



PROJECT MUSE®

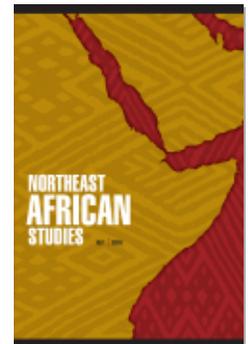
---

On Silencing the Next Generation: Legacies of the 1974  
Ethiopian Revolution on Youth Political Engagement

Eyob Balcha Gebremariam, Linda Herrera

Northeast African Studies, Volume 16, Number 1, 2016, pp. 141-166 (Article)

Published by Michigan State University Press



➔ For additional information about this article

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/622241>

# On Silencing the Next Generation: Legacies of the 1974 Ethiopian Revolution on Youth Political Engagement

EYOB BALCHA GEBREMARIAM, *University of Manchester, UK*

LINDA HERRERA, *University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign*

## ABSTRACT

---

*This article argues that the Ethiopian revolution was a generational achievement. Hence, its legacy and lasting social effects can be best examined through a sociological lens that highlights the intergenerational relations between the “revolutionary generation” of 1974 and today’s “restrained generation.” One of the significant legacies of the Ethiopian revolution is that it continues to instill fear in young people who are inclined to engage in politics. This culture of fear has grown out of the atrocious “Red Terror” period of the late 1970s, and continues in different forms to the present as political youth, including social media activists, are vulnerable to persecution. Even as the young generation attempts to create new platforms for political engagement, it remains under the heavy hand of the revolutionary generation. After nearly four decades, the methods of crushing youth political activism remain almost the same. This article seeks to offer insights into how Ethiopian youth pursue various strategies to deal with the structural impediments to their active political engagement. It is also*

*an attempt to unveil certain practices by the older generation that are designed to keep the youth in a political impasse.*

---

## **Introduction**

Friday 25 April 2014 is likely to stand as one of the most dreadful days for contemporary Ethiopian youth activists. This day marked the Ethiopian government's first crackdown on social media activists. Six bloggers between the ages of 24 and 32—all members of an informal bloggers' group called Zone Nine<sup>1</sup>—were arrested by state security forces and sent to the notorious interrogation and detention center, Maækelawi.<sup>2</sup> Along with the bloggers, two young freelance journalists and a young editor of a weekly magazine were incarcerated in Maækelawi. During the middle to late 1970s, thousands of young revolutionaries had been imprisoned and tortured in Maækelawi.<sup>3</sup> Scores of revolutionaries, of whom the exact numbers remain disputed, were killed by extrajudicial murder, especially during the "Red Terror."<sup>4</sup> Four decades after the 1974 revolution, members of a new generation of politically engaged and media savvy youth were sent to this same prison, where they faced torture and inhuman treatment such as solitary confinement before being charged with "acts of terrorism." The formal charges against them included "conspiring against the constitution & constitutional order" and "intent to overthrow the constitutional order through organized terrorism acts and rebellion."<sup>5</sup>

The 25 April 2014 incident reverberates far beyond the lives of a few individuals. It signifies the risk associated with political dissent in today's Ethiopia and epitomizes the nature of the regime established by former revolutionaries and rebel fighters. More importantly, it illustrates the ways in which institutions are structured to silence any dissident voices, particularly young ones. The historical process that most African countries underwent in the post-colonial period, and the situation in Ethiopia specifically, provides a rich terrain in which to analyze youth, intergenerational relations, and politics.

This article identifies the 1974 Ethiopian revolution as a significant historical event with a legacy that includes the systematic and ongoing repression of politically active youth. Since the Ethiopian revolution was a generational achievement, a perspective grounded in the sociology of

generations can illuminate the lasting effects of the revolution on contemporary youth political engagement. This analysis, therefore, is especially concerned with intergenerational relations between the “revolutionary generation” of the 1970s and today’s “restrained generation.”

The “restrained generation” refers to those who were born between the late 1970s and the mid-1990s and who share, broadly speaking, certain common experiences related to nationalism and a particular type of political socialization. While members of this generation have no direct memory of the “Red Terror,” they have come to know about it through oral history, the state media, and the widely circulating accounts of trials, testimonials, and memoirs written by its survivors. The restrained generation has the collective memory of the end of the civil war (which lasted from 1974 to 1991) and a period of relative stability. Under the new regime, the country gained a new constitution which guaranteed procedural democracy, a federal system of governance, political parties, and regular elections. The restrained generation grew up with the popular saying, “avoid politics like you would avoid electric shock” (*poletikana korentin beruqu*). This saying sums up their perception of politics.

Compared to the “revolutionary generation,” members of the “restrained generation” tend to be less ideological and to be distant from the Marxism-Leninism that still shapes the political structure and permeates the political discourse. In 2005, scores of young people attempted, for the first time, to enter the center of Ethiopian politics by participating in national elections. Their fervor, however, was massively crushed as a result of the political rivalries that persisted among members of the “revolutionary generation” that still controlled Ethiopian politics and did not welcome new players to the political field. The polarized political environment led to post-election turmoil, mass killings, and the detention of thousands, many of whom were from the younger generation. The message sent to the youth, loud and clear, was that they should shun politics, which would only bring them hardship. A few years on, with the emergence of social media and new forms and platforms of communications, members of the restrained generation have been seeking alternative ways to make a positive impact on Ethiopian politics. However, their efforts have been met with politically orchestrated violence, disguised through the judiciary as charges of terrorism and sedition.

Against this political backdrop, we conceptualize youth as a sociohistorical generational cohort which is distinct from an age group.

We identify three major factors, which are by no means exhaustive, to explain why the current generation is characterized as “restrained” with regard to their political choices, actions, and ideas. First, youth depoliticization has been occurring at the discursive and systemic levels, and these processes need to be understood in terms of intergenerational relations. Secondly, politically active youth, especially in urban areas, are increasingly using social media as a sphere to create an alternative space of political engagement. Most social media activists are critical of existing political institutions and parties, which are largely dominated by the “revolutionary generation,” but they are not equipped to forge a viable alternative. Thirdly, even as social media activists attempt to identify new platforms and techniques of political engagement, they continue to face challenges from the incumbent regime, similar to those the youth of the revolutionary period faced. Hence, despite the rise of new political ideas, practices, platforms, and players in present day Ethiopian politics, the older power elite employs a series of techniques to silence Ethiopian youth in ways that are reminiscent of the revolutionary period of the middle to late 1970s.

To address the three points outlined above, we draw on primary data collected during two periods: 2009 to 2010 and 2014 to 2015.<sup>6</sup> The first round of data collection entailed a series of interviews and focus group discussions with youth leaders from independent youth organizations and regional youth associations, and with young politicians (under 35) from political parties including the Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), All Ethiopian Unity Party (AEUP), Ethiopian Democratic Party (EDP), Unity for Democracy and Justice (UDJ), and Oromo People’s Congress (OPC). Interviews were also conducted with older party leaders from prominent opposition parties, the UDJ, EDP, AEUP, OPC, and Medrek (two of them were members of parliament from 2005 to 2010) and with a senior EPRDF official. From November 2014 to February 2015, another set of interviews was conducted, with young politicians from four main political parties (the EPRDF, EDP, UDJ, and Blue Party). Social media activists outside the formal political establishment were also interviewed, as were other young people in Addis Ababa from diverse socioeconomic, professional, and political ideological backgrounds.

Before presenting the three main arguments, we will lay out a discussion of “youth” as a socially constructed and historically positioned

social category and juxtapose it with the concepts of “generation” and “generational consciousness.”

### **Youth as a Political Category**

“Youth stands for many things at once: for the terrors of the present, the errors of the past, the prospect of a future. For old hopes and new frontiers.”<sup>7</sup> In this revealing quotation, John and Jean Comaroff uncover the problematic nature of the concept of youth. One can talk in general terms about the “natural” and biological characteristics of being young.<sup>8</sup> Some analysts look more to the social and statistical features of youth by focusing, for instance, on health, employment, crime, education, and other domains.<sup>9</sup> Such normative and essentially ahistorical approaches presume that youth should more or less be socialized into the status quo and reproduce the predominant hierarchies and social structures. These research orientations stress a life course approach whereby youth occupy a rung in the age structure of society and are valued for their future potential as adults. Such frameworks do not view youth in their own right, whether as a political entity or as a force that shapes social values and practices.

Youth should not be analyzed in an ahistorical vacuum, but in relation to actual social, cultural, and political contexts. Anthropologist Deborah Durham makes an insightful contribution to the relational meaning of youth when she posits that youth can be understood as “social shifters.”<sup>10</sup> A “shifter,” as Durham explains, “points to something in the (cultural) world that stands independent of any particular use.”<sup>11</sup> The meaning of youth changes and shifts according to every context.

According to Durham, the word “youth” conjures complementary and contradictory meanings that are contextual and relational. Youth may at times be in need of mentorship and guidance, and other times in need of self-exploration and discovery. Similarly, at certain moments they may benefit from control, yet at other times from freedom. Depending on the context, youth can be conceived as independent or dependent social actors who constitute valuable assets to the wellbeing of society, that is, when they are not social, economic, and political liabilities.

The political position of youth as “social shifters” can be further expounded if we examine how they are perceived within the societal

imagination. Youth are at times included in and at other times excluded from blueprints for socioeconomic development and political transformation. At key transitional moments, the ruling elite entrust youth to lead society to a better future citing their qualities of resilience, adaptability, and creativity. There are specific historical circumstances in which “youth agency” enters the public discourse and is given unparalleled recognition so that the youth may assume (or may be allowed to assume) a central role in the societal imagination. Such moments are triggered during specific political/historical circumstances, such as anti-colonial or anti-imperial struggles. It is imperative to understand the inverse situation and consider contexts that trigger exactly the opposite situation, in which the youth are reduced either to just numbers within society or to immature individuals in need of adult guidance. For any meaningful analysis on youth politics, it is imperative to approach youth as a “historically constructed social category” whose role in the societal imagination shifts according to the context.<sup>12</sup> Considering youth in context allows us to better understand how power is exercised in relation to the construction of ideas around youth agency, rights, and personhood.<sup>13</sup>

When considering the intersection of youth and politics, we must also take into consideration the process of political socialization. Fred Greenstein argues that political socialization is “the deliberate inculcation of political information, values and practices by institutional agents who have formally been charged with this responsibility.”<sup>14</sup> Political socialization relates to “what is learned,” “when it is learned,” “how it is learned,” and the learning’s impact on the political behavior of the youth. The deliberate modes of political socialization include all kinds of formal and informal, intentional and unintentional, political and nonpolitical acts and lessons at all stages of a young person’s life cycle.<sup>15</sup>

Political participation, as distinct from political socialization, is about the involvement of people in the political system. The spectrum of political participation ranges from non-involvement to a simple interest in politics, to participating in informal politics, casting a vote, belonging to a political party, active involvement in quasi-political organizations, to running for and holding political office.<sup>16</sup> The political behavior and socialization of the youth is also influenced by generational location, a point to which we now turn.

## **Generation: Understanding the Young and Old beyond Age**

In contrast to the concept “youth,” which often denotes an ahistorical, age-based category, the sociology of generations offers a more historically grounded approach to understanding generational struggles, political ruptures, and ways in which attitudes and practices are formed in connection to wider sociohistorical and political processes. As argued by Christiansen and colleagues,

Generational positions, such as youth, are . . . intricately tied to social processes, and it is only when we move our focus from the realm of chronology or biology to the sphere of social life that we become able to fully realize the complexity of the position and able to illuminate how it is negotiated and unfolds in relation to dynamics of social interaction.<sup>17</sup>

A valuable way of understanding youth and their potential is to delve into intergenerational relations, which for our purposes means the relation between the “restrained generation” that grew up after the civil war and the “revolutionary generation” that came of age during the 1974 revolution and captured state power.

In his seminal work, “The Problem of Generations,” Karl Mannheim argues that people who belong to the same generation will develop a sense of belonging because of their common “location” in the historical process. In all the diversity that exists among members of a generation, there is also a great deal of unity and shared dispositions.<sup>18</sup> In other words, sharing a common location certainly does not mean that youth are homogeneous or that they harbor a common set of attitudes. Rather, even when they are at odds with each other, their positions and subjectivities have been shaped by a common generational experience and historical time. As one of the present authors has argued elsewhere:

A generation, as Karl Mannheim expounds . . . is a social collectivity insofar as it is a group of people who share a common historical time, what he terms, ‘a common location in the historical dimension of the social process.’<sup>19</sup> Members of a generation are shaped by major world events, popular culture, the prevailing technological regimes, and economic system, among the countless other influences that permeate a

group's mode of being, thinking, and acting on the world. The concept 'generation,' thus, is a meaningful category insofar as it allows us to glean the common characteristics, behaviors, worldviews, and dispositions of a demographic collectively who have come of age during a particular historical moment. It is made up of a diverse range of individuals and groups at odds with each other insofar as they embody different ideological positions, subjectivities, and visions about the kind of society they deem desirable.<sup>20</sup>

A major question posed by Mannheim and other generation theorists is when, and under what circumstances, does a generation become "active" or "actualized," while some generations remain "passive?"<sup>21</sup> Under what historical circumstances do youth create a concrete bond among themselves, a "generational consciousness" that can become the basis for potential large-scale political and social transformation?<sup>22</sup> Why do other generational cohorts remain marginal groups who are more socially and politically silent?<sup>23</sup> Mannheim writes that a generational potentiality will be transformed into an "actuality" when "a concrete bond is created between members of a generation because of being exposed to the social and intellectual symptoms of a process of dynamic destabilization."<sup>24</sup> This destabilization can come about, for instance, in times of rebellion and revolution, war, economic crisis, environmental and human crises like drought and famine, or technological revolutions that bring about rapid change and new sets of opportunities for communication and organization. When people begin to make meanings out of their objectively created location and shared experiences, they can develop "a common consciousness, or identity."<sup>25</sup>

By conceptualizing youth as a socially and historically constructed category, and by employing the notion of generational consciousness, we analyze the lasting legacy of the Ethiopian revolution for youth political engagement. Ethiopia's political history in the post-revolution period is filled with harsh political violence and terror, a civil war, and the intimidation and coercion of people who have dared to challenge the two post-revolution regimes. While today's youth in Ethiopia have come of age during a period of political turmoil, they have also lived during times of relative stability, political advances (with a new constitution that established a federal state, a procedural democracy with periodic elections,

and other institutions of democracy), and socioeconomic developments (increased access to education, health, and other social services). For the most part, the state media were the main narrators of the revolution and its aftermath, but more recently a number of individuals, most of them members of the 1974 “revolutionary generation” and survivors of the Red Terror massacre, have been producing novels, autobiographies, and memoirs of the period. These all contribute to the way in which politics is being re-perceived by the younger generation.

On another note, with the rise of digital communications, the ubiquity of cell phones, and slowly growing Internet connectivity, a new phase of generational change appears to be underway. Even though Internet penetration in Ethiopia is one of the lowest in the world, with less than 2 percent of the total population having Internet access, recent political developments show that it has started to have an impact on the Ethiopian political landscape, particularly on the political engagement of urban youth.<sup>26</sup>

## **The 1974 Revolution and the Red Terror**

The revolutionary generation of 1974 grew out of the Ethiopian student movement (ESM). The ESM brought national issues into the public domain and created platforms for their articulation. The ESM's membership grew within Ethiopia and abroad at European and North American universities. The students' movement also became the breeding ground for the first political parties in Ethiopian political history, namely the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party (EPRP) and the All-Ethiopia Socialist Movement (AESM or MEISON).

The incipient revolutionary generation had come together over a set of internal/national grievances and in relation to external/global movements. Internally, pre-1974 Ethiopia was organized according to a feudal structure that was highly exploitative, repressive, and exclusionary. The emperor of Ethiopia wielded absolute power, and members of the royal family and the aristocratic class owned a significant portion of the productive land. Peasants were forced by law to give one third of their yield to the landlord.<sup>27</sup> Persistent political pressure was mounted against the imperial regime through demonstrations calling for social justice, the

redistribution of land, and a radical change of governance.<sup>28</sup> World events in the 1960s and 1970s coincided with the movement against the imperial feudal order. Historically, this was a time of momentous social change, with the civil rights movement, anticolonial struggles, youth centered antiwar movements, anti-imperialism struggles, and the non-aligned movement, the last two of which were inspired by Marxist ideology.<sup>29</sup>

The 1974 Ethiopian revolution was a manifestation of a politically active global generation that rose out of the 1960s. The members of this generation translated a shared set of grievances into an ideological Marxist-Leninist platform and political plan of action. We can say that this process led them onto a path towards a shared generational consciousness. The revolutionaries in Ethiopia placed a great deal of emphasis on class struggle, which became an ideological feature of the generation. Active members of the revolutionary generation moved on to the next level by organizing themselves to seize political power and transform society according to their radical political vision.

Even by the standards of the Ethiopian radical students who were calling for revolution, the February 1974 revolution in Ethiopia occurred suddenly.<sup>30</sup> Once the uprising started, people from all walks of life, such as teachers, taxi drivers, workers, students, and peasants, joined in to protest their dire situations. In addition, the deteriorating economic situation in urban areas and the famine in different parts of the country sped up the revolutionary process. Ultimately, the military “Derg” exploited the power vacuum left by the revolution and took power. The emperor was officially removed from his throne on 12 September 1974.<sup>31</sup> Soon after this, fractures among the revolutionary generation, which predated the revolution, became stronger. The revolutionaries were divided into competing political groups, most notably the EPRP, the AESM (MEISON), and the Provisional Military Administrative Committee (PMAC or the Derg). These groups also included the Tigray People’s Liberation Front (TPLF) and the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF), which launched rebel movements of their own in the early post-revolution period.

A lasting legacy of the Ethiopian revolution up to today is the appalling “Red Terror,” perpetrated mainly by the Derg (the military junta), against the EPRP and the AESM (MEISON).<sup>32</sup> There is contention about the causes, instigators, and social, psychological, and political consequences of the Red Terror. However, it is incontrovertible that the Red Terror was a period of

unprecedented political violence that involved extrajudicial indictments and scores of executions of politically active youth. The “vanguard” of the revolution justified the brutality and violence, which was mainly carried out by government forces, as a form of “revolutionary action” that was necessary to realize the goals of the revolution. From this time forward, politics became synonymous with violence.

The Red Terror left a scar on the shared consciousness of Ethiopian society to the extent that the children born after the revolutionary period have been socialized to think that involvement in politics will likely lead to their being tortured or killed. As argued by Jon Abbink, “the Ethiopian [Derg] regime came to define and manifest itself through intimidation, force, and terror. Repression and coercion became equivalent with the idea of state itself.”<sup>33</sup> Abbink further argues that, when ideological and instrumental performances of violence become the main framework of reference in shaping the orientation of a society, a culture of violence emerges.<sup>34</sup> The military regime maintained a maximum level of fear among the people and repression during its reign while fighting the rebellion against it, particularly in the northern region of the country.

Ultimately, the Derg succeeded in crushing all organized resistance in the urban areas. In rural areas, however, rebel movements that had emerged during the early days of the revolution were intensified, particularly after the Derg consolidated its power in the late 1970s. One of the striking elements of the revolutionary generation is the fact that the opposing sides, the Derg and the rebel movements, both subscribed to a Marxism-Leninism ideology. The civil war can be best described as a war of “comrades against comrades.”<sup>35</sup> On 28 May 1991, after 17 years of war, the Derg regime was ousted and the allied forces of the rebel movement came to power under the banner of the Ethiopian Peoples’ Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF).<sup>36</sup>

### **Youth Politics: A Brief Opening before the Crackdown**

The EPRDF took power and established a federal government with a new constitution, introducing a nominally democratic system under which periodic elections have been held since 1995. The 2005 national elections marked the first time the EPRDF government faced a real challenge from opposition parties. One can say that 2005 was a historic turning point for

the younger generation when they tested the waters of Ethiopian politics with full energy and passion. They disregarded constant warnings from their elders that politics is synonymous with danger.

The decision by the government to open up the political sphere and provide a space for organized opposition groups to participate in elections coincided with the coming of age of millions of first-time voters. The 2005 general elections galvanized many young people who were moved by the election tide created by opposition groups, live television debates, and voter education programs organized by civil society groups. Even though the youth were actively involved in the political rallies and other election-related activities, their capacity to transform their presence into a political force was severely constrained. Their role was mainly limited to pouring into the streets during the peaceful demonstrations, casting their votes during elections, and taking part in clashes with the police in the post-election period. The youth did not play a significant role in determining the political agenda and were not able to reach candidates with pointed political questions. The oxygen in the political space was taken up by competing and combatting members of the aging revolutionary generation.

Those politically active youth who engaged fearlessly in the 2005 elections paid dearly for it. Immediately following the elections, opposition parties started accusing the ruling party of fraud and vote rigging. Soon thereafter, a series of protest demonstrations and clashes with the security and police officers took place.<sup>37</sup> The two main protests in Addis Ababa (on 8 June and 1 November 2005) resulted in the killing of hundreds of unarmed civilians by the EPRDF regime's Special Forces. The official figure announced by the government-established Independent Inquiry Commission put the number of dead at 193 individuals, however, other sources maintain that roughly 400 people were killed and as many as 17,000 were imprisoned.<sup>38</sup> The overwhelming majority of those killed or imprisoned were young people. Later on, leaders and members of the main opposition party, journalists, and civil society leaders were imprisoned and charged with multiple offenses including treason.

The post-election crisis in 2005 revealed that the intra-generational conflict of the late 1970s was still ongoing. The leading figures who put themselves forward for the 2005 elections were either revolutionaries or individuals who had served in the Derg regime. In other words, they were

all from the generation of the 1970s revolution. Despite their intention to influence the political process, the youth played the part of foot soldiers who populated the demonstrations, only to clash with the police and be killed in the hundreds and imprisoned in the thousands while the older generations settled old scores.<sup>39</sup>

In light of the country's intergenerational profile and political legacy, the following sections of this article, based on original research, offer three entry points for understanding youth political engagement in contemporary Ethiopia: the perception of politics among Ethiopian youth, intergenerational political discourse, and social media as a new arena of political engagement.

### **De-politicization: Growing up with a Politics of Fear and Despair**

In 2009 one of the authors of this article conducted a round of interviews with young activists aged 23 to 31. These activists had grown up during the civil war period and been warned repeatedly about the immense risks inherent to becoming involved in politics. When asked about their early perceptions of politics and how they understood political activism, almost all of them spoke about politics as an activity in which people lost their lives, killed each other, were imprisoned, or fled from their country. A youth leader who chaired the Addis Ababa Youth Forum stated that

Young people of that time [during the Derg regime] interpreted politics in terms of bullets and guns, and also in terms of the forced revolutionary army conscription when they became old enough to be soldiers.

Stories from the Red Terror period discouraged most young people from getting involved in politics. As one respondent, a youth leader (aged 31) stated,

My family was so close to politics. I have older brothers who were tortured during the Red Terror and two sisters who luckily escaped from being massacred after being taken out of prison. Hence, they used to tell me that political involvement is seriously dangerous.

A common thread among respondents was the fact that from an early age they perceived political discourse as being synonymous with fear and despair. The 2005 elections provided a kind of awakening, a time of fervor among scores of young people who sincerely saw a place for themselves in the political process. However, they found that they were blocked from meaningful involvement in the established political organizations.

### **Intergenerational Political Discourse and the Closing of Political Thought**

The revolutionary generation also holds sway over the younger generation through language or political discourse. Discourse is a subtle way of influencing youth attitudes while concealing power relations and maintaining the power structure.<sup>40</sup> In Ethiopia, as in many other countries, it is not uncommon to hear that “youth are the holders of a bright future” or youth are “tomorrow’s leaders” and “actors of tomorrow.” Such discursive notions about the future of youth negate their active involvement in society and politics in the present. This future orientation of youth, seen as “tomorrow’s leaders,” comes across as disingenuous when we recall that the majority of the current political leaders realized their potential when they themselves were young.

The strong influence of the future-oriented discourse can be observed in the responses of young politicians who talk about preparing themselves under the mentorship of their elders so that they will assume better decision-making positions in the future. A youth group leader of the All Ethiopian Unity Party (AEUP) argued that “We have a lot to learn from the past generation. . . . Politics is a system to lead a country. We should not consider it as simple as a kindergarten.” This response indicates the extent to which this youth leader had internalized the paternalistic discourse of the elder generation, a pattern that was repeated in a number of the interviews with young members of political parties.

Another example of the importance of language can be found in the common use of the words “struggle” (*tigil* in Amharic) and “comrade” (*guadoch*), terms that gained currency in the late 1960s and 1970s in the context of the Marxist-Leninist ideology of the student movement and the Derg regime. Our young respondents, especially those connected to

the ruling party, regularly use the words “struggle” and “comrade” even though they are not ideologically connected to Marxism-Leninism. The literal meaning of these two words in Amharic is strongly associated with force, militarism, and hierarchy. For instance, the EPRDF Addis Ababa Youth League chairperson explained that when they established the youth league, their motto was, “though the nature of the struggle is different, it will continue with the new generation.” He continued by declaring that the main objective of the youth league was to uphold “the principles for which comrades have sacrificed their lives.” The head of the Southern Ethiopian Youth Association Addis Ababa Branch, who is also a member of the EPRDF youth league, constantly mentioned the role of “struggle” in bringing about desired change:

We have to create a conducive environment through a struggle. . . . We can bring about a better situation through process and struggle. . . . this generation has a better opportunity and . . . if things are not going well [that means] a struggle is required, then we have to struggle.

The use by the younger generation of the word “struggle” implies a continuation of a rigid and militarized political orientation, one that connotes there will be an absolute winner and an absolute loser, a sentiment reminiscent of the early post-revolution period. With no room or very little room for compromise and negotiation, the young politicians are continuing a politics that blocks the way for pluralism, reconciliation, and unity. Through their political discourse, the implicit objective of the older generation is to block the possibility of an alternative discourse, continue a politics of polarization, and maintain their generational dominance.

### **Social Media: A New Sphere of Political Engagement, but Similar Challenges**

One of the unique features of political engagement among the younger generations of Ethiopia, especially in the urban areas, is the emergence of social media as an alternative political platform. Ethiopia has among the lowest Internet penetration rates in the world at 1.7 percent, which comes to slightly over 1.6 million users<sup>41</sup> in a country of 100 million.<sup>42</sup> Nevertheless,

social media, especially Facebook, Twitter, and blogging, are becoming influential platforms of political engagement within certain circles. As Linda Herrera explained in the Egyptian context, the ways in which “digital natives” use technology are causing “a monumental generational rupture.”<sup>43</sup> The Ethiopian context has witnessed the emergence of social media activists who are making waves. Though their numbers are modest, a critical mass of young, educated urbanites is using social media as an alternative platform from which to exercise citizenship and to debate and dialogue with others who hold similar and opposing political views.

When Facebook reached the capital in 2009, many students with access initially used it for leisure and connecting with friends. But as the political situation in the country turned tenser and the formal spaces of political dialogue and reflection started to contract, many people in their late teens and twenties seized on social media as an alternative platform. As one social media activist recalls, the closure of one of the most influential weekly newspapers, *Addis Neger*, in November 2009 was a key moment in leading him to adopt social media for his activism.

Initially I used social media [Facebook] only for posting pictures and to meet old friends. When *Addis Neger* newspaper was closed down before the 2010 election and when an *Addis Neger* fan page was opened on Facebook, I become actively involved in social media based politics. The fan page was extremely dynamic, with debates on every national issue, and I was very active.

Another female youth social media activist explained:

I think it is because of the lack of any alternative media where we can express our opinion that we are using Facebook to vent our concerns. I think this changed the social media from being a platform of posting pictures, dating, or passing time into a highly political sphere.

The increasing access to social media, coupled with the closing down of the physical political sphere in Ethiopia, has contributed to youth migrating to social media for different forms of political engagement. Since 2010, hundreds of youth, if not thousands, have capitalized on this relatively

free space to gain political awareness and to engage in dialogue about their political views and perspectives. Social media hosts an array of postings, from blogs, status updates, tweets, pictures, memes, jokes, short stories and poems, to more traditional news items, whistleblowing reports, debates, and feature articles.<sup>44</sup> The platform allows for innovation and creativity and has expanded the ways in which people craft political messages and undertake strategies. These experiments are still in their infancy, and are providing new ways for people to synchronize online and offline political engagement.

A case in point is Zone Nine,<sup>45</sup> a bloggers' group established by nine bloggers in 2011 (two females and seven males) who were at the time between the ages of 21 and 29. The bloggers picked a politically provocative name. The name Zone Nine figuratively represents an extension of the main prison in Addis Ababa, known as Kality Prison, which has eight zones. Most political prisoners, including journalists, are held in zone eight. Hence, the expression "Zone Nine" was coined to represent metaphorically the entire country of Ethiopia, which is "the bigger prison."<sup>46</sup>

The members of this pioneering group started their collective blogging by writing critical, well-researched, and articulated blog articles disseminated through Facebook and Twitter. The group describes itself as an "informal group of activists and bloggers" with the motto "We blog because we care!" Its main aim is to introduce "alternative narratives" into the socioeconomic and political discourses in Ethiopia. The Zone Nine bloggers also spearheaded a new method of political engagement in Ethiopia by organizing online campaigns. The themes of the online campaigns were "Respect the Constitution," "Respect the Right for Freedom of Speech," "Respect the Right for Peaceful Demonstration," and "The Ethiopian Dream." Their involvement in Ethiopian politics introduced fresh life into a scene dominated by the polarized political discourses of the revolutionary generation and political practices restricted to formal party structures and institutions. It took only two weeks for the government to block their blog, mainly because it cannot tolerate any critical view. One of the founding members recalled that the group tried to reopen the blog six times before they settled for the current web address.<sup>47</sup>

Friday, 25 April 2014, will be remembered as one of the most significant days in the political history of young and wired Ethiopians. In the late afternoon of that day, six members of the Zone Nine bloggers' group

were arrested in different places in a coordinated move by state security forces. Five of them were arrested in Addis Ababa, while the sixth was arrested in a town called Ambo, where he worked at the university as a law lecturer. Along with the bloggers, two freelance journalists (one female) and one editor of a weekly magazine, *Addis Guday*, were also detained. All these youth social media activists had grown up reading and listening to the appalling stories of the revolutionary period, in which hundreds and thousands of political activists were tortured and suffered inhuman treatment in detention centers, the most infamous being Maäkelawi. These youth social media activists were themselves taken to Maäkelawi, meaning they were made to experience the cruel fate of the young revolutionaries from four decades ago.

A major difference between then and now, however, is that in a short space of time, news about their detention came to dominate the social media and circulated globally among an extensive network of activists. Other members of the group and close friends had to flee the country in search of a safe haven. Government officials provided various explanations to justify their detention. These explanations changed through time from “they were working with human rights organizations,” to “they were working with Egyptian and Eritrean governments,” to the more threatening sounding “they were inciting violence using social media” and “working with terrorist organizations” like Ginbot 7 and the OLF.<sup>48</sup> Finally, the bloggers and journalists were formally charged under the Anti-Terrorism Proclamation after spending 87 days at the Maäkelawi detention center.<sup>49</sup>

The arrest of the bloggers is a clear indication that the inherent nature of Ethiopian politics remains the same, regardless of the opening of new spaces of dissent like social media. Social media activism in a country of 100 million people with an Internet penetration rate of less than 2 percent is now considered a national threat. For many people, this showed the limited extent to which dissent is tolerated in Ethiopia. As one social media activist says, “I think the Ethiopian government is more afraid of the person expressing opinions with a keyboard and pen than the one carrying a gun.”

What happened to the Zone Nine bloggers sent a strong message to the population on social media. The increasing harassment and intimidation of other social media activists proves there is a continuation of the dominant political practices that were common during the revolutionary period. One

status update posted by an active social media outlet reads “Silenced!” This epitomizes not only an individual status but also a generational status. While social media offers a new political sphere that is less hierarchical, is relatively enabling, and encourages new political practices by youth activists, is it enough to overcome the stifling political atmosphere? Even with these new venues, the realpolitik is conditioned by politics reminiscent of the revolutionary period. The burgeoning youth social media activism faces the oppressive state apparatus, which has been instrumental in silencing dissent since the revolutionary period.

## **Conclusion**

The lasting legacies of the Ethiopian revolution can be seen in the various spheres of Ethiopian society. This article takes as a point of departure that the Ethiopian revolution was a generational achievement, and thus certain enduring effects of the revolution can be captured through an intergenerational analysis. The article shows how the 1974 generation has persistently pursued ways to thwart the rise of a younger and active generation onto the political scene. To this end, the younger generation are categorized as the “restrained generation” in contrast to the dominant “revolutionary generation.” The two generations exist in a codependent relationship. Conceptually, the article argues that in order to understand youth as a political category, we need to acknowledge the ways in which “youth” is a socially constructed concept. Prevailing ideas about the youth and the place they occupy in society change, or shift, according to the historical context, conditions, and power structures.

The members of the 1974 generation have attempted to maintain their monopoly on politics and to socialize the youth into subordinate roles through various means. They perpetuate an outdated political discourse that draws on Marxism-Leninism to maintain their authority, they relegate youth to largely symbolic positions in political parties, and they resort to traditional means of repression and violence to silence dissenting voices. In connection with this, this article puts forward three lines of argument. First, there is a widespread prevalence of fear and despair among many members of the “restrained generation.” Their fear emanates from the lessons they have learned through their political socialization, as well as

from witnessing the high price paid by their peers who engage in political work. Second, the “revolutionary generation” perpetuates a social discourse that values youth for its future potential, and in so doing tries to repress any notions of their present roles in shaping political practices and ideas. Third, members of the “restrained generation” have never stopped making demands and trying to assert a more significant role in Ethiopian politics. Despite the hurdles and downsides, many of today’s youth in Ethiopia are actively engaged in politics in a wide range of contexts. Recently, social media have offered fertile ground for individual and collective action. However, even these up-and-coming young actors on the political scene have faced the same violent consequences as politically active youth during the revolution some four decades ago.

The members of the “revolutionary generation” of 1974, who were themselves in their 20s and early 30s when they took the reins of politics and state power, have been setting up all manner of structural, moral, and cultural impediments to succeeding generations. Obviously, an aging generation cannot assert its will forever. The cycle will inevitably be broken, but the question remains: when and by whom will it be replaced, and what will replace it? Politics is a dangerous game, especially for those who are inclined to speak truth to power. The price of being politically engaged has been decidedly high, but it does not need to be this way. The rising generations need to struggle—and convince the older generations on the way—for an environment in which raising a voice, organizing, and engaging in politics does not lead to imprisonment, torture, death, and exile, but to the forging of a better, more inclusive, more just society—a better society today, not just at some unspecified time in the future.

## NOTES

---

1. Zone Nine is “an informal group of activists and bloggers.” The main prison in Addis Ababa, Kality Prison, has eight zones. Zone Nine metaphorically represents all of Ethiopia, which is “the bigger prison.”
2. *Maʾakelawi* is an Amharic word; the equivalent English term is “The Center.” Since the beginning of the military regime, which was marred by political persecution, imprisonment, torture, and killings, this particular prison facility has been serving as a center of both crime investigation and political interrogation.

3. Babile Tola, *To Kill a Generation: The Red Terror in Ethiopia* (Washington, DC: Free Ethiopia Press, 1997).
4. “Red Terror” signifies the most important period of the Ethiopian revolution, a period of maximum political violence among contending political forces seeking to control state power in the aftermath of the coup that toppled the imperial government. For detailed accounts, see Andargachew Tiruneh, *The Ethiopian Revolution 1974–1987: A Transformation from an Aristocratic to a Totalitarian Autocracy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993); Tola, *To Kill a Generation*, 16; and Bahru Zewde, “The History of the Red Terror: Contexts and Consequences,” in *The Ethiopian Red Terror Trials: Transitional Justice Challenged*, ed. K. Tronvoll, C. Schaefer, and Girmachew Alemu Aneme (New York: James Currey, 2009), 17–32.
5. This is author Eyob’s translation of the charge submitted by the federal prosecutor to the Federal High Court 19th Criminal Bench.
6. The field research was undertaken exclusively by the first author, Eyob Balcha Gebremariam.
7. Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff, “Reflections on Youth, from the Past to the Postcolony,” in *Frontiers of Capital: Ethnographic Reflections on the New Economy*, ed. Melissa S. Fisher and Greg Downey, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 267–81.
8. Reed W. Larson, “Toward a Psychology of Positive Youth Development,” *American Psychologist* 55, no. 1 (2000): 170; Richard M. Lerner et al., “Positive Youth Development,” *Journal of Early Adolescence* 25, no. 1 (2005): 10–16.
9. Keith R. Ihlanfeldt and David L. Sjoquist, “Job Accessibility and Racial Differences in Youth Employment Rates,” *American Economic Review* 80, no. 1 (1990): 267–76; J. David Hawkins et al., “Preventing Adolescent Health-Risk Behaviors by Strengthening Protection during Childhood,” *Archives of Pediatrics and Adolescent Medicine* 153, no. 3 (1999): 226–34; Rolf Loeber, “Development and Risk Factors of Juvenile Antisocial Behavior and Delinquency,” *Clinical Psychology Review* 10, no. 1 (1990): 1–41.
10. Deborah Durham, “Youth and the Social Imagination in Africa: Introduction to Parts 1 and 2,” *Anthropological Quarterly* 73, no. 3 (2000): 113–20.
11. Deborah Durham, “Disappearing Youth: Youth as a Social Shifter in

- Botswana," *American Ethnologist* 31, no. 4 (2004): 592.
12. Durham, "Youth and the Social Imagination in Africa," 113–20.
  13. Durham, "Youth and the Social Imagination in Africa," 113–20.
  14. Fred Greenstein, "Political socialization," *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences* (McMillan and Free Press, 1968), 551.
  15. Michael Rush, *Politics and Society: An Introduction to Political Sociology* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 96.
  16. Rush, *Politics and Society*.
  17. Catrine Christiansen, Mats Utas, and Henrik E. Vigh, *Navigating Youth, Generating Adulthood: Social Becoming in an African Context* (Stockholm: Nordic Africa Institute, 2006), 12.
  18. Karl, Mannheim, "The Problem of Generations," in *Essays on the Sociology of Knowledge* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1952), 286–322.
  19. Mannheim, "The Problem of Generations," 290.
  20. Linda Herrera and Abdelrahman Mansour, "Arab Youth: Disruptive Generation of the Twenty-first Century?" in *The Oxford Handbook of Contemporary Middle-Eastern and North African History*, ed. Amal Ghazal and Jens Hanssen (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).
  21. James E. Côté and Anton Allahar, *Generation on Hold: Coming of Age in the Late Twentieth Century* (New York: NYU Press, 1994); June Edmunds and Bryan S. Turner, "Global Generations: Social Change in the Twentieth Century," *British Journal of Sociology* 56, no. 4 (2005): 559–77.
  22. Mannheim, "The Problem of Generations," 292.
  23. June Edmunds and Bryan S. Turner, "Global Generations: Social Change in the Twentieth Century," *British Journal of Sociology* 56, no. 4 (2005): 559–77.
  24. Mannheim "The Problem of Generations," 296.
  25. Leena Alanen and Berry Mayall, ed., *Conceptualizing Child-Adult Relations* (New York: RoutledgeFalmer, 2001).
  26. Internet in Ethiopia remains limited to the capital city Addis Ababa and major towns. See [www.internetlvestats.com/internet-users-by-country/](http://www.internetlvestats.com/internet-users-by-country/) (Accessed on 8 October 2015).
  27. Tola, *To Kill a Generation*, 16.
  28. Bahru Zewde, *A History of Modern Ethiopia, 1855–1991* (Addis Ababa: James Currey, 2001), 207.
  29. Gebru Tareke, *The Ethiopian Revolution: War in the Horn of Africa* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), 26; Zewde, *A History of Modern*

*Ethiopia*, 222.

30. Gebru Tareke, *The Ethiopian Revolution*; Andargachew Tiruneh, *The Ethiopian Revolution 1974–1987*; Zewde, *A History of Modern Ethiopia*.
31. Merera Gudina, “Ethiopia: Competing Ethnic Nationalisms and the Quest for Democracy, 1960–2000” (PhD thesis, Erasmus University Rotterdam, 2002).
32. Prominent Ethiopian historian Professor Bahru Zewde argues that there were three phases of the Red Terror, which lasted in all from September 1976 to May 1978. In the first phase, from September 1976 till 3 February 1977, the EPRP was more offensive and the Derg was actively retaliating by imprisoning and killing EPRP members and sympathizers. The EPRP offensive against the Derg and AESM (MEISON) members is usually termed the “White Terror,” and the “Red Terror” was the reaction to it. The second phase covers the large-scale offensive by the Derg to wipe out the EPRP, from February to November 1977. This includes the eve of May Day 1977, when more than 1,000 young people were mercilessly massacred after the youth league of EPRP organized a demonstration. In the third phase, from November 1977 to May 1978, AESM members were specially targeted after the “critical support” that the AESM was offering to the Derg reached political deadlock. In his historical analysis, Bahru contends that the Red Terror was a process that developed from a debate in the newspapers to an armed clash. See Bahru Zewde, “The History of the Red Terror,” 17–32. In addition to Bahru Zewde’s narrative historical account, analytical explanations are available, emphasizing the inevitability of such a violent encounter among the contending actors in the revolution. For instance, adopting Louis Althusser’s analysis of the state, it can be argued that the EPRP had a superior hold over the ideological state apparatus (ISA) during the revolution and the Derg commanded the repressive state apparatus (RSA). The stalemate between the two in their struggle to take over the other apparatus made the Red Terror relentless. See Tamrat Haile, “Alternative Approach to the Study of Ethiopian Revolution” (paper presented at the International Conference on the 40th Anniversary of the Ethiopian Revolution and 50th Anniversary of the Department of History, Addis Ababa University, Addis Ababa, 28 February–1 March 2014).
33. Jon Abbink, “The Impact of Violence: The Ethiopian ‘Red Terror’ as a Social Phenomenon,” in *Krieg und Frieden: Ethnologische Perspektiven*, ed. P. Braunlein & A. Lauser, (Bremen: Kea-Edition, 1995), 129.

34. Abbink, "The Impact of Violence," 129.
35. Gebru Tareke, *The Ethiopian Revolution*, 7.
36. The EPRDF is a coalition of four ethno-nationalist political parties, namely, the TPLF (Tigray People's Liberation Front), OPDO (Oromo People's Democratic Organization), ANDM (Amhara Nationalist Democratic Movement), and SEPDM (Southern Ethiopian Peoples' Democratic Movement).
37. Randi Rønning Balsvik, *The Quest for Expression: The State and the University in Ethiopia under Three Regimes, 1952–2005* (Addis Ababa: Addis Ababa University Press, 2007).
38. Melakou Tegegn, "Power Politics: Kinijit in the 2005 Elections," *Journal of Developing Societies* 24, no. 2 (2008): 273–306.
39. Tegegn, "Power Politics," 273–306.
40. Teun A. Van Dijk, "Critical Discourse Analysis," in *The Handbook of Discourse Analysis* (ed. Schiffrin, D., Tannen, D. and Hamilton, H.E, Massachusetts, Oxford, Blackwell 2001).
41. See [www.internetlivestats.com/internet-users-by-country/](http://www.internetlivestats.com/internet-users-by-country/) (accessed 8 October 2015).
42. The latest UN population estimate puts the Ethiopian population at 99,391,000 as of 1 July 2015. See <http://esa.un.org/unpd/wpp/DVD/> (accessed 27 September 2015).
43. Linda Herrera, "Youth and Citizenship in the Digital Age: A View from Egypt," *Harvard Educational Review* 82, no. 3 (2012): 333–52.
44. As Edmunds and Turner have argued, members of a generation exploit and make use of the available resources and opportunities to turn themselves into an active generation that has its own signature in a society. Edmunds and Turner, "Global Generations," 559–77.
45. See <http://zone9ethio.blogpost.co.uk>.
46. The name was coined by Reeyot Alemu, a young journalist who was sentenced under the new Anti-Terrorism Proclamation for reporting on political protests in Ethiopia during the North African uprisings in 2011 and communicating with a diaspora-based political activist who was also sentenced in absentia under the same proclamation. Reeyot Alemu reportedly said that the political prisoners in zone eight consider the people outside the prison as people who live in the bigger prison, hence, Zone Nine. Reeyot was released from prison in July 2015.

47. The influence of the blog started to gather momentum when the bloggers ran their online campaigns, which resulted in the blocking of their Facebook page. Changing the web address of the group and making the blog available through secured links was their response. At present (November 2015), their Facebook page is accessible within Ethiopia but the blog is blocked (conversation with founding member Soleyana Shimelis Gebremichael—accused in absentia).
48. Ginbot 7 and the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) are opposition political parties operating in exile. In June 2011, the Ethiopian parliament, in which the ruling party controlled 99.6 percent of the seats, categorized these two political parties as terrorist organizations.
49. In July 2015, two bloggers (one female) and the three journalists were released from prison. They were suddenly told that the government had interrupted their case. After spending nearly 15 months in prison, no further explanation was given by the government about the interruption of their case. After 539 days of imprisonment, the remaining five Zone Nine bloggers (one female accused in absentia) were acquitted from the terrorism charges on 16 October 2015. However, as this article is being finalized (January 2016), the Federal Prosecutor has appealed the decision to the Supreme Court and the bloggers are currently following their cases at the Supreme Court. The evidence that the prosecutor submitted consists of the articles that the bloggers had written and witnesses who were present during procedures of warranted searching and signing of exhibits. No substantive evidence has been presented against them so far.

#### ABOUT THE AUTHORS

---

**Eyob Balcha Gebremariam** is a youth activist from Ethiopia, currently a PhD researcher at Global Development Institute (GDI), University of Manchester, UK. He can be reached at [ebalcha@gmail.com](mailto:ebalcha@gmail.com).

---

**Linda Herrera** is professor in the department of Education Policy, Organization and Leadership at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, and director of the Global Studies in Education program. Her two most recent books are: *Revolution in the Age of Social Media*:

*The Egyptian Popular Insurrection and the Internet* (Verso, 2014) and *Wired Citizenship: Youth Learning and Activism in the Middle East* (Routledge, 2014). She curates the online platform, “Democracy Dialogue,” @ [www.democracydialog.com](http://www.democracydialog.com).

---