

Challenges of Governance in an Age of Disinformation and Hate Speech in Africa: A Lesson from the Post-2018 Ethiopian Experience

Mohammed Dejen Assen (PhD)*

Abstract

Disinformation and hate speech is extremely pervasive in Ethiopia that negatively affected the political, economic, social, ethnic and religious landscape of the country. Several deadly conflicts occurred between religious and ethnic groups in the last five years alone (2018-2023) that prompted the deaths and displacements of thousands, if not millions, of people and destruction of property. Based on a qualitative analysis of primary and secondary data, the present research found that, the practical implementation of the law is problematic, sometimes (mis)used to suppress government critics and freedom of expression enshrined in the constitution. Moreover, the magnitude of the problem is ever increasing where the government is unable to control via the law and with an erratic measure of shutting down of internet and social media accesses.

Key Words: Ethiopia, Disinformation, Hate Speech, Governance, Social Media

Introduction

With a population of well over 123 million in 2023, Ethiopia is the 2nd most populous country in Africa next to Nigeria and the 14th in the world. The country is known for its rich diversity in terms of culture, ethnicity, language and religion. It hosts around 85 ethnic groups. The ethnic and religious figures are extremely politicized and highly contested but as per the 2007 national population and housing census of Ethiopia, the Oromo ethnic group comprise the largest share of the total population with 34.5% followed by the Amhara with 26.9%. The Somali constitute around 6.2% and Tigray with 6.1%. The share of all other ethnic groups ranges from 4% to a very insignificant percent only in hundreds. The religious composition is also contested with the

* The Author is an Assistant Professor of Federalism & Governance at the College of Law & Governance Studies of Addis Ababa University, Ethiopia. He can be reached via: mohammed.dejen@aau.edu.et or mohalem99@gmail.com

Orthodox Christians representing 43.5%, Muslims 33.9%, Protestants 18.9%, Catholics 0.5% and all others (including traditional religions) 3.2%.¹

Following the overthrow of the Marxist-Leninist-oriented military dictatorship of Derg regime in 1991, the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) instituted ethnic-based federalism. The constituent units of the federation are organized along linguistic and identity (ethnicity) lines.² The EPRDF was a coalition of four ethnically organized political parties and five affiliated ethnic parties founded in 1989. The Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), the Amhara National Democratic Movement (ANDM), the Oromo People's Democratic Organization (OPDO) and the Southern Ethiopian People's Democratic Movement (SEPDM) were the ruling coalition member parties; while the Gambella People's Democratic Party (GPDP), the Benishangul/Gumuz People's Democratic Party (BGPDP), the Somali People's Democratic Party (SPDP), the Afar people's Democratic Party (APDP) and the Harari People's Democratic Party (HPDP) were affiliated with it but administer their own regional states. All of these political parties mainly represent their own respective ethnic groups.³

The TPLF was the creator and architect of the EPRDF which dominated the federal government from 1991 to 2018. All other ethnic parties were organized taking the TPLF as a role model and tutored by it for the last 27 years until it was removed from the center by a popular protest. The TPLF-led EPRDF regime introduced the 1995 Constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (FDRE) with an "oppressor-oppressed framework". As per the Constitution, Ethiopian history or more specifically, ethnic relation is characterized by national/ethnic oppression where there was an "oppressor ethnic group and oppressed ethnic groups".⁴ The oppressor, though not explicitly mentioned in name, is later revealed through government practice and policy documents as Amhara ethnic group. All other ethnic groups were designated as oppressed. Hence, the Constitution was ratified to "rectify this unjust historical relationship among ethnic groups".

¹ Since political power is distributed on the basis of ethnic number, every ethnic group tries to report an exaggerated figure. Due to the politicization of population census, the government postponed the census for three consecutive periods to avoid exacerbation of ethnic and religious tensions. The government even for the first time amended the constitutional provision of article 103 that provides for a national population census to be conducted every ten years.

² As per Article 46(2) the 1995 Constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, four criteria are employed to create constituent units of the federation: settlement patterns, language, identity and consent of the people concerned. However, in practice, language and identity takes the precedence in the formation of regional states. Accordingly, 9 regional states were created but now reached to 12 and most likely increase the number as many ethnically organized zones are demanding and applied (e.g. Gurage, Wolaita etc.) for statehood.

³ For detailed information, you can refer "EPRDF in Brief", available online at: www.eprdf.org.et

⁴ Preamble of the 1995 FDRE Constitution.

In this regard, the Constitution recognized the Ethiopian people not as one political community but an amalgamation of a group of nations, nationalities and peoples (ethnic groups) with their own distinct language, culture, custom and psychological make-up settled in their own territory aspiring to establish their own political community at a regional state level within the Ethiopian Federation or independent statehood if they wish to do so.⁵ They have the right to organize political parties along ethnic lines and aspire political power to fulfil their self-rule rights and promote their group identity. By promoting group identity, the constitution and the federal system openly encouraged the thinking of “group mentality” which instituted divisive politics in the country that made governance very chaotic especially in this age of mis-, dis-, and mal-information and hate speech using the internet and social media platforms targeting group identity and polarizing ethnic and religious relations as shall be discussed later.

The TPLF-led EPRDF was gradually opposed by politicians of other ethnic groups (even from the oppressed ethnic groups), social media activists, elites and the public alike that contributed for the scramble of the coalition in 2018. The two largest ethnic groups (Oromo and Amhara) in particular opposed the political and economic dominance of a minority ethnic group (Tigray). The opposition and resistance struggle was again organized along ethnic lines with its negative repercussions on future ethnic relations in the country.

Social media activism played an indispensable role in organizing the youth protest across the country. Based on real and perceived marginalization rhetoric, youth activists from home and the diaspora agitated to stand against the TPLF dominance. After three successive years of anti-TPLF/EPRDF regime protests (2015-2018), a “reformist group” emerged from within the EPRDF dominated by the Oromo and Amhara ethnic group members. The elites from the two ethnic groups established a “tactical alliance” named *OroMara* (Oro+Mara - Oromo and/plus Amhara) against TPLF with a negative connotation for Tigray ethnic group who were labeled as oppressors and later nick-named as “*junta*” and “*yeken jib*” – an Amharic term literally mean *daytime hyena*.⁶ This naming and the subsequent actions taken by the federal government further sow the seeds of hate

⁵ Article 39(1) of the 1995 FDRE Constitution provides that “Every Nation, Nationality and People in Ethiopia has unconditional right to self-determination, including the right to secession”. Based on this provision, unparalleled to any constitution in the world, all ethnic groups in the country has the right to secede after fulfilling 5 procedures mentioned under sub-article 4 (which are very easy with no substantive requirements).

⁶ The term *yeken jib* – daytime hyena” in Amharic connotes that, it is more dangerous compared to night time hyena. Both are dangerous but the former is dangerous than the later. *Yeken jib* also denotes an extremely hungry hyena which is also used to explain a person in this term is s/he is extremely selfish and corrupt.

and antagonistic relationship that finally caused the 2020 civil war between the forces of Tigray and the Ethiopian government.

The *OroMara* coalition forced the TPLF to flee to Tigray region and the new government of Ethiopia led by PM Abiy Ahmed was formed on the 2nd of April 2018. The removal of TPLF from the federal government and the successive government and social media propaganda against them severely affected ethnic relations as people started to see ethnic Tigrians in suspicion. The official government rhetoric of labelling the TPLF (organized in the name of Tigray ethnic group) as “*junta*” and “*yeken jib*”, broadcasted through mainstream state media and the PM’s social media account and further shared by other social media networks peaked the polarization among ethnic groups to unprecedented level.

Against this backdrop, this research paper investigates some empirical cases of violence and attacks on certain ethnic/religious communities initiated and exacerbated by disinformation and hate speech circulated through social media and the internet. It examines how the widespread of disinformation and hate speech made governance problematic in Ethiopia that negatively affected the right to freedom of expression, human rights and democracy. The research focuses on the post-2018 period. The last five years of governance under PM Abiy Ahmed is highly problematic where disinformation via social media resulted in mass killings and some even with genocidal intent. The ungovernability of the situation forced the government to undertake repeated internet shutdown and the ratification of hate speech and disinformation prevention and suppression proclamation on the 23rd of March 2020. To the best of my knowledge, there is no any academic or policy-oriented research on the impacts of disinformation on governance in Ethiopia. This research paper is, therefore, intended to fill this gap and contribute to further academic debate on the issue and serve as an input for policy-makers.

Methodology and Methods of Data Collection

The study employed a qualitative research design. Both primary and secondary data collection instruments have been employed. Secondary data are collected from government policy documents, constitution, proclamations, directives and other related documents. Other documents such as published and unpublished literature, newspaper archives, opinion pieces, and internet sources that focus on disinformation and counter-disinformation measures were also used.

Primary data were collected mainly from Addis Ababa and other parts of the country, both from government and non-governmental institutions using key-informant interviews through semi-structured interview guides. The following key informants for primary data collection were involved: religious leaders, government representatives, academicians, activists, experts and ordinary citizens. The key informants were selected not for their representative purpose but for their knowledge of the issue at hand. In addition to interviews, personal observation also served as an additional tool of primary data collection. The following institutions are consulted as priority partners in the conduct of this research as sources of data, information, and insight: The Inter-Religious Council of Ethiopia (IRCE), the Religious Affairs Directorate in the Ministry of Peace, and Addis Ababa City Government.

In view of the political sensitivity of many of the issues under discussion, willingness to be recorded and named was the major problem during the fieldwork. In tackling the problem, the researcher adopted a policy of not naming those interviewees who won't be volunteers to be named. For this reason, most of the names and identifying information that could suggest one's identity such as the location of interviews, position, educational background, job status of informants, etc. have been removed.

Misinformation, Disinformation and Governance: An Overview

Misinformation and disinformation are not mutual exclusive concepts though not necessarily synonymous. Disinformation is false information which is deliberately fabricated to mislead or deceive recipients or audiences (Turcilo & Obrenovic, 2020). In disinformation, there is an intentional fabrication of false information and circulating it to intentionally mislead. Misinformation, on the other hand, is also false information but there is truth in it which is misrepresented to get the facts wrong or inaccurate (Turcilo & Obrenovic, 2020). Misinformation and disinformation affects democracy, governance and human rights across the world (Colomina, Margalef, & Youngs, 2021). The fast spread of misinformation and disinformation due to improvements in communication technologies made controlling it very difficult and counter-disinformation measures in turn affects governance. Counter-measures for protecting

disinformation will be counter-productive on the governance of human rights, freedom of speech and expression and other human rights elements unless it is based on accurate understanding of the level of the problem and acting proportionally.

Understanding the Concepts of Disinformation and Hate Speech

Disinformation or an information fabrication is not a new phenomenon in the world. It has a long history. However, what makes it unique today is the advancement of digital technology which makes its dissemination very fast and its impacts wide/multidimensional. The production and distribution of disinformation now became very easy using social media and internet services. Hate speech is also as old as the speech itself except change of platform for its dissemination without having necessarily to pass through “fact-checking or editorial judgement” (Hilary & Dumebi, 2021) as was the case for traditional media services (radio, television and print).

The Concept of Disinformation

The concept of disinformation can be defined in different ways and we may not find a consensual definition acceptable for all. However, I found the definition given by a study coordinated by the European Parliament (2021) all-inclusive to use it as an operational definition for this research paper. It defines disinformation as “false, inaccurate or misleading information designed, presented and promoted to cause public harm or make a profit” (Colomina, Margalef, & Youngs, 2021: 2). As per this definition, one can observe three important components. One is the meaning of the term which is false, inaccurate or misleading information. The other is the deliberate designing, presentation and promotion of the information. The third element is the goal or objective of the designer, presenter or promoter of the false, inaccurate or misleading information. Its goal is either to cause harm or make a profit (political, financial or reputational). The ultimate consequences of disseminating false information is harming societal relations or damaging social, economic and political stability of a state, community or even individuals for getting profit on the part of the disseminator or bad intention of simply harming others.

Disinformation is spreading alarmingly across the world through social media as a result of rapid technological advancement. Today, everyone is a producer and disseminator of information because of the availability of technologies. In this sense, anyone can produce any content of information and disseminate to large audiences across the globe within a second. Studies on the

impact of the spread of disinformation (Tucilo & Obrenovic, 2020; Colomina, Margalef & Youngs, 2021) indicate that large portion of the people feel that it has caused increased polarization and problems. Its effects are multifaceted. It polarizes relations, creates distrust in legal norms, democratic institutions, feeds disbelief, disrupt election and negatively affects relations. The motives behind spreading disinformation varies (Colomina, Margalef & Youngs, 2021). It may be for political or economic gains or even for reputational purposes in order to influence others.

Taking the devastating effects of disinformation and its unprecedented level, addressing the problems using legal frameworks and policy responses is crucial. Freedom of speech or expression is one of the pillars of democracy and human rights. However, this right may be abused or misused by individuals, groups or even by the state actors to deliberately gain profit or advantage by harming others or undermining democracy and human rights itself. In this case, there emerges a hard choice to limit the freedom in order to save democracy or allow the freedom of expression to its limitless scope and shoulder the consequences.

As we have discussed earlier, the advancement of communication technologies using internet opened the door very wide to reach large number of people within a short period of time. Information is power and international legal norms guarantee freedom for information.⁷ Everyone has unlimited right to information. It is also guaranteed that the right to information includes the right to disseminate it without a limit. Social media networks take our ability to receive and disseminate information to unprecedented extent. Nonetheless, false or manipulated information could be disseminated to a larger audience that causes and caused damages on human relation, democracy, governance, human rights, religious institutions, election results, international relations etc. What makes very difficult to control disinformation by relevant authorities is that false information circulates much faster than other information. A research finding conducted by MIT Lab indicates that “lies disseminate farther, faster, deeper and more broadly than the truth and falsehoods were 70% more likely to be retweeted than the truth” (Colomina, Margalef & Youngs, 2021: 2). This shows that huge audiences will be more attracted by cooked or false information with a greater chance of being shared, retweeted and re-disseminated by the receivers.

⁷ Article 19 of the UDHR for example provides that: Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers. Article 19 of ICCPR in turn states that: Everyone shall have the right to hold opinions without interference. Everyone shall have the right to freedom of expression; this right shall include freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media of his choice.

This makes false information to spread much faster than truth and other information related to education, scientific findings or any other else. Connected to this, the damaging effect of false information is high. The public harm may include “threats to democratic political processes and values” (Colomina, Margalef & Youngs, 2021: 2).

Claire Wardle and Hossein Derakhshan (2017: 20) distinguish three types of information to identify falsehood from truth. These are generally called information disorders: dis-information, mis-information and mal-information. In most cases, these three concepts overlap but “the intention to harm or making profit” is the major distinguishing factor. Accordingly, mis-information occurs when false information is created and disseminated not necessarily to cause harm. Mal-information occurs when genuine information is created and shared to cause harm on a person, organization, social group or a nation. Dis-information occurs when false information is being deliberately created and circulated to cause harm (Tucilo & Obrenovic, 2020: 8).

The challenge of disinformation comes not only from the content of the information but from the manner in which it is distributed in social media networks. Put differently, it is not only the content of the information that causes harm but the intention of the producers and disseminators of the information and the techniques and manipulation strategies matters more in creating instability and harm on the part of the end receivers (Colomina, Margalef & Youngs, 2021: 5).

The Concept of Hate Speech

As any other conceptual definitions, there is no universal consensus on the definition of hate speech. Different people define it in different ways. It covers a range of negative discourse that ignites hostility. It may include any dehumanizing expression or speech against a certain race, ethnic identity, religion or gender. According to the definition provided by Cambridge Dictionary (2008), hate speech is a “public speech that expresses hate or encourages violence towards a person or group based on something such as race, religion, sex, or sexual orientation.” Hate speech is “usually thought to include communications of animosity or disparagement of an individual or a group on account of a group characteristic such as race, colour, national origin, sex, disability, religion, or sexual orientation” (Brown-Sica and Beall, 2008).

Hate speech is a speech that targets individuals or groups on the basis of their identity that denigrates hate, violence and attack. Hate speech is not new in this world but facilitated by the internet that lies, conspiracies and threats against a certain group is instantly spread across the world. Different countries react to hate speech differently. In some countries, legislations are introduced which may contravene freedom of speech which is an internationally protected right. In others, it is constitutionally and legally protected. In many African countries, governments usually resort to blocking the internet and social media services and suppressing hate speech through a draconian politico-legal framework. Authoritarianism in the African context plays a major role in suppressing critics and a means to control power at the exclusion of opponents and critics. Governments used disinformation and the counter-measures to strengthen their grip in power and narrow down the political space. A case study conducted by Simone Toussi (2022: 3) on five African countries (Cameroon, Ethiopia, Kenya, Nigeria and Uganda) indicate that “governments have weaponized disinformation laws to silence critical voices. Rather than to counter the ills of disinformation, related laws have in most cases been used to target political critics while government officials complicit in promoting disinformation are protected”.

Impacts of Disinformation and Hate Speech on Governance

There is no consensus among scholars to precisely define what governance really mean. But the most widely used conceptualization of governance revolves around the relationship between the governor and the governed. The UDHR, for example, defines governance to mean “the process whereby public institutions conduct public affairs, manage public resources and guarantee the realization of human rights” (Nwanna, n.d: 56).

The most serious challenge to governance (which includes the political processes and human rights protection) arises from coordinated campaigns of disinformation and hate speech from multiple social media platforms. The impacts of disinformation and hate speech are multifaceted. It touches every aspect of life and system of governance which spoils the relationship between the governor and the governed. It impacts human rights as it affects the right to freedom of thought, opinion and expression without interference. It disrupts the right to participate in public election and vote in elections. It undermines democracy as the spread of disinformation and hate speech damages trust on democratic institutions and the electoral processes and the outcome of election. In sum, it

damages the relationships between the government and the people (Colomina, Margalef, & Youngs, 2021).

The former president of Costa Rica and Chair of the Kofi Annan Commission on Elections and Democracy in the Digital Age, Laura Chinchilla, puts the paradox of the positive and negative roles of the digital technology to effective governance in this long quote as:

On the one hand, digital technologies have played a vital role in providing free access to government data and information; encouraging citizen participation in public decision-making; introducing new voices to the public debate; fostering the transparency and scrutiny of administrative actions; knitting global advocacies together on issues affecting human rights, the rule of law and democracy; and mobilizing new actors eager to find alternative avenues for political participation. The Arab Spring almost a decade ago, the pro-democracy protests in Hong Kong this summer and the toppling of Puerto Rico's governor in July are only a few examples. On the other, the alarming number of episodes involving the use of social media platforms to manipulate elections and public debates, as well as the surge of extremist groups using the internet to incite hatred and violence, clearly warns us that the adverse relationship between those platforms and democracy is no longer just anecdotal. Fake news is as old as news, and hate speech is as old as speech. But the digital age has provided a ripe environment for the virulent reproduction and visibility of both. To be clear, the promise of the betterment of the human condition held by new technologies is beyond question. But the risks have become just as apparent (Turcilo & Mladen Obrenovic, 2020: 18).

Paradoxically, not only disinformation and hate speech that damages democracy, human rights and the quality of governance but also the counter-measures to control disinformation and hate speech undermines the same. The counter-measures, for instance, may have a negative consequence on the right to freedom of expression.

Challenges of Governance in an Age of Disinformation and Hate Speech in Ethiopia

Ethiopia is a country of diversity. It hosts around 85 ethnic groups and all major world religions plus several traditional religious practices. Accommodation of these diversities is a serious challenge for the country. Ethnic and religious tensions are simmering today partly due to the institutionalization of ethnic/identity politics and the polarization of differences manipulated by political elites and social media activists. Ethnic conflict is almost common throughout the country and there is no ethnic group which has no conflict with its immediate neighbor either due to competition over resources, boundary demarcation issue or struggle for dominance (Mohammed, 2022). Political power struggle among ethnic Amhara, Tigray and Oromo is even intense today which resulted in one of the devastating civil war from 2020 onwards. Religious tensions are also

alarming. There are inter-religious and intra-religious conflicts in the country. Conflicts between Muslims and Christians is common across the country. Although it is known for religious tolerance and peaceful co-existence among religious groups (Mohammed, 2017), the post-2018 political change and the accompanied political instability exposed the fragility of peace and stability in Ethiopia.

Ethnic and religious polarization is further aggravated due to the dissemination of disinformation and hate speech using the internet and social media platforms and sometimes through mainstream media. There are ample cases of ethnic and religious violence in the last five years of Abiy Ahmed's administration (2018-2023) as shall be discussed below.

Attacks against Muslims in Amhara National Regional State

Attacks at Motta Town (East Gojjam Zone)

On the 20th of December 2019, at least four mosques and several Muslim-owned business centers were destroyed by a group of Christians who received disinformation that alleges Muslims for destroying an Orthodox Christian church in the town of Motta.⁸ It all began and spread this way. At around 5pm, there was a Christian prayer ceremony at St. George Church in Motta, a Christian-majority area with small minority of Muslims. Unexpectedly, smoke come out through the roof of the church. The exact cause of the fire was unknown at the moment but later discovered that it was due to a fire left by a priest while smoking spice for the celebration. Scores of people from the surrounding area (both Muslims and Christians) show up and participated in pouring water to extinguish the fire. After a coordinated effort from both communities, the fire was controlled and the church was saved from complete destruction.⁹ However, when disinformation and rumors circulate through social media and mobile messaging that “it was the Muslims who burnt St. George Church”, things dramatically changed against Muslims and their properties. Despite the presence of relative peaceful co-existence between Muslims and Christians in the town, young Christians spontaneously destroyed four mosques and shops, pharmacies, business centers, restaurants, and looted properties owned by Muslims. The security forces of the town were unable

⁸ For detailed information, you can look at BBC Amharic “በሞገ የተፈጠረው ምንድን ነው?”, available online at: <https://www.bbc.com/amharic/news-50876652>

⁹ Ethiopian Observer (2023). <https://www.ethiopiaobserver.com/2019/12/24/what-happened-in-mota/>

or unwilling to stop the violence and attack directed against the Muslims, their religious institutions and properties.¹⁰

The attack then attracted condemnation and public protests by Muslims and others in Addis Ababa and other Muslim-majority areas of the country. PM Abiy Ahmed condemned the attack and described it as “an attempt by extremists to breakdown our rich history of religious tolerance and co-existence”.¹¹ The Attorney-General of the Federal Government of Ethiopia and the Mayor of the City of Addis Ababa also condemned it as an act of violence against the country’s culture of religious tolerance and vowed for the government to take decisive actions against the perpetrators.¹² Other renowned Muslim activists and religious leaders¹³ associated the violence with a planned and orchestrated attack on the Muslims that take roots for long. They didn’t consider it as an isolated incident but a continuation of the marginalization and attack of Muslims started long years back.

The attacks, killings and lootings of Muslims in the town of Motta was not without a consequence. It attracted large Muslim protests and in some instances counter-attacks on Christians in other parts of the country such as in the Muslim-majority Silte Zone in Southern Ethiopia People’s Regional State and Jimma Zone of Oromia National Regional State.

The violence was later controlled by the security forces. Demolished mosques were re-built in Motta through funds collected using the same social media that caused the dissemination of false information to cause harm against Muslim-Christian relations. In the dissemination of disinformation in Motta, those involved in the act deliberately misled the Christians accusing of Muslims for burning the church. The fact of the matter was that a church was caught with fire. This was true. However, it was not the Muslims who caused the fire but a fire left inside the church by a priest used to smoke spice for the celebration of Christian festivals. In this regard, false information was deliberately fabricated by somebody else designed, presented and promoted to cause harm over Muslims or polarize Muslim-Christian relations not only in Motta town but also across the country.

¹⁰ Ethiopian Observer, <https://www.ethiopiaobserver.com/2019/12/24/what-happened-in-mota/>

¹¹ For detailed information, see <https://www.thenationalnews.com/world/africa/ethiopian-muslims-protest-after-several-mosques-burned-1.955737>

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Uztaz Ahmedin Jebel, for example, expressed his feeling that the attack was not a single incident in this particular even but systematically targeting Muslims throughout the country and in Amhara National Regional State in particular. For more information on this, refer the Ethiopian Observer at <https://www.ethiopiaobserver.com/2019/12/24/what-happened-in-mota/>

Attacks against Orthodox Christians and Ethnic Amhara in Oromia National Regional State

The Killings of Hachalu Hundessa and its aftermath

Hachalu Hundessa, the most popular Afan Oromo singer and the widely celebrated hero and symbol of resistance against the TPLF-led EPRDF regime by the Oromo youth, was killed on the 29th of June 2020 in Addis Ababa where his death was instantly but inaccurately implicated with *Amhara ethnic group* by most known Oromo activists (including the popular Jawar Mohammed) and his media outlet, Oromia Media Network (OMN) (Gilbert, 2020). Although his assassinator was later identified being from the *Oromo ethnic group*, OMN and other social media posts deliberately linked his killing directly with the Amhara ethnic group arguing that “Hachalu was killed by a *neftegna* [to mean Amhara] because of the interview he gave just one week before his death to OMN criticizing Emperor Menelik II whom the Amhara saw as their hero”.¹⁴

Where did the problem start? The story goes as follows. Emperor Menelik II (r.1889-1913) was the one who incorporated large parts of Ethiopia through war and conquest at the end of the 19th c and beginning of 20th c (Bahru, 2002). Most parts of today’s Oromia, Southern Ethiopia People’s Regional State, Harar, Gambella, Benishangul/Gumuz and others became part of the expanding Ethiopian state during his reign. As the incorporation entails war and conquest, using force to assimilate or integrate the newly incorporated areas and peoples were an inevitable fact. However, in most cases, Emperor Menelik II was known by his tolerant policies towards the newly incorporated religious and ethnic groups (Clapham, 2013). He followed a policy of “limited toleration” or “guarded-tolerance” towards those traditional chiefs and local leaders as far as they peacefully submitted and accepted his suzerainty and agreed to pay annual tributes (Bahru, 2002; Markakis, 1974). On the contrary, for those who rejected his kingship and preferred resistance, he used severe measures of punishment and replaced the local rulers with his own appointed officials from the center (Clapham, 2013).¹⁵

¹⁴ Oromia Media Network (OMN), 30 June 2020.

¹⁵ The tolerance and intolerance faces of Menelik towards local communities and religious groups were largely dependent up on the reactions of these communities and groups. Clapham (2013: 20), for instance, contends that, “in the most striking case, the Moslem Oromo sultanate of Jimma, Sultan Aba Jiffar was able to reach an agreement with Menelik under which he not only remained on his throne, but was able to prevent the imposition of such symbols of conquest as the erection of Christian churches [in his kingdom].” On the other hand, “it was very different in Harar, which resisted, and in which a large Orthodox Church was erected with brutal symbolism in the center of the old Muslim city”

The Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF), the TPLF, the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF), the Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF) and other ethnic-based parties later rose up in arms fighting against ethnic domination in the country. These groups promoted the national oppression thesis and even the colonial thesis to fight against the imperial regime of Haile Selassie I (r. 1930-1974) (successor of Emperor Menelik II) and the Marxist-Leninist military Derg regime (r. 1974-1991) accusing them of perpetuating (Amhara) ethnic dominance in Ethiopia (McCracken, 2004). For all the misdeeds of Ethiopia's past, the ethnically organized ethno-nationalist fighters blame Emperor Menelik II. The TPLF and OLF, in particular alleged Emperor Menelik II for instituting Amhara dominance against the Tigray and Oromo ethnic groups. The 1995 Constitution of Ethiopia is largely drafted and ratified by incorporating the oppressor-oppressed framework of ethnic relations in the country.¹⁶ The constitution is therefore meant "to liberate the oppressed ethnic groups" in the country "from the Amhara oppression" (McCracken, 2004). The OLF propagated against Amhara oppression and regarded Emperor Menelik II as oppressor who committed genocide against the Oromo people (Mekuria, 2005). He is accused of cutting hands and breasts of Oromo (Mekuria, 2005). The Anolle Statue, a female statue her hands stretched carrying a breast is one showcase to commemorate the sufferings of the Oromo by Emperor Menelik II. This statue in itself imprints hatred between the two ethnic communities permanently as shown below.

Although this narration of the brutality of Emperor Menelik II against the Oromo people is not substantiated with historical facts, it is widely accepted among the Oromo youth. The contemporary political elites and social media activists also promote and widely disseminate this (dis)information across Oromia and beyond.

¹⁶ For more information on this, see the Preamble of the 1995 FDRE Constitution.



Anolle Statue erected as a tribute to Arsi Oromo whose hands and breasts were mutilated by Emperor Menelik II

It was in this context that the killings of Hachalu Hundessa on the 29th of June 2020 became a bone of contention between the Amhara and Oromo elites and ethnic groups. In his interview to OMN a week before his death, Hachalu criticized Emperor Menelik II both with some sort of evidence and emotional insult for perpetrating crimes against the Oromo people. The Media, in a way that encourages the interviewee to focus on the Emperor, pushes him to speak about Menelik's personality and cruelty against the Oromo.



Statue of Emperor Menelik II at the center of Addis Ababa

Referring to the statue of Emperor Menelik II which stands on the back of the horse, Hachalu said: “the Oromo people should remember that all the horses seen mounted by old rulers/leaders belonged to the [Oromo] people”.¹⁷ His interview was to indicate that, while coming to the land of Oromo for conquest and incorporation into the expanding Ethiopian empire, Menelik did not have horses form himself and his soldiers but forcefully taken them from the Oromo people. After the interview, he received a “death threat” from an unknown person as he confirmed later.

¹⁷ Interview with OMN on 22 June 2020.

However, nothing has happened against him because of the interview at least for a week. In an orchestrated killing, Hachalu was later assassinated and his body was found in his car at the outskirts of Addis Ababa.

In a coordinated campaign using multiple social media outlets and the OMN, disinformation was circulated that “Amharas killed Hachalu because of his critics of Menelik in his interview with the OMN”. A high-profile Oromo activist/politician and media mogul, Jawar Mohammed, in his Facebook account (with more than 1.5 million followers) tweeted the following: “*They* did not just kill Hacaaluu. *They* shot at the heart of the Oromo Nation, once again!! It was Tadesse Biru, Haile Fida, Elemo Qilxuu, Eebbisaa Addunya ... now Hacaaluu! *You* can kill *us*, all of *us*, *you* can never ever stop *us*!! NEVER!!”¹⁸(emphasis mine). The tweet already dichotomized the attacker and the victim as “*us* and *them* or *they* and *we*” to give the attack ethnic connotation differentiating the perpetrator’s and victim’s ethnic identity.

The protesters also showed slogans such as “*They* killed *us*”, “*Amhara* out of *Oromia*”, etc. The terms “*they*” and “*us*” were deliberately used to polarize ethnic relations and to externalize the ethnic affiliation of the killers. Different propaganda messages were broadcasted through OMN that the Oromos are being attacked. The death of Hachalu was portrayed not just an individual killing but an attack perpetrated against the whole Oromo people. In its live transmission, the OMN allowed this message from an individual phone call: “Oromo should be organized, do not sit home do nothing and anyone against Oromo should take measure”.¹⁹ It was widely circulated and angry mobs come out in Addis Ababa and other major cities of Oromia National Regional State paralleling his death with George Floyd protests in the United States of America (Black Lives Matter) - “Oromo Lives Matter” to link the killing with his ethnic background. The targets of the violent attack in the aftermath of his killing were mainly Orthodox Christians and ethnic Amharas. At least 240 individuals were killed throughout Oromia, particularly in Shashemene, Adama and Ambo (the hometown of Hachalu).²⁰

The violent attackers also focused on attacking Orthodox Christians because Oromo nationalists portray the Ethiopian Orthodox Church as part of the Amhara political power structure during the imperial regime and accused it of suppressing Oromo language, culture and their traditional

¹⁸ You can refer the Facebook account of Jawar Mohammed tweeted on 30 June 2020.

¹⁹ Oromia Media Network (OMN), broadcasted on 30 June 2020.

²⁰ Ethiopian Human Rights Commission, Violence and Human Rights Violations following Musician Hachalu Hundessa’s Assassination, Investigation Report (2020).

religion (*Waqeffena*). Whenever violence erupts in Oromia, the Orthodox Church is the prime target and Orthodox Christians of mainly Amharic-speaking were targeted during the protest following Hachalu's death.

The fact of the matter was that Hachalu Hundessa was interviewed by OMN and he criticized Emperor Menelik II referring to the statue of the Emperor standing at the center of Addis Ababa. He also received a death threat from somebody else connected to his critics against the Emperor. It was also a fact that he was killed a week after his interview. However, his killing was not attributed to Amhara ethnic group. He was rather killed by an Oromo linked to the OLF²¹ who wanted to associate the killing with Amhara ethnic group to further polarize relations and create instability in the country to maximize its political gains.

Disinformation and hate speech against Amhara ethnic groups and Orthodox Christians were deliberately designed, presented and disseminated by activists and mainstream media. After the killing, large number of people turned up towards the statue of Emperor Menelik II to demolish it. One individual said this: "we have to demolish this statue of the *neftegna*".²² The government was unable or unwilling to control the angry mob with stones, sticks, wood, knives and even grenades in their hands and protect the victims in Addis Ababa, Shashemene, Adama, Ambo, Chiro and other parts of Oromia. In some parts of Oromia, for example, the police and other security forces remain reluctant to stop the attackers and protect the victims. In some instances, they complicit to the crimes committed. According to the Investigation Report by the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission of 2020;

Local authorities and security did not respond to victims' repeated calls for help, being told instead "that higher ups gave no order to intervene, we are not here to protect private property, we are here to provide security to government development institutions, banks and religious institutions". Survivors and witnesses also recount how sometimes police stood watching as the attacks took place. "It did not feel like we had a government!"

²¹ According to David Gilbert (2020) "The man police charged with Hundessa's killing told prosecutors that he was working as an assassin for the Oromo Liberation Front, an armed nationalist group linked to numerous violent attacks – and who told the shooter that Oromia would benefit from the death of one of its most famous singers. For more information, you can visit: <https://www.vice.com/en/article/xg897a/hate-speech-on-facebook-is-pushing-ethiopia-dangerously-close-to-a-genocide>

²² The word "*neftegna*" – literally means a gun-bearer. However, this term was used to denote the Amhara soldiers who accompanied Emperor Menelik II during his expansion towards the south part of Ethiopia, including the present-day Oromia. *Neftegna* means, therefore, Menelik's soldiers who were recruited from different ethnic groups, including the Oromo, but due to repeated propaganda by the TPLF-led EPRDF regime for the last 30 years and so, became synonymous to Amhara settlers in the South and Amhara ethnic group.

In some extreme cases, “security forces even went inside medical institutions and harassed, including by threatening medical professionals, and barred victims from getting medical help.” Lack of preparedness from the part of the government also prevented it from stopping the attacks with “sufficient speed and scale”. It was only after lots of killings and destructions that calm regained.

David Gilbert in his online article provides his observations and substantiated with sources how the disinformation and the hate speech posted on Facebook incited the violence and how the attackers targeted ethnic Amhara and Orthodox Christians as follows:

In the wake of the Hundessa murder, the attacks were primarily focused on the Amhara people. Social media users were quick to assert, inaccurately and without evidence, that the murder was committed by a “neftegna” - an increasingly problematic term that has become a dogwhistle call to demonize and attack Amhara people in parts of Oromia. The Network Against Hate Speech recorded posts on Facebook that clearly called for “genocidal attacks against an ethnic group or a religion - or both at the same time; and ordering people to burn civilians’ properties, kill them brutally, and displace them. There are also texts and videos that give instructions about how to make a homemade explosive to carry out the attacks at a greater scale. There was even a video by someone living in the U.S. that ordered young people to brutally murder some ethnic group and burn their properties, and inciting terror with a suicide bombing (Gilbert, 2020: 1).

Members of the Amhara ethnic group accused media outlets, esp. the OMN and some government mainstream media, for instigating the attackers and instructing how to attack other ethnic groups everywhere in Oromia and other parts of the country. These media platforms were blamed for the killings of Amharas as they spread hate-filled messages to lock and burn the Amhara ethnic group inside their home.

The Ethiopian government later expressed its condolences to the victims and their families. Through the PM’s Office on its updates of the developments in the country following the death of Hachalu, stated about the circulation of disinformation as follows:

there are a number of rumors and misinformation being spread through social and traditional media on the political situation in the country and the legal measures undertaken by the government following this tragic incident. Some international media have reported that the government had “unlawfully” arrested opposition leaders. Some others have claimed that the democratization process started two years ago is rolling back. Some others went to the extent of saying that the government has continued to “marginalize” certain ethnic groups. This is an attempt to paint a wrong picture of the

current political situation by highlighting piecemeal information, with little effort to delve into what really caused the current incident.²³

In this government update of the situation and context, the government hinted that it may be caused by two actors who are not interested in the political reforms introduced after 2018. One is related to the “unabated attempt made by aggrieved forces to perpetuate political tensions”. The second was connected to those groups who are interested in having “increasing polarization and the negative role of the media in creating ethnic tensions”. From this government speculation of the causes of the incident, it is understandable that the first cause was related to the TPLF which was aggrieved with the political reforms ensued after 2018 that put all the blames and misdeeds of the last 27 years to it. The second cause was related to OMN and other private media owners who promoted and propagated polarization and ethnic tensions in the country. Although the government widely opened the political and the media space for democracy to flourish, the government communique says:

Some opposition parties and political figures began to misuse it. Some others began to throw offensive slurs against members of other ethnic groups. Some others engaged in defamation and finger-pointing without reference to established facts. Some media reporting could now draw a clear line between opinion and facts and engaged in media practices that put a certain ethnic or religious group under a negative light. Still, others also began to employ a certain media framing to put blame on the government. They accused the government of “destroying the federal system, bringing back the old centralist government system and threatening to roll back the hard-won political gains.” These accusations were, however, hurled at the government without adequate facts and often based on invalid arguments. The government has patiently refrained from taking corrective action with the hope that they would correct themselves and get back to the right track in due time. The government believed that it must exercise some patience in order not to discourage the nascent exercise of freedom of expression the nation has been yearning for. Unfortunately, this did not happen.²⁴

On the same day of the violence, Jawar Mohammed and the opposition Oromo Federalist Congress Party leader Bekele Gerba were arrested by the Ethiopian Federal Police. Two senior TPLF members were also arrested in Addis Ababa. The chairman of Balderas opposition party Eskindir Nega and its public relation officer Sintayehu Chekol were arrested on the same day. The Balderas

²³ Office of the Prime Minister of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (July 2020: 2) Context and Updates on Current Issues in Ethiopia. Available online at: <https://www.ethioembassy.org.uk/context-and-updates-on-current-issues-in-ethiopia/>

²⁴ Office of the Prime Minister of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (2020) Context and Updates on Current Issues in Ethiopia. Available online at: <https://www.ethioembassy.org.uk/context-and-updates-on-current-issues-in-ethiopia/>

Party is known for its critic of PM Abiy Ahmed and the Oromo nationalist forces for fomenting hatred against the Amhara ethnic group.

To control the violence, the government deployed the National Defence Force in Addis Ababa and its surroundings. One of the immediate response of the government to arrest the chaos, in addition to using state security apparatus, was shutting down the internet and social media services throughout the country.²⁵ The aim was to stop further circulation of disinformation and hate speech that will further stir up ethnic tensions.

Government Responses to Protect Disinformation and Hate Speech

Internet Blackout

In this digital age, citizens are no more consumers of political propaganda by state media and government but become producers and disseminators of their perspectives (Tsandzana, 2018: 256). Social media activism using Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Telegram, TikTok etc. is a common practice in today's world. Youth, for obvious reason of being active in technology and the desire to know about new things, is very much active in the production, dissemination, and consumption of information through social media. The social networking sites enabled the youth to connect with friends, protest movement leaders, and other groups both at home and abroad. It also enabled them to post and disseminate the photos and videos of their interest.

Although social media platforms provide opportunities for different useful purposes, it also resulted in polarizing relations and stirring conflicts. The innovation of social media platforms created conducive environment for the quick dissemination of disinformation and hate speech across the globe. Different countries responded differently for this multifaceted problems. Some authoritarian regimes in Africa, for example, used to shutdown internet services and social media networks altogether as they are in a position to do so. The Ethiopian government, for instance, is in full control of the Ethiopian Telecommunication Corporation which is the sole provider of internet service in the country. In this regard, it is easy for the government to undertake internet blackout to control violence caused by the dissemination of disinformation or for any other purpose which the government deemed necessary. Other countries also legislate laws that govern

²⁵ For more information on this issue, refer BBC services online at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p08kt9z0>

disinformation and hate speech. The Ethiopian government used both methods of internet blackout and legislating a law to prevent disinformation and hate speech.

On the 30th of June 2020, following the death of Hachalu Hundessa and its violent aftermath, the government blocked all the internet accesses throughout the country. Shutting internet and social media platforms is the often used strategy of the government of Ethiopia. Since 2018, the Ethiopian government shutdown internet service and social media outlets several times. As of the writing of this paper, social media networks are blocked following the split within the Ethiopian Orthodox Church starting from January 2023.

Hate Speech and Disinformation Protection Law

An ever-increasing access to internet and social media in Ethiopia facilitated the spread of hate speech that stirred up communal and religious tensions and conflicts in the country. The challenges of the spread of hate speeches and its attendant consequences of exacerbating ethnic conflicts, social and political instability, spurring violence are already visible in the country as discussed above. Hate speech and disinformation are very common targeting individuals, groups, religious institutions, societal norms etc. As a result, it necessitated for the government to protect hate speech and disinformation by law. It was clear that protecting disinformation and hate speech is impossible by restricting access to internet or complete shutdown. Hence, the government introduced hate speech and disinformation prevention and suppression proclamation (Proclamation No. 1185/2020) in March 2020. The law stresses the need for preventing and suppressing the deliberate dissemination of hate speech and disinformation as it poses an imminent threat to social harmony, political stability, national unity, human dignity, diversity and equality.²⁶ However, the effectiveness of the law in achieving its objectives is questionable as the government may abuse its implementation targeting freedom of expression criticizing the government.

The law is being criticized by different scholars and international organizations for being too broad and vague in its definition of hate speech and disinformation and also contradicts the constitutional rights of citizens that ensures freedom of thought, opinion and expression without any limitation.²⁷

²⁶ Preamble of of Hate Speech and Disinformation Prevention and Suppression Proclamation No. 1185/2020.

²⁷ The 1995 FDRE Constitution under Article 29 provides for the Right of thought, opinion and expression. It says, everyone has the right to hold opinion without interference. This right shall include freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any media of his choice. It also puts some limitation when it says that “These rights can be limited only

As per the Proclamation, the term speech is to mean the act of disseminating of information verbally, textually, graphically or by other means. Hate speech is broadly defined as speech that deliberately promotes hatred, discrimination or attack against a person or a discernable group of identity, based on ethnicity, religion, race, gender or disability. Disinformation is also broadly defined as speech that is false, is disseminated by a person who knew or should reasonably have known the falsity of the information and is highly likely to cause a public disturbance, riot, violence or conflict.²⁸ This definition of disinformation resembles the definition provided above in the literature review part. It consists of different elements: the information is false; is deliberate as the person disseminating it knew or should have known; and causes public harm in the form of public disturbance, riot, violence or conflict.

The objective of the law is to stop individuals from engaging in disseminating false information that incite violence in the name of freedom of expression. Its other purpose is to promote tolerance and mutual respect by suppressing the dissemination of hate speech and disinformation.²⁹ There are few exemptions from this prohibition. Speeches related to academic study or scientific inquiry, a news report, analysis or political critique, artistic creativity and religious teachings are exempted from prohibition.³⁰ Criminal liability is attached on the violators of this law that ranges from 50,000 ETB (roughly \$1000) fine to a maximum of five-years imprisonment. The severity of the punishment varies depending on the consequences of the disinformation and hate speech and the number of followers of the disseminator of the false information that cause or may not cause public harm.³¹ Institutions and service providers are also duty bound to respect the law. Social media service providers, for example, are obliged to suppress and prevent the dissemination of hate speech and disinformation through their platform. If disinformation or hate speech is disseminated through their platform, they should act to remove the message within 24 hours.³²

Hate speech and disinformation already became a serious problem in Ethiopia. Disinformation is widely circulating in the country that already caused ethnic and religious polarization and conflicts. It created mistrust between the government and the people. With the proliferation of digital

through laws which are guided by the principle that freedom of expression and information cannot be limited on account of the content or effect of the point of view expressed.”

²⁸ Article 2(2-3) of Hate Speech and Disinformation Prevention and Suppression Proclamation No. 1185/2020.

²⁹ Article 3(1-3).

³⁰ Article 6(1a-d).

³¹ Article 7(1-6)

³² Article 8(1-3).

technology, the challenge of disinformation and hate speech is becoming a major feature of Ethiopia's political landscape. There was several disinformation circulations and rumors in post-2018 Ethiopia about the health status of PM Abiy Ahmed and even about his death. Whenever the PM disappears from the media just for a week or so during the first 1 or 2 years of rule, disinformation was widely circulating to the extent that he sometimes obliged to respond for this. In the extreme cases, disinformation and hate speech led to ethnic and religious conflicts as the cases are discussed above in Motta town between Muslims and Christians and the violence caused after the killing of Hachalu Hundessa targeting ethnic Amharas and Orthodox Christians.

Conclusion

Disinformation and hate speech has already resulted in devastation in terms of human and material costs in Ethiopia. The use of social media and internet services to disseminate hatred and violent messages against individuals or groups made it very difficult to suppress and control by relevant authorities in the country. The fact that many of the contents to be produced and manipulated are undertaken outside the jurisdiction of Ethiopia complicated the problem even to control its dissemination through the application of domestic laws.

Inter-ethnic conflict has been fomented in the country especially after the 2015 public protest and the last five years in particular where the country remained the first in the world in terms of internally displaced people. Disinformation and hate speech by social media users are the major factors in igniting ethnic conflicts. The killings of a popular Afan Oromo singer Hachalu Hundessa in June 2020 and the dissemination of false information that implicated Amhara ethnic group for his death, for instance, resulted in killings of more than 200 people in parts of Oromia mainly ethnic Amhara and Orthodox Christians. The burning of St. George Church in Motta town of Amhara national regional state in 2019 due to a fire erupted from within but falsely implicated with the acts of Muslims disseminated via social media and mobile messaging, caused religious disturbances in the town and its surroundings. Four mosques were destroyed by a group of Christians and scores of Muslims killed in the violence.

The government of Ethiopia often used force to stop the violence and try to suppress internet access and social media services. It is almost a routine task of the government to shutdown internet services whenever violence occurs in the country. However, this measure doesn't stop the

dissemination of disinformation and hate speech as many individuals use VPN and other Apps to bypass the social media blackout.

The law which was introduced in 2020 directed against hate speech and disinformation was either not in full force to control disinformation or (mis)used by the government. As per the law, disseminating hate speech and disinformation is prohibited and doing it is punishable by law. However, its implementation to control disinformation and hate speech is problematic as the social media contents are mostly produced and manipulated outside of the country. For another, the government is abusing it to suppress political critics and freedom of expression.

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