 2020. [Opinion: Oromo Protests: Marking the next Ethiopian political chapter - Addis Standard](#) Accessed December 29 2021.

Key informants argued that the structural changes made to control the protest in Oromia include the formation of the “Media Committees” at regional and federal communication affairs offices level (Amanyihun 19/01/2021). The “Media Committees” comprised party cadres, public relations officers from government ministries, regional bureaus and representatives from the communication affairs office (Amanyihun 19/01/2021²⁷⁸). The media committees were viewed as mechanisms to control State and privately-owned media reports about the escalating Oromo protest. According to informants, the Media Committees repeatedly forced media organizations to expose their information sources and extrajudicially expelled and detained journalists for reporting on political matters that the GCAO did not thematically approve. This point is further explained as follows:

“The media committee was literally a spying machine over journalists. Committee members exchange information about individual journalists who are seen vocal in newsrooms. Journalists who attempted to report on the Oromo protest were identified and told to stop, directly and indirectly” (Yirga 21/11/2018.²⁷⁹)

Although the media committee worked to block the media reporting of the 2015 Oromo protest, there were attempts made by the Oromia Radio and Television Organization (ORTO). Data from the field shows that Oromia TV was not silent about the repression. It was the first and only media outlet to expose the fierce opposition of the Oromo political leaders against the master plan.²⁸⁰ Then ORTO suddenly refrained from covering the protests, with interference from the Media Committee at the federal level (Amanyihun 19/01/2021). In June 2014, the government fired 18 Oromo journalists from ORTO following a meeting with the former Government Communication Affairs Office head Bereket Simon regarding the Oromo protests (Tolera 10/06/2021; Olana 10/06/2021). During the meeting, journalists from ORTO expressed their anger against the arbitrary detention of young people in Oromia and asked the federal officials if they had restricted ORTO from reporting the protests.

“We asked them... our editors told us not to cover the protests because it is a political direction set by the federal government. Did you instruct ORTO not to say a word about the engulfing protests and the dying youth? Then, they said, no, we will not allow any media, any of you, to collaborate with anti-peace elements” (Olana 10/06/2021).

The above statement by Olana, who participated in that particular meeting, shows that the media was generally restricted from reporting political dissent, which indicates media stagnation. This study argues that it was the stagnation of the legacy media and the reduced availability and consumption of political content that inspired the 2015 Oromo protest leaders to look for opportunities to develop the capacity of controlling communication. Crackdown against media organizations intensified in 2014, many journalists, bloggers, and opposition political party members were jailed, exiled and labelled as messengers of foreign forces working to overthrow the government by

²⁷⁸ Amanyihun, EPRDF cadre and media committee member, interview with the author, January 19, 2021.

²⁷⁹ Yirga, government official from Ethiopian Broadcasting Authority, interview conducted by the author for a term paper on freedom of expression and national security, November 21, 2018.

²⁸⁰ Yihun Engida. 13 April, 2014. [Addis Ababa-Finfinnee surrounding master plan faces fierce opposition from Oromos - YouTube](#) Accessed on November 18, 2021.

force.²⁸¹ Around the same time, Yonatan Tesfaye, the spokesperson of the party, was imprisoned over nine Facebook posts about the Oromo protests on his account.²⁸² Zone 9 bloggers were also arrested a little earlier and charged with terrorism.²⁸³ The Zone 9 collectives started political blogging with more than 67 thousand followers.²⁸⁴ The Zone 9ers claimed that their aim is “to create an alternative and independent platform of ideas on the socio-political conditions of Ethiopia – in which public discourse will be encouraged”. According to Misgana,²⁸⁵ the primary objective was to advocate for the protection of freedom of expression.

“We have advocated for freedom of expression, assembly and association, in a way, our nonviolent approach to advance a public dialogue on social media attested the power of the Internet in advancing political causes” (Misgana 24/08/2021).

The above claim was acknowledged by Hiyab (13/05/2021), who recalled online political topics Zone 9ers shared, “I remember a piece ‘non-violence for dummies’. It discussed the importance of peaceful political engagement in Ethiopia and disproved those who deride the Oromo protest as hopeless”. Zone 9 group members frequently visited political prisoners and detained journalists and provided public updates regarding their treatment and court hearings, indirectly sustaining ongoing public protests. Interestingly, they continued to update their followers regarding the imprisoned group members’ prison life on their Facebook page.²⁸⁶

²⁸¹ Human Rights Watch. 21 January 2015. [Violations of Media Freedoms in Ethiopia | HRW](#)

²⁸² UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency. 6 June 2017. [Refworld | Ethiopia: Third ‘Internet shutdown follows imprisonment of two human rights activists. Accessed on November 17 2021.](#)

²⁸³ CPJ. [Zone 9 Bloggers, Ethiopia - Committee to Protect Journalists \(cpj.org\)](#) Accessed on November 14 2020.

²⁸⁴ <https://www.facebook.com/Zone9ers/> Page was created on May 12 2012, as a news and media website. Accessed on November 17 2021.

²⁸⁵ Misgana, Zone 9 member and blogger, interview with the author, August 24, 2021.

²⁸⁶ Some members of the Zone 9ers fled the country as police apprehended their colleagues, and they continued to blog.



Zone9 updated their cover photo.



6 Sep 2015 · 🌐

#500ቀናት በእስር ቤት ለመፃፍና ለያገባኛል ባይነት የተከፈለ መስዋእትነት!

#500days in Prison for caring and Blogging.

#FreeZone9bloggers #Ethiopia



👍 140

8 comments • 83 shares

Figure 46 Zone 9ers: 500 days paid for demanding free speech

The screenshot in Figure 46 illustrated the 500 days the Zone 9 group members spent in prison defending online freedom of expression. Misgana expressed confidence that the public acceptance of Zone 9ers’ inspired the 2015 Oromo protest leaders to deploy the Internet for political communication.

“I used to share a prison cell with one of the prominent Oromo protest leaders. He told me that when the government arrested nine of us, they capitalized onto our lessons of using the Internet to mobilize the mass” (Misgana 24/08/2021).

The above claim reinforced human rights reports, which further explained the reason behind the arrest of Zone 9 bloggers in April 2014 was posting opinions regarding the ongoing public unrest.²⁸⁷ Two years after the arrest of Zone 9ers, in 2016, Ethiopia ranked as the third-worst jailer of journalists in Africa,²⁸⁸ and the Oromo protest escalated online and offline. According to Kitata (13/12/2020), the Zone 9ers online engagement somehow encouraged the Oromo protest actors to use the Internet as an alternative platform. He said, “Zone 9ers started using the Internet before we launched the #BoycotBedele campaign in 2013, so we were encouraged for sure”.

Given the tyrannical nature of the government, the intensification of the 2015 Oromo protest heightened the attack against news sources. Responses from focus group discussion participants asserted that speaking to international media broadcasting in local

²⁸⁷ Ibid.

²⁸⁸ Aljazeera News. 05 October 2016. [Oromo protests: Ethiopia arrests blogger Seyoum Teshome | News | Al Jazeera](#) Accessed on January 5 2022.

languages (i.e., VOA, DW and BBC) and diasporic media such as ESAT and OMN became dangerous for individual citizens (Hundesu 29/12/2020, Belina 15/01/2021; Hirpha 18/01/2021). The screenshot in Figure 47, captured through content analysis, details 13 people arrested for speaking to ESAT. While six of the defendants were released free, seven were accused of communicating with terrorists and giving media interviews to the “terrorist ESAT radio and television” station.



Figure 47 Court hearing: accused of giving an interview to “terrorist ESAT”

Through time, watching and listening to diasporic satellite media, accessing any form of social media and using smartphones became “politically” prohibited (Ebsa 04//05/2021; Negera 01/02/2021; Naol 28/12/2020). Diasporic media reported incidents that involved confiscation of dishes and smartphones as seen in Figure 48.



Figure 48 News from ESAT: Police confiscating satellite dishes and smartphones

The screenshot in Figure 49 from Facebook shows that party cadres’ allegiance to the government was evaluated based on their political content consumption, expanding the restriction on access to information to “privileged party cadres” (Abdulkakim 06/11/2020; Hassan 15/11/2020).

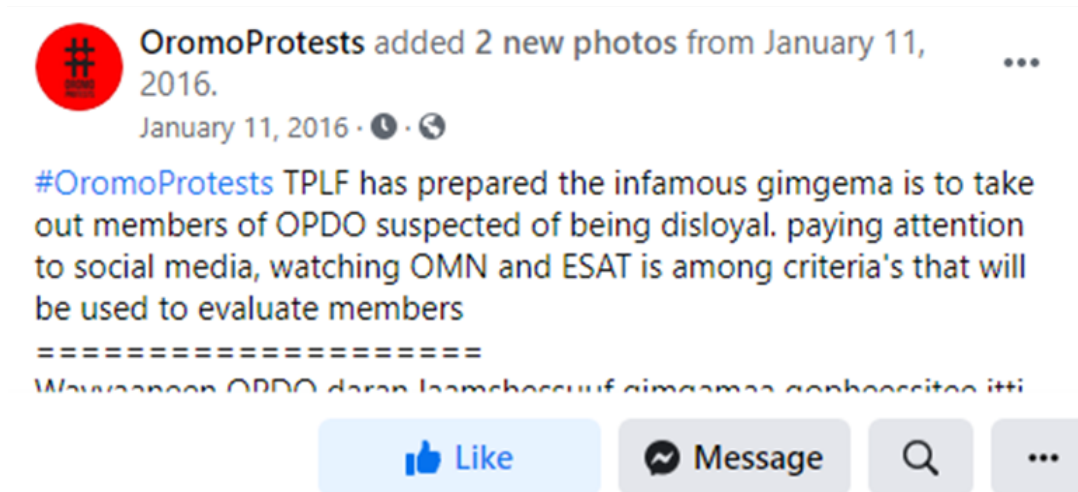


Figure 49 Party cadres evaluated for accessing social

This dissertation further argues that the State of emergencies declared during the 2015 Oromo protest reinforced the demand for freedom of expression online and offline. The State of emergencies declared in 2016 and 2018 placed heavy restrictions on the right to freedom of expression and access to information offline and online.²⁸⁹ Nonetheless, it did not stop the engulfing protests and save the ruling party from crumbling, leading to the prime minister's resignation.

6.2.2. Legal Factor: Repressive Laws Affecting the Exercise of Freedom of Expression Online During the 2015 Oromo Protest

The study findings show that the repression of free speech escalated as the 2015 Oromo protest online presence garnered considerable support from other ethnic groups, international media and human rights organizations. Key informants proclaimed that, among other things, the frequent hackings and seizures of government websites stimulated the enactment of additional laws to suppress online expression and political engagement (Yirga 21/11/2018; Amanyihun 19/01/2021).

The Ethiopian Constitution guarantees freedom of expression under Article 29. However, exercising these fundamental freedoms has been threatened by enacting fragmented proclamations. Against reality, the ERDF government enacted additional laws to restrict and penalize online activities and freedom of expression between 2005 and 2018 (ibid). The Freedom of the Mass Media and Access to Information Proclamation,²⁹⁰ the Charities and Societies Proclamation,²⁹¹ the Anti-Terrorism Proclamation,²⁹² the Computer Crime Proclamation,²⁹³ and the 2012 Telecom Fraud Offences Proclamation²⁹⁴ were said to be the products of the government's frustration of the widespread anger

²⁸⁹Fana BC. 17 February 2018. የአስፕራይሪ ጊዜ አዋጁ ለስድስት ወራት ይቆያል (the State of Emergency remains in effect for six months), <http://fanabc.com/index.php/news/item/31241>. Accessed on November 18, 2018.

²⁹⁰ Proclamation Number 590/2008.

²⁹¹ Proclamation Number 621/2009

²⁹² Proclamation Number 652/2009

²⁹³ Proclamation Number 958/2016

²⁹⁴ Proclamation Number 761/2012.

following the 2005 post-election violence (Aymen 28/12/2020²⁹⁵; Kelbesa 03/11/2020; Nahim 14/11/2020).

The Arab Spring erupted when the government claimed to have won the 2010 national election, which was rejected by the opposition as fraudulent. Then the ruling party came up with a story that “the opposition is working with foreign forces to overturn people’s will, and started to hate computers” (Aymen 28/12/2020).

The government’s fear of online communication worsened to the extent of criminalizing the use of digital and telecom equipment, software and call-back service.²⁹⁶ The Telecom Fraud Offences Proclamation defined call-back service as the use of dial tone of a foreign operator without the knowledge of the domestic telecom operator.²⁹⁷ The definition extends to making using VoIP, accessories, and software punishable with imprisonment from 1 to 4 years and a fine of up to 40 thousand Birr.²⁹⁸ Nonetheless, the government often used the anti-terrorism law to take cases related to the Internet and any digital communication to courts. As Aymen (28/12/2020) emphasized, “because the authorities were scared by what the Internet could do to their power, they wanted to terrorize citizens through the anti-terrorism act.”

Aymen’s claim could be supported by the case of the Zone 9 collectives who were convicted under the anti-terrorism law and the criminal code just for taking digital security training about protecting their online privacy and posting political messages on social media. One of the group members recalled that their charge included allegiance to the causes of Ginbot 7 and OLF to overthrow the government (Misgana 24/09/2021). Moreover, freedom of expression and the media court cases that reached the Supreme Court during the 2015 Oromo protest exhibited that the Anti-Terrorism Proclamation was extensively used to sue journalists who exercised their professional duties to obtain produce and disseminate information. According to Tebabal (22/11/2018),²⁹⁹ the Telecom Fraud Offences Proclamation was enacted to expand the reaches of the Anti-Terrorism Law so that using new technologies to transfer information and documents were criminalized, and there were individual cases litigated under the Telecom Fraud Offences Proclamation. Key informants asserted that the litigation process involved various proclamations and the criminal code because there was no straightforward judicial procedure to examine digital communication and telecom fraud cases. A good example could be the case between Eskinder Nega and the Federal Prosecutor.

“It was the most famous freedom of expression case, as far as I am concerned. Eskinder appealed his case to the Supreme Court after being convicted of terrorism and sentenced to 18 years in prison by the Federal High Court. He was accused of conspiring and preparing to commit a crime in collaboration with OLF and ONLF under cover of his constitutional right to the freedom of expression.

²⁹⁵ Aymen, Oromo Federalist Congress member, interview with the author, December 28, 2020.

²⁹⁶ See Proclamation No. 761/2012, part 1 (1-3).

²⁹⁷ Proclamation 761/2012, part 1 (3).

²⁹⁸ Proclamation 761/2012, part 2 (3)

²⁹⁹ Tebabal, Supreme Court Judge, interview with the author, November 22, 2018.

The Supreme Court upheld the decision and reject Eskinder’s appeal (Supreme Court Judge 22/11/2018).

Conversely, Eskinder’s case³⁰⁰ forced the Ethiopian government to respond to a query by the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights Chair Rapporteur of the Working Group on Arbitrary Detention. Ethiopia argued it observed the due process of the law in Eskinder’s case.³⁰¹ The response letter further showed that Eskinder was accused of violating Article 32(1a) of the criminal code³⁰² and Article 7(2) of the Anti-Terrorism Proclamation.³⁰³ His criminal charge read among other details:

“...He has also been involved in disseminating different materials, articles and other information intended to destabilize the country to the propaganda machine of the terrorist organization called ESAT.”³⁰⁴

Eskinder was not the only person tried under the Anti-Terrorism clause. According to Human Rights Watch, Woubshet Taye and Zerihun Gebre-Egziabher were convicted of “primarily of online articles critical of the government” and telephone calls discussing “peaceful protest actions that do not amount to acts of terrorism”.³⁰⁵

Moreover, the Ethiopian Human Rights Project (Represented by Robert F. Kennedy Human Rights and Institute for Human Rights and Development in Africa) submitted a case against the Ethiopian government before the African Commission. The case was submitted in December 2015 against the violations of freedom of expression, assembly, association and the right to vote.³⁰⁶ Although the admissibility brief was submitted to the Commission in May 2016, the case was deferred during the 66th Ordinary Session of the Commission.³⁰⁷ Nonetheless, the African Commission stated its concern regarding the human rights situation in Ethiopia as the Oromo protest escalated in November 2015.³⁰⁸ The African Commission resolution further asserted that the restrictions on access to the media and the Internet are against international human rights standards and called on the Ethiopian government to lift the ban on access to the Media and Internet services.

³⁰⁰ Federal High Court Case between Eskinder Nega and Federal Prosecutor. Criminal Charge file number: 00180/04. Police investigation file number: 107/04.

³⁰¹ Mission Permanent D’Ethiopie-Communication Report. 124/2012-A December 14, 2012. <https://spcommreports.ohchr.org/TMResultsBase/DownloadFile?gId=31804> Accessed on 12/12/202018.

³⁰² The 2004 Criminal Code of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia.

³⁰³ Proclamation Number 652/2009.

³⁰⁴ Federal High Court, Criminal Charge file number: 00180/04.

³⁰⁵ Human Rights Watch Submission on Ethiopia. 2012 Report of the UN Special Rapporteur on human rights defenders to the General Assembly: Questionnaire on the use of legislation, including criminal legislation, to regulate the activities and work of human rights defenders. Retrieved from https://www.ohchr.org/documents/issues/defenders/answers/ngos/africa/ethiopia_hrwp.pdf Accessed on July 22, 2021.

³⁰⁶ Communication 599/16- Ethiopian Human Rights Project (Represented by Robert F. Kennedy Human Rights and IHRDA) v. the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia. Combined 48th and 49th Activity Reports of the African Commission on Human and Peoples’ Rights.

³⁰⁷ Ibid

³⁰⁸ Resolution on the Human Rights Situation in the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia – ACHPR/Res.356 (LIX) 2016. Adopted by the African Commission on Human and Peoples’ Rights at its 59th Ordinary Session held from October 21 to November 04 2016 in Banjul, Islamic Republic of the Gambia.

The 2015 Oromo protest seemed to reveal the legal loopholes, fragmented proclamations and vague judicial processes in regulating the Internet and technological devices, as Wariyo (07/11/2021) articulated: “there has been undoubtedly a gap between the fast expansion of the Internet and the Ethiopian justice system”. The Media Diagnostic Report (2018) further shows that the previous laws destined to regulate technological devices were fragmented and excluded crucial Internet components in legislative responses.

The legal lacuna and the dynamics of online protests somehow contributed to the repeated hacking of government websites that frustrated the ruling party that sought to toughen Internet regulation (The Reporter 2016). The hacking of the Woredanet infrastructure was the turning point for the government to come up with the draft Computer Crime Proclamation (ibid). As discussed in Chapter Five, the Woredanet web portal was hosted on the central data system where the State stored sensitive information such as citizens’ fingerprints. Key informants of this study agreed that the enactment of the Computer Crime Proclamation in 2016 aimed at halting the 2015 Oromo protest hacktivism (Dabesa 15/11/2020; Yirga 21/11/2018). The then Minister of Communication, Information, and Technology (MoCIT), Debretsion Gebremichael was quoted by The Reporter (2016) saying, “they do this just to add fuel to the unrest in Oromia...the unrest provides a conducive situation” for repeated government website hacks. Consequently, in April 2016, the government claimed an increased cyber-attack on its central data system, which required comprehensive and robust law to protect the Internet infrastructure.³⁰⁹

The Computer Crime proclamation adopted on June 7 2016, encountered fierce opposition from prominent bloggers and human rights advocates stating that the draft law could be used to suppress free expression on the Internet.³¹⁰ Computer Crime Proclamation covers various issues ranging from illegal access to computer systems to disseminating spam and combating child pornography.³¹¹ It also incorporated activities and behaviors on the Internet covered in several Ethiopian laws such as the Criminal Code and the Telecom Fraud Offence proclamation, which created a fragmentation of the law and a slow judicial process (Welde 29/08/2021; Jamal 05/05/20). The proclamation provides investigative power to law enforcement agencies as it allows virtual surveillance by INSA where technical support is envisaged.³¹² It also proscribes against liberty and reputation of persons by disseminating any writing, video, audio or any other image through a computer system, which broadens the definition and application of defamation.³¹³ Moreover, the proclamation introduced new criminal offences such as causing fear by repeatedly transmitting information³¹⁴ on the Internet as a punishable act by

³⁰⁹ Yohannes Anberbir. 02 April 2016. Cyber-attack targets PM's office. The Reporter. Available at <https://www.thereporterethiopia.com/content/cyber-attack-targets-pm%E2%80%99s-office> Accessed on January 1 2022.

³¹⁰ [Proposed Ethiopia Law Worries Bloggers, Activists \(voanews.com\)](#) Accessed on November 17, 2021.

³¹¹ Computer Crime Proclamation, Number 958/2016, Section Three (12)

³¹² Computer Crime Proclamation, Number 958/2016, Part Three (23) (1 and 2)

³¹³ Computer Crime Proclamation, Number 958/2016, Section Three (13 (1-3) and 14)

³¹⁴ Computer Crime Proclamation, Number 958/2016, Section Three (13) (2)

imprisonment up to ten years. The findings of this study confirm Kinfe Michael's (2016) argument that the Computer Crime Proclamation criminalized hacking, disseminating malware and Denial of Service Attacks (DoS). On the other hand, this study proclaims that the enactment of the Computer Crime Proclamation was not to uphold freedom of expression, the right to privacy and online assembly. Thus, it incorporated clauses that prioritize national security over the protection of fundamental human rights.

Nonetheless, citizens continued to defy repressive laws, including the Computer Crime Proclamation, by deploying technological tools to access the limited Internet. Key informants claimed that they continued to access online political information and voice their dissent by deploying Virtual Private Network (VPN) and Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) tools. How to tips regarding proxy server change were shared on widely accessed social media groups and pages. The screenshot in Figure 50 describes how to change access points during mobile Internet access shutdown.



Figure 50 Guide on how to change access points during Internet shutdowns

According to data collected from public dialogue forums and experts' consultative workshops, the 2015 Oromo protest and the political transition period after the government change exposed the weakness of the Computer Crime Proclamation to respond to the nature of the Internet and the role of private actors in regulating digital communication infrastructures. International legal experts, ICT professionals and digital rights activists reflected shared views with academic studies by Kinfe Michael (2016) and Benedek and Kettmann (2020). They argued that digital technologies brought multifaceted challenges on governments to ensure constitutional freedoms are protected online the same as offline. Nevertheless, the new government initiated further

amendment of the Computer Crime Proclamation, promising a law that meets international human rights standards.

6.2.3. Technological Factors: Restricting Freedom of Expression Online Through Limited Internet Access

Empirical data from the field shows that the 2015 Oromo protesters faced technological barriers similar to broadly identified challenges limiting access to the Internet in developing countries, such as high data charges and poor telecom infrastructure (Graham and Dutton 2013). Study informants further mentioned the lack of finance to purchase smartphones and pay for mobile data due to technological barriers that hindered access to the Internet during the 2015 Oromo protest. Some claimed to have worked as daily laborer to pay for their mobile data expenses, while others convinced parents and siblings with better income to cover Internet access expenses. University students who participated in Oromo protests avowed that they were privileged to acquire mobile phone access through family support to help them stay in contact with home (Negasa 28/12/2020; Weltaji³¹⁵ 18/01/2021; Simera 03/01/2021). Godana (29/12/2020) said, “my parents bought me a phone when I joined university so that I call them often, and I used it to access Facebook”.

Conversely, *Qeerroo* leaders interviewed for this study mentioned equipment and financial support from the diaspora to access the Internet and make mobile calls. Some were also enabled with satellite phones with quick and secure satellite Internet connectivity (Koket 16/07/2021; Kelbesa 03/11/2020). Repeated claims of focus group participants about donations of phones and finance from relatives living in urban areas indicated a volunteer-based support mechanism to distribute smartphones and airtime fees, especially for those in far remote areas with limited income and visible participation in the protest (Belina 15/01/2021; Negasa 28/12/2020³¹⁶; Weltaji 18/01/2021; Simera 03/01/2021).

“I was not active online until the government change in early 2018; because I was working for an international organization, and nonpartisanship is required from all employees. But then again, I supported my relatives who were active in the protest. I sent smartphones and airtime for them to be able to record and share what is going on in their localities” (Sifan 09/12/2020).

Informants argued that access to mobile Internet increased public participation in political dissent and encouraged people to connect to the Internet merely to join political debates and protests (Bontu 03/04/2021; Belina 15/01/2021; Bikila 31/12/2020³¹⁷). As much as people tried hard to access the Internet, data charges remained expensive, costing five Birr for 25 MB of data per day.³¹⁸

³¹⁵ Weltaji, civil servant (university student during the protests), focus group discussion, Lege Tafo, January 18, 2021.

³¹⁶ Negasa, agriculture development agent, focus group discussion, Sebeta, December 28, 2020.

³¹⁷ Bikila, Bank security, Focus group discussion, Burayu, December 31, 2020.

³¹⁸ Misak Workneh. 23 February 2016. “Ethio Telecom announces new mobile ‘Internet packages, tariff revisions” .[Ethio telecom Announces New Mobile ‘Internet Packages, Tariff Revisions \(addisfortune.net\)](https://www.addisfortune.net) Accessed on January 2, 2021.

In February 2016, at the peak of the Oromo protest, Ethio Telecom, the only telecom company owned by the government, announced new mobile Internet packages and revised tariffs that reduced the cost of access to the Internet. The purpose was said to increase the number of Internet subscribers in Ethiopia. This study avows a direct relationship between the reduced cost of Internet access in February 2016, which led to the rapid growth of social media users and the repeated Internet shutdowns from July 2016 onwards. According to Graham and Dutton (2013), an increasing number of users leads to the extensive use of the Internet for organizing social movements, encouraging governments to deploy Internet surveillance, as well as repeated shutdowns as responses for such occurrences. According to key informants, the government used Internet shutdowns as an effective regulatory mechanism (Chala 18/01/2021; Garoma 05/08/2021). It is validated through human rights reports that the Internet shutdown was a quick fix for the government because it owns and controls the only telecom service provider in the country.³¹⁹

Subsequently, access to the Internet remained challenging due to poor infrastructure and unstable data connectivity (Chala 18/01/2021; Garoma 05/08/2021). Study informants mentioned that even when they afford to pay for data connectivity, Internet access slows down, making them pay extra money to access multimedia content online. Jabessa (14/04/2021) uttered that “ones Hailemariam said Ethio Telecom is a national cash cow. Well, the fact is, we Ethiopians are the government’s cash cow, paying too much to surf Facebook.” Jabessa’s statement is reinforced by Jarso, a former protest organizer in one of the universities.

“Usually, I connect to Facebook to get information about protests in other universities, nothing more. But the more I stay online, the more I pay, which is discouraging. Often, I just call friends for more details” (Jarso 28/12/2020).

Even though diaspora movement actors actively encouraged protesters back home to use VoIP to access the Internet with reduced costs, the services were also affected by frequent power outages and slow data connectivity (Keno 16/03/2021; Nahim 14/11/2020; Keneni 26/12/2020). More so, poor institutional systems designed and controlled by the government left no room for the public, individuals, non-state actors and the State to collaborate in the protection and regulation of the Internet (comments from expert consultative meetings 01/02/2020; 16/09/2019). Lelisa (09/02/2021) argued that “the government was confident that it is capable of tracing any communication that could threaten the national security of the country through the INSA infrastructure”. However, the study data presented in Chapter Five implies that the government’s institutional system did not diagnose organized hacks against its websites and the widespread use of VoIP during the 2015 Oromo protest. Lelisa added, “we were ahead of the government in many ways. We introduced Viber and WhatsApp to the mass while the government talked about banning Skype” (09/02/2021).

³¹⁹ Freedom House. [Ethiopia: Freedom on the Net 2016 Country Report | Freedom](#). Accessed on December 12, 2020.

The findings of this study indicate that respondents with high school and university education shared multimedia content about the protest through Viber Groups, while informants categorized as local digital activists freely access content on any other online platforms. Skype was also popular among individuals in the movement leadership structure, whereas Telegram groups came into the picture at the later stage of the Oromo protest dominantly in late 2017 and 2018 (Bontu 03/04/2021; Belina 15/01/2021; Bikila 31/12/2020). The trend to control VoIP legally and technologically grew faster, keeping pace with the widespread protests in the country. In April 2016, Ethio Telecom announced a plan to charge the use of VoIP services on mobile devices, although its implementation was not public.³²⁰ This study accentuates that the slow Internet connectivity and the announcement to charge access to VoIP services were politically motivated, simply to discourage people from engaging in online political debates (ibid).

6.3. Contours of Content Moderation and Transparency of Social Media Platforms

Since the new government administration has come into power in 2018, various social, economic, political and legal reform packages were introduced and among the issues that enjoyed closer attention, and political will are freedom of expression, assembly and association (Melaku et al. 2020). In contrast, the persisting disinformation and hate speech both online and offline against individuals and groups continued to aggravate ethnic-based violence in different parts of the country. This study acknowledges the multifaceted implications of the post-2018 developments on the formalization of social movements and the legal reform process. The announcement of the reform packages in early 2018 has partly guided the objectives, the research design and the timeframe of this study. Therefore, it was important for this study to go further ahead and examine the ongoing legal reform process that has been altered by the developing political factors. In contrast, discussing the post-2018 practices of freedom of expression online and offline, and the seemingly reviving political contentions are beyond the scope of this study. But then again, it is worth reflecting on how content moderation became into the limelight of the ongoing legal reform process to set the scene for the discussion about the influence of the 2015 Oromo protest on the legal reform process concerning freedom of expression and the media.

The issue of content moderation and transparency was extensively raised after the government change in 2018, as the widespread hate speech and disinformation challenged the democratic process (Deyas 04/05/2020³²¹; Yirga 21/11/2018). Study findings suggested the absence of strong civil society organizations working with and for the media to advance freedom of expression during the 2015 Oromo protest (Human Rights Watch 2010). Therefore, any attack against free expression online and offline was defended either by exiled opposition political leaders, activists, or international human rights advocate groups (ibid). Content analysis of this study observed individual and coordinated efforts to protect freedom of expression on the Internet as social media

³²⁰Ibid.

³²¹ Deyas, government official from Ethiopian Broadcasting Authority, interview with the author, May 04, 2020.

platforms attempted to moderate online content during the 2015 Oromo protest. For instance, Facebook temporarily blocked Jawar Mohammed's account for what it described as hyperactivity in February 2018. The incident raised the issue of erroneous algorithms suspecting graphic posts on the one hand and the interference of the Ethiopian government requesting Facebook to block Jawar on the other.



Figure 51 Samples of tweets: Jawar's Facebook page blocked


As seen in Figure 51, Jawar seemed to buy the idea that Facebook collaborated with the Ethiopian government to temporarily block his account, although Facebook's message to Jawar read, "it looks like you were misusing this feature by going too fast".³²² Either way, Oromo activists launched a #UnblockJawar online campaign and a petition calling upon Facebook to unblock Jawar's account. Nonetheless, the findings of this study indicated that Facebook's transparency report did not show any information about its activities to moderate content before and during the 2015 Oromo protest. There were no registered government requests for user data, intellectual property and content restriction based on local laws submitted to Facebook ever since the service was introduced from July 2016 to June 2021.³²³ Hence, it was difficult to prove Jawar's claim regarding collaboration between Facebook and the Ethiopian government to block his account. Also, instead of using the Internet platforms transparency report, which is a widely accepted best practice used by States to request Internet-based companies to enforce their own content policies, the Ethiopian government was trying to convince the public to refrain from consuming social media content through local media campaigns.³²⁴

³²² Abdur Rahman Alfa Shaban. 15 February 2018. [Facebook blocks top Ethiopian activist over hyperactivity, followers protest | Africanews](#) Accessed on June 14, 2020.

³²³ Meta. Transparency Reports. [Government Requests for User Data | Transparency Center \(fb.com\)](#) Accessed on November 12, 2021.

³²⁴ Retrieved from [Addis Standard on Twitter: "#Ethiopia - Command Post urges public to carry out normal day-to-day activities, reject social media intimidating posts https://t.co/V5bmb5K5Rw "The public should know that these social media posts are illegal and purposely aimed at affecting peaceful activities..." https://t.co/dD6fbXBwch" / Twitter](#) Accessed on March 19, 2021.



Addis Standard  @addisstandard · Mar 5, 2018

#Ethiopia - Command Post urges public to carry out normal day-to-day activities, reject social media intimidating posts

fanabc.com/english/index...

"The public should know that these social media posts are illegal and purposely aimed at affecting peaceful activities..."

Figure 52 Government warning of social media use

Addis Standard cross-posted the State of Emergency Command Post's message in Figure 52 initially shared on Fana Broadcasting Facebook page, urging the society to reject social media messages that affect the peaceful lives of the society. The study analysis further produced no result of content moderation cases reported by and about Ethiopia by Twitter.³²⁵ According to Google Transparency Report on governments' removal requests, a single request was received from the Ethiopian government ever since Google started recording transparency reports in 2011.³²⁶ The Information and Communication Authority filed a hate speech case on June 30 2021; the case details were not stated on Google's transparency report.

Content analysis of this study shows that the amended Organizations of Civil Societies Proclamation³²⁷ as part of the legal reform process, nurtured civil organizations' emergence to promote freedom of expression and defend digital rights (Gagliardone and Atnafu 2021). As a result, in August 2020, local and international civil society organizations campaigning for freedom of expression and Internet freedom called upon Facebook to act on hate speech, disinformation and incitement of violence that became rampant following the death of Hachalu Hundessa, a famous musician and social activist.³²⁸ The civil organizations recommended essential long and short-term measures that Facebook must take to promote freedom of expression on the Internet. The proposed measures include establishing an early warning system that will help detect imminent harm to the privacy and physical security of individuals and assigning individuals that understand the dynamic local context to help support the machine learning content moderation activities. They also demanded Facebook to enforce meaningful transparency initiatives about policies, standards and practices for identification, removal, or other restrictions of online posts that incite hate and violence.³²⁹

Shortly after the civil societies demand, on October 23 2021, Facebook announced that it hired content moderators to review Amharic, Afan Oromo, Tigrigna, and Somali posts. It

³²⁵ Twitter. Transparency Center. [Search - Transparency \(twitter.com\)](https://twitter.com/transparency) Accessed on December 23 2021.

³²⁶ Google Transparency Report [Government requests to remove content – Google Transparency Report](https://transparencyreport.google.com/government-removal). Accessed on December 23 2021.

³²⁷ Organizations of Civil Societies Proclamation Number 1113/2019

³²⁸ The Africa Freedom of Expression Exchange (AFEX). 13 August 2020. [Ethiopia: AFEX Joins Call for Facebook to Act on Violence-Inciting Speech - African Freedom of Expression Exchange \(africafex.org\)](https://africafex.org/ethiopia-afex-joins-call-for-facebook-to-act-on-violence-inciting-speech) Accessed on April 12 2021.

³²⁹ *ibid*

also reduced the distribution of content that likely violates its policies on hate speech, with the leeway to remove content when its adverse impact is confirmed.³³⁰ Additionally, Facebook introduced a “Lock Profile” safety feature in Ethiopia. The feature allows Facebook users to restrict anyone who is not on their friends’ list from downloading and sharing their profile pictures, stories and news posts. It should be noted that the Lock Profile feature is available in certain countries classified as “Temporary High-Risk Location” that are susceptible to online hate speech, disinformation and individual privacy breach.³³¹ This study contends that the new measures Facebook introduced appeared to respond to the requests made by civil society organizations. The study findings further agree with Yohannes (2021) that content moderation efforts may not be practical without understanding countries’ overall social, political, cultural, and economic contexts. Civil societies are also required to work with social media organizations to help support content moderation.

6.4. “Internet is where we breathe”: The Influence of the 2015 Oromo Protest in Defending the Online Protest Sphere

The findings of this study show that the 2015 Oromo protest contributed to the development of the demand for access to the Internet and freedom of expression online through its organizational structure, leadership, mobilization tactics and communication.

“Internet is where we breathe. I would say that was the only place we could speak our mind during the protest. It was everything to us because we launched the protest in a volatile political context; we relied on the Internet to communicate our agenda. So, we were curious to follow how the Internet service and access developed from the start. We truly took it seriously when there was shutdown” (Bedaso 18/08/2021).

The necessity of the Internet to organize the 2015 Oromo protest has been explained as a matter of existence as several respondents relate it with basic needs to survive. Wariyo (07/11/2021) put it as, “access to the Internet during the protest was as important as water and air to humans that no one should be denied of”. The assertion by Wariyo (07/11/2021) echoed Bedaso’s (18/08/2021) remark about the significance of the Internet to facilitate the enjoyment of freedom of expression through his statement, “Internet is where we breathe”.

Key informants expressed a strong belief that the physical access to the Internet infrastructure and smartphone ownership made it possible for many people who were not active in politics before to join the 2015 Oromo protest (Wariyo 07/11/2021; Bedaso’s 18/08/2021). According to Garoma (05/08/20), technical methods to protect one’s identity through anonymity and pseudonymity on the Internet encouraged many to express their political opinions without fear. For Kelbesa (03/11/2020), online anonymity and pseudonymity produced mixed results for the 2015 Oromo protest; he uttered, “even those at the higher movement leadership structure abused these technological features to

³³⁰ Miranda Sissons and Nicole Isaac. 23 October 2021. [Our Approach to Maintaining a Safe Online Environment in Countries at Risk | Meta \(fb.com\)](#) Accessed on December 23 2021.

³³¹ Mercy Ndegwa and Mark Smith. 09 November 2021. [An Update on Our Longstanding Work to Protect People in Ethiopia | Meta \(fb.com\)](#) Accessed on December 23 2021.

propagate hate against others”. However, a shared key informants’ perception is that the Internet facilitated online political creation, dissemination and consumption during the 2015 Oromo protest, and the protest itself contributed to igniting efforts for the protection of access to the Internet and online expression as fundamental rights through the legal reform process. Study participants’ responses regarding the Oromo protest’s contribution to the protection and regulation of access to the Internet offered diverse perspectives later categorized into themes: access to the physical Internet infrastructure and online political content production, consumption and dissemination as a fundamental right.

“The Internet has completely influenced the dynamics of political communication. It has diversified information sources, brought about a new media ownership structure to our system, and changed political participation in Ethiopia. So, all this suggested that way we exercise our freedom of expression requires a revisit of laws and regulations that are already in place” (Deyas, 04/05/2020).

The above quote from a government official from the Ethiopian Broadcasting Authority captures the influence of the Internet on political communication and participation. Study data shows that the legal reform process aimed at establishing a system of democratization, the rule of law and constitutionalism in which the human rights of citizens are protected and respected (Jamal 05/05/2020). It sought to address the longstanding demands of the people for the protection of human rights and democracy by maintaining and consolidating the gains of the 2018 political reform through legal, administrative and regulatory changes (Mesenbet and Solomon 2020). In light of this, the Federal Attorney-General encouraged the formation of the Legal and Justice Affairs Advisory Council (LJAAC) entrusted with tasks to lead the technical work of transforming Ethiopia’s legal system (Jamal 05/05/2020). The LJAAC was established in June 2018 with three years lifespan that could be extended if need be.³³² The LJAAC has working groups that research themes and prepare draft legislation for the Council to review and transmit to the Government’s Council of Ministers for approval.

“The LJAAC comprised of thirteen prominent lawyers who volunteered to provide technical advice about the justice system reform to embed the achievements of the political transition. I am certain that we defended our professionalism and neutrality from the government and funding institutions interference throughout the reform work” (Jamal 05/05/2020).

Similarly, the then UN Special Rapporteur on the right to freedom of opinion and expression, David Kaye, acclaimed the work of the LJAAC during his visit to Ethiopia in December 2019 as professional and independent.³³³ As part of its mandate to advise the Attorney General on legal and justice reform matters, the LJAAC prioritized four proclamations, i.e., anti-terrorism, mass media, election and civil society laws for the first phase of the legal reform process. In light of this, the Media Law Reform Working Group

³³² The LJAAC is still functional performing its tasks among which are the amendments of Access to Information, the Computer Crime Proclamation, and the Anti-Terrorism Proclamation.

³³³ David Kaye. 05 December 2019. Visit to Ethiopia, 2-9 December 2019, End of mission statement. [OHCHR | United Nations Special Rapporteur on the right to freedom of opinion and expression](#)
 [David Kaye](#)
 [Visit to Ethiopia, 2-9 December 2019](#)
 [End of mission statement](#) Accessed on May 9 2020.

(MLRWG) was established and started the amendment process in 2018 with a Media Diagnostic Report that identified the major gaps in the previous media proclamation. The Media Diagnostic Report identified 33 laws meant to regulate online and offline media in Ethiopia (Media Diagnostic Report 2018). It also pinpointed broader legal issues to ensure free and safe Internet-based communication and personal data protection. The report further stated that the existing national context required the enactment of proclamations cognizant of international human rights law to establish legal and institutional systems to protect freedom of expression (Media Diagnostic Report 2018, 45).

The Working Group held public dialogue forums, experts' roundtables and stakeholders' meetings to discuss gaps and possible legal remedies to develop a comprehensive and effective media proclamation mending the 33 fragmented legal packages (Welde 29/08/2021). As a result, the working group prioritized revising the Freedom of Mass Media & Access to Information Proclamation,³³⁴ the Broadcast Service Proclamation,³³⁵ and the Computer Crime Proclamation.³³⁶ The Media Diagnostic Report (2018, 10) stated that the baseline assessment of media laws was conducted:

“To evaluate the compatibility of existing laws with the current popular demand for change and the government’s obligation to respect, protect and promote human and democratic changes stipulated in the federal Constitution, to identify gaps and recommend law reform” (Welde 29/08/2021).

The reviewed laws contained provisions that restricted freedom of expression and were criticized for criminalizing dissent and access to the Internet infrastructure with vague and broad clauses (Media Diagnostic Report 2018). The report found out that the Freedom of Mass Media & Access to Information Proclamation and the Broadcast Service Proclamation were incompatible with the Ethiopian federal constitution and international human rights law. Furthermore, the above excerpt suggested the desire to respond to the 2015 Oromo protest demand given its tone regarding the “current popular demand for change” and when the diagnostic report was prepared., The 2015 Oromo protest was the manifestation of the accumulated grievances of repression and human rights violation that created power imbalance and narrow political space to exercise freedoms of expression, assembly and association, hence, “the 2015 Oromo protest had an indirect contribution to the law reform process” (Welde 29/08/2021). On the other hand, Jamal argued:

“My perspective is that the legal reform agenda was long overdue. After four years of protest, it was time for a democratization system, the rule of law and constitutionalism. The law reform process aims to bring about a democratic society where freedom of expression is respected, the rule of law is ensured, and a country where indigenous communities are not kicked out of their ancestral lands. The legal reform process aims to establish a system in which the basic rights of citizens are respected and protected” (Jamal 05/05/2020).

³³⁴ Proclamation Number 590/2008

³³⁵ Proclamation Number 533/2007

³³⁶ Proclamation Number 958/2016

Additionally, the Media Diagnostic Report (2018, 77) acknowledged the role of Facebook in bringing about political change in Ethiopia on a positive note, without annulling the challenges it posed to the protection and regulation of freedom of expression on the Internet. Hence, this study argues that the 2015 Oromo protest experiences, challenges and opportunities in deploying the Internet as an alternative communication platform and safe site of political resistance informed the overall legal reform process.

6.4.1. Enabling the Protection of Access to the Physical Internet Infrastructure through the Legal Reform Process

This section of the study examines the amendment process of the draft Computer Crime Proclamation that has been in the amendment process. The draft proclamation is a major legal framework that protects and regulates access to the physical Internet infrastructure. The draft proclamation is being discussed at the experts' group level aiming to come up with a law that meets international human rights standards, the UN Human Rights Council resolution on the promotion, protection and enjoyment of human rights on the Internet,³³⁷ the Declaration of Principles on Freedom of Expression and Access to Information in Africa,³³⁸ and the Ethiopian Constitution. In this regard, the Media Diagnostic Report identified gaps in Internet regulation within the existing Computer Crime Proclamation.³³⁹ The identified problems include a lack of clear and comprehensive Internet regulatory mechanisms, blanket criminalization of online acts rather than Internet regulation, and prioritizing national security over the protection of fundamental human rights.

The identified gaps, possible solutions and expected outcomes of the Computer Crime Proclamation amendment process are discussed through working group meetings, public dialogue forums and experts' roundtable discussions since the government administration change in 2018. Analysis of this study found that the existing Computer Crime Proclamation refers to the Internet only ones, in part three of the proclamation under number 25 as stipulates about court warrant to conduct surveillance on computer data or "Internet". Discussion Results of the experts' consultative workshops further indicated that the absence of clear Internet and online speech regulatory mechanisms in Ethiopia favoured the government to interfere with people's access to the Internet.³⁴⁰ Thus, the issue of Internet regulation and protection of online expression seemed to have less consideration because the existing proclamation emphasized protecting national interest.³⁴¹ Study data highlighted that the term national interest is vague and has been

³³⁷ The promotion, protection and enjoyment of human rights on the 'Internet. Resolution adopted by the Human Rights Council on 13 July 2021. 47/16. The updated version issued on July 2021 elaborates access to the 'Internet, shutdowns and online censorship, net neutrality, and encryption. It is the fifth one in a series of resolutions on the same issues.

³³⁸ Adopted by the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights at its 65th Ordinary Session held from October 21 to November 10 2019, in Banjul, The Gambia. African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights.

https://achpr.org/public/Document/file/English/Declaration%20of%20Principles%20on%20Freedom%20of%20Expression_ENG_2019.pdf

³³⁹ Proclamation Number 958/2016

³⁴⁰ Part Three: Preventive and investigative measures. Number 25: Real-time collection of computer data.

used by the government to restrict freedom of expression and block the Internet. Furthermore, the existing proclamation appeared to make computer crimes punishable instead of regulating and protecting the Internet and digital communication technologies that sought a revision after just two years of its enactment.

“The Computer Crime Proclamation amendment group is expected to answer the question “what is it that the law is securing? If this question is answered, then all is set. Otherwise, we will probably sit down soon to revise the law that you are currently amending” (International ICT lawyer 16/09/2019³⁴²).

The ultimate objective of the Computer Crime Proclamation amendment is to develop “a contemporary regulatory framework” that complies with the international human rights standards (MLRWG 15/09/2019³⁴³). This dissertation contends that the amendment process could come up with a clear definition of computer crimes by responding to the issues of Internet shutdowns, net neutrality, data protection and online censorship stated in the UN resolution. Therefore, the Computer Crime Proclamation amendment group started its work by designing its approach to addressing three broader areas, i.e., crimes against computer systems; conventional crimes committed using a computer; and illegal content disseminated through a computer. The three areas were designed based on the definition of “computer crime” under the draft law, which the experts’ roundtable discussion participants found is against the international standard. In order to address this concern, the draft proclamation is to revisit its definition of computer crime.³⁴⁴ It will also help achieve the international requirements of the protection and enjoyment of human rights on the Internet.

This study further asserts that learning from the mistakes of the 2016 Computer Crime Proclamation that prioritized national security over the protection of fundamental human rights, the draft proclamation ought to enhance freedom of expression, the right to privacy and online assembly in light of the ICCPR (Articles 17, 19, 21). Therefore, the drafting team is expected to revise its law-making approach in order to avoid mistakes committed in the existing computer proclamation, such as using broad and vague terms, duplicative provision (i.e., intent, national interest), heavy penalties, and clauses that do not conform to international human rights law if the ongoing computer proclamation amendment process addresses the identified legal blunders in the existing proclamation, it can develop legal and regulatory measures that make sense for ICT experts and lawyers in the process of interpretation and implementation.

As presented earlier, the initial reason for the enactment of the existing Computer Crime Proclamation in 2016 was the hacking of the Woredanet.³⁴⁵ Therefore, the idea of

³⁴¹ Part one. Number 11.

³⁴² International ICT lawyer, human rights defender and researcher from Nairobi.

³⁴³ Presentation made by the MLRWG’s subgroup on the draft Computer Crime Proclamation. Intercontinental Addis Hotel. August 15-17, 2019.

³⁴⁴ The promotion, protection and enjoyment of human rights on the ‘Internet. Resolution adopted by the Human Rights Council on 13 July 2021. 47/16.

³⁴⁵ Ethiopian News Agency. Ministry of Innovative and Technology set to replace the old WoredaNet with the latest version of National Back Bone ICT infrastructure aiming at increasing ‘Internet gateway capacity. Retrieved from <https://allafrica.com/stories/201901230561.html>. Accessed on August 20 2021.

amending this specific proclamation is inherited from the old EPRDF government. Study data further showed informal committee meetings that took place in 2016 to “relax some identified laws in response to the protesters demand for the protection of human rights and democracy” (Haji 19/11/2020).³⁴⁶ As such, the importance of protecting the right to data privacy through a comprehensive law was an initiative to respond to learning from the system hack by the 2105 Oromo protesters that exposed citizens’ biometric data to third parties.

On September 15 2019, the computer proclamation drafting team presented its initial document for discussion. The draft computer crime proclamation attempted to address Internet shutdowns, net neutrality, online censorship, and personal data protection. In this regard, the draft computer crime law incorporated clauses that obligate the government and private entities to perform their tasks securely and take responsibility for data protection. The draft computer proclamation presentation by the MLRWG stated that the amended proclamation would introduce penalties for attempting to access unauthorized information. It was followed by expert comments stating that a significant number of the crimes set out in the draft proclamation duplicate crimes which presumably already exist in the Ethiopian Criminal Code. Study data suggests careful treatment of private data and sensitive information that may affect national security and public safety per international human rights law.

Data from a public webinar organized by the International Internet Society Ethiopia Chapter reinforced the importance of critically examining the roles and responsibilities of the government in protecting private data and free expression online. This study further argues that the issue of data protection in the draft amendment seems to focus on the relationship between the government and private citizens, assuming that the government is the protector of data privacy. At the same time, the practical experience during the 2015 Oromo protest illustrated that the government practiced sophisticated private data theft and surveillance. Therefore, the approach to private data protection in the law-making process have a duty to consider the role of main actors, including individuals, the government, non-state actors, international ISPs and social media platforms.

“Everyone wants to feel safe to rightly say what we are thinking even in friendly talks, let alone about political issues. I will not feel safe if the government has unrestricted access to what I say and do on my phone or laptop. That is why I say data protection is crucial to exercise freedom of expression online” (Comment by a webinar participant).³⁴⁷

Empirical data of this study show a sound regulatory framework towards private data and sensitive information on the Internet requires collaboration between individuals, international commercial companies and governments. An international consulting expert with a specialization in ICT law during the expert’s roundtable discussion on the draft Computer Crime Proclamation emphasized that companies like Facebook and Google

³⁴⁶ Haji, legal scholar, interview with the author, November 19, 2020.

³⁴⁷ Public webinar organized by ‘Internet Society Ethiopia Chapter. August 7, 2020. From 4 pm 4 pm. “Impacts of ‘Internet Shutdown in Ethiopia and proposed solutions” moderated by the author. <https://youtu.be/bJWwMb9QuRA> Comment at 1:17.

obtain consent and authorization from users to use their personal data for advertising activities.³⁴⁸ It is not easy for any State to control the widespread personal data exchange that is transnational in nature. Nonetheless, this study argues that laying down a strong legal framework is necessary to restrict the government's access to private data.

Study data from the field depicted seizure of personal communication gadgets by the police as a widespread practice, especially during the 2015 Oromo protest, which hindered free political information flow, the practice of freedom of expression, and violation of private data protection under the international human rights law. Additionally, the contextual factors, such as using physical private digital data checking through random mobile phone content search without a court warrant, must be addressed and linked to the fundamental rights of thoughts, opinion, and expression stipulated under the federal constitution Article 29.³⁴⁹ Moreover, the amendment process needs to introduce clear procedures regarding the confiscation of communication gadgets, smartphones, computers, IP addresses and others” (International ICT expert 16/09/2019). The 2015 Oromo protest case validated Ethiopia's experience concerning private data protection that portrays a strong linkage between online private data and offline practices. It shows that data unprotected offline is violated online and vice-versa. For this reason, the draft computer crime proclamation is expected to provide clauses covering online data protection and establish a strong intent requirement to criminalize fraudulent and dishonest access to private data, considering the direct link between the offline and online spheres. Based on the analysis of the empirical data gathered from different forums,³⁵⁰ the study argues that the best way for the Ethiopian legal system is to adopt a separate comprehensive data protection law with an oversight body to control its implementation and raise public awareness, instead of criminal law governing it (experts' consultative meetings).

The experiences and uncertainties during the 2015 Oromo protest show the importance of appropriate safeguarding mechanisms against State abuse of power to shut down the Internet, content filtering and limit the powers of the government to what is genuinely required to address computer crimes. Study data evidenced that the draft computer crime proclamation generally attempted to respond to these facts. However, there are still gaps in the draft document that needs careful consideration. The safeguarding standards put in place in the draft proclamation fail to create appropriate safeguards against the State abuse of power to shut down, filter or block the Internet largely because of the vague language used, such as “extraordinary circumstances”, “proportional”, and “national interest” (International consulting expert 17/09/2019, International ICT expert 16/09/2019).

According to the Computer Crime Proclamation drafting team presentation, the team worked hard to formulate safeguarding that can protect human rights, specifically

³⁴⁸ International ICT law expert. Commentary on the draft Computer Crime Proclamation. Intercontinental Addis Hotel. August 17, 2019.

³⁴⁹ Federal Constitution 1994, Article 29 (1-6).

³⁵⁰ Eexperts consultative meetings, public dialogue forums and stakeholders' meetings organized by the MLRWG.

freedom of expression and access to information online that may be affected by other laws. Nonetheless, this study argues that the law amendment process could not achieve its objectives without incorporating a clear clause that declares access to the physical Internet infrastructure as a fundamental human right based on Article 19 of the ICCPR and Article 15 of the ICESCR. Conversely, this study highlights that tendencies to categorize the Internet within civil and political rights or economic and social rights will do more harm than good because protecting the right to access the Internet serves everyone everywhere.

“We know what the Internet could do to a society without going too far. We have seen how our youth toppled down a regime that was thought to stay forever; also, its role during the COVID outbreak. So, it is necessary to protect it, and of course, use it properly. It must be our right to have access to the Internet all the time, not only in developed countries with good economic strength, access to the Internet should be protected” (comment by political party leader 27/07/ 2019).³⁵¹

Empirical data of this study suggested the need for the law amendment working group to exhaustively refer to international human rights law to respond to the reality on the ground and develop a practical safeguarding mechanism for the right to access the Internet. Among the strengths of the draft, Computer Crime Proclamation is its safeguard to online political expression, which could be taken as a direct response to the demands of the 2015 Oromo protest. The draft law stipulates “political speech should be protected to the widest possible” and provides plausible rules regarding political speech such as asserting restrictive grounds to be based on the federal constitution, Article 29(6) (MLRWG 01/02/2020).³⁵² However, the draft proclamation lacks clear and specific safeguarding clauses concerning access to the Internet as a right and the online content that is not intended to cause harm to others, although offensive.

Another strong side of the draft proclamation is the incorporation of a limitation clause on the power of the government to prohibit arbitrary shutdown of the Internet. According to Welde (29/08/2021), the limitation clause in the draft document is inspired by the international human rights standards that do not allow governments to apply complete interruption of access to the Internet under any circumstances. Unlike the existing computer crime proclamation, the draft law encourages affected parties by Internet shutdown to challenge service providers and the national INSA through judicial force. The draft law suggests that it could be legitimate for the government to bloc identified websites and online content following a court order. However, the draft proclamation still needs to refine its limitation clause to add procedural protections that require prior approval of the courts.

“Be specific in what ground the government is allowed to shut down the Internet. Could the law authorize it before it is shut down? Why and when did the government apply complete Internet shutdown? Which network and IP address could be closed to minimize harm?” (International ICT expert 15/09/2019).

³⁵¹ Representative from Oromo Liberation Front (OLF), Intercontinental Addis Hotel, Addis Ababa, June 27, 2019.

³⁵² Presentation made by the MLRWG’s subgroup on the draft Computer Crime Proclamation. Azzeman Hotel, Addis Ababa, February 02, 2020

The expert and public dialogue forums underscored the need to prohibit blanket shutdown of the Internet and specify circumstances for blocking identified websites and website content. In this regard, the draft law needs to set requirements both for the government and Internet intermediaries to clearly show and justify an imminent threat to national security and the reputation of others that necessitates Internet shutdown. Otherwise, the draft proclamation would fail to fully observe international human rights law and the resolution on the promotion, protection and enjoyment of all human rights on the Internet³⁵³. Most importantly, this study asserts that observing the ICCPR Article 19 (3) in framing limitation clauses on political speech and the use of the Internet as a communication platform is important. As one of the international experts put it, “the proclamation should protect all expressive behaviours, not only political speech; thus, it is important to replace the phrase political speech with matters of public concern.”

This article argues that if the draft proclamation establishes plausible safeguarding and limitation mechanisms per the international human rights law, it can respond to the practical experiences of the 2015 Oromo protesters related to vague Internet regulation and unreliable Internet connectivity that challenged the movement. As a way forward to refining the draft computer crime proclamation, the drafting team needs to consider promoting “cyber hygiene” by clearly identifying the responsibilities of actors involved in Internet governance, i.e., individuals, non-state actors, service providers and the government (International ICT expert 16/09/2019). In addition, the amendment process is expected to focus on what would be done before a cyberattack happens than on criminal sanction after the attack. This assertion was also supported by an international expert who emphasized multi-stakeholder cooperation.

“Government or private sector cannot secure the Internet alone. The government designs no computer; the technical community and everybody have responsibility. Even within the law, there should be specific consideration for cooperation and multi-stakeholder structures” (International ICT expert 16/09/2019).

Study data indicate the importance of prevention measures in the Internet governance to establish an effective incident response team with the capacity to constantly monitor and report cybercrime, online hate speech and disinformation. This study further suggests incorporating comments and recommendations of the public, experts, media practitioners, and civil societies to formulate a proclamation that responds to the public demands regarding the protected rights to freedom of expression on the Internet and access to reliable and affordable Internet. Public dialogue forum participants and experts urged the drafting team to draw lessons from other countries’ experiences, specifically South Africa, Kenya, and Ghana, to introduce components of online self-regulation that can support Internet governance and legal regulation.

The MLRWG submitted the draft amended Access to the Information Proclamation to the Council of Ministers in mid-2021 (Welde 29/08/2021). More so, deliberations from public dialogues and experts’ discussion forums suggested the proposed draft access to

³⁵³The resolution “condemns” the use of ‘Internet shutdown, content filtering and online censorship as a legitimate regulatory mechanism by governments. Numbers 13, 51 and 62.

information proclamation to recognize the importance of information and communication technologies to expand opportunities for people with disabilities to access official information. As such, the proclamation serves as a legal document to enforce the web accessibility of government institutions for all and special consideration for the needs of people with disabilities to ensure citizens' rights to access official information and participate in policy matters. The rights to access to information, communication and technology infrastructures must also be supported with relevant directives to ensure Internet access and affordability by all and across the country.³⁵⁴

6.4.2. Overview of Internet Accessibility, Affordability and Reliable Connectivity through the Eyes of Digital Policies and Institutions

The new government administration introduced diverse legal reforms and policy initiatives that can contribute to the protection of access to the Internet for all. The 10-year perspective plan of economic and social development, called Pathway to Prosperity (2021-2030), replaced the previous Growth and Development Plan II and prioritized inclusive social and economic development in which technology plays a role in creating a digital economy. The government acknowledged the importance of the Internet and digital technologies as drivers for economic growth and promoting freedom of expression.³⁵⁵

The Council of Ministers has also approved the Digital Ethiopia Strategy 2025 that is thought to support the country's objective to ensure "more efficient and inclusive interactions between citizens, government and businesses, thereby catalyzing its progress towards its national priorities."³⁵⁶ The short-term projects of the Digital Ethiopia Strategy 2025 aim to ensure accessibility and affordability of digital infrastructures for all guided by the notion of the "legal identity for all" to accelerate the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals and the Agenda 2063 of the African Union.³⁵⁷ It is also aligned with the Declaration of Principles on Freedom of Expression and Access to Information in Africa. The declaration emphasized that access and affordability of the Internet be granted for persons without discrimination to facilitate the exercise and enjoyment of freedom of expression and corollary rights in Africa.³⁵⁸ Among the new legal developments is the amended media proclamation, which broadened the means of broadcasting service by recognizing Internet-based information dissemination to promote information diversity and inclusion of people with diverse backgrounds.³⁵⁹ This study argues that the legal reform process seems committed to bringing about frameworks and

³⁵⁴ The promotion, protection and enjoyment of human rights on the 'Internet. Resolution adopted by the Human Rights Council on 13 July 2021. 47/16; Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, Article 4: 1-5.

³⁵⁵ Development Assistance Group Ethiopia. Phase V- Development Partners Support to the Implementation of GTP II and SDGs. Second Quarter Report (April-June 2020.)

³⁵⁶ Capital. 18 May 2021. Building a Digital Ethiopia [Digital Ethiopia - capital Newspaper \(capitalethiopia.com\)](http://capitalethiopia.com) Accessed on December 02, 2021.

³⁵⁷ Agenda 2063 is the African Union master plan to transform the continent into the global powerhouse of the future. [Agenda 2063: The Africa We Want. | African Union \(au.int\)](http://au.int)

³⁵⁸ Declaration of Principles on Freedom of Expression and Access to Information in Africa. Part 4, Principle 37: No. 3 (a-e).

³⁵⁹ Proclamation No. 1238/2021. Part one: general provisions, number 35.

initiatives that promote and protect Internet accessibility, affordability and reliable connectivity.

The argument that has been advanced in this study regarding due consideration to the fast-changing technologies and the nature of the Internet could be evidenced by the fact that Ethiopia is being recognized for advancing Artificial Intelligence (AI) solutions and market (Abebe 2019). Hence, the ongoing amendment of the computer crime proclamation is expected to effectively be crafted to respond to the growing AI invention and other technologies such as cryptocurrency, Internet of Things (IoT) and other imagined technologies (International ICT expert 16/09/2019). In addition, study data indicated the government's obligation to narrow the digital divide by protecting Internet accessibility, affordability and reliable connectivity. Enhanced access to the Internet, broadband connectivity, and cloud computing are critical to protecting and regulating freedom of expression, assembly, and association online.³⁶⁰

The enactment of the 2019 Communications Service Proclamation³⁶¹ is a product of the legal reform process, which permits private entities to invest in the telecom sector and is projected to liberalize Ethiopia's communications and information technology sector. The Communications Service Proclamation gives the authority to regulate the country's telecommunications, information and communications technologies, electronic commerce, and postal services to the Ethiopian Communications Service Authority (ECSA), a newly established regulatory established under the proclamation. The ECA's technical mandate comprises developing and promoting high quality, efficient and affordable communications services throughout the country.

As part of its mandate, the Communications Authority is planning to launch Ethiopia's first-ever communication satellite within that will reduce the cost of television transmission frequency lease.³⁶² This study draws three inferences from the efforts made to protect and promote Internet accessibility, affordability, and reliable connectivity through the eyes of digital policies and institutions. First, the new government, being part of the Team Lemma group in the movement structure, appeared to understand and address the technological and legal challenges that the 2015 Oromo protest faced to advance democracy and human rights. Second, the enactment of the 2019 Communications Service Proclamation and the establishment of the ECSA would promote the emergence of private entities to invest in the telecom sector and promote access to the Internet, affordable and reliable connectivity that will promote human rights on the Internet. Conversely, the expanding market would bring about new actors into the Internet governance structure of the country that the ongoing computer crime act proclamation needs to consider. Third, the overall focus of expanding access to the Internet should not be on its economic benefit. Instead, the protection, regulation, and promotion aspects of the Internet and digital technologies require prioritizing freedom of expression and access to online information as fundamental rights.

³⁶⁰ Human Rights Commission Comment no.61, paragraph 7.

³⁶¹ Proclamation Number 1148

³⁶² Space in Africa. 28 May 2019. [Ethiopia signed a communications satellite development agreement with China - Space in Africa \(africanews.space\)](#) Accessed on January 9, 2022.

6.4.3. Protecting and Regulating Freedom of Expression Online as a Fundamental Right

This section presents study participants' responses about online political content production, consumption and dissemination as a fundamental right. It also analyzes answers to a sub research question regarding the influence of the 2015 Oromo protest in revising and enacting laws that would promote and regulate online expression. Informants in the movement leadership structure articulated that the reform agenda considered institutionalizing core demands of the Oromo protest into the State's legal and political structure (Kelbesa 03/11/2020; Robsan 16/07/2021; Chali 16/06/2021). This section of the chapter focuses on analyzing empirical data in light of the new media proclamation that covers freedom of expression online and on the media.

On February 02 2021, the Ethiopian Parliament approved the revised Media Proclamation 1238/2021. The revised media proclamation recognized the Internet as a means of broadcasting service transmission than a free communication platform.³⁶³ Hence, it obligates online media³⁶⁴ to uphold freedom of expression and adhere to the legal limitations stipulated under the Ethiopian constitution. The law further prohibits inciting hatred on the grounds of age, mental or physical disability,³⁶⁵ spreading disinformation and cyber-attacks.³⁶⁶ It also decriminalized defamation and reestablished the Ethiopian Media Authority as a nonpartisan, nonpolitical body accountable to the House of Peoples Representatives.

One of the unique features of the new media proclamation includes its clauses that regulate online media, which was not mentioned in the previous law.³⁶⁷ The revised media proclamation stipulates the regulation, ownership, registration and licensing of online media outlets based on clear criteria and without any discrimination compared with the legacy media (Welde 29/08/2021). The new media proclamation defined online media as:

“...an Internet-based information dissemination service by an organization whose principal business involves the collection, production, processing and dissemination of news or programs or news and programs, through online images, audio, video and websites or a combination of means, per the editorial responsibility of a media service provider.”³⁶⁸

Empirical data from the field revealed three opposite opinions regarding the registration and licensing of online media. The first group argued that registering and licensing online media provides legal protection to the platform. The second opinion rejected the notion of online media registration, inferring Ethiopia's experience where media registration and licensing structures were used to prohibit citizens from owning media platforms and

³⁶³ Media Proclamation No. 1238/2021. Means of Broadcasting, 29 (14-16).

³⁶⁴ Media Proclamation No. 1238/2021. Obligations of Online Media 61(1-10).

³⁶⁵ Media Proclamation No. 1238/2021. 68(e).

³⁶⁶ Media Proclamation No. 1238/2021. 61(9)

³⁶⁷ Freedom of the Mass Media and Access to Information Proclamation No. 590/2008

³⁶⁸ Media Proclamation No. 1238/2021. General Provisions, 2 (4).

discourage the development of independent online media through direct control (Olana 10/06/2021; Bedaso 18/07/2021). The third view is obtained from online media owners who pointed out that the new media proclamation neglected the nature of online media by laying out similar media ownership, registration and licensing schemes with periodicals³⁶⁹.

“For example, my online media earns more money from international companies such as Google. My media is a Google member website, and it displays ads from Google; when a visitor of my page clicks on the advertisement, I earn a portion of revenue. So, I make sure to produce and post content that appeals to the diaspora to get more views and clicks on the ads that appeal to them (diaspora) than us here in Ethiopia. The more click I get, the more revenue I attract” (Zekarias 11/05/2021).³⁷⁰

Zekarias’s media uses AdSense Network, which helps non-Google websites to incorporate Google advertisements on their pages, and when visitors click on the ads displayed on a member website, Google pays some amount of money to page owners. In such a case, the attempt to ensure diversity of views and prevent media monopoly could easily be challenged.³⁷¹ This study further argues that the revised media proclamation interpreted online media ambiguously that may be challenging to regulate the media both as a platform to exercise freedom of expression and the media as a commercial organization.³⁷²

The experience of countries in the western world shows that the registration of legacy media outlets may include their online editions. Nonetheless, the definition of online media is beyond news making. It involves individual citizens and groups who use search engines, social media, aggregators, independent web portals, blogs and other digital platforms to produce, receive and disseminate information that might not need to be regulated under the media proclamation. At the same time, study data suggested avoiding redundancy and duplication of provisions in the draft Computer Crime Proclamation. It is also worth remembering that individuals and groups using online platforms may in any way be held accountable under criminal and civil law.

Additionally, the revised media proclamation defined online media broadly, as if its characteristics involve scarce resources that need to be allocated fairly to citizens through licensing and registration. According to Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (2018), licensing works well for radio and television stations that need the allocation of identified frequencies, which is considered to be a scarce public good.³⁷³ The media law reform working group argued that online media registration has a non-mandatory nature and may not be considered as licensing. Yet again, the working group asserted that by giving legal recognition to online media through registration, the law confers legally recognized rights and duties on them. According to Welde 29/08/2021

³⁶⁹ Media Proclamation No. 1238/2021. Part three: Media ownership, registration and licensing 22 (1-4)

³⁷⁰ Zekarias, Online media owner and manager, interview with the author, May 05, 2021.

³⁷¹ Media Proclamation No. 1238/2021. Part three: Principle 22(4).

³⁷² Media Proclamation No. 1238/2021. Part one, Number 4.

“when online media does not register, it is basically forfeiting its rights while the duties remain”. So far, 28 online media organizations have registered with the Ethiopian Media Authority, fulfilling legal requirements.³⁷⁴

“We were among the first to register. We are now recognized as a media entity and called for official press briefings, which positively impact our news collection and content making. We are also told that we will benefit from tax exemptions since we already have the certificate of recognition” (Zekarias 11/05/2021).

Therefore, this study argues that online media registration under the new media law is being perceived by both online media and the Ethiopian Media Authority as a licensing scheme to access content and other benefits that could potentially curtail citizens’ right to access to information. The study acknowledges the concerns of citizens regarding hate speech and disinformation to suggest a separate treatment of online content moderation and online media regulation.³⁷⁵ As the account of a media association representative below clearly shows widespread hate speech and disinformation is still on the agenda of the law reform process.

“People are dying in every corner of the country. Sadly, young people have no clue about the political history of Ethiopia killing and dying with no purpose, just being driven by online hate speech and incitement of violence against their neighbours. Unless there is a mechanism to stop online poison spiting, we will continue to witness ethnic-based conflicts and killings” (Media Association representative 27/07/ 2019).³⁷⁶

The new media proclamation required online media to refrain from disinformation and cyber-attacks.³⁷⁷ It is understandable that the new law designated disinformation and hate speech matters to the specific legislation on hate speech and disinformation.³⁷⁸ Proclamation Number 1185/2020 outlawed hate speech and disinformation, aiming to ensure that in their exercise of freedom of expression, citizens will not engage in spreading hate speech that incites violence and promotes discrimination against individuals and groups based on their identity.³⁷⁹ Spreading disinformation is a punishable act; a higher penalty is attracted if the dissemination is through social media accounts with more than 5,000 followers and print or broadcast media.³⁸⁰ The UN Special Rapporteur on the Rights to Freedom of Opinion and Expression said that the definition of hate speech and disinformation in the new proclamation is vague and overbroad in a manner that threatens freedom of expression and reinforces ethnic and political tensions.³⁸¹

³⁷⁴ Kaleab Girma, June 10, 2021. [How to Acquire an Online Media License in Ethiopia? - AfroLeap](#) Accessed on August 15, 2021.

³⁷⁵ Intercontinental Hotel, Addis Ababa June 27, 2019; Azzeman Hotel, Addis Ababa, February 02, 2020

³⁷⁶ A representative from Ethiopian Media Women Association, a civil society organization, June 27, 2019, Intercontinental Hotel, Addis Ababa.

³⁷⁷ Proclamation number 1238/2021. Subsection two, number 61(9).

³⁷⁸ Hate Speech and Disinformation Prevention and Suppression Proclamation No. 1185/2020.

³⁷⁹ Hate Speech and Disinformation Prevention and Suppression Proclamation No. 1185/2020. Article 3.

³⁸⁰ Proclamation No. 1185/2020. Article 7 (sub-articles 3 and 5).

This study argues that because Proclamation No. 1185/2020 lacks a clear and precise definition of hate speech and disinformation, the debate about controlling hate speech in general and online hate in particular. Furthermore, key informants argued that the definition of hate speech and disinformation sounds broad under Proclamation No. 1185/2020. The new media proclamation also emphasized the malpractices on the Internet and established “a new type - online media” into the existing media systems (Yirga 21/11/2018). Ethiopia is still challenged by hate speech and disinformation online. The Internet changed the overall political communication and media system in the country. Hence, there is a need to balance the right of individuals to exercise their freedom of expression and the right of others to be protected from hate speech against their human dignity under the international human rights law and the federal Constitution (Addis Standard 2018).³⁸²

Moreover, The Declaration of Principles on Freedom of Expression and Access to Information in Africa required States to cooperate with relevant stakeholders to formulate policies, laws, and measures necessary to facilitate digital literacy skills aiming to help improve the status of freedom of expression on the Internet.³⁸³ Online media owners, bloggers and urban digital activists interviewed for this study indicated the importance of introducing online self-regulatory practices into the existing Ethiopian Media Council structure to help ensure healthy online media engagement. Empirical data of this study shows that Ethiopia needs not only proclamations and policies to protect and regulate the Internet. It also has a duty to also introduce an Internet governance system where all relevant stakeholders, i.e., the government, non-state actors, Internet service providers, play their respective roles to advance accessible, affordable, and reliable Internet connectivity.

³⁸¹ David Kaye. 05 December 2019. Visit to Ethiopia, 2-9 December 2019, End of mission statement. [OHCHR | United Nations Special Rapporteur on the right to freedom of opinion and expression](#)
[David Kaye](#)
[Visit to Ethiopia, 2-9 December 2019](#)
[End of mission statement](#) Accessed on May 9 2020.

³⁸² Addis Standard’s Interview with Zinabu Tunu, Communications Director at the Federal Office of Attorney General, November 23, 2018

³⁸³ Part 4. Principle 37(3e).

CHAPTER SEVEN

7. Concluding Notes and Ways Forward

The role of social media in promoting and sustaining social movements has been at the center of academic debates. Global developments in the post-2000 period that attracted the attention of scholars researching the impact of social media on collective action and social movement accentuated the value of social media in maintaining a free and democratic virtual space. This dissertation aimed to examine if and how the Internet served as an alternative and effective digital space to organize a social movement based on freedom of expression and other corollary rights in the context of criminalization of dissent by a dominant-party state. The study examined dominant perspectives of freedom of expression and social movements through the case-based empirical analysis of the 2015 Oromo protest.

The empirical findings of this study reflected some eminent features of social movement framing theory presented in prior academic discussions by Sarikakis and Rodriguez-Amat 2012; Lilleker and Vedel 2013; Della Porat and Diani 2006 concerning the role of the Internet in social movements. However, the study findings regarding the relationship between the 2015 Oromo protest movement actors, their agenda and the existing sociopolitical contexts showed that the Internet alone could not integrate different interpretations of the situation and the beliefs of diverse social groups that might otherwise remain separated. Without annulling the role of the Internet in social movements, the study turned to the notion of “networked social movements” introduced by Castells (2015, 308; 2016, 10), which is reflected in the organizational structure of the 2015 Oromo protest. Based on the analysis of the findings, the study proclaims the Oromo protest as a networked social movement where the Internet played a role in facilitating effective communication and mobilization, self-protection, and a safer space of resistance.

This thesis brought new information to the existing knowledge concerning networked social movements in the global south based on the organization of the 2015 Oromo protest, which revealed a balance of structural power by defining the social boundaries of movement actors through the deployment of the Internet. But then again, this research spotted Castells (2015, 2016) limitations in reducing the role of social actors in the networked social movement structure, stating that communication rules in the network society “are not based on the sharing of culture but on the culture of sharing” (Castells 2016, 126; 2015, 260). Against Castells’s claim, the empirical findings of this thesis accentuated the role of social actors in establishing communication rules, including sharing of movement-related messages and displaying the Oromo values through pictures and video, which endorses one’s ability to be acknowledged as a movement member. The study offers a new outlook of networked social movements in the global south that were perceived as dependent on the sharing of culture by highlighting social actors’ capability to stimulate the culture of sharing, linking, commenting and posting as members inclusion criteria into the networked society. Therefore, the study highlighted that the influence of the Internet in social movements could not be explained from a theoretical

perspective that pays mere attention to the value of the technology without paying attention to the agency of actors and the contextual factors. Hence the analysis of the findings of this study contributes to existing academic discussions on the nexus between social movements, the Internet, and freedom of expression. Furthermore, this study contributes to the existing gap in studies on digital space and social movement in the Global South as most of the pre-existing works overconcentrate on studies conducted in Europe, North America and the MENA region (Sarihan, 2014; Mutahi and Kimari 2017; Hagerty and Rubinov; Mateos and Bajo-Erro 2020).

This study accentuated that the 2015 Oromo protest is a social movement that used coordinated protest demonstrations as options when movement actors felt their relative position in the Ethiopian political order was threatened. The 2015 Oromo protest involved actors who could establish connections between different events that happened at different points in time and place to develop a broader narrative relevant to their shared experiences. This is very much in line with Melucci (1996a) and Tarrow (2011), who asserted that the formation of effective social movements depends on the capacity of actors to create comprehensive narratives based on sequences of events and shared experiences. This can be best denoted through the framing of the master plan as an identity issue unifying Oromos beyond its relevance as an economic and land right issue.

The dominating knowledge about the organizational structure of the Oromo protest was described as spontaneous (Ostebo 2020) and informal (Mosisa 2020). On the other hand, the empirical findings of this study revealed that the 2015 Oromo protest was a networked social movement, which effectively utilized structural opportunities and instrumental resources, as was discussed by Tourani (1981) and Melucci (1996b). The study findings established that the 2015 Oromo protest utilized the Internet to form a distinct and multilevel segmented movement structure. This position was taken considering the larger contextual, structural and institutional factors that shape and are shaped by the deployment of the Internet in the 2015 Oromo protest, including the emergence of the educated Oromo youth and the vibrant Oromo diaspora community. Nonetheless, it does not explicitly reject the influence of the Oromo traditional leadership culture and the key actors' desire to form a flexible organizational structure to defy repression.

Based on the study's findings, one can argue that the 2015 Oromo protest was the continuation of decades-long grievances of the Oromo people. The study empirical findings show informants' strong opinion about the link between the Oromo national question in the 1970s and the 2015 Oromo protest. Respondents identified the political fragmentation and disagreement on the social movement organization approach among the Oromo elites that created political stagnation. This is similar to Tarrow's (2011, 152) argument about fragmenting movements, yet again, protest rallies that seemed partly to bear extended demands of the movement never stopped, and there are developing stories, perhaps suggesting a lingering question that may probably require further study. This again leads us to enquire about the role the Internet plays after the 2015 Oromo protest and how political activism is perceived and performed in today's Ethiopia. Data findings depicted that the new generations of Oromos revived the movement by abandoning the

secessionist movement agenda of the old Oromos and upholding a multicultural Ethiopian state where all ethnic groups are equally treated, which garnered the support of other groups, especially the Amhara.

Empirical findings of the study portrayed that the 2015 Oromo protest leaders prudently waited for the right time to exploit the Addis Ababa master plan as a political opportunity to deliberate on the concept of free Oromia within the multicultural national context. Study informants emphasized articulating the master plan into the notion of freedom from forceful eviction appealed to the longstanding demands of the Oromos about the right to land, language and political participation. Moreover, the weakening of the ruling party and continuous protest episodes such as the Rio Olympic incident and the Grand Oromia Rally served as political opportunities creating strategic collaboration between local movement actors, the diaspora and transnational human rights actors. This study found out that the Oromo protest applied an intersectional approach to recognize and amplify Muslims, Amhara and Konso protest demands without compromising its agendas. Looking into the popular demands, motivations, diverse profile of participants, the degree of organization and strategies of protest rallies held in various cities, one can understand that the Oromo protest was indeed an inspiration for various uprisings against the ruling party. Perhaps, this could be an opportunity for future research to understand the importance of the intersectional movement approach against interconnected repressions in nondemocratic states.

The analysis of the outcomes and effects of the 2015 Oromo protest showed its contribution to the 2018 government administration change and the political reform processes. The protest achieved this because movement actors used distinct organizational and leadership structures, mobilization and communication tactics anchored by mutual trust based on shared objectives and supported by digital communication technologies. The new generations of Oromos commonly referred to as the *Qubee* generations framed the movement agenda into three pertinent themes: Land, Leadership and Language, which they branded as “The 3Ls”. The study found out that these 3Ls related to the Oromo religious and philosophical worldview with the same fashion Gemetchu (2005, 68-79) explained the Oromo worldview. The Oromo people perceive land not as just an economic commodity rather the core of their existence and realm, and hence, the right to land administration has been their main movement agenda since the 1970s, intertwined with shared identity calling for collective action.

The issue of language as a movement agenda points to two crucial research findings. First, it reveals how the language agenda symbolizes the “one-ness” of geographically dispersed Oromo people within the shared value of *Oromumma*. Accordingly, this study concluded that the 2015 Oromo protest became a networked transnational movement with the deployment of Afan Oromo as the primary movement language and the use of the Internet. The empirical findings confirm Anttiroiko (2015) critic of Castells’ argument that network society is constructed around digital networks of communication. This study proved that it is not only the Internet platform needed to mobilize the network society. Like offline mobilization, networked movements require social, economic, technological, and political perspectives to determine their organization and leadership

structure. Most importantly, the study findings showed that the perception and practice of freedom of expression online are dependent on the level of education, economic and social status, and commitment to engage in political information creation, consumption and sharing.

The second point accentuated is the right to language as one of the 2015 Oromo movement agendas, political demand for Afan Oromo to be an official language in the federal structure while projecting Afan Oromo as a symbol of Oromoness. Hence, this study evidenced that movement actors knew that they could conquer communication power over the State by emboldening the demand for language rights and exercising the communicative act to articulate shared identity and objectives. Such a focus on language acted out well to mobilize the Oromo youth who proud themselves as *Qubee* generation for whom Afan Oromo goes beyond symbolizing *Oromumma* and is rather linked to their very subsistence as individuals. This makes sense considering the fact that Afan Oromo was the only language majority of young Oromos of the *Qubee* generation were exposed to, unlike the earlier generation. Furthermore, Afan Oromo became recognized as one of the official languages following the 2018 government change, which is considered among the achievements of the protest in advancing and protecting freedom of expression and access to information.

One of the most important empirical findings of the 2015 Oromo protest demand for equal political participation and meaningful representation in national politics relates to how key actors framed the demand for leadership and the “timing” it became in the spotlight of the movement. Conforming to Tarrow (2011, 2016) assertion, the 2015 Oromo protest leaders reinvigorated the demand for leadership as a primary movement agenda without undermining the remaining demands for land and language rights. Evidence for this is the key actors’ reaction to the unexpected cancellation of the master plan in January 2016.

This thesis brought new information to the existing knowledge regarding the role of the Addis Ababa Master Plan in the Oromo protest that has been widely discussed as a triggering factor of the 2015 Oromo protest (Habtamu 2017; Seifu 2019 Ostebo 2020; Mosisa 2020; Meseret 2020; Mebratu 2021). Empirical findings of the study further depicted that the master plan additionally served as a unifying and mobilizing factor that shaped the anger and cause of the Oromo people to establish a common agenda and constant cooperation between the mass and key movement actors. Through the master plan, the issue of freedom from forceful eviction became at the center of the political debate between movement actors and the ruling party. Furthermore, the master plan was an entry point of interaction between diverse actors: the *Qeerroo*, local digital activists, the diaspora, and Team Lemma. Team Lemma obtained trust and acceptance from other movement actors due to the team’s firm opposition to the ruling party’s stance towards implementing the master plan.

This thesis also added another perspective to understanding the marking date of the 2015 Oromo protest. Prior studies depicted the Ginchi protest on 12 November 2015 as the marking date of the 2015 Oromo protest, a point this study argued against. The first

chains of protests against the master plan were held in April 2014 in Ambo, Nekemte, Jimma, Meda Welabu; Ambo university students' rally being the first and repeated coordinated protest against the master plan. Two points can be deduced from this empirical finding: first, the Ambo protest on 30 April 2014 is the marking date of the protest where movement leaders synchronized the off-the-road protests with online activism. Second, the Ginchi protest has its marking in the development of the 2015 Oromo protest as it has enabled the diaspora community to recruit and communicate with *Qeerroo* leaders who can serve as a focal point on the ground. Thus, according to empirical findings, the flare-up of the Oromo protest is in April 2014 rather than late November 2015. Something distinct that featured in this dissertation was the careful preparation, timing, and message alignment of movement episodes with the launch of online and offline campaigns. The matching time of the first organized movement episode in Ambo on 30 April 2014, the launching of OMN on 01 March 2014 and online campaigns through hashtags could serve as examples. On the one hand, this confirms Castells (2015, 308; 2016, 8-10) claim that the role of the in organizing "networked social movements". On the other, it proves the empirical findings of this study concerning the importance of legacy media and interpersonal communication in the formation and sustenance of networked social movements in authoritarian contexts.

The analysis of various events that took place during the course of the protest draws on McAdam et al.'s (2001, 33) notion of "scale shift". One of such instances was the occasion when Feyisa Lelisa took the protest to the global stage during the Rio Olympics publicizing the 2015 Oromo protest into an international human rights agenda. The *Irreecha* stampede elevated the 2015 Oromo protest to a revolution as the national school-leaving exam leak was also a significant movement episode where the upward scale shift of the 2015 Oromo protest was observed. The diffusion and scale shift resulted from three factors: the Internet creating a safe protest sphere and movement actors re-narrating the relationship between historically contending Oromo and Amhara ethnic groups. The leaked exam saga, repeated road blockades, market strikes, and intensified repressions against Oromos became a national agenda inspiring support rallies in Amhara regional state. The rescheduling of the national exam during the Eid-al-Fitr Muslim's holiday added fuel to the already protesting Muslim mass, demanding religious freedom. The rescheduling of the exam confirmed the relevance of time in shaping the dynamics of social movements and the experiences of movement actors intertwined into the broader narrative (Melucci 1996a; Tarrow 2011). The exam leak incident also revealed that the 2015 Oromo protest was a secular movement, which people from all religions and beliefs joined because they supported the causes of the 2015 Oromo protest.

The empirical findings regarding key movement actors and their discursive practices demonstrated that one must develop trust to openly exchange information about the organization and leadership structure of the movement. The repeated answer from pretest in-depth interviews and focus group discussions was "no one knows them". On the one hand, empirical findings showed that protecting the movement and its leaders from unforeseen risk was considered everyone's role. Second, as presented in this study, the importance of trust is required within the movement circle and with external institutions, groups, and individuals who are expected to be trusted to the movement's cause. Third,

developing trust with informants to nurture reliable data that leads to obtaining consistent answers across respondents resulting in the replicability of study findings were also a methodological factor that this study pursued. As a result, the study succeeded in capturing and illustrating the diverse profile of members in the segmented leadership structure of the 2015 Oromo protest. University students formed *Qeerroo*, and then it embraced young Oromos from diverse walks of life, while urban digital activists are primarily town dwellers with better Internet access and educational background. Many diaspora movement leaders were from academics and are nationals or permanent residency permit holders, leading decent life in their host countries, and their fight is to emancipate Oromos under repression. Empirical analysis of the study highlighted that the network power of the diaspora activists originated from their ability to have more safety, freedom and access to the Internet in respective their host land.

Furthermore, this thesis capitalizes on findings pertaining to the sense of ownership and participation of actors that show no asymmetrical power relationships in the movement structure. The study underscored the indirect participation of individuals with financial resources, human rights awareness and connections with international organizations in sustaining the movement. The study findings showed that the incidental contributions of supporters and sympathizers were beyond financing protests and distributing smartphones. They were actively engaged in translating human rights norms and brokering political information between protesters and the international community.

The empirical findings of this study confirm the assertion by Mateos and Bajo-Erró (2020) concerning new social movement phenomena in Africa whereby the use of the Internet facilitated collaborative networks across the continent. Mateos and Bajo-Erró (2020, 651) further argued that the chain of protests that took place in Africa simultaneously, including in Ethiopia, were ignored by literature discussing “Revolutions 2.0”, “Wikirevolutions”, and “networked social movements”. This thesis found out that the 2015 Oromo protest adopted a similar Internet-oriented social movement strategy and message framings with the Arab Spring and *Dimtsachin Yisema* movement that preceded it. However, this study did not claim that the overall mass mobilization and communication tactics of the Oromo protest were learned from the Arab Spring. This finding was significant as it shed light on key informants claim that local grievances and distinct organizational approach inspired the 2015 Oromo protest. The direct control of the diasporic satellite television and easy access to the Internet provided the diaspora movement actors with the communication power, which also influenced the internal power dynamics within the movement structure. Empirical findings accentuated that the stagnation of the media landscape in Ethiopia and the reduced availability of political content inspired movement actors to establish satellite television and radio. The study findings evidenced that the deployment of the Internet coupled with diasporic satellite broadcasting enabled the 2015 Oromo protest leadership to conquer communication power and influence mainstream media to report the 2015 Oromo protest.

Another study result that may inspire further research is the hegemony of *Qeerroo* on political content production from the ground and the diaspora’s power to decide on the content to be transmitted to the mass. Such power relationship in political information

production and dissemination, specifically in contexts where freedom of expression is muzzled, provided new insight about media practices of networked transnational social movements. The symbiotic relationship between *Qeerroo* and the diaspora adds to the claims of Maier (2016) regarding the Internet-mediated transboundary political mobilization of the African diaspora. The relationship between *Qeerroo* and the diaspora highlights the influence of the Internet in creating opportunities for local actors to possess and employ communicative routines as resources to articulate and negotiate movement agenda.

In addition to message framings, research findings revealed that protesters were very interested in knowing the sources of information to consume political news and mobilize themselves for offline protests. Active participation and wider acceptance weighed the loyalty and trust of information sources both in the offline and online movement base. One of the intriguing results of this thesis was that offline protesters trusted political messages that came through the Internet and, by default, from the diaspora. Thus, the Internet further served the 2015 Oromo protest as a network of trust that narrowed the distance between diaspora-urban digital activists and rural protesters. It should also be noted that the Internet changed the overall political communication and media system during the protest.

This dissertation found that the Internet was appropriated as a common site of political resistance and safe communication platform despite limited connectivity and expensive costs for smartphone and airtime purchases due to repression and violation of freedom of expression and the media. This is proved by well-coordinated transnational protest rallies such as the Grand Oromia Rally and the well-coordinated hacktivism against government websites and online platforms in an attempt to cause “online disruption”. Drawing on Trottier and Fuchs’s (2014) argument about the role of hacktivism in regulating the Internet, the empirical findings of the study showed that the Oromo protest hacktivists challenged the Ethiopian government’s control over the online sphere and its deployment of Internet shutdown as a mechanism to regulate online expression.

Previous academic studies proved that social movements tend to deploy the Internet in contexts where political repression occurs and when the legacy media serves as the State’s mouthpiece (Soares and Joia 2015; Graham and Dutton 2014; Sarikakis and Rodriguez-Amat 2012). In light of this, the thesis claimed that the dissatisfaction about how the state-owned media overlooked reporting the protests and manipulated facts seemed to influence the political information consumption of the Oromo movement actors who resorted to looking for alternatives. Empirical findings of the study illustrated that the 2015 Oromo protest started to use the Internet as the movement intensified and that artistic works, religious places, schools and cultural ceremonies, weddings and funerals served as platforms to form collective identity and show demonstrate grievances. The dissertation portrayed that the Internet was not the only mobilization tool deployed in the 2015 Oromo protest; the appropriation of the one-to-five networking of the ruling party into a mobilization platform provided a particular social movement strategy in contexts where a dominant party state operates to control the day-to-day lives of citizens. Nonetheless, how online activism and political engagement stimulate offline political

action needs further examination in light of human rights, social movement, and media theories.

The deployment of the Internet in supporting the formation of collective identity within the 2015 Oromo protest is a significant empirical finding. It portrays the decision of movement actors to rectify the dominant narratives of the Oromo people within the political history of the Ethiopian State. The importance of this result is deepened given the grievances of the Oromo people regarding the foundation of the Ethiopian Empire that the movement leaders asserted as not inclusive of the Oromo people and the desire to look for an effective and alternative communication sphere to proclaim the Oromo narrative. Given the limited and expensive access to the Internet, the rise of online protest engagement during the 2015 Oromo protest was attributed to a sense of security and searching for a broader platform to communicate with other movement actors. Additionally, the Internet, specifically social media, cultivated an individual movement persona and a sense of solidarity among the 2015 Oromo protest members. It is worth mentioning that the findings of this study showed Facebook as a major social media platform among the Oromo protesters.

Among the significant empirical findings that proved the initial assumptions of the study included the empirical finding that demonstrated social movements in draconian states may not always choose contention as an ultimate approach to pursue change. Two perspectives resulted from this study. First, the online movement space, created through the Internet, was nearer to political authorities than the offline protesting squares and roads to speak to authority. The study revealed civilized communication and arguments between key actors of the 2015 Oromo protest and government officials on issues of concern over social media than any other media. Second, empirical results of the study illustrated that Team Lemma, as members of the 2015 Oromo protest movement leadership structure, were passive online due to frequent and harsh Internet surveillance of the ruling party against its citizens. However, as local authorities, Team Lemma accentuated the Oromo peoples' demand and joined the resistance movement to uphold the causes of the 2015 Oromo protest agenda through state-owned media. As Gale (1986, 205) argued, state authorities could be either supporters or opponents of movements, he ignored the possibility of state authorities to continue serving the state apparatus while actively involved in the leadership structure of social movements.

There are academic works about the involvement of government officials in social movements for various reasons, and their contribution is as regulators or unintentional disrupters (Krieger et al., 2021; Fligstein and McAdam 2019). Conversely, this dissertation brought about the distinct participation of state authorities in social movements as key movement actors in movement leadership structure. Based on empirical findings, during the 2015 Oromo protest, state authorities served a unique role that can be considered "unintentional organizational resource" as protesters utilized the government's established one-to-five network to operate safely within communities and expand their support base. Movement actors associated the refusal of the regional police and local militia to crackdown protests with the capacity of Team Lemma providing safety and protection to the 2015 Oromo movement.

Empirical findings of this study provided three alternative explanations about the decision of the 2015 Oromo protest movement actors to utilize the Internet. In the first place, the Internet was just a default communicative position to reclaim freedom of expression in a repressive situation. Secondly, using the Internet as a safe site of political resistance was a matter of survival for the Oromo movement actors, to protect themselves from the government's imminent attacks. Third, the Internet was an alternative communication platform to call for mass support when the legacy media serves as a mouthpiece of the dominant party state. Therefore, this study emphasized that the Internet was an asset that movement actors used to trespass the political and technological barriers in organizing the 2015 Oromo protest.

The research analyzed if the 2015 Oromo protest has in any way contributed to the ongoing revision and enactment of freedom of expression and media laws following the 2018 government transformation. Empirical findings demonstrated that the 2015 Oromo protest has an indirect effect on the legal reform process. The findings supported this argument that the 2015 Oromo protest provided a strong evidence base to build on existing local experiences and secure political commitment to initiate the legal reform process. The study argued that the new government, being part of the Team Lemma group in the movement structure, appeared to understand and address the political, technological and legal challenges that the 2015 Oromo protest faced to advance democracy and human rights. In this regard, the 2015 Oromo protest paved the way for freedom of expression online to become in the limelight of Ethiopia's struggle for democratization, the rule of law and democracy.

This study argued that the overall law reform process concerning freedom of expression and the media complies with the State's duties and responsibilities stipulated in Art 19 (3) of the ICCPR³⁸⁴ to protect and regulate freedom of expression. As a result, there have been efforts to enact and amend laws that may, directly and indirectly, affect the protection and regulation of freedom of expression online. This dissertation argued that the quest for freedom of expression on the Internet and access to the Internet as a basic right by its own could not have been at the forefront of the legal reform agenda without the contribution of the 2015 Oromo protest portraying multifaceted roles of the Internet in political participation. The study highlighted that the reform process emboldened online expression as a fundamental human right to be protected in the same way offline rights are protected through the new Media Proclamation. The findings of the study further emphasized the ongoing discussions on protecting and regulating physical access to the Internet through the proposed draft Access to Information Proclamation and the draft Computer Crime Proclamation. The study indicated that the ongoing amendment process of the Computer Crime Proclamation must come up with a clear definition of computer crimes, including Internet shutdowns, net neutrality, data protection and online censorship as stipulated in the UN resolution. Most importantly, the law amendment working group must exhaustively refer to international human rights law to respond to the reality on the ground and develop a practical safeguarding mechanism for physical access to the Internet.

³⁸⁴ ICCPR Art. 19 (3).

This study contended that the legal reform could not ensure freedom of expression online and access to the Internet as fundamental rights without delivering a clear and comprehensive law that considers the nature of the Internet and the diverse interests of main actors, including individuals, the government, non-state actors, ISPs and social media platforms. The study emphasized that private data protection on the Internet is directly linked with freedom of expression based on lived experiences of key informants during the 2015 Oromo protest. However, the relationship between individual citizens, non-state actors and ISPs must be considered in the law-making process to ensure the right to privacy on the Internet and online expression.

Empirical findings highlighted that the government curtailed freedom of expression on the Internet through offline mechanisms, such as offline bullying and physical checks on individual mobile handsets by the police and influential individuals. Thus, the study suggested the law reform process lay down requirements for establishing a robust self-regulatory mechanism guided by a code of conduct, with an independent ombudsman office to enable citizens to exercise their freedom of expression on the Internet. Additionally, this study pinpointed the need to support civil society organizations to introduce digital literacy interventions to help citizens understand their duties of not infringing others right to freedom of expression and access to the Internet through continuous interventions. Hate speech and disinformation prevention measures by all actors in Internet governance can be encouraged by obligating the government to create a conducive environment as stipulated in the Declaration of Principles on Freedom of Expression and Access to Information in Africa.

Most importantly, the study findings accentuated the fast-changing developments of the digital market in Ethiopia and beyond, which requires a clear, tech-informed and up-to-date proclamation that regulates the Internet and online content. It argued that the liberalized telecom market in Ethiopia would bring about diverse actors and technologies that may impose economic and technological barriers on the right to access the physical Internet infrastructure and online content unless it is best protected and regulated through effective laws and policies that may result from the ongoing legal reform process. The study highlighted the need for comprehensive proclamations and policies to protect and regulate the Internet and introduce an Internet governance system where all relevant stakeholders, i.e., the government, non-state actors, Internet service providers, play their respective roles. The study further alluded that the current political and legal environment that emphasizes the protection and regulation of free expression and personal data protection calls for further academic scrutiny on how Ethiopia could possibly unpack the vague relationship between national security, sovereignty, and freedom of expression in an era where the Internet is enabling cross border interaction. To sum up, the study underpinned directions and thoughts for future research and the empirical findings of this work point at some themes for further scrutiny.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: List of Key Informants

S.N	Name	Occupation	Gender	Claimed role in the 2015 Oromo protest	Interview Location	Date of Interview
1.	Kelbesa	Diaspora returnee	M	Protest leader and diaspora activist	Addis Ababa	November 03, 2020
2.	Wariyo	Civil society member	M	Protest leader and activist	Addis Ababa	November 07, 2020
3.	Nahim	University lecturer	M	Protest leader and activist	Addis Ababa	November 14, 2020
4.	Hassan	Politician /OPDO	M	Protest leader and activist	Addis Ababa	November 15, 2020
5.	Sifan	Diplomatic corps services employee	F	Activist	Addis Ababa	December 9, 2020
6.	Meti	Fashion model	F	Activist		November 03,2020
7.	Abdulhakim	Politician /OPDO	M	Protest leader and activist	Addis Ababa	November 06,2020
8.	Robsan	Medical Doctor	M	Protest leader and activist	Addis Ababa	July 16 2021
9.	Garoma	INGO program lead	M	Blogger and activist	Addis Ababa	August 05, 2021
10.	Badaso	Medical Doctor	M	Blogger and activist	Addis Ababa	July 18, 2021
11.	Ketim	Shelter supervisor and translator (diaspora)	F	Diaspora activist	Virtual	December 10, 2020
12.	Jigsa	Diaspora	M	Diaspora activist	Virtual	February 16 2021
13.	Yesuf	Diaspora	M	Diaspora in the Oromo Protest and <i>Dimtsachin Yisema</i>	Virtual	February 10, 2021
14.	Terefe	Unemployed	M	Qeerroo leader	Sabata/Hawas	January 12, 2021
15.	Terfasa	Pastor	M	Qeerroo leader	Alem Gena	January 20, 2021
16.	Humnesa	Primary school teacher	M	Qeerroo leader	Sululta	March 06, 2021

17.	Kumsa	Production manager (industry)	M	Qeerroo	Sabata	December 30, 2020
18.	Soreti	Housewife	F	Protester	Sabata	January 02 2021
19.	Gelan	Diaspora (academics)	M	Diaspora activist	Virtual	March 03 2021
20.	Morka	Civil engineer/Contractor	M	Activist	Burayu	April 10, 2021
21.	Jabessa	NGO employee	M	Blogger and activist	Alem Gena	April 14, 2021
22.	Gemechu	Hotel receptionist	M	Youth leader	Alem Gena	May 10, 2021
23.	Miresa	High school teacher	M	Opinion leader/activist	Lega Tafo	May 12, 2021
24.	Tolera	Journalist	M	Activist	Addis Ababa	June 10, 2021
25.	Olana	Journalist	M	Activist	Addis Ababa	June 10, 2021
26.	Chali	Journalist	M	Local digital activist	Addis Ababa	June 16, 2021
27.	Hamda	Journalist/diasporic media	F	Diaspora activist	Virtual	February 22, 2021
28.	Kitata	University lecturer	M	Opinion leader/activist	Addis Ababa	December 13, 2020
29.	Gifti	Self-employed	F	Protester/opinion leader	Burayu	January 24, 2021
30.	Negera	Police	M	Law enforcement	Burayu	February 01, 2021
31.	Ebsa	Police/Local peace and security head	M	Law enforcement	Lage Tafo	May 04, 2021
32.	Geda	Farmer	M	Protester	Sululta	January 15, 2021
33.	Keno	Self-employed	M	Community leader/protester	Sabata	March 16, 2021
34.	Wagari	Farmer	M	Protester	Sululta	November 01, 2020
35.	Qabso	Wereda chairman	M	Community leader/protester	Lega Tafo	November 01, 2020
36.	Kooluu	Civil servant	M	Protester/activist	Alem Gena	January 29 2021
37.	Keneni	IT specialist /Diaspora returnee	M	Hack for freedom	Addis Ababa	December 26, 2020

38.	Lelisa	Computer programmer	M	Hack for freedom	Addis Ababa	February 09, 2021
39.	Jarso	Ambo University graduate/self-employed	M	Qeerroo a former protest organizer in one of the universities	Sebeta	December 28, 2020
40.	Chala	Software developer	M	Hack for freedom	Lege Tafo	January 18, 2021
41.	Abdireshid	Diaspora (academics)	M	diaspora activist	Virtual	December 12, 2020
42.	Dabesa	Electrical engineer	M	Blogger and activist	Addis Ababa	November 15, 2020
43.	Hiyab	University lecturer	M	Local activist/ Qeerroo	Burayu	May 13, 2021
44.	Koket	Nongovernmental organization employee	F	Qarreee leader	Addis Ababa	July 16, 2021
45.	Urgesa	Self-employed	M	Ex-OLF fighter/Qeerroo leader	Sebeta	May 28, 2021
46.	Welde	Legal expert	M	MLRWG lead member	Addis Ababa	August 29, 2021
47.	Toltu	Civil servant	F	Online activist	Addis Ababa	April 03, 2021
48.	Aymen	OFC member		politician		April 28, 2020
49.	Jamal	Legal scholar	M	nonpartisan	Virtual	May 05, 2020
50.	Behaylu	Computer Science Expert		nonpartisan	Virtual	May 08, 2020
51.	Tebabal	Supreme court judge	M	nonpartisan	Addis Ababa	November 22, 2018
52.	Yirga	Government official from Ethiopian Broadcasting Authority	M	Government Official	Addis Ababa	November 21, 2018
53.	Ali	Legal scholar		Activist		November 19, 2020
54.	Nahom	MLRWG member	M	Media freedom advocate/journalist	Addis Ababa	

55.	Deyas	Government official Ethiopia Media Authority	M	Government official	Addis Ababa	May 04, 2020
56.	Natai	Merchant	M	Natai, Qeerroo, QBO founding member	Addis Ababa	January 03, 2021
57.	Amanyihun	Federal civil servant	M	EPRDF cadre, media committee member	Addis Ababa	January 19, 2021
58.	Misgana	Blogger	M	Local media advocate group	Addis Ababa	August 24, 2021
59.	Zekarias	Online media owner	M	Online media manager/owner	Virtual	May 11, 2021
60.	Benti	NA	M	activist and protest leader, personal communication	Personal communication	February 04, 2021
61.	Nameen	NA	M	Urban digital	Personal communication	February 04, 2021

Appendix 2: Focus Group Discussion Participants

Addis Ababa: January 03, 2021, 2:10pm-3:40pm				
Facilitator: Kinde Etefa				
Translator/Coordinator: Tesfaye Fikadu				
S.N.	Participant's name	Gender	Educational background	Occupation
1.	Monera	Male	Degree	Self-employed
2.	Doja	Male	Degree	Merchant
3.	Naol	Male	Degree	Teacher
4.	Firaol	Male	Masters	Health Officer
5.	Hunde	Male	10+3	unemployed
6.	Nafiyad	Male	Degree	Journalist
Alem Gena: December 29, 2020, 11:50am-1:15pm				
Facilitator: Kenea Birhanu				
Translator/Coordinator: Tesfaye Fikadu				
	Participant's name	Gender	Educational background	Occupation
7.	Yeron	Male	University student	Student
8.	Hundesaa	Male	University graduate	Engineer (Qeerroo leader)
9.	Futasa	Male	Level 4	Self employed
10.	Solan	Male	Degree	Unemployed

				(Qeerro leader)
11.	Godana	Male	Degree	University graduate
12.	Demeke	Male	University student University student	Student
Burayu: December 31, 2020, 11:50am-1:05pm				
Facilitator: Kebede Kelbecha				
Translator/Coordinator: Tesfaye Fikadu				
	Participant's name	Gender	Educational background	Occupation
13.	Bikilia	Male	Grade 10	Bank security
14.	Guta	Male	Grade 8	Farmer
15.	Feyisa	Male	Degree	Government employee
16.	Abdi	Male	Degree	Casual worker
17.	Daniel	Male	Degree	Business owner
Lege Tafo : January 18, 2021, 5:15-6:40pm				
Facilitator: Meseret Ararso				
Translator/Coordinator: Tesfaye Fikadu				
	Participant's name	Gender	Educational background	Occupation
18.	Hirpha	Male	Diploma	Self-employed
19.	Weltaji	Male	Degree	Civil servant
20.	kabada	Male	Diploma	Self-employed
21.	Robera	Male	Degree	Prosecutor
22.	Soressa	Male	10+3	Un employment
23.	Jalata	Male	Degree	Prosecutor
Sebeta: December 28, 2020. 1:40-3:05pm				
Facilitator: Adamu Yilma				
Translator/Coordinator: Tesfaye Fikadu				
	Participant's name	Gender	Educational background	Occupation
24.	Fedessa	Male	Degree	Contract worker
25.	Chimdesa	Male	Degree	Agriculture expert
26.	Negasa	Male	Diploma	Development Agent (Agriculture)
27.	Roba	Male	Degree	CSA expert
28.	Mati	Female	Degree	unemployed
Sululta: January 15, 2021. 12:00-1:25pm				
Facilitator: Guta Ayale				
Translator/Coordinator: Tesfaye Fikadu				

	Participant's name	Gender	Educational background	Occupation	
29.	Jallele	Female	Diploma	Merchant	
30.	Ganati	Male	Degree	Unemployed	
31.	Belina	Male	College student	College student	
32.	Qalbecha	Male	Degree	NGO employee	
33.	Godana	Male	Diploma	Health officer	
34.	Tarafa	Male	Degree	Unemployed	
Women-only focus group discussion participants held in Lege Tafo April 03, 2021. 2:10:pm- 3:35pm.					
Facilitator: Fantahun Aboma					
Translator/Coordinator: Tesfaye Fikadu					
	Participant's name	Gender	Educational background	Occupation	Residence area
35.	Tokiti	Female	Level 3	Government employee	Sululta
36.	Bontu	Female	Degree	Unemployment	LagaTafo
37.	Meilal	Female	Level 3	Causal Work	Addis Ababa
38.	Sena	Female	Degree	Government employee	Sabata
39.	Simera	Female	Grade 10	Self-employment	Burayu
Focus group discussions with small-scale farmers and less-educated men held in Burayu May 13, 2021, 11:25am-12:35pm					
Facilitator: Takele Bayecha					
Translator/Coordinator: Tesfaye Fikadu					
	Participant's name	Gender	Educational background	Occupation	Residence area
40.	Marga	Male	Grade 10	Farmer/Casual worker	LagaTafo
41.	Yilma	Male	Grade 12	Self-employment	Sululta
42.	Hirpha	Male	Level 3	Unemployed	Sabata
43.	Kitata	Male	Level 2	Church guide	Burayu
44.	Abara	Male	Grade 10	Causal Work	Addis Ababa

Appendix 3: Consent Statement for Interview and Focus Group Discussion

You have been identified as a key resource person and an informant for PhD research being conducted by Elsabet Samuel of the Center for Human Rights, Addis Ababa University.

You have been informed that the objective of this research is to examine the role of the Internet during and after the 2015 Oromo protest in facilitating political communication, and serving as an alternative site of political resistance.

You have understood that you will participate in this research group discussion/interview as an informant and that the discussion will take from 1 to 2 hours. The discussion will be audio recorded and that there are no risks involved in this discussion. Respondents are free to ask for not to be recorded.

You have voluntarily agreed and provided your consent to participate in this research. You have understood that you are free to withdraw your consent or to discontinue to take part in the interview/discussion at any time.

You are informed that your participation in this research is confidential, the researcher will know who you are, but will never disclose your identity to third party.

You have understood that the data from this study will probably be published. However, your name and all information that could lead to your personal identification will not be disclosed unless you willfully permitted the researcher to do so.

Now the interview/discussion continues.

Appendix 4: Interview Participation Request Letter

The interview participation request letter will be sent only to organizations and individuals who wish to have formal communication to take part in the interview.

Greetings,

My name is Elsabet Samuel, a PhD Candidate in Human Rights at Addis Ababa University, College of Law and Governance. I am writing to ask for your kind assistance with my research that explores Ethiopia's experience of promoting and regulating freedom of expression online and offline during and after the 2015 Oromo protest.

You are one of the selected individuals for a brief key informant interview. The Interview is about your understanding of freedom of expression online specifically during the 2015 Oromo protest. The objective of this interview is to clearly understand the role the Internet played and how Internet-connected citizens were using the technology to advance their freedom of expression and other related rights during the Oromo protest. I

am also interested to explore if there are issues related to your experience of using the Internet.

The interview is completely voluntary, and will take approximately 60 – 75 minutes. Your identity will be kept confidential and any information you will provide will be coded and kept safe.

I would be glad if you could give me the opportunity of an interview, either in person, via telephone or over the Internet soonest doable.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Elsabet Samuel

Appendix 5: Semi- Structured Qualitative Interview Questions

1. General Questions: Background (History, Objectives and Outcome of the Protest)

What were the triggering factors that caused the 2015 Oromo protest to start?

Tell me briefly about the Oromo protest specifically about the developments in 2015. What were the core objectives of the 2015 protest?

What were the main agenda of political activists and protest leaders during the 2015 Oromo protest?

What were the core human rights issues that the 2015 Oromo protest sought to address?

Describe factors that may have influenced you to support or oppose the Oromo protest?

What were the factors that helped the 2015 Oromo protest to continue?

Explain the factors that helped the 2015 Oromo protest to mobilize the general public.

Explain the most critical events during the 2015 Oromo protest that influenced your understanding of the protest and the politics in the country.

How do you explain the reaction of the government during the 2015 Oromo protest?

What in your opinion were the main results of the protest in 2015?

What do you think are the contributions of the 2015 Oromo protest in Ethiopia's political reform?

Explain political changes that can be associated with the use of the Internet in Ethiopia.

2. Mapping Actors

Who were the key actors who played key role during the 2015 protest?

Describe how key actors you mentioned used available technology specifically the Internet to provide leadership.

Describe who the online and offline key actors were during the 2015 Oromo protest.

What made online and offline protest leaders collaborate each other regardless of their diverse background and experience?

What were the shared agendas between the different actors you named?

Were there underlying issues that the key actors have differences on?

Describe moments where there had been internal contestations among key actors in the 2015 Oromo protest.

What were communication tactics key actors employed to gain public trust?

3. The Role of the Internet as a Tool for Demanding Basic Human Rights and as a Tool of Political Mobilization

How do you explain the roles of the Internet during the Oromo protest?

Describe what inspired the Oromo activists to use the Internet as an online political sphere and as a communication tool.

Why was the Internet chosen to serve as a tool for demanding basic human rights and self-rule during the protest?

How did the Internet affect the course of political information flow during the 2015 Oromo protest?

Explain the perceptions and practices of Internet-connected citizens about online freedom of expression and information?

How did the Internet help to demand basic human rights and self-rule during the protest?

Do you think the Internet helped the Oromo protest to evolve as a national uprising? If yes, how?

Describe how influential were social media platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, Twitter during the 2015 Oromo protest.

Explain the importance of event-related hashtags such as the #2016 Irreecha Massacre and #Rio Olympics among others in generating mass support.

Explain how the Internet served to bridge the gap between the urban-digital and diaspora Oromo activists.

Do you think the Internet served the rural-offline protesters in any way? If yes how?

Explain the benefits of using the Internet as an alternative political communication platform during the 2015 Oromo protest.

What were the risks of using the Internet as a political communication platform during the 2015 Oromo protest?

Cross-Learning from Previous Social Movements

Would there be any social movements in Ethiopia or beyond that you can match with the 2015 Oromo protest?

Explain the underlying similarities and differences between the Oromo protest and other social movements such as the Dimstachin Yisema Muslims protest with regard to the use of the Internet as an effective tool of mobilization.

Describe how well organized online and offline activists were during the Oromo protest comparing with matching movements that you mentioned.

4. Perceptions and Practices of Citizens About Online Political Information Creation and Dissemination During the 2015 Oromo Protest

Explain how the Internet was serving as a site of political resistance during the 2015 Oromo protest.

Describe the reason why you used the Internet specifically social media platforms to access information about the Oromo protest.

Explain what kind of Internet platforms or social media sites you used during the Oromo protest and why.

Did the use of the Internet in any way impact the way you access political information? If yes, how did it impact?

Have you ever posted, shared or commented on political posts, photographs and video about the Oromo protest?

Did the Internet change your political engagement and social interaction during and after the protest and how?

How did you access information about the 2015 Oromo protest during Internet shutdowns?

The Role of Mainstream Media During the 2015 Oromo Protest: General Query Beyond the Internet

How did the mainstream media report on the 2015 Oromo protest?

Explain the role mainstream media played to provide accurate political information about the 2015 Oromo protest.

What was the contribution of the mainstream media in strengthening the structure and promoting the causes of the 2015 Oromo protest?

How did the Internet influence the way the Oromo protest was reported on the mainstream media?

What was the role of mainstream media in facilitating transnational movement in support of the 2015 Oromo protest?

Describe the information difference and similarity between the Internet and the mainstream media reporting about the Oromo protest.

How could you compare the contribution of the mainstream media and the Internet in promoting the causes of the 2015 Oromo protest?

5. Protecting and Regulating Access to the Internet as Fundamental Right

How do you explain the state of freedom of expression in Ethiopia during and after the 2015 Oromo protest?

Describe how the freedom of expression on the Internet was understood and practiced by individual citizens during the 2015 Oromo protest.

How do you describe government's reaction about online dissent during the 2015 Oromo protest?

Does the 2015 Oromo protest influence the government to consider revising and enacting laws that would promote and regulate online expression?

Does the right to freedom of expression under the Ethiopian Constitution suffice to protect and regulate online expression?

What are the prospects of Ethiopia in establishing legal regulation taking into account international and constitutional human rights obligations in protecting and restricting freedom of expression online?

What are the challenges of Ethiopia in protecting and regulating freedom of expression on the Internet?

Explain whether access to the Internet will tend to contribute to the advancement of freedom of expression in Ethiopia.

Describe how the Internet was understood and addressed during the process of amending media laws and enacting anti-hate and disinformation proclamation in Ethiopia.

Describe ways Ethiopia can be able to address competing interests of individual citizens, the state, nonstate actors and Internet intermediaries during the revision and promulgation process of freedom of expression and media laws.

Appendix 6: Focus Group Discussion Guiding Questions

Have you participated in the 2015 Oromo protests? If so, what motivated you to join the protests? If no, why?

What were the major demands of the people during the 2015 Oromo protest?

What were the basic human rights demands of the 2015 Oromo protest?

Do you think the Oromo protest relates to other social movements in terms of its organization and information sharing practices and how?

Who were the key actors of the Oromo protest that provided online leadership in 2015?

Describe how on-the-road protests were organized during the 2015 Oromo protest.

Who were the leaders of the Oromo protest that provided offline leadership in 2015?

What were the main political agendas of the key actors during the 2015 Oromo protest?

Describe the communication tactics that online and offline key actors used for you to have trust in or to join the 2015 Oromo protest?

How do you describe the way the urban and diaspora Oromo community were engaged with the protesters in Ethiopia and the values that helped them stay connected with the rural on-the-road protesters?

How do you explain the demands of the rural communities and urban-diaspora Oromo community during the 2015 protest?

Do you think the Internet have changed or facilitated the political role of citizens during the Oromo protest and how?

Were there factors curtailing the involvement of citizens in creating, acquiring and disseminating political information during the Oromo protest? If yes what are these factors?

Have you ever trusted newspapers, television or radio broadcasts to get full information about the 2015 Oromo protest? If yes which ones specifically? If not, what was your reservation?

In your opinion, did the 2015 Oromo protest enable the process of ensuring freedom of expression online as a fundamental right in Ethiopia? If yes how? If not tell me what inhibited it.

Describe the power relationships of the state and individual citizens in terms of promoting and regulating free expression on the Internet.

Explain the role of Ethio-Telecom and subsidiary SIM Card service retailers in promoting and regulating freedom of expression online in Ethiopia.

What was the role of nonstate actors in promoting the use of the Internet during the 2015 Oromo protest?

Appendix 7: Public Dialogue Forums and Experts' Meetings

Dates	Events	Additional Information
July 27, 2019	Consultation with Civil Societies, political parties and regional media, organized by LJAAC and the MLRWG	Intercontinental Addis Hotel, Addis Ababa
August 15-17, 2019	A three-day expert on the Media Proclamation, the basic principles guiding the drafting process of Freedom of Information Proclamation, and the Computer Crime Proclamation.	Intercontinental Hotel, Addis Ababa
February 01, 2020	Consultation on draft access to information and computer crime proclamations, organized by the LJAAC and the MLRWG	Azzeman Hotel, Addis Ababa
August 22, 2020	A half-day stakeholder consultation on the draft Access to Information Proclamation, organized by LJAAC and the MLRWG	Virtual meeting 9:30am- 12:00pm Addis Time.
September 22, 2020	Stakeholder consultation on the draft access information law and Computer Crime Proclamation, organized by LJAAC and the MLRWG	Hilton Hotel, Addis Ababa

Appendix 8: Online Data Scraping

6. Data Mining from Social Media

Posts of text, images, media and other user-generated content about the 2015 Oromo protest were collected from selected Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube user accounts of bloggers, activists, journalists, politicians, and government officials with significant followers using the below tables.

Online/Internet Platforms	URL of pages, groups or websites	Mode of Observation	Page type and ownership	Language	Year launched	Keywords and hashtags harvested/ general content
Facebook						
Twitter						
YouTube						
Government Communication Affairs						
O Pride						
Tigray Online						
Press Secretariat of the Prime Minister's Office						

7. Recording Hashtags and Keywords

Keywords and hashtags were collected, categorized and documented using the below codebook.

Data sources	Themes	Information sources	Number of shares, likes and comments	Format of the Content	Observed effect
<i>Facebook</i>					
<i>YouTube</i>					
<i>Twitter</i>					

Appendix 9: Journal Articles and Acceptance Letters

1. **The Genesis and Trajectories of Social Movements in Ethiopia: The Case of the 1974 Students' Movement and the 2015 Oromo Protest**
Ethiopian Journal of Social Sciences and Language Studies (EJSSLS), Volume 9: No. 1 (June 2022). Elsabet Samuel Tadesse (forthcoming).
2. **Social Movements and the Youth: The Ethiopian Experience**
Journal of Ethiopian Studies (JES), Volume LV, No. 1 (June 2022). Elsabet Samuel Tadesse (forthcoming).
3. **Muted Online Voices: The Role of the Internet in Amplifying Freedom of Expression of Persons with Disabilities in Ethiopia**
Ethiopian Journal of Human Rights (EJHR), Volume 6, (2020/2021). Elsabet Samuel Tadesse (forthcoming).
4. **Diasporas as Agents of Political Change: The Role of the Oromo Diaspora in the 2015 Oromo Protest in Ethiopia.** It is submitted to a journal (waiting for its review report).