CHAPTER 21

Youth movements and political protest

Opportunities and limitations of Ethiopia's *Qeerroo* movement in affecting transformative change

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INTRODUCTION

Young people in Ethiopia have been central to political protest and mobilisation for change, in the past and more recently. The election of a reformist Prime Minister, Abiy Ahmed, in 2018 is broadly recognised as connected to widespread anti-regime protests by the Oromo youth movement popularly known as *Qeerroo*, which used social media to mobilise support and advocate for political and economic reform (Abebe, 2022; Dias and Yetena, 2022). However, although those protests involved both peaceful and violent methods, the years since Abiy's coming to power have seen a period of escalating ethnic violence in different parts of the country. Clashes over contested land and resources at the borders between Somali and Oromo regions

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have resulted in mass displacement, and, after years of hostilities, 2020 saw the start of two years of intense armed conflict between the Ethiopian government and the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), with widespread involvement of young people in regional and federal forces as well as militarised groups of youth.

The role of the *Qeerroo* movement in Ethiopia's recent political transformation has been equated with the youth protests against unemployment and government corruption that heralded the Arab Spring in the early 2010s, with analysts emphasising the connections between youth marginalisation and precarity and their political mobilisation (LeFort, 2016; Abebe, 2020). However, this framing risks obscuring the unevenness and diversity of participation opportunities over time, and how these opportunities are linked to the specificities of politics in Ethiopia. As in most studies of youth protest, there has been little attention to how experiences of participation are mediated by gender as well as ethnicity and education. Under Abiy's premiership, Ethiopia has also moved from a period of upheaval and security concerns towards a peace process, which has implications for how youth movements interact with institutional politics and what spaces exist for young people to exercise voice and agency. To present a nuanced view of the role of youth movements, this case study draws on interviews and participatory research at multiple points in time with adolescents and young people from Oromo region, to exploring their voice, agency and political participation between 2018 and 2022.

BACKGROUND

The Arab Spring and the subsequent wave of youth movements across the Global South saw young people widely credited with bringing about regime change and sparked a renewed interest in the role of youth in securing democratic futures. Yet in the years since, adolescents and young people have continued to be excluded from political processes, and initial successes in instigating regime and policy change have largely failed to effect the anticipated structural economic, social or political transformations (Maganga, 2020; Belschner, 2021; Mansouri, 2022). However, whereas in the Middle East and North Africa region, informal youth movements represented a break with institutional political participation, in Ethiopia, the youth movements that have instigated change have a long history of being linked with formal political participation. The Ethiopian Youth Movement (established in the 1950s) became a key platform for mobilisation, becoming a student movement that was at the forefront of overthrowing the imperial regime in 1974. Young people were also on the front line in the civil war against the

Derg regime, which was replaced by the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) in 1991 (Tareke, 2009; Zewde, 2014).

Young people's political activism in Ethiopia must also be understood in the context of the country's constitutional order. Ethnic identity has historically been the primary means by which politics is organised in Ethiopia and is also an important organising principle for youth movements (Keller, 2014; Mekonnen, 2019). The weakening of the TPLF-led federal government from 2012 onwards contributed to the political conditions that gave rise to the *Qeerroo*, whose members (mostly well educated) wanted transformative change and greater Oromo political representation (Forsen and Tronvoll, 2021). Since 2014, the *Qeerroo* has become increasingly organised, using social media and grassroots mobilisation to coordinate mass protests around the country. From 2016 to early 2018, the *Qeerroo* movement was embraced by leaders and government cadres in the Oromia regional government led by Lemma Megersa, ex-president of the Oromia region. The movement's online activities were led by the famous Oromo activist, Jawar Mohammed (based in the United States and Europe) who was responsible for mobilising a very active diaspora movement for change. This coordinated *Qeerroo* mobilisation has been partly credited with regime change and the coming to power of Abiy Ahmed in 2018 (Abebe, 2020; Forsen and Tronvoll, 2021).

Nevertheless, under Abiy Ahmed's premiership, youth movements have struggled to penetrate formal political structures in ways that challenge the status quo. Although never a unified movement as such, as time has passed, fractures have begun to emerge within the *Qeerroo*. Some members have been co-opted into government structures through efforts to restore law and order and services (Østebø and Tronvoll, 2020). However, others are increasingly critical of Abiy Ahmed and the government, not just for failing to deliver transformative change but also for the repression and imprisonment of *Qeerroo* leaders, particularly following protests triggered by the assassination of the famous Oromo artist Hachalu Hundessa in 2020. These evolving dynamics underscore the need for a more nuanced analysis of the role of youth mobilisation in relation to institutional politics, and particularly the extent to which informal movements can avoid co-optation of spaces for grassroots youth participation.

Although the socioeconomic background of young people involved in youth movements has been widely discussed in the extant literature, there has been little attention to gender. Discriminatory gender norms have historically excluded women from participating in civic and political activities in Ethiopia (Kassa and Sarikakis, 2019; Semela et al., 2019; Dessie and Demissie, 2022). However, women played an important role in the struggle against the Derg regime and, during the 2017–2018 protests in the Oromia region,

activists began to use the feminine term '*Qarree*' both to recognise young women's role and make the movement more gender-inclusive (Tola, 2019; Forsen and Tronvoll, 2021). Despite this, relatively little is known about the role of young women involved in mobilising for change in Ethiopia (Geset and Moges, 2021).

METHODS

This chapter draws on qualitative research nested within the Gender and Adolescence: Global Evidence (GAGE) longitudinal study undertaken in 2017, 2018, 2019 and 2022. Researchers conducted individual and group interviews with a purposefully selected sample of adolescent girls and boys, their caregivers, and key informants living in Fedis district of East Hararghe zone, a highly marginalised area of the Oromia regional state of Ethiopia (see Table 21.1 for an overview of key socioeconomic characteristics, and Table 21.2 for details of the sample). The interviews were carried out in Afaan Oromo and transcribed and translated into English then coded using a detailed thematic codebook using the qualitative software MAXQDA.

FINDINGS

Evolution of the Qeerroo as a space for young people to participate in politics

In 2017/2018, the emerging *Qeerroo* movement was focused on defending Oromo villages from attack during the Oromo-Somali regional conflict. The fighting was centred around the GAGE research site of East Hararghe zone. Even parents supported their adolescent sons' participation in the conflict, given the peril their communities were facing:

> Our parents supported us to fight with the Qeerroo… They were convinced that it's better for one to die than the whole community perishes. If I died, then others like my little brothers and sisters could survive… I was relatively older and bigger… They had actually prohibited me [from fighting] first, because mothers have a caring heart for their child and cannot bear the loss. But I had gone, hidden from her… I wanted to defend the community.
>
> (18-year-old adolescent boy aged 16 during the conflict, midline)

The *Qeerroo* also provided a space for older adolescents to educate themselves (sometimes through regular and structured sessions) about local,

TABLE 21.1

Overview of key socioeconomic development indicators: Oromia in comparative perspective

	Oromia	Amhara	National
People living below the national poverty line (World Bank, 2020)	24%	26%	24%
People living below the food poverty line (UNICEF, n.d.a, n.d.b)	21%	31%	25%
Primary completion rate (male/female) (Ministry of Education, 2022)	81%/ 71%	72%/ 80%	77%/73%
Net secondary enrolment (male/female) (Ministry of Education, 2022)	29%/ 26%	35%/ 46%	33%/33%
Illiteracy among adolescents aged 15–17 (UNICEF, n.d.a, n.d.b)	48%	29%	46%
Marriage by age 18 (of women aged 20–24) (UNICEF, n.d.a, n.d.b)	48%	43%	40%
Person deciding on woman's first marriage was self (of women aged 15–49) (Central Statistical Agency of Ethiopia (CSA) and ICF, 2017)	35%	15%	35%
Current use of modern contraceptive (of all women aged 15–49) (CSA and ICF, 2017)	28%	47%	35%
Has ever used modern contraceptive (married girls aged 17–19, GAGE sample) (Presler-Marshall et al., 2020)	7%	79%	NA
Has begun childbearing (girls aged 15–19) (CSA and ICF, 2017)	17%	8%	13%
Facility delivery (CSA, 2019)	19%	27%	26%
Skilled birth attendant present at delivery (CSA, 2019)	20%	28%	28%
Maternal mortality (per 1,000) (CSA, 2019)	.88	.44	.67
Used a bank account (of women aged 15–49)	8%	21%	15%
Women who have primary decision-making over their own earnings	22%	27%	30%

Note: Amhara is the second most populous region in the country after Oromia, and thus we include it as a point of comparison to underscore the disadvantageous socioeconomic indicators that characterise Oromia.

regional and national issues. Given the high rates of school dropout in rural areas, the importance of this in terms of political mobilisation cannot be underestimated:

TABLE 21.2

Qualitative research sample and timeframe in East Hararghe zone

Timeframe for GAGE data collection and political context	Adolescent girls	Adolescent boys	Parents	Key informants
2017: GAGE baseline data collection coincided with the conflict between Oromo and Somali regions in late 2017/early 2018, which resulted in the forced displacement of hundreds of thousands of people	36	21	48	42
2018: GAGE participatory work	32	32	n/a	n/a
2019: GAGE midline data collection occurred soon after the peaceful reconciliation between the two regions	45	32		7
2022: GAGE follow-up data collection occurred following the coming to power of Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed and a period of optimism about political transformation	34	32	57	7

> We hold sessions and have discussions together in the evenings… We meet every Friday evening, beginning from [when young people are] 15 years old. We set the agenda by discussing together… We discuss how the people who are assigned to defend our territory shall be supported with food. The Qarree assign females who can prepare food and the Qeerroo focus on taking that food to the conflict area.
>
> (Focus group discussion with 17–19-year-old boys)

The *Qeerroo* movement also gave voice to students who had previously been targeted by authorities due to their political views. This was seen by Oromo adolescents, especially those in remote rural areas like East Hararghe, as a major shift in their political participation.

> The unemployment of students is directly related with the political system of the past. Now, there is great revival in the political spectrum and we, the upcoming generation, shouldn't be discouraged by what they tell us. We have to press on with full energy and hope. In the past, Oromo politics was diverted and many of our students were targeted because of their political views. The politics are now in the hand of Oromos… There is change now. The Qeerroo started the struggle.
>
> (17-year-old boy, participatory)

> In the past we used to worry… because people were imprisoned. Now, you are free to do anything you like… Yes, if you [were to] go out and cross your arms like this [crossing her arms; a sign showing dissent with the past government and allegiance to the Qeerroo, which could previously have led to imprisonment], you would be in danger. But now, you are free to show your dissent in any ways you like… Before, many youth were beaten and imprisoned just for opposing the government… So, after the Qeerroo came to the area, everything is in a good condition… It is the contribution of Abiy [Ahmed, Prime Minister], Lemma [Megersa] and Jawar [Mohammed] [well-known Oromo political activists] together with our Qeerroo.
>
> (16-year-old girl, participatory)

It is notable that the young people who took part in ethnic-based protests saw them as having both positive and negative dimensions. While the movement served as a vehicle for young Oromo to express voice and agency on the streets protesting against the EPRDF regime, the rise of Oromo ethnic nationalism was also perceived as provoking a negative reaction from other ethnic groups. Some young people identified this as a key driver of the violent conflict and forced displacement of Oromos and Somalis in late 2017/early 2018.

> Now, we live in freedom… We fought the regime with what we have. The Qeerroos struggled to the death… But… the revolution created fertile ground for other people to attack Oromo people, especially the Somalis. They used the chance as a shield and attacked our people to leave Somali area. They killed our people and evicted them by the thousands.
>
> (Focus group discussion with 17–19-year-old boys, participatory)

Evolving role of Qeerroo post-conflict

Once peace had been brokered in the Oromo-Somali conflict, there was a significant shift in the role of the *Qeerroo* and space for adolescents and youth to participate. A key theme that came up during the GAGE midline research in late 2019 and early 2020 was the role of the *Qeerroo* in encouraging young people's development:

> There is support both among the youth and the parents for the Qeerroo! The people do not denounce what the Qeerroo promote… This year, for example, they have influenced youngsters to stop shegoye [an adolescent-only all-night cultural dance that has been associated with child marriage and school attrition]. Qeerroo also have influence by collaborating with religious leaders… Religious leaders support abandoning shegoye,

> because of Sharia law. They say that youngsters who participate in the dance are defying Sharia and should refrain from the behaviour.
>
> (18-year-old boy, midline)

In some communities, the *Qeerroo* also played an important role in mobilising support for people displaced by the conflict who have been living in chronically under-resourced host communities:

> Government arranged for displaced people to get free medications… It was the Qeerroo who convinced the government to deliver this… When poor people become sick and do not have money for transportation and medication, the Qeerroo raise money from the community. When a person is sick and needs emergency treatment and when an ambulance does not come, the Qeerroo raise money from the community and take that person to a health facility immediately…
>
> (17-year-old girl, midline)

However, interviews with adolescents showed that while the *Qeerroo* can be very influential and play a pivotal role in reshaping community norms and practices, the modality has been top-down rather than democratic and participatory. This may have substantial implications for modes of political participation for young people in the coming years, especially as discontent between the movement and the reformist government groups over time.

> Qeerroo is widely acceptable within the community… Qeerroo is more acceptable than religious leaders. Youths accept advice from Qeerroo. For example, giving up shegoye because it reduces productivity – adolescents who participate risk wasting their education and it reduces work time as they need to sleep if they have been dancing the previous night.
>
> (17-year-old boy, midline)

> Qeerroo is so omnipotent! They beat up anybody that rejects their words because they are Qeerroo…. They hold demonstrations. They can shut down businesses when they think that the people should struggle for Oromo's rights by putting aside their personal activities… They made us demonstrate when it was said that Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed sent security forces to the residence of Jawar Mohammed. We were made to come out of schools and demonstrated by crossing our hands as a sign of resistance… Mothers whose husbands have left them will report the case to Qeerroo group and… [they] will make the husband cover the needs of their children. Qeerroo settles such issues and addresses problems.
>
> (12-year-old girl, midline)

The research also found varying levels of *Qeerroo* support for local development and emergency assistance. For example, in some places, internally displaced people reported receiving only limited support and assistance from the *Qeerroo*. Some former *Qeerroo* members were also becoming disillusioned, as there was a crisis of leadership. These issues underscore the challenges of sustaining youth movements beyond the urgency of conflict-affected contexts.

> I used to go to meetings… but now they are disorganised here… There is no chairman. They didn't agree because the neighbourhood is big and the population is big. I am also Qeerroo but I want Qeerroo that works. They don't have a programme and time to discuss… They just waste your time. They will not come if you call for a meeting. You only get few people. In the meantime you miss what you do. Youths don't come on time… Last year they constructed houses and did farming for displaced people. They became disorganised after that… They even used to work on getting children back to school. They are not like that now. Those in the leadership in the past are not active now.
>
> (18-year-old boy, participatory)

Gender dimensions of Qeerroo participation

Interviews with adolescent girls and boys alike underscored that gender discrimination is embedded within the structure of the *Qeerroo* and leaves little space for girls and young women to participate beyond stereotypically female roles, such as food preparation. Even though there is a group for girls and young women (*Qarree*) they do not have an analogous structure or role and are still led by men.

> No, they [Qarree] are not organised and structured as Qeerroo(s). Because she is required to work in the house and help her husband preparing foods and doing other domestic errands.
>
> (18-year-old boy, midline)

> They [the Qeerroo] discuss in the evening. We do not have a place for discussion. They do not call us to discuss either. They do not accept our voices. When we face challenges, we go to them and tell them our problems but otherwise they do not call us.
>
> (17-year-old girl, midline)

The depth of gender discrimination in the *Qeerroo* structure was further illustrated by a girl who explained that she had initially turned down an

offer to head the local *Qarree* group because she was worried that a girl in a leadership role would not be accepted.

> I regret that I turned down the opportunity to lead the Qarree group… I was worried that participants would accept the order of a male but they do not accept my order. When you give an order to them, and if they do not [accept] that, [then] conflict will arise. So I refused… Now, I wish I had taken the post… but I was concerned that if they do not accept my order what could I do?… But now I'm thinking… I want to be their leader… I think they might respect the word of a girl and want to go ahead with her… Some may accept, some of them refuse… The current leader [a male], he would accept the change.
>
> (19-year-old adolescent girl, midline)

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Our findings highlight that youth movements and the opportunities they offer young people to exercise voice and agency in the political sphere are transformed through interactions with formal political processes and institutions. During conflict, a common objective – bringing about regime change – can provide the impetus for collective action and open up spaces for participation for young people that are not regularly afforded. This was the case with the *Qeerroo* movement's mass protests against the then ruling EPRDF regime that had overseen the exclusion and political repression of ethnic Oromo. The relative influence of the *Qeerroo* was enhanced by the key contribution the youth had made in defending their communities during the Oromo-Somali regional conflict in which approximately 700,000 people were forcibly displaced. It is important to highlight that the *Qeerroo* movement illustrates that youth are not always mobilised around issues that are specific to them (such as unemployment or distress migration) but can be mobilised to support causes that do not necessarily prioritise their best interests – that is, the machinations of political elites premised on ethnic nationalism. The interviews with adolescents in this study clearly reflected a discourse centred around a conviction in progress and political transformation based not on the emergence of a fairer political system but rather one linked to ethnic identity and allegiances – i.e. because political power is now held by people of Oromo origin.

The longitudinal dimension of these findings also underscores that these types of youth movements may have a finite political window. During and immediately after the conflict, the *Qeerroo* played a positive role in terms of community development, especially in supporting internally displaced people living in local host communities and in tackling cultural practices (such

as *shegoye*) deemed to threaten young people's educational and economic trajectories. However, in the absence of strong and well-coordinated local leadership and with uneven responses to community (and especially youth) needs, the movement's strength began to wane. This was exacerbated by its focus on ethnic nationalism, which meant that as national-level politics confronted new challenges – especially the conflict in the north between Amhara region and the TPLF starting in late 2020 – the movement struggled to find common cause with youth in other parts of the country.

It is also important to reflect critically on the extent to which youth movements provide opportunities not only for adolescent boys and young men but also for adolescent girls and young women. Our findings indicate that in the case of the *Qeerroo*, powerful discriminatory gender norms meant that girls and young women only joined in much smaller numbers. Moreover, the groups for female participation (*Qarree*) were designed with a supportive rather than protagonist role, whereby young women were expected to support male fighters and defer to their agenda.

In sum, our findings are a reminder that it is important to avoid romanticising youth activism and to consider how such movements relate to wider context-specific and rapidly evolving political dynamics at particular junctures in time. While there are participation opportunities for young people that can support transformative economic and social change, challenges

FIGURE 21.1
Oromo boys in their residence area, Ethiopia.

remain for movements to ensure the sustainability of such opportunities and to mitigate the risk of manipulation and co-optation, and/or diversion into violent counter-politics.

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