DOMINANT PATTERNS AND DYNAMICS OF URBAN CONTESTATIONS IN HAWASSA

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Rift Valley Institute
MAKING LOCAL KNOWLEDGE WORK

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AUTHORS

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CONTENTS

SUMMARY

- Studying urban contestations in Ethiopia's secondary cities can help us understand how the urban centres outside of Addis Ababa are evolving during an ongoing period of significant socio-economic and political change.
- In this regard, Hawassa in Sidama region provides an exceptional case where various layers of contestations over the past three decades resulted in changes at the subregional, regional and national levels. This study focuses on identifying the major actors and spaces of contestation and explaining the dominant patterns and dynamics of contestation in Hawassa.
- Hawassa provided the physical, institutional and discursive platform for the Sidama elite's mission of controlling their own regional state and thereby reaffirming the Sidama identity.
- The victorious campaign to establish Sidama region paved the way for three other new regions—Central Ethiopia, South Ethiopia and South West Ethiopia—to be carved out of the former Southern Nations Nationalities and Peoples' Regional State (SNNPRS).
- The study's findings are structured around three analytically distinct but inextricably intertwined lines of argument. The distinction made between the three layers of contestation is more analytical than empirical, as the reality on the ground is complex and interlinked. The analysis attempts to show the overlapping relationships while also emphasizing the important explanatory factors of each line of argument.
- The first layer focuses on the Sidama elite's efforts to control Hawassa in their struggle for statehood, primarily against the federal and regional governments. This is presented as a vertical contestation.
- The second layer focuses on the contestations between ethnolinguistic, sociocultural and religious groups in Hawassa. Elites claiming to represent the Sidama and Wolayta communities are identified as the primary actors along with groups from the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church (EOTC) and Protestant churches. The study approaches these kinds of contestations as horizontal.
- The third layer underscores the salient role in shaping urban contestations in Hawassa of the developmental ideology of the Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), the former ruling coalition. This layer helps to identify how the developmental thrust unique to the city brought new actors, socio-economic

dynamics and processes into Hawassa.

- The first argument posits that Hawassa has been the epicentre of vertical contestations, primarily among the Sidama elites, SNNPRS and the federal government. The critical dynamic in this contestation was created by the Sidama elites' claim that the city of Hawassa was on Sidama land.

- The key actors in the vertical contestation were political parties, and the major spaces of contestation were formal processes such as elections, referendums and decision-making at the regional and federal levels. The dominant patterns observed include co-optation, concession, repression and resistance.

- The second argument underscored the salient role of horizontal contestations in Hawassa. The main actors of horizontal contestation are elites who claim to represent ethnolinguistic, sociocultural and religious groups.

- Factors shaping the horizontal contestations include horizontal inequalities, a long history of competition among communities for control and access to resources, and the legacy of the state-making project at the national level.

- The identified spaces of contestation include language, control over public spaces, mainstream and social media platforms and public events such as religious and sporting occasions.

- Horizontal contestation takes a range of forms, including violent civil conflicts, exclusion and competition for visibility and dominance in public spaces. Violent civil conflicts involve individuals or groups, often organized informally. The Ejjetto, a group of young Sidamas, was the leading actor in violent civil conflict targeting non-Sidamas, mainly from the Wolayta community.

- The third argument foregrounds the salient role that EPRDF's developmentalist ideology played in shaping urban contestations in Hawassa. Developmentalism manifested through major infrastructure projects such as Hawassa Industrial Park. The accompanying high rate of urbanization brought new actors into Hawassa, such as the migrant labour force and multinational corporations. The observed spaces of contestation include wages, housing, land and municipal services.

- Patterns of contestations were shaped by the deficiencies of the developmental thrust, which included weak planning, execution and provision of municipal services, corrupt land transaction and acquisition practices and issues of labour suppression and exploitation.

- Understanding the dynamics of the development-induced contestation, however, requires going beyond the administrative features and examining the political processes that enabled them. EPRDF's developmentalism focused more on attracting foreign direct investment, with less priority given to supporting local companies and workers.

- Similarly, the EPRDF's economic growth strategy meant it was more interested in the hard currency generated by international garment and apparel manufacturers than it was concerned about the exploitation of Ethiopian labour by global capital.

INTRODUCTION

Ethiopian urban centres became the epicentres of political, economic and social change that engulfed the country in the aftermath of the 2015 elections, culminating in a change of government leadership in 2018. This paper uses the case of Hawassa to explain how the contestations unfolded in urban centres other than the federal capital, Addis Ababa. By focusing on Hawassa, the research aims to identify the actors, spaces and dominant patterns and dynamics of urban contestations and explain why specific conflicts and contestations dominate Hawassa's politics.

Hawassa offers a valuable analytical lens through which we can understand urban contestations in Ethiopia for at least three interrelated reasons. First, it represented a vertical struggle between local political elites and those at the regional and federal level. Hawassa had served as the seat of the SNNPRS government since the mid-1990s. This was the only geographically organized region in the new federation that emerged from the politicization of ethnic identities in post-1991 Ethiopia. As a result, Hawassa became a hotspot after the 2018 national political change for elites seeking political power by appealing to ethnolinguistic and cultural identities. The vertical contestations, particularly between the Sidama political elite and federal officials, occurred through formal political decision-making processes and under the framework of the federal constitution.

Second, Hawassa also became an epicentre of political contestations among rival political and economic elites within SNNPRS that claimed to represent ethnolinguistic and sociocultural groups such as the Sidama, Wolayta, Amhara and Oromo. This horizontal character of sub-national level contestation has shaped various groups' socio-cultural, political, economic and historical relations within the city and its surroundings.

Third, Hawassa is one of the emblems of the EPRDF-era development aspirations manifested through large infrastructure projects. The EPRDF government's commitment to improve Ethiopia's manufacturing sector was prominent in Hawassa. The expansive HIP and the accompanying high rate of urbanization make Hawassa suitable for exploring how political and economic decisions at the national level shape local-level political contestation patterns and dynamics.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES AND QUESTIONS

The research explains the dominant patterns and dynamics of urban contestations in Hawassa by identifying and examining the key actors and the spaces within which contestation occurs.

Moreover, the study explores unique aspects of urban conflict, analysing the impact of urban population growth on disparities in access to utilities, land, services and infrastructure, new demographic compositions and the political instrumentalization of historical grievances. The main question we aim to answer is: Who are the key actors and what are the main spaces of contestation in Hawassa? After identifying the primary actors and spaces, we explain how the dominant patterns and dynamics of socioeconomic and political contestations have been unfolding in the city.

METHODOLOGY

The report includes a review of socio-economic and political developments that have shaped urban contestations in Hawassa. This background helps in framing the first argument where the vertical contestation between Sidama and federal elites took various forms over the past three decades. The historical context also helps to discuss the recent socio-economic and political developments, which are analysed using primary data and a review of secondary sources. The discussions of horizontal contestation and development-induced contestations are substantiated by analysis of primary sources.

The primary data for this report was collected by the second author in Hawassa from October to December 2023. The primary data collection includes 32 interviews and two focus group discussions (FGDs). Participants in the interviews and the FGDs included government officials, community leaders, business operators, religious leaders, political and social activists, journalists, youth leaders, women's associations, NGO leaders and officials from HIP. The participants cover various socio-cultural and economic statuses, ages, genders and religious identities. The primary data collection also involved by the second author visiting places in Hawassa where violence occurred and attending public events to celebrate Nations and Nationalities Day in December 2023.

BACKGROUND

After Emperor Haile Selassie founded Hawassa in 1958, it replaced Yirgalem as the capital of Sidamo province in 1968. The geographic features of the location and its surroundings were a significant factor in shaping the economic activities, the political and social relations between the area's inhabitants and newcomers and the role that Hawassa has continued to play in Ethiopia's political-economic sphere. Establishing a state farm on the outskirts of Hawassa in 1966 had a lasting impact on the original inhabitants of Hawassa. The farm evicted Sidama semi-pastoralists from their ancestral land, labourers migrated to Hawassa in massive numbers, mainly from two neighbouring communities, the Wolayta and Kembata. Meanwhile, government officials, business people and their families (the majority of them Amharic speakers) moved to the new town.[1]

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1   Lovise Aalen, *The Politics of Ethnicity in Ethiopia: Actors, Power and Mobilisation under Ethnic Federalism.* Brill, 2011.

Hawassa is located 275 km south of Addis Ababa. The Hawassa city administration covers an area of 157.2 km² divided into eight sub-cities and 32 kebeles, of which 20 are classified as urban. Hawassa's population increased exponentially over past decades, doubling almost every ten years. According to the last three national censuses, the city's population was 36,200 in 1984, 69,200 in 1994 and 157,100 in 2007. The official estimate for Hawassa's population in 2019 was 372,721.[2] Between 2020–2030, the annual population growth rate is expected to be 5.4 per cent, more than double the national average.[3] Given the current rate of infrastructural and other economic development, high migration to Hawassa may increase the population growth rate to 7.5 per cent, which would lead to a population of more than 800,000 in 2030.[4]

Hawassa has both ethnolinguistic and religious diversity. The Sidama constitute an estimated 53 per cent of the population, followed by 13 per cent Amhara, 11 per cent Wolayta, 6 per cent Gurage, 4 per cent Kembata and 2 per cent Hadiya. Followers of Protestant denominations constitute 67 percent of Hawassa's population. In contrast, Orthodox Christians constitute 25 per cent, followed by Catholics and Muslims, which are roughly the same in number.[5]

2   Hawassa City Administration, 'The Structural Plan of Hawassa: 2020–2030, 2021'.

3   Hawassa City, 'Structural Plan'.

4   Hawassa City, 'Structural Plan'.

5   Hawassa City, 'Structural Plan'.

HAWASSA AS A SITE OF VERTICAL CONTESTATION

in this section, we explain how political contestation in Hawassa is an outcome of the demand for self-rule, territorial control and the affirmation of the Sidama identity. The primary focus of our analysis is the vertical contestation between the Sidama elite and the federal government in the wake of the post-1991 federalist system.[6] The primary actors are the Sidama elite, elites from other groups constituting SNNPRS and the federal government. The key spaces of vertical contestation include formal ones such as decision-making processes within the regional government, elections, referendum and ad hoc events such as civil resistance activities and demonstrations. The most frequently observed patterns of vertical contestation include co-optation, compromise, resistance and repression. Depending on the degree of contestation and on other contextual factors, these patterns either overlap or are discrete.

The vertical contestations between the Sidama elite and the federal government over the past three decades reveal the idiosyncrasies of the Ethiopian federal system. The core element of contention stems from the conceptualization and institutionalization of ethnicity in the post-1991 federal arrangement. Scholars contend that there are arguably three different approaches to understanding ethnicity. The first is a primordial approach emphasizing ethnolinguistic and sociocultural groups' objectively and externally identifiable features. In this approach, ethnic groups have limited agency to define and identify themselves but are primarily categorized from outside by their ascribed and often fixed features. The second approach focuses on the instrumentalist role of ethnicity as a politically malleable feature, open for manipulation, interpretation and contestation depending on the political dynamics. A related third approach, the constructivist approach, also underscores that 'ethnicity cannot be defined by fixed, inborn and natural criteria, but is an outcome of self-ascription and selective interpretation of meaningful cultural and historical experiences.'[7] Over time, all three approaches to ethnicity have been adopted as part of the articulation of political movements. However, in recent history, most social scientists have agreed that the instrumentalist and constructivist approaches have been prevalent.

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6   The Sidama elite refers to those that hold significant social, economic or political power and claim to represent the group. This includes government officials, wealthy individuals, intellectuals, community leaders and religious figures. Sidama elites were integral to the politics of Sidama zone and SNNPRS. They were involved in formal and informal movements pushing for Sidama self-determination and engaged in protests as well as negotiations with the authorities.

7   Aalen, *Politics of Ethnicity*, 41.

The Ethiopian constitution, however, adopts the primordial approach. Article 39 states that a 'nation, nationality or people' is:

> [A] group of people who have or share a large measure of a common culture or similar customs, mutual intelligibility of language, belief in a common or related identities, a common psychological make-up, and who inhabit an identifiable, predominantly contiguous territory.[8]

While the grievances that drove the adoption of ethnolinguistic-based federalism are based on past events, this definition proved unworkable in practice. This was particularly the case in southern Ethiopia where ethnolinguistic diversity is more intense and intricate than in other parts of the country. As a result, EPRDF adopted an instrumentalist approach and effectively used its power to provide ideational and legal support for elites who pursued political mobilization based on ethnolinguistic identities. This led to the mushrooming of Peoples' Democratic Organizations (PDOs) in the early 1990s.[9] Almost every ethnolinguistic and sociocultural group had a PDO that became the primary local political actor and claimed to represent the community at every level of decision-making. Most importantly, EPRDF organized the PDOs into a single structure that formed the southern wing of its coalition, the Southern Ethiopian People's Democratic Movement (SEPDM).[10]

The adoption of the instrumentalist approach to ethnicity, however, opened a Pandora's box because political elites were incentivized to mobilize along ethnic lines as a means to try and increase their political power. As a result, EPRDF had to establish and enforce the principle of realizing 'unity in diversity' as the overarching framework in order to curb the dangers of a downward spiral of perpetual ethnic mobilization.[11]

The Sidama claim for self-rule, territorial control and reaffirmation of identity centring on Hawassa is an ideal example of how the constitution's primordial framing collided with the EPRDF's instrumentalist approach. In 1991, five regional states (known as regions 7–11) were

8   Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, 'Proclamation of the Constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia', Federal Negarit Gazeta, 21 August 1995.

9   Merera Gudina. 'Elections and democratization in Ethiopia, 1991–2010.' *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 5/4 (2011): 664-680.

10   Aalen, *Politics of Ethnicity*, 103.

11   Bach, Jean-Nicolas. 'EPRDF's Nation-Building: Tinkering with convictions and pragmatism,' *Cadernos de Estudos Africanos* 27 (2014).

established under transitional arrangements before they were amalgamated to SNNPRS.[12] Before this, the Sidama were assembled with the Gedio, Burji, Amaro and Gidicho communities in Region Eight. In this short-lived arrangement, the Sidama's greater population and socioeconomic influence allowed them to dominate decision-making. However, the 1992 merger into SNNPRS reduced Sidama prestige and political clout as the administrative area they controlled became a zone in a much larger region. Whilst the formation of the five regions was based on the primordial approach, the amalgamation was for administrative efficiency and political control. In both instances, the EPRDF, especially the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), drove the process. As a result, the Sidama elite was frustrated with losing the right to govern their own region despite the large Sidama population compared to other ethnolinguistic and sociocultural groups in the south and across the country.

It is important to note that the Sidama group has its own internal power divisions, primarily along clan lines. Various mythological, traditional and socially constructed narratives justify the difference between these sub-groups. Distinctions are further demarcated by socio-economic activities and the link between those activities and indicators of power, such as land ownership and holding political office. Among the Sidama, the sharpest distinction is between the Wollabicho and Hadicho clans. The Wollabicho have a history of dominance through land ownership and administration of large chunks of Sidama territory, whereas the Hadicho are primarily artisans, particularly potters. Despite the Hadicho claim of being descendants of a respected family line in the Sidama community and their territorial dominance in parts of Sidama, they are also relatively marginalized by Wollabicho, mainly because of their artisanal work. Rather than being imposed by external actors, the distinctions and hierarchies among Sidama sub-groups have primarily emerged from within the community. When the differences have political significance, Hadicho and Wollabicho elites may use them to try and advance their goals.[13]

ACTORS OF VERTICAL CONTESTATION

Sidama elites are the primary actors in the vertical contestation. The vital claim in mobilizing their support base is that Hawassa is located on Sidama land.[14] The most salient political groups are the Sidama Liberation Movement (SLM) and the Sidama Peoples' Democratic Organisation (SPDO). The SLM has been one of the most prominent political groups in southern Ethiopia since 1975. It led the local resistance movement against the Derg regime, with most of its

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12   Region Seven (Gurage, Hadiya, Kembata, Alaba, Tembaro and Yem); Region Eight (Sidama, Gedio, Burji, Amaro and Gidicho); Region Nine (Wolayita, Dawro, Konta, Aydi, Gewada, Melon, Gofa, Zeyse, Gobez, Busa, Konsa, Gidole and Gamo); Region Ten (Basketo, Mursi, Ari, Hamer, Arbore, Dasenech, Ngangatom, Tsemay, Male, Dime and Bodi) and Region Eleven (Keficho, Noa, Dizo, Surma, Zelmam, Shekicho, Minit, Chara, Bench, Shiko)

13   Aalen, *Politics of Ethnicity*, 60–71 and 113.

14   Aalen, *Politics of Ethnicity*, 154.

fighters trained in guerilla warfare in Somalia.[15] Under the post-1991 political arrangements, the SLM were part of the Transitional Government. However, the movement quickly became an antagonist to the dominant force in the transition, the TPLF, because it rejected the proposed SNNPRS.

EPRDF's response to SLM's rejection was to establish a new party, SPDO, by gathering young political cadres. It then became one of the organizations constituting SEPDM, which in turn was a member party of EPRDF. Elites claiming to represent other southern groups also became part of SEPDM. The vertical contestation centring on Hawassa played out through a series of struggles among Sidama elites that were organized under SLM and SPDO, other SEPDM factions and the TPLF-dominated EPRDF that controlled the federal government.

Control over Awassa was one of the focal points of the vertical contestation.[16] When SNNPRS was created, Awassa became a municipality under the new Sidama zone. In a significant move, the Sidama-dominated city administration encouraged and facilitated the settlement of Sidama people in the centre and outskirts of Awassa, in part by favouring Sidamas in the allocation of land for business and residential purposes.[17] The strategy was one of the primary steps the Sidama elite took to assert its claim of Awassa as Sidama land.

The efforts to control Awassa resulted in a chain of events that brought all major political actors into a spiral of contestations. Groups that claimed to represent other ethnolinguistic and sociocultural groups in SNNPRS objected to the Sidama move. With implicit and explicit support from the federal government, non-Sidama elites were victorious by the end of the 1990s in changing Awassa's administrative accountability from Sidama zone to the regional government. Having the city run by a multi-ethnic regional elite was a major setback to the Sidama elite's drive for self-rule, territorial control and affirmation of the Sidama identity centring Awassa. After the change, the SNNPRS council replaced ethnic Sidama regional president, Abate Kisho, with Hailemariam Dessalegn, a Wolayta.

SPACES OF VERTICAL CONTESTATION

The spaces of the vertical contestation were legally sanctioned formal platforms and ad hoc informal venues. The regional government, elections, protest movements and a referendum were all used to advance or contain the Sidama elite's demand for self-determination.

Under the federal arrangement, the SNNPRS government became a vital contestation space when it proposed making Awassa's city administration accountable to it, thereby sidelining

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15   John Markakis. *Ethiopia: The last two frontiers*. Vol. 10. Boydell & Brewer Ltd, 2011.

16   'Awassa' is the Amharic name, whereas 'Hawassa' is the Sidama version. One of the contestations was to reclaim 'Hawassa' as the official name. This was achieved after the 2005 elections, as discussed below.

17   Aalen, *Politics of Ethnicity*, 149.

Sidama zone. The president of Sidama zone at the time was at the forefront of opposition to the proposal. In response to the prospect of losing control of Awassa, the Sidama elite upped their constitutional demand for self-rule via a Sidama regional state, with SLM and SPDO leaders tacitly allying for the cause.

The SEPDM-EPRDF's efforts to discipline the Sidama elites did not succeed, and around 15,000 people demonstrated in May 2002, denouncing the regional administration. In response, the security forces killed at least 25 people.[18] The repression, which included the imprisonment and exile of several Sidama elites, helped to quash the Sidama question for the second time. A year later, in May 2003, Awassa city government became directly accountable to the regional administration.[19]

For EPRDF, suppressing Sidama self-determination was an important part of being able to govern SNNPRS. The force used against the protesters in 2002 was accompanied by manipulation of divisions among the Sidama, notably by assigning or removing zonal administrators according to their stance on the Sidama question. The SEPDM's internal evaluation (*gimgemma*) process helped ensure that the federal government's interests were maintained and dissenting voices silenced. In the early years, EPRDF assigned trusted officials as advisors to regional presidents to ensure they did not veer from central government policy. Later, once enough cadres were trained, EPRDF adopted a carrot and stick approach, rewarding consent through promotion to federal positions, including at embassies abroad, and punishing dissent through prosecutions for corruption and maladministration. For example, Shiferaw Shigute, a Sidama politician, was SNNPRS president before he became a federal minister. Head of SNNPRS justice bureau during the 2002 clash, another Sidama politician, Melese Marimo, was appointed Ethiopian ambassador to South Africa in 2006, presumably as reward for supporting the federal government on the Sidama self-rule issue.[20]

The exclusion of Sidama from the benefits of economic growth in Awassa and the marginalization of the Sidama continued to be the primary vectors of contestation between the Sidama elite and the regional government. SPDO's subtle support for Sidama self-determination also strengthened after SEPDM lost several constituencies during the May 2005 election, mainly to SLM. Government allegations of widespread irregularities in the election, however, resulted in its annulment. This gave SPDO (part of the ruling SEPDM-EPRDF) a chance to campaign on support for a Sidama region, and they were duly re-elected.[21]

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18   Amnesty International, '*Amnesty International Report 2003: Ethiopia*', 28 May 2003. Accessed 27 June 2024, https://www.refworld.org/reference/annualreport/amnesty/2003/en/15671.

19   Kinkino K Legide, 'The Quest for Regional Statehood and Its Practicability under the Post-1991 Ethiopian Federation: The Discontents and Experience of Sidama Nation', *Global Journal of Politics and Law Research* 7/7 (2019): 1-52.

20   Aalen, *Politics of Ethnicity*, 151.

21   Daniel Mains and Eshetayehu Kinfu, 'Making the city of nations and nationalities: the politics of ethnicity and roads in Hawassa, Ethiopia', *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 54/4 (2016): 645-669.

This SPDO-SEPDM victory in the rerun gave Sidama elites the major boost they needed to push the regional and federal governments to accept their demand for regional status. Sidama elites began by successfully making their self-rule case to the relevant regional decision-making bodies, the SNNPRS Council and the Council of Nationalities.[22] The EPRDF federal government then intervened with a political solution. The intervention led by then Prime Minister Meles Zenawi involved a major federal concession to appease Sidama elites, especially concerning control over Awassa.[23]

The negotiations between Meles and Sidama political and cultural leaders served a key objective. It helped the federal government contain the Sidama nationalist movement, hence avoiding a potential domino effect self-administration demands from other SNNPRS groups. The federal government offered considerable political concessions to the Sidama elite, including regaining control of the regional presidency, with Shiferaw replacing Hailemariam. Sidama officials also took charge of all the bureaus at Awassa municipality. The city's name was officially changed to the Sidama version, Hawassa, and Debub (Southern) University was renamed Hawassa University. The return of Sidama political control over the city also meant the resumption of favourable land allocations for Sidamas.[24]

As the EPRDF government was one of the main actors in the vertical contestation, any weakening of the coalition was an opportune moment for Sidama elites to try and achieve their ultimate goal, a standalone Sidama region. Such an occasion arose during the political turmoil from 2017 and 2019. The Sidama elite duly intensified the push for a referendum immediately after Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed was inaugurated in April 2018. That led to deadly violence as protesters in Hawassa made autonomy demands in June 2018.[25]

The assertiveness of the Sidama elite could be seen in the pressure they applied on the federal government to set a date for the referendum. Constitutional procedure requires the authorities to organize a plebiscite within a year of the regional council accepting the request. Based on this timeline, the Sidama elite set 18 July 2019 (this was the eleventh day of the eleventh month in year 2011 in the Ethiopian calendar, hence 11/11/11), a year after the SNNPRS council voted, as their deadline for a referendum to be held.

22   The SNPPR State Council has 'the highest political power regarding the internal affairs of the State' according to the SNNPRS revised constitution in November 2001, whereas the Council of Nationalities 'interprets the State constitution, organises the Council of Constitutional Inquiry, decides on issues relating Nations, Nationalities or Peoples right to Zone, Special Wereda, Wereda Administration according to the State Constitution'.

23   Aalen, *Politics of Ethnicity*; Mains and Kinfu, 'Making the City'.

24   Aalen, *Politics of Ethnicity*, 152–154; Mains and Kinfu, 'Making the City', 655.

25   William Davison, 'Deadly violence hits Hawassa as protesters call for Sidama state', Ethiopia Insight, 14 June 2018. Accessed 13 January 2025, https://www.ethiopia-insight.com/2018/06/14/deadly-violence-hits-hawassa-as-protesters/.

Even though it was a legally sanctioned space of contestation, the referendum was very much part of the power struggle. The reluctance from the federal government to hold the vote contributed to the high political tension. This tension translated into conflict involving targeted attacks based on ethnic identities. Sidama groups, in particular, attacked Wolayta, Amhara and Gurage residents in the city and vandalized their properties. As elaborated below, the targeted attack on other communities is a manifestation of the long history of horizontal contestation that had recently become markedly ethnicized.

The federal government delayed the referendum for both political and administrative reasons. Politically, as mentioned above, containing the Sidama question was deemed necessary to discourage similar self-rule demands from elsewhere in SNNPRS. Administratively, the National Election Board of Ethiopia (NEBE), the institution responsible for organizing referendums, was undergoing comprehensive reform, and so lacked sufficient capacity. Even though it would have been possible to postpone the referendum to a mutually agreed date, tension in the vertical contestation and its implication for the horizontal contestation meant a threshold for violence was passed. As a result, deadly inter-communal clashes and those between Sidama activists and security forces occurred in Hawassa in July 2019.[26] The latter occurred when security forces opened fire on protesters who had gathered to discuss a referendum.

Finally, the referendum was held on 20 November 2019 and led to the creation of Sidama region as a new member of the Ethiopian federation. While a remarkable victory for the Sidama elite, it also created an irreparable crack in SNNPRS, where subsequent demands for regional statehood led to a decline in Hawassa's political importance. The fragmentation meant the subsequent creation of three other regions, Central Ethiopia, South Ethiopia and South West Ethiopia, each with their own administrative capital.

DOMINANT PATTERNS AND DYNAMICS OF VERTICAL CONTESTATIONS

The actors and spaces of the vertical contestations shape the dominant patterns. The prominent actors are organized political groups and the major spaces were decision-making processes, elections and referendums. Ad hoc groups and politically crafted spaces such as protests and demonstrations also had a role, though the main actors controlled them.

The main observed patterns of contestation include co-optation, concession, repression and resistance. Since 1991, EPRDF, which TPLF founded and controlled, has effectively co-opted elites from various ethnolinguistic and sociocultural groups to run the federation while remaining under its grip. SPDO is just one example of the organizations it created to enact a version of ethnic-based federalism where in reality political priorities surpassed constitutionally

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26   'Ethiopia: At least 17 killed in violence over Sidama autonomy', *Al Jazeera*, 20 July 2019. Accessed 30 June 2024, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/7/20/ethiopia-at-least-17-killed-in-violence-over-sidama-autonomy.; 'Ethiopia referendum: dozes killed in Sidama clashes', *BBC*, 22 July 2019. Accessed 30 June 2024, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-49070762.

guaranteed self-determination principles.[27] For a considerable time, EPRDF managed to co-opt Sidama elites and so gain the upper hand in the vertical contestation. However, there were also episodes of concessions to that elite, mainly from the federal government, in order to avoid potentially damaging political consequences. The post-2005 election scenario enabled the Sidama elite to achieve some victories, especially concerning Hawassa and the federal government, that also had the effect of delaying resolution of the self-determination question.

When the actors found co-option and concession less effective, repression and resistance became dominant. Some Sidama elites challenged the top-down approach of the TPLF-dominated EPRDF since the early 1990s. For example, SLM was consistent in demanding self-rule in the form of regional autonomy. The repressive federal response came in the form of intimidation and persecution. The trend continued in May 2002 when scores of people were killed as they raised the Sidama national question and the issue of control over Hawassa. During the tensest moments of the referendum campaign, the dominant patterns of contestation were resistance and repression. Sidama leaders resisted political and legal pressure from the federal government through formal channels as well as ad hoc strategies of mass-based mobilization, which led to deadly protests in July 2019. From the federal government side, the heavy-handed repression that worked in May 2002 could not be employed during the post-2018 period because of EPRDF's internal divisions and the relative weakness of the federal government.

The dynamics of the vertical contestation can be summarized in two ways. First, the claim of Hawassa as Sidama land helped the Sidama elite mobilize people effectively and eventually achieve control over the city. The claim sat within the overall objective of establishing an autonomous ethnolinguistically defined region. Accompanying this was an expectation from the Sidama elite that regional status would have socio-economic benefits, including in terms of federal fiscal transfers. The Sidama elite have had a legitimate agenda of calling for fair resource distribution since the federal system was established. This is because the population of the zone is almost equal to Tigray region, but it received less federal budgetary support because of its lower tier administrative status, with its budget disbursed from SNNPRS.[28] Further adding to the sense of inequity, Sidama zone is a major producer of the country's most valuable export commodity, coffee. As a result, the implications of the vertical contestation over Hawassa went beyond control of the city. They also shaped not just the fate of SNNPRS and fiscal arrangements across the federation. In Sidama, the key implication of the post-referendum period on vertical contestation is the Sidama legal claim that the new region should receive a larger proportion of federal resources than the zone had.

The second important dynamic of the vertical contestation is its implications on other ethnolinguistic and sociocultural groups represented in SNNPRS government and/or residing in the city. The violent conflict that emerged from the vertical contestation, especially around the referendum, involved in inter-communal clashes. Sidama elites targeted communities that

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27   Gudina, 'Elections and Democratization in Ethiopia', 664-680.

28   Markakis, *The Last Two Frontiers*, 200.

were perceived to be against the Sidama statehood demand. As a result, the heightened tension of the vertical contestation resulted in the intensification of horizontal contestations between the Sidama and other groups.

HAWASSA AS A SITE OF HORIZONTAL CONTESTATIONS

Understanding the dominant patterns and dynamics of conflict in Hawassa requires examining the socio-economic, political and cultural interplay among the city's ethnolinguistic and sociocultural groups. In this section, we primarily focus on how horizontal contestations played out among elites claiming to represent various groups by identifying major actors, spaces, dominant patterns and dynamics of contestations. The key actors identified are formal and ad-hoc political groups, religious organizations and leaders, business elites, media organizations and social media activists. The identified spaces of horizontal contestation include language, public spaces, religious and cultural events, socioeconomic opportunities and social media platforms.

ACTORS OF HORIZONTAL CONTESTATIONS

Horizontal contestations in Hawassa primarily involve political and economic elites claiming to represent ethnolinguistic and sociocultural groups. These elites organize themselves both in formal and ad-hoc political groups. The most consequential horizontal contestation in Hawassa involves elites from the Sidama and Wolayta. As with most neighbouring communities, the groups have a long history of both cooperation and conflict. The historical rivalry between the sets of elites and the two communities increased in recent decades because of the legacy of Ethiopian state formation and the manner in which the federal arrangement was implemented. Most notably, EPRDF's primary focus on ensuring control led to politically crafted interventions in SNNPRS that contradicted the self-determination principles in the constitution. In addition, the creation of ethnic borders and the favouring of the Wolayta elite over the Sidama, or vice versa, are salient examples of EPRDF practices that intensified horizontal contestation.

The two communities have distinct sociocultural institutions, dominant economic activities and modes of political mobilization. For example, the Sidama have a decentralized clan system, an experience of recent armed struggle against the post-revolution military government, competing intra-ethnic categories and a valuable commodity in coffee that reduces out-migration.[29] Meanwhile, the Wolayta have a history of a centralized kingdom with no armed struggle against the post-revolution central government. The community practices subsistence farming, economic migration and has a relatively cohesive societal system.[30] These differences

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29   Markakis, *The Last Two Frontiers*, 200.

30   Aalen, *Politics of Ethnicity*, 11.

have rarely been politicized though there were some prejudicial attitudes as well as low-intensity localized conflict over land and water. Once ethnolinguistic and sociocultural identity became the primary feature of political organization under the federal constitution, however, identity-based administrative borders were created. This heightened the intensity of the horizontal contestations, which in turn incentivized elites to increasingly organize along ethnic lines.

Hawassa became the epicentre of the Sidama-Wolayta elite rivalry because of its centrality to the SNNPRS government and economy. When EPRDF suppressed the Sidama self-rule demand, it used Wolayta elites within the ruling SEPDM as a balancing force, in particular when Abate Kisho was removed from the regional presidency, charged with corruption and replaced by Hailemariam in November 2001. In addition to the suppression of the Sidama's constitutional autonomy campaign, most of the Sidama elite considered the move as inflicting further political damage on the Sidama by the Wolayta, 'the major competitors of the Sidama in Awassa and the region'.[31]

It is important to note that while the rivalry between the Sidama and Wolayta is prominent in Hawassa, horizontal contestations by the Sidama with other groups, such as the Amhara and the Oromo, are no less important. The contestation with the Amhara community is linked with the history of state-making in Ethiopia, which includes the violent incorporation of the Sidama community into the imperial Ethiopian state and associated cultural, political, economic and religious subjugation. Furthermore, in relation to the Oromo community, the contestation is associated with the administrative boundary that the Sidama region, and Hawassa in particular, shares with Oromia.

The Sidama elite engaged in vertical and horizontal contestations to secure their control over Hawassa, realizing self-rule and achieving their ultimate objective of becoming an autonomous region. For example, after the 2005 political victory of controlling Hawassa and the regional government, the victory in the vertical contestation was instrumental in gaining more ground in the horizontal contestation. One of our respondents, part of the Sidama political elite, recalls that period:

> The Amhara, along with other minority groups, influenced government civil service, dominated business and played a significant role in cities, while the Wolayta controlled politics. However, Sidamas' role was invisible. As a result, adding the Hawella Tula sub-city to Hawassa significantly affected power dynamics and demography.[32]

The Sidama elite's purposefully established Tabor and Hawella Tula sub-cities to change Hawassa's administrative and socio-demographic dynamics in their favour. The 2005 election showed that heterogeneous urban voters favoured opposition parties. To counterbalance these voters, the ruling party incorporated 12 former rural kebeles into the city administration, with

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31   Aalen, *Politics of Ethnicity*, 149.

32   Interview with former official, male, 64, Hawassa, 7 October 2023.

a total population of 137,812.[33] Roads, office buildings and other infrastructure were built to incorporate the sub-city into Hawassa. This development came largely at the expense of the city centre.[34] The majority of the rural population incorporated into the city administration were Sidama, meaning that the expansion in administrative boundaries made the Sidama the most populous ethnic group (53 per cent in 2021) in Hawassa.

SEPDM and the SLM have been the primary formal political actors shaping the horizontal contestation in Hawassa. SEPDM provided a legal platform within the EPRDF structure for the Sidama and Wolayta elite. SLM, on the other hand, is an opposition movement with no administrative power that is comprised of exclusively Sidama elites and focused on promoting the interests of the Sidama.

The growing intensity of the demand for self-administration, especially after the post-2018 national political change, also brought new groups onto the scene. Of these, the Sidama youth group, the *Ejjeto*, remain the most important. *Ejjeto* in the Sidama language describes the state of being a youth and a hero. As an informal group, it played an important role in the horizontal contestation in Hawassa, provided significant organizational power for the Sidama elite. The deadly violence, including targeted attacks, especially on Wolayta communities in Hawassa in 2018 and 2019, indicate that some elites had an extremist agenda. One of our Sidama interviewees mentions that:

> The 2018 conflict was merely a drama orchestrated by a few opportunistic politicians. Although many people assume that the Sidama and Wolayta conflicted, we also know that they coexisted peacefully and amicably for a considerable time. Nevertheless, a small number of radical activists and political leaders were actively attempting to drive a wedge between them and foster ethnic friction. I came across messages and saw actions taken by Wolayta activists and a few rent-seeker politicians who provoked the Sidama.[35]

Another interviewee who works at Hawassa University shares his view by stating how the ties between the communities are more harmonious than portrayed by the political elites.

> I am Sidama. Two of my older brothers are married to Tigray and Gurage families, while my younger brother married Amhara, and my younger sister married Wolayta. Therefore, how can I dispute with other ethnicities while my ethnicity is Sidama? It's not possible.[36]

33   Eshetayehu Kinfu, Henning Bombeck, Agizew Nigussie, and Fisseha Wegayehu. 'The genesis of peri-urban Ethiopia: The case of Hawassa city.' *Journal of Land and Rural Studies* 7/1 (2019): 71-95.

34   Mains and Kinfu, 'Making the City'.

35   Interview with journalist and Hawassa resident, Sidama, female, 28, Hawassa, 6 December 2023.

36   Interview with Hawassa resident, Sidama, male, 42, Hawassa, 9 October 2023.

However, a Wolayta informant observes the opposite. He recounts his experience as follows:

> I was here, and it was a heartbreaking situation. The Sidama politicians organized, supported and advised the *Ejjeto*. The gang was a major player in the 2018 and 2019 attacks. The group attacked several innocent Wolayta and purposefully looted and damaged their properties.[37]

When one of the leaders of the *Ejjeto* was asked about the group's role in the 2019 conflict, she denied that *Ejjetos* were violent:

> The culture and morals of the Sidama do not promote the persecution or killing of other people. Misleading information concerning *Ejjeto's* bad reputation has been spread, particularly on social media. However, this was fake news. We [*Ejjeto*] are organized by principle, not emotions.[38]

Religious groups are the other most important actors in the horizontal contestations in Hawassa. Yet the implicit and explicit rivalry between Orthodox and Protestant groups also has an ethnic component embedded in them. The history of Ethiopian state formation and the role of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahdo Church (EOTC) in influencing the cultural, socioeconomic and religious practices of incorporated territories are some of the vital drivers of self-determination movements in southern and southwest Ethiopia. As a result, when the Sidama elites, mostly Protestants, mobilize for self-rule and regional autonomy, their political articulation also includes a shade of opposition to the EOTC.

The EOTC's dominance by owning the central location that St. Gabriel Church occupies in Hawassa is a key element of contestation among ethno-religious elites in Hawassa. Since Orthodox Christianity is strongly associated with the Amhara, the dominance and visibility of the Orthodox Church is interpreted through the lens of ethnicity. For example, one of our Sidama respondents says:

> The EOTC has a large area of land in Hawassa. The reason behind this is its influential role in former regimes, which the Amharas also led. Nowadays, our constitution declares that all religions are equal; however, some Orthodox do not accept this and [that] creates disputes.[39]

The Sidama elite challenged the centrality of St. Gabriel Church to Hawassa by erecting a large fountain in front of its main gate. The monument's commissioning occurred when the Sidama elite gained concessions from the federal government in 2005. Sidama city officials argue that

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37   Interview with Hawassa resident, Wolayta, male, 59, Hawassa, 6 December 2023.

38   Interview with Ejjote (the female equivalent of Ejetto) leader, Sidama, female, 31, Hawassa, 14 November 2023.

39   Interview with Protestant follower, male, 68, Hawassa, 15 November 2023.

the architecture and fountain represent Sidama culture and values. Some Orthodox followers see it differently. One of our respondents says:

> They [Sidama] have alternative areas to build the fountain. However, most city and regional officials are Protestant and associate Orthodox with the former [feudal] regimes. This monument is their way of disrespecting the church and showing that this time is theirs.[40]

Media organizations have also been major players in the horizontal contestations. Especially in the heightened period of political mobilization before the Sidama referendum, the Sidama Media Network (SMN) was the most influential actor. Established with technical and ideological support from the Oromo Media Network (OMN), a vital outlet around the national political change in 2018, SMN became the primary vehicle for articulating Sidama nationalism and attacking rival political forces.

Inflammatory messages and fake photographs and videos served the purpose of fomenting violence and horizontal contestations. As reported by many interviewees, social media activists played a significant role in aggravating, orchestrating and directing the 11/11/11 violence on platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube. One of our respondents summarized the role of social media as follows:

> These [social media] were a battlefield for both supporters and those against the referendum on Sidama statehood. The majority of activists' messages were provoking. Social media was used as a breeding ground for malicious stories bent on instigating conflict among ethnic groups.[41]

Some respondents saw SMN as playing a negative role. One says:

> Before the referendum, the Sidama Media Network painted all other non-Sidama people in Hawassa as Sidama's enemies and opposed the Sidama statehood issue. This was false. Through that media, false narratives created by ethnic politicians aired, and they have reshaped people's behaviour and opinions in accordance with victimhood narration.[42]

Media organizations, individuals and groups on social media become vital actors of horizontal contestations mainly because they have more room to accommodate different perspectives. Vertical contestations often require legally sanctioned processes such as elections, legislative action or actors such as political parties. Whereas horizontal contestations have more room for ad hoc groups to mobilize and to shape the dominant narrative though intensive messaging.

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40 Interview with Orthodox follower, male, 30, Hawassa, 13 November 2023.

41 Interview with foreign media correspondent, male, 34, Hawassa, 25 December 2023.

42 Interview with former high school teacher, male, 70, Hawassa, 11 October 2023.

Especially in a context where prejudice and perceived and actual inequalities between ethnolinguistic and sociocultural groups are widely circulated, media platforms are key to narrative creation. The conflict we observed in Hawassa and the role of social media in it are good examples of this.

SPACES OF HORIZONTAL CONTESTATIONS

Identified spaces of horizontal contestations in Hawassa include language, public events (religious, cultural and sports) and socio-economic opportunities. The above-mentioned actors influence the intensity and outcome of horizontal contestations within these spaces.

Concerning language, one of the moves of Sidama elites after establishing Sidama region was replacing Amharic with Sidamo (Sidaamu Afoo) as the main working language of the regional government. In a context where Amharic was the working language of SNNPRS and Hawassa city administrations, the change was radical and had major consequences. Using Amharic is one of the critical legacies of the state-formation processes in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Hence, its replacement by Sidamo was one way of affirming the success of Sidama's self-determination struggle.

Most of the Sidama respondents shared their experiences of past exclusion when government services in Hawassa used Amharic. Conversely, they celebrate the introduction of Sidama as the main official language of the region. But this came at the expense of other non-Sidama residents of the city who are not fluent in Sidamo. The new administration implemented measures to make Sidamo visible by requiring public signposts and business displays to use it as their primary language, followed by Amharic and English. While this language policy is understandable, it raised legitimate concerns about the exclusion of non-Sidama residents. One of our respondents questions the fairness of excluding civil servants in the city because of their limited Sidamo skills:

> Do you think that is that fair? Despite having lived here, served the city for more than 20 years, and raised a family here for more than 40 years, you are finally neglected due to language barriers. I don't think so.[43]

Hence, a significant impact of the post-referendum period on horizontal contestations is the exclusion of non-Sidamas in Hawassa because of the language policy. Promoting Sidamo solidified Sidama nationalism's success but also caused exclusion and disadvantage.

Other major spaces of horizontal contestation are public events that involve religious, cultural and sports activities. Given the historical legacy of the Orthodox Church, the Timket (Epiphany) celebration and the street parade are often seen by Sidama nationalists as a manifestation of continued socio-cultural and religious domination associated with the Ethiopian state-making

43   Interview with resident, female, 58, Hawassa, 19 November 2023.

project.[44] This sentiment became more emboldened as calls for a referendum intensified and caused targeted religious attacks on Orthodox Christians.[45] Examples include the removal of the plain tricolour (without the star emblem) from the street during the *Timket* celebration due to its association with the imperial state. Often, groups that do not agree with multinational federal arrangement use the flag without the star emblem as an act of protest.

The ethnicization and politicization of religious events are key aspects of horizontal contestations. For example, there was a case during the period of intensified pro-referendum mobilization where some young people put a slogan on a T-shirt demanding 'Hawassa should be a Federal City' during a *Timket* celebration. The regional police quickly arrested the individuals before any escalation. In another instance, the role of the EOTC as owner of land and properties across the city and the region is also being challenged.

This shows that contestation on religious grounds cuts across issues of economic, political and cultural domination and demands for equity. The political and economic interest can also be attributed to a new form of religious communication—satellite TV stations broadcasting from Protestant churches in Hawassa.

Sporting events, especially football matches between Sidama Buna and Wolayita Ditcha clubs, are also critical spaces of horizontal contestation in Hawassa. As discussed earlier, the long history of coexistence between the Sidama and Wolayta was challenged by EPRDF's politics of ethnicity. As a result, the competition between two clubs that have ethnically demarcated support bases became a space for political messaging. One of our respondents shares his observations:

> The tense environment between the supporters of the two football clubs often leads to violent clashes. On several occasions the violent clashes caused both physical injuries and the damage of property across the city.[46]

The city administration often deploys a high number of police officers to deter and contain the violence that routinely occurs between the supporters of the two clubs. Another respondent says:

> I heard offensive messages and ugly insults in the stadium. The main reason for this dispute is that these football clubs are established along ethnic lines, and supporters follow that line and forget the true spirit of sport, such as peace, love and togetherness. Radical activists used this occasion as a fertile ground to show their ideology and

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44   Afework Hailu, 'Religion and the 2018/2019 conflict in Hawassa', Rift Valley Institute. Accessed 21 November 2024, https://riftvalley.net/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/Hawassa-Report_Final.pdf.

45   Interview with an Orthodox follower, male, 45, Hawassa, 13 December 2023.

46   Interview with football supporter, male, 28, Hawassa, 20 December 2023.

dominance.[47]

The spaces of horizontal contestations are tied to those of the vertical contestations. For example, efforts to disassociate from Amharic and Orthodox Christianity are informed by the same logic that triggered the Sidama struggle for self-determination. Language, culture and religion are essential elements of self-rule and identity. Hawassa provided both the physical and institutional set-up for the pursuit of self-determination.

DOMINANT PATTERNS AND DYNAMICS OF HORIZONTAL CONTESTATIONS

Violent conflict is the dominant pattern of horizontal contestation. Perceived and actual inequalities among ethnolinguistic, sociocultural and religious groups inform horizontal contestations. As a result, they tend to instigate conflict among communities. Hawassa experienced deadly conflict between ethnic groups ahead of the Sidama referendum, where, in most cases, groups claiming to represent the Sidama cause committed targeted attacks on other communities, particularly the Wolayta. Both historical grievances and contemporary political articulations that focus on other ethnic, cultural or religious groups contribute to the acts of violence. Many social media activists and other political leaders who use mainstream media also manipulate horizontal contestations to instigate violence. Respondents to our study mention media outlets such OMN, SMN and 'social media activists' as key instigators of conflict, ethnic tension and identity-based attacks. One of our respondents says:

> The narratives of the oppressor and the oppressed are widely spread on mainstream and social media. Sadly, the government, including other groups interested in politics, used historical grievances as an instrument of struggle. Emotion-driven comments affect genuine discussion.[48]

The multiplicity and complexity of spaces and the actors involved in horizontal contestations add a two-layered dynamism to the conflict patterns. First, the multiplicity of actors and the fertile ground for hastily organized groups make efforts to contain conflict difficult. Individuals and groups may commit violent attacks because of perceived antagonism from other cultural, linguistic or religious groups. Such micro-level targeted attacks are enabled by institutionalized actions and the rhetoric of political figures. As mentioned by one of the respondents, innocent people not connected to any political group can be targeted just because they are categorized as belonging to a particular ethnolinguistic, sociocultural or religious group.[49] But as this violence affecting individuals is isolated, often it is not witnessed and reported.

The second layer of dynamism is that since horizontal contestation offers room for more actors and multiple spaces, these actors and spaces also have the potential to serve as part of the

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47   Interview with football supporter, male, 42, Hawassa, 20 December 2023.

48   Interview with resident, male, 58, Hawassa, 23 October 2023.

49   Interview with foreign media reporter, male, 33, Hawassa, 5 December 2023.

solution. The conflict threads that cross religion, ethnicity and language can equally serve as threads of reconciliation. Some of our respondents alluded to the positive role that religious institutions played in diffusing ethnic tensions. One Protestant respondent recalls:

> Hiwet Birhan church played a significant role in bringing the Sidama and Wolayta people together. They did their best to mediate those people. On the other hand, several Wolaytas sought refuge during the 11/11/11 clash in Orthodox churches and received a great deal of assistance from their leaders and believers. At that horrifying moment, this was not an easy task.[50]

The positive role that churches play in times of conflict, either to shelter victims or to mediate conflict, make them potential sources of reconciliation—not only spaces of contestation. However, the patterns and dynamics in horizontal contestations are not insulated from the patterns and dynamics that shape vertical contestations.

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50   Interview with Protestant follower, male, 68. Hawassa, 15 November 2023.

HAWASSA AS AN EMBLEM OF DEVELOPMENTALISM

The dominant patterns and dynamics of contestation in Hawassa can be examined through the lens of the developmentalist political-economy orientation of the EPRDF regime, mainly during the last decade of its rule. Developmental statism, the utilization of state power to achieve transformative change, has significantly impacted the socioeconomic, cultural, and political spheres of Hawassa.[51] The city's geographic features, such as its proximity to Addis Ababa, the main dry port in Modjo and the Ethio-Djibouti railway line, the flat terrain, its natural tourist attractions, and its location in one of the most densely populated areas of the country all played a role in shaping the processes and outcomes of EPRDF's developmentalist thrust.

EPRDF's depiction of Hawassa as an emblem of its development model and its claims of creating a cosmopolitan centre radically changed Hawassa's socioeconomic and physical features. This was manifested through the increased rate of rural-urban migration and urbanization induced by the establishment of Hawassa Industrial Park (HIP) in July 2016. The main actors of contestation are the federal government, multinational corporations, the predominantly young and female labour force and brokers that facilitate access to house rentals and similar services for migrant labour. The spaces of contestation that emerged from the development drive include contestations in labour relations, housing and informal settlements. The observed patterns and dynamics of contestation that resulted include disorganization and limited planning and execution of social aspects of the HIP project, labour repression and exploitation and the profiteering of local cadres and politicians from the housing crisis caused by the high rate of migration to Hawassa.

ACTORS OF THE DEVELOPMENTAL INTERVENTIONS

The developmentalist ideology of EPRDF made the federal government a dominant player in Hawassa's socioeconomic and political sphere. The federal government applied its prerogative power, institutional capacity and policy and legal frameworks to pursue its developmental agenda. Prerogative power is exercised primarily through the structures of the ruling party, its

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51 Eyob Balcha Gebremariam, 'Thandika Mkandawire's Model for an African Developmental State, and the Ethiopian Experiment (2001–2018)', *Africa Development/Afrique et Développement* 49/2 (2024): 13-46.

ideology of revolutionary democracy and adherence to the principle of democratic centralism.[52] As a result, the federal government's intention to build a developmental state, formalized in the first Growth and Transformation Plan of 2010–2015, directed the socioeconomic priorities of the regions. This political set-up enabled the federal government to exercise power uncontested, meaning it was able to apply the same policy and legal frameworks across the federation.[53]

The outcomes of the developmental agenda are visible in Hawassa. Most importantly, the government's focus on infrastructure led to the expansion of Hawassa University and construction of major highways that connect to national and Kenyan road networks, Hawassa International Airport and HIP.

Located in the northeast part of the city, HIP was a nationally important project and one of the emblems of ERPDF's developmentalism. Built by the China Civil Engineering Corporation, construction started in July 2015 and the park was inaugurated on 13 July 2016 by Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn. Considered a flagship scheme, HIP is the largest textile and apparel industrial park in Africa and cost more than USD 250 million.[54] It has housed companies mainly producing textiles and garments from countries including the USA, UK, India, Belgium, France, Spain, Taiwan, Indonesia, China and Hong Kong. Around 25,000 new jobs were created in the second year of its operation, with the expectation of 60,000 jobs to be created when fully operational.[55] Since the 2017/18 fiscal year, the export revenue generated from the HIP has increased annually from USD 19.4 million to USD 62.9, USD 81.5 and USD 77.9 in the four years to 2019/2020.[56]

Providing a cheap labour force is one of the incentives the Ethiopian government offers to attract foreign direct investment (FDI) into its manufacturing sector. PVH Corp., which owns well-known brands such as Calvin Klein and Tommy Hilfiger, started producing at HIP. Yet with

52   Gebremariam, 'Thandika Mkandawire's Model', 38. Despite being a composite of four formally autonomous regional ruling parties, EPRDF was known for its hierarchical and centralized decision-making.

53   Meles Zenawi, 'States and markets: Neoliberal limitations and the case for a developmental state', *Good growth and governance in Africa: Rethinking development strategies* (2012): 140-174.

54   Xiaodi Zhang et al, 'Industrial park development in Ethiopia: Case study report', *Inclusive and Sustainable Industrial Development Working Paper Series*, WP 21, UNIDO, 2018. Covering a total area of 2.3 km2 with a built-up space of 230,000 m2, HIP includes 37 standard plants, living facilities and other ancillary facilities. It was lauded for its eco-friendly features as Africa's first sustainable industrial park.

55   Daniel Mains and Robel Mulat, 'The Ethiopian developmental state and struggles over the reproduction of young migrant women's labor at the Hawassa Industrial Park', *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 15/3 (2021): 359-377.

56   Ethiopian Investment Commission, Ethiopia Investment Report, 2017. Accessed 10 December 2024, https://investethiopia.gov.et/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/EIC-2017-Report-.pdf; Senidu Fanuel, Matthew Butler, and Philip Grinsted, 'On the Path to Industrialization: A Review of Industrial Parks in Ethiopia-Policy Report', World Bank, 2022. Accessed 13 October 2023, https://policycommons.net/artifacts/3174132/on-the-path-to-industrialization/3972631/.

the absence of a legally binding minimum wage, Ethiopian workers in HIP and other newly built industrial parks became the lowest-paid labour force in the world, with monthly average payments as low as USD 26.[57] With such low wages and documented practices of union busting, HIP's predominantly young, female and migrant labour force has become an ideal example of labour exploitation by global capital.[58]

SPACES OF CONTESTATION IN THE DEVELOPMENTAL INTERVENTIONS

The labour-based contestations in the HIP occur among a relatively organized group of companies and their operatives manipulating legal and policy loopholes and less organized mostly young, migrant female workers. HIP helped companies to coordinate the wages they offer to their workers. At the same time, the relatively disadvantaged migrant female workers remain highly vulnerable to labour exploitation and unfair working conditions, possessing limited capacity to unionize and so engage in collective bargaining. The workers also complained about the limited support from government officials whose primary interest has been securing job opportunities for young people and addressing the unemployment problem. One of our respondents says:

> The government representatives assured us we would receive great pay, safe working conditions and a good lifestyle. However, my experience and the situation in the HIP are entirely different from the promises.[59]

Recruited mainly from surrounding rural areas, most migrant workers moved to Hawassa with high expectations. Some of the promises included a liveable wage, free transportation, a food allowance and subsidized housing. At the time of data collection (November–December 2023) the average monthly salary in HIP, however, was ETB 1,200 (approximately USD 23). As a result, employees complain about weak or non-existent policy and legal frameworks for a minimum or living wage and the lack of protection for collective bargaining. Meanwhile government officials and companies underscore various labour-related problems as significant problems facing HIP, including low skill levels, high turnover, absenteeism and unrest.

Housing is another significant space of contestation within Hawassa, and one also shaped by EPRDF's developmental state policies. The resulting infrastructure developments attracted

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57   Paul Barrett and Dorothée Baumann-Pauly, 'Made in Ethiopia: Challenges in the Garment Industry's New Frontier', NYU Stern Center for Business and Human Rights, 2019. Accessed 21 November 2024, https://issuu.com/nyusterncenterforbusinessandhumanri/docs/nyu_ethiopia_final_online?e=31640827/69644612.

58   Samuel Andreas Admasie, 'Amid political recalibrations: Strike wave hits Ethiopia', Journal of Labor and Society 21/3 (2018): 431-435; Mains and Mulat, 'Struggles over Reproduction', 359-377; Thomas Hilton, 'Skills for Competitiveness–Hawassa Industrial Park Sourcing and Training Employees in the Region: Private Enterprise Programme Ethiopia, March 2019', London: United Kingdom Department for International Development (2019).

59   Interview with former HIP worker, male, 31. Hawassa, 29 October 2023.

many new residents to Hawassa. With a 7.5 per cent annual projected growth, the population is expected to increase from 403,025 in 2018 to 825,804 by 2030.[60] The number of employees at HIP was expected to reach 84,000 by 2025. With such a rapid increase, housing provision has become a significant challenge and a vital space of contestation.

Brokers, landlords and corrupt officials benefit from the increasing demand for housing and the limited capacity of the city administration to provide it. A common consequence is the construction of informal settlements on the outskirts. Most of these settlements lack water, electricity, road and sewage systems. In most cases, a network of actors involving brokers, professionals such as surveyors and engineers and corrupt officials negotiate with farmers to convert their land into an informal settlement. This is a common practice, especially in peripheral kebeles such as Dato Odahe and Chefe Koti-Jabesa, where most inhabitants work at HIP.

The flourishing informal settlements have become part of the contestations in Hawassa for at least two reasons. The first relates to the financial reward that the network of actors can generate from the illegal transaction of land from farmers to buyers and house builders through brokers and officials. The deals attract officials and ruling party cadres who use the opportunity to distribute rents to their political operatives. In a context where politics is highly ethnicized, most of the key networks involved in land transactions are close to the Sidama political elite.[61] The second element of contestation relates to enforcement. Occasional decisions from the city administration to demolish informal settlements often cause violence between residents and law-enforcement officials. The processes of both demolishing and legally registering informal settlements are well established, and one of the major problems in the city is the absence of a housing development policy that is fit for purpose.

PATTERNS AND DYNAMICS OF CONTESTATION FROM THE DEVELOPMENTAL INTERVENTIONS

EPRDF's developmental statism, both at the national and subnational level, is often regarded as an outcome of an activist state's policy design and institution building. Indeed, the balance sheet of the period shows massive public investment in pro-poor sectors (education, health, agriculture, energy and infrastructure) and enhanced implementation capacity. These developmental success stories are accompanied by a top-down approach and limited room

60   Astrid Haas, Sebastian Kriticos and Nicolas Lippolis, 'Housing in Hawassa: How to accommodate migrant labour in industrialising cities', International Growth Centre. Accessed 5 December 2024, https://www.theigc.org/blogs/housing-hawassa-how-accommodate-migrant-labour-industrialising-cities.

61   Interview with Hawassa resident/former politician, male, 60, Hawassa, 8 October 2023.

for citizens to exercise their civil and political rights.[62] Development is an essentially political process that shapes resource distribution, control, access and production, and in Hawassa there were at least three dominant patterns and dynamics.

The first pattern is the absence of adequate planning and execution regarding the social aspects of establishing Africa's largest garment manufacturing hub. The government proudly promoted HIP's advanced technology, efficient service for foreign investors and limited environmental impact. The social implications of attracting thousands of young migrant workers from surrounding areas were neglected, however. The needed social and physical infrastructure was insufficiently considered and under-provided. This created a massive social problem in terms of access to housing and related municipal services and an increase in gender-based violence and crime. The top-down approach to developmentalism without local capacity in the city to deliver the necessary services has caused significant problems. One of our respondents from the Hawassa municipality summarizes the situation:

> The city administration's capacity to manage urban growth and address the challenges of rapid urbanization is limited. Corruption, ethnic-based favouritism, limited skills and capacity, and lack of transparency and accountability have contributed to the worsening of urban disputes in the city.[63]

The poor spatial planning, the absence of relevant services and the limited capacity of the city administration to cope with the high rate of urbanization have been severe challenges and have the potential to cause violent conflict. The absence of an active and capable city government structure and effective delivery of services invites non-state actors to fill the vacuum. In most cases, ad hoc arrangements play a functional role in addressing immediate needs. Yet they are also prone to capture by actors that may prioritize quick gains via violence and other illegal activities.

The second, related pattern is the mushrooming of illegal land acquisition and house building, which have become sources of income and political rent distribution in Hawassa. The top-down development approach and the limited technical and institutional capacity at the local level have fostered a worrying dynamic where quick money-making and political favour-generating interests are benefiting from the failure. Especially in a context where horizontal violence is rife and often results in conflicts among ethnolinguistic groups, the gap created by the federal and regional governments is open for manipulation by political actors. Hence, the problems related

62   Fana Gebresenbet, 'Securitisation of development in Ethiopia: the discourse and politics of developmentalism', *Review of African Political Economy* 41/1 (2014): S64-S74; Eyob Balcha Gebremariam, 'The carrot and stick of Ethiopian "democratic developmentalism": Ideological, legal, and policy frameworks,' *Developmental State* 61 (2018); Ezana Haddis Weldeghebrael, 'Opportunistic obedient resistance: "Taking the state at its word" in resisting state-led inner-city redevelopment in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.' *Political Geography* 107 (2023).

63   Interview with former official, male, 69, Hawassa, 7 October 2023.

to ineffective spatial and urban planning do not stop at the level of people demanding improved service delivery. The issues have already become sources of income for corrupt brokers, officials, cadres and professionals. Hence, solutions to resolve the problem might go against the material interests of these groups. As a result, the potential solution is not only about enhanced capacity but also about creating a mechanism where the economic and political incentives of engaging in illegal activity around housing and related services are altered.

The third pattern of contestation involves labour suppression and exploitation. The three actors in this and their diverging interests create multiple layers of contestation. The federal government is more interested in generating foreign currency from exports and creating a favourable environment for investors. Given this, safeguarding workers' safety and working conditions and protecting their civil and political rights for unionization is not a priority. On the other hand, foreign investors would prefer higher productivity from the labour force and less regulation to generate higher profits. As a result, the priority for fair compensation, better working conditions and strong trade unions are almost non-existent, unless there is pressure from the market or consumers. The workers' limited power makes them prone to exploitative labour relations yet they also often lack sufficient awareness of their civil and political rights to push for improvements in the working conditions.

In summary, examining urban contestation in Hawassa through the lens of national developmentalism provides insight into how this ideology shapes the actors, spaces, patterns and dynamics of contestation at the local level. EPRDF's model brought new players into the socio-economic sphere of the city (migrant labourers and international corporations) and created new spaces of contestation (wages, housing and land), which in turn produced various patterns and dynamics of contestation. This perspective helps explain contestations without centring ethnolinguistic and sociocultural identities that are prominent in the vertical and horizontal layers. This does not mean identity has no place in the political-economy analysis. Instead, it emphasizes the salient role of other layers of analysis in explaining contestations in Ethiopian urban settings.

KEY FINDINGS

This section aims to draw valuable analytical lessons and possible implications for urban politics and governance at the national and sub-national levels. The research attempted to answer the questions of who are the main actors and what are the spaces of contestation in Hawassa, and to explain the dominant patterns and dynamics of contestation. In doing so, it presented three interrelated arguments articulated through distinct lines of analysis. The first argument underscores the vital role of vertical contestations between the Sidama elite and the federal government as a lens for understanding urban contestations in Hawassa. The second highlights how urban contestations in Hawassa manifested through horizontal contestations. The third argument emphasized the salient role of EPRDF's developmentalist ideology in shaping urban contestations in Hawassa.

Perhaps the most critical analytical lesson from studying Hawassa is that Ethiopia's complex history of state-making is a vital structural cause of conflict. The vertical relationships between the federal and regional governments and the horizontal relations among ethnolinguistic and sociocultural groups require careful reading of past socioeconomic, political, religious and cultural ties. Shaping current socioeconomic and political dynamics and crafting a better future requires a comprehensive understanding of the past.

Hawassa is a prominent example of intersecting vertical and horizontal contestations, where the outcomes of the contestations shaped the configurations of power at the subregional, regional and national levels. At the sub-regional level, zonal administrations increasingly became hotbeds of political struggle with aspirations of becoming regions. EPRDF's fears were realized when 12 requests for upgrading to regional status were submitted by southern zonal administrations. At the regional level, the identity and legitimacy of SNNPRS faced an existential threat when the Sidama elite took control of Hawassa as they established Sidama region. The emergence of three other new regions, Central Ethiopia, South Ethiopia and South West Ethiopia, meant the dissolution of SNNPRS. At the national level, the federal government became occupied by constitutionally guaranteed requests, politically expedited demands and the burdensome administrative process of establishing new regions. As stated by the first Sidama region president, Desta Ledamo, the Sidama elite translated the constitutional rights of self-administration from being 'jewels on paper' into a reality on the ground.[64]

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64   Brook Abdu, 'የክልልነት ጥያቄን የተመለከቱ ሕገ መንግሥታዊ ድንጋጌዎች የወረቀት ላይ ጌጥ ነበሩ እንጂ ወደ ተግባር የተቀየሩ አይደሉም', አቶ ደስታ ሌዳሞ፣ የሲዳማ ክልል ፕሬዚዳንት ('Constitutionally guaranteed rights to establish regions were jewels on paper that were not practiced', Mr. Desta Ledamo, President of Sidama Region') *The Reporter*, 19 July 2020. Accessed 28 June 2024, https://www.ethiopianreporter.com/69917/.

This report makes the analytical distinction between the vertical and horizontal contestations and the contestations that were driven by EPRDF's developmentalist aspiration. In reality, the dynamics of contestations are much more complex, and the wires that drive political or socio-economic contestations intersect. Hence, each section's findings should be interpreted with close consideration of the others. For example, in all three lines of the core arguments, the centralizing tendency of the federal government and its top-down approach in pursuing a political agenda or a socioeconomic goal often was problematic. While EPRDF's attachment to a developmental state model and self-determination might have been the right approach for the country, it struggled to build a strong support base to pursue these often-competing objectives. As a result, pursuing state-led developmentalism and consensus-based federalism created more problems than solutions.

The Hawassa case helps us understand conflict patterns and dynamics at the national level in at least two ways. First, historical, cultural and socio-economic marginalization and grievances cannot be suppressed, or quickly fixed through legalistic interventions and short-termist political approaches such as co-optation. EPRDF's approach to the Sidama question was not fruitful and led to more political crises and bloodshed than satisfactory resolutions. It may well have been the case that no amount of political co-optation, repression or developmentalist intervention could have solved the demand for self-determination by the Sidama elite. Their demands to administer their historical homeland, promote their socio-cultural values and benefit from a fair resource distribution was a long fight with a justifiable cause.

The 1995 constitution, presented as a political and legal mechanism for solving the historical injustices of Ethiopian state-making, inadvertently contributed to the hardening of horizontal inequities by erecting administrative boundaries between communities. In the case of Hawassa, the instrumentalist approach that the EPRDF adopted in defining ethnolinguistic groups shaped how elites from neighbouring groups interacted. The case of the Sidama and Wolayta, as well as the Sidama's interactions with Amhara and Oromo communities in Hawassa and its surroundings, became tense because the institutional arrangements incentivized antagonistic political mobilization. The pursuit of self-administration, which often involved promoting of a community's socio-cultural values and principles, become easily perceived as threatening the other, thereby sustaining a cycle of violent contestations.[65] This was witnessed in Hawassa. Especially around the time of the referendum, the relative weakness of the federal state significantly contributed to escalating the horizontal contestations into deadly conflicts.

The Hawassa case also demonstrated the salient role of the national political-economy ideology in shaping patterns and dynamics of contestations in urban centres outside of Addis Ababa. EPRDF's state-centred developmentalism bolstered the capacity of the state structure at the federal and regional levels to shape the ownership, control, production and distribution of

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65   Semir Yusuf, 'Drivers of ethnic conflict in contemporary Ethiopia', monograph, Institute for Security Studies, 2019. Accessed 21 November 2024, https://issafrica.s3.amazonaws.com/site/uploads/mono-202-2.pdf.

resources. The state played a dominant role in creating new layers of contestation, actors, spaces, patterns and dynamics. The high rate of urbanization induced by HIP and other infrastructure developments, the intensified rural-urban migration and the associated contestation for housing, access to land and urban services are prominent examples in this regard. Problems related to housing, poor infrastructure and service delivery seem to arise primarily from poor planning and execution. However, deeper examination reveals that political factors at the national and local levels are, perhaps, the most critical factors.

After losing an unprecedented number of seats in the disputed 2005 elections, EPRDF sought to gain legitimacy from providing economic opportunities after losing almost all of its democratic legitimacy. Hawassa was suitably endowed to be a focal of these development efforts, which included a large-scale industrial park. Local elites also played their part in pursuing the developmentalist aspiration and benefited from the rents created. They facilitated access to strained resources such as land, housing and services for the rapidly increasing urban population, which included the migrant labour force. Hence, while contestations over self-administration and sociocultural identities remained visible, the implementation of a national development model also played an integral role in shaping conflict at the local level.

The cycle of political crisis at the national level after the 2015 elections, which culminated in the emergence of a new national leadership in April 2018, left a lasting impact on Hawassa. The crisis period is marked by the relative weakness of the federal government in exercising its political and administrative powers and using repressive strategies effectively. This helped the Sidama elite to push for the ultimate goal of establishing Sidama region through a referendum. The Sidama elite shaped the outcomes of the vertical and horizontal contestations in Hawassa by establishing the new ethnolinguistically organized region where Sidamo is the official language. This victory of the Sidama elite also started a process that reduced the political significance of Hawassa due to the emergence of three new regions with their own political and administrative capitals. Hawassa will continue, however, to be a primary centre of tourism and major economic activities, primarily due to the legacy of developmentalism.

Hawassa's new identity as the capital of Sidama region introduced new intertwined layers of contestation in the post-referendum period. One aspect of this is intensified competition within the Sidama elites along clan lines. With the relative absence of a common external political target, which required group cohesion, the Sidama elite now have more incentive to compete with each other for better access to economic resources and control of the new region. SLM, which spearheaded the Sidama question, is accused of being dominated by the Wollabicho clan. As a result, other clans, such as the Hadicho, which are relatively marginalized within the Sidama community, are subjected to internal hierarchies, which will be more prominent within a Sidama-only administration. Sidama region is now receiving more financing as a regional state than the former Sidama zone did. The new region also has the economic activity and institutional capacity to generate and collect tax revenue. The availability of more resources and increase in internal clan-based rivalries set the ground for new forms of contestations in post-referendum Hawassa.

CONCLUSION

Hawassa has unique features as well as similarities with other urban contestations across Ethiopia. The most visible similarity is the legacy of the historically contested processes of Ethiopian state-making. Hawassa has been one of the epicentres of contestation where elites mobilized their respective communities in an effort to shift the structural forces that sustained unjust relations, exclusion and socio-cultural domination. Claiming Hawassa as a Sidama land involved a long history of violent political struggle, which finally had its watershed moment when Sidama region was established.

The Hawassa case is also an outlier among urban contestations in Ethiopia for two reasons. First, the contestation centring on Hawassa and the political success of the Sidama elite had a ripple effect of restructuring the entire southern region and the Ethiopian federation. The amalgamation of several ethnolinguistic and sociocultural groups into the SNNPRS mega-region was a risky political move by EPRDF, which served its purpose in the 1990s and 2000s. Constitutionally sound demands were suppressed using co-optation and repressive mechanisms, but, eventually, sustained political pressure and a structural fracture in the national political system enabled SNNPRS' fragmentation. Hence, the Sidama case, which centres on Hawassa, set a precedent for establishing three more new regional states in southern Ethiopia.

Second, Hawassa is an outlier because of its symbolic role demonstrating the partial developmental successes of the EPRDF era. Hawassa's entire socio-economic, cultural, and political landscape has changed because of various mega projects. These infrastructure developments are lasting legacies of EPRDF's top-down developmental thrust. The emergence of new local and international actors, spaces of contestations over labour wages, access to land, and municipal services, and the intensified interest of global capital in all these processes make the Hawassa case different from the contestations in other secondary cities in Ethiopia.

Based on the key findings of this study, we make the following recommendations for policy-makers and advocates:

- The contested history of Ethiopian state-making will continue to shape socio-economic and political relations. Vertical contestations against the central state and horizontal contestations among socio-cultural and religious groups will struggle to escape the shadow of the past. Hence, it will be important to embrace competing interpretations of history and accommodate differences in every aspect of public and social policy.
- Hawassa's new identity as the capital of Sidama region will only be embraced by non-Sidama residents of the city if there is a deliberate effort to recognize the value of diverse socio-cultural groups to the city. Social and public policy should promote

belongingness and celebrate diversity rather than create a sense of exclusion among non-Sidama inhabitants.

- Hawassa's population is expected to significantly increase in coming years. This growth combined with insufficient city government capacity to provide the required public services can create more tension. As a result, while inclusive social and public policies remain central, equal attention must also be paid to enhancing administrative capabilities.

- Potential sources of conflict in Hawassa may emerge around competing ethnolinguistic or clan-based differences. Attention must also be given, however, to divisions based on class and disparities in accessing resources and employment opportunities.

- The labour exploitation, marginalization and exclusion that followed the expansion of HIP must be addressed. The predominantly young, migrant and female labour force enduring high levels of exclusion and the equally marginalized young migrant men may be susceptible to mobilization for violence if their aspirations remain unfulfilled and their treatment does not improve. Social and public policies that curtail exploitation and support excluded urban dwellers should be designed for Hawassa's specific problems.

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