RETHINKING ETHIOPIA II: YOUTH AND POLITICS
SEMINAR REPORT

INSTITUTE FOR PEACE AND SECURITY STUDIES AND RIFT VALLEY INSTITUTE

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IPSS Institute for Peace and Security Studies

Rift Valley Institute MAKING LOCAL KNOWLEDGE WORK

Peace Research Facility

Rethinking Ethiopia II: Youth and politics Seminar report

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The Institute for Peace and Security Studies (IPSS) at Addis Ababa University is the premiere institute for education, research and policy dialogues on peace and security in Africa. Our mission is to offer quality education and capacity training in the specialised field of peace and security to students and other stakeholders, as well as foster peace and security through research, dialogue and other outreach activities in Ethiopia and across Africa.

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Background: Rethinking Ethiopia

Rethinking Ethiopia, a collaborative essay competition initiative between Addis Ababa University's Institute for Peace and Security Studies (IPSS) and the Rift Valley Institute's (RVI) Peace Research Facility (PRF), offers a platform for Ethiopian youth to express their ideas and improve their writing skills. The first round of the initiative took place in 2023–2024, with the accompanying seminar conducted on 22 February 2024—coinciding with the 50th anniversary of the 1974 Ethiopian Revolution. The full seminar report and Amharic, Oromo, Tigrigna and Somali translations of the essays can be found on the RVI and IPSS websites.[1]

In this second round (2024–2025), Ethiopian youth (aged 18–30) were invited to compose a 1,500–2,000 word essay written in Amharic, Afaan Oromo, Tigrigna, Somali or English on the place of youth in Ethiopia's political space. The topic was intended to open up discussion around youth engagement in a political context often characterized by gerontocracy. Against this backdrop, entrants from a wide range of academic backgrounds submitted essays on subjects as diverse as the quest for new political imaginings; the relationship between youth and security dynamics; and youth's dual role as both protagonist and victim of political conflict. The call for ideas was advertised on various social media sites on 27 September 2024, with the original submission deadline of 25 October subsequently extended to 8 November.[2]

More than 30 essays in various languages were submitted by essayists from across Ethiopia, including Addis Ababa, Oromia, Amhara, Somali, Sidama and Tigray. A panel of four IPSS and RVI representatives reviewed the submissions based on originality, progressive value and clarity of thought, especially regarding proposed recommendations. Ensuring a diversity of voices (societal, gender) was also a key consideration. The panel then selected 13 semi-finalists, each of whom received a writing mentorship to help refine and shape their essays. The mentors, all esteemed Ethiopian academics—Dr Eyob Balcha, Dr Netsanet Gebremichael, Dr Kiya Gezahegn, Dr Selam Esayas and Debela Fituma—were selected for their expertise, diverse educational backgrounds and willingness to mentor the young contributors.

Following the six-week mentorship process, the mentees submitted their final essays on 10 February 2025. These were reviewed by the four-person IPSS/RVI panel, who selected the five best essays for presentation at the April 2025 seminar with a view to eventual publication. The previously applied criteria of originality, progressive value and clarity of thought were again used

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1   Institute for Peace and Security Studies and Rift Valley Institute, 'Rethinking Ethiopia: Legacy of the Ethiopian Revolution: Seminar Report', Addis Ababa, 22 February 2024. Accessed 14 October 2025, https://riftvalley.net/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/PRF_Rethinking-Ethopia-report_v2.pdf or https://ipss-addis.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/PRF_Rethinking-Ethopia-report_v2.pdf.

2   Institute for Peace and Security Studies and Rift Valley Institute, 2024. Accessed 14 October 2025, https://ipss-addis.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/Rethinking-Ethiopia-II-Youth-and-Politics.pdf.

to select the five finalists: Fikir Getachew, Wakjira Tesfaye and Awol Ali (all postgraduate degree holders); Megdelawit Getahun (an LLB graduate); and Dina Abebe (an undergraduate student in her final year at Ambo University). Fikir and Megdelawit are based in Addis Ababa; Awol is from Hawassa in Sidama; Dina is based in Ambo in Oromia; and Wakjira is from Haramaya but currently based in the United States.

On 30 April 2025, RVI and IPSS convened a seminar entitled 'Rethinking Ethiopia: Youth and Politics'. This not only allowed the finalists to present their work to a wider audience, but provided space for soliciting reflections on the place of youth in Ethiopian politics.

The seminar consisted of three main segments, the first of which was an opening session kicked off by a greeting from the IPSS's Dr Fana Gebresenbet, followed by opening remarks from the RVI's Dr Semir Yusuf and a keynote speech by Natnael Feleke. Next came involved presentations from the five essay finalists. Finally, there was a panel discussion on the theme of 'Youth and Ethiopian Politics, Youth in Ethiopian Politics', with remarks by Tsion Engdaye, Kulsma Nur and Tekrim Ahmed. Both the presentations and panel discussion were followed by audience question-and-answer sessions.

Semir closed out the seminar with some concluding remarks, including a call for continued reflection and engagement. The seminar moderators were Dr Messash Kassaye, Anteneh Tesfahun and Dalaya Ashenafi. The seminar was recorded and reported by IPSS's Sofanit Ayu and Fikir Gezahagne.

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Opening session

Introduction and opening remarks

The seminar opened with an introduction by the MC, and PRF research manager, Brook Abdu, who discussed the dilemma of youth participation in Ethiopia. In particular, he focused on the relative absence of youth in political institutions despite their large demographic share, as well as their more active involvement in advocacy, informal political engagement and, at times, political unrest. Opening remarks were then delivered by Dr Fana Gebresenbet, IPSS director, and Dr Semir Yusuf, head of RVI Ethiopia.

Fana highlighted the initiative's efforts to foster dialogue and debate, as well as the importance of the seminar's 'Youth and Politics' theme. In doing so, he emphasized the crucial role of youth in shaping Ethiopia's political landscape. Fana also walked the audience through the essay competition's process, stressing the RVI's and IPSS's commitment to inclusion.

Semir, meanwhile, congratulated the competition winners, before going on to introduce the RVI and its various work streams, which encompass research; education and training; cultural production; and heritage preservation. In addition, he explained the RVI's focus on conflict sensitivity, especially how collaboration with humanitarian, development and peacebuilding actors can help raise awareness about related complexities. Finally, Semir reflected on the RVI's seminar-inspiring core objective: to create platforms that amplify the voices of marginalized and underrepresented communities.

Figure 1. IPSS Director, Fana Gebresenbet, welcoming participants.

Figure 2. RVI Ethiopia Office Head, Semir Yusuf, delivering opening remarks.

Keynote address

Natnael Feleke delivered a keynote address entitled 'The Unfolding Truth: Ethiopian Youth and the Canvas'.[3] Natnael was a member of the Zone 9, a blogging collective dedicated to promoting civic and political engagement among Ethiopian youth. The group achieved fame for its advocacy on human rights and democratization during the latter years of the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) government. He was later a founding member of the Ethiopian Citizens for Social Justice Party (EZEMA), where he served as a spokesperson and member of the National Executive Committee until his resignation in 2022.

Natnael opened by reflecting on the year 2012, which marked the formation of Zone 9. What began as informal social media activism soon developed into a coordinated platform raising awareness on political, social and economic issues in Ethiopia. Their efforts were, however, met with state repression, culminating in members being arrested and charged with terrorism offences.

In exploring historical and contemporary youth engagement in Ethiopia's political landscape, Natnael pointed out that although several young leaders have driven change, their actions—when not grounded in democratic values and inclusive governance—have often contributed to authoritarianism and conflict. Turning to the contemporary context, Natnael observed that youth continue to play a central role in political narratives.

Figure 3. Natnael Feleke delivering his keynote address.

Present-day youth engagement is, however, increasingly marked by violent resistance, a path Natnael warned is likely to escalate disorder rather than bring about meaningful change. As such, he stressed the importance of building a movement with clear goals, a centralized agenda and institutionalized solutions. Natnael concluded with a call for youth to pursue wise, peaceful and impactful engagement.

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3   See Annex I for the full text of his keynote address.

First round of presentations

Fikir Getachew and Wakjira Tesfaye provided the first round of presentations. Fikir is an early career researcher working as a research assistant in an Addis Ababa-based think tank. She formerly served in the public relations department of, and as head office administrator for, an opposition political party. Wakjira, who presented his paper online, is a legal professional with expertise in human rights and international humanitarian law. He served as a lecturer at the University of Gondar, where he also directed the Legal Aid Center, overseeing access to justice for vulnerable populations. The session was moderated by Messash Kasaye, a seasoned training facilitator.

'Beyond the ballot box: How Ethiopian youth navigate an unfavourable political system' by Fikir Getachew

Fikir's presentation explored how Ethiopian youth are reconstructing the idea of political engagement in response to a system they view as ineffective, repressive and exclusionary. Distrust in electoral politics has led to disengagement becoming the norm. While this is often viewed as apathy, Fikir argued it represents a different form of political expression. Here, she stressed the importance of acknowledging how the heterogeneity of youth shapes political engagement.

Fikir identified four common forms of youth engagement beyond formal political structures: 1) militant organization; 2) digital activism; 3) cultural production; and 4) economic withdrawal (exit strategy). Having done so, she emphasized that efforts should be made to recognize youth political engagement, pointing out how informal and alternative forms of engagement are already influencing the political landscape. Supporting these everyday acts of resistance is, she argues, crucial for fostering inclusive, meaningful youth participation.

Figure 4. Megdelawit Getahun (left) and Awol Ali (centre) presenting their papers, moderated by Anteneh Tesfahun (right).

'Youth, marginalization and the future of Ethiopian politics' by Wakjira Tesfaye

Wakjira began his talk by noting that despite being mobilized by various regimes, Ethiopian youth have historically been excluded from meaningful political decision-making. Rather than being incidental or episodic, this pattern is deliberate and systemic, with youth compelled to operate inside a political structure that persistently sidelines them.

Wakjira argued that the consolidation of power within elite circles, combined with young people's exclusion from decision-making, has weakened trust, participation and inter-generational cohesion in Ethiopia, thereby undermining the development of social capital. Moreover, political exclusion is compounded by economic marginalization, with the mass expansion of higher education not matched by adequate job opportunities. This has left many young people in a state of 'waithood'—seemingly unprepared for either the labour market or meaningful societal participation.

The superficial policy responses of successive regimes have, according to Wakjira, failed to address the systemic roots of inequality. In the face of ongoing exclusion, youth have turned to alternative platforms, particularly digital activism. This form of engagement is, however, constrained by infrastructural limitations and state-imposed internet shutdowns, and moreover risks digital spaces becoming breeding grounds for misinformation and hate speech.

To address these challenges, Wakjira advocates creating both bonding (within homogeneous groups) and bridging (across diverse groups) social capital. In this respect, fostering inter-generational trust and youth solidarity is essential to overcoming marginalization, and in turn building a more inclusive political and economic future.

Discussion points

The first question addressed how the papers engage with a contemporary political landscape heavily shaped by ethnic tensions and identity politics. The presenters pointed out that this complex reality underscores the need for youth to engage politically, especially through informal means. They also stressed that youth experiences and concerns are as diverse as their identities, and that ethnic tensions and identity politics form part of the youth agenda.

The second question, directed at Wakjira, asked why, in terms of building social capital, his presentation focused primarily on inter-generational rather than broader cross-generational trust. Wakjira explained his focus on inter-generational trust stems from the intense competition and deep mistrust that characterizes interactions between generations. Nevertheless, he acknowledged that cross-generational trust is equally essential for fostering strong social capital.

The third question asked how a unified youth voice could be achieved given Ethiopia's diversity. Both presenters clarified that their work does not advocate for a singular voice among youth. Rather, as Wakjira explained, the goal is to create a unified platform that accommodates and amplifies diverse voices, rather than flattening them into one.

Second round of presentations

Megdelawit Getahun and Awol Ali provided the second round of presentations, with the remaining finalist, Dina Abebe, unable to attend the seminar. Megdelawit is a human rights defender and feminist activist with a background in law. Her work centres on 'writivism': using writing as a tool to challenge the structural inequalities that shape women's lives, particularly in the areas of gender justice and digital rights. Megdelawit is a member of Article 35, a collective dedicated to embedding feminist perspectives into Ethiopian national policy and public discourse. Awol is a lecturer at the College of Law and Governance, Hawassa University, Ethiopia. Dina is an undergraduate computer science student at Ambo University, an aspiring technological neuro-anthropologist, and founder and executive director of ISG Ethiopia, a non-profit dedicated to empowering underserved and under-resourced high school and university students across Ethiopia. The session was moderated by Anteneh Tesfahun, a political analyst with an MA in Peace and Security Studies. Anteneh has previously worked at Jimma University and Bahir Dar University, and served as a graduate teaching assistant at Syracuse University in New York.

'Fighting for space: A feminist vision for digital inclusion in Ethiopia' by Megdelawit Getahun

Megdelawit highlighted the contrast between perception and reality underlying the digital world, arguing that although it is usually considered a free, open space where everyone can voice their truths, research reveals a gendered and rural–urban divide. In essence, digital spaces have proven to be neither safe nor un-politicized.

This gender divide is not just an infrastructural problem, but an outcome of broader power dynamics. In support of this claim, Megdelawit's pointed to wider patterns of patriarchal control, economic disparity and systemic exclusion, which are then reflected in what most perceive to be a modernized platform. She also highlighted the impact of the urban–rural divide on women's access to digital spaces. The utilization, or lack thereof, of digital spaces also impacts activism. Here, Megdelawit argued that younger feminists are often sidelined due to digital access rights being regarded as a secondary concern.

Megdelawit also spotlighted a number of other disparities, such as violation of rights and digital insecurity, which act as impediments to inclusive access. In noting that the risk of technology-facilitated

Figure 5. Fiker Getachew (left) presenting her research findings, moderated by Messash Kassaye (right).

gender-based violence has yet to be addressed through legal and institutional frameworks, she stressed that online harm translates into offline inequality and rights violations.

According to Megdelawit, digital spaces must be cognizant of the gender divide if they are to secure equality and help dismantle oppression. Moreover, ensuring accessibility for those in rural areas and with literacy gaps is crucial to realizing a feminist digital future.

Megdelawit concluded by arguing that inclusion should not be viewed as an end goal, but rather a step towards realizing safer, equal and fair access to 'feminist digital futures'.

'Rethinking non-violent youth-led political engagement in Ethiopia' by Awol Ali

Awol's presentation called for a rethinking of Ethiopia's non-violent youth-led political movements, citing the Ejetto movement in Sidama as an example of youth acting as change-makers. Such youth engagement is risky for those involved, however, and often proves fragile over the longer term due to a lack of structured political action and post-victory planning.

In the case of Ejetto, Awol argued that these limitations were particularly apparent during the 11/11/11 clashes, where members violently attacked non-Sidama ethnic groups.[4] The Ejetto movement, which played a key part in Sidama's quest for self-determination, deliberately eschewed formal power structures in order to protect activists from government retribution and internal power struggles. At the same time, this lack of organization meant the movement struggled to transform itself into a sustainable, comprehensive administration once its goals had been achieved.

Challenges like these should, in Awol's view, be addressed using an 'action-oriented approach' that encourages non-violent movements founded on common values and consensus-building. As such, youth should not be viewed as agents of disorder and violence, but enablers of constructive change. Here, strategic non-violent models such as alliance building and peaceful dialogue between youth are crucial to long-term success.

Awol also emphasized that empowering youth in education, as well as organizing coalitions and engaging in mutual decision-making with the adult population, helps promote a sense of ownership conducive to the eschewing of violence and pursuit of peaceful approaches.

In conclusion, Awol stressed that non-violent opposition not only empowers youth by building self-confidence and collective strength, but lays the groundwork for future reconciliation and democratic participation.

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4   '11/11/11' refers to the 11th of Hamle 2011 in the Ethiopian Calendar, which corresponds to 28 July 2019 in the Gregorian calendar. The clashes occurred in Hawassa, Sidama, with the immediate cause being Sidama zone council's unilateral declaration of statehood. This led to violent confrontations between government security forces and Sidama protestors.

Discussion points

Participants' questions focused on youth violence and feminist digital inclusion. Addressing a question concerning comparable instances of youth violence, Awol emphasized the inadequacy of government interventions in El Salvador. In this case, religious institutions and civil society helped integrate former gang members into society through education and employment programmes.

Building on Megdelawit's presentation, participants explored the link between feminism and digital inclusion, with a particular focus on the unique needs of rural women. The discussion emphasized that women's experiences and challenges differ widely depending on geography, economic status and social roles. It also acknowledged that the digital inclusion agenda often centres on economic integration, market access and property rights. Here, it was noted a rethink was due in terms of prioritizing the issues most relevant to rural women.

Also highlighted was the importance of digital inclusion strategies aimed at addressing these structural challenges, empowering women through digital tools, and improving digital literacy through initiatives such as digital ID and digital agriculture. Furthermore, targeted efforts to support marginalized and vulnerable women were emphasized, including extending the concept of accessibility to incorporate safety and protection within digital spaces. On this point, it was suggested that policies and programmes should actively address the socio-cultural barriers preventing women from using digital technologies safely and effectively.

The anti-feminist backlash was flagged as a challenge to efforts at promoting gender equality, with participants underscoring the importance of continued advocacy for women's rights and digital inclusion.

Panel discussion: Youth and Ethiopian politics, Youth in Ethiopian politics

The panellists for the discussion were Tsion Engdaye, Kulsma Nur and Tekrim Ahmed, with researcher and policy expert Dalaya Ashenafi acting as moderator. Tsion is a gender and human rights consultant, as well as a former Ethiopian Citizens for Social Justice (EZEMA) party youth affairs department head and National Executive Committee member. She discussed youth participation in party politics. Kulsuma is a law graduate and an LLM candidate in public international law at Addis Ababa University. Her interests lie in women's rights issues, international humanitarian law and politics. Her discussion focused on youth as victims and perpetrators of violence. Tekrim is a feminist media practitioner and a writer and researcher for feminist magazine Finding Fura, which seeks to amplify marginalized narratives through critical discourse and storytelling. Tekrim's remarks focused on youth in non-institutional settings, particularly in terms of cultural politics and activism.

Figure 6. Panel discussion: Youth and Ethiopian politics, Youth in Ethiopian politics. Participants from left to right: Tsion Engidaye, Kulsma Nur, Tekrim Amhed and moderator Dalaya Ashenafi.

Tsion Engdaye on youth and party politics

Tsion began by pointing out that Ethiopia's youth, who constitute roughly 70 per cent of the country's population, require answers to an array of important questions. As such, she argued there is a critical need for political participation by youth, who should enjoy proportionate representation in political parties. Moreover, parties should not have an exclusively preserve on setting the youth agenda—rather, youth themselves must be empowered to articulate their agendas and gain answers to their questions. She therefore advocated for youth participation in all decisions that impact them, emphasizing such participation should be peaceful.

Tsion also explored the major challenges to youth involvement, including a political culture that rewards violence, the restrictions on opposition parties, and the fact that no party has been able to bring about meaningful change. This has discouraged youth involvement in democratic politics, leading some to become involved in political violence. In addition, older politicians tend to monopolize leadership positions for extended periods, with cultural, linguistic and

societal biases further limiting opportunities for young leaders, especially women. In many cases, Tsion observed, communities believe that youth do not have the abilities to lead.

Financial instability poses another key challenge, as graduates often join parties seeking payment and are then forced to leave due to lack of financial resources. Tsion highlighted that youth are sometimes even expected to pay for membership, making it difficult for low-income individuals to become involved. Youth involvement in political parties is also stymied by lack of capacity, knowledge or experience, which suggests skills-building programmes such as internships are essential.

Tsion noted that youth often struggle to find political parties that align with their ideology and interests. In many cases, this is because the parties are weak and disconnected from the youth. In particular, she criticized parties for only seeking youth participation when trying to advance their agendas, particularly during protests or elections, rather than routinely involving them in decision-making.

To address these challenges, Tsion advocates transforming the political culture in ways that bring about greater participation and inclusiveness, particularly regarding youth. At present, many parents discourage their children from political participation due to fears of violence or arrest. Thus, she emphasized the importance of developing peaceful, participatory political practices, emphasizing that youth, government and political parties bear equal responsibility in this endeavour.

In terms of practical steps, Tsion proposed that the National Election Board extend its recent proclamation—which mandates the inclusion of women and persons with disabilities in political parties—to cover youth. She also advocated for youth quota systems, noting that while quotas exist for women, they remain insufficient. Here, Tsion pointed out that only 2 per cent of political participants in Ethiopia are of youth age.

Finally, Tsion called for the development of inter-generational partnerships and strengthening of youth capacity, cautioning that in some cases youth are even perceived as enemies. She concluded her talk by reiterating that comprehensive action to ensure youth's full participation in political processes is vital.

Kulsma Nur on youth as both victims and perpetrators of violence

Building on Tsion's insights, Kulsma focused on youth's involvement in violence, both as victims and perpetrators. She began by defining violence, described by the United Nations as acts causing political, social, economic or physical harm. Here, she pointed out that there multiple classifications of youth: whereas the UN defines youth as those aged 15–24, Ethiopia's National Policy uses a 15–29 age range. For the purposes of her talk, Kulsma made clear she was using the African Union's chosen age range of 15–35.

Kulsma emphasized that violence remains the leading cause of death among the world's youth, claiming the lives of approximately 100,000 young people each year. In Ethiopia specifically, she identified multiple forms of violence—political, physical, economic, social media/technological—that affect youth, who depending on the circumstances can be both perpetrator

and victim. Moreover, such acts often occur against a backdrop of armed conflict, and often within groups.

Digging deeper, Kulsma elaborated on economic violence, encompassing job loss and property destruction; and physical violence, including gender-based violence such as sexual harassment. These two types of violence predominantly affect rural youth. Meanwhile, social media violence, encompassing disinformation, defamation and psychological harassment, mostly affects urban youth and diaspora communities. Disinformation (deliberately faked information) especially can lead to urban social media users becoming participants in violence.

Kulsma identified poverty and inequality as key causes of conflict, explaining that when groups or individuals cannot get answers to their grievances—whether over economic issues or welfare policies—they may see violence as their only hope. Here, she cited *Qerroo* and *Fano* as examples of how youth-led groups in Ethiopia may resort to force when officials and political elites ignore their concerns around land distribution, marginalization and ethnic grievances.[5] According to Kulsma, contested borderlands are particularly critical in driving youth violence, as the issue affects numerous communities, including the Oromos and Somalis, Afars and Somali-Issas, and Amharas and Tigrayans.

The current situation is both unacceptable and unsustainable, while efforts at resolution are unsatisfactory. As Kulsma pointed out, more than 9 million students in Amhara, Tigray and Oromia are excluded from education due to violence, with many schools closed and damaged. Peaceful discussions involving meaningful youth participation are needed to overcome what has become an extensive, ongoing crisis, with gender-sensitive issues requiring particular attention.

Finally, Kulsma recommended executing policies designed to lift youth out of poverty, including mentorship and leadership development programmes.

Tekrim Ahmed on youth in non-institutional politics

As a feminist media practitioner, Tekrim explored the role of youth in non-institutional politics, especially cultural politics and activism. Although digital spaces and cultural production have already been used as means of organizing, Tekrim argued that people are increasingly seeking alternative ways of organizing beyond traditional electoral politics, pointing to examples from Sudan and Kenya.

In Sudan, young people organized themselves outside party structures, utilizing spaces such as mosques and community discussions. They also expressed political views through arts

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5   *Qeerroo* and *Fano* emerged in Oromia and Amhara, respectively, as youth-led mobilizations rooted in distinct ethno-political movements. At the time of this writing, their roles, composition and public image have shifted markedly in response to evolving political dynamics and security developments. While *Fano* has transformed into a nationalist armed group actively in conflict with government forces in Amhara, *Qeerroo* is no longer publicly visible as a political actor. Security conditions in Oromia have also undergone significant changes, with several members of *Qeerroo* joining the rebellion taking place in the region.

and culture, often reacting to laws attempting to regulate music and social media. The 2018–19 Sudanese revolution was, claimed Tekrim, a significant achievement in terms of youth organization. During the nine years leading up it, Sudanese youth employed various alternative methods to build political consciousness and question the country's political economy. Tekrim recalled a popular motto used by the movement—'We will bring down the state, and then we will get married and have children'—which reflected youth's prioritization of political change over traditional expectations. The youth protests initially focused on economic grievances, such as the rising bread and fuel prices, which the government ignored. Despite the state repression that was soon to meet the youth's calls for justice and economic relief, their activism persisted.

Tekrim also underlined the role of Sudanese youth in criminalizing female genital mutilation (FGM). Youth artists produced an array of podcasts, theatre performances, satire and creative plays critiquing FGM and challenging its religious justification, particularly under Islam. These cultural productions helped raise public and political awareness about the practice's harmful effects. In addition, youth collaborated with activists involved in sit-ins to emphasize that FGM was part of a broader oppressive agenda. All these efforts came to fruition following the July 2020 political transition, when Sudan at last criminalized FGM.

Turning to Kenya, Tekrim discussed the 'Gen Z movement', a youth-led initiative seeking to combat economic injustice that emerged in 2024 as a response to the controversial finance bill. The movement adopted a leaderless, horizontal structure in order to resist co-optation and betrayal, as well as avoid state reprisals and the targeting of individual leaders. This decentralized model reflected both strategic caution and a broader rejection of traditional political hierarchies, with Kenyan youth insisted on direct, intermediary free communication via digital platforms such as X. Tekrim noted that digital spaces were crucial to youth building alternative political structures, despite the inherent challenges in doing so. She also mentioned that Kenya's youth movement had been active in protesting against femicides and other gender-based violence.

Regarding Ethiopia, Tekrim praised the Yellow Movement as a promising start for youth activism.[6] She also highlighted Ajrit ('አጅሪት'), a participatory digital project focused on young women's political questions—which are often overlooked or conflated with those of older women.[7] In order to capture the diverse political, economic and cultural concerns at play, Ajrit's researchers conducted interviews and focus groups with young Ethiopian women across multiple regions. Whereas the country's political parties have largely failed to create supportive environments, Ajrit provided an accessible platform for women's groups to express their views. Furthermore, it gave rise to other initiatives such as Finding Fura, which provides opportunities to young women interested in writing and public speaking.

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6   The Yellow Movement is that began in 2011 as an initiative by students and a lecturer at Addis Ababa University School of Law. The youth-led feminist movement currently has active chapters in Addis Ababa University, Mekelle University and Hawassa University.

7   Ajrit started in 2023 as an initiative by Addis Powerhouse (a feminist media and research initiative based in Addis Ababa).

Overall, Tekrim emphasized that youth activism in non-institutional politics is vibrant and evolving. Driven by creative cultural expression, it offers pathways for political participation that extend beyond conventional party politics.

Discussion points

Following the opening remarks, participants posed a series of questions:

- If we see 2018 as a political milestone in Ethiopia, what types of changes and continuity do you see in terms of youth political participation, youth violence and institutional humanism and politics?

- Youth are often uninterested in participating in political parties. What agendas and mobilization methods should parties adopt to increase youth participation?

- Youth are presented as both victims and perpetrators of violence. Yet they must be assigned responsibility so they can participate willingly and define their own political or economic agenda. If that were to happen, what agenda would they choose?

- Mostly, Ethiopian youth have participated in protests and political struggles. However, they have at times been instrumentalized by older politicians. Why? What makes youth vulnerable to that? And what should the formal and informal power relationships between youth and those with power look like?

- In Sudan, youth movements initially aimed for government change, but also raised economic issues like the cost of living and unemployment. In Kenya, taxation was a key issue. These movements raised structured, policy-based questions and then either got answers or moved to other phases, including violence. However, in Ethiopia, most movements are ethnic-based and aim to take power, such as *Qerroo* and *Fano*, framing questions ethnically rather than structurally or policy-wise. How do you view Ethiopia's political uniqueness in this regard?

- Learning from Sudan's humanist women's movement, what advice do you have for women's empowerment movements in Ethiopia regarding building friendship and solidarity among women? What lessons can we learn from non-political women's empowerment movements in Ethiopia over the last ten years?

Reflections: The panellists respond

Tsion Engdaye: Tsion stated that although political participation was difficult prior to the 2018, youth membership increased following the reforms granting political parties greater freedom to operate. This progress was short-lived, however, with repression—including arrests of party leaders and activists—intensifying during and after the 2021 elections. She observed that youth participation is often sought around elections, only to be ignored afterwards. The current political environment is worse than in 2017, as no party is able to challenge the government effectively. Tsion acknowledged youth's right to neutrality but attributed most

of their disinterest to fear, economic insecurity and lack of capacity or knowledge. Here, she emphasized the importance of financial empowerment.

She also criticized political parties for failing to engage youth on the platforms they use most, such as TikTok, and assuming they understand youth concerns without bothering to conduct proper research. Despite frequently being mobilized by parties for protests or violence, youth lack genuine leadership opportunities. Thus, rather than being used as tools by older politicians, they should formulate their own agendas.

Tsion agreed that youth participation often varies according to political openings or repression, making it difficult to predict when mobilizations will occur. Here, she highlighted the absence of structured youth leadership within political parties and the need for youth to articulate their agendas and build capacity.

Tsion noted that former youth movement leaders often pursue their own agendas as they grow older rather than continue to represent youth interests. These 'moved out agents' should create their own political spaces, leaving youth to make their demands without interference from older figures. In this regard, Tsion underscored the importance of youth shaping their own questions and asserting their agency.

Tsion clarified that the social definition of youth varies across communities, with some cultures using secondary characteristics to define adulthood. Given that political participation requires accountability and responsibility, a legal definition of youth is necessary. For example, child marriage laws define anyone married before they reach the age of 18 as a child. Returning to the subject of former youth leaders, she argued that active steps should be made to ensure younger, emerging leaders take their place.

An entrenched institutional culture allows corruption and bribery to persist, making change difficult. Going forward, Tsion explained that youth participation is not just about making demands, but taking part in solutions, decision-making and power-sharing. Just as women advocate for 50/50 representation, so youth representation should be proportional to their population share.

She also stressed the importance of understanding why people join political parties—whether for daily survival or to address societal questions—and argued that if youth, who constitute 70 per cent of the population, organize and raise questions, it should not be seen as threatening. Successful advocacy for youth and women's political participation should move beyond narrow group-specific concerns and instead empower them to engage meaningfully in broader community and societal decision-making.

Kulsma Nur: Kulsma described 2018 as a hopeful year for Ethiopia marked by youth-driven reforms and protests, initially peaceful but later involving violence. She noted that active youth movements such as *Qeerroo* and *Fano* were eventually marginalized and militarized during the Tigray conflict. Ethiopian politicians have historically used and discarded youth movements, while youth questions are often bound up with ethnic issues, complicating mobilization. This has undermined youth trust and participation. Kulsma pointed out that after the 2018 reforms youth initially mobilized strongly, but later faced repression and exclusion.

According to Kulsma, youth often engage in violence as a response to unmet demands related to land, economic inequality or marginalization. Youth violence is frequently politicized by elites, with youth themselves potentially unaware of the full consequences of militarization. Thus, youth are both manipulated and marginalized in these processes.

Although youth violence is often reactive to political and economic crises, Kulsma noted its timing and scale can be unpredictable due to complex social dynamics and manipulation by political actors. At present, youth lack leadership roles and are often used by the older politicians who dominate movements. In response, she stressed the need to recognize youth as leaders and separate youth agendas from ethnic politics.

Kulsma noted that families and communities often discourage youth from political participation not because they deny their demands, but out of fear they may be arrested, exiled, hurt or even killed. Most Ethiopian political parties are regional and ethnically based, making it difficult to identify those genuinely committed to youth interests. Against this backdrop, she advised youth to participate in political parties aligned with their ideologies and community questions, or else organize new parties that reflect their aims.

Finally, Kulsma pointed out a recurring cycle whereby youth risk their lives for movements, only to see a handful of individuals gain political or financial benefits and then betray the youth, perpetuating disenchantment.

Tekrim Ahmed: Tekrim also acknowledged 2018 as a hopeful time for opening up political spaces in Ethiopia, with increased activism and civic engagement. The Tigray war, however, led to a shrinking of political space and fragmentation of youth activism along ethnic and gender lines, limiting shared alternative political visions. Despite these ongoing challenges, youth in Tigray have made efforts to reimagine post-war futures through cultural activism. More generally, though, Tekrim pointed to a lack of alternative political spaces capable of crossing ethnic divides, and noted how gender dynamics affect youth participation.

While emphasizing that youth cultural activism should be an expression of self-made agendas, Tekrim acknowledged the challenges posed by political repression. In response, she suggested cultivating inter-generational partnerships, as well as inclusive spaces where youth voices are heard and empowered. Despite some efforts being made towards this end, especially in Tigray, there remains a need for more inclusive, inter-ethnic dialogue spaces.

In stressing the economic challenges limiting youth participation, Tekrim noted that Ethiopia's political parties often cannot pay youth members, discouraging sustained engagement. She also underscored the importance of transforming ethnic conflicts into peaceful political agendas through research and documentation. Ethiopian youth often appear to mobilize around nationalism and religion, but their actual political questions remain unaddressed.

Tekrim suggested that the differences between youth agendas are more cultural than political, with identity politics hindering cooperation. Thus, it is important to understand root causes and mobilize youth around peaceful political solutions, thereby fostering hope and mitigating potentially negative trends such as migration. Tekrim touched on how youth political awareness has been shaped by cultural productions such as 'Frash Adash' and the 'Tobiya' poetry

programmes in Addis Ababa, which have helped young people engage with political issues by serving as sites of satire and artistic critique.

While recognizing that Ethiopian politics is deeply influenced by ethnic identity, Tekrim emphasized this is not unique. For instance, Sudan has also experienced ethnic divisions, yet the country's youth have managed to mobilize around shared goals, demonstrating 'unity within diversity'. She added that feminism in Ethiopia is closely tied to ethnic identity, raising important questions about how gender and belonging intersect in political life.

Dalaya Ashenafi: Dalaya brought the panel discussion to a close, acknowledging it had covered a broad range of topics relevant to youth political participation. In particular, she noted the discussion had explored both formal and informal modes of engagement, including how youth are reimagining the various mechanisms involved in political participation. In doing so, a challenge had been laid down for participants to rethink existing social and political structures in relation to youth agency.

Closing remarks

The seminar wound up with some closing remarks by Dr Semir Yusuf, who reflected on the breadth of topics covered before thanking the participants and panellists for their active involvement and insightful contributions, and the IPSS for facilitating. He encouraged ongoing discussions aimed at promoting inclusive, peaceful and meaningful youth political participation.

Annex 1: Keynote address

'The unfolding chapter: Ethiopian youth and the canvas of politics' by Natnael Feleke

Good morning!

Exactly 13 years ago, nine energetic young people who met earlier at a gathering for a social initiative decided to uplift their individual activism on social media to something more organized. In the following two years, these young men and women wrote over 200 articles that reported, analysed and/or criticized social, economic and political issues in the country. They planned, organized and executed four social media campaigns that were successful in mobilizing the youth in a call to respect rights protected in the Constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia. The objective of Zone 9 initially was to create a platform for our fellow youth to reflect and discuss their concerns, a platform we were largely denied by the state. Our motto was 'ስለሚያገባን እንጦምራለን' (We blog, because we care!).

For much of the time we blogged and campaigned, it was a part-time, fun activity for us. We also operated under the assumption that things couldn't get any worse than they were back then. Little did we know.

Respected guests, people of my age and significantly younger age, it is an honour to stand before you today to discuss a topic that lies at the heart of our nation's future: The dynamic and crucial role of youth in peaceful political engagement. Ethiopia, a land filled with youthful energy and potential, stands at a critical stage. As we look towards shaping a more peaceful and affluent future, the engagement of our young people is not just desirable—it is indispensable.

Our history offers compelling, albeit complex, lessons on the influence of youth in political leadership. Consider the rise of Emperor Haile Selassie, Mengistu Hailemariam and Meles Zenawi. Each of these figures rose to significant power at a relatively young age.

While Emperor Haile Selassie held significant roles before becoming emperor, his early years were marked by ambition and a drive for modernization. His long reign, however, also witnessed periods of stagnation and ultimately ended in revolution. His time in power generally offers a reminder that youthful dynamism, while potent, requires wisdom and inclusiveness to build lasting positive change.

Coming to power through a military junta, Mengistu's early leadership was characterized by radical reforms and a forceful assertion of power. His youth, perhaps coupled with the revolutionary fervour of the time, contributed to a period of intense upheaval and, ultimately, the tragic loss of many lives. This serves as a stark reminder of the potential pitfalls when youthful idealism is untampered by democratic principles and respect for human rights.

Leading the EPRDF to power at a relatively young age, Meles ushered in a period of economic growth and a new political system. His youth was perhaps associated with a willingness to break with the past and implement bold policies. However, his rule also faced criticisms regarding its human rights record and democratic space. This highlights the complexity of evaluating youthful leadership and the importance of accountability and broad participation.

Reflecting on these historical examples, we see that the energy and vision often associated with youth can be a powerful catalyst for change. However, the direction and impact of that change are profoundly shaped by the values, ideologies and the political systems within which these young leaders operated. Their experiences underscore the critical need for a foundation of inclusiveness, justice and peaceful means in any political endeavour, regardless of the age of those leading it.

Turning to our present reality, we observe a similar thread of youthful engagement in the political landscape. It is no secret that the leadership of some of the current resistance and rebellion movements in the Oromia and Amhara regions has roots in youth movements and youth league leadership.

These young individuals, driven by their experiences and aspirations, initially mobilized within youth structures, often advocating for greater political participation, cultural rights and addressing grievances they felt were unmet by the existing systems. Their early involvement in youth activism, perhaps, provided them with organizational skills, a platform to articulate their concerns and a network of like-minded individuals.

The trajectory from youth activism to armed resistance is a complex and often tragic one. It speaks to the frustrations and the perceived lack of viable peaceful avenues for political expression and change. Understanding this trajectory is crucial. It compels us to ask: how can we create an environment where the dynamism and passion of our youth find constructive and peaceful channels for political engagement, preventing the escalation towards conflict?

Previous generations in Ethiopia grappled with and, to a significant extent, institutionalized answers to fundamental questions: the land question and the question of nations and nationalities. These were defining issues of their time, shaping the political landscape and the very identity of our nation. They engaged in intense debates, struggles and, ultimately, enshrined certain principles within our political and legal frameworks.

For this generation, the youth of today, the homework is different, but no less critical. We inherit the complexities and the progress of the past, but we also face new and pressing challenges. What is the burning question of our time and the time to come that we must articulate and institutionalize?

I believe it revolves around issues of genuine democratic participation, inclusive governance, economic opportunity for all, and the fostering of a truly unified yet diverse national identity. These are the issues that ignite the passions of young Ethiopians, that fuel our conversations, and that will ultimately define the legacy of the youth of this generation. It is the responsibility of the youth of this generation to move beyond simply identifying these challenges and to actively work towards institutionalizing solutions through peaceful and constructive engagement.

Given the historical context and the current realities, the question of how we engage politically is paramount. For the youth of this generation, peaceful political engagement is not merely a preference; it is a necessity.

We are acutely aware that the state, in many contexts, views independent youth movements and expressions of dissent with suspicion, often reacting with measures intended to suppress them. While this reality can be frustrating and even provoke anger, resorting to violence only perpetuates a cycle of conflict and hinders the very change we seek.

Peaceful engagement—through dialogue, advocacy, civic participation and the building of broad-based coalitions—offers a more sustainable and ultimately more powerful path towards achieving our goals. It allows us to build legitimacy, garner wider support, and create the space for meaningful and lasting change. It demands patience, strategic thinking and resilience, but it is the path that holds the greatest promise for a future where the rights and aspirations of all Ethiopians are respected.

For any youth movement or initiative for political change to be effective and avoid disillusionment, it is crucial to clearly define its goals. What is the specific change we are striving for? What are the tangible outcomes we seek to achieve?

Vague or ill-defined objectives leave movements vulnerable to internal divisions, external manipulation and, ultimately, a sense of failure. Clear goals provide a roadmap, a unifying purpose and a basis for measuring progress.

Furthermore, a lack of clarity can make a movement susceptible to being hijacked by other actors with different agendas. By articulating our principles and objectives with precision, we can safeguard the integrity of our movement and ensure that it remains true to its original purpose and the aspirations of its members. This requires open and honest internal dialogue, democratic decision-making processes and a commitment to transparency. To conclude, let me take you back to the personal story I shared at the beginning.

Although we engaged with all the passion and commitment in our blogging and campaigning activities, it was the state that recognized our full potential first. That meant that things got worse for us. It was exactly 11 years ago that we were arrested and later accused of terrorism charges. The state took our work way more seriously than we actually did.

The future of Ethiopia rests in the hands of its youth. You have the energy, the passion and the potential to shape a more just, peaceful and developed nation. Learning from the past, understanding the present, and focusing on a future built through peaceful and clearly defined engagement is your collective responsibility. You need to rise to this challenge with courage, with wisdom, and with an unwavering commitment to building the Ethiopia we all deserve. The time for your generation to articulate and institutionalize its vision for a better Ethiopia is now. Let's begin this vital work now. While we're at it, let's not operate under the assumption that things couldn't get any worse. Let's recognize things could actually get worse and engage so that things get better.

We blogged because we care. I am sure you can find a much more impactful engagement to show how much you care and put your footprint on the canvas.

Thank you very much!

Annex 2: Essays

'Beyond the ballot box: How Ethiopian youth navigate an unfavourable political system' by Fikir Getachew

In June 2024, the streets of Nairobi erupted in flames as thousands of Kenyan youths clashed with police over a controversial finance bill that threatened to deepen economic inequality. Chants of '*siasa mbaya, maisha mbaya*' ('bad politics, bad life') echoed as young Kenyans, armed with smartphones and slogans, demanded change. This uprising was part of a continental wave of dissent, with Gen Z leading movements from Kenya to Ghana, Uganda, Mozambique and Nigeria just last year. Inspired by these events, some in Ethiopia took to social media to reflect on what it would take to mobilize their fellow citizens into similar political action, attempting to draw inspiration from the multiethnicity of the Kenyan protests.

Viewed as having two-sided contributions as agents of positive change but also repositories of violence and destruction, young people in Ethiopia are reimagining political engagement on their own terms.[8] Despite their large share of the population, youth are not flooding the ranks of political parties, nor are they widely engaging in formal political process. Instead, they are choosing to (dis)engage in ways that mirror their dissatisfaction with these channels. And they have legitimate reasons to distrust institutional politics, as these mechanisms have consistently failed to deliver meaningful change and continue to protect elitist interests—often at the expense of the general populace.

Rather than lamenting the lack of youth participation in formal political channels and viewing their disengagement as apathy, this essay contends that we should recognize their modes of engagement as strategic acts of self-preservation and a profound critique of a system that feels ineffective, exclusionary and dangerous. I argue that we are witnessing youth crafting a new lexicon of engagement to challenge systemic failures, and that even as they navigate economic precarity and authoritarian backlash, young people must take the lead in forging non-violent pathways to reclaim political agency, assert their collective power and improve their circumstances.

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8   Jon Abbink and Ineke Van Kessel, *Vanguard or Vandals: Youth Politics and Conflict in Africa*, Leiden: Brill, 2005.

The concept of participation is often ambiguous. Liberal democratic theory defines political participation narrowly as engagement in political organizations; membership in associations; attending meetings and/or rallies; or taking part in electoral activities. But this conception ignores the realities of young people navigating systems that do not represent them. Conventional wisdom on democracy also assumes that participation is largely achieved through voting and political party membership. However, research suggests that young people globally are increasingly viewing democracy as a staged performance, where politicians make grand promises but consistently fail to deliver.[9] This is increasingly becoming the case even in those states considered to be 'established democracies'. This declining faith in democratic process is, according to expectations, even more pronounced in Ethiopia, where democratic norms and practices were never mainstream.

Elections in Ethiopia have been tightly controlled, and marred by irregularities, state interference and opposition suppression, discouraging youth from engaging in a system that feels predetermined. This has also meant that despite there being more than 60 registered political parties as of 2022, there is a dire shortage of parties willing and able to serve as true vehicles for grassroots change.

A more nuanced approach to participation views it more critically as the active influence of citizens in decision-making. Worthy of note is that participation is not static—it is continuously shaped and reshaped by interactions between individuals, collectives and institutional actors, often within deeply asymmetrical power relationships. And by choosing to find alternative ways than partaking in electoral politics, youth are not opting out of public life, but rather rejecting predefined, state-sanctioned forms of participation in favour of lived, everyday acts of resistance that challenge the legitimacy of a broken political system through 'the quiet encroachment of the ordinary'.[10]

It is, however, essential to recognize that Ethiopian youth are not a homogeneous group. Urban digital activists in Addis Ababa engage with politics differently from rural organizers in towns like Ginchi (West Shewa, Oromia). Ethnic, class and religious divides further complicate this, with historical grievances between different sections often exploited by political elites. Despite shared frustrations, groups frequently find themselves at odds due to deeply ingrained

9   Bennett Institute for Public Policy, 'Youth and Satisfaction with Democracy', Centre for the Future of Democracy, 2022. Accessed 13 October 2022, https://www.bennettinstitute.cam.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/Youth_and_Satisfaction_with_Democracy-lite.pdf.

10   Asef Bayat originally coined the term 'quiet encroachment of the ordinary' to describe the 'silent, protracted, but pervasive advancement of ordinary people ... marked by quiet, largely atomized and prolonged mobilization with episodic collective action—open and fleeting struggles without clear leadership, ideology or structured organization', particularly in urban contexts in the Global South. While Bayat's conception referred primarily to material survival strategies by subaltern urban actors, this essays expands the framework to analyse how youth today are gradually and informally entering political life by leveraging the digital space and cultural forms of participation, which are similarly subtle, dispersed and driven by everyday practices. Asef Bayat, *Life as Politics: How Ordinary People Change the Middle East*, Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2009, 56.

historical tensions. This alienation reflects a broader systemic failure within Ethiopian politics in which party structures prioritize patronage, perpetuate ethnic and religious divisions, and exhibit little accountability to the people they claim to represent.

Party (especially ruling party) politics in Ethiopia is deeply intertwined with corruption and clientelism, where loyalty to the party leader often takes precedence over political ideals or policy goals. Joining a political party is sometimes seen to secure financial stability, even when that means through small paying public-service jobs where one would have to compromise personal values. The parties frequently operate within entrenched networks of power, favouring certain groups over others and upholding deeply rooted systems of favouritism. This has meant the system has remained inherently exclusionary, disenfranchizing those who refuse to participate in these exploitative networks.

Given these complexities, youth engagement manifests in varied forms—some turn to digital activism, others to grassroots mobilization, some to radical militancy, while others again opt for disengagement altogether. What seems to remain consistent is the shared sense of disillusionment with political parties and the electoral system. The youth understand that casting a ballot within state-enforced constraints does not constitute meaningful political action. And hence, they are withdrawing from the process and reimagining what it means to engage politically in ways that do not reinforce state power.

Alternative forms of political engagement

In contexts where political parties are unresponsive and the broader political space is restrictive or repressive, some youth have turned to radical or militant groups that exploit their frustration. These groups often present themselves as anti-establishment forces, framing violence as a legitimate response to systemic exclusion and state violence. They capitalize on youth anger, channelling it toward confrontation rather than constructive change. Youth are particularly vulnerable to such recruitment in areas where the state is experienced primarily through coercive or violent means.

This pattern speaks to a failure of formal political structures to provide these young people with viable, peaceful avenues for expressing their grievances and enacting change. In the absence of legitimate and meaningful representation or pathways to voice their discontent, the militant path may offer youth a short-lived sense of agency or retribution, while ultimately harming them and their communities. These movements also often spiral into criminality, deepening the precarity, eroding community trust and undermining any emancipatory potential.

Youth are also increasingly turning to the digital space as an avenue for resistance. Since the days of the Zone 9 bloggers (founded in 2012, with its leaders arrested in 2014) and the '*Dimstachen Yisema*' ('Let Our Voices Be Heard') movement,[11] the rise of social media has allowed young activists to circumvent state-controlled narratives and organize grassroots campaigns. How

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11   An Ethiopian Muslim protest movement.

digital platforms can be leveraged to mobilize large-scale dissent has also been demonstrated by movements such as #OromoProtests and #AmharaProtests.

However, digital activism also faces significant challenges, one among them being a proposed revision of the Computer Crime Proclamation that would tighten cyber laws, criminalizing online dissent and enabling authorities to arrest activists. Furthermore, digital activism risks becoming performative and insular. While social media can amplify voices, it must be accompanied by offline action to effect tangible change. Kenyan activists, for example, ensured that their #RejectFinanceBill2024 campaign translated into real-world mobilization through door-to-door organizing. Ethiopian activists could draw lessons from these strategies to strengthen their digital movements with offline praxis.

Another powerful form of youth political engagement is cultural production. Poetry, music and storytelling have become vehicles for young people to express dissent and challenge oppressive narratives. In Addis Ababa, poetry stages have become incubators of resistance, where young poets embed political critiques in their verses, drawing crowds that rival political rallies. This challenges the notion that cultural practices are apolitical. As Harris *et al.* argue, youth subcultures inherently contest power structures.[12] From hip-hop artists like Teddy Yo critiquing state violence to visual artists and animators satirizing corrupt officials, youth are repurposing artistic spaces as subaltern counter publics.[13]

Despite attempts at continued resistance and defiance, however, for many young people in Ethiopia the struggle for economic independence has overtaken direct political engagement. With high unemployment rates and limited opportunities, many prioritize securing a livelihood over engaging in political activities that seem to offer nothing but a threat to their and their families' livelihoods. Many young people are forced to prioritize immediate survival over long-term political engagement, which they fear will result in their further disenfranchisement. They are caught in a relentless cycle of economic struggle, seeking opportunities abroad, hoping to secure a stable future, and are of the opinion that political engagement is a luxury they cannot afford.

This economic focus is both a reflection of the harsh politico-economic landscape and a critique of a system that has consistently failed to provide economic opportunities or social mobility for its youth. Political parties are seen as irrelevant to the daily realities of young people, who feel that these organizations are more interested in consolidating power than in addressing the socioeconomic issues that affect the population.

12   Anita Harris, Johanna Wyn and Salem Younes, 'Beyond apathetic or activist youth: "Ordinary" young people and contemporary forms of participation', *YOUNG*, 18/1 (2010): 9–32. Accessed 25 January 2026, https://doi.org/10.1177/110330880901800103.

13   MelaMuziqaVEVO, 'Mela Muziqa - Teddy Yo (ቴዲ ዮ) - ወንበርሽ | Wenbersh New Ethiopian Music 2022 (Offical Video)', *YouTube*, 28 December 2022. Accessed 13 October 2025, www.youtube.com/watch?v=bysBhXz4XaM. Mamo Kilo (translated as 'Mamo the fool') is an Ethiopian *YouTube* channel recognized for its incisive political and social critique, delivered through animated video productions. ማሞ ቄሎ/Mamo the Fool, *YouTube*. Accessed 13 October 2025, www.youtube.com/@mamothefool.

However, young people must recognize that their economic struggles are inherently political. Policies governing employment, taxation and education directly impact their livelihoods, making economic justice a crucial aspect of youth political engagement. Rather than disengaging entirely, youth must find ways to channel their economic struggles into collective action for systemic change.

The engagement of youth in the militant groups may also partly be explained by the economic opportunities they present. In some of the regions, disenfranchised youth have been drawn into insurgent movements that promise empowerment but ultimately deepen instability. Engagement in these groups presents a double-edged sword, with an increasing level of criminalization of insurgencies with armed groups engaging in activities such as kidnapping for ransom, illegal mining or smuggling. This trajectory is not unique to Ethiopia. Across Africa, youth disillusionment with formal politics has, in some cases, translated into violent extremism.

Reclaiming political agency

Youth who have a tendency for active political participation now stand at a crossroads. They can continue disengaging and risk being weaponized by destructive groups, or seize their collective political power and forge new paths for change. While formal political organizations have consistently failed them, youth cannot afford to abandon politics altogether as politics is not confined to state institutions but woven into everyday struggles and decisions.

Instead of mourning the absence of youth in formal politics, we should listen to what their refusal to participate in these processes reveals as a critique of a fundamentally flawed system. The challenge, then, is for young people to reclaim political agency through the alternative pathways they continue to craft. Political engagement flourishes in spaces where youth articulate their visions of justice and build grassroots connections for popular struggles with transformative potential. These pathways—whether through digital activism, artistic expression, or community organizing—must be grounded in peaceful resistance and constructive dialogue. In this sense, political agency goes beyond the ballot box, offering ways to challenge exclusion while fostering inclusive and non-violent change.

'Youth, marginalization, and the future of Ethiopian politics' by Wakjira Tesfaye

According to recent data, two-thirds of Ethiopians are under 30.[14] This demographic has the potential to shape the country's political and socioeconomic future. However, young Ethiopians remain excluded from decision-making and public life. Their marginalization stems from historical centralization and authoritarian governance since the 1974 revolution. This essay argues that centralized power structures and economic inequalities have long suppressed youth participation in Ethiopia. Nevertheless, emerging shifts—including digital activism, grassroots organizing and inter-generational dialogue—demonstrate how a new generation is reshaping governance and participation.

In 1974, a revolution ended the imperial system and brought in the Derg, which aimed to address inequality and underdevelopment through centralization.[15] Although these policies sought to stabilize the state, they concentrated authority at the top, leaving minimal space for grassroots voices. One outcome was the formation of youth organizations like the Revolutionary Ethiopia Youth Association (REYA). Instead of supporting genuine youth-led initiatives, REYA functioned as a vehicle for state propaganda.[16] Young people were mobilized for rallies and service projects to bolster the regime's image rather than shape policy. The Derg's use of ethnic suppression and surveillance as tactics of control instilled fear in young Ethiopians seeking political engagement, contributing to a climate of distrust and political disengagement. Rural youth were vulnerable—conscription and forced relocations limited their autonomy, while fear of dissent silenced concerns over governance.[17] Many young people saw participation as risky or futile, widening the gap between them and those in power.

After the fall of Derg in 1991, the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) presented itself as more inclusive. Although it created youth participation platforms—most notably the Ethiopian Youth Federation—these structures primarily served the ruling party rather than allowing young people to shape policy. Additionally, official youth representation quotas existed in local councils and federal bodies, but enforcement was weak. Yet, despite these

14   Swati Rao, 'The Youth Employment Imperative: Harnessing Ethiopia's Demographic Dividend', Policy Brief, Adroit Associates, 2024. Accessed 25 January 2026, https://adroitassociates.org/media/documents/publications/2024/harnessing-ethiopias-demographic-dividend/The-Youth-Employment-Imperative-Harnessing-Ethiopias-Demographic-Dividend.pdf.

15   Christopher Clapham, *Transformation and Continuity in Revolutionary Ethiopia*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988, 55–58.

16   Estifanos Biru Gebremariam and Linda Herrera, 'On Silencing the Next Generation: Legacies of the 1974 Ethiopian Revolution on Youth Political Engagement', *Northeast African Studies* 16/1 (2016): 141–166.

17   Estifanos and Herrera, 'On Silencing', 150.

mechanisms, many young people felt unheard and increasingly disillusioned. This frustration led to more direct and confrontational dissent.

Under the EPRDF, Ethiopia witnessed waves of youth and student protests. In 1993, student protests over academic freedom and ethnic favouritism led to university crackdowns. In 2000 and 2005, renewed unrest led university students to organize sit-ins and protests against government interference in education.[18] A 2003 Human Rights Watch report found these protests led to mass arrests, beatings and surveillance of activists.[19] This legacy of suppressing dissent paved the way for deeper mistrust of official channels and foreshadowed the larger mobilizations of the Oromo protests that erupted in 2014–2018.

Despite youth recognition, political participation remained superficial, fuelling disillusionment and leading to the Oromo protests. When young activists organized demonstrations challenging policies, authorities responded with force. These protests became pivotal, as Oromo youth demanded fair political representation and socioeconomic reform.[20] Thousands participated, and the state's crackdown—marked by arrests and allegations of force—signalled that decision-makers continued to view independent youth activism as a threat. These events underscored the continuity of exclusionary practices across regimes: while the Derg had been overtly authoritarian, the EPRDF restricted free political engagement through more understated methods.

In 2018, Ethiopia underwent a political transformation with the coming to power of Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed. His administration initiated reforms liberalizing the political landscape, including the release of political prisoners, lifting the state of emergency and inviting exiled opposition figures to return. This shift raised optimism among young Ethiopians sidelined by civic restrictions and internet shutdowns.[21] Yet inequalities and patronage networks proved difficult to uproot. The 2019 Sidama Zone referendum—where voters supported forming a new regional state—revealed the potential for greater local autonomy and lingering resentment toward centralized authority.[22] Although federal institutions recognized Sidama's quest for statehood, periodic unrest in other regions highlighted the challenge of delivering genuine inclusivity. Observers noted constraints on independent media and continued mistrust

18   Human Rights Watch, 'Lessons in Repression: Violations of Academic Freedom in Ethiopian Universities', 2003. Accessed 29 January 2025, https://www.hrw.org/reports/2003/ethiopia0103/ethiopia0103-01. htm.

19   Human Rights Watch, 'Lessons in Repression'.

20   Human Rights Watch, '"Such a Brutal Crackdown": Killings and Arrests in Response to Ethiopia's Oromo Protests', 15 June 2016. Accessed 29 January 2025, https://www.hrw.org/report/2016/06/16/such-brutal-crackdown/killings-and-arrests-response-ethiopias-oromo-protests.

21   Ethiopian Human Rights Commission, 'Brief Report on the Situation of Civilians in Conflict-Affected Areas', 2021.

22   Freedom House, 'Reform in Ethiopia: Turning Promise into Progress', September 2018. Accessed 13 October 2025, https://freedomhouse.org/report/policy-brief/2018/reform-ethiopia-turning-promise-progress.

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between the government and marginalized communities.[23] Against this backdrop, many young Ethiopians remained wary of reforms that did not tackle systemic inequities or generational divides—factors that had fuelled protests in the first place.

Decades of hierarchical rule left elites with disproportionate power, causing generational divides and sidelining youth in decision-making. One way to interpret these rifts is through Robert Putnam's notion of social capital: 'the networks, norms, and trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit'.[24] In Bowling Alone, Putnam discusses two dimensions— 'bonding' social capital (reinforcing ties within a homogenous group) and 'bridging' social capital (connecting people across diverse backgrounds). When bridging ties remain underdeveloped—between younger citizens and established leaders—cohesion deteriorates and grievances intensify.[25] In a similar vein, Francis Fukuyama argues that trust, built on shared norms and transparent cooperation, is essential for any society to thrive.[26] In Ethiopia, youth view formal arenas as unresponsive, leading them to withdraw and weaken bridging networks. Consequently, reforms—like nominal quotas—fail to address the distrust that perpetuates generational fractures. Rebuilding social capital requires dismantling exclusionary practices, fostering equitable opportunities, and engaging young people and elders in collaborative ventures.

Economic marginalization further compounds youth political exclusion. The 'massification' of education, democratizing access to higher learning, has produced a generation of graduates who often struggle to secure employment.[27] Although the expansion of universities and colleges was intended to democratize education, the rapid increase in enrolment has not been matched by a corresponding growth in labour market opportunities. The result is widespread underemployment that affects recent graduates, many of whom remain stuck in what Alcinda Honwana terms 'waithood'—a phase of prolonged socioeconomic limbo.[28]

Far from being a passive condition, waithood is a dynamic struggle for autonomy. Young Ethiopians negotiate informal economies, embark on labour migration, or turn to activism to forge a sense of purpose. In rural areas, the lack of local industries forces many to migrate to cities or abroad, where they face precarious conditions and immigration policies. In

23   Freedom House, 'Freedom in the World 2021: Ethiopia', 2021. Accessed 13 October 2025, https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2021/democracy-under-siege.

24   Robert D. Putnam, Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community, New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000.

25   Putnam, Bowling Alone.

26   Francis Fukuyama, Trust: The Social Virtues and the Creation of Prosperity, New York: Free Press, 1995.

27   Girmaw A. Akalu, 'Higher education "massification" and challenges to the professoriate: do academics' conceptions of quality matter?', Quality in Higher Education, 22/3 (2016): 260–276. DOI: Accessed 25 January 2026, http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13538322.2016.1266230.

28   Alcinda Honwana, The Time of Youth: Work, Social Change, and Politics in Africa, Sterling, VA: Kumarian Press, 2012.

urban centres, graduates toggle between temporary gigs or low-paid roles in service sectors, accumulating enough income to marry, start families or launch their ventures. This struggle reveals gaps in state-led development strategies and the resilience and resourcefulness of a youth demographic that refuses to be rendered irrelevant.

In response to mounting youth unemployment, the Ethiopian government has implemented initiatives supporting micro and small enterprises (MSEs). The National Micro and Small Enterprise Development Strategy, developed in 1997 and implemented in the early 2000s, aimed to provide critical support to MSEs to alleviate urban poverty through job creation. The MSE programme contributed to economic empowerment by establishing more than 1 million MSEs and providing vocational training to approximately 200,000 youth and women.[29] On paper, these programmes promote entrepreneurship through credit, training and workspaces. However, critics say bureaucratic, politicized selection criteria demand party loyalty, excluding those who challenge government narratives.[30] Rather than fostering authentic empowerment, such policies risk becoming patronage networks benefiting the politically compliant. Youth with dissenting opinions or lacking connections remain systematically excluded from the programmes meant to lift them out of economic precarity.

This dynamic leaves many young Ethiopians disillusioned with political and economic structures. The reliance on loyalty-based distribution of resources not only fails to address the causes of unemployment but also fuels cycles of clientelism that reinforce social inequalities.[31] Moreover, by prioritizing job creation as a tool of political control, these programmes stifle the innovative potential of a generation that could revitalize Ethiopia's economy through technology, agriculture, creative industries and more.

In 2018, youth protests over marginalization reached a crescendo, marking a turning point in Ethiopia. Initially triggered by disputes over land in Oromia, the unrest spread nationwide, demanding political reform, economic justice and ethnic equity. Social media, especially Facebook and Twitter, was pivotal in uniting diverse communities nationwide. Unlike earlier top-down mobilizations, the 2018 protests had decentralized leadership and inclusivity, enabling grassroots grievances to echo nationwide.

Subsequent government actions—internet shutdowns, surveillance, and arrests of activists—illustrate the difficulties of digital activism under authorities wary of large-scale youth

29   Ethiopian Ministry of Trade, 'Annual Report on Micro and Small Enterprises Development', 2020.

30   Marco Di Nunzio, '"Do not cross the red line": The 2010 general elections, dissent, and political mobilization in urban Ethiopia', *African Affairs*, 113/452 (2014): 409–430. Accessed 25 January 2026, https://doi.org/10.1093/afraf/adu029.

31   Jorge Gallego and Rafal Raciborski, *Clientelism and the Political Economy of Inequality*, Pisa: University of Pisa, 2007. Accessed 13 October 2025, https://growth-institutions.ec.unipi.it/pages/InstitutionI/clientelism.pdf.

mobilization.[32] Yet the protests showed young Ethiopians could disrupt narratives, exposing inequalities and demanding accountability. In many cases, youth activists bypassed censorship using VPNs, encrypted apps and offline community meetings.

Amid this political landscape, digital activism has become an indispensable avenue for young people to assert their agency beyond conventional arenas. Platforms like Facebook, Twitter and Telegram enable decentralized coordination, allowing youth—excluded from traditional power channels—to organize collective initiatives with speed and reach. By linking activists across ethnic, linguistic and regional divides, these digital forums act as unifying spaces where critical voices converge. Yet, constraints temper online mobilization's transformative potential. According to a 2024 Freedom House report, under 20 per cent of Ethiopians had internet access, mostly in urban centres.[33] This uneven infrastructure—particularly in rural and underserved regions—limits participation, as connectivity can be expensive or unavailable.[34] Even where access exists, periodic shutdowns and social media restrictions weaken mobilization efforts. Authorities often view large-scale digital activism with suspicion, reflecting a centralized governance wary of dissent. Surveillance further exacerbates fears of reprisal, discouraging many from speaking out.

Moreover, social and economic disparities create barriers to virtual participation for segments of the youth population. High data costs, linguistic challenges and limited digital literacy sideline many, particularly young women and remote communities. Recognizing this, youth have adopted hybrid strategies merging digital outreach with local, face-to-face organizing. Door-to-door discussions, clandestine meetups and community involvement remain crucial for sustaining activism when online avenues are blocked. These dual methods mitigate the fragility of online campaigning while strengthening communal relationships often missed in digital interactions.

Ultimately, digital activism can amplify marginalized voices, but it is not a complete solution. While social media enables rapid message dissemination, structural issues such as limited infrastructure, surveillance and socioeconomic inequalities limit its reach. Additionally, the digital space can foster misinformation, where false or inflammatory content spreads quickly and escalates ethnic tensions, weakening legitimate activism. The tragic case of Ethiopian professor Meareg Amare, killed in Bahir Dar in 2021, illustrates this danger. He was reportedly targeted after false posts were circulated on Facebook, including a social media call that incited

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32   Freedom House, 'Freedom on the Net 2021: Ethiopia'. Accessed 29 January 2025, https://freedomhouse.
      org/country/ethiopia/freedom-net/2021.

33   Freedom House, 'Freedom on the Net 2024: Ethiopia'. Accessed 26 January 2026, https://freedomhouse.
      org/country/ethiopia/freedom-net/2024.

34   Freedom House, 'Freedom on the Net 2024'.

violence against him and primed the conditions for his death.[35] Consequently, although digital tools have expanded youth activism, they also create vulnerabilities that can be exploited to disrupt and undermine genuine efforts for change.

A key question, therefore, is whether genuine reform in Ethiopia necessarily requires the radical transformation of existing systems. The answer may lie in balancing efforts within established structures with advocacy for external, transformative change. The concept of social capital—particularly the distinction between 'bonding' and 'bridging'—underscores the importance of building networks that connect diverse groups. While full-scale dismantling could lead to volatility and create openings for opportunistic elites, gradual reform risks stagnation if entrenched interests resist. For youth activists, the choice often depends on context: Incremental approaches can shift power dynamics over time, while moments of direct confrontation may be necessary to disrupt inertia and expose systemic failures. Inclusive governance requires balancing gradual reforms with deeper structural changes. Incremental reforms, such as integrating youth representatives into decision-making bodies, can expand participation without destabilizing existing systems. However, when such reforms are blocked by entrenched elites or treated as symbolic gestures, they fail to address exclusion. Larger structural shifts that dismantle longstanding inequalities can offer sustainable change, but often come with risks of instability and elite resistance. Youth activists must navigate this tension—choosing when to push for radical change and when to leverage incremental progress.

A successful strategy blends grassroots activism with inter-generational collaboration. Grassroots movements channel the frustrations of marginalized communities, while collaboration with older generations builds trust, ensuring that reform efforts remain cohesive and enduring.

George Bernard Shaw once said, 'Youth is wasted on the young'—but Ethiopian youth have no such luxury. They live in a world shaped by authoritarianism, economic marginalization and pervasive distrust. Rural young women face patriarchal systems that limit access to education and independence. Urban activists battle censorship and repression, relying on hybrid organizing methods to adapt. While youth experiences vary, they share a common struggle against exclusion. By rejecting token gestures and building coalitions across regions and generations, they are reshaping governance and advancing inclusive, sustainable reform. Youth struggle—neither naively revolutionary nor passive—reveals the emptiness of token reforms. True inclusion requires bridging divides of gender, geography and ethnicity. Through dissent in community meetings and online forums, they reject inherited fractures. Their determined efforts to challenge prejudice and reclaim belonging hint at governance beyond symbolic change.

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35   Toral Parmar, 'A professor was murdered after a Facebook post branded him a traitor. Was Facebook complicit in his death?', *Business Insider*, 15 April 2023. Accessed 13 October 2025, https://www.businessinsider.com/facebooks-local-partners-say-hate-speech-stays-on-the-platform-2023-4.

'Fighting for space: A feminist vision for digital inclusion in Ethiopia' by Megdelawit Getahun

In Ethiopia, where internet access is scarce and digital literacy remains a distant aspiration for many, women navigate a space defined by systemic barriers and societal expectations. From online harassment to the widening digital gender divide, the challenges are urgent and complex. In Ethiopia's cities, women are leveraging technology to their advantage, running businesses through social media, accessing online education and building professional networks. This shift holds real potential, demonstrating that when provided with the necessary tools, women can drive and benefit from the digital economy. This progress, however, does not extend equally to all. While some women benefit, many—especially in rural areas—face deeper, intersecting forms of exclusion.

Digital exclusion is not just about weak networks or expensive devices; it reflects deeper societal hierarchies. Decisions about infrastructure and access are often made far from the communities they affect, where being online is a privilege filtered through power. It is not just about who goes online, but who gets to be visible and whose voice shapes the digital future.

Step into the countryside, and you will see it. A woman rises before the sun, moving through a life that demands everything from her but offers little in return. She works the land, tends to her family and holds everything together. Yet when decisions are made about the future, technology, opportunity and change, she is nowhere to be found in the conversation.

At some point in the day, she steps away. Phone in hand, she walks to where the signal is strongest, perhaps a hilltop or the edge of a dusty road. She holds it up and waits. One bar. Maybe two. A lifeline that flickers in and out, never quite steady enough. Maybe she is trying to call a friend, the one who left before she could be married off. Maybe she is checking if the number still works, if the world beyond this place still remembers her. Or maybe she just stands there, staring at the screen, knowing that on the other end there is silence.

These moments go beyond just getting connected; they are about survival, about pushing back against a system that often overlooks them. It is about women who will not be ignored, who find ways to make themselves heard despite the barriers.

Yet, in distant offices, policies are crafted as if their experiences do not matter. They speak of progress while keeping them on the margins. The solutions offered often assume that access alone is enough, that technology can erase the deep-rooted challenges they face. But the digital divide is not just about technology; it is about the broader systems of inequality—shaped by gender, power and place—that continue to leave many behind.

If Ethiopia is serious about progress, it cannot afford to leave half its population behind. The real question is not just how to get women online; it is whether the country is ready to face the more profound questions of why they were excluded in the first place.

Unpacking the systemic roots of digital exclusion

As of early 2025, Ethiopia has 28.6 million internet users—only 21.3 per cent of the population. The gender gap persists, with past studies showing only 11 per cent of women online, compared to 20 per cent of men. While we do not yet have updated data for 2025, it is clear that these numbers are a reminder of how women continue to be excluded from spaces that define progress and power.[36]

This divide stems from structural inequalities, where patriarchal norms dictate who gets access, often limiting women's time online and dismissing their needs. In Ethiopia, this shows up as labour without voice, as laws that ignore women, and in technologies not built for or with them.

Patriarchy does not just govern women's roles, it extends to their access to technology. Women who challenge these norms often face criticism, with remarks such as 'technology leads women astray' or 'a phone brings trouble'. In many households, men control access, limiting women's time online and dismissing their need for anything beyond basic literacy.[37]

Even when women move past social and digital barriers, rural infrastructure often leaves them behind. Frequent power outages, poor internet connectivity, poor road infrastructure, and online harassment make access and safety a daily challenge. Government-imposed internet shutdowns—occurring at least 26 times since 2016 and three times in 2023—along with ongoing conflict and political instability exacerbate these issues.[38]

In rural areas, where conflict is more prevalent, internet shutdowns have significant consequences. They deny women access to critical information, limit their ability to seek support and isolate them from broader networks. This exclusion silences their voices, shields those in power from accountability and deepens inequality.

The digital divide facing rural Ethiopian women is not just about a lack of technology; it is a violent extension of years of oppression. It reflects deep-seated inequality, locking women out of opportunities and freedoms others take for granted. Digital access becomes a privilege deliberately kept from them. In a world where access to information shapes power, these women are not just silenced, they are excluded from the conversation entirely.

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36   Simon Kemp, 'Digital 2025: Ethiopia', 3 March 2025. Accessed 18 April 2025, https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2025-ethiopia.

37   Fondazione Aurora, 'Unveiling the Core: Tackling the Heart of Gender Digital Divide in Ethiopia'. Accessed 13 October 2025, https://www.fondazioneaurora.org/en/genderdigitaldivideinethiopia/.

38   Access Now, 'Preserving freedom in crisis: Ethiopia's internet shutdowns must not become the norm', 12 September 2023. Accessed 13 October 2025, https://www.accessnow.org/press-release/open-statement-internet-shutdown-amhara/.

While some may argue that Ethiopia is on the verge of a digital breakthrough, the reality is undeniable. The issue is not just about access; it is gendered. In fact, data shows that married men in rural areas are five times more likely to own a mobile phone than their wives. This is not about a lack of access; it is about intentional exclusion.[39]

The consequences of this exclusion are far reaching. Without digital access, women in rural areas are cut off from crucial conversations about healthcare, education, and economic opportunities—trapping them in cycles of vulnerability. They are excluded from social and political processes, unable to advocate for their rights or shape policy. Women miss out on spaces where job opportunities, campaigns against child marriage, or land rights debates unfold. While online activism sparks public conversations, these rarely reach women in Sidama or Gojjam, who are living these realities.

Imagine a widow fighting land-grabbing relatives to protect her property. What if she could learn her rights through a YouTube video in Afaan Oromoo or Af Somali, or connect with other women facing similar battles? Despite legal protections, weak enforcement and patriarchy leave women unaware of their rights. Excluding them from the internet denies them the power to shape their futures. It is not just about access; it is about control.

Those who benefit from oppression resist change, fearing the disruption technology can bring. Accessible legal education and collective advocacy could break this cycle and drive systemic change.

By keeping rural Ethiopian women offline, society reinforces that their voices are silenced, their needs ignored and their potential wasted. To bridge the digital divide, we must dismantle systemic barriers, not just hand out devices. The 'digital revolution' remains a lie as long as Ethiopian women walk miles for water and even farther for a faint signal.

Feminist activism in the digital age: A house divided

I entered this movement through digital spaces, including hashtags, threads and campaigns, which resonated with my own anger and hopes. For me, online activism was not just a tool; it was the only space where I could speak up and feel heard. It was where I learned that being a young woman with something to say was not a liability. It was power. However, the more I moved through different spaces, the more I noticed a gap, not just generational, but also regarding what constitutes legitimate activism.

I have had experiences where raising concerns about online harassment or the importance of digital safety for women is met with silence or indifference—or treated like a side issue. There

39   James Warner, Yalew Mekonnen and Yetimwork Habte, 'The Digital Divide in Rural Ethiopia: Determinants and Implications of Sex-Disaggregated Mobile Phone Ownership and Use', IFPRI Discussion Paper 012196, International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI), August 2023. Accessed 13 October 2025, https://cgspace.cgiar.org/server/api/core/bitstreams/4b481e3d-05be-4105-aa27-6749e0bf50d9/content.

is a recurring sense that digital rights, especially as they relate to women, are not considered 'real' rights, or at least not urgent ones. And that creates tension, especially in spaces where I expected understanding and solidarity.

However, I cannot help seeing the parallels. Just as rural women are told that technology is not for them, young feminists are often told, sometimes with words, often without, that leadership is not for us. That we are too new. Too different. Too online.

This is happening at a time when women's rights in Ethiopia are visibly regressing, with hard-won gains like Family Code reforms and public participation being eroded by resurgent patriarchal ideologies. These are entrenched not just in policy and discourse but also in the digital space, where women's participation is limited, and misogynists use the internet to spread harmful views and reinforce gender stereotypes. As the civic space shrinks, so does the ability to resist.

At the same time, I have noticed a troubling trend: More organizations are adopting gender programming, but it often feels like gender language is being co-opted by groups with little history in this space. This shift warrants closer scrutiny. Are we witnessing a genuine commitment to feminist principles or a strategic pivot to occupy what seems like a safer, less politically risky space? Feminist advocacy has never been about security; it confronts power, inequality and systemic injustice. When reduced to checkbox projects or donor-friendly rhetoric, it loses its purpose and erases the voices of those who have fought with conviction. Online, this performativity is even sharper; hashtags and slogans mask a failure to challenge the systems of oppression. Real activism calls out power, not appeases it.

To mistake gender work for a depoliticized safe zone is dangerous.

At the same time, I want to emphasize that digital activism is not merely a trend. The campaigns I have followed and supported—#FishkayeDimtse,[40] #FromCatcallingToFemicide, #JusticeForHeaven—were not publicity stunts. They were survival strategies, acts of resistance. For many of us, digital space is the only space we have.

What the Ethiopian feminist movement needs now is not more fragmentation, but radical collaboration. We need to value lived experience and institutional wisdom, as well as grassroots urgency and digital strategy. We need to centre young women and recognize that their leadership is not optional; it is essential.

The gendered cost of digital spaces

Talking about technology without its risks ignores women's realities. The internet mirrors offline patriarchy, offering not liberation, but harassment and abuse for those who resist. It amplifies the same systems that already oppress us.

Technology-facilitated gender-based violence (TFGBV) is when violence is committed by one or more people who use digital tools, such as social media or other communication

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40   Amharic for '#MyWhistleMyVoice'.

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technologies. It targets someone based on their gender, whether through harassment, abuse or other harmful acts.[41] Bringing more women online does not guarantee empowerment. Feminists and outspoken women often face relentless online harassment and digital violence that can spill into the physical world, silencing them and pushing them out of vital conversations.[42]

The Shega investigative report on the non-consensual distribution of intimate photos of Ethiopian women reveals a deeply entrenched form of TFGBV that reflects systemic inequalities and patriarchal control over women's bodies.[43] This case shows how women's vulnerability fuels an industry built on non-consensual image sharing, enabled by objectification, victim-blaming and deep stigma in Ethiopia.

The absence of explicit legal protections against non-consensual image sharing, despite the Computer Crime Proclamation (2016), reflects a broader institutional gap in addressing how digital harms affect women. It fails to capture the specific realities of gendered online abuse, leaving many women without meaningful recourse and allowing perpetrators to act with little fear of accountability.

For instance, women from low-income rural communities have lower levels of experience with smartphones and the internet, making them more susceptible to various forms of TFGBV, including online scams and misinformation. This is not a separate issue; it is inextricably linked to digital inclusion. While the internet did not create this violence, it has made it crueller and harder to escape.

A feminist vision for digital inclusion

For most women in Ethiopia, life is a never-ending struggle against time and society's expectations. From dawn to dusk, they care for families, run households, and fuel the economy through farming, trading and countless other forms of labour. Yet, despite these essential roles, their needs, voices and dreams are often ignored. The opportunities they deserve are too often out of reach. This goes beyond technology; it is about deep-rooted norms that keep women locked into narrow roles, shutting them out of spaces where their influence could truly matter.

But what if things were different? What if these women had access to digital spaces not just to consume content but to create, lead and influence? The simple act of accessing information, connecting with others and engaging in discourse can become an act of resistance. For many

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41   United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), 'What is technology-facilitated gender-based violence?', March 2023. Accessed 13 October 2025, https://www.unfpa.org/resources/brochure-what-technology-facilitated-gender-based-violence.

42   Centre for Information Resilience, 'The untold impacts of online abuse on Ethiopian women', 8 April 2025. Accessed 13 October 2025, https://www.info-res.org/articles/the-untold-impacts-of-online-abuse-on-ethiopian-women/.

43   Kaleab Girma, 'Hidden Horror: How Ethiopia's Underground Revenge Porn Industry Preys on Young Women', *Shega*, 29 November 2024. Accessed 13 October 2025, https://shega.co/news/hidden-horror-how-ethiopia-s-underground-revenge-porn-industry-preys-on-young-women.

women, the digital world could be a platform to challenge the norms that have long defined their lives.

Technology stakeholders must stop designing programmes that assume all women start from the same place. A rural woman, with no formal education and facing community backlash for owning a phone, does not need a crash course in coding. She needs low-barrier, practical ways to access justice, organize and claim her rights.

The fight for digital inclusion is not about fitting women into a broken system; it is about breaking the barriers that exclude them. This applies to women in all areas, each facing unique struggles, but each finding ways to resist and connect. Will we stand with them, amplify their voices and demand a future where they are in control? Because if they do not shape Ethiopia's digital future, then it is not a future worth having.

Digital access should not be seen as a luxury but as a necessary tool for claiming rights. It accelerates progress in education, protection from violence and economic opportunity. This is not about choosing one over the other; it is about integrating digital inclusion into the broader gender equality agenda. If we wait for everything else to be 'solved', women will remain excluded from the digital revolution.

To truly rethink Ethiopia through its women is to confront and dismantle the systems that have always silenced us. It is not about inclusion into a broken structure; it is about centring our resistance, our survival and our power. Especially for women at the margins, progress means owning the tools to rewrite the rules. The gender digital divide is not a given; it is a product of systems we have built, systems that must be dismantled.

My vision for Ethiopia's digital future is one where all women, across all geographies, have the tools, access and safety to shape their own narratives. Technology should be a deliberate tool for expression, connection and justice.

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'From fighting for freedom to fighting off freedom: The nexus of Ethiopian liberty and AI-driven algorithms of the digital world' by Dina Abebe

As the fate of an entire nation hung in the balance, more than 100,000 Ethiopian soldiers stood united at the Battle of Adwa, defiantly facing down colonial forces. In less than a single day, they etched VICTORY in the boldest black ink. Today, more 7.05 million active social media users in Ethiopia engage with a digital landscape, often unaware of the new forms of imperialistic colonial power subtly reshaping their reality and trading away their liberty in the most insidious ways.[44] This makes it increasingly complicated to journey through the wormhole between information and autonomy. Just as Ethiopians at Adwa united against colonial aggression, today's struggle calls for similar awareness to resist the covert influence of AI-driven algorithms. This essay explores Ethiopian liberty, connecting historical struggles with digital platform challenges, reclaiming agency and promoting collective awareness for progress.

Human beings have an innate tendency to form in groups; a behaviour rooted in evolutionary survival strategies. By banding together, early humans increased cooperation and protection, securing loyalty within their group while viewing outsiders with suspicion, laying the foundation for the 'us versus them' mentality.[45] This defence mechanism allowed communities to unite against external threats. In Ethiopia, this tendency has led to strong ethnic and cultural affiliations, with various groups historically mobilizing around collective identities, often resulting in conflict.[46] Moreover, amplifying the 'us versus them' mentality, patriarchy and gerontocracy reinforce hierarchical structures, concentrating power among older men who control resources and decision-making. This marginalizes women and younger generations, deepening societal divisions. These elites craft distorted historical narratives that favour victorious groups, fuelling ethnic and gender-based violence by portraying certain communities as outsiders.

Religion further sets these divisions. For more than 1,700 years, Abrahamic traditions have shaped Ethiopian society, intensifying the 'us versus them' mentality through rigid hierarchies that suppress dissent, particularly among women and youth. Rather than bridging divides, these structures sustain societal rifts, limiting progress and collaboration. This rigidity limits

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44   Simon Kemp, 'Digital 2024: Ethiopia', 23 February 2024. Accessed 18 April 2025, https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2024-ethiopia.

45   Yuval Noah Harari, Sapiens: *A Brief History of Humankind*, London: Vintage, 2015.

46   Tesfaye Semela, 'Intergroup Relations among the Ethiopian Youth: Effect of Ethnicity, Language, and Religious Background', *Journal of Developing Societies* 28/3 (2012): 323–354.

those seeking a greater role in society, as they feel marginalized or silenced in a system that upholds traditional views.[47] These internal tensions brew as Ethiopia also grapples with external challenges, particularly global interference in its politics and economy. Ethiopia's strategic location in the Horn of Africa grants it geopolitical importance, but also attracts foreign interventions that deepen internal divisions. Poverty and economic instability solidifying the 'us versus them' mentality, escalating ethnic and social tensions, especially among those competing for power and resources. Scarcity drives competition, with communities blaming each other, particularly in rural areas facing food insecurity. Marginalized groups receive inadequate support, often prioritizing ethnic identity over national unity. These conditions weaken societal cohesion and hinder collective action, while foreign powers exploit internal conflicts for strategic gain.[48]

During the rocky transition from postcolonial to neocolonial practices in the mid-twentieth century, foreign interventions in Ethiopia became systematic, complicating Ethiopia's pursuit of a unified national identity. The Cold War escalated these interventions as the USSR and the West competed for influence through aid and investments, deepening divisions and undermining sovereignty. Dissatisfaction under Emperor Haile Selassie ignited the Ethiopian student movement of the 1960s and 1970s. Protests like the 1966 Addis Ababa University demonstrations opposed feudalism and foreign interference, driven by poverty, inequality and stagnation. Inspired by Marxist and socialist ideas, students sought to dismantle feudalism, redistribute land and promote equality.[49]

In the post-Derg era, Ethiopians shifted from class struggle to identity politics, with the 'us versus them' mentality taking new forms. The federal system aimed to grant ethnic groups greater autonomy but often fuelled competition for resources and power, deepening tensions. While marginalized communities gained a platform to demand rights, divisions grew, challenging national cohesion and a unified identity. In 1993, Ethiopian youth, particularly Addis Ababa University students, protested the Eritrean independence referendum, marking their political awakening. In the 2000s, Oromo students led demonstrations against systemic oppression, facing severe repression. In 2001, protests expanded nationwide, demanding academic freedom and reforms. In 2003, student-led demonstrations persisted, showing a deepening commitment to justice.[50]

47   Terje Østebø, 'Religious Dynamics and Conflicts in Contemporary Ethiopia: Expansion, Protection, and Reclaiming Space', *African Studies Review* 60/1 (2017): 120–121.

48   Quentin C. Holbert, 'Regional Influences on the Italo-Ethiopian Crisis, 1934–1938', Master's thesis, University of Calgary, 2019. Accessed 13 October 2025, http://hdl.handle.net/1880/110477.

49   Messay Kebede, 'The Ethiopian Student Movement and the Revolution of 1974', *Ethiopia Observer*, 22 March 2024. Accessed 14 October 2025, https://www.ethiopiaobserver.com/2024/03/22/the-ethiopian-student-movement-and-the-revolution-of-1974/; Bahru Zewde, ed., *Documenting the Ethiopian Student Movement: An Exercise in Oral History*, Forum for Social Studies, 2010.

50   Human Rights Watch, 'Lessons in Repression: Violations of Academic Freedom in Ethiopia', 24 January 2003. Accessed 14 October 2025, https://www.refworld.org/reference/countryrep/hrw/2003/en/47799.

The 2010s saw a resurgence of activism, shaped by global social justice movements. Social media became an essential tool for organizing in the fight for freedom, with platforms like Facebook and Twitter giving voices to the masses. While algorithm-driven platforms empowered grassroots movements, they simultaneously held up a mirror to a society with a solid foundation in the 'us versus them' mentality, fuelling divisions and shaping narratives in ways that both united and further polarized Ethiopian society. Ethiopian youth, both within the country and in the diaspora, have incorporated anti-neocolonial and identity politics into their activism, using digital platforms to challenge state repression and promote democracy. For instance, in 2012, the Zone 9 bloggers embodied digital resistance despite the threat of imprisonment.[51] Additionally, the #OromoProtests (2014) against the Addis Ababa Master Plan and the #AmharaProtests (2016) addressing Amhara grievances became key mobilizing tools against political and economic marginalization, with social media propelling these movements locally and globally, while diaspora youth reframed the struggle as a human rights issue.[52]

However, competition for visibility and narrative control, driven by AI algorithms, undermines unity and weakens the fight for freedom. These algorithms prioritize certain narratives while suppressing others, creating echo chambers that reinforce biases, restrict perspectives and deepen societal divisions. In the digital age, AI and big data reshape governance and equity, distorting realities through unequal access to information. This divide intensifies the disconnect between urban and rural communities, as online spaces isolate users within algorithmically curated content, further distancing them from rural realities. Meanwhile, rural communities with limited internet access continue to rely on face-to-face interactions, widening the digital gap and worsening societal fragmentation. A few connected youth movements, like Qeerroo (prominent during the 2014 Oromo protests), Fano (rising after 2018 in Amhara mobilizations), Woyane (active since the 1970s and re-emerging in the 2020 Tigray War), Ejetto (notable in the 2019 Sidama statehood push) and Yelaga (driving Wolayta quest for statehood since the late 2018) advocate for their ethnic groups' rights, often leveraging social media to mobilize.[53]

51   IFEX, 'Zone 9 Bloggers: A Profile', 24 March 2019. Accessed 14 October 2025, https://ifex.org/zone-9-bloggers-a-profile/.

52   Elsabet Samuel, 'Diasporas as Agents of Political Change: The Role of the Oromo Diaspora in the 2015 Oromo Protest in Ethiopia', *Ethiopian Journal of the Social Sciences and Humanities (EJOSSAH)* 18/1 (2022). Accessed 14 October 2025, https://www.ajol.info/index.php/ejossah/article/view/235266/222270?utm.

53   Tom Gardner, '"Freedom!": the mysterious movement that brought Ethiopia to a standstill', *The Guardian*, 13 March 2018. Accessed 14 October 2025, https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2018/mar/13/freedom-oromo-activists-qeerroo-ethiopia-standstill; Petros B. Ogbazghi, 'Ethiopia and the Running Sores of Ethnic Federalism: The Antithetical Forces of Statehood and Nationhood', *African Studies Quarterly* 21/2 (2022). Accessed 14 October 2025, https://asq.africa.ufl.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/168/V21i2a3.pdf.

However, while most strive for justice, others exploit digital platforms to manipulate discourse, incite conflict and spread falsehoods, with algorithms further fuelling political violence.[54]

The spread of misinformation and emotionally charged content simplifies complex issues, overshadowing thoughtful discussion and deepening divisions. This weakens traditional political participation, leaving youth disconnected from local governance. Although widespread, online activism often lacks real-world impact and can contribute to political violence. This dynamic creates a cycle of instant activism, where rapid reactions and surface-level engagement replace sustained involvement. In the rush to respond, information is often shared without verification, blurring the line between fact and fiction. Over time, this constant exposure leads to emotional exhaustion, desensitization and a declining willingness to engage meaningfully in social change. Youths are increasingly exposed to misleading content that creates filter bubbles, narrowing their perspectives and replacing meaningful civic engagement with polarized debates. This constant cycle leads to emotional exhaustion and desensitization.

In the meantime, music, memes and viral trends reshape political expression, turning activism into performative engagement and reducing complex issues to oversimplified narratives. One example of this trend is 'Gibi Memes', a youth-led Telegram and Instagram channel that created satirical content about Ethiopian universities during the 2019–2020 university student protests.[55] Over time, it evolved into an informal news source with updates during the Covid-19 pandemic and the Tigrayan War. As trust in state-run media declined, meme channels became a vital source of information for Ethiopian youth. In 2021, during the Tigrayan War, clips of Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed's controversial quote ('the self-centred junta'), directed at Tigray People's Liberation Front leaders, went viral—sparking a song that became a cultural sensation. Such viral content often fuels performative activism, where sharing replaces meaningful action. Its short-form nature limits long-term impact; while pop culture empowers marginalized voices, it also lets opportunistic advocates commodify activism, shifting focus from real-world issues to performative engagement.

As young Ethiopians engage with the digital world, they hold unprecedented power, one click away from shaping both positive and negative outcomes. But how will they use this power? To tackle the challenges posed by AI-driven platforms, Ethiopian youth can take strategic actions for positive change. One major challenge is the existence of echo chambers, where AI boosts existing beliefs and limits exposure to diverse perspectives. Youth can promote media literacy and critical thinking to encourage engagement with varied viewpoints and break free from algorithmic isolation. Similarly, filter bubbles, created when personalized content feeds limit individuals to information that reinforces their pre-existing views, narrow perspectives and hinder informed discourse. To counter this, youth can engage with diverse content sources,

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54   Eliza Mackintosh, 'An Ethiopian professor was murdered by a mob. A lawsuit alleges Facebook fuelled the violence', *CNN*, 14 December 2022. Accessed 14 October 2025, https://edition.cnn.com/2022/12/14/tech/ethiopia-murdered-professor-lawsuit-meta-kenya-intl/index.html.

55   Amharic for 'Campus Memes'.

follow independent media outlets, and advocate for algorithmic transparency that prioritizes balanced information rather than reinforcing biases.

The competition for visibility and divisions caused by social media algorithms is another concern. By uniting communities around shared values and prioritizing collective progress, youth can advocate for algorithms that emphasize inclusivity and unity. Moreover, to combat the distortion of narratives, youth can lead efforts to promote fact-based, transparent content that accurately represents Ethiopia's diverse identity. Additionally, youth can advocate for equal access to technology, pushing for infrastructure development to bridge the digital divide between urban and rural areas, and expanding mobile-based literacy programmes in rural communities. Programmes such as the 'Africa Check Youth Program' show how fact-checking and responsible engagement can challenge misinformation and amplify marginalized voices.[56] Additionally, youth can report malicious bots (malbots), push for algorithmic reforms and promote ethical digital activism to ensure online integrity while respecting free speech and open discourse. Beyond the digital space, youth can engage in grassroots initiatives like media literacy workshops, civic education programmes and school-based awareness campaigns to bridge the gap between online advocacy and real-world impact. To combat emotional exhaustion, they can promote digital wellness by encouraging uplifting, educational and inspiring content. Finally, collaborating with independent media outlets can help restore trust in journalism and ensure access to factual, balanced news.

In conclusion, to make sure we are fully equipped to fight off the forces threatening our freedom, we must look back to the time in Ethiopian history when the nation stood united. During the 'Scramble for Africa' in the late nineteenth century, Ethiopia became the first nation in the world to defeat a European colonial power before ever being colonized, preserving its independence and showing the strength and determination of its people. This victory was not just a military strategy, but a defiance of systems designed to exploit and divide. Just as colonial powers promised modernization, economic prosperity and civilizational progress while ultimately exploiting and dividing nations, algorithms claim to broaden perspectives, deliver relevant information and connect like-minded communities, but instead they distort reality by taking advantage of human behaviour, reinforcing societal hierarchies and weaponizing historical divisions to weaken collective action and unity.

The stakes have never been higher—128 years ago, Adwa was more than a battle, it was a symbol of Pan-Africanism, a victory for the Black diaspora, and a moment when Ethiopians ignited a global awakening. Now, as digital forces threaten the very freedom we fought to preserve, we must rise again, becoming conscious before AI does and confronting these forces with the same unity, resilience and determination that once defeated colonial powers. Ethiopian youth have the power to reshape the digital landscape, not only for their own country's narrative, but for African nations, the Black diaspora, developing countries and anyone who resonates with their cause. Only if we debug for freedom before freedom gets debugged can the next fight for freedom be won, not with a bloodbath, but with code-breadth.

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56   Africa Check. Accessed 14 October 2025, https://africacheck.org/.

'Rethinking non-violent youth-led political engagement in Ethiopia' by Awol Ali

Ethiopian youth have been the backbone of the nation's political evolution, standing as resolute agents of change in the face of tyranny. Their bravery and determination have propelled them to the forefront of struggles for justice and liberty. From resisting Emperor Haile Selassie's rule to challenging the Derg's dictatorship and the Tigray People's Liberation Front-led government, Ethiopia's youth have etched their sacrifices in history with blood and valour. They have endured widespread rebellions, state oppression, incarceration and exile—all driven by a quest for freedom and justice. Yet this sacrifice has drained the potential of Ethiopia's most dynamic force for progress. This essay argues that transformative youth-led activism in Ethiopia must adopt non-violent strategies that transcend ethno-affiliated foundations and shift toward 'democratic meritopianism', a model rooted in universal human values such as individual rights, rather than the politicization of primordial identities.[57]

A critical case study in this essay is the Ejetto youth-led movement in Sidama, which exemplifies the complexities of youth-driven political mobilization. While its advocacy was instrumental in securing Sidama's long-awaited statehood, its methods at times escalated into violent demonstrations and widespread disruptions. Though historic in its achievements, the movement's confrontational approach left a legacy of division and disillusionment. This essay contends that for youth movements to realize their full potential, a fundamental shift toward peaceful activism is essential—one that transcends factional divides and fosters unity across diverse political landscapes.

This essay proposes an 'action-oriented approach'—a transformative framework for fostering non-violent engagement in political discourse, as articulated by the National Democratic Institute. This paradigm emphasizes active participation, encouraging young individuals to engage meaningfully within their communities and assert their rights to democratic governance without resorting to aggression. By cultivating an environment rooted in consensus-building, shared values and collaborative political action, this approach seeks to empower youth movements to dismantle entrenched patterns of violence.

57   Biniam Misga Jemal, 'The depoliticisation of two competing nationalisms and the introduction of democratic Meritopianism as a possible way out for Ethiopia', *Journal of Contemporary African Studies* 38/2 (2020): 205–220. Accessed 14 October 2025, https://doi.org/10.1080/02589001.2020.1774520.

Historical context

In Ethiopia, the political narrative is intricately linked to the courage and sacrifices made by its youth, whose resolute actions have historically shaped the nation's trajectory. The intense struggle for statehood in the Sidama region exemplifies the immense potential embodied by youth-led political engagement. The emergence of the *Ejetto* movement encapsulated a beacon of hope in a protracted struggle characterized by marginalization and unmet aspirations. It galvanized grassroots mobilization, public demonstrations and strategic empowerment, ultimately acting as a formidable agent advocating for Sidama's statehood.

Despite the remarkable achievement of establishing statehood in 2020, the aftermath reveals a stark reality: Many *Ejetto* activists remain sidelined from significant governance roles. This marginalization highlights persistent systematic barriers that inhibit youth voices, even following hard-won victories. Thus, the Sidama experience serves as a cautionary tale, revealing both the extraordinary potential and the ongoing challenges confronting youth-led political mobilization within Ethiopia's multifaceted political framework.

Embracing the 'action-oriented approach'

The action-oriented approach represents a groundbreaking model for youth political engagement, offering a transformative path for young people to challenge oppressive systems while avoiding violence. By prioritizing practical, hands-on involvement in political processes, this approach empowers youth to engage directly in governance, civil movements and advocacy. Unlike traditional political training, which often confines itself to theoretical knowledge, the action-oriented approach emphasizes the value of experiential learning. It provides young people with the tools to gain real-world insights into the political landscape, enabling them to contribute meaningfully to societal change.

Central to this model is the inclusion of mentorship and guided practice, which play a pivotal role in equipping youth with essential leadership skills. By collaborating with seasoned mentors, young individuals receive structured, constructive feedback that helps bridge the gap between abstract theory and tangible practice. This personalized guidance ensures that they are not only prepared but also confident in navigating complex political and social challenges, fostering responsible engagement in their communities.

Equally important is the focus on coalition building, which facilitates dialogue and fosters understanding among youth from diverse backgrounds. This inclusive strategy helps unite individuals across ethnic, social and political divides, fostering a collective sense of responsibility and shared purpose. By promoting collaboration over conflict, youth coalitions strengthen societal cohesion and ensure that efforts toward social change are grounded in unity, not division.

Moreover, the role of technology, particularly social media, cannot be overstated in this approach. Digital platforms provide youth with a powerful means of communication and mobilization. They enable young activists to amplify their voices, organize campaigns and engage in broader dialogues about alternative political and economic solutions. Social media,

when used responsibly, allows youth to challenge dominant narratives, propose innovative ideas and connect with like-minded individuals across the globe, making their activism more impactful and far reaching.

Finally, the action-oriented approach emphasizes the necessity of inclusivity within youth organizations. For these movements to thrive and reflect the multi-ethnic nature of their societies, they must prioritize representation, ensuring that diverse perspectives are woven into the fabric of decision-making. Inclusivity not only strengthens the unity of youth movements but also bridges societal divides, ensuring that no group is left behind in the pursuit of common goals. This sense of collective responsibility makes these movements resilient, effective and truly representative of the communities they aim to serve.

In essence, the action-oriented approach offers a dynamic and holistic framework for non-violent youth activism; complemented by the principles of 'tradimornism'[58]—a synthesis of traditional values with modern democratic ideals—it provides young people with the means to lead transformative social change, fostering unity, progress and the active participation of youth in shaping their societies.

Critical examination of the *Ejetto movement*

While the *Ejetto* movement has significantly advanced the Sidama region's pursuit of autonomy, it also reflects various challenges that have historically impeded youth-led political movements across Ethiopia. A primary challenge is the lack of a cohesive political and ideological framework, limiting the movement's sustainability beyond immediate objectives. Although the successful attainment of statehood was a historic milestone, the absence of strategic post-victory planning left the *Ejetto* movement fragmented and ill-equipped to navigate the complexities of governance.

The movement's acute focus on the immediate goal of statehood overshadowed the necessity for long-term planning. Upon securing autonomy, the *Ejetto* movement encountered hurdles in transitioning from grassroots mobilization to institutional leadership. The void of robust organizational structures capable of fostering enduring governance created a leadership vacuum, fostering disillusionment among activists who had tirelessly fought for political discourse inclusion.

Furthermore, the reliance on confrontational tactics—while beneficial in galvanizing support— inflicted lasting harm upon the region's social fabric. These tactics alienated potential allies within the community, exacerbating tensions. Adversarial strategies increased vulnerability to state-sponsored retaliation, resulting in significant personal and communal risks to activists.

The organizational fragility exhibited by the *Ejetto* movement symbolizes broader systemic challenges that plague youth movements in Ethiopia. The lack of strategic foresight regarding

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58   'Tradimornism' refers to the negotiated coexistence and creative fusion of indigenous traditions and modern innovations.

leadership succession and institutional development impedes the ability of movements to exert influence beyond immediate victories. This phenomenon aligns with broader research indicating that youth-led movements often struggle to sustain their relevance after achieving their primary objectives.

Moreover, the ethnic-centric nature of the *Ejetto* movement, while vital in rallying support, complicates the creation of inclusive coalitions and enduring unity within the Sidama region. While ethnic identity served as a unifying force for statehood, its prominence risks cementing divisions when collaborative governance is essential. To ensure the enduring legacy of the *Ejetto* movement, a transition toward strategic, collaborative and inclusive approaches is paramount—approaches that are insightful to the proposed 'action-oriented approach'.

Implementing the 'action-oriented approach' in the *Ejetto* context

The *Ejetto* movement offers a critical lens through which to examine the application of an 'action-oriented approach' to youth-led political engagement. The *Ejetto* movement's push for Sidama statehood exemplified the power of youth activism, yet its reliance on violent and exclusionary tactics underscores the urgent need for a paradigm shift. An 'action-oriented approach' emphasizes non-violence, inclusivity and institutional reform, offering a sustainable alternative to destructive patterns that have historically defined political activism in Ethiopia.

To transform the *Ejetto* context, institutionalizing youth representation in governance is crucial. Creating local youth councils—modelled on successful frameworks like National Youth Council of Uganda—can give voice to marginalized youth, enabling them to address pressing issues such as unemployment and unequal access to education and resources. These councils could foster participatory decision-making, ensuring that policies reflect community-specific needs and priorities.

Ethnic and socio-political tensions related to *Ejetto* in Sidama region further necessitate fostering inter-ethnic and inter-generational dialogue. Establishing platforms for collaboration—such as a local version of a National Youth Platform—can bridge divides and encourage collective responsibility for regional development. Such initiatives could focus on equitable resource distribution, infrastructure development and economic empowerment, promoting a culture of shared goals and mutual respect.

Digital innovation offers another avenue for non-violent political engagement. In the *Ejetto* context, digital tools could amplify youth voices and facilitate peaceful activism, even in areas with limited technological infrastructure. Global examples underscore the transformative potential of digital engagement. For instance, Kenya's Young Political Leadership Academy organizes televised policy debates that foster constructive dialogue and community projects, while Nigeria's BudgIT simplifies complex budgetary information to empower youth through transparency and accountability. Ethiopian youth could adapt such models to mobilize support for peaceful advocacy and democratic reforms.

Economic empowerment is central to mitigating the exploitation of youth vulnerabilities. Political elites have historically manipulated youth unemployment to suppress dissent and

co-opt activism. Introducing youth innovation hubs, inspired by Rwanda's YouthConnekt Initiative, could help address this challenge. These hubs could prioritize sectors such as agriculture, technology and small-scale industries, unlocking untapped regional potential while fostering entrepreneurship and self-reliance.

Lessons from global youth-led movements reinforce the viability of non-violent approaches. The #EndSARS movement in Nigeria, for example, leveraged social media to organize peaceful protests against systemic police brutality, achieving international attention and policy reforms.[59] Similarly, the Umbrella Movement in Hong Kong demonstrated the power of peaceful civil disobedience in advocating for democratic reforms, despite significant repression. Ethiopian youth could draw from these examples to engage in non-violent mobilization that emphasizes transparency, accountability and institutional change.

In addition to digital activism and peaceful protests, localized initiatives addressing specific grievances—such as land rights or resource management—can catalyse broader political transformation. The Gezi Park protests in Turkey and Tunisia's Shahid Movement highlight how youth-led efforts centred on pressing local concerns can grow into national movements advocating for democracy and economic reform.[60] Adapting these approaches to Ethiopia could involve targeted campaigns promoting education reform, employment opportunities and interregional dialogue, all framed within a commitment to non-violence. Ultimately, the 'action-oriented approach' envisions a youth movement in *Ejetto* that transcends the destructive patterns of the past, prioritizing sustainable change through inclusive and non-violent strategies.

Conclusion

Drawing on the historical trajectory and transformative potential of Ethiopia's youth-led movements, this essay offers a resounding call for a paradigmatic shift in political activism. The Ejetto movement, despite its crucial role in achieving Sidama's statehood, epitomizes the duality inherent in confrontational tactics that, while galvanizing support, have led to fragmentation and socio-political discord. The essay argues that Ethiopia's dynamic youth— whose formidable energy has been predominantly channelled through violent mobilization— must redirect their passion toward strategic, non-violent engagement. The proposed 'action-oriented approach' champions an inclusive, 'meritopian' rethinking of political mobilization, integrating grassroots coalition building and inter-ethnic dialogue with the innovative principles of 'tradimornism'. This synthesis of traditional values and modern democratic ideals provides a

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59   Tamani Maganga, 'Youth Demonstrations and their Impact on Political Change and Development in Africa', Conflict Trends 2020/2, *ACCORD*, 20 August 2020. Accessed 25 January 2026, https://www. accord.org.za/conflict-trends/youth-demonstrations-and-their-impact-on-political-change-and-development-in-africa/.

60   Cemal Taştan, 'The Gezi Park Protests in Turkey: A Qualitative Field Research', *Insight Turkey* 15/3 (2013): 27–38; Stefano M. Torelli, Frankie Merone and Francesco Cavatorta, 'Salafism in Tunisia: Challenges and Opportunities for Democratization', *Middle East Policy* 19/4 (2012): 140–154.

robust framework for institutionalizing youth voices, fostering systemic reform and cultivating resilient democratic institutions.

Embracing non-violent activism is not merely a tactical shift, but a transformative movement essential for overcoming historical divisions and forging a future defined by peace, equity and shared progress. Ultimately, the future of Ethiopia hinges on reimagining youth activism as a unifying, constructive force capable of driving meaningful, enduring change across the nation. Therefore, as we explore the intricacies of youth political activism in Ethiopia, we must embrace the imperative for innovative methodologies that honour the aspirations of the country's most dynamic demographic. The energy and idealism of Ethiopia's youth are too precious to be squandered on destructive patterns. It is time to reimagine their role—not as agents of chaos, but as architects of a peaceful, democratic and equitable society.