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Peasants and Political Contestation in Oromia Region under EPRDF, 1991-2018

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Abstract

The Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) regime (1991–2018) built a peasant-centered strategy to sustain a dominant-party system. Most post-1991 studies of state-society relations focus on ethnic federalism and ethno-nationalism, overlooking peasant political agency. Drawing on 28 interviews and 11 FGDs in rural Dawo Woreda and peri-urban Sululta, this study examines peasants' role in the 2005 national election and the 2014–2018 Oromo protests using a critical political economy framework and social movement theory. Peasants, mobilized by educated youth, opposition parties and the diaspora, used both episodes to resist EPRDF rule that denied them meaningful local governance and land-tenure security. The analysis reveals that the transition from the electoral challenge in 2005 to the protests from 2014–2018 was propelled by a contestation vacuum created by the suppression of formal political space following the landslide elections of 2010 and 2015. For a party that claimed to be the sole representative of the peasants, the Oromo protests were triggered by the displacement of Oromo peasants, ultimately leading to its downfall. Current land policies retain EPRDF-era continuities and risk renewed instability unless local governance and tenure security are democratized.

Keywords: Peasants, neopatrimonial regimes, political contests, elections, social movement, Oromo protests
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Background

Regime changes in 1974 and 1991 fundamentally restructured the Ethiopian state (Merera, 2003). While the Derg declared war on class inequality, the Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), dominated by the Tigrayan People's Liberation Front (TPLF), prioritized ending 'national oppression' and centering peasants in economic policy (Lavers, 2023; Markakis, 2011). The Agricultural Development-Led Industrialization (ADLI) gave centrality to smallholder farmers mainly for political control (Kassahun & Poulton, 2014). In the 2000s, EPRDF acknowledged the failure of ADLI and shifted to a 'developmental state model', focusing on 'model farmers' (Clapham, 2017, p. 94; Lefort, 2015).

This study is grounded in a critical political economy (CPE) approach, which asserts that economic processes are intrinsically shaped by power imbalances. Unlike liberal views of peasants as rational market actors, CPE investigates the power dynamics that animate the "agrarian question": the process by which capital seizes hold of agriculture and renders old forms of production and property untenable. This study examines the central tension in Oromia between the subsistence-oriented logic of most peasant households—who continue to rely on family labor and traditional implements, engaging markets primarily to meet immediate cash needs for taxes, fertilizer, and education—and the state's extractive demands for market integration, surplus extraction, and accumulation by dispossession. This tension drove political contestation under EPRDF.

On the political front, despite federalist pretensions, EPRDF rule remained centralized and authoritarian (Pausewang et al., 2002). By dissociating elites of other groups from peasantry (Markakis, 2011), it sought to create a dominant party system sustained by "overwhelming support of rural voters" (Huntington, 1993, p. 10). After falling out with Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) in 1992, with which EPRDF partnered to establish a transitional government in 1991, Oromo People's Democratic Organization (OPDO) dominated Oromia region but lacked legitimacy since it was seen as the "Oromigna mouthpiece of TPLF" by Oromo nationalists (Aregawi, 2008, p. 333).

Representation creates "a minimum level (considered to be the only realistic one) of self-government" (Mastropaolo, 2011, pp. 2273–2274). Despite promising democracy, EPRDF won the 1992, 1995, and 2000 elections by over 90% in contests widely considered unfree (Aalen, 2002; Merera, 2011). The result was polarization of the political process in Ethiopia (Tronvoll, 2000, p. 16) and emergence of "electoral authoritarianism" (Merera, 2011, p. 667). The 1993

EPRDF document distributed to its cadres, Revolutionary Democratic Goals and the Next Steps states:

> We can attain our objectives and goals only if Revolutionary Democracy becomes the governing outlook in our society, and only by winning the elections successively and holding power without letup…If we lose in the elections even once, we will encounter a great danger (quoted in Vestal, 1999, pp. 72–73).

The regime failed to achieve ideological hegemony. As Kurian (2011, p. 1463) notes, officials' claims to represent the people "unavoidably become an object of contestation by citizens", a tension at the center of state-society relations. This is evident in Oromia as low-key insurgency of OLF and students protests against OPDO rule contested the regimes' hegemonic aspiration (Human Rights Watch, 2005). Yet, wider challenges to EPRDF that involved ordinary citizens emerged later.

Ultimately, it was only in the May 2005 national election that EPRDF faced real and popular political contestation. This was due to the opening of political space by the regime, which underestimated support for opposition parties (Merera, 2011). The main opposition parties were the Coalition for Unity and Democracy (CUD) and the United Ethiopian Democratic Forces (UEDF). When the opposition took almost all seats in the capital, the alarmed EPRDF claimed victory before half of the votes were counted (Merera, 2011). The opposition rejected its claim and, in the election-related violence that followed over a hundred individuals were killed and thousands injured and imprisoned (Merera, 2011, p. 672). Despite, the opposition took 30 percent of parliamentary seats.

After 'winning' the 2005 election, EPRDF narrowed political space and built a neo-patrimonial network from "its circle of trusted people, loyalists, and former comrades in the armed struggle" who were afraid of losing their privileges and jobs (Abbink, 2006, p. 174). EPRDF further 'won' the 2010 and 2015 national elections by landslides, leaving no avenue for political contestations through representative institutions. Armed struggle was seen as one option to dislodge the regime from power, including by some opposition party leaders from the 2005 election. However, they did not match the regime's security apparatus.

This suppression of formal political space after the 2005 election created a contestation vacuum, propelling the shift from electoral challenge to the 2014-2018 Oromo protests, driven by long-standing Oromo marginalization. The immediate cause of the Oromo protest was the 'Addis Ababa-Finfinne Integrated

Development Plan.' Known as the Master Plan, the regime claimed it would provide integrated development of infrastructure between the capital and areas of Oromia in its vicinity. However, protesters saw it as targeting Oromo peasants for eviction and annexation of territory Oromia (Forsén & Tronvoll, 2021, p. 9). Oromo protest began as a resistance to "accumulation by dispossession" (ABD) (Gutema, 2025). This concept describes a political process where the state uses extra-economic force—rather than purely market mechanisms—to help capital overcome barriers to accumulation by releasing assets (like land) into the market at very low or zero cost (Harvey, 2003). The Master Plan was framed as a mechanism for the state to expropriate rural land for real estate and industrial zones, rewarding urban elites while displacing Oromo peasants. In Sululta, the regime's strategy reportedly mirrored the feudal system of Haile Sellasie's times, replacing landlords with investors, and in Dawo fear of "future dispossession" was prevalent (Gutema, 2025).

The Oromo protests constituted a social movement sustained by efforts of "ordinary people to change some aspect of their society by using extra-institutional means" (Goodwin & Jasper 2015, p. 3). Social movement could serve as an alternative to representative institutions in renegotiating the relationship between the state and civil society (Jenkins & Klandermans, 1995, p. 5). Political process theory explains origin of social movement by opportunities afforded by the state, such as lessening repression and alliance of factions within the government with social movement (Goodwin & Jasper, 2015, pp. 6–11; Jenkins, 1995, pp. 21–25). Beyond marginalization of Oromos, the lessening of repression, emergence of an OPDO faction aligning with protesters, and Meles Zenawi's 2012 death fueled the Oromo protests.

The organization of Oromo protests remains obscure. Østebø claims Oromo protests "emerged as a spontaneous grassroots social movement" (quoted in Forsén & Tronvoll, 2021, p. 7). However, among others, OLF claims to have organized Oromo protests (Aga & Burayu cited in Forsén & Tronvoll, 2021). The reality likely lies in the middle of these divergent views. The coordination of protests indicates that protests were organized (Gardner, 2018; Ezekiel, 2019), while participation of the masses at unprecedented scale shows that there was an element of spontaneity.

Universities and student organizations served as mobilizing structure for Oromo youth or Qeerroos who spearheaded the protests (Forsén & Tronvoll, 2021, p. 12). With most peasants having at least one child in these universities, they anchored "an urban-centered protest movement in the rural areas" (Forsén & Tronvoll, 2021, p. 12). This was in part the result of EPRDF's strategy of 'coercive

distribution' that tried to create an environment in which citizens depend on it through the mass distribution of resources (Albertus cited in Lavers, 2023). Despite significant economic growth, the regime was unable to deliver employment opportunities for the youth, whose frustration was mostly directed at the government that "had so visibly taken responsibility for the distribution of land, jobs and most other services" (Lavers, 2023, p. 273).

The wider society, including peasants, supported and participated in the protests, which entailed significant risk. Framing theory focuses on the way organizers frame issues "in a way that resonates with or makes sense to potential recruits and the broader public", including through appeal to collective identity (Goodwin & Jasper, 2015, p. 6; Shigetomi, 2009). In terms of framing the Oromo protests, Jawar Mohammed, a savvy social media user and the owner of private satellite TV, Oromia Media Network (OMN) played a crucial role (Ezekiel, 2019). He and his team were responsible for creating slogans, catchphrases, or demands that resonated with the concerns of most Oromos, deploying social media activism to that end. Oromo protest organizers also effectively appealed to Oromo nationalism.

This study explores the role and view of peasants in 2005 national election and the 'Oromo protests' of 2014-2018. Studies of political contestations under EPRDF mostly focus on ethno-national forces (Merera, 2003; Leenco, 1999). This study advances beyond existing scholarship on ethno-nationalism by specifically exploring the "class content" of the contestation at the local level, through case studies of Dawo *Woreda*[2] and Sululta town, connecting local grievances over governance and land tenure to national political ruptures. The main research questions are: How did Oromo peasants view elections under EPRDF in general and the 2005 election in particular? What were the reasons behind peasants' support for opposition political parties or EPRDF in that election? How was 'Oromo protests' viewed and engaged by peasants?

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows. The next section provides a description of the research area and methods. The third section presents participation of peasants in the 2005 national election. The fourth section treats 'Oromo protests' as a social movement and covers the role of peasants in it. The fifth section attempts to draw some lessons about 'the political' and peasants. The final section concludes this paper.

[2]*Woreda* is a local government unit in Ethiopia equivalent to district.

The research area and methods

The research area

Two study locations in the Oromia region were selected for this study. The first was Dawo woreda, found in the Southwest Shoa Zone. The Woreda has 24 *Kebeles*[3]. It is a rural area with a market and administrative town in Busa. The second study site was Sululta Town, found in the Oromia Special Zone Surrounding the Finfinne. It forms part of the peri-urban area around Addis Ababa. The town administration has four Kebeles (Girma, 2016).

Dawo and Sululta were chosen as they fall within the 'highland periphery', an area "accustomed to the basic level of governance" and "largely excluded from the existing structure of states" (Clapham, 2017, p. 22). The claim of northern ethnic groups domination of the state was used to mobilize Oromo peasants in both 2005 and the Oromo protests. The cases were selected purposively to build variety of opportunities to learn about state-peasant relations (Stake, 2005). Thus, Dawo is a rural area dominated by agriculture, while Sululta is a peri-urban area. Dawo Woreda mainly produces Teff[4], a staple grain in Ethiopia. However, in Sululta there is small production of crops, insufficient for subsistence, and existing alongside land commercialization (Girma, 2016). Two Kebeles from Dawo Woreda (Sadan Dawo & Nano Gabriel) and one Kebele from Sululta (Qaso Wasarbi) were selected considering accessibility, security[5], and convenience. The contrast between the two cases is analytical: in Dawo, grievances are centered on market exploitation and local governance, while in Sululta, the primary conflict is over accumulation by dispossession. This allows for a comparison of how spatial dynamics (rural vs. peri-urban) shape state-peasant relations.

Research methods

The research adopted a qualitative approach to incorporate multiple perspectives to study. These are national politics, ethno-nationalism, local power relations, and class character of peasants. The data collection methods used are mainly interviews and focus-group discussions. Secondary sources of data included review of published books, journal articles, and policy documents. The data for the study was gathered from January 2023 to December 2023. Semi-structured, open-ended in-

[3]A *kebele* is local government unit in Ethiopia equivalent to parish.

[4]The scientific name of *teff* is Eragrostistef.

[5]The armed conflict between government forces and Oromo Liberation Army since 2018 has rendered much of Oromia region insecure.

depth interviews with peasants provided data on their view of 2005 election and 'Oromo protests'. Key informant interviews were conducted with development agents (DAs), Kebele and Woreda officials. FGDs, each consisting of five to seven members, including different segments of peasants (women, youth, and elders) were also used. Questions focused on experiences with local governance, perceptions of the 2005 election campaign and results, understanding of the Master Plan, reasons for supporting or participating in protests, and views on land tenure security. The sampling technique used was purposive and snowballing. Purposive sampling allowed intentionally selecting participants with diverse roles, experiences, and class backgrounds. Snowball sampling was used due to political sensitivity and security risks in Oromia region. The researcher lived in Sululta for 4 years, knew the local community, and participants were identified with the help of local research assistants and Kebele officials. In Dawo, a Development Agent who worked for years in that Woreda served as research assistant and helped with identifying participants in addition to Kebele officials. The use of local informants and Kebele officials could suffer from their biases, and to mitigate this, we used independent snowballing and included peasants coming for government services to Kebeles and health extension centers as participants. The author is from Oromia and fluent in Afaan Oromo which enhanced rapport to discussions politically sensitive issue of state-peasant relations. Rural family roots gave intergenerational insight into peasant struggles. Following critical realism, the author acknowledges embeddedness but pursued objectivity through triangulation and reflexivity while remaining sensitive to participants' lived experiences. Saturation of data determined the appropriate sample size, meaning data gathering was stopped "when gathering fresh data no longer sparks new insights or reveals new properties" (Creswell & John, 2018, p. 262), and twenty-eight (28) interviews and eleven (11) FGDs were conducted. Participant distribution was as follows: Sadan Dawo Kebele (9 interviews & 4 FGDs), Nano Gabriel Kebele (9 interviews & 4 FGDs), and Qaso Wasarbi Kebele (8 interviews & 3 FGDs), ensuring balanced representation across sites.

The data analysis process was facilitated by Taguette, an open-source qualitative software. Transcripts were coded iteratively to identify patterns. Initial coding identified surface-level themes like "fertilizer prices" and "vote rigging," while axial coding linked these to broader political economy frameworks such as "upward accountability", "local governance" and "ABD." The analytical synthesis integrated these codes into a cross-case comparison that highlights how spatial dynamics shape state-peasant relations.

All participants in the study were verbally asked for their consent, because it allowed participants to feel safe and since participants were wary that a signature could be used as evidence of "subversion" by armed groups operating in rural Oromia. By ensuring that no physical record of their identity was linked to their testimony, the researcher was able to build rapport to elicit nuanced accounts of state-peasant relations. Furthermore, names were anonymized to prevent any risks to participants. To ensure data transparency, the following table provides details on the distribution of participants.

Respondent Category	**Dawo Woreda (Rural)**	**Sululta Town (Peri-Urban)**	**Federal / Institutional**	**Total**
In-depth/Key Informant Interviews	**18**	**8**	**2**	**28**
- Peasant/Farmers (Various strata)	10	4	-	14
- Local Officials (Kebele/Woreda)	5	4	-	9
- Agricultural Experts / DAs	3	-	-	3
- Federal Experts /CSO Officers	-	-	2	2
Focus Group Discussions (FGDs)	**8**	**3**	**-**	**11**

- Mixed Peasant Groups	4	2	-	6
- Youth / Unemployed Groups	2	1	-	3
- Women's Groups	2	-	-	2
Total Primary Data Points	**26**	**11**	**2**	**39**

Table: Research Respondents' Matrix

The 2005 contested national election and peasants

The 2005 national election stands out as a watershed moment in Ethiopia's post-1991 political landscape, where the EPRDF regime faced unprecedented competition, particularly in Oromia, as peasants leveraged the ballot to challenge political repression and economic exploitation. Drawing on empirical findings from case studies in Dawo Woreda and Sululta town, this section examines peasants' views, motivations, and participation in the election, utilizing data from interviews and focus group discussions to illuminate their role in this electoral rupture.

In Dawo, peasants overwhelmingly backed the Oromo National Congress (ONC), motivated by campaigns against TPLF domination, economic exploitation and promises of cheaper farm inputs. An election observer testified (I3)[6]

> Almost all the people supported ONC. Of more than one thousand people who voted in our Kebele, only 36 voted for EPRDF. ONC campaigned on: 'TPLF is robbing you', 'Why are Oromos unable to rule the country?', "We have to own our region, Oromia'. The whole Woreda was moved, even if the campaign did not reach rural Kebeles

[6]Codes were used to identify interviews and Focus Group Discussions. For example, I1 refers to Interview number one, FGD 3 refers to Focus Group Discussion number three.

> and was focused on Busa town[7]. Peasants understood that there was no change [under EPRDF], life was stuck at the level of 'hand to mouth'. The peasants themselves were awakened (Interview with a Kebele Manager under EPRDF in Dawo, January 16, 2023).

A *Kebele* official (I17) from that time described the election as cosmetic, a mask hiding authoritarianism of the regime: "*Oobdii baddaan laqlaqaa, keessi biyyeedha*" [Below the cow dung spread over the threshing field is a mass of the dirty soil] (Interview with a Kebele Chairman, Dawo, January 27, 2023). He further explains, "Peasants could not voice their concerns as doing so could put them in difficulty. And the peasants thought, 'if I withheld my vote, maybe something would change'". And peasants could not choose local leaders for *Kebele* positions, with the party controlling the process, which was a big problem in their eyes (I18, Interview with Dawo Woreda official, Busa Town, January 27, 2023).

Educated individuals and students were responsible for mobilizing peasants for the opposition. According to one official (I21), the local governments were terrible and manned by poorly educated *Dabales* (cadres) who showed loyalty by "informing on, imprisoning, and even murdering people considered to be against the regime. People were infuriated, so they voted for the ONC" (Interview with Dawo Woreda Planning Officer/Former DA, Busa Town, January 30, 2023). The ONC was supported by peasants as it promised to solve practical problems, like providing fertilizer on a loan basis and at a lower price (FGD1, FGD with Youth in Sadan Dawo Kebele, Dawo, January 14, 2023).

In the end, EPRDF was said to have won in Dawo by rigging votes. In a way that reminds us of the feeling of having little control over the outside world observed in peasants, we are informed by a peasant in Dawo "we voted for Merara, but 'they' made him fail" (FGD9, FGD with Elders, Sadan Dawo Kebele, Dawo, January 15, 2023). Local officials rigged votes out of fear of losing jobs:

> They sent their supporters to markets, streets, and even election sites to pressure people to vote for EPRDF. People knew the government was behind these individuals. The local officials were afraid of losing their jobs, so they intimidated voters (FGD10, FGD with Civil Servants, Busa Town, February 2, 2023).

[7]Busa town is administrative center and major town of Dawo *Woreda*.

On the other hand, some claimed that there were peasants who genuinely believed in the economic changes brought by EPRDF, and they voted for it. We are told not a few peasants were "pressurized by their youth to vote for opposition parties" (I20, Interview with Dawo Woreda Agriculture Expert, Busa Town, January 27, 2023).

In Sululta, the 2005 election was contested by the ONC, the CUD, and the EPRDF. While most participants claim that ONC was the major contender of EPRDF there, some claim that CUD was the contender, as most peasants in Sululta go to Addis Ababa, a CUD stronghold, for markets, and it was there that they mostly hear political news (I16, Interview with a Peasant, Qaso Wasarbi Kebele, Sululta, December 21, 2023). A *Garee misooma*[8] leader in Sululta (I23) explains:

> EPRDF used money in the election to buy off some CUD and ONC supporters. It was CUD that got more attention here because the government did not keep its promises. ONC did try to mobilize people to little effect, as its members and candidates were imprisoned and harassed (Interview, Qaso Wasarbi Kebele, Sululta, February 17, 2023).

The overall picture that we get about the election in Sululta in 2005 was that many people supported opposition political parties, which EPRDF won by stealing votes. An *Aba Gada* (FGD2) explains there was little they could do when EPRDF won the election: "it was through overwhelming force of the government and poverty that people put their head down, accepted their rule while waiting for an opportunity" (FGD with Elders/Aba Gadas of Sululta Town, Sululta, December 28, 2023). Some of the peasants voted for EPRDF since they were afraid they would not receive government services and fertilizer otherwise. OPDO officials also tried to agitate people against ONC, claiming (I21) "those with *Farda Leexaa*[9] [ONC] were not Oromos and do not know the Oromo culture" (Interview with a youth, Qaso Wasarbi Kebele, Sululta, February, 15, 2023). Since most of the peasants could not read and sign correctly, their votes were also manipulated. On

[8]*garee misooma* is a sub-Kebele unit (local government unit) that bring together and mobilizes around thirty households for development projects and political control.

[9]*Farda Leexaa* means horse without proper seat in Afan Oromo. As a symbol of ONC, the insinuation by OPDO was ONC did not know Oromo culture, horses being central to social rituals in rural Oromia.

election day, one peasant informed us (FGD2), "we were told by officials to be in line to vote in the middle of the night and directly go home. They did this so that there was no discussion among us on whom to vote for (FGD with Elders/Aba Gadas of Sululta Town, Sululta, December 28, 2023). Even election observers were said to "stand near you and tell you to vote for the bee [EPRDF symbol] that it will feed you, honey. If you ask questions or show doubt, that could put you in trouble" (FGD11, FGD with Women, Youth, and Elders, Sululta, December 25, 2023). An election observer (FGD2) in Sululta in the 2005 election tells us:

> We told people to vote for EPRDF after taking training for a week at Sululta Woreda. They asked us to conduct the election in a forest away from the election station so that opposition observers would not come. I resisted successfully telling them it can lead to violence among people because it is far away. More people supported the opposition, but these votes were thrown out and replaced by votes for EPRDF (FGD with Elders/Aba Gadas of Sululta Town, Sululta, December 28, 2023).

Deep-seated grievances over economic exploitation and land insecurity drove the electoral shift. In Dawo, peasants reported that the government strategically collected fertilizer credit and taxes exactly during the harvest season. This forced a massive, simultaneous grain supply onto the market, which naturally depressed prices and allowed urban merchants to buy the surplus for cheap. Furthermore, the state-run cooperatives, intended to stabilize prices, were perceived as corrupt or in active collusion with grain traders. Respondents observed that cooperatives would only open their doors to buy our products for just a day to pretend like they are doing their job, while often following the prices set by exploitative merchants.

In Sululta, these economic frustrations were compounded by the intensifying threat of land dispossession. Peasants in rural areas were alerted to these dangers via radio, which played a crucial role as they heard the Oromo National Congress (ONC) argue against the government's practice of taking land from peasants with lower compensation (FGD2, FGD with Elders/Aba Gadas of Sululta Town, Sululta, December 28, 2023). Consequently, the ONC's 2005 campaign resonated because it directly addressed these grievances, promising fertilizer at lower prices and advocating for land tenure security. For many, the vote for the opposition was a strategic act of agency driven by withholding a vote that might finally prompt

systemic change. Overall, the youth played a crucial role in mobilizing peasants to support opposition parties in Sululta.

The government's strategy since 2005 was aimed at reducing the political space for both opposition and emerging civil society organizations through new legislations (Merera, 2011). EPRDF also embarked on increasing its membership that went beyond its traditional base (smallholder peasants and lower civil servants) to include 'model farmers' (Mulugeta, 2020). The mode of governance was "reconstituted anew as one of neo-patrimonial governance" (Abbink, 2006, p. 193). EPRDF saw support for the opposition as 'protest votes' against its weak performance rather than support for the policy alternatives presented by the opposition. (Aregawi, 2020, p. 239).

Despite the failure of elections to bring about democratization in Ethiopia, it appears that elections by themselves have educational value by entrenching democratic norms. (Lindberg, 2006). In the subsequent national elections in 2010 and 2015, EPRDF took almost all seats in parliament. The 'Oromo protests' were inspired in part by the rejection of these as not competitive elections.

The regime attempted to reform local governance after 2005, bringing more educated and accountable individuals to positions in Oromia. These officials sided with the people during the Oromo protests. An elder from Dawo (FGD6) explained:

> Before the 2005 election, they [EPRDF] engaged with peasants with little knowledge. Elders with knowledge and educated people were shunned until that election. A year later, they held a three-week meeting with us, asking why we did not vote for EPRDF. We asked them: 'Why are the Oromos, as the largest group, not governing the country?''Why are you moving the capital of the Oromia region to Adama?' Afterwards, EPRDF brought people closer by increasing membership and putting in position more acceptable individuals. That was how they survived. Despite the development they brought, people did not accept their rule from the beginning because they thought the Tigreans were against them [Oromos]. It was because they were the government and brought development that people tolerated them (FGD with Women, Sadan Dawo Kebele, Dawo, January 14, 2023).

In hindsight, it seems that despite the narrowing of political space at the national level after the 2005 election, local governance reforms by EPRDF had narrowed some of the gaps between state and society.

'Oromo protests' and peasants

Oromo protests from 2014 to 2018 represented a transformative social movement in Ethiopia, where peasants played a critical yet supportive role, driven primarily by fears of land dispossession. Evidence suggests peasants were mobilized by educated youth, opposition parties, and diaspora networks. The prospect of Sululta and Dawo's inclusion in the capital under The Master Plan, on government terms that usually involved little or no compensation, was seen as worth resisting.

The Master Plan was framed by the organizers of the Oromo protests as Addis Ababa's expansion threatening Oromo culture and peasant livelihoods. (Asebe & Emana, 2022). For one Aba Gada in Sululta (FGD 2), "it was thanks to Jawar that the youth understood the Master Plan, the peasants rose in anger, participated in the protests, and averted it. He told us our land will be taken by non-Oromos" (FGD with Elders/Aba Gadas of Sululta Town, Sululta, December 28, 2023). Another peasant in Sululta (I21) noted:

> Jawar Mohammed *Oromoo afaan tokko godhe* (united and gave the Oromo one voice) and mobilized them against *Woyane* [TPLF]. Before [OMN] Oromos had no free media. While people were killed by night and forced into disappearance by the government, the government media talked about development and increased wheat production (Interview, Qaso Wasarbi Kebele Sululta, February 5, 2023).

A government official, Dawo (I21), explained the assumption that the Master Plan would include towns like Ambo, Woliso, and Adama into Addis Ababa, far beyond the Oromia special zone, led peasants to think "now they [Tigrayans] are trying to sell us too (*nu gurguruuf deemuu*)" (Interview, Busa Town, January 30, 2023).

In Sululta, the protests stemmed not only from fear of future dispossession but also from accumulated grievances over lands already taken from peasants. Peasants in Dawo knew from the experience of peasants in neighboring Dilala Woreda that they could face similar problems under the Master Plan:

> There were peasants who were removed from their land for floral cultivation in Dilala Woreda, for little compensation, and they later fell into poverty. Peasants were in touch with each other, and those from Dawo expected the same fate with the Master Plan (I3, Interview with a Kebele Manager in Dawo, Dawo, January 16, 2023).

An educated youth in Dawo (I2) claimed that his peasant parents used to say 'Okay' to things that came from above (government), even if they were not happy with it, and it was when they were told that the Master Plan covers even Dawo that they supported the protests (Interview, Busa Town, January 12, 2023). Peasants assumed "rightly or wrongly that the Master Plan would incorporate all towns, including Waliso, and they were shocked by it" (I18, Interview with Dawo Woreda official, Busa Town, January 27, 2023). A peasant in Dawo (FGD 4) adds:

> We were told by some officials concerning the Master Plan that our land will be leased as it was in towns, and we assumed that this might be a good thing, just like the land certificates. But our students, who we thought knew better and we did not know much, told us that EPRDF was selling our land to investors, and we were angered by this. And we supported the protests (FGD with Youth, Nano Gabriel Kebele, Dawo, January 21, 2023).

The protests succeeded through mounting united opposition, first against the Master Plan and then (after the regime agreed to scrap the plan) against TPLF domination: "peasants trusted their educated children and supported their demands" (I23, Interview, Qaso Wasarbi Kebele, Sululta, February 17, 2023). A peasant in Dawo added that parents supported the youth because of their agitation for self-rule in Oromia; Oromo leadership at the federal level; and against police brutality, illegal arrests, arbitrary killings, and exploitation of the Oromia region to enrich Tigray. Even when parents were not directly involved in the protests, the youth had the support of their parents (FGD6, FGD with Women, Youth, and Elders, Nano Gabriel Kebele, Dawo, January 22, 2023). In Sululta too, peasants supported and participated in the protests: "it was about *Oromumma* [being an Oromo] and the Master Plan. Therefore, the community supported it" (I4, Interview with young Dairy Farmer, Qaso Wasarbi Kebele, Sululta, December 14, 2023). Another peasant (I1) added that everyone supported the protests because "No one loved them [TPLF] and we were forced through the muzzle of the gun to remain under their rule" (Interview with an elderly Peasant, Sadan Dawo Kebele, Dawo, January 11, 2023).

That said, there are some sceptical voices regarding the participation of peasants in protests since many youths were killed. Even if peasants knew of the repression of the government, some thought elections could be used to change the government. “Peasants in Sululta were poor, busy with their lives, and pressurized by government officials to rein in their youth” (I21, Interview with a youth, Qaso Wasarbi Kebele, Sululta, February 5, 2023). For one government official in Dawo (I20)

> The peasants travel to Finfinne [Addis Ababa] and return home, and they didn’t know about its boundary or the problems there. It was mainly educated individuals who mobilized the peasants. Some peasants even used to ask, ‘I don’t have any business in Addis Ababa, why should I care [about the Master Plan]?’ (Interview with Dawo Woreda official, Busa Town, January 27, 2023).

As to why the youth, more than the older peasants, spearheaded the protests, studies of social movements indicate “biographical availability”, that is, fewer obligations as critical. (Goodwin & Jasper, 2015, p. 54). Moreover, the use of social media, youthful rebellion, and the youth’s ‘natural’ inclination toward unconventional politics contributed to their active role. (Pitti, 2018). Peasants lacked the kind of social network provided by high schools and universities to the Oromo youth, with Kebele and sub-kebele organizations (*Garee Misooma, Shanee*) that reached rural households, used to preempt any organized opposition by peasants. (Human Rights Watch, 2005). This made resistance through the “weapon of the weak” the only option available to peasants. (Labzae & Planel, 2021).

Even if peasants were not the organizers of the protests, their support and participation were crucial for their success, as it gave the movement legitimacy thanks to their numerical majority. They came out in numbers and participated in the major demonstrations held in cities and small towns across Oromia during the Oromo protests. Malseed notes that successful social movements require “an atmosphere of communal acceptance and support” (quoted in Asebe & Emana, 2022, p. 12). The economic inequality generated by economic growth, large youth unemployment, and the dispossession of land from peasants created such an atmosphere, ultimately leading to the removal of TPLF from central power. (Lavers, 2023).

Discussions: Peasants and political participation

Contrary to expectations, peasants have survived into the contemporary world (Vanhaute, 2021). Yet, under neoliberalism, peasants are marginalized from political and economic decisions. (McMichael, 2008). They are not only poor but also powerless, "[o]r at least they look upon themselves as powerless" for they have been a force in many revolutionary movements when they believed otherwise (Foster, 1967, p. 8).

Peasants' preference for autonomy and short-term goals gives them "low classness", limiting their political impact. (Shanin, 1989, p. 357). Their strength lies in numbers, rural dispersion and their role in food production. (Shanin, 1989). Based on these, Shanin suggests three types of political action available to peasants. The first was "autonomous class action," whereby peasants form their own nationwide organization (Shanin, 1989). The second form is "guided" in the sense that the external elite unites peasants for political action. (Shanin, 1989, p. 357). The third form is "amorphous political action" and can take different forms, like local riots that emerge suddenly or peasant passivity that renders government policies void by "silent non-fulfilment" (Shanin, 1989, p. 357).

TPLF, formed by urban-based Tigrayan elite, and its mobilisation of Tigrayan peasantry against Derg was essentially a "guided" political action (Young, 1997). After coming to power, TPLF/EPRDF claimed it alone represented the interests of peasants in Ethiopia. (Pausewang, 2009). In the 2005 election, mobilization by opposition parties and educated youth was crucial for peasants' participation, and for many of them, that election was "politically awakening". The participation of peasants in "Oromo protests" again falls into the "guided" category, largely led by educated youth and diaspora-based intelligentsia. Oromo nationalism acted as glue that tied the local grievance of peasants with the reduced role of Oromos at the national level. Amin (1977, p. 333) has argued in areas of peripheral capitalism dominated by agriculture, a form of revolution other than the class-based one was possible: "that of the peoples (i.e. not specific classes)" due to "the unequal development inherent in capitalist expansion". These struggles usually were against "the constant threat of dispossession of whatever assets they do control by state-led actions" (Harvey, 2003, pp. 172–175).

It seems "amorphous political action" was widespread among peasants due to the repressive nature of EPRDF. The regime used a combination of material incentives, societal norms, and "unpredictability and severe punishments' to keep peasants subordinate subjects" (Poluha, 2002). Repression, not economic satisfaction, produced "agrarian peace" before the protests (Labzae & Planel, 2021, p. 83). "A farmer toils with dirt and dust. We are not people of paper and pen"; "A

donkey and a farmer should consent to take orders" and "Who would listen to a farmer? We are looked down upon by everyone" are some of the reactions of peasants under EPRDF registered by Mulugeta (2020). Nevertheless, peasants engaged in "low-scale criticism" of the regime and "missed as many meetings as they could, adapted to land registration by keeping parcels hidden from the surveyors, and more generally avoided top-down mobilization of state structures" (Labzae & Planel, 2021, pp. 84–86). The researcher was unable to obtain data on the issue of passive resistance because of the prevailing political insecurity in Oromia. Peasants saw little difference in local government personnel before and after 2018 and were unwilling to discuss resistance. Yet, anecdotal evidence from Sululta indicates that peasants encroach on government-owned land, collect firewood from communal/government-owned forests, engage in foot-dragging, and resist contributing money to development projects. They attempted to preempt government dispossession by "selling" land to private buyers at better prices. In the end, passive resistance is an individual action that does not lead to collective action (Labzae & Planel, 2021, p. 90). Shanin (1989) writes throughout history "[t]he peasantry proved no match for smaller, closely knit, better organized and technically superior [political] groups, and has, time and time again, been double-crossed or suppressed politically or by force of arms". Yet, everyday forms of passive resistance (foot-dragging, hidden parcels, selective non-attendance) provided a long-term undercurrent of discontent and laid the groundwork for overt collective action during the protests. This demonstrates the contingent nature of the political agency of peasants, which increases when their economic grievances are fused with ethno-nationalism and provided with external guidance.

Conclusion

TPLF/EPRDF, one of Africa's strongest authoritarian regimes, sought to build a dominant party system maintained by the vote of peasants secured by economic policy that improved their living standard. This study has illuminated Oromo peasants' critical yet overlooked role in challenging EPRDF's authoritarian dominance. By mobilizing alongside educated youth, opposition parties and diaspora networks, peasants not only voiced resistance to perceived EPRDF subjugation but also exposed the regime's facade of peasant representation, ultimately contributing to its reconfiguration in 2018. This reconfiguration led to a significant shift toward neoliberal economic policy. Yet, the 2024 rural land proclamation under Prosperity Party shows many continuities with land proclamations under EPRDF, maintaining state ownership and the power of expropriation. If local governance remains undemocratized, these policies could

fuel future instability, underscoring the need for inclusive reforms addressing peasant insecurities. Despite these insights, the study has limitations: reliance on qualitative data from two case sites (Dawo and Sululta) may not fully generalize to Oromia's diverse contexts, and ongoing insecurity constrained discussions of passive resistance. Future research could compare peasant dynamics in other regions, examine post-2018 land governance under the Prosperity Party, or explore comparative authoritarian transitions in agrarian societies to deepen understanding of state-society relations.

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