

# NEW CLUSTER REGIONS AND DISTRIBUTIVE STRUGGLES IN SOUTHERN ETHIOPIA

BOUNDARY CONFLICTS IN THE ZEYSE-GAMO AND  
KABENA-GURAGE BORDERLANDS

*Asebe Regassa Debelo and Yacob Cheka Hidoto*



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## THE ETHIOPIA PEACE RESEARCH FACILITY

This report was written for the Ethiopia Peace Research Facility (PRF) and is part of its Knowledge for Peace (K4P) series on contested borderlands. The PRF is an independent facility combining timely analysis on peace and conflict from Ethiopian experts with support for conflict-sensitive programming in the country. It is managed by the Rift Valley Institute (RVI) and funded by the UK government.

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## THE RIFT VALLEY INSTITUTE

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## MAP DESIGN

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# MAP



# SUMMARY

- This report focuses on tension between the Zeyse and Gamo and the Kabena and Gurage ethnic groups in the context of the administrative cluster approach taken in southern Ethiopia since 2018.
  - Ethiopia has been experiencing an increase in violent conflicts associated with borders and self-administration demands in the post-2018 period. The Prosperity Party (PP) government has in part attempted to address the peace and security challenges by reconfiguring regional and local administrations, especially in the former Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples' Regional State (SNNPRS).
  - SNNPRS can be viewed as a microcosm of Ethiopia's multinational federation because of its diversity, political polarization and the tension between respecting autonomy and promoting unity. Violent conflict in SNNPRS has been linked to quests for self-administration, which multiplied after the government approved the long-standing Sidama bid for statehood in 2019. Following this, similar autonomy campaigns emerged in 12 other SNNPRS zones, highlighting the need to resolve chronic border disputes and recognize the identities of groups in those areas.
  - This study aims to understand the peace and conflict potential linked to the post-2018 reconfiguration of borders. It is based on two case studies. The first examines the violence that arose in Gamo zone in Zeyse-inhabited areas and the second looks at Wolkite town and the surrounding Kabena district.
  - These two conflicts emerged, respectively, after the August 2023 establishment of South Ethiopia Regional State (SERS) and Central Ethiopia Regional State (CERS). This increased the number of regional states in the federation to 12. Parallel to the formation of these regions, SNNPRS began relocating regional offices to various zones to try and defuse distributive conflicts between ethnicities.
  - The studies found that one cause of conflict is the prevailing top-down imposition of administrative restructuring. This is exacerbated by the closure of spaces for peaceful dialogue on vital issues, which contributes to the use of violence as a means of pursuing political and economic goals.
  - Additionally, in the current context where the use of negotiation, deliberation and other traditional conflict resolution mechanisms is dwindling, social media platforms are increasingly used to incite conflict and so polarize relations between competing actors. In turn, this complicates the everyday lives of the majority of people who otherwise coexist peacefully.
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- Study findings show that the lack of institutional mechanisms in place to protect the rights of minority groups and prevent the discrimination practiced by dominant groups plays a key role in sustaining conflicts.
- Border and identity-related conflicts have broad relevance in Ethiopia. Borders and borderlands are loaded with issues related to identity and resources, and reconfiguration of them without consideration of historical and contemporary claims to the spaces leads to discontent and instability.
- In post-1991 Ethiopia where territories are tied to identities, administrative reconfigurations that constrain constitutionally granted self-rule rights are likely to be counterproductive. Given continuing bids for self-administration and ongoing issues related to border demarcation and identity recognition in SERS and CERS, it is critical for the regional and federal governments to focus on protecting the basic rights of citizens, ensuring equality between groups and enforcing accountability mechanisms for regional and local authorities.



# INTRODUCTION

Before its recent dissolution, SNNPRS was Ethiopia's most diverse region, home to some 56 ethnic groups, each with their own distinct socio-cultural identity.<sup>1</sup> According to the most recent census in 2007, it had a population of around 15 million people.<sup>2</sup> The Sidama ethnic group was the plurality, followed by the Wolayta, Gurage and Gamo. With nearly 90 per cent of the population consisting of rural inhabitants, it was the least urbanized region in Ethiopia.

Before 2018, SNNPRS was divided into 14 ethnic-based zones and four special *woredas* (regular woredas are sub-zonal administrative districts), which were accountable to the regional council. These structures are mostly ethnic-based territorial administrations that enable groups to exercise self-rule. Zones and special woredas have similar structures, powers and responsibilities.<sup>3</sup> Each zone or special woreda has an elected council, chief administrator, court and police. They also have the power to protect identity, culture and language, and to exercise self-rule, including legislative powers.

Established in 1992, SNNPRS was particularly complex and an outlier in the ethno-linguistic federal system inaugurated by the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) after it came to power in 1991. This is because it conglomerated a large number of ethnicities when other comparably sized regional states such as Amhara, Oromia or Somali were dominated by the ethnicity whose name they took. Its highly multi-ethnic composition led to ongoing self-determination demands from the groups contained within it. Likewise, SNNPRS created discontent among minorities who said they were denied their right to self-government in zones named after and dominated by majority groups.

SNNPRS was dissolved in 2023. It has been replaced by four new regional states, starting with Sidama in 2019. This was followed by the establishment of South West Ethiopia Peoples'

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- 1 'Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples Region (SNNPR). Regional Profile', Ethiopian Peace Observatory, ACLED, 8 August 2024. Accessed 14 August 2024, <https://epo.acledata.com/southern-nations-nationalities-and-peoples-region-snnpr/>.
  - 2 Population Census Commission, 'The 2007 Population and Housing Census of Ethiopia: Statistical Report for Country level', Addis Ababa: Population Census Commission, 2007, 98–100. Accessed 16 August 2024, [https://www.statsethiopia.gov.et/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Population-and-Housing-Census-2007-National\\_Statistical.pdf](https://www.statsethiopia.gov.et/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Population-and-Housing-Census-2007-National_Statistical.pdf). Also see: 'General Overview Regional Brief', UNICEF Ethiopia, April 2022. Accessed 14 August 2024, <https://www.unicef.org/ethiopia/media/6516/file/SNNPR%20regional%20brief.pdf>.
  - 3 Christophe van der Beken, 'Federalism in a Context of Extreme Ethnic Pluralism: The Case of Ethiopia's Southern Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples Region', *Verfassung und Recht in Übersee* 46 (2013).



Regional State (SWERS) in 2021 and South Ethiopia Regional State (SERS) and Central Ethiopia Regional State (CERS) in 2023.

## THE POST-2018 CLUSTER APPROACH EXPERIMENT

Popular discontent fuelled the national political transition of 2018. After nearly 30 years, the practice of multinational ethno-linguistic federalism was unsatisfactory for both its ideological supporters and its detractors, albeit for different reasons. For its supporters, who seek what they often call genuine federalism, deep-rooted discontent among many groups, particularly in SNNPRS, was based on claims that the federal system did not address their right to self-government. For its detractors, especially among Amhara nationalists, discontent was rooted in accusations that the federal system was inherently divisive and at odds with building a strong Ethiopian national identity.<sup>4</sup> Compounding these polarized positions, there were also complaints about authoritarianism, resource ownership and utilization and equality and justice.

Following the transition, several groups in SNNPRS made demands for self-administration, territorial autonomy and administrative independence that were not properly addressed. Just after Abiy Ahmed became prime minister, the regional government tried to diffuse tensions by creating administrative zones for the Konso, Halaba, Gofa and West Omo peoples, though this led to more localized violence, especially in and around Konso zone in the former Segen Area People's zone.<sup>5</sup> Given several claims for regional statehood, the SNNPRS government organized a 'scientific study' on how to handle the demands. Meanwhile, Abiy's federal government eventually allowed a referendum for a Sidama region, though only after deadly clashes between security forces and activists, as well as ethnically targeted killings in Hawassa. This decision had a role in triggering similar autonomy claims and discontent in SNNPRS. The federal government responded by reorganizing the remaining zones and special woredas into three clustered regions, SWERS, SERS and CERS.

Due to competition among southern elites, the cluster approach also involved spreading regional offices across towns in the new regions. While designed to promote equitable resource distribution, this creates challenges for those who need to move between multiple dispersed towns with poor transport links. The policy led to ethnic-based zones for the Derashe, Koore and Burji, Konta, Yem, Basketo, Aari and special woredas for Kabena, Mareko and Tambaro. In some cases, this has contributed to tensions that have escalated to conflict, including between the Zeyse and Gamo communities and the Kabena and Gurage.

By clustering adjacent ethnic-based administrations into regions, with the arrangements to some extent based on socio-economic similarities, and also respecting those groups' rights, the

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4 Tegegne Teka, 'Amhara Ethnicity in the Making', in *Ethnicity and the State in Eastern Africa*, eds. Salih Mohammed and John Markakis, Uppsala: Nordic Africa Institute, 1998.

5 Chalachew Tadesse, 'Referendum in Ethiopia's Southern Region', Briefing Paper, Rift Valley Institute, March 2023.

approach is designed to appease both those who believe true multinational federalism has not been implemented and those who oppose the system altogether. It is partly based on settlement patterns as well as previous administrative experiences during the imperial (pre-1974) and Derg (1974-1991) regimes, and during the post-Derg transition. The clustered regions grant ethnic-based rights such as the use of local languages for administration at the zonal or special woreda levels.

Furthermore, the aim is to distribute regional bureaus and departments to multiple locations in order to avoid privileging one town at the expense of others. Many ethnic communities felt the former regional administrative capital, Hawassa, was unfairly favoured for public and private investment. To reduce the domination of majority groups in the clustered regions, attempts were made to create a quota system to distribute offices. The leadership of the new regions also established more administrative zones and special woredas for ethnic communities. In short, the approach attempted to disentangle territory and identity by creating geography-oriented regions with ethnic-based local administrative units.

However, in the months following the formation of the cluster regions there was continued discontent related to administrative arrangements, as well as the rise of conflicts in the Central and South Ethiopia regions. Despite the cluster approach attempting to resolve issues that have plagued ethno-linguistic federalism in Ethiopia, the conflicts related to two familiar challenges: the hardening of borders and boundaries, and demands for administrative self-rule. These two factors are entangled with disputes over borders and borderland resources. Southern Ethiopia had already been an epicentre of claims over borders, self-determination and demands for recognition, especially among minorities, for more than 30 years. Groups requesting their own region often see the cluster approach as insufficient, but neither does it necessarily assist minority groups seeking official recognition and/or for their administrative status to be upgraded.

## **AIMS OF THE STUDY**

These case studies on emerging tensions between the Zeyse-Gamo in SERS and the Kabena-Gurage in CERS sit alongside other reports on contested spaces in Ethiopia. Both the southern case studies are contextualized in relation to the post-2018 political transition, with close attention to the cluster approach to reconfiguration. In effect, this administrative restructuring serves to harden existing official borders and informal boundaries between groups, and invokes further claims of territorial control and entitlement. This report's objective is to unpack these emerging tensions by identifying and analysing the terms of contestation, where contestation occurs and who the key actors are in order to provide a nuanced and in-depth understanding of these emerging conflicts.

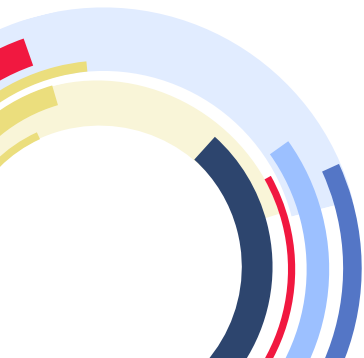
More broadly, the study aims to analyse the federal experiment with the cluster approach in terms of its peace and conflict potential. It examines how various actors use the question of borders and borderland resources in their claims for territorial control and as part of political

competition. Since borders and borderlands are contested and negotiated spaces, they are often sources of conflict.

The cluster approach in the south could be applied elsewhere, particularly given the possibility of PP deciding to break up the two largest regions, Amhara and Oromia. This study warns that any more top-down administrative reconfigurations may lead to further conflict and instability.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This study uses various qualitative research methods. First, it is informed by a comprehensive literature review of secondary sources, including academic publications and grey literature. In particular, social media posts and government reports were analysed to substantiate other data sources. Second, it is based on the collection of primary data during four weeks of fieldwork in SERS and CERS. This includes key informant interviews, ethnographic-oriented in-depth interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs) with civil servants, traders, business persons, elders, farmers, religious leaders, researchers, activists, opposition party leaders and members, representatives of women and youth, ruling party members and officials from the Kabena, Gurage, Gamo and Zeyse ethnic groups. A total of 31 people participated in the research. Third, the study draws on both the long-term research experience of the team members among all four ethnic groups, along with their well-established social and political networks. This greatly enhanced access to study participants, enabled the collection of relevant data and facilitated the effective management of political sensitivities.



# BACKGROUND

Enacted in 1995, the constitutional remapping of Ethiopia along ethno-linguistic lines by the ruling EPRDF had historical justifications.<sup>6</sup> According to the proponents of this model of federalism, the system was designed to redress historical injustices that were rooted in imperial Ethiopia.<sup>7</sup> The question of nationalities that became one of the rallying points of the Ethiopian student movement in the 1960s and 1970s invoked a fundamental question about state–society relations. Although detractors of the multinational federal system criticize it as divisive and a root cause of intergroup conflict,<sup>8</sup> it also granted the right of self-determination to ethnic groups (known in the federal constitution as ‘nations, nationalities and peoples’), fostered cultural revival and spurred the rewriting of histories.<sup>9</sup> In the end, however, the multinational federation has hardened the physical and intangible boundaries between groups and created shifting alliances between traditional enemies and friends.<sup>10</sup> Although these controversies around the federal system remain unresolved, a fundamental fact remains: During the post-1991 period, localized conflicts related to borders, territory and identity increased more than ever before in modern Ethiopian history.<sup>11</sup>

Decades later, popular discontent with the ethno-linguistic federalist model gave rise to large-scale change in Ethiopia. At the climax of four years of protest against the authoritarian approach of the Tigray People’s Liberation Front (TPLF)-dominated EPRDF coalition, Abiy Ahmed was appointed prime minister in April 2018. Capitalizing on the critique of ethno-linguistic federalism as a divisive system, Abiy employed rhetoric calling for peace, unity and reconciliation. His Amharic concept of *medemer* (lit. addition; coming together) was presented

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6 Wendy James et al., eds., *Remapping Ethiopia: socialism and after*, Oxford: James Currey, 2002.

7 John Markakis, ‘Ethnic Conflict and the State in the Horn of Africa’, in *Ethnicity and Conflict in the Horn of Africa*, eds. Katsuyoshi Fukui and John Markakis, London: James Currey, 1994.

8 Jon Abbink, ‘Ethnicity and constitutionalism in contemporary Ethiopia’, *Journal of African Law* 41/2 (1997).

9 Asebe Regassa Debelo, ‘Self-Determination, multinational federalism and an emerging threat in Ethiopia: A decolonial approach’, *Northeast African Studies* 21/2 (2022).

10 Günther Schlee and Elisabeth Watson (eds.), *Changing Identifications and Alliances in North-East Africa: Volume II: Sudan, Uganda, and the Ethiopia-Sudan Borderlands*, New York NY: Berghahn Books, 2022; Abbink, ‘Ethnicity and constitutionalism.’ Others blame the EPRDF regime for decentralizing conflict as a mechanism for consolidating its power at the centre; see: Asebe Regassa Debelo, ‘Competing orders and conflicts at the margins of the State. Inter-group conflicts along the Ethiopia-Kenya border’, *African Journal of Conflict Resolution* 16/2 (2016).

11 See, for example, Asnake Kefale, *Federalism and ethnic conflict in Ethiopia: A comparative regional study*, Abingdon-On-Thames: Routledge, 2013.

as the basis for forging a state and society upon the values of harmony and togetherness. Despite high hopes and a few months of euphoria, Abiy, however, took the country in a different direction. He dissolved the EPRDF, an alliance of regional ruling parties, and replaced it with the single, national PP in 2019.<sup>12</sup> This move significantly changed the country's political context, particularly increasing tensions with TPLF, which culminated in the Tigray war.

Abiy's rhetoric of national unity stood in contrast to growing demands for statehood, identity recognition and self-government from many ethnic groups, particularly those in SNNPRS. Key to the transformation that the government, especially the prime minister, sought was a loosening of the links between ethno-linguistic identities and boundaries in the interests of promoting an Ethiopian identity.<sup>13</sup> Hence, rather than addressing the statehood requests from groups such as the Wolayta, Gurage and Gamo, his administration created multi-ethnic regional clusters organized along geographic lines. This essentially sidelined the multiple self-rule claims based on ethno-linguistic identity in an approach that the government may well adopt for other large regions.

The first test for PP in SNNPRS was the Sidama bid for a standalone Sidama region. Suspended for decades, this was re-energized just prior to Abiy taking office in 2018. Government attempts to suppress the Sidama campaign led to the death of dozens of people in July 2019.<sup>14</sup> This did not, however, deter the Sidama, which culminated in an overwhelming referendum vote the same year to form a new region.<sup>15</sup>

Although that settled the Sidama demand, it opened up a Pandora's box in the complex SNNPRS landscape, sparking the interest of many elites to pursue a similar path. Soon after the Sidama referendum, demonstrations and violence broke out, including the destruction of property, in towns in Wolayta and Gurage zones.<sup>16</sup> More conflict erupted in Gedeo zone, Sawla (Gamo-Gofa zone), Segen Area People's zone, as well as between the Kabena and the Gurage and the

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- 12 This move shattered the relationship between TPLF leaders and the prime minister, and became a cause of the Tigray war (2020–2022). See: Hermann Boko, 'Abiy Ahmed: Ethiopia's first Oromo PM spreads hope of reform', *France 24*, 30 July 2018. Accessed 2 August 2024, <https://www.france24.com/en/20180730-abiy-ahmed-spreads-hope-reform-ethiopia>.
- 13 Asebe Regassa Debelo and Rony Emmenegger, 'The emperor, the lion and the peacock: Monuments and contested state sovereignty in contemporary Ethiopia', *Environment and Planning C: Politics and Space* 41/5 (2023).
- 14 'At least 17 killed in violence over Sidama autonomy', *Al Jazeera*, 20 July 2019. Accessed 2 August 2024, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/7/20/ethiopia-at-least-17-killed-in-violence-over-sidama-autonomy>.
- 15 Kjetil Tronvoll, 'The Sidama Quest for Self-Rule: The Referendum on Regional Statehood Under the Ethiopian Federation', *International Journal on Minority and Group Rights* 29/2 (2021); Ermias Tasfaye and Kulle Kursha, 'Southern comfort on the rocks', *Ethiopia Insight*, 20 November 2019. Accessed 2 August 2024, [www.ethiopia-insight.com/2019/11/20/southern-comfort-on-the-rocks/](http://www.ethiopia-insight.com/2019/11/20/southern-comfort-on-the-rocks/).
- 16 'Wolayta Conflict', Ethiopia Peace Observatory, ACLED, 29 March 2021. Accessed 2 August 2024, <https://epo.acleddata.com/wolayta-conflict/>.

Maskan and the Mareko. Claims for recognition also re-emerged from groups such as Kucha and Wollene, along with demands for status as a special woreda or promotion to a zone from the Kabena, Tambaro, Mareko, Derashe, Koore and Burji. In total, 12 SNNPRS zones demanded regional status. This would entail the hardening rather than softening of ethnic boundaries; the opposite of what the new national leadership wanted.

This situation was compounded by the inconsistent approach of the authorities to addressing southern demands for autonomy. Initially, Abiy's government followed the approach laid out in the constitution: holding a referendum in Sidama (2019).<sup>17</sup> For other cases, however, the now-defunct Southern Ethiopian People Democratic Movement (SEPDM) commissioned a 'scientific study' on how to manage the mushrooming claims. In July 2019, the research team recommended to the SEPDM Executive Committee that existing arrangements should be maintained.<sup>18</sup> Perhaps to be expected, this rejection of multiple constitutional autonomy demands was not widely accepted by the claimants.

In light of the lack of willingness to compromise from other ethnic groups seeking their own regions, the government took a different course. Henceforth, the prevailing idea was to reorganize SNNPRS into four new regional states (including Sidama region). This replaced the initial approach of advocating for continuity and unity based on a shared idea of Ethiopianism. Broadly, that approach aligned with PP's. Its architects envisioned it as an all-inclusive national party incorporating not just the EPRDF member parties but also their affiliates (*agar*) that ruled the peripheral regions.

The four-region option was mainly promulgated by national peace ambassadors, known as the '*Yeselam Ambasaderoch*' committee, established under the Office of the Prime Minister to investigate the autonomy demands. In December 2019, the House of Federation also approved the establishment of an Administrative Boundaries and Identity Issues Commission to inform the Office of the Prime Minister and coordinate a nationwide study on issues related to identity, self-administration and border disputes. In the months after the December 2019 establishment of PP, a series of public discussions with representatives from SNNPRS zones and woredas were conducted on the issue of self-rule by the committee, the Office of the Prime Minister and the House of Federation. As a result of these consultations, the committee said consensus was reached on the plan to reorganize the south into four regions.<sup>19</sup>

Following the eruption of war in Tigray in November 2020, however, the official rhetoric of

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17 Brook Abdu, 'Sidama's quest for statehood', *The Reporter*, 10 November 2018. Accessed 2 August 2024, <https://www.thereporterethiopia.com/6819/>.

18 Chalachew Tadesse, 'Referendum in Ethiopia's Southern Region'. Briefing Paper, Rift Valley Institute, March 2023, 2.

19 Bereket Eshetu, 'Splitting Southern Nations region into four can promote peace', *Ethiopia Insight*, 10 October 2010. Accessed 13 November 2024, <https://www.ethiopia-insight.com/2020/10/10/splitting-southern-nations-region-into-four-can-promote-peace/>.

unity was refocused, this time against a common threat—the TPLF—and used to postpone popular demands. Alongside this, security crackdowns, arrests and intimidation of activists and political leaders were applied to suppress the autonomy campaigns.

Over time, the government used a range of strategies—constitutional, coercive, persuasive and pragmatic—to respond to the southern autonomy demands. As such, southern Ethiopia appears to be a testing ground for the reintroduction of the type of geography-based regions that existed prior to the federal era. The government may be looking to replicate the cluster approach nationally as part of its efforts to unbundle ethnic and administrative territories. In practice, however, this will be difficult to successfully implement. First, there are numerous resource and economic challenges that encourage local aspirations for self-rule. Second, the cluster approach will create another layer of border conflict as it entails intensified competition for resources. Third, unlike in SNNPRS, regions such as Oromia and Amhara are strongly tied to the identity of the titular group, which will lead to greater resistance from those groups to any attempts to fragment the regions.

## OVERVIEW OF THE CASE STUDIES

The two case studies in this report are based on the Zeyse-Gamo and Kabena-Gurage boundary conflicts. They are designed to unpack some of the emerging intergroup tensions in the post-2018 landscape, with a specific focus on the cluster approach in the former SNNPRS, including analysis of the processes, its response to continued demands from ethnic minorities and associated disputes over borders and borderland resources. The case studies examine the context of each area, the nature and sources of the conflicts, key drivers of conflict and the primary actors involved. They also look at the intensity of conflicts and how the violence has manifested. In particular, they highlight resource-related drivers for border demarcation, opposition to border demarcation and the implications of these resources for the contesting groups at local and regional levels.

Case study selection was based on two interrelated patterns that are both generating local rivalry and conflict, thus affecting peace and security in the wider region. The first is the top-down imposition of regional and local border reconfigurations, and the second is the absence of dialogue with the affected communities. Immediately following the establishment of SERS and CERS, conflicts broke out in both study areas. The case studies also draw attention to the strategies used by the federal government, the regional governments and non-state actors to address this violence, the degree of public satisfaction with the solutions and the risk of escalation of each conflict.

In particular, the Zeyse-Gamo study reveals that border spaces are contested due to the presence of lucrative banana farms that conflict actors vie to control. In Ethiopia's political landscape where ethnicity is a salient force in political mobilization, resources and spaces tend to be linked to and carry markers of ethnicity and identity. Political parties use the conflict over borderlands to promote their agendas, as evidenced by Zeyse EZEMA (Ethiopian Citizens

Social Justice Party, or *ye-itiyopiya zegochi le-mahiberawi fitih*) party members' campaign against Gamo zone officials.<sup>20</sup> Although EZEMA does not have a direct economic interest in the banana business, it uses Gamo-Zeyse tension over the issue as an instrument of political mobilization. Zeyse people also have administrative grievances related to the Gamo-Gofa zone (now Gamo zone), which fuel ongoing demands for a special woreda.

In the case of the Kabena–Gurage conflict over the town of Wolkite, competing elites mobilize and agitate over issues related to history and urban resources, including infrastructure, taxation powers and government positions and institutions. This tension occurred because following the cluster processes, which made Wolkite the host of several government institutions, the political and economic significance of the town increased. Wolkite was officially endorsed by the CERS council as the seat of some CERS offices and Gurage zone, although it had already been serving as the seat of Kabena district as well. This status has renewed contests over the town and its expansion into peri-urban areas that fall within Kabena special woreda, with the Gurage making claims to incorporate these areas into Wolkite's jurisdiction.

While each case study reveals distinct conflict dynamics, participants from both revealed commonalities; namely, that the top-down imposition of administrative restructuring and the closure of spaces for dialogue are leading to violence as a means to achieve political and economic goals.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, in a context where recourse to negotiation, deliberation and traditional conflict resolution mechanisms is dwindling, social media platforms are often used to incite conflict and polarize relations between rival groups.<sup>22</sup>

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20 EZEMA support the Zeyse bid for self-rule as long as there is no legal change to rights related to self-rule in the current Ethiopia constitution, although the party openly opposes the constitution that allows for ethnic-based self-rule. See: 'EPO Weekly: 28 October–3 November 2023', Reliefweb, 8 November 2023. Accessed 2 August 2024, <https://reliefweb.int/report/ethiopia/ethiopia-epo-weekly-28-october-3-november-2023-enam>.

21 Interviews with EZEMA leader and Gurage members in Wolkite, 23 December 2023; interviews with Zeyse members in Wolayta Sodo and Wozaka, 27–29 December 2023.

22 For example, see: Samson Berhane, 'የኢትዮጵያ መገናኛ ብዙሃን ድርጅት' ('Social Media fueling violence in Ethiopia'), Ethiopian Mass Media Action. Accessed 2 August 2024, <https://am.africanewschannel.org/news/social-media-fueling-violence-in-ethiopia/>.



# CASE STUDY 1: ZEYSE-GAMO CONFLICT

The Zeyse-Gamo conflict, which erupted following the 2023 formation of SERS, is a significant security challenge for the new region. Since October 2023, it has led to the deaths of 11 citizens, numerous injuries, large-scale internal displacement, property destruction and mass arbitrary arrests of ethnic Zeyse. The conflict has its origins in the long-standing bid of the Zeyse for a self-administered special woreda. This was resuscitated in the post-2018 national political transition, along with a series of similar autonomy campaigns in SNNPRS. The Zeyse-Gamo conflict represents a trend in SERS and across the country of top-down regional reconfiguration fuelling contestation over borders and borderland resources.

## LAND OF BANANAS

The Zeyse territory is on the western side of Lake Chamo, its northern tip is 18 km from Arba Minch town. Zeyse areas are bordered to the east by Koore zone, to the north and west by Gamo woredas and to the south by the Konso and Gardula zones. Currently, Zeyse mainly reside in three kebeles (the lowest level administrative units) that are under Arba Minch Zuria woreda of Gamo Zone. The Gamo-Zeyse borderland is known for abundant banana production, with Gamo zone accounting for around 70 percent of the banana supply in Ethiopia.<sup>23</sup> Hence, local people call it the 'land of bananas'.

The Gamo are the second-most populous ethnic group in SERS. According to the 2007 census, the Gamo population was about 1,107,163. Among the Gamo there are more than 40 sub-groups, known as '*deres*'. In the past, each *deres* had a discrete territory and autonomous political status. Some were ruled by *kawos* (kings), while others functioned under a more decentralized system of elected aleka or councillors. Other *deres* (notably the Boroda and Kucha kingdoms), however, were first categorized as part of the Gamo after the introduction of the federal system in 1995.<sup>24</sup> Some *deres* speak languages that are mutually unintelligible to one another, although people in those sub-groups are related in many way, such as through inter-marriage. Other *deres* such as the Dorze and Kucha consider themselves distinct ethnic groups and are now seeking

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23 Molla Mekonnen Alemu, 'Banana as a Cash Crop and Its Food Security and Socioeconomic Contribution: The Case of Southern Ethiopia, Arba Minch', *Journal of Environmental Protection* 8/3 (2017). Accessed 2 August 2024, <https://www.scirp.org/journal/paperinformation?paperid=74908>.

24 Thomas Temesgen, 'Ethnicity, federalism, and conflict in Ethiopia: a comparative study of Gamo-Goffa and Gurage zones', PhD dissertation, Addis Ababa University, Addis Ababa, 2017, 87-88.

recognition through submissions to the House of Federation.

The Zeyse are one of the minorities in Gamo zone. Their main activities include beekeeping, animal rearing, fishing, weaving and fruit production in the lowlands (for example, tomato, banana, mango, papaya and avocado). They also produce *teff* (a grain), corn, millet, cotton, oil seeds and coffee.<sup>25</sup> Their lands are home to large-scale banana plantations on state farms—Elgo, Wozaka, Sile—and Lucy Agricultural Development Plc (known as Lucy Farm), a private banana farm.<sup>26</sup> Zeyse speak an Omotic language that is closely related to the neighbouring Zargula and Koore languages. The 2007 population census put the Zeyse population at 17,889 people.<sup>27</sup> Although this figure is outdated and disputed by many Zeyse, it is still used by rival politicians to diminish the Zeyse bid for self-rule.

In the past, the Zeyse had their own king (*kate*), who ruled over the Zeyse people residing in 28 Zeyse traditional *magas* or settlements. Since the fifteenth century, more than 30 *kates* are said to have reigned in Zeyse. During the Derg regime, Zeyse traditional settlements were administratively grouped into three larger peasant associations (*kebeles*); namely, Elgo and Wozaka in the lowlands and Denbille in the highlands. Under the Derg, Wozaka kebele was administered as part of the Gardula *awraja* (province), Elgo under Gamo *awraja* and Denbille under Kamba *awraja*.<sup>28</sup> Study participants explain that after the fall of the Derg, the Zeyse appealed to the authorities, complaining that they had not consented to the previous arrangement. Moreover, they said, it harmed their linguistic, psychological and cultural development, as well as led to the loss of traditional Zeyse territories.<sup>29</sup> In addition, Zeyse's lowland areas saw the growth of state-owned cotton plantations and resettlement of Gamo, Derashe and others.

Under the EPRDF, the Zeyse and Gamo were recognized as distinct identities and had their own political representatives. According to Zeyse participants, a joint administration of three Zeyse-dominated settlements was formed at Wozaka, although they were formally brought under Arba Minch Zuria *woreda* in the former Gamo-Gofa zone.<sup>30</sup> In the early 1990s, the Zeyse People's Democratic Organization (part of the ruling Southern Ethiopian Peoples' Democratic Movement) attempted to mobilize the people to form their own special *woreda*, collecting more

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25 Abayneh Unasho, 'Ye Zeyse Behreseb Bahl', Dilla University, Dilla, 85-86.

26 Fanos Mekonnen, 'The history and future of bananas in Arba Minch, Ethiopia', LIVES Ethiopia, 25 February 2014. Accessed 2 August 2024, <https://livesethiopia.wordpress.com/2014/02/25/banana-history/>.

27 Population Census Commission, '2007 Census', 74.

28 Zeyse EZEMA party elected regional and federal councilors, 'ye zeyse bihreseb be liyu *woreda* lemederajet yakrebachew nebarawi hunetawochina milash sayagegn ye koyebet huneta be'achiru ye kerebe megilecha' (Socio-economic situation of the Zeyse justifying the Zeyse quest for special *woreda*), unpublished report, 2023.

29 Interview with Zeyse farmers at Wozaka, 27 December 2023.

30 Interviews with the Zeyse EZEMA leadership at Wolayta Sodo, 28-29 December 2023.

than 22,000 signatures. At the same time, the Gamo and Zezse were brought under Semien Omo zone administration, which had its capital at Arba Minch. This zone was forged by the Southern Ethiopian People's Democratic Movement to produce a homogenized political and social identity by merging groups that speak related languages—also referred to as Omoto languages—such as Gamo, Wolayta, Gofa and Dawro.

In the Semien Omo zone, the Zezse-inhabited kebeles were brought under Arba Minch Zuria woreda. The zone was dissolved in 2000 due to disagreements over the school language homogenization project called 'WoGaGoDa, resulting in the establishment of Gamo-Gofa, Dawro and Wolayta zones and Basketo and Konta special woredas.<sup>31</sup> According to Zezse participants, this is one of the key incidents that led to the revival of the campaign for a Zezse special woreda.

## POST-2018 ZEZESE-GAMO RELATIONS

Until 2018, the Zezse community did not enjoy the conditions to promote self-rule in the form of a special woreda due to staunch opposition from the regional authorities. The SNNPRS administration worked to restrict the establishment of new local governments, claiming they were merely vehicles for ethnic entrepreneurs.<sup>32</sup> The officials did not accept the grievance of ethnic communities. This instrumentalist view is also echoed by some academics who have conducted research on self-determination campaigns in the region. For example, Lovise Aalen wrote that local elites '... mobilized their people to get separate administrative units in the name of national self-rule ... as a cover-up for seeking personal benefit ...'.<sup>33</sup>

Although self-administration is a constitutional right, most of our Zezse respondents say it has been obstructed at the local level by Gamo elites set on controlling resources and cultural development.<sup>34</sup> They identify a number of grievances similar to those from the 1990s, when Gamo elites worked to undermine Zezse political representatives who promoted the idea of their own special woreda. The list of grievances and efforts to stir up hostility between Zezse and Gamo residents is long. For example, all Zezse interlocutors cite a lack of basic services such as drinking water, roads, schools and health centres. In particular, they note that since the last election in June 2021, supporters of EZEMA, an opposition party, have been denied basic services at the kebele; for example, access to fertilizer, irrigation and identity cards.

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31 Data Dea, 'Enduring Issues in State-Society Relations in Ethiopia: A Case Study of the WoGaGoDa Conflict in Wolayta, Southern Ethiopia', *International Journal of Ethiopian Studies* 2/112 (2006).

32 Lovise Aalen, 'Institutionalizing the Politics of Ethnicity: Actors, Power, and Mobilization in Southern Ethiopia under Ethnic Federalism', PhD dissertation, University of Oslo, Oslo, 2008.

33 Aalen, 'Institutionalizing Politics', 127.

34 Interviews with Zezse EZEMA leadership at Wolayta Sodo, 28–29 December 2023. Zezse study participant observations in the remainder of this paragraph and the next three paragraphs are from this source.

Most Zeysse respondents from Elgo and Wozeka claim that Gamo elites have encouraged Gamo people in the highlands to resettle in Zeysse territories as a ploy to control Zeysse lands and blur traditional boundaries. Looking back to the last census in 2007, several Zeysse respondents of Wozeka say that Gamo elites concealed the size of the Zeysse group by reporting the 1984 census figures, with the Zeysse showing only a 41-person increment in population growth over a 23-year period. In this regard, one of the Zeysse respondents, a 35-year-old, states:

The Gamo zone officials say that the Zeysse people do not have the demographic size required to form a special woreda. They quote the Zeysse demographic size in 1984 census of Ethiopia to support their position. During that time, Zeysse's size was 17,843. At that time, Ethiopia had a total of 42 million people. In 1984, I was not born. I have now five children [national average at time was time 5.3 children at age of 49 for a woman]. How will the size of the population remain constant in 40 years? The Gamo zone officials still mention this figure to deny our rights.<sup>35</sup>

More recently, Gamo elites blocked researchers working for the federal government from visiting rural Zeysse sites. Most Zeysse participants note that Gamo elites deleted Zeysse names from Google Maps, replacing them with Gamo place names, which they and other Zeysse consider to be part of a systematic erasure of Zeysse identity.

According to a Zeysse interviewee who is an EZEMA member, their group members who support a special woreda have faced beatings, arrests and even arbitrary killings after the formation of SERS. A few informants from Zeysse EZEMA also claim that Zeysse authorities have also been summarily dismissed from their offices (at kebele, woreda and zone levels). According to Zeysse respondents, above all, Gamo elites have discouraged cultural expressions in public places, including in Arba Minch; for example, Zeysse new year feasts. They have also attempted to introduce Gamo language textbooks in Zeysse primary schools in 2001 in order to block an initiative to have Zeysse language textbooks. Thus, the key fear of all of our Zeysse participants is the loss of their identity, citing the experience of their neighbour, the Zergulla, who were indecisive over their identity—in part due to limited awareness—as the multinational federal system took shape in the 1990s. In addition, the community resides in relatively inaccessible areas behind the Zeysse mountain. Currently, although they have their own language, the Zergulla people are categorized as Gamo.<sup>36</sup>

According to our key interviewees from the Zeysse, as a strategy to counter Gamo influence, many Zeysse supported EZEMA, a party that generally promotes individual over group rights. They did this because the Zeysse members of the ruling PP were unable to convince Gamo

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35 Interview with the Zeysse member from Zeysse Wozaka kebele, Holte, 27 December 2023; see also the 1984 Population and Housing Census of Ethiopia, 47 and 200.

36 Hussein Mohammed, Linda Jordan & Carol Magnusson, 'Survey of Zeysse, Zergulla and Related Speech Varieties', SIL International, 2015, 6. Accessed 22 November 2024, [https://www.sil.org/system/files/realdata/16/56/58/165658063018986010551716525188146383929/silesr2015\\_025.pdf](https://www.sil.org/system/files/realdata/16/56/58/165658063018986010551716525188146383929/silesr2015_025.pdf).

officials to support their special woreda campaign. Thus, the Zeysse backed EZEMA, despite its lack of support for new ethnic-based regions and position that ethno-linguistic federalism fosters division rather than unity.

Some Zeysse demonstrated their opposition to Gamo zone officials and elites by airing their grievances in the media, not supporting the Gamo bid for their own region and, later, to host the SERS capital in Arba Minch. After a lack of positive response from SERS to their request for a special woreda, about 200 Zeysse members composed of representatives of different sections of the society staged peaceful protests at the regional administrative and political capital in Wolayta Sodo and appealed once again to the House of Federation.

The primary aim of the Gamo zone administration is to maintain the status quo.<sup>37</sup> The zone has already faced internal challenges, such as requests for recognition as distinct identities by the Dorze and the Kucha,<sup>38</sup> as well as resistance from the Kola Shara community against Arba Minch town's expansion into their lands.<sup>39</sup> The Gamo zone officials interviewed fear that allowing the Zeysse to have a special woreda may create a domino effect that eventually undermines Gamo identity and the zone's unity. They also fear the implications of a smaller Gamo population for politics and budget allocation in SERS. Moreover, a Zeysse special woreda would contribute to tensions between the Zeysse and Gamo, as there are three Gamo-dominated kebeles and large-scale banana farms in borderlands that the Zeysse claim as their own.

Some of the arguments that the Gamo make undermine Zeysse demands for self-rule. For example, Gamo narratives speak of a homogenized identity, claiming that the Gamo and Zeysse are one people, intermarried and tied together. One Zeysse respondent reflects on the words of the regional president, Tilahun Kebede:

He said that it is impossible to separate the Zeysse from the Gamo, and vice versa. Yes, we believe he is right on this issue. As we live together, we marry one another. For example, in my house, there are three Gamo men and two women who earn their income by working on the banana farm. We cannot stop this as we need one another but our quest is that we are a recognized ethnic group. We should have the same recognition that the Gamo already have. As they develop their culture, language and history, we need to develop ours.

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37 'Rights groups reports surge in violence over governance in Gamo Zone', *Addis Standard*, 2 January 2024. Accessed 13 November 2024, <https://addisstandard.com/news-rights-group-reports-surge-in-violence-over-governance-in-gamo-zone/>.

38 In particular, the Dorze and Kucha are openly seeking recognition of their identity, with the latter also seeking a zonal administration for the Kucha people. See: Temesgen, 'Ethnicity, Federalism, and Conflict'.

39 'For the control of Kola Shara: Armed insurgency simmer in Ethiopia's youngest regional state', *Addis Standard*, 13 February 2024. Accessed 2 August 2024, <https://addisstandard.com/in-depth-for-the-control-of-kola-shara-armed-insurgency-simmer-in-ethiopia-s-youngest-regional-state/>.

Let them manage their house, as we desire to develop our own culture and language.<sup>40</sup>

In contrast, a Gamo participant in neighbouring Shelle town characterize the groups as intertwined:

They are not different from us. Zeysse people are our people; half of them went from here [Gamo highlands]. Some have an uncle here or a brother here and there. To talk about the difference between the Gamo and the Zeysse in strict ethnic terms is political. For instance, our relationship is not like that between the Gamo and the Nyangatom [the pastoralist community in South Omo zone].<sup>41</sup>

Another prevailing view expressed by both current Gamo zone and regional leaders is that the Zeysse do not meet the demographic threshold to form a special woreda, citing the 2007 population census, which shows little change from the 1984 census. When asked at the SERS council about the lack of response to the Zeysse bid, the regional president indicated that they will not form a special woreda consisting of only three kebeles.<sup>42</sup> Some Gamo zone officials have also said publicly that Zeysse EZEMA members who promote the Zeysse quest do not have a mandate to form an administration because they have not won local elections.<sup>43</sup> After SERS was formed, Gamo officials made moves to securitize the Zeysse campaign and arrested those promoting the special woreda. They even claimed the presence of armed groups in Zeysse and appealed for regional security forces to intervene, which has led to more than 11 deaths in Zeysse areas since October 2023.<sup>44</sup>

As one study participant who previously represented the Zeysse in the federal parliament explains, these arguments constitute a violation of Zeysse legal rights by the ruling party and the opposition:

The constitution supports the self-rule of the people at different levels. The ruling party [PP] did not allow this right even though the people have been seeking for it for a long time. There are EZEMA members who obstruct the right of the ruling party to administer the Zeysse kebeles. Even if the PP is defeated by the Zeysse, the PP is still the majority in

40 Interview with a Zeysse trader from Elgo town, Arba Minch Zuria woreda, 27 December 2023.

41 Interview with a Gamo member from Shelle, Arba Minch, 14 January 2024.

42 Interview with the current elected Zeysse federal state councilor, Wolayta Sodo, 29 December 2023.

43 Interview with the former federal state councilor of Zeysse, Arba Minch, 14 January 2024. See also: Ethiopian Human Rights Commission, ደቡብ ኢትዮጵያ ክልል፡- በጋሞ ዞን፣ አርባ ምንጭ ዙሪያ ወረዳ የተከሰተው ውጥረት እና ግጭት ከመባባሱ በፊት አስቸኳይ ምላሽ ይሻል, ('South Ethiopia Region: The Tension and Clash in Gamo Zone, Arba Minch Zuria Woreda Needs Quick Resolution Before It Escalates') 2 January 2024. Accessed 23 November 2024, <https://ehrc.org/ደቡብ-ኢትዮጵያ-ክልል፡-በጋሞ-ዞን፣-አርባ/>.

44 'በአርባ ምንጭ ዙሪያ የልዩ ወረዳ ጥያቄ በሚያቀርቡ ነዋሪዎች እና የጸጥታ አካላት ግጭት ሰባት ሰው ተገደለ' ('Seven people killed in a clash between security forces and residents demanding a special woreda in Arba Minch Zuria – residents'), Voice of America, 9 January 2024. Accessed 2 August 2024, <https://amharic.voanews.com/a/gamo-deadly-clashes/7431563.html>.

the [Gamo] zone council and has the right to govern the area until a local election is held in the area. For example, the EZEMA supporters are the majority in the Zeysse Elgo kebele and they interfere in the everyday activities of the kebele authorities. At this time of current crisis in the Zeysse, elected EZEMA representatives were denied access to visit the people. The regional councillor was even imprisoned. There were multiple violations of rights related to massive arbitrary arrests of Zeysse members on false charges, and killings in the Zeysse areas.<sup>45</sup>

Despite their constitutional focus, the same respondent also remarks that the decision to block the Zeysse bid is more political than legal, saying it is related to friction between supporters of EZEMA and PP.<sup>46</sup> The ruling party postponed decisions on most self-rule requests until the end of the national elections in June 2021. In the election, EZEMA won in the Zeysse special constituency.<sup>47</sup> After the election, PP started a campaign for the creation of a cluster region. Zeysse EZEMA leaders encouraged people to vote no in the referendum, which heightened tension between EZEMA and Gamo zone officials.<sup>48</sup> The no vote also appears to have harmed the chances of Arba Minch town becoming the administrative centre of the new region.

During the first meeting of the SERS council, the majority of Zeysse did not get what they had been demanding for more than two decades—a special woreda. But the council did approve zone status for ethnic groups such as the Ale, whose members had not requested their own administration. All of our Zeysse study participants agree that this outcome created a serious problem for the people. The former Zeysse parliamentary representative explains:

When EZEMA won in Zeysse, we knew our people would suffer. We know the EPRDF political practice. Everything is done on a party level regardless of the rights in the constitution. There is little change under the PP. We [who demand ordinary woreda for the Zeysse to be established under Gamo zone] warned the EZEMA candidates that it would affect our people. They did not take our warning seriously. Given the political culture we have, you cannot get an autonomous special woreda by electing the EZEMA...See what happened in the first regional council meeting of the South Ethiopia Region at Arba Minch? It blocked the quest of our people even though it was being made for a long time. There is virtually no representation of the Zeysse in the current regional state government. There is no platform for dialogue on issues. I do not know why the Zeysse EZEMA leadership promotes an ethnic agenda here [for the Zeysse], while it is a citizen-based party in its party manifesto.<sup>49</sup>

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45 Interview with former federal councilor of Zeysse, Arba Minch, 14 January 2024.

46 Interview with former federal councilor of Zeysse, Arba Minch, 14 January 2024.

47 The Zeysse were entitled to this according to the 1995 Ethiopian Electoral proclamation as well as the 2019 revised Ethiopian Electoral Proclamation. See Proclamation no. 111/1995, Art. 15 (3) with amendments made by proclamation no. 438/2005. The Ethiopian Electoral, Political Parties Registration and Election's Code of Conduct Proclamation No. 1162/2019 Art. 13(b).

48 Interview with former federal councilor of Zeysse, Arba Minch, 14 January 2024.

49 Interview with former federal councilor of Zeysse, Arba Minch, 14 January 2024.

The same respondent promotes an ordinary woreda for the Zeysse, although the majority of the other Zeysse study participants disagree; they want a special woreda.

A former cabinet member in Arba Minch Zuria woreda, an ethnic Gamo, expresses his surprise that the Zeysse bid was rejected:

The Zeysse quest has existed for a long time. As a newly formed region, we expected them to get their special woreda. This is the position of Gamo zone, since they have been asking for it for a long time. The zone does not provide an administrative structure [for self-rule]. Since they submitted the case to the House of Federation, [it] will decide on their case.<sup>50</sup>

The same Gamo respondent adds:

It would be good if their [the Zeysse] desire is addressed. The problem is that they ask for a special woreda, which does not exist in SERS. They do not want to have an ordinary woreda and continue under the Gamo zone administration. They want direct accountability to the regional authorities not to the Gamo zone.<sup>51</sup>

While political disputes between the Zeysse EZEMA and PP have taken centre stage, the issue at the heart of the Zeysse–Gamo conflict is competition over borderland resources, predominantly the fertile land used for banana plantations. According to a report produced by a Zeysse EZEMA leader, the Zeysse lowlands constitute 33 per cent of the Zeysse lands and are renowned for their banana production.<sup>52</sup> These lowlands are home to large-scale banana farms in Elgo, Wozaka, Sile and Lucy Agricultural Development Plc (also known as Lucy Farm), a private banana farm. In addition to small-scale banana farming, plantations have attracted significant investment. For example, the privately owned Lucy Farm<sup>53</sup> leases 140 ha, of which more than 64 ha is a banana farm located in the Zeysse-Gamo borderlands.<sup>54</sup>

Bananas generate significant revenue for farmers, traders and landowners in the area, as well as for the Gamo zone administration. According to study participants, annual revenue for the zone is estimated to be more than ETB 100 million (USD 920,000)<sup>55</sup> in taxes that are paid by

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50 Interview with former cabinet member of the Arba Minch Zuria woreda, Arba Minch, 14 January 2024.

51 Interview with former cabinet member of Arba Minch Zuria woreda, Arba Minch, 14 January 2024.

52 Zeysse EZEMA, 'Socio-economic situation of the Zeysse'.

53 Lucy Farm is owned by a Tigrayan business person who took over the former state farm in 2016. See: Dawit Endeshaw, 'Public Enterprise Transfers 59 Million Br Farm to Lucy Agricultural', *Addis Fortune*, 17 May 2016. Accessed 2 August 2024, <https://allafrica.com/stories/201605180933.html>.

54 Mekonnen, 'Banana as a Cash Crop'.

55 All currency exchange rates in this report are approximate and based on Oanda rates from 16 August 2024; see: <https://www.oanda.com/currency-converter/en/?from=ETB&to=USD&amount=1>.



around 100 banana traders.<sup>56</sup> They also say four other fruit and vegetable associations in the area generate taxes of more than ETB 20 million (USD 184,000) per year for Gamo zone. Moreover, these revenues exclude the income taxes collected from individual farmers, and state-owned and large-scale private banana farms. Participants say that in the peak production season, more than 100 banana-loaded cars per day go from the Zeysse lowlands to large markets across the country such as Addis Ababa, Adama, Dire Dawa and Gondar.

One Zeysse banana farmer offers insights on the household income from banana production:

Bananas are cut every month. The income differs depending on the size of the farm. Some farmers get more than ETB 100,000 [USD 9,200] per month if they have one hectare of an irrigable farm that produces more than 60 quintals [6,000 kilos] per month. For instance, I have half a hectare as a banana farm. I calculate my expenses, including labour payments, and get a minimum of 30 quintals [3,000 kilos] per month. Every farmer producing bananas in the lowlands has more than half a hectare of land.<sup>57</sup>

The contest for control of the revenue generated in Zeysse areas is at the centre of the recent Zeysse–Gamo conflict. In addition to formal taxation, there are also opportunities for actors across the supply chain to demand informal payments. One trigger for violence was the death of a young Zeysse man in police custody in October 2023 and the subsequent destruction of more than 5 ha of banana farms belonging to the Elgo kebele authorities, who were allegedly against the Zeysse special woreda campaign.<sup>58</sup> Although the Zeysse study participants from Elgo and Wozaka did not know who vandalized the farm, they think the incident was used as an excuse by Gamo elites to arrest Zeysse suspected of supporting EZEMA and promoting the special woreda demand.<sup>59</sup> Irrigation for banana farmers who support EZEMA was also cut off.

The situation in the borderlands between the Zeysse and Gamo adds another layer of complexity. While not a source of open conflict, there is nonetheless tension simmering because of the locations of the banana farms in Shelle (the Lucy Farm) and Sile state farms. These lands traditionally belong to the Zeysse but the inhabitants near the banana farms are predominantly Gamo, with a few Ganjulle, Amhara and Zeysse. One Zeysse respondent explains the latent nature of the conflict in these borderlands:

The reason why our people kept silent regarding the border is that even if we are recognized as an ethnic group, we have yet to receive the autonomous local government structure [a

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56 Interview with Zeysse members, Wolayta Sodo, 29 December 2023. Unless otherwise specified, the financial information in this paragraph is derived from this source.

57 Interview with Zeysse farmers at Wozaka, 27 December 2023.

58 Interview with Zeysse college teacher in Arba Minch Town, Wolayta Sodo, 28 December 2023. See also, 'Rights Groups Report', *Addis Standard*; Ethiopian Human Rights Commission, 'South Ethiopia Region'.

59 Interviews with the Zeysse participants; see also 'Rights Groups Report', *Addis Standard*; Ethiopian Human Rights Commission, 'South Ethiopia Region'.

special woreda] that we have been seeking for three decades. Since the administrative structure is formed in the known geographic territory of the Zeyse people, we did not raise the issue now. In Shelle villages, the majority of the residents come from other areas. Once we get the special woreda status, these kebeles will be part of that woreda. We fear that if Gamo zone elites claim that the land belongs to the residents to control the villages and the Lucy banana plantation, this would create a new problem in the area in the future.<sup>60</sup>

The new problem this respondent raises is escalation of border conflict between the groups:

The Gamo zone officials have spread rumours to see the reaction of our people [the Zeyse]. For instance, they talked about the issue of distributing open land below the main road near Lake Chamo to the Shelle youth. These lands have been used for grazing by Zeyse farmers. We, as Zeyse, believe that the people who settled in our lands at Shelle villages, like any Ethiopians, have the right to live in their homes. Whenever such rumours spread among our people, there are fierce debates and tensions. Again, the Gamo zone officials say they want to give Shelle residents a woreda to see our reaction. They say it is up to the Zeyse to be with the Shelle. We see this as an attempt to create a woreda structure within Zeyse lands to continue to control our people and our resources, if we secure administrative autonomy from the Gamo zone. If we buy into such rumours and raise the border issue now, it will compound the suffering of our people.<sup>61</sup>

In contrast, all the Gamo participants from neighbouring Shelle town do not accept that the areas claimed by the Zeyse belong to the group:

There is a land expansion idea from the Zeyse, similar to that between the Amhara and Tigray or in Benishangul. Zeyse people have their kebele structures with clear borders. There is no border problem or dispute. There is a clear natural border, which is the Sego River, demarcating the Zeyse and Gamo kebeles from the highlands to Lake Chamo. They do not cross this river and we do not cross it. Areas such as Shelle Mele have been under the Gamo Mele traditional *kawo*, or king. The name 'Mele' is already on the Google map. They desire to write Zeyse names on the map. There is no Zeyse residence in Shelle. The Zeyse king [*kate*] did not administer the area where there are banana plantations [Lucy Farm].<sup>62</sup>

Alongside these dichotomized views on territorial control, some of our study participants situate the problem in the lack of accountability and rule of law in Arba Minch Zuria woreda. The former Zeyse parliamentary representative offers an overview:

Border issues should not be raised or used to mobilize the people. Shelle Mele, near

60 Interview with male Zeyse college teacher in Arba Minch, Wolayta Sodo, 28 December 2023.

61 Interview with male Zeyse college teacher in Arba Minch, Wolayta Sodo, 28 December 2023.

62 Interview with Gamo member from Shelle village, Arba Minch, 14 January 2024.

the road, was created on Zeysse land. The Derg regime resettled the Ganjule in this area, relocating them from the island on Lake Chamo. Others later resettled in the area. ... Settlements are not unique to this place. They are everywhere in Ethiopia. The plantation farm was a state farm. If someone wanted to have it, there was a legal process. We should not talk about this general issue.

He adds:

The key issue is the self-rule of the people and the development of language and culture. In the current situation, one group cannot develop alone. We need mutually beneficial development via woreda administration at the lower level, a joint zone with Gamo and participation in politics at the regional level. The Shelle Mele issue should not be used to mobilize our people for a special woreda. The problem is rather the illegal use of public land, especially near the lake, for personal gain. There are individuals from the Zeysse and Gamo who have informally accumulated wealth. They instigate this chaotic situation. They are the ones who block access to water and fertilizers for the weak or the poor. And they are the ones who bribe the judges of the woreda to do their bidding.<sup>63</sup>

There are a growing number of educated Zeysse who do not have employment or representation in Gamo zone. Consequently, they challenge the status quo. The blurring of boundaries between the two communities also complicates their relationship. The SERS government is seen as lacking neutrality in addressing the issues. The regional president, who is the former president of Gamo-Gofa zone and was the PP office head in SNNPRS, is seen as blocking the voice of the Zeysse. Zeysse respondents point to the regional government taking a securitized approach. For example, after security forces were sent to Gamo zone, 18 Shara members were killed on 26 August 2023, with 8 Zeysse killed later the same year on 29 December.<sup>64</sup>

At the time of fieldwork for this study in December 2023, the federal government sent a team from the National Election Board to diffuse tensions between Zeysse EZEMA members and PP, as well as among the Zeysse. This team consulted with SERS, Gamo zone and Arba Minch Zuria woreda authorities as well as Zeysse EZEMA leadership at Wolayta Sodo town. In the meetings, they agreed to conduct grassroots dialogue in Zeysse to try and reduce tensions and explore ways to bring back displaced Zeysse.

On 25 March 2024, the two parties held a joint conference, although whether it will diffuse tensions related to the Zeysse special woreda campaign is yet to be seen. Study participants highlight a need for more dialogue to address the issues. They urge the regional government to conduct genuine dialogue to understand the concerns of the Zeysse. Based on observations of the research team, there are elders from both communities who can handle this in a constructive

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63 Interview with former federal councilor of Zeysse, Arba Minch, 14 January 2024.

64 'Eighteen people killed, twenty others injured in Gamo zone, South Ethiopia', *Borkena*, 28 August 2023. Accessed 2 August 2024, <https://borkena.com/2023/08/28/ethiopia-shara-kebele-eighteen-people-killed-20-injured-in-gamo-zone/>.

manner. The regional government should engage them. Zeyse respondents also stress the need for the regional government to revisit the motion it passed during its first meeting when it restructured several districts into zones and said all autonomy demands had been addressed, though it did not mention the Zeyse's.<sup>65</sup>

Overall, the way the SERS government is addressing the bids for self-administered units does not appear to be grounded in objective criteria. This is visible from a regional council decision that gave a zonal status to the Ale ethnic group who did not ask for it while ignoring Zeyse's long-standing campaign for a special woreda. Rather, the decisions seem to be based on the political interests of a small group of regional leaders and elites from dominant groups. This offers minorities such as the Zeyse limited political options to pursue their own interests, and instead triggers the use of a mix of strategies, including demonstrations and non-collaboration with Gamo officials. With limited accountability at all levels for officials' role in creating problems or in how they have chosen to address the legitimate requests and grievances in this contested borderland, future Zeyse–Gamo conflict is likely.



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65 'Ethiopia's two new regional states formed: Central Ethiopia, South Ethiopia', *Borkena*, 19 August 2023. Accessed 13 November 2024, <https://borkena.com/2023/08/19/ethiopias-two-new-regional-states-formed-central-ethiopia-south-ethiopia/>.

## CASE STUDY 2: KABENA–GURAGE CONFLICT

Like the Zeyse-Gamo conflict, the Kabena-Gurage conflict is also centred on borders and borderland resources. The Kabena and the Gurage are among the ten recognized ethnic groups in Central Ethiopia Regional State (CERS). The Kabena predominantly live in rural areas around Wolkite town and the Gurage mostly live in the town. The Kabena speak a highland east Cushitic language, a type also spoken by related groups such as Halaba, Hadiya, Kambatta, Mareko and Tambaro.<sup>66</sup> According to the 2007 census, the Kabena population was 52,735 people, with the majority followers of Islam. Their key economic activities are agriculture and trade.

The Gurage are the largest ethnic group in CERS, numbering 1,859,831 people according to the 2007 census.<sup>67</sup> The other larger CERS groups are the Cushitic language-speaking Hadiya and Kambatta and Semitic-speaking Silte. In addition to the Gurage, these groups also wanted their own region. Gurage speak a Semitic language, with local variations among Gurage sub-groups such as the Sodo, Maskan and Sebat-Bet. The Gurage are mostly followers of Christianity and Islam. They are among the groups that have widely migrated into urban centres, including forming the majority in Wolkite town.<sup>68</sup>

The Kabena–Gurage conflict stems from their long-standing dispute over Wolkite and the Kabena bid for self-rule in the form of a special woreda. Evolving since the 1990s, the dispute between the two has resulted in tensions and violent conflicts, including after the formation of CERS. The violence took on a more politicized ethnic dimension following the granting of a special woreda to the Kabena in 2023. It erupted in Wolkite in February 2023.<sup>69</sup> In October that year it spread to surrounding settlements in Kabena special woreda, leading to the destruction of private and public properties and deaths on both sides.<sup>70</sup> There were already polarized

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66 Joachim Crass and Ronny Meyer, 'The Qabena and the Wolene: two peoples of the Gurage region and their respective histories according to their own traditions', *Annals d Ethiopie* 11/17 (2001).

67 Population Census Commission, '2007 Census', 73.

68 Worku Nida, 'Fanonet: Ethnohistorical notes on the Gurage urban migration in Ethiopia', *Ufahamu: A Journal of African Studies* 28/2–3 (2000).

69 'Wolkite, Ethiopia: Police shot dead four peaceful protestors', *Borkena*, 16 February 2023. Accessed 2 August 2024, <https://borkena.com/2023/02/16/wolkite-ethiopia-police-shot-dead-four-peaceful-protestors/>.

70 'Deadly conflict in Gurage zone leaves four dead, dozens injured', *Addis Standard*, 17 October 2023. Accessed 2 August 2024, <https://addisstandard.com/news-deadly-conflict-in-gurage-zone-leaves-four-dead-dozens-injured/>.

discourses and tensions between the Kabena and the Gurage, especially following the CERS council decision to upgrade the status of Kabena, Mareko and Tambaro districts to special woredas during its first meeting in Wolkite on 19 August 2023.<sup>71</sup> The fundamental point of contention between the Kabena and the Gurage is the border reconfiguration that the creation of Kabena special woreda might entail.<sup>72</sup>

### LOCAL CONTEXT: WOES OVER WOLKITE

Wolkite is located around 150 km from Addis Ababa on the main highway to Jimma and south-west Ethiopia. In the late nineteenth century, before the formation of modern Ethiopia, it was already a significant trade centre. The town attracted people from regions such as Kaffa, Adal, Tigray and other areas inhabited by Cushitic groups. As a trade corridor, Wolkite also became the home for many Yemeni business people who were believed to have helped foster an entrepreneurial mindset in the locals.<sup>73</sup> In the Gurage oral tradition, there are stories about conflicts with Oromos over lands situated between the Wabe and Rebu rivers. Now inhabited by the Kabena, according to the Kabena oral tradition, these lands were not inhabited by the Gurage at the time the Kabena settled there. At least 400 years before their incorporation into the Ethiopian state, the Kabena were the dominant group in the area.<sup>74</sup> Hassen Injamo was a famous Kabena leader who instilled a strong Islamic faith among the Kabena and the Gurage. He also resisted the territorial raids of Emperor Menelik II (1889–1913) in the late nineteenth century. Injamo had good relations with Jimma Aba Jiffar (the son of Diggo Oromo leader Abba Magal), who often stayed overnight in Wolkite during official trips.<sup>75</sup>

By 1889, Menelik II had finally succeeded in incorporating Kabena and Gurage lands into the Ethiopian state and both groups had to pay tributes and taxes to the central government in Addis Ababa. The oppressive Menelik regime resulted in forced migrations, with some Kabena fleeing to other areas such as Jimma and the Gurage moving into urban areas including Wolkite and Addis Ababa. Until 1991, the Gurage, Kabena and some Oromos were under the same administration, based in Wolkite, which became a multi-ethnic town with a Gurage majority. Wolkite and surrounding kebeles were administered as Goro woreda. As a result, the town became an administrative and trade centre for the Gurage and the Kabena. Successive Ethiopian rulers favoured the dominant Gurage, however, because the Kabena were largely Muslims and

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71 'Deadly conflict in Gurage', *Addis Standard*.

72 'EPO Weekly: 14–20 October 2023', Ethiopia Peace Observatory, ACLED, 25 October 2023. Accessed 2 August 2024, <https://epo.acleddata.com/2023/10/25/epo-weekly-14-20-october-2023/>.

73 Crass and Meyer, 'Qabena and Wolene'.

74 Crass and Meyer, 'Qabena and Wolene'.

75 Established around 1830, the kingdom of Jimma Abba Jifar was the largest and most powerful of five monarchies formed by Oromo people in south-western Ethiopia.

had fiercely resisted Menelik.<sup>76</sup> It was only during the Derg regime that the Kabena arrived at a cordial relationship with the government in Addis Ababa following a secularization policy that provided some space for Muslims to practice their religion.

Kabena–Gurage relations have been strained since the introduction of the ethno-linguistic federal system in the 1990s. In line with the principle of self-rule enshrined in the constitution, the Kabena demanded recognition for their identity, along with the granting of special woreda status so they would be accountable to the region rather than part of Gurage zone. The Kabena wanted to establish their special woreda in Goro woreda, which is considered to be their historic heartland. Since the 1990s, the rural areas of Goro have been primarily settled by the Kabena. Goro lowland areas are inhabited by the Kembatta, Hadiya, Oromo and Amhara as a result of the Derg villagization programmes and were included in Gurage zone. Although the Kabena received official recognition as a group in 1992, they were not allowed to form an autonomous government. Instead, they remained under the administration of Gurage zone as a minority. Their demand for self-rule was opposed by the Gurage, who chose Wolkite as their capital. In response, the Kabena attempted to join neighbouring Oromia region to counter Gurage influence. This was not successful, however, partly due to lack of interest from the then Oromia president and partly due to pressure by the Gurage and SNNPRS officials in blocking a federal government plan to demarcate the boundaries between the two groups.<sup>77</sup>

Most of our Kabena study participants identify several measures that have undermined their identity and interests in Wolkite, including the separation of Goro woreda into Kabena and Abeshige woredas in 2002 and the transfer of Wolkite municipal authority to Abeshige.<sup>78</sup> They accuse the Gurage authorities of incorporating Gubure into the Wolkite administration in 2012 even though it is 12 km away from the town. They did this without consulting the Kabena people in Kolakabada kebele, located between Wolkite and Gubure. The inclusion of Gubure, originally in Chaha woreda, in Wolkite town was seen as a solution by the regional government to ease tensions related to Kabena's resistance to Wolkite's expansion into surrounding Kabena rural kebeles. Other issues include changing the names of institutions and streets in Wolkite, the forceful eviction of farmers and the inclusion of five surrounding rural Kabena kebeles into Wolkite in 2012.

## POST-2018 KABENA–GURAGE RELATIONS

The Kabena woreda council request for a special woreda resurfaced after the post-2018 national political transition, and led to a violent incident in Wolkite town. This was fuelled by inequality and disputes between the two groups relating to matters such as unequal access to employment

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76 Temesgen Thomas and Engida Esayas, 'Politics of identity and minority quest for self-rule in federal Ethiopia: the case study of Kabena people in south-central Ethiopia', *Journal of Asian and African Studies* (2024). Accessed 22 November 2024, <https://doi.org/10.1177/00219096231218441>.

77 Thomas and Esayas, 'Politics of Identity'.

78 Thomas and Esayas, 'Politics of Identity'.

in Wolkite, inadequate water services, a lack of space for cultural expression, unfair resource distribution and threats to Kabena lands.<sup>79</sup>

A few months into his rule, Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed toured SNNPRS, primarily to try and diffuse tensions and quell the violence that broke out across the region during the transition. He visited Wolkite on 20 June 2018 and spoke to residents from both communities, promising to cooperate with them to seek a sustainable solution to the disagreement. In particular, the prime minister called for dialogue facilitated by traditional and religious leaders to address points of differences between the Kabena and Gurage, including the role of youth in instigating the violence. He emphasized the role local youth could instead play in restoring peace.<sup>80</sup> Abiy stated: ‘I strongly request the youth to follow in my steps by promptly forgiving one another and to work in unison to set a visible example for the rest of the members of the community and the town.’<sup>81</sup> His intervention temporarily eased tensions, although the root causes remained unaddressed.

The post-2018 Kabena–Gurage dispute occurred amid a chaotic political situation in SNNPRS, with the Kabena and the Gurage among multiple groups seeking enhanced self-administration. Whereas a majority of Gurage residents vigorously sought regional statehood and opposed the CERS proposed by the ruling party,<sup>82</sup> the bulk of Kabena people sought a special woreda and supported the cluster approach.<sup>83</sup> The ruling party conducted a series of public consultations to persuade the Gurage to accept CERS. In the end, many Sebat-Bet Gurage woreda and zone officials remained resistant and were consequently removed from their jobs.

79 Thomas and Esayas, ‘Politics of Identity’.

80 The Gurage youth are called ‘Zerma’. They have been active since the 2018 transition, especially in the protest against the cluster approach; see: ‘Security forces arrest several senior gov’t officials, youth, activists in Gurage zone following intensified crackdown on dissent’, *Addis Standard*, 4 March 2023. Accessed 2 August 2024, <https://addisstandard.com/news-security-forces-arrest-several-senior-govt-officials-youth-activists-in-gurage-zone-following-intensified-crackdown-on-dissent/>. The Kabena youth formed ‘enkam kabena youth association’, which was certified by the federal civil society agency in August 2011; interview with a Kabena who is Wolkite University instructor, Wolkite, 4 January, 2024. The Kabena youth were active in the recent conflict in Wolkite; see: ‘EPO Weekly: 7–13 October 2023’, Ethiopia Peace Observatory, ACLED, 18 October 2023. Accessed 2 August 2024, <https://epo.acleddata.com/2023/10/18/epo-weekly-7-13-october-2023/>.

81 ‘Premier Abiy Conferred with Residents of Wolkite town’, *Ethiopian News Agency*, 20 June 2018. Accessed 2 August 2024, [https://www.ena.et/web/eng/w/en\\_1408](https://www.ena.et/web/eng/w/en_1408).

82 ‘Without official decision from House of Federation and a referendum, Southern region discusses forming “Central Ethiopia Region”; plan includes restive Gurage zone’, *Addis Standard*, 2 December 2022. Accessed 2 August 2024, <https://addisstandard.com/news-analysis-without-official-decision-from-house-of-federation-and-a-referendum-southern-region-discusses-forming-central-ethiopia-region-plan-includes-restive-gurage-zone/>.

83 Interview with PP officials in Kabena special woreda, Wolkite, 24 December 2024. See also Ethiopia Peace Observatory, ‘Central Ethiopia/Regional Profile’, ACLED. Accessed 8 August 2024, <https://epo.acleddata.com/central-ethiopia/>.



Ultimately, however, the consultations and the CERS council decision did not ease tensions but rather reinvigorated the Kabena–Gurage dispute over Wolkite. According to most study participants, this is due to boundary-related disputes that pre-date the 2018 transition. A Gurage respondent, a civil servant in the town administration, identifies the source of the problem:

The Kabena rural residents who were included in the town boundary demarcation have been unwilling to accept this. These people are our people. Regardless of the alleged differences between the Kabena and the Gurage, we are mixed by marriage and we have lived together in town for a long time. If you tell them that this land is within the town master plan boundary, then they say no. This entails the enforcement of the rule of law by the government. The town boundary must be respected.<sup>84</sup>

Another participant points out that tax revenue is collected by both the town administration and the Kabena woreda administration:

Kabena collects the taxes for itself and the Gurage collects for itself. I ask: How can a person pay double taxes to two authorities at the same time? Does this trend help the healthy growth of our economy? In particular, this trend has emerged since the 2018 reform. This means that there are two types of practice in town. The lack of a clear boundary for the town has also produced other problems. If you go and buy land from farmers in the areas that are, in principle, within the town boundaries but also claimed by the Kabena woreda, you cannot build a house in it or you will have to pay kabena woreda officials money to do it.<sup>85</sup>

Many Gurage respondents state that the core demand of the Gurage is to have the town boundary demarcated.<sup>86</sup> They say that in the series of consultations held—some of which included local administrators who opposed the cluster approach—the people agreed to the formation of the new region on the condition that it would end the longstanding problem of the town boundary and ameliorate tensions with the Kabena.

In contrast, most of our Kabena respondents indicate that they were focused on other issues raised during the public consultations held to promote CERS. As a Wolkite University employee explains:

The public discussion focused on the draft constitution, especially on improving articles 47 and 48. Article 47 says CERS was established from five zones; namely, Gurage, Hadiya, Silte, Halaba and Kambata, and one special woreda [Yem]. This provision denied the rights of ethnic groups such as Mareko, Kabena, Tambaro and Gongga, which are already recognized in the federal constitution. Article 48 limits the rights of minority groups,

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84 Key informant interview with civil servant in Gurage zone, Wolkite, 23 December 2023.

85 Key informant interview with Gurage trader, Wolkite, 23 December 2023.

86 Interviews with Gurage informants, Wolkite, December 2023.

saying that to secure a quest for a new administration, it should be approved by a three-fourths majority vote and other criteria. The people agreed in the public consultation that no criteria are needed to get rights for ethnic groups, as mentioned in article 48. It was also agreed that a two-thirds vote of the council is enough to secure a self-rule bid, instead of the three-fourths vote mentioned in this article. The consultation also confirmed that all recognized ethnic groups should be the founding members of CERS.<sup>87</sup>

The Kabena study participants who participated in the consultation explain that their people overwhelmingly opposed the proposal made by the Wolkite town mayor—that the Kabena self-rule decision should first get the consent of the town council. As the views shared by study participants from both sides of the conflict show, the consultations held for the establishment of CERS served to resuscitate rather than mitigate their long-simmering dispute over the town.

## CLUSTER REGION AND WOLKITE TOWN MASTER PLAN AS A BONE OF CONTENTION

The creation of CERS as a cluster region through a top-down approach and the contested master plan for Wolkite town have already raised serious questions about the land claims made by the Kabena and the Gurage. First, the establishment of CERS meant that Wolkite became one of the administrative seats of the new region, which increased the potential for urban sprawl and land expropriation from Kabena farmers in the town's environs. In line with this, the master plan for Wolkite, contested by Kabena since 2002 because it incorporates historic Kabena lands, escalated tensions between the groups.

The decision passed in the first CERS council meeting had different consequences for the Kabena and the Gurage.<sup>88</sup> It established four new administrative structures in Gurage zone. The Kabena and Mareko were each permitted to form their own special woredas.<sup>89</sup> Eastern Gurage zone was established for the Maskan and Sodo Gurage who supported the cluster region. While western Sebat-Bet Gurage support a Gurage regional state and rejected the cluster, other Gurage groups support the multi-ethnic region. Gurage respondents see the council decision as a move by PP to divide and weaken the Gurage.<sup>90</sup>

Although the CERS council affirmed Wolkite as the capital of Gurage zone, it did not address the dispute between the Kabena and Gurage over the town. Wolkite was also assigned to host eight regional institutions, including the state council. This has both increased the significance of the

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87 Interview with a Kabena who is Wolkite University instructor, Wolkite, 4 January 2024.

88 'From Water Shortage to Bloodshed: Wolkite Residents Mourn Lives Lost in Crackdown', *Addis Insight*, 17 February 2023. Accessed 2 August 2024, <https://addisinsight.net/from-water-shortage-to-bloodshed-wolkite-residents-mourn-lives-lost-in-crackdown/>.

89 The Mareko group has a violent ongoing borderland dispute with the Maskan Gurage. See: 'EPO Weekly: 30 September–6 October 2023', Ethiopia Peace Observatory, ACLED, 1 October 2023. Accessed 2 August 2024, <https://epo.acledata.com/2023/10/11/epo-weekly-30-september-6-october-2023/>.

90 Interviews with Gurage zone EZEMA leadership, Wolkite, 22 December 2023.

town and exacerbated the Kabena–Gurage dispute. All Gurage zone officials and some of the Gurage study participants we interviewed stress that the council motion to form Kabena special woreda was conditional on moving the Kabena out of Wolkite, though the motion mentions Wolkite as the Gurage zone administrative seat and it does not specify the administrative seat of Kabena. Gurage zone respondents state that the administrative offices for Kabena special woreda should be established more than 7 km from the Wolkite town boundary. All of the Kabena officials and some of the Kabena study participants we interviewed reject this interpretation.<sup>91</sup>

In the days following CERS' establishment, several Gurage and the Kabena ruling party officials promoted contradictory interests, which led to the violence. For most Gurage respondents, the conflict was triggered by the decision of Kabena officials to locate the seat of its special woreda in Wolkite. As stated in the council motion, however, Wolkite is the administrative capital of Gurage zone.<sup>92</sup> They further point out that the root cause of the problem is the lack of a clear boundary between Wolkite town and Kabena special woreda. This is compounded by the fact that the town was used as an administrative centre for Kabena woreda in the past, before CERS' establishment.<sup>93</sup> The majority of our Gurage study participants express support for the official position of Gurage zone: Kabena special woreda should relocate its offices outside the town boundary.

Specifically, all the Gurage respondents we interviewed echo the position of Wolkite town administration that the regional government should adhere to the 2012 master plan for the town. To this end, they shared documents containing a list of Kabena farmers from those five Kabena kebeles with the signatures of the kebele chairpersons.<sup>94</sup> These do not, however, indicate whether the farmers were willing to give up their lands and nor do they talk about compensation.

A majority of Kabena participants see the problem as continued Gurage efforts to evict Kabena farmers from a town that lies on their traditional lands established by Kabena Imams long before the Gurage arrived. As a Kabena activist states:

On the day of the inauguration of our special woreda, they tore our cultural clothes, and the Gurage police gave them protection. After the end of the inauguration, the windows of the cars of guests were broken. Some guests were beaten in the town. All of these incidents were given protection by the town authority and zone police. ...We celebrated this special woreda in the town of our grandfathers; namely, Abba Dalacha and Imam Hassen Injamo, our historical heritage, with a great feast. Wolkite is our red line. We kept silent until this official inauguration but no longer. In the history of the town, those who came for work

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91 Interviews with Gurage and Kabena participants, December 2023; January 2024.

92 Ethiopia Peace Observatory, 'Central Ethiopia', 8 August 2024.

93 Thomas and Esayas, 'politics of identity', 7.

94 Documents shared by Wolkite municipality manager, Wolkite, 24 December 2023.

and those who are indigenous to the land are not judged equally.<sup>95</sup>

Most of the Kabena respondents also relate the conflict to a continuing attempt by the Gurage to incorporate five Kabena kebeles into the town administration, evicting the farmers from their lands. As indicated by our elderly Kabena interlocutors and substantiated by secondary sources,<sup>96</sup> the inclusion of these rural kebeles in the Wolkite master plan encountered violent resistance from the Kabena after it was introduced without the consent of the people and the Kabena woreda leadership more than a decade ago. Thus, they opposed the demands promoted by the Wolkite administration. The Kabena believe there is no reason to relocate because their woreda offices have been in Wolkite for a long time. One Kabena civil servant in the Wolkite administration expresses his view of the October 2023 violence:

They planned to cleanse us from the town in a 30-minute campaign just to implement the town boundary demarcation and disperse the Kabena special woreda. But they did not succeed in displacing us to their desired place, Worshebe [another town in Kabena special woreda to the north-east of Wolkite]. Our people did not lose a single centimetre of their heritage.<sup>97</sup>

Most of our Gurage and Kabena interlocutors agree that issues involving the five Kabena kebeles included in Wolkite remain unresolved, thus blurring the boundary between the town and special woreda. Due to large-scale informal land transactions in those kebeles, however, the areas have been settled by Kabena, Gurage and others, urbanizing them in the process. Moreover, the Gurage zone, town administration and Kabena woreda have all built government offices on territory claimed by Kabena special woreda. Kabena and Gurage respondents agree tax revenue is a significant source of the town's budget and control over its collection remains a major issue between the groups, with both Gurage and Kabena officials collecting in the disputed kebeles.

Given such issues, the CERS council decision fails to consider the complexity of the problem. The motion does not mention the Kabena special woreda administrative seat, although it already has offices in Wolkite. It appears that the decision of the CERS council has contributed to the hardening of the existing inter-ethnic boundary conflict in the town. The regional police enforced the law but did not foster negotiations to address the dispute. The federal government responded by sending forces to contain the violence and protect roads and ethnically mixed settlements. It disarmed local police and militias in Wolkite and the surrounding Kabena kebeles,

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95 See: Habib Kedir, 'Kabena people re-birth', Telegram post, 7 October 2023 [9:27 PM], [https://t.me/Habib\\_Kedir](https://t.me/Habib_Kedir).

96 Thomas and Esayas, 'Politics of identity'; Getachew Gebrewold Delcasso, 'Identity-Based Conflict in Federal Ethiopia: The Case of Gurage and Kabena in the Gurage zone of SNNPR', MA thesis, Wachemo University, Hosanna, 2023.

97 Key informant interview with civil servant in Kabena special woreda peace and security office, Wolkite, 5 January 2024.

and arrested young people, local authorities, council members and activists from both sides, blaming them for fuelling the tensions. As an attempt to reduce the tension, the regional peace and security bureau organized a dialogue through traditional elders, including the neighbouring Oromo *Abba Gada*. The root causes remain unaddressed, however, and the conflict is likely to recur unless there is serious engagement by the regional and federal governments.

The Kabena–Gurage conflict demonstrates the intricacies and difficulties related to demarcating borders between groups that have coexisted relatively peacefully for centuries. It also shows the risks of failure to reconcile divergent group interests in mixed urban areas and borderlands. The lack of an inclusive solution intensifies competition and violence—including property damage that harms livelihoods—and weakens the social ties between Wolkite residents, as has occurred over the last two decades.



# CONCLUSION

Borders and borderlands provide opportunities for individuals and groups but also discourage social and economic interactions because of competition and differing administrative regimes. Although borders in Ethiopia are not entirely new political constructions—rather, they are rooted in social, cultural and historical realities—the formation of administrative units along ethno-linguistic lines since the 1990s has given them extra salience. Consequently, contestations, conflicts and claims for regional, zonal or special woreda status are rooted in an intricate and shifting entanglement of political, identity and economic questions. This highlights both the complexity of these conflicts and the difficulties any peacebuilding initiative encounters, especially in the absence of in-depth understanding of the nuances.

While the EPRDF regime suppressed many popular demands for autonomy in SNNPRS, sometimes through violence, such as the 2003 killings in Sidama, the government opened up space for such demands in the post-2018 transition. In contrast to the narrative promoted by Prime Minister Abiy and his government about breaking down barriers between ethnic groups (arguably implying a constitutional shift from ethno-linguistic federalism), dozens of groups in SNNPRS demanded regional statehood following the landslide Sidama vote in 2019.

Through a top-down approach, the government later introduced a cluster model as the basis for forming new regions, the result of which was the dissolution of SNNPRS and its reconfiguration as three new regional states, in addition to Sidama. The cluster approach was in part an initial experiment with geographical federalism but without robust comprehensive research and public consultation.

The two case studies in this report focus on SERS and CERS to identify the peculiarities of contestation in each state and emerging forms of conflict as a common phenomenon linked to the cluster model and the top-down manner in which it was implemented.

The Gamo-Zeyse case exemplifies competition for borderland resources as a causal factor behind identity-related political demands. The struggle over the banana-rich borderland between the Gamo and Zeyse, which the Zeyse claim as their ancestral land, is fundamentally a resource conflict, prompting Gamo elites to suppress the Zeyse quest for self-rule, especially after the formation of SERS.

In contrast, the Kabena-Gurage conflict raises issues of land expropriation in the context of urban sprawl, which also has an ethnic dimension. Wolkite town has become a bone of contention, in particular following the establishment of CERS in 2023 and the design of a 2012 town master plan that the Kabena view as a new form of land grabbing on their ancestral territory.



The cases possess an important commonality—the marginalization of minorities. The Zeyse and Kabena are marginalized by dominant groups, the Gamo and Gurage, respectively. This manifests in two primary ways: in a cultural and linguistic dimension, as in the case of Gamo elites suppressing Zeyse culture and language; and as a form of political under-representation, as seen with the historical and current marginalization of the Kabena by the Gurage.

Overall, a key finding is that the top-down administrative reconfigurations in SNPPRS has exacerbated competition for control of resources. In turn, this has worsened territorial and boundary conflicts. Combined with the marginalization of minorities, and in the absence of inclusive and participatory consultation and decision-making, the federal government risks causing further tension and conflict if it implements the cluster approach elsewhere.

Self-rule is a fundamental democratic demand and granting such rights can enhance peace, security and economic stability.<sup>98</sup> The way such questions are addressed, or the denial of a self-rule demand, may have negative consequences, however. The following six recommendations are designed to enhance harmony between the four ethnicities that are the focus of the studies, as well as to help foster peace in the new regions and the country at large:

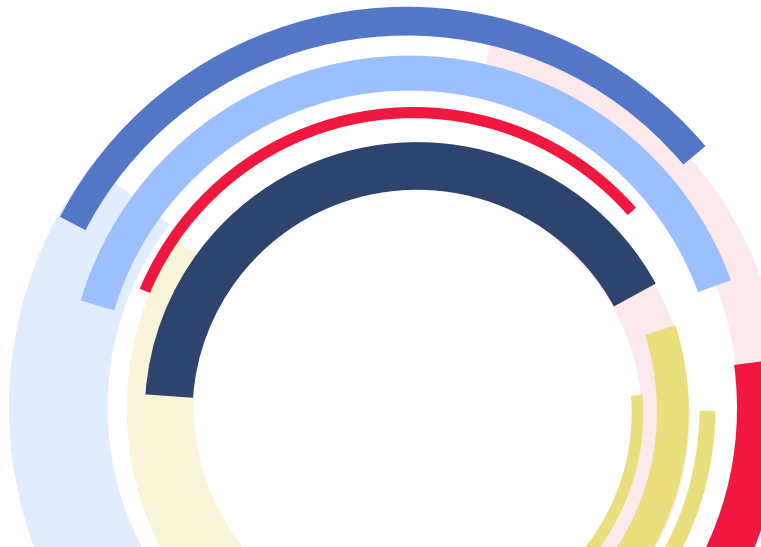
- The authorities should use participatory and democratic approaches to address self-rule bids.
- The authorities should reassess the cluster approach, as the evidence from southern Ethiopia suggests that top-down, non-inclusive attempts to redraw borders in ways that alters groups' sense of belonging and identity will increase tensions and the chances of conflict.
- In contentious border conflicts such as those between the Zeyse and Gamo, and the Kabena and Gurage, the federal and regional governments should protect minority groups and constrain those stoking conflicts for their own benefit.
- Regional and local governments, along with civil society organizations, should facilitate dialogue between conflicting parties.
- Especially given the increasing amounts of divisive online content, the government, local elders and civil society actors should promote intergroup harmony and peaceful co-existence.
- It is essential to demarcate clear borders informed by adequate and inclusive public consultation, negotiation and dialogue.

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98 Kymlicka, Will. 'The Global Diffusion of Multiculturalism'. In *The Governing Diversity: Democratic Solutions in multicultural society*, edited by Razmil Panossian, Bruce Berman and Anne Linscott, EDG-Ethnicity & Democratic Governance, Canada, 2007. Accessed 13 November 2024, [https://publications.gc.ca/collections/collection\\_2007/dd-rd/E84-23-2007E.pdf](https://publications.gc.ca/collections/collection_2007/dd-rd/E84-23-2007E.pdf).

# GLOSSARY OF ACRONYMS, WORDS AND PHRASES

|               |   |
|---------------|---|
| <i>Awraja</i> | (Amharic) province  |
| CERS          | Central Ethiopia Regional State   |
| <i>deres</i>  | (Gamo) sub-group  |
| EPRDF         | Ethiopia People's Revolutionary Democratic Front  |
| EZEMA         | Ethiopian Citizens Social Justice Party or<br><i>ye-ititiyopiya zegochi le-mahiberawi fitih</i> |
| <i>kate</i>   | (Zeyse) king  |
| <i>kawo</i>   | (Gamo) king   |
| <i>kebele</i> | (Amharic) lowest administrative division  |
| <i>maga</i>   | (Zeyse) settlement  |
| PP            | Prosperity Party  |
| SERS          | South Ethiopia Regional State   |
| SEPDM         | Southern Ethiopian People's Democratic Movement   |
| SNNPRS        | Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples' Regional State                                     |
| TPLF          | Tigray People's Liberation Front  |
| <i>woreda</i> | (Amharic) third-level administrative division   |





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