In Ethiopia, the Oromo youth led a resistance campaign that toppled the Tigray-dominated government in 2018.

In February 2018, the Prime Minister of Ethiopia resigned after more than two years of popular protests against the Tigray-dominated EPRDF government. The protests were led by the Oromo people—an ethnic group that was discriminated against by the Ethiopian government for decades. The civic mobilization was triggered in 2015 by the announcement of the Addis Ababa “Master Plan,” which would expand the city into the Oromia region. This discontent quickly paired up with a larger set of grievances related to unfair ethnic power sharing at the national level, the lack of educational and economic opportunities for Oromo youth, and human rights violations. Starting in November 2015, there were a series of protests led by a clandestine organization of Oromo youth who coordinated a school strike and rallies. Eventually there were similar protests by the Amhara people and other ethnic groups focusing on similar issues. After a police crackdown at an Oromo cultural festival resulted in a stampede and several hundred deaths, the demand for equal rights changed to the demand for the government to step down. The government declared a state of emergency and attempted to stop the protests with some concessions, including the cancellation of the Addis Ababa “Master Plan.” However, the protests continued until the Prime Minister stepped down from his post.

Several precursors made the unusual growth of this mobilization possible at this historical moment, after decades of grievances and repression. First, the framing of the Oromo struggle was reshaped by the Qubee generation, the first to be educated in their native language, Afan Oromo, and who benefited from a recent expansion of higher education. In previous generations, the Oromo movement promoted a secessionist agenda, sometimes paired with violent
struggle for independence. The Qubee generation criticized secessionism and advocated for a more equal ethnic federation. The federalist agenda used to be monopolized by the EPRDF government, but the government never lived up to this promise. The new framing of the Oromo protest broke that monopoly and sought to hold the regime accountable for fair power sharing. A federalist framing accommodated the grievances of other ethnic groups and created space for them to join the resistance started in Oromia. This Qubee federalist strategy emerged a few years before the mobilization, and the new framing of grievances was ready to be used when the right trigger emerged.

Second, educated Oromo youth created an effective clandestine organization on the ground that acted in coordination with the Oromo diaspora abroad. In 2011, Oromo students from several universities established an organization called Qeerroo Bilisummaa Oromoo, or Youth for Oromo Freedom. The organization was decentralized with multiple units and decision centers whose leaders often managed to remain unknown for the public, thus making it difficult for the regime to repress. The social circles of Oromo university students served as a safe space for organizing because their shared ethnic ties provided some protection from infiltration by agents of the regime. This organization acted together with younger members of the diaspora who provided publicity and material support, including access to satellite TV channels and satellite phones to circumvent government restrictions on the circulation of information. One of the diaspora members, Jawar Mohammed, became the face and the spokesperson of the Oromo resistance for the international public.

Third, the Oromo youth took advantage of a recent expansion of Internet and mobile networks by skillfully using them in combination with traditional media, paper leaflets, and word of mouth to reach rural communities. Internet penetration in Ethiopia grew from 1% to 14% between 2011 and 2015, and university students, who often went to school far away from their communities, were among the first beneficiaries of this expansion. By combining new and traditional media and communication technologies and by utilizing their connections to their home communities, they were able to spread messages and coordinate protest actions effectively.

Fourth, the EPRDF regime made several mistakes that also played a role in growing the movement. In the 2015 elections, when tension was already high because of the Addis Ababa “Master Plan” and the demand for equal representation of all ethnic groups was growing, EPRDF declared itself a winner of all seats in the federal parliament and regional state councils. It provoked a social backlash and contributed to the size of the first large protest in this mobilization episode—the Ginchi protest in November 2015. Also, the deadly crackdown on the protest at the Irreecha cultural festival in October 2016 was a moral shock for the Oromo community and led to the escalation of protesters’ demands.

About the research project:

**HOW CIVIC MOBILIZATIONS GROW IN AUTHORITARIAN CONTEXTS**

This case study is part of a larger project examining when and why citizens mobilize to challenge the state in hard authoritarian contexts. The project compares 21 recent episodes of mobilization in order to understand the factors that contributed to the mobilization’s growth. Four mobilization episodes (Ethiopia in 2015-2018, Vietnam in 2016, Sudan in 2018-2019, and Belarus in 2020) were selected for in-depth case studies. The summary presents a brief description of the episode and the main factors that contributed to the mobilization’s growth.1

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