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Diasporas as Agents of Political Change: The Role of the Oromo Diaspora in the 2015 Oromo Protest in Ethiopia

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Abstract

Diasporas are significant actors in the international political arena. By leveraging the human and financial capital in their possession, operating in a more open political space, and enabling access to information and communication technologies, the diasporas are well-positioned to contribute to socio-political change in their respective places of origin and settlement. This article aims to understand the role and influence of the African diaspora in the political affairs of their respective homeland, taking the case of the transnational political practice of the Oromo diaspora focusing on their involvement during the 2015-2017 Oromo protest that propelled the political change in Ethiopia since 2018. It does so by examining how the new identity of the educated Oromo youth developed and contributed to the emergence of a vibrant diaspora community committed to bringing about democratic change in their homeland. The article further discusses how the expansion of transnationalism and the Internet interacted with the politicized ethnic identity of the new generation of Oromo diaspora to reframe and organize the popular protest against repression and human rights violation in their homeland. The article is based on primary and secondary data collected through interviews, focus group discussions, and social media analysis. This article shows that the diaspora's involvement in homeland politics contributed to the diffusion and scale shift of the 2015 Oromo protest, transformed it into a transnational human rights agenda, and ultimately contributed to political reform and transition to democracy. It further explicates that the Oromo protest brought about harmony and political solidarity among multiple ethnic identities and political views of the Ethiopian diaspora to challenge the regime in their homeland.

Keywords: diaspora, Oromo, Ethiopia, ethnic identity, transnationalism, social mobilization

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Background

The African diaspora who migrated to western countries, searching for security and self-realization, continue to play a pivotal role in their homeland's socio-economic and political affairs (Hafkin, 2006; Habecker, 2011). Even though the influence of the African diaspora in transnational social movements has been recognized for a long time, a more coordinated and technology-assisted diasporic mobilization among the African diaspora was inspired by the 2011 Arab uprising (Marable & Mullings, 2009; Beaugr & Geisser, 2016). Hence, examining the African diaspora's role and influence in their homeland's political affairs in this digital age requires a careful methodological approach considering its ethnic diversity and shared experiences.

The modern African diaspora shared a common experience of political oppression, communal conflict, social instability in their country of origin, racial discrimination and the fight against it in destination countries (Zeleza, 2010). Despite the shared experiences of the refugee African diaspora, some ethnic groups stay connected to their homeland political affairs even when their countries of origin do not politically and legally recognize their involvement. Furthermore, political and technological factors enhanced the African diaspora's social mobilization and political participation in their homeland and became more visible in the international political arena (Beaugrand & Geisser, 2016). The expansion of transnationalism and the Internet-mediated transboundary political mobilization of the young African diaspora facilitates frequent interaction between the hostland and homeland communities (Maier, 2016). Moreover, the transnational connectivity between the diaspora and their homeland communities eliminated the local and global dichotomy and facilitated identity construction and cooperation among diverse diaspora groups (Hafkin, 2006; Maier, 2016).

The central question in this article is how the solidification of ethnic identity supports the emergence of a vibrant African diaspora capable of transforming a domestic movement in their homeland into an international human rights agenda. The article provides empirical evidence to understand how the young African diaspora with diverse linguistic and ethnic backgrounds and political desires consolidate its interests in organizing social movements in their country of origin. It also offers additional insight into how historically contending Oromo and Amhara ethnic groups from Ethiopia in the diaspora collaborated to challenge the government in their homeland, taking the case of the 2015-2017 Oromo protest in Ethiopia and its influence on other similar protests generated by common conditions existing in different places among different ethnic groups.

The Ethiopian diaspora comprises diverse ethnic groups and cultural identities (Lyons, 2007). Previous research discussed the Ethiopian diaspora's role in generating political conflict, peacemaking initiatives, and remittances to the national economy (Kassahun, 2018; Meron, 2018; Beyene, 2015; Dereje, 2012; Lyons, 2007). The struggle of the Ethiopian diaspora to preserve their "Habasha" identity through endogamy, specifically in the United States, is studied by Habecker (2011). Hafkin (2006) discussed the role of the Internet in shaping the transnational Ethiopian identity, while Habtamu (2017) highlighted diasporic political engagement on the Internet, taking the case of the 2015 Oromo protests. 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. This article argues that the Internet served as a site of connectivity and self-identification that contributes to the formation of diasporic political identity and behaviour. Hence, the politicized ethnic identity among the Ethiopian diaspora in general and the Oromo diaspora in particular encouraged diasporic social mobilization on the Internet. This article supports Posey's (2014) assertion that the Internet helped the Oromo diaspora be noticed in their hostland and homeland communities during the 2015-2017 Oromo protest. Nonetheless, there is a need to understand how the diaspora's political involvement influenced the organization, resource mobilization, leadership, and communication tactic of the 2015-2017 Oromo protest.

This article differs from prior studies conducted on the role of the Ethiopian diaspora in the political affairs of their homeland in two ways. First, it scrutinizes how the new identity of the educated Oromo youth developed and is shared among the new generation of the Oromo diaspora. Then, the article discusses how the expansion of transnationalism and the Internet interacted with the new identity of educated Oromo youth in Ethiopia and the diaspora to organize a popular protest against the Ethiopian government. This article contends that the solidification of ethnic identity supported the emergence of a vibrant and united Oromo diaspora committed to supporting the 2015-2017 protest in their homeland. It also reflects the Ethiopian government's attempt to control diasporic mobilization by deploying technological and political incentives and coercive mechanisms.

The empirical basis of this article is primary data collected through in-depth interviews and focus group discussions during extensive fieldwork conducted from 03 November 2020 to 31 August 2021. Key informants were purposively selected based on their active role in the 2015 Oromo protest as leaders, activists, bloggers,

academics, journalists, diaspora activists, and party cadres. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with informants to obtain primary data about the organizational and leadership structure of the Oromo protest. Sub-questions were asked regarding key diaspora actors, their role, and their influence in movement framing and communication strategies. Focus group discussions were held with individuals from different walks of life (i.e., farmers, civil servants, traders, university students, teachers, religious leaders, casual workers, and unemployed youth) who participated in the protest. Furthermore, secondary data were collected by reviewing relevant literature, media reports, and social media posts. The ethical precautions considered during the data collection and write-up of the article includes gaining informed consent and granting anonymity to informants through pseudonyms.

The article followed a case study approach to understand the involvement of the Ethiopian diaspora in shaping the movement agenda, leadership structure, and sharing of political messages via available communication platforms (Tracy, 2020). The case study approach was chosen because it helps to analyze how the solidification of ethnic identity guides the role and influence of the diaspora on the diffusion and scale shift of the Oromo protest (Tracy, 2020). In addition, the analysis of this article is informed by the conceptual framework that characterizes the Oromo protest as a networked transnational social movement.

This article is structured into four sections. The first section provides an overview of the Ethiopian diaspora, particularly the ethnic Oromo diaspora. Section two discusses the concepts of identity, territoriality, transnationalism, and diasporic social mobilization that shape the understanding of the African diaspora's role and influence in their homeland's political affairs. These concepts help examine the strategies of the ethnic Oromo diaspora in coalition-building with the local youth clandestine group and their collaboration with the ethnic Amhara diaspora to challenge the regime in their homeland. Section three discusses the role and influence of the diaspora on the diffusion and scale shift of the Oromo protest and its transformation into a transnational human rights agenda. The last part highlights the major findings of the article as it suggests possible approaches to encourage and accommodate the role and desire of the refugee African diaspora in the political affairs of their homeland based on Ethiopia’s experiences.

Setting the scene

Overview of the Ethiopian diaspora

The Ethiopian global diaspora community is estimated to be more than three million, with the highest reported number in the United States of America (IOM, 2018). The Ethiopian diaspora emerged significantly in the post-1970s due to the political turmoil following the student movement that led to the overthrowing of the imperial monarchy in 1974 (Posey, 2016). According to Lyons (2007), the influx of the Ethiopian diaspora to different parts of the world can be categorized into four phases, which this article borrowed to define the Ethiopian diaspora groups. The first phase was the migration of educated elites before the 1974 student movement. The imperial time, 1930–1974, was when only a few students of high academic excellence got a scholarship opportunity sponsored by the government to equip them with knowledge bases to contribute to the mission of "modernizing" the country (Meron, 2018). The second wave of migration occurred between 1974-1982 when people escaped the killings, torture, and imprisonment of the Derg regime, a military junta that replaced the monarchy. The military Derg regime is renowned for its strict restriction on international migration. From 1982 to 1991, the third migration phase was primarily part of family reunification programs to the west (Lyons, 2007; IOM, 2018). The last phase occurred right after the Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) took power in 1991, toppling down the Derg. This period produced a new generation of the Ethiopian diaspora who fled ethnic violence and oppression (Lyons, 2007; Beyene, 2015). Also, many Ethiopians gained permanent residency permits in the United States through the diversity visa program that aims to promote diversity in the United States immigration system since 1995 (Posey, 2014; IOM, 2018). The empirical bases of this article focus on the fourth generation of the Ethiopian diaspora. Generally, this article categorizes the Ethiopian diaspora into two groups: the old generation and the new generation of the diaspora. The old generation embraced those who left the country during the Imperial and Derg era (pre1974-1991) to the United States of America and Western Europe. The new generations of the diaspora are those who fled the country during the EPRDF (post-1991), notably to places like Australia, New Zealand and South Africa. Relatively young and barely literate Ethiopians chose the Middle East as their destination (Meron, 2018). Nonetheless, because the new generation of the Ethiopian diaspora fled repression under the EPRDF regime, they considered themselves key actors in their homeland's current political process (Asafa 2020).

Recent studies indicated that the Ethiopian diaspora in the United States is the most vocal and active in homeland politics (IOM, 2018). It possesses

significant human capital, income, wealth, and feelings of pride for being Ethiopian through constructing vibrant social institutions, i.e., Churches, Mosques, community centers, and ethnic restaurants that afford them visibility in host communities (Dereje, 2012). However, the diaspora's identification with their homeland is surrounded by cultural frustration in places of settlement, lack of trust in the political regime in the homeland, and politicized ethnic grouping among themselves (Habecker, 2011; IOM, 2018). As a result, the term "Ethiopian" has a complex relationship with ethnic identity as some people in the diaspora and inside the country claim that it refers only to Semitic-speaking groups – the "Habesha". Thus, the Ethiopian identity becomes more contested, specifically for other large populations like Oromo and Somali (Thompson, 2018).

The introduction of ethnic federalism in 1991 appeared to affect the sense of identity and relationship between over 80 ethnic groups in Ethiopia. The ethnic federal structure was introduced to provide a concrete answer to longstanding ethnic fragmentation through the exercise of self-determination up to secession (Branch & Mampilly, 2015). However, the ethnic federalism structure only served the interests of the party-state to control national power rather than serving citizens' interests for self-rule and autonomy. Hence, being an Ethiopian and a member of a particular ethnic group in diaspora and homeland appeared to be challenged by the very essence of federalism. According to Thompson (2018), the Ethiopian federal structure did not encourage the sustenance of the Ethiopian identity in the diaspora. It instead created "overlaps and disjunctures between Ethiopian identity and ethno-national categories" (Thompson, 2018, p. 16). Nonetheless, the Ethiopian diaspora continues to challenge the receiving countries' culture by preserving their ethnic identity and sense of homeland (Hafkin, 2006; Habecker, 2011).

The Oromo ethnic diaspora

The Oromo diaspora community shares the political history of other ethnic groups of the Ethiopian diaspora, who fled persecution under different regimes and fall in the broader new and old generation category. The early 1970s to 1990s saw the formation of Oromo diaspora associations valorizing the Oromo ethnic identity as local organizations were banned from operating in Ethiopia. For example, the Macha-Tulama self-help association was the first organization that campaigned for national recognition and equal participation of the Oromo people in state affairs until the Imperial state banned its activities (Mekuria, 2002; Asafa, 2020). The repression against the Macha-Tulama association resulted in an increased outflow

of Oromo refugees to the diaspora (Mekuria, 2002; Asafa, 2020). As a result, the association established its equivalent organization in different parts of the world.

The Derg regime's "Red Terror" campaign produced a significant number of ethnic Oromo refugees in the western world, emboldening the Oromo ethnic diaspora identity (Mekuria, 2002; Asafa, 2020). The old Oromo diaspora members claimed that the Oromo people were denied equal participation in the Ethiopian social, economic and political structure. Therefore, they disassociated themselves from other Ethiopian diasporas as they continued campaigning for a free Oromia state (Asafa, 2020). The new generation of Oromo diaspora formed after the EPRDF regime took power depicts a more politicized ethnic identity than the old Oromo diaspora cohorts (Thompson, 2018). Like other Ethiopian diaspora communities in the Middle East, Oromo migrants are characterized by their irregular status, relatively young age and low-skilled workers (Meron, 2018; IOM, 2018).

The Oromo diaspora in the United States of America established diasporic charity, academic, and movement organizations to facilitate their engagement in homeland political affairs. One such initiative of the Oromo diaspora includes establishing the Oromo Relief Association of North America (ORANA), which has been helping Oromo refugees resettle in the USA since 1981. The prominent international organization, the Oromo Studies Association (OSA), was established in North America to promote and foster scholarly studies in all fields of the Oromo people. The Oromo Redeemer Church and Tawfiq Islamic Center in Minneapolis help keep the connectedness of the Oromo diaspora with their homeland (Posey, 2014). The geographic concentration of the Oromo diaspora in Minnesota, USA, has facilitated ethnic networking and eased political mobilization. The Oromo community in Minnesota is one of the largest Oromo settlements outside of Ethiopia, which the diaspora affectionately calls 'Little Oromia'. Two annual events bring Oromos in North America together: the Oromo Sports Federation in North America (OSFANA) and Irreecha, the Oromo thanksgiving festival (Asebe & Meron, 2014). The host communities in Minnesota have recognized the one-week sports event in late July as "Oromo Week" since 2011. Every September, Oromos in North America gather in Minneapolis, Seattle and the San Francisco Bay area to celebrate Irreecha and interact with one another as they assert their membership in their community of origin (Asebe & Meron, 2014).

A brief note about the genesis of the Oromo protest – 2015-2017

The Ethiopian federal constitution established nine regional states along major ethnic groups and two city administrations, i.e., Addis Ababa and Dire Dawa.

Although the two city administrations are not ethnically defined, their structure prompted ownership contestation among the major ethnic groups like the Oromo, Somali and Amhara. Dire Dawa is contested by the Oromos and Somalis, while the Oromos and Amharas claim Addis Ababa. More so, the federal structure appeared to instigate border conflicts in and around Oromia that shares boundaries with almost every region except Tigray. In 2014, April 20, the Ethiopian government announced the Addis Ababa and Surrounding Oromia Special Zone Integrated Development Plan to expand the capital city onto Oromia special zone towns by 1.5 million hectares. The controversial master plan caused prolonged deadly protests in various towns of the Oromia region.

The first coordinated protest against the master plan was in 2014, April 30, organized by Ambo university students that spread to other Oromia towns. The Oromo diaspora used the master plan saga to show allegiance to local activists by introducing the #OromoProtests on Twitter and Facebook right after the Ambo protest on 01 May 2014. 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 these protests was "No to *Finfinne* Master Plan", with a hashtag on social media. The protest gradually embraced the demand for democracy, fair wealth distribution, and federal political power. During the Ginchi protest on 12 November 2015, the diaspora community agreed with local movement leaders to appropriate the Internet as a digital communication sphere and declare a "Schooling after Freedom" protest campaign to voice dissent against the regime. After the Ginchi protest, youth across Oromia continued to demonstrate, instigating the closure of schools across Oromia region for months.

Jawar Mohammed, a diaspora member, based in Minneapolis, United States and the founding director of Oromia Media Network, is known for his Oromo activism role. In May 2016, Jawar urged the government to postpone the annual school-leaving examination. He argued that the Oromo students protesting for months needed additional time to prepare themselves for the national exam. Days later, Jawar disclosed that the national exam was leaked over social media, and copies of exams started circulating on Facebook, forcing the government to postpone the exam, blaming the situation on the diaspora activists. The protests continued with prolonged roadblocks, repeated market boycotts, and economic and social insecurities that forced the public to question the government's capability to provide security and social services.

The Oromo protest escalated, garnering support rallies in the Amhara region. The first support rally in Gondar set the tone of collaboration between the

two ethnic groups as the crowd chanted, "The blood flowing in Oromia is our blood too". The rally messages in Amhara were against the decades-long narratives and historical tensions between the two ethnic groups. As the Oromo and Amhara collaboration strengthened, the Oromo diaspora coordinated the Grand Oromia Rally throughout Oromia and major western cities such as Minnesota, Toronto, Melbourne, London, and Geneva, attracting significant Ethiopian diaspora communities.

The 2016 Irrecha (Oromo thanksgiving festival) stampede in Bishoftu was an event that changed the trajectory of the Oromo protest. The government admitted that 52 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, flaring up widespread anger throughout Ethiopia and the diaspora (BBC, 2016). The diaspora launched the #Irreecha2016 social media campaign, transforming the protest into a revolution, ostensibly reducing protesters' fear of brutal crackdowns. Protest demonstrations against the Irreecha stamped in Oromia and Amhara regions turned violent as the diaspora activists called for the international community to intervene (Habtamu, 2017).

On 09 October 2016, the government openly declared a state of emergency, acknowledging that the situation was endangering the lives and properties of citizens in the country. Various events occurred during the state of emergency that contributed to the diffusion and upward-scale shift of the protest. Market boycotts, sit-ins and lockdowns continued in Oromia and Amhara. Oromo mothers held a women-only rally in East Harerge, Aweday, to uphold the protest spirit by systematically reducing police crackdowns. The government continued to arrest thousands of people in the Oromia, Amhara and Sothern nations. The protest intensified online, exposing repeated hackings of government-owned websites such as the Ministry of Defense and different universities' websites.

Conversely, the Ethiopian government hired hacking firms to spy on selected diaspora members, journalists and media organizations. The prolonged state of emergencies and corrective actions to respond to the protesters' demand, including releasing political prisoners, did not help curb the mass protests in Oromia and Amhara regional states. As a result, on 16 February 2018, Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn announced his resignation to help ensure peace and democracy in Ethiopia. The protest culminated in 2018 when the political change was promised by the incumbent Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, who has embarked on political liberalization, opening the door for the democratic transition.

Conceptual frameworks: Ethnic identity, territoriality, and diasporic social mobilization

The homeland is perceived as a country of origin from which the diaspora acquired social and cultural attributes that shaped their collective identity (Zeleza, 2010; Wald, 2008). The African diaspora communities do not detach themselves from their homeland's political, social, and economic happenings. Instead, they express support and compassion that have been translated into action to better their country of origin (Stacey, 2019). According to Baron (2009), the diaspora often reflects dual loyalty to their origin and host communities that crosses class, religion, ethnic and political lines. The dual loyalty characteristics of the diasporas made them dominant actors in transnational politics mediated by the Internet (Castells, 2013). However, it is not all diaspora communities that are actively participating in their homeland affairs. According to Stacey (2019), maintaining connectedness with the homeland requires the development of strong identification with the historical memory of the homeland. Connectedness to the homeland among the African diaspora in general and the Ethiopian diaspora, in particular, is reflected by upholding family ties, religious, ethnic, and community associations, and charities to help improve the political, social, cultural, and economic conditions (Kassahun, 2018; Dereje, 2012). This article utilized the concepts of ethnic identity, territory, and transnationalism to understand the old and new Ethiopian diaspora narratives of home and their active participation in the political affairs of their country of origin.

Ethnic identity in the diasporic space

This article espouses Wald's assertion that the diaspora's political involvement in their country of origin depends on the strength of one's ethnic identity that supports "the development of a political consciousness devoted to homeland concerns" (Wald, 2008, p. 274). Thus, it is essential to understand the effect of frequent communication with the homeland and cultural discrimination in host communities towards solidifying ethnic identity among the African diaspora communities (Marable & Mullings, 2009). By contrast, the young generation of the African diaspora exhibits highly politicized ethnic identity as socio-cultural differences hinders their fast assimilation into host countries (Beaugrand & Geisser, 2016; Wald, 2008). The old cohorts of the diaspora are significantly detached from their homeland through intermarriage and prolonged social interaction with host communities, with some of them still active in homeland politics. However, the old and new diaspora contributes a fair share to the political affairs of their homeland. Generally, the African diaspora communities are

involved in the politics of their homeland to assert their identity in the host nations by claiming shared migration history amongst themselves and diaspora membership within receiving communities (Beaugrand & Geisser, 2016; Wald, 2008). As such, shared identity building is all about establishing connections between different incidences located at different points of time and space relevant to one's experience. This experience is intertwined into the broader homeland narrative and understanding of life in their host countries (Zeleza, 2010). Given Ethiopia's ethnic division and communal conflict, the broader homeland narrative diverges among different diaspora ethnic groups. Thus, reflecting on the diasporic contestation and collaboration among historically contending ethnic groups, i.e., the Oromos and the Amhara, over the narratives of 'home' helps to understand the deployment of ethnic identity among Oromo diaspora communities in mobilizing movement resources for the 2015 Oromo protest.

Territoriality

The narrative of the home is directly linked to what Oleinikova and Bayeh (2020) called territorial mentality, which may lead to the rise of populism. For Maier (2016, p. 3), territoriality is about the demarcation and "control of bordered political space" that serves to develop identity and a sense of belongingness. Furthermore, Maier (2016) suggested the need to examine the concepts of bordered territorial space further to understand the role of the diaspora in shaping political developments in their homeland. Therefore, this article probes the notion and practice of ethnic federalism in Ethiopia as a crucial framework for understanding the diaspora's role in their homeland's political affairs. It does so by scrutinizing ethnic federalism as a way of establishing territories based on societies' ethnic and cultural identities (Maier, 2016; Oleinikova & Bayeh, 2020). Territoriality in the African context defines ethnic identity, considering cultural boundaries and a shared history (Maier, 2016). Although the African reality is similar to the Ethiopian diaspora case, ethnic federalism aggravated fragmentation among the Ethiopian diaspora community.

Consequently, the domination of the Tigray Peoples' Liberation Front (TPLF) and its rule created popular discontent with the federal system in the country. However, the Amhara and Tigray ethnic diaspora considers the Ethiopian state its homeland, while the Oromo diaspora groups call Oromia, a regional state within Ethiopia, their homeland. According to Sorenson (1996), the Oromo diaspora used to identify themselves as Ethiopians, and their political activism was not based on ethnic identity until the introduction of ethnic federalism in Ethiopia. The Oromo diaspora rejected its Ethiopian identity "through the emotional focus

provided by the project of creating an independent state" (Sorenson, 1996, p. 465). Conversely, Martha (2002) argued that the Oromo identity space in the diaspora is not homogenous, as it entertains diversified claims and expressions about Oromo nationalism and the independent Oromo state. Such varied perception of home and territoriality is not a distinct phenomenon with the Ethiopian diaspora as it conforms to the notion of tribal African territories (Marable & Mullings, 2009; Maier, 2016; Oleinikova & Bayeh, 2020). Territoriality continues to accommodate "identity space" and "decision space" for citizens within the border of a nation-state (Oleinikova & Bayeh, 2020, p. 9). From the African diaspora perspective, identity space embraces the decision of the diaspora members to protect their initial values and culture as they strive to build a new identity in their host communities (Oleinikova & Bayeh, 2020; Stacey, 2019). Thus, being African diaspora entails emotional attachment to the socio-political affairs of respective countries of origin despite the physical distance from homeland territory and the expected assimilation (Stacey, 2019).

This article avows that the transboundary political engagement of the African diaspora cannot be fully understood within a bounded space of the territoriality discourse (Oleinikova & Bayeh, 2020; Maier, 2016). In the case of Ethiopia, for example, the ethnic allegiance of its diaspora community is not motivated by political representation and participation in the geographic spaces of its country of origin. It is instead by common identity and belongingness, which Maier (2016) defined as an identity space. According to Kassaw (2017), regardless of ethnic background, the Ethiopian diaspora adopted to their hostland as they maintain regular contact with their community of origin. They also portray sentimental importance in the political affairs of their homeland through personal and extended engagement in advocating for democracy and human rights.

Nonetheless, the diaspora has been challenged by ethnic division and a lack of trust that emanated from the introduction of ethnic-based federalism in Ethiopia. Kassaw (2017) argued that the influence of ethnic federalism on the Ethiopian diaspora is reflected in the structure of spaces and institutions such as party politics, Churches, social gatherings, arts and sports festivals. Building on the argument made by Kassaw (2017) this article claims that the solidification of ethnic identities guides diasporic political behavior that contributes to the deterritorialization of nation-states taking the Ethiopian experiences into the spotlight. The article further debates that the African diaspora expanded its reach to its homeland, supported by the growing global capitalism and social media. Hence, the expanding decision space between the homeland and host nations depleted the importance of territoriality and sovereignty (Bernal, 2014; Oleinikova

& Bayeh, 2020). While supporting the assertion that the shared identity between the diaspora and people within the territory of a nation-state influences the political space, the article further highlights Bernal's (2014) claim that the diaspora and the Internet transformed the way nation-states are sustained. The emergence and fast expansion of the Internet transformed the tactics of the African diaspora in subverting and supporting state power in their home countries (Bernal, 2014). Thus, the article takes the Internet as a decision space for the Ethiopian diaspora to mobilize their homeland in real time and space by disregarding physical territories and emboldening their ethnic identity.

Results and Discussion

The politicized ethnic identity and the educated Oromo youth in places of origin and settlement

The diffusion and scale shift of the 2015-2017 Oromo protest resulted from politicized identity surrounded by three factors in play. First, the educated Oromo youth, who call themselves the *Qubee* (alphabet) generation, established a clandestine youth organization to mobilize the Oromo people against repression. Second, the communication opportunities with the expansion of the Internet and globalization facilitated the linkage between the educated Oromo youth in Ethiopia and the new generation of the Oromo diaspora, who claimed to be part of the *Qubee* generation. Third, the *Qubee* generation reframed the Oromo protest agenda from establishing "Free Oromia" seceding from Ethiopia to independent Oromia within the multicultural Ethiopian state that garnered the support of other ethnic groups, specifically the Amhara.

The historical background analysis of the Oromo resistance depicted the emboldened Oromo identity, *Oromumma* - Oromoness, which started to revive during the early 1970s. Oromumma influenced members' self-consciousness about their common values and shared goals. Therefore, 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. According to the study informants, since the 1960s, Oromos continued to argue that they were denied formal education and the right to learn in their mother tongue. This claim is supported by Asafa (2020) that because of a lack of education in their native language, the Oromo youth had poor access to economic opportunities and political participation in State affairs. During the 1970s student movement, Oromos sacrificed their young leaders under the 'land to the tiller' national movement agenda. 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. Thus, the demand for land rights and freedom from forceful eviction remained on the Oromos movement agenda. It can be argued that land, language and political leadership were the main agendas of the Oromo movement since 1960. Hence, this article contends that the 2015 Oromo protest was the continuation of the popular anger that led to the establishment of the Macha-Tulama Self-help Association and the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) in the 1960s.

Study informants argued that the Oromo's demand for language rights became central to Ethiopian politics when the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) came to power. Similarly, Smith (2008) asserted that in 1991 the Transitional Government of Ethiopia declared primary education through five major ethnic languages, including the Oromo language, aiming to address demands for self-government. According to informants, the new generation of Oromo youth taught in their mother tongue developed the confidence to articulate their Oromo culture, identity, and political views. Young people who reached the university level through the new education policy taught in the Oromo language in their primary schools call themselves the *Qubee* generation to symbolize their ability to read and write the Oromo language in the Latin alphabet. "Teresa" (a youth leader from Sebeta) asserted that the *Qubee* generation's character embraces young educated Oromos who were involved in the 2015 protest. Kelbecha, an Oromo activist from Addis Ababa, supports Teresa's claim and further asserted:

> Many of us within the movement, in the diaspora and Ethiopia-from Dembi Dollo to Tulu Bollo, are the *Qubee* generation with the same experience and objective to change the fate of the Oromo people.

For the *Qubee* generation, it is a must to read and write Afan Oromo to start an open discussion about the Oromo quest. Unlike other student groups, the *Qubee* generation has a strong ethnic identity bonding their social circles, which often made it more difficult for the regime cadres to infiltrate them. Informants claimed that for a long time, the Amhara ethnic ruling class denied advancing the Oromo language and culture to justify their focus on language. However, this article argues that access to education in native languages in Ethiopia served to politicize ethnic identity and instigate longstanding communities' grievances. Oromo protest

leaders emphasized that the major demands of the 2015 Oromo protest include an equal share of national resources and meaningful participation of the Oromo people in Ethiopian state affairs anchored by the demand for language rights. The demand for language rights ever since the start of the Oromo movement in the 1960s was a profound move to symbolize the "one-ness" of geographically dispersed Oromo people embedded within the shared value of *Orommuummaa*-Oromoness. Informants of this article believed that positioning the Oromo language at the center of the notion of *Orommuumma* ('Oromoness') enabled Oromos to retrieve their shared culture and serve as a transnational movement tactic to valorize the Oromo collective identity. For instance, in Minneapolis, using the Oromo language to provide resident services in city offices and departments generated new social experiences and a sense of recognition among the Oromo diaspora. As a result, Oromo diaspora often claim that their cultural and language rights are more recognized in Minnesota than in Oromia. "Tulu" (diaspora activist from Minneapolis) said:

> The Oromo community in Minneapolis was thrilled to learn that the Technical College in the city started teaching Afaan Oromo. Getting basic services in your language is one thing; witnessing *Qubee* taught in a well-known American university was something else.

The Oromo diaspora rhetorically claims Minnesota as *Mene Soda* (the land of the inlaws) to articulate that they feel welcomed and well-integrated into their settlement community. They also argue that the recognition of Oromo culture and language in Minnesota, where a sizable number of Oromo immigrants settled, has emboldened the sense of relative deprivation of Oromo's equal recognition in Ethiopia.

The exclusion of Oromos from the country's social, economic and political resources could not be solved only by providing equal education opportunities. Since the official state languages in Ethiopia were only Amharic and English until recently, the Oromo youth could not compete for economic opportunities outside their region. This reduces their opportunity to access national jobs and social services, igniting the need to legitimize Afan Oromo as a federal working language. At the same time, projecting Afan Oromo as a symbol of Oromoness is a strategy to valorize the language within the broader Ethiopian society. The demands for language rights during the 2015 Oromo protest can also be understood through the constructionist perspective, where by collective identities help shape

transnational ethnic movements and inspire trust that lasts beyond the protest moment and across borders.

The Oromo diaspora shares the identity and experience of its homeland community because they have not lost contact with the everyday struggle of their people under tyranny. Nonetheless, there is a visible difference between the old and new generations of the ethnic Oromo diaspora. The old diaspora generation who left during the Imperial and Derg era supported the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF), an armed group that aspired for "Free Oromia," an independent state seceding from Ethiopia (interview with Oromo diaspora returnee, Disassa, 03 November 2020). The new cohort of the Oromo diaspora that fled the country during the EPRDF era is dominated by the *Qubee* generation identity determined to denounce the Oromo diaspora's half-a-century-old political approach.

Informants highlighted a blog article written in July 2009 by Jawar Mohammed, criticizing the OLF as 'a failed organization' to deliver on its promises laying a stepping stone to re-organize the ethnic Oromo diasporic movement (Jawar, 2009). According to informants, Jawar possesses expertise in social movements and fundraising to represent the movement online and offline. Jawar graduated with a political science degree from Stanford University and a master's degree in human rights at Colombia University (BBC, 2020). He is tech savvy, dubbed the "keyboard warrior"; Jawar called his laptop a "weapon." On his return to Addis Ababa following the government change in August 2018, Jawar gave the laptop he used for activism to the then-Oromia regional President, Lema Megersa. As he handed over the laptop, Jawar delivered an iconic speech that symbolized resistance and acknowledgement of the collaboration between the *Qubee* generation in the diaspora and Ethiopia to topple the TPLF government in February 2018. He asserted that the computer goes to the Ambo youth who paid untold sacrifices during the protest.

In his blog, Jawar urged the new generation to free the Oromo people from dependency on exiled politics, a hostage organization, and incompetent leadership. The old generation was appalled to see a young Oromo insulting the OLF, while diaspora members from other ethnic backgrounds applauded Jawar for challenging OLF's secessionist stance (interview with diaspora members, Hawi, 16 July 2021; & Kelbecha, 16 February 2021). After four years, in 2013, during an interview with Aljazeera (2013), Jawar made a crucial statement, "I am an Oromo first… Ethiopia is imposed on me…, which triggered the "Oromo First" campaign that discussed Oromo identity online and in several town hall meetings in settlement countries (Posey, 2014). Moreover, Jawar's experience resonated with his homeland counterparts. Reflections from focus group discussants in Sebeta, Laga

Tafo and Sululta towns indicated that local Oromos were also aware of the "Oromo First" debate. Geda (a farmer from Sululta) said:

> I am an Oromo. No one can change this fact; even if I want to change my Oromo identity, I cannot. Citizenship comes after ethnic identity.

Jawar's "I am an Oromo first" statement implied his loyalty to his Oromo ethnic identity before recognizing his Ethiopian national identity. The old Oromo diaspora started cheering Jawar for emboldening his ethnic Oromo identity as the broader Ethiopian diaspora groups confronted him for being a tribalist. Jawar was seen as an embodiment of the *Qubee* generation's identity and political stance in the Oromo diaspora (interview with Oromo protest leaders, Waqo, 29 December 2020; and Firaol, , 10 May 2021).The diaspora groups with shared ethnic identities might not agree on the same political agenda unless they develop distinct group attachments and symbolic relationships. Hence, Jawar's reflection and acceptance in his country of origin and settlement show that solidified ethnic identity can cultivate transnational political domination. According to informants, the continued debate on the "I am Oromo first…" notion helped the Oromo diaspora reposition itself in homeland political affairs and redirect their allegiance to the 2015 movement framings of the new generation, which is self-governance within multiethnic Ethiopia. Thus, it can be argued that politicized ethnic identity does not necessarily contribute negatively to the diaspora's connection with their homeland. Instead, it supports the development of shared interest to be involved in the political affairs of their respective countries of origin. Focus group discussants repeatedly mentioned that the objective of the 2015 Oromo protest was to ensure self-determination. However, the notion of self-determination seems to be contested among key movement actors. Informants from the diaspora and relatively old-aged claimed that the movement failed to achieve its primary objective of establishing an independent democratic Oromia state. In contrast, local digital activists and young diaspora members asserted that the movement aimed to reestablish a democratic Oromia state within the multicultural national context. Nonetheless, most respondents highlighted the unmet demand for recognizing Afan Oromo as an official language to argue that the Oromo protest has not yet achieved its objectives. The right to language is a critical homogenizing factor in self-determination, so equal political participation and social and cultural developments are also core aspects of self-determination. For this reason, the 2015 Oromo protest articulated its agendas as land, language and leadership.

Empirical data shows that there has been a 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 claimants' leadership quality. According to informants, the Oromo diaspora developed common characteristics that resulted from generational change and a belief in the Oromo movement agenda to serve their homeland regardless of citizenship and non-citizen residency. As “Disassa", (a diaspora returnee interviewed in Addis Ababa) asserted:

> The diaspora considers itself a legitimate member of the Oromo community. They have never disassociated themselves from what is happening at home. Once freedom and justice are restored, they dream of returning to their homeland, Oromia.

"Doja" (a diaspora activist from Holland) argued that many diaspora activists during the 2015 Oromo protest were academics and were nationals or permanent residency permit holders in their host countries. Most of them claimed they led a decent life in their host countries, and their involvement in the protest was to emancipate Oromo compatriots under repression. Therefore, the Oromo diaspora took it on themselves to become political assets to their homeland without abandoning political loyalty to their host communities.

Even though the issue of dual loyalty among diaspora communities has been discussed in various literature (Wald, 2008; Baron, 2009), the Ethiopian experience depicted that the African ethnic diaspora can be loyal to the hostland, but they become near their homeland the more they strengthen their ties to their ethnic community and stay tuned to local developments. Most importantly, the influence of the diaspora in organizing the 2015 Oromo protest confirms that it is not only the Internet and transnationalism that challenge the territoriality of African nation-states. The politicized ethnic identity of the diaspora communities plays a crucial role in maintaining a sense of belongingness and active participation in their homeland affairs.

Territoriality and internationalization of the 2015 Oromo protest

The notion of territoriality helps to understand the collective action of the Oromo diaspora to participate in the 2015 Oromo protest without being hindered by the geographic demarcation of borders. This article argues that the Oromo diaspora, who are emotionally and culturally connected to their homeland, saw four pathways to deplete the geopolitical territoriality to participate in the struggle for democratization and human rights protection in Ethiopia. The first pathway was collaborating with Qeerroo (homeland youth movement leaders) to intensify the Oromo movement. Second, they designed strategic engagement with other ethnic diaspora groups, specifically the Amhara, who felt oppressed by the minority

Tigray Peoples' Liberation Front (TPLF). The Oromo diaspora worked with the Amhara diaspora activists to embolden Amhara nationalism and its implication in broader Ethiopian politics. There were meetings and debates on various online and offline media platforms between the leading Amhara activists, Achamyeleh Tamiru, Muluken Tesfaw, and Jawar Mohammed, on issues related to collective identity, ethnic federalism and democracy. The third track to challenge the Ethiopian state was deploying the Internet as a movement resource to facilitate safe communication and provide the protest with a nonspatial political resistance site. The fourth approach was combining the transnational political norm with the local movement agenda to attract the support of international media and human rights organizations to the plight of the Oromo people. The next section of this article reflects on the Oromo diaspora pathways in challenging the territorial integrity of the Ethiopian state.

Coordination with Qeerroo

In April 2011, representatives from various universities managed to join the Addis Ababa conference to establish a clandestine youth movement organization called Qeerroo Bilisummaa Oromoo (QBO),[†]Qeerroo is the Qubee generation's formal movement organization, fully operating within Ethiopia. Since its establishment, the QBO has been known for organizing protest rallies and university hunger strikes. Informants argued that the diaspora-based interest groups and the OLF supported the establishment of the Qerroo financially to launch its initiatives. Informants who claimed to attend the founding meeting in 2011 asserted that member university students contributed startup money from their pockets. The contestation about how the QBO was established extends to the leadership and organization of the 2015 Oromo protest. "Gobu" (Qeerroo leader from Alem Gena) claimed that Qeerroo requested financial support from the diaspora to mobilize the mass, help the families of the imprisoned and deceased comrades and care for the wounded during protests. Others argued that the diaspora got information about the existence of the Qeerroo structure and found it essential to safely communicate with them when Qeerroo's online presence attracted the mass. "Chali" (female Qeerroo leader from Sebeta) said, "people who did not understand how the 2015 Oromo protest was organized tend to give credit to the diaspora. We were the ones". Chali's assertion is shared by "Nafiyad" (a founding member of QBO from Addis Ababa). He said local activists confronted death to campaign for the Oromo

[†] QBO is widely known as *Qeerroo* (Oromo word for unmarried young people).

cause through social media and on the ground. According to Nafiyad, the people who provided the leadership under QBO are still in the country, and "their identities are kept secret for security reasons". Conversely, whoever initiated the communication, the fact on the ground shows a strong relationship between the diaspora activists and local Qeerroo leaders guided by mutual trust and shared Qubee generation identity.

The announcement of the master plan on 20 April 2014 provided both Qeerroo and the diaspora with a common reason to join hands in framing a stronger movement. They held continuous online conferences via Skype, Viber, and WhatsApp to mutually agree on the framings of the objectives, agendas, and messages that reflected the core demands of the Oromo people ever since the 1970s (interview with a protest leader from Sululta Firaol, 10 May 2021). The conveners agreed that the master plan appeals to the longstanding interests and symbolizes the inequalities and marginalization of the Oromos from State affairs. Therefore, freedom from eviction, meaningful political representation and participation, and language rights were framed as movement agendas. The 2015 Oromo protests' leadership structure involved four groups in its segmented leadership structure: Qeerroo, the diaspora, local digital activists, and Team Lemma, Soreti (a housewife from Sabata) said:

> 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 those young students who defended our rights killed by the *Liyu* police (special police) in front of their parents. That is the reason we went out on the roads.

Qeerroo members travelled to areas where Internet and Satellite television were not reaching to introduce the movement's objectives and organize the grassroots for the upcoming protest rallies. They post written notices and distribute leaflets in marketplaces about the injustice, killings and mass arrests of the Oromo youth to encourage uprisings.

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.

Data from focus group discussions show that offline protesters' trust in online sources of information eases Qeerros' mobilization work. In this regard, the Internet helped the offline protesters to build trust in the movement's agenda and action as it created a means to ensure that Oromos in different parts of the world were also standing with them. The regard people on the ground had for the

diaspora movement actors appeared to be associated with deploying the Internet as a safe communication platform and the message that comes through it. "Bikila" (a bank security guard) participated in a focus group discussion organized in Burayu. He said:

> When Qeerroo came to tell us about demonstrations, we first asked, '*Biyya alaa warri jiran maal jedhan*?'… 'What does the diaspora say?' and some people asked, 'what is on Facebook?' Then they will tell us what is on social media.

Bikila's assertion magnifies the role of *Qeerroo* leaders, with some degree of better socio-economic background, played as conduits to facilitate information flow between the diaspora-urban digital activists and the local people. Thus, in the case of the 2015 Oromo protest, the Internet narrowed the distance between diaspora-urban digital activists and rural protesters by facilitating the creation of a network of trust. The local digital activists were primarily urban dwellers with better Internet access and educational background. The urban-based local activists do not identify themselves with a specific name, but some informants of this article tend to associate their role with that of *Qeerroo*. Local activists were better positioned to recruit other educated urban-based Oromo elites to join the movement and mediate safe communication between *Qeerroo* and the diaspora. Team Lemma later joined the 2015 protest leadership and provided the movement with safety and protection from the government's crackdown (interview with a former OPDO cadre, Jaldesa,10 November 2020). Team Lemma was a faction of the Oromo Peoples' Liberation Front (OPDO) that championed political reform and challenged the structure of the EPRDF together with the split of the Amhara National Democratic Movement (ANDM), whose combined political agency contributed to the 2018 political change. Team Lemma worked with the diaspora and *Qeerroo,* as local digital activists served as intermediaries to facilitate safe communication between the team and other leadership groups. Team Lemma portrayed a bold relationship with ANDM through the *Xaanaan Keenyaa* (Tana is ours) campaign, in which Oromia sent its youth to help fight invasive water hyacinth on Lake Tana, in the capital of Amhara regional state. The OPDO-ANDM forum in Bahr Dar in November 2017 recommended that the Oromo language 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. More importantly, the OPDO-ANDM alliance on the language agenda highlighted the in-country collaboration between

the Oromo and Amhara, strengthening the relationship between the two ethnic diaspora groups.

Empirical data shows that the synchronization of local and diaspora initiatives as the protest ripened transformed the Oromo movement into a networked transnational social movement. Informants articulated that each leadership cluster (Qeerroo, the urban digital activists, the diaspora and Team Lemma) is responsible for mobilizing the mass and achieving the movement agenda. *Qeerroo* decides how and when to execute protest demonstrations and strikes independently or in consultation with other leadership member groups. The diaspora activists positioned themselves in the movement leadership organization by generating movement resources such as finance, social media engagement, diasporic media, easy access to international human rights organizations, and the influence of western countries where they reside.

Informants highlighted that any political decisions and statements were issued in *Qeerroo* name until the movement actors realized that the group name "*Qeerroo*" must get a boost through an identified leader to inspire the youth. Then, Jawar Mohammed arose as a defacto representative of the 2015 Oromo protest using social media sites and diasporic satellite television, Oromia Media Network (OMN), which he launched during the protest period. "Tulu" (diaspora activist from Minneapolis) claimed Jawar was already getting recognition by the *Qubee* generation in Ethiopia and the diaspora convincing the 2015 Oromo protest leadership to endorse him as the defacto "face of the movement." "Waqo" (a protest leader from Burayu) argued that safety issues justified Jawar's defacto leadership representation role, as he lives in the diaspora, not exposed to repression and attack by the homeland. However, the Ethiopian government charged Jawar with terrorism in February 2017.

Jawar Mohammed, who is often presented as the 2015 Oromo protest leader in various settings, has never claimed a leadership role; instead, Jawar emphasized that Qeerroo are the leaders of the movement, and he described himself as "the Oromo microphone". On the one hand, the government's recognition of Jawar's role as the representative of the Oromo protest indicates the strong relationship between the homeland and the diaspora capable of challenging political power. On the other, the government used Jawar's emergence as a defacto leader to delegitimize the popular demand, arguing that the protests were financed by "Ethiopia's historical enemies" who wanted to destabilize the country through "diaspora extremists" (Ethiopian Broadcasting Corporate, 2016).This article argues that the government's reaction to the diaspora's involvement in the 2015 Oromo

protest leadership highlighted the Oromo diaspora's role in their homeland's political affairs and their pivotal role as one of the key actors in the movement.

Collaboration with the Amhara ethnic diaspora

The Oromo movement actors carefully framed the objective of the 2015 Oromo protest to resonate with the Oromos' longstanding demands and get the support of other ethnic groups in-country and in the diaspora. "Doja" (a diaspora activist from Amsterdam) highlighted frequent collaboration meetings with influential Amhara diaspora members in the United States to align efforts towards joint movement agenda. "Chalachew" (Amhara activist in Bahir Dar, 30 September 2021) said that the objective of the 2015 Oromo protest to establish a multinational democratic government in Ethiopia resonated with the Amhara interest. The Oromo and Amhara major ethnic groups shared grievances about the unfair distribution of political power and national resources where the "minority of Tigrayans" dominated the federal government system. Thus, the flareup of the 2015 Oromo protest stimulated the Amhara protest, and the Amhara protest emboldened the objectives of the Oromo protest. The spread of the Oromo protest to the Amhara regional state facilitated collaboration between the Oromo and Amhara diaspora communities.

According to “Yitayew” (Amhara protest leader in Bahir Dar, 30 September 2021), in the first week of August 2016, Amhara activists called for a stay-at-home strike in major regional cities in remembrance of protesters killed earlier in the region, which saw support lockdown in Ambo town of Oromia region. During this time, the Oromo movement leaders called for the Grand Oromia Rally in Oromia and different parts of the world. Later, the Oromo and Amhara diaspora worked together, advocating for the declaration of support for the respect of human rights and inclusive governance in Ethiopia by the United States Congress. [‡]Hence, this article argues that the 2015 Oromo protest helped the diverse Ethiopian diaspora community deliberate on its differences and consolidate its interest in supporting the popular uprising in their homeland.

The Internet as a nonspatial political resistance site

The 2015 Oromo protest used the Internet as a nonbounded identity and decision space. As a result, the deployment of the Internet influenced the organization of the protest, which had a multilevel informal organizational structure with a segmented

[‡] H.RES.128. Supporting respect for human rights and encouraging inclusive governance in Ethiopia. 15 February 2 17. 115th Congress 1st Session.

character, providing an opportunity for the diaspora to distant mobilize the mass through the Internet and transform the protest into a transnational human rights agenda. Hence, this article contends that diasporic political behavior undermined the territoriality and sovereignty of the Ethiopian state by utilizing the Internet as a distinctive political site. Because of the Internet-mediated interaction between protest leadership clusters, it was difficult for the government to suppress the movement. As decisions regarding protest episodes and movement strategies were communicated often on the Internet, the 2015 Oromo protest challenged Ethiopia's traditional territorial integrity and sovereignty.“ Seyum” (local activist, Addis Ababa, 16 July 2021) asserted:

> I would say our office was on the Internet. It was a place to exchange information and coordinate with the movement leadership. We agreed to speed up the movement and protect ourselves by using the Internet from the outset.

The Internet provided the movement with a safe site of resistance and a communication platform. The Internet further allowed the Oromo diaspora to coordinate transnational collaboration with other Ethiopian diaspora ethnic groups, international media, and human rights organizations. The diaspora coordinated the movement's communication structure through the Internet and satellite television. They created Facebook pages, hashtags, and Twitter campaigns, building upon the experience from the "Oromo First" social media campaign. However, media content production about local protests was coordinated by *Qeerroo* and sent to the diaspora via the Internet. In order to keep the online platform safe, the diasporic satellite television, OMN, taught the masses how to access information online and securely communicate using Virtual Private Network (VPN) and Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) services. "Oliyad" (university lecturer from Nekemte) learned about digital safety from the diaspora media and shared the knowledge with his students. As a result of such knowledge sharing between the diaspora, *Qeerroo*, and local digital activists, citizens continued securely using the Internet. Focus group discussants who have smartphone access mentioned using VPNs and VoIP to penetrate slow connections and to surf the Internet anonymously.

Nonetheless, the government repeatedly shut down internet access, blocked opposition websites, and jammed diasporic satellite television stations, particularly OMN and Ethiopian Satellite Television. Moreover, informants mentioned random searches where police check personal data on individuals' smartphones. "Godana" (health officer from Alem Gena) remembers:

> My phone rang as I passed by two Agazi (federal police) officers. I used Hachalu's Maalan Jira as a ringtone; it was very famous then. They stopped me, confiscated my phone and took me to the police station" (Godana, Pers. Comm. December 29, 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 and became the soundtrack to the 2015 Oromo protest. According to "Yirga" (a government official from Ethiopian Broadcasting Authority), the government was convinced that the diaspora had launched online protest campaigns. Therefore, it initiated online surveillance against identified diaspora activists and prominent diaspora journalists by deploying software called "FinFisher" (Marquis-Boire et al., 2013). The FinSpy malware, which the Ethiopian government used to track individuals' passwords and Skype calls, was first identified in August 2012 by Rapid7, a cybersecurity solutions company. The malware used images of diaspora opposition political leaders to lure the diaspora who used the online platform for political communication. Some unsuspecting diaspora members failed in the malware trap. Those who hold United States citizenship took the case to the United States Court, accusing the Ethiopian government of intruding on their personal computers and accounts.

Convincing the Ethiopian diaspora that the EPRDF regime is committed to democracy and human rights has been challenging. The Ethiopian government launched an outreach program to engage the diaspora in conversation about the development achievements and the country's democratization process. As a result, the first draft of the Diaspora Policy was tabled for discussion and ratified in 2013, bestowing the diaspora with more liberal participation in the country's social, economic, and political affairs. The Diaspora policy promised to put mechanisms in place to encourage the diaspora's participation in national policy research and formulation. However, the diaspora could not fully develop trust in the offers of the Ethiopian government. Besides, diaspora members who opposed the government were deliberately barred from the policy benefits. The contestation and interaction between the homeland government and the diaspora community exposed the ambiguity of territory and sovereignty. For the diaspora, the Internet created a space to engage in homeland politics actively and assert their importance among their ethnic groups. For the Ethiopian government, the Internet allowed exercising its power of incentivizing and coercing transnational citizens through technological and political mechanisms regardless of their place of settlement.

Attracting the support of international media and human rights organizations

The 2015 Oromo protest highlighted transnational political activity as the continuous political participation of migrants in their country of origin and settlement (Dereje, 2012). Transnational political participation involves occasional mobilization activities toward political happenings in their homeland, explicitly lobbying for democratization and human rights (Dereje, 2012). For example, in December 2015, the Oromo community in Minnesota approached members of the US congress such as Betty McCollum, Keith Ellison and Tom Emmer regarding the harsh crackdown against the Oromo protesters in their homeland. In response, the members of congress urged the US government to investigate human rights violations in Ethiopia and take appropriate action. The US influence on the Ethiopian government to lift the prolonged state of emergency was also reflected during the visit of Secretary of State Rex Tillerson in March 2018. Although different movement episodes transformed the 2015 Oromo protest into a transnational movement, the protest reached another level during the 2016 Rio Olympics. Feyisa Lilesa, an Olympic marathon runner who won a silver medal on 21 August 2016, crossed his arms above his head, symbolizing support for the Oromo movement. Diaspora Oromo activists compared Feyisa'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. "Tulu" (a diaspora activist from Minneapolis) uttered, "what Feyisa Lilesa did during the Rio Olympics moved the Oromo movement to the international arena."

Feyisa's case was framed as gross human rights abuse against the Oromo people, which the international community should condemn. 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. According to Disassa" (a diaspora returnee, Addis Ababa), diaspora group members in the United States who were keen to amplify the Oromo movement to the international audience supported Lilesa with his first press release after the Olympic protest gesture. More than 86 news reports about Lilesa and his cause were recorded in two days (Dahir, 2016). Back home in Ethiopia, the government blamed foreign enemies and social media activists for the country's instability and tarnished Ethiopia's good image before the international community. Also, the government's complaint against social media made it to the United Nations podium on 21 September 2016, when Ethiopia's Prime Minister Hailemariam Dessalegn addressed the 71stGeneral Assembly. Hailemariam's 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 and frequent statements of human rights violations from international bodies like the Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International condemning grave human rights abuses in Ethiopia.

Conclusion

The emergence of educated Oromo youth, the vibrant diaspora community, and the advancement of the Internet facilitated the organization and sustenance of the 2015 Oromo protest. The establishment of the Qeerroo Bilisummaa Oromoo as a formal Oromo youth movement organization and the emergence of the united diaspora community served as forerunners to the organization of the 2015 Oromo protest, leadership structure, mobilization tactics, and communication. Despite the government's intense repression, the Internet served as a safe communication platform and site of political resistance that shaped the movement in the context of criminalizing political dissent. This study highlights that the Oromo movement has been uninterrupted since the Oromo elites raised the national identity question in the 1970s through the flare up of the 2015 protests that contributed to the government administration change in 2018. What can be deducted from this analysis is that the 2015 Oromo protest is part of an unfinished movement formation process, which required many resources and technologies to evolve through different stages as an informal networked movement structure led by segmented groups rather than individual leaders.

The formal movement organization of the youth for Oromo freedom, Qeerroo, was the nucleus of the 2015 Oromo protest that organized movement actions on the ground. Although the diaspora contributed to coordinating the movement's communication tactics through its satellite television and social media, Qeerroo positioned itself with the power to produce, select, and disseminate content from the ground. The diaspora's role depended on the Internet and the movement resources they possessed. The 2015 Oromo protest might be successful without the Internet and the diaspora's involvement; however, the time span of the movement might have been prolonged, and the movement strategy would have been different than what it was in 2018, possibly leading the country into civil war.

The African diaspora, in general, and the Ethiopian diaspora, in particular, are dominant actors in the political affairs of their homeland, and the Internet facilitated their role and influence. The solidification of ethnic identity and the reducing effect of territoriality and sovereignty in transnational politics supported diasporic social mobilization in Ethiopia. The 2015 Oromo protest experience shows that there should be harmony among multiple ethnic identities and political

views of the African diaspora to bring about democratic change in their respective homeland. More so, there is a need for continued research to understand better the Ethiopian diaspora's political involvement, role, and desire in the democratization and human rights protection of their country of origin.

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