

Research Article

Unemployment, protest, conflict and Elites in Oromia, Ethiopia

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Abstract

The article discusses how the role of the elites in Oromia region played a paramount role in the protests and conflicts which began in 2015 by using the Resource Mobilization theory, which gives much weight on the role of the elite in mobilizing people. But, it first sheds some light on other theories like the Relative Deprivation theory which argues that people protest or enter into conflict because of the discrepancy between their expectations and the actual reality.

Key Words: - unemployment, conflict, elite

1. Introduction

High youth unemployment is an area of serious concern for countries alike, because the presence of an idle young population might be highly related to social instability and political unrest (International Labour Organization, 2013). This idea is supported by Collier, Gurr and the likes and by their theories; they believe unemployment will have a significant role in making the unemployed (especially the youth) to engage in different kinds of conflicts. Meaning they put the emphasis on the phenomenon, for Gurr – it is the relative deprivation and for Collier and Hoffer – the economic aspect of joining the protests which are pivotal in making people join protests.

Another theory which is famous for dealing with such kind of issues is the ‘Resource Mobilization Theory’; this theory was founded in the time of academic seminal debate where scholars like McCarthy and Zald (1977) immensely criticized deprivation theory and other classical theories. The theory mainly argues that derivations and grievances are not the only factors leading people to revolt, rather additional political actors are needed who are responsible in framing the deprivations and grievances in a way presentable to the people to make them enter in to some kind of protest.

Therefore, in the following sections we will use the above approaches by delving into the 2015 Oromia protests and the subsequent political happenings in the country and the region.

2. Theories

There are different theories discussing about the main causes of protests and conflicts, but for the purpose of this article we will be focusing on the following.

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The first is Relative deprivation theory, this theory was developed by Ted Gurr in 1970 and it states that relative deprivation is a discrepancy or gap between what people feel are entitled and what they actually get makes them to be frustrated and will lead them to discontents which is a motivating factor for aggression. He argues that the frustrating gap between what people imagine and what they actually have on their hands leads to discontents. According to Hoselitz and Willner cited in Gurr (1970), *unrealized aspirations produce feelings of disappointment, but unrealized expectations result in feelings of deprivation. Disappointment is generally tolerable; deprivation is often intolerable. The deprived individual feels impelled to remedy, by whatever means are available, the material and psychic frustrations produced in him. Whereas disappointment may breed the seeds of incipient revolution, deprivation serves as a catalyst for revolutionary action.* He also indicated other scholars like Zollschan G. (1964) and Coser L. (1967) who believe that relative deprivation will lead to revolution.

In the same vein, Collier argued that unemployment will create a fertile ground for the unemployed to enter into protests and conflicts. He said, unemployment is a grievance which clearly reduces the opportunity cost of people in joining protests and conflicts (Collier, 2000). He also said, if there are plentiful job opportunities, then it would be hard to find people willing to engage in conflicts and protests.

Another theory that will be employed in this article is resource mobilization theory. According to McCarthy and Zald (1977), for a protest to materialize, ‘movement entrepreneurs’ are needed, they redefine the grievances that are on the ground to mobilize the people who are enduring them to achieve their goals.

3. Unemployment and Conflicts in Oromia

Despite its promising economic growth in the last two decades the unemployment rate in the country is still high especially among the youth group of the population. According to Mesfin (2021), the growing economy of the country failed to create enough job opportunities for the vast youth group. He said, creating employment opportunities for the youth is still a daunting task for the country; roughly speaking 26 youths out of 100 are unemployed in Ethiopia. In the same vein, according to the Central Statistics Agency of Ethiopia (2020), the unemployment rate in urban areas in the country is 18.7 percent, and when it comes to the unemployment among the youth portion of the society is close to 26 percent in 2020.

If we go back to 2015, where the youth in the country began protesting the then government; for instance in Oromia, according to Tatek (2021), which is the biggest region and also housing the biggest nation of the country seen one of the largest and frequent protests and instabilities of the country. The main triggering reason for these series of protests and instabilities was the proposed Addis Ababa Integrated Master Plan. According to the International Peace Institute (IPI) (2017), Oromia region was engulfed by a wave of protests and instabilities all mainly because of the governments’ intention to expand the capital Addis Ababa in to the neighbouring Oromia. The plan was met by stiff resistance mainly by the educated youth. Tatek, (2021), reaffirmed that the youth were indeed against the plan mainly because of their understanding about the extensive land grab that the government planned at the time.

Tatek (2021), in his study highlighted that there were other causes for the protests such as corruption, inequality and the lack of political freedom. But, he stressed that land right was the main push factor for the political turmoil in the region. The government was giving away and

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leasing peasant land for domestic and foreign investments, dispossessing peasants land which created economic repercussions as majority of the Ethiopian and the regional populace depends on these lands. According to TheGlobalEconomy.com (2021), which provides reliable economic data, the average percentage of employment rendered by the agricultural sector in Ethiopia from 1991-2019 is 74.47% which is significant compared to 23.40% of the global average. According to the Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization (UNPO) (2016), the land grab policy of the government evicted more than 150,000 peasants at that time.

In addition, UNPO (2016) reiterated that the marginalization (economic) of the large youth in the region was also another main factor unfolding the protests and riots in the political landscape of the country. This idea is also supported by (Merera, 2016); he said people (especially the youth) felt the extensive marginalization in the country. Youth were side-lined from the fruits of the economic growth the country was experiencing at that time, they were unemployed and if employed were paid below par.

The youth in the region known as 'Qeerroo' meaning 'unmarried youth' or 'young person' began a series of protests, strikes and riots pressuring the then Tigrayan People Liberation Front (TPLF) led government (Mosisa, 2021). The government was forced to introduce a series of state of emergency measures to contain and deal with the protests, but the protests soon began to gain traction and diffuse to other regions of the country. Which brings the idea of Hoselitz and Willner cited in Gurr (1970), where they argued that deprivation will lead to revolutionary actions. In the same vein, Qeerroos in the region marched in around 200 towns, villages and cities across the region on the same day.

According to Tatek (2021), the protests were led by predominantly unemployed Qeerroos. According to him, in 2015 the unemployment rate among the educated youth (university graduates) in the country was very high, it was estimated to be around 50%. The Economist (2016), also argued that the expectation of the graduates and the actual reality were not the same, meaning there was a discrepancy which was a push factor for revolution as Gurr (1970) argued, and indeed the youth in Oromia revolted.

Then the country entered in to unprecedented protests and violence throughout the country forcing the then government to introduce a series of measures, but its intention to crush the dissents didn't materialize and finally the TPLF led government was forced to step down appointing a new Prime Minister.

Then a new political dawn shed its light on the Ethiopian political landscape. The new government led by the new PM Abiy Ahmed took a series of promising political moves; at that time for the first time in many years the country was not jailing a journalist based on political intentions, exiled political parties hitherto described as terrorists were given a pardon and were allowed to enter the country, and prominent politicians were also released from notorious prisons (Dahir, 2018). Other measures such as introducing legal and administrative reforms, achieving gender parity in his cabinet, and acknowledging and apologizing for the misdeeds by the government were the bold moves that the PM pulled out of his sleeves (Bekele, 2020). Moreover, in terms of diplomatic relations, he made peace between Eritrea and tried to broker peace between the governments of the infamous Horn of Africa region.

These and other measures skyrocketed the expectation of the general public and the broad young population, who played the major role in bringing the so called 'change'. But, soon expectations

met reality. According to Ademo (2019), the bloated expectation especially from the youth and the inability of the government to create job opportunity for the vast youth and the stagnant economy were frustrating, which is in support of Gurrs' notion of the discrepancy between expectations and reality leading people to enter in to conflicts.

Soon, the conflicts and instabilities throughout the country resumed, as a result the country was ranked the first in hosting the largest number of IDPs. There are many reasons forwarded as the causes for the relapse of conflict; for instance Semir (2019), forwarded a number of major causes for the various conflicts happened in the country, such as weak state and institutions to deal with the upheavals, contending nationalisms, and economic malaise. According to him one of the economic malaise was unemployment and lack of enough job creation for the soaring demand among other things. Semir argued, especially since 2015 the government has been policing the country to deal with the various protests erupting here and there, taking its precious time needed to deal with this economic challenge.

From the above discussions, one will conclude that the high unemployment (especially among the youth) had a huge role to the protests and instabilities starting from 2015, i.e. supporting the notion of relative deprivation or unemployment are the main factors leading people to protest and enter in to conflicts. In fact, unemployment had a strong share in the violence and protests unfolded in the country since. But, as tried to mention earlier, it is not the only/main factor to be held responsible for the unfolded happenings, but the involvement of the elite is. In the subsequent sections of the article, we will see how the elite of the country manipulated the grievances (including unemployment) of the people for political aims by employing the Resource Mobilization theory.

5. Role of the political elites; Mobilizing the Youth

As discussed earlier, one of the bold moves that PM Abiy took right after sworn in to office was widening the narrow political space of the country, as he released thousands of political prisoners and pardoned political parties and individuals in exile, which can be a turning point in terms of the stability of the country. OLF, one of the many parties given governmental pardon, when entering the country there was a welcoming ceremony for its leaders by its supporters and members, soon things began to go sideways, as a result around 23 people lost their lives because of the ethnic-motivated attacks on that day (Maasho, 2018).

If we once again go back to 2015 where it all began, as discussed in the above section of this article, there were many factors making people (youth) take the streets, but now we will look in to the role of the elite in articulating the questions, needs and strategies of the protests and conflicts up to now by relating it with resource mobilization theory.

The role of the elite at that specific time of the political history of the country was paramount. The elite was mobilizing the youth, it was giving them agenda and devising next strategies. For instance, Jawar Mohammed played unparalleled role in mobilizing the Qeerroos in the region to achieve a set of political goals (Ndiaye et al 2020). According to Bekele (2020), activists including Jawar were equipping the jobless Qeerroo with political agenda; how the state has been unfair towards the Oromo people, how the government was expropriating farm lands of the people, when and how to protest, and who to target. This can be seen from his famous speech 'I am Oromo first' which according to Awol Allo was a 'Political Tsunami'. His famous speech grew to a movement and culminated with the opening of a television station. According to Jost, et. Al (2018), social

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media provides a suitable condition for movement organizers as they easily transmit information because they reach their followers in a matter of few seconds/minutes. Social media was used as a main instrument to facilitate the protests. Prominent activists were reaching their followers using these platforms, because the mainstream media is tightly controlled by the state. At the height of these protests, the country was forced to censor these social media platforms in various instances, one of them was when influential Oromo activists including Jawar leaked and posted pictures of the national entrance exam forcing the national exam to reschedule and change the exams (Al Jazeera, 2016).

If we also try to see the unemployment rate of the country on 2015 where the protests began, compared to prior fiscal years, the unemployment rate even though it was high, it was slightly decreasing compared to previous years. According to the World Bank (2021), in 2014 the rate was 2.22%, 2.2% in 2015, 2.17% in 2016, 2.12% in 2017 and 2.07% in 2018. The following figure will give insight on how unemployment in the country has been decreasing amidst the protests.

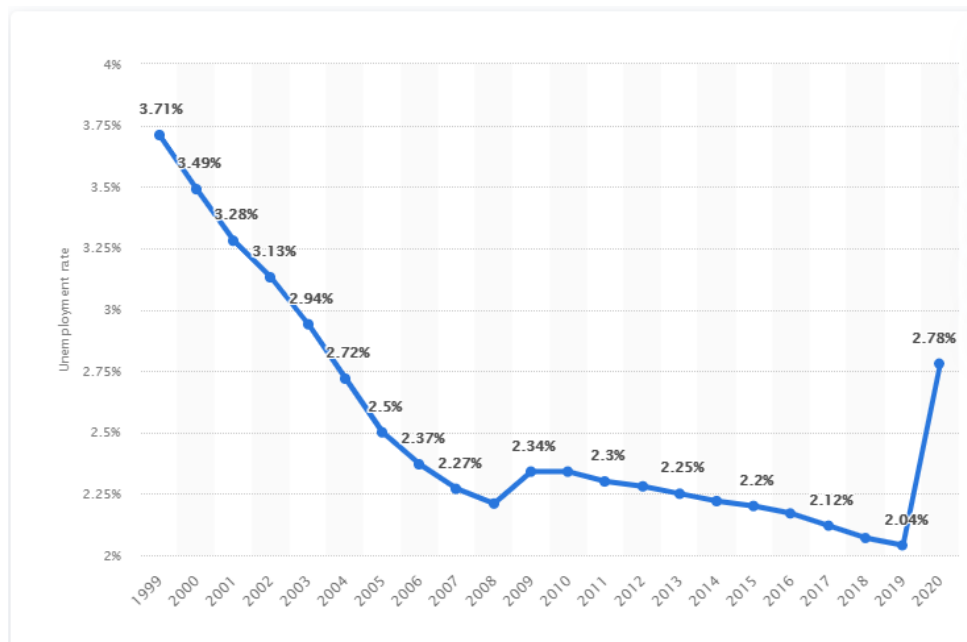


Figure 5.1; Unemployment in Ethiopia

Source Statista

Earlier, we have seen how the likes of Gurr (1970) claim that unemployment and relative deprivation will trigger protests and conflicts, but the above figure shows us a slightly different story. For example, there are various years having larger unemployment rate, but the widespread protests and conflicts didn't manage to happen, hence, strengthening our main idea which is based on relative deprivation theory, 'not only unemployment and grievances will lead people to protests and conflicts, but there should be the involvement of the elite in reframing those deprivations and leading the deprived in a certain ways to achieve specific goals.

Therefore, the unemployment and the grievances in the region were used by the politicians/activists who can be termed as elites. The elites by employing various techniques and strategies to organize the youth in the region undertook specific actions in pursuit of certain objectives.

The strategies and actions employed became successful in pressurizing the then government and forced it to introduce radical changes and reforms that swept the country. As discussed earlier, after the coming to power of Abiy, the country entered in to some kind of euphoria where the majority of the people had great expectations. After a brief time of tranquillity the country once again entered in to widespread conflicts, protests and instabilities.

Especially in the Oromia region became hub of the relapsed conflicts. According to Dawit (2019), protests erupted in huge cities and towns across the region against the planned distribution of condominiums in the outskirts of Addis Ababa. According to him, people took the streets in opposition of the proposed decision of the Addis Ababa administration. The protests gained the blessings and approval of the prominent leaders like Jawar Mohammed i.e. he was personally there in the middle of it. Another incident that shows how the protests and conflicts in the region were orchestrated by the elites was when Jawar Mohammed claimed that the security detail that the government provided him upon his return to the country was being removed in the middle of the night in his repetitive Facebook posts. Because of his posts a huge crowd of people entered in to Addis Ababa and in the next day the protests spread in to other locations in the region and soon the protests took violent form, resulting in death of civilians (Tikisa, 2019). To strengthen the above idea, (Ndiyaye, et al 2020), the growing divide between Jawar and the PM (ruling party) has manifested itself by the alleged effort of the government to remove the security detail of the activist. In the prior months to the incident, he has been ardent critic of the PM and his party's' decisions. Not only he did criticized the government, but also joined the Oromo Federalist Congress (OFC) party, giving the party a huge support especially the youth (his supporters). This has also been seen in the various meetings that the party held in different locations where a huge number of young people were mobilized and had participated.

After some time, a famous Oromo artist known as Hachalu Hundessa was found killed in Addis Ababa. The incident resulted in one of the biggest series of conflicts and attacks in the region since Abiy came to power, as a result many people lost their precious lives. Soon, the government arrested Jawar and co, who are prominent individuals, they were arrested for instigating ethnic conflicts.

According to Mistr (2021), who wrote an interesting piece on the main reasons why the Qeerroo is weak and fragmented, the article lists some main reasons why like egocentric rivalry to own Qeerroo, tension between Jawar and OLF, the loss of faith and the like. From this piece one can clearly see as to how the once popular and strong movement of the Oromo youth has lost its strength and power.

After the arrest of its prominent leaders, various Oromo activists repetitively called for protests throughout the region, also known as 'Yellow Movement' because of the colour of the jumpsuits the prisoners wear in the prisons (Oromo Protests, 2021). But, didn't materialize as expected. Which shows how the arrested political elites were the ones behind those popular protests in the region shaking the very foundation of the then government.

Conclusion

One of the main theories of protests and conflicts argue that protests or conflicts erupt because of economic phenomenon such as unemployment and the other theory developed by Gurr argues that relative deprivation will lead people to revolt.

But, for the purpose of this article we have used the Resource mobilization theory, which argues that the role of the elite is the main in dealing with protests and conflicts. From the protests and conflicts on Oromia region we have seen that the role of the elite is paramount with regards to directing, organizing and mobilizing the protestors (youth).

Hence, the unemployment and the discrepancy between the expectation of people and the actual realities on the ground are factors creating frustration among the people. But, for the people to revolt or protest, the role of the elite is pivotal. This is what we have seen from the above discussion. People were already frustrated because of the political, social and economic conditions of the country but were not able to express their discontents, at least in the way they did in 2015. But, once they got the necessary leadership and strategy from the elites, they took the government by surprise and the youth became a force to reckon with.

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