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RELIGION, ETHNICITY, AND CHARGES OF EXTREMISM: THE DYNAMICS OF INTER-COMMUNAL VIOLENCE IN ETHIOPIA



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ACRONYMS

ANDM	Amhara National Democratic Movement
EHRC	Ethiopian Human Rights Commission
EIASC	Ethiopian Islamic Affairs' Supreme Council
EOC	Ethiopian Orthodox Church
EPRDF	Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front
NAMA	National Movement of Amhara
OFC	Oromo Federalist Congress
OLF	Oromo Liberation Front
OPDO	Oromo People's Democratic Organization
PP	Prosperity Party
SEPDm	Southern Ethiopian People's Democratic Movement
TPLF	Tigray People's Liberation Front



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In recent months, the conflict in Tigray has dominated most analyses of Ethiopian politics. The scale of that crisis makes this understandable, but it remains important to keep analysing the inter-communal tensions and conflicts lines that had already emerged all over the country before the fighting in Tigray and continue to persist in parallel. This report addresses in particular the question of religiously motivated violence and its relationship with ethnic conflict. It analyses in detail two specific instances of inter-communal conflict that occurred in Mota (Amhara region) in December 2019 and in Shashemene (Oromia region) in July 2020. Both incidents might be seen as archetypical cases for inter-communal tensions and conflict motivated by religious (Mota) and ethnic (Shashemene) difference. Yet as the report will go on to show, these two aspects of collective identity formation are not clearly separate in Ethiopia but overlap and interact with one another in complex ways.

This renders moot all mono-dimensional analyses of inter-communal conflict in Ethiopia, especially as different narratives compete in the interpretation of violence and its causes. Socio-economic variables undoubtedly play a role in defining the wider context, but the formation of communities, the genesis of conflict, and the circulation of interpretative narratives typically rest on references to ethnicity and religion. Given the current emphasis on ethnicity in Ethiopian politics, the role of religious affiliation is often overlooked, yet it is here that the accusation of “extremism” is most frequently and most consequentially raised. The report engages critically with such accusations and the corollary notion of rising religious extremism in Ethiopia. It will show, moreover, how the mere expectation or accusation of extremism has sufficed to generate inter-communal violence and deepened a climate of mistrust.

After a brief introduction and a clarification of the concepts of extremism and communal identity, the report presents an extensive background analysis summarising how religious and ethnic identities have risen to the fore since the fall of the Derg and facilitated PM Abiy Ahmed’s rise to power, followed by an overview over major incidents of inter-communal violence since 2018 and their political background. This is then followed by a detailed analysis of the inter-communal violence in Mota in December 2019, when Orthodox youth attacked and burned four of the city’s mosques as well as multiple businesses and apartment buildings overwhelmingly belonging to Muslims. This is followed by an equally detailed analysis of inter-communal violence in Shashemene in July 2020, following the murder of Hachalu Hundessa, where Oromo protesters attacked people and property perceived as non-Oromo.

The main findings of the report are:

- A multi-faceted approach is necessary to understanding inter-communal violence in Ethiopia. While there are some similarities between incidents with regard to their socio-economic context, there are multiple contextual variables and parameters at work in each of them which connect broader national developments and discourses to local incidents of violence. Chief among them is how patterns of ethnic and religious affiliation operate locally.
- The changing religious landscape has contributed to extremism narratives in interpreting and anticipating inter-communal violence. Politics of ethnicity and ethno-nationalist discourses have similarly affected demarcation of community boundaries and intensified processes of othering. Religious and ethnic identities often become intertwined in these processes, and they are fortified through instances of inter-communal violence, closing a feedback loop of further communal othering which operates via narratives of suffering, conspiracy theories, and heightened suspicion.


- Accusations of extremism play a prominent role here, because they convey a sense of worsening inter-communal relations with one side standing accused of resigning the civil bond. This accusation operates in generalised tropes, for example by seeing Muslims as increasingly influenced by “Wahhabi” ideology or attributing attacks by Christians to neo-Orthodox movements and preachers. Yet this does not do justice to the highly diversified nature of religious reform movements, which are often contested within and do not uniformly push its members to “extreme” or “fundamentalist” positions. Invocations of “extremism” by politicians to explain inter-communal violence only fuels these narratives of suspicion rather than explaining the underlying dynamics.
- The discussed instances of inter-communal violence were marked by a severe failure of state institutions. In most violent incidents police forces have been described nearly ubiquitously of standing by and even preventing people from defending themselves. While there may be different reasons behind this failure to protect citizens, the erosion of trust this has caused has been clear in our interviews and other data collected. This is exacerbated by the fact that there have been no official investigations or indictments in relation to the incidents. This not only sets up the state as passive (if not complicit, in the minds of some), but it also allows one-sided reports about the violent incidents to stand as only source of information.
- We have not witnessed any concerted dialogue initiatives arising in Mota or Shashemene in the aftermath of the violence. Instead, our interviews showed continued division in the aftermath, expressed in both disagreements about causes and events as well as in a general pessimism about the future. This shows that the cycle of inter-communal conflict, violence, and suspicion about further conflict has not yet been broken and the divisive post-hoc analysis of the violent incidents is likely fuelling further suspicions and divisions, exacerbated by the rapid and fragmented flow of information on social media.

1. INTRODUCTION

The topics discussed in this report could easily be overshadowed by the ongoing conflict in Tigray. That would, however, be a mistake – for two reasons. First, there are no reasons to believe that religious and ethnic violence as discussed in this report could not erupt again, and it remains pivotal to carefully monitor developments across Ethiopia. Secondly, the ongoing conflict in Tigray could contribute to destabilising the political situation in the country, thus providing openings for further insecurity and local conflicts. Therefore, it is important to understand the underlying dynamics behind current inter-communal violence and broaden the scope of analysis. In media reports and discussions, the violent conflicts tend to be framed in rather narrow concepts of ethnicity, which partly is a result of Ethiopia’s multinational federal arrangement and the strength of various ethno-nationalist movements. This report aims to offer a broader political analysis in particular with regard to the dimension of religion – which we argue remains an important, yet overlooked, dimension of Ethiopian politics. One reason for why observers (both foreign and local) have failed to pay attention to this is because of the strong emphasis on politics as *secular*, while another factor is the salience of a near-hegemonic Christian Orthodox national narrative, marginalising other religious communities. Similarly, religious discourses in Ethiopia have been expressed in a rather subtle nature, with the exception of the so-called Muslim protests (2012-2013) related to the al-Abhash controversy.¹ Religion remains, however, a salient issue and religious tensions have increased in recent years.

The main aim of this report is to contribute to a deeper understanding of inter-religious tensions and violence in Ethiopia. It addresses this along two interrelated axes: relations between religion and ethnic discourses and

¹ Terje Østebø (2013): "Islam and State Relations in Ethiopia: From Containment to “Governmental Islam”." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 81(4): 1029-1060.



the emergence of religious reformism. It moves beyond common – yet simplistic – models that explain violent conflicts in light of deteriorating socio-economic conditions, and examines the inter-connections between religion and ethnicity, and how this possibly have produced and exacerbated violence. It further explores how current religious reform movements may have contributed to produce or heighten inter-communal tension and violence. More in particular, it focuses on two cases of violence, first the attacks against Muslims in Mota (Amhara region) in December 2019 and, secondly, the violence in Shashemene and other surrounding areas (Oromia region) in July 2020. It seeks – as much as possible – to establish what actually took place during these and other incidents, and more importantly, it aims to analyse how conflict narratives, processes of othering, perceptions of victimhood, and images of extremism contributed to the violence – and reciprocally, how the violent incidents themselves intensified such narratives.

The report draws on ethnographic data as well as background research. Team members carried out fieldwork and conducted qualitative interviews in various localities in January and February 2020 and in October 2020.² The report also draws upon news sources, social media postings, reports, and other relevant written material. The sensitive nature of the topic and the continuing conflict lines made the research methodologically challenging. Conflicting stories, lack of independently confirmed information, and explicit biases have made it difficult to assess with certainty many details of what occurred. This has to some extent been mitigated by the team members long-term research experience in Ethiopia and knowledge of local languages.

The report starts with a brief discussion of extremism as a concept, before providing an overview over recent political and religious developments, including an outline over the most disruptive incidents of inter-communal violence since Abiy Ahmed came to power. This will lead directly to our two main case studies of Mota and Shashemene, before offering summary conclusions.

THE CONCEPT OF EXTREMISM AND COMMUNAL IDENTITY

The intention of the study was to investigate religious violence – and how it appears to be intertwined with ethnicity – in order to address the question of *extremism*. Extremism is, however, an inherently complex and ambiguous concept. This is demonstrated by how Martin Luther King, when accused by a group of white clergymen of being an extremist, ends up embracing this label, calling himself an extremist – of love.³ Extremists also tend to be placed in opposition to moderates, but in something of a continuing spectrum, leaving us with the question of where to draw the line between extremist and acceptable opinions and actions.⁴ This further means that there is a political dimension to it; who gets to decide who is an extremist? As in this context there would be those who would call the Oromo activist Jawar Mohammed an extremist, while others would hail him as freedom fighter. Religious extremism could, furthermore, be understood as a result of secularism, both in terms of how religion has been made peripheral and religious ideas are viewed as outlandish and sometimes extreme – and by the way movements have rejuvenated religion as a reaction to secularism.⁵ Extremism has moreover been associated with violence, producing the concept violent extremism, yet it is clear that ideas, practices, and groups defined as extreme by some are not necessarily violent.


While we believe that extremism is a problematic concept, we have not discarded it in this report for the simple reason that that it is a concept our informants often referred to – mainly with the Amharic term of *akrarinet*. It is worth noting here, that the Amharic term in its primary meaning refers to a rope or string of an instrument being tightly twisted or taut, rather than something exceeding the ordinary or being far from a perceived centre. This means the Amharic interpretation of extremism rests on the tensions and possible ruptures it produces.

² Plans for additional fieldwork was interrupted by the Covid-19 pandemic, and further research was delayed until October 2020.

³ King, Martin Luther. "Letter from the Birmingham Jail". M.L King (ed.), *Why Can't We Wait*. New York: Signet, 2007: 64-84.

⁴ Sedwick, Mark. "The concept of Radicalization as a Source of Confusion." *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 22, 4, 2010: 479-494.

⁵ Lawrence, Bruce. *Defenders of God: The Fundamentalist Revolt against the Modern Age*. Durham: University of South Carolina Press, 1998.



While translation undoubtedly erodes this linguistic distinction in the minds of some, it is important to note this difference as an example of the difficulties involved when applying such a full explanatory concept to the complex, and often highly localised political configuration of inter-communal violence. Therefore, rather than seeking to categorise something or someone as extreme, our focus has been on our informants' narratives and images of extremism and how they inform their analysis and anticipation of inter-communal violence.

We argue that religion and ethnicity form *foundational dimensions* of people's socio-political identity. We moreover believe that these two dimensions are inherently affective, producing strong emotional ties of belonging and may as well demarcate sharp boundaries towards the other. Their salience is built upon and grounded on embodied relations and emplaced realities, wherein primary experience of family and home become the bases for imagined belonging to a larger collective, or peoplehood. This is evident in how they are used as metaphors like homeland, motherland, founding fathers, and how religious communities talk about brothers and sisters. And it is precisely these references to primary relations and primary place, associated with intimate love what make religious and ethnic identities so potentially powerful – something to defend with one's life. Benedict Anderson has noted how nationhood commands “a profound emotional legitimacy”, arguing that no one is willing to die “for the Labour Party, the American Medical Association, or perhaps even Amnesty International”⁶ As the examples discussed in this report will show, people have indeed died for a specific community or because they were seen as members of a specific community, the identity or peoplehood of which was often determined by ethnicity, religion, or a combination of both.

2. BACKGROUND

The three most important parameters for identity in Ethiopia therefore are ethnicity, religion, and nationality. The latter concept is seldom invoked in analyses of inter-communal conflict in Ethiopia, but appeals to the national unity or identity of Ethiopia are in fact an essential part of the corollary debates. Religion and ethnicity, on the other hand, are typically invoked to identify peoplehood via intra-Ethiopian difference. This difference can be deployed in the interest of competition and conflict, but it may also be used to create a notion of unity within diversity, such as in the Ethiopian constitutional vision of multinational federalism. While religion and ethnicity and religious and ethnic conflicts too often are categorised as separate – sometimes deliberately – we argue that religion and ethnicity serve as connected identity markers, which interact in complicated ways.

Ethiopia is home to three main religious groupings (Orthodoxy, Islam, and Protestantism), which are sharply distinct in practice and community identification. At the same time, the country is made up of over eighty ethnic groups, with the Oromo and Amhara comprising over half of the country's population (34.6 and 27.1 percent, respectively), and the remainder fragmented into much smaller ethnic groups (the next largest are the Somali and Tigray with just over six percent each).⁷ Among these ethnic groups, there are some with a very high religious homogeneity, so that the invocation of this ethnic identity may be homologous with invoking this predominant religion. This is the case, for example, with the Amhara or Tigray, who are each well over 90 percent Orthodox, or the Somali, who are nearly 100 percent Muslim. Other ethnic groups, most notably the Oromo, are religiously diverse, being spread over predominantly Muslim, Orthodox, and Protestant regions, which makes for a more complex configuration of ethnic identity over and against religious affiliation. In recent years, the revival of Oromo Traditional Religion has been a particularly effective rallying ground for ethnic identity on the basis of a shared religion.

⁶ Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London & New York: Verso, 1983: 4.

⁷Office of the Population Census Commission, “The 2007 Population and Housing Census of Ethiopia: Statistical Report for Amhara Region”, Addis Ababa, 2007.

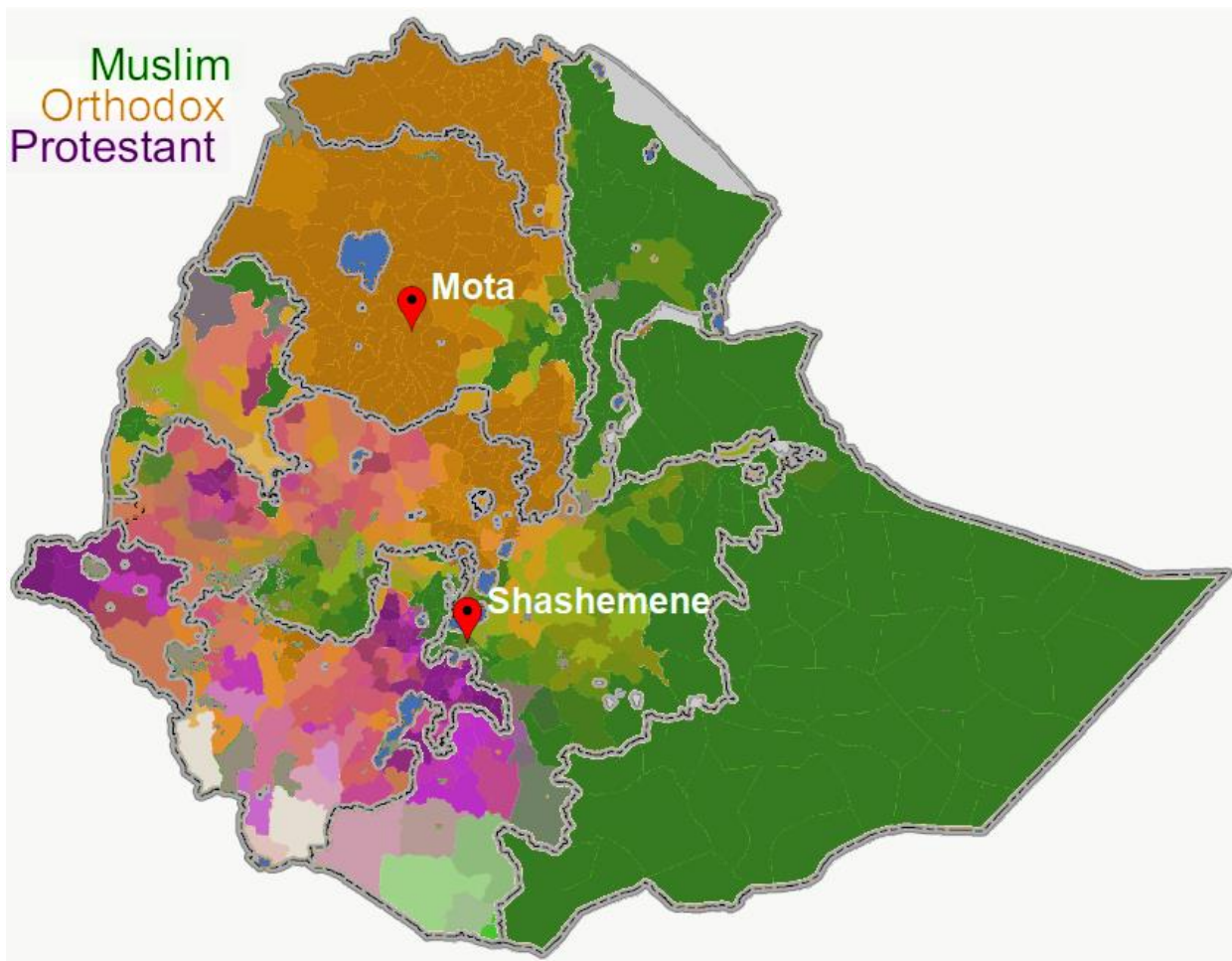


Figure 1: Religious majorities in Ethiopia by woreda (overlay of maps from Census Atlas 2007)

Figure 1. may help appreciate the inter-related nature of religion and ethnic affiliation. The graph is a visual overlay of the percentages of each of the three major religious traditions per district (*woreda*); the darker the colour, the larger the majority. The figure clearly shows areas of religious homogeneity, in particular in Afar, Amhara, Tigray, and Somali regions, while the composition of Benishangul Gumuz, Oromia, and the Southern Nations, Nationalities and People's Region are much more complex.

POLITICAL CHANGES SINCE 2018

Ethiopia has been governed by the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Front (EPRDF) coalition since it ousted the Derg government in 1991. While formally a coalition, it was effectively dominated by the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) – and with Meles Zenawi at the helm until his death in 2012.⁸ His successor, Hailemariam Desalegn managed to keep the coalition together, but broader developments would gradually affect the internal cohesion. In November 2015 popular protests erupted in Oromia and spread across the region. The protests were organised and carried out by the so-called Qeerroo movement, an Oromo word that refers youth; an unmarried person between 20 and 36.⁹ The movement was informal and decentralised in nature, but played a significant role in bringing about recent political change. A key actor here was Jawar Mohammed, an Oromo

⁸ In addition to TPLF, the coalition consisted of the Amhara National Democratic Movement (ANDM), the Oromo People's Democratic Organization (OPDO), and the Southern Ethiopian People's Democratic Movement (SEPDM).

⁹ Mulualem Daba Tola. "Qeerroo fi Qarree': The Engine of Current Transition in Ethiopia Politics." *International Journal of Scientific and Research Publications*, 9, 5, 2019: 534-343.

activist based in the US, who acted as the “*abba Qeerroo*” (the father of the Qeerroo) and to a large extent coordinated the protests via Facebook.¹⁰ Protests also spread to the Amhara region in 2016, led by the Fano – a decentralised Amhara youth movement similar to the Qeerroo. The government answered by declaring two rounds of state of emergency – in October 2016¹¹ and February 2018. The latter was connected to PM Hailemariam Dessalegn’s resignation and the fear that this could cause further political instability.

Meanwhile, the chairperson of the Oromo People’s Democratic Organization (OPDO) and President of Oromia Lemma Megersa and his OPDO deputy Abiy Ahmed started to criticise the government’s handling of the protests, and Lemma vowed to “address the legitimate concerns of the youth.” This soon earned them significant support among the Oromo protesters and activists, and Lemma’s conciliatory statements vis-à-vis the Amhara further broadened their base. Together with people in the Amhara National Democratic Movement (ANDM), the two started to challenge TPLF’s hegemony within EPRDF, and through alliances with the other parties in the coalition, succeeded in having Abiy Ahmed elected the new chairperson of EPRDF and hence the Premiership of the federation. Abiy Ahmed’s arrival generated strong expectations among the Oromo, and due to his unprecedented political reforms, he was widely seen by others as well as a transformative, unifying character ushering in a new era of Ethiopian politics. The first months of his tenure was thus characterised by a particular “Abiy-mania”, where most Ethiopians rallied behind him.¹²

However, inasmuch as Abiy Ahmed’s vision of a peaceful and prosperous pan-Ethiopian nation clashed with the political realities in government and on the streets, his “honeymoon” began to wane and gave way to scepticism and outright opposition. Continued high youth unemployment, a sense of disappointment in the expected “quick fix” now that an Oromo leader was in place, and increasing ethnic violence eroded trust in Abiy Ahmed’s leadership, while foreign and Ethiopian observers questioned the apparent lack of a road-map toward a peaceful, more democratic Ethiopia.

In an effort to solidify his position and to quash the TPLF over-sized dominance of the government, Abiy Ahmed pushed through the dissolution of EPRDF and the establishment of the new unitary Prosperity Party (PP) in December 2019. As a unitary party, the PP arguably reflected Abiy Ahmed’s aim to centralise power and was quickly met with opposition, primarily from TPLF, who accused him of undermining the federal system.¹³ The TPLF chose not to join the PP, and its leadership retreated to the Tigray region. Tensions between Abiy Ahmed and the TPLF regional government gradually escalated during 2020. When the federal government decided to indefinitely postpone national elections due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the TPLF held its own regional elections in September, winning nearly 100 percent of the vote. Relations between the federal and the regional government in Tigray subsequently soured and exchanges between the two became increasingly hostile, leading to military conflict between the federal army and regional forces in early November.

The establishment of PP was also met with criticism from Abiy Ahmed’s own Oromo constituency, most notably from Lemma Megersa, who opposed Abiy Ahmed’s pan-Ethiopian and unitary discourse.¹⁴ Jawar Mohammed, who had returned to Ethiopia in the summer of 2018 after the previous government’s “terrorism” charges against him had been dropped, also started to criticise the prime minister for seemingly abolishing multinational ethnic federalism. Jawar quickly emerged as a leading voice of Oromo opposition to Abiy Ahmed, and in

¹⁰ Østebø, Terje. Analyses: The Role of the Qeerroo in Future Oromo Politics.” *Addis Standard*, 2020. <https://addisstandard.com/analysis-the-role-of-the-qeerroo-in-future-oromo-politics/> (accessed 12 December 2020).

¹¹ This was related to the Irreechaa incident, when on 2 October 2016 security forces tried to disperse protesters at the annual Irreechaa thanksgiving ceremony in Bishoftu with tear gas, resulting in a stampede. According to government sources 55 people died, but other sources put the death toll much higher, as many as 500.

¹² “Ethiopians are Going Wild for Abiy Ahmed.” *The Economist*, 2018. <https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2018/08/18/ethiopians-are-going-wild-for-abiy-ahmed> (accessed 2 March 2020).

¹³ “Ethiopia: Debretsion’s Final Nail in the EPRDF Coffin.” *Gedab News*, 2019. <http://awate.com/ethiopia-debretsions-final-nail-eprdf-coffin/> (accessed 27 March 2020).

¹⁴ Salem Solomon. “Efforts to End Ethiopia’s Ruling Party Draw Criticism from Within.” *VOA News*, 2019. <https://www.voanews.com/africa/efforts-end-ethiopias-ruling-party-draw-criticism-within> (accessed 28 March 2020).

December 2019 he joined the Oromo Federalist Congress (OFC), one of the Oromo opposition parties. The internal divisions within the PP came at full display in August 2020, when Lemma Megersa was fired as Minister of Defence and ousted from the PP.¹⁵ This move further eroded the prime minister's support within the Oromo constituency, and another reshuffle in November left the impression that Abiy Ahmed surrounded himself mainly with his own loyalists.¹⁶ At the time of writing, the ongoing war in Tigray has energised Amhara ethno-nationalism in Ethiopia, and PM Abiy Ahmed's future, and even political survival, very much depends on how he is able to manoeuvre between the different ethno-political groups, which in turns depends on the trajectory and outcome of the conflict in Tigray.

RELIGIOUS CHANGES AND ETHIOPIAN POLITICS

After the Derg was ousted in 1991 and the EPRDF regime consolidated its power, Ethiopia saw an unprecedented introduction of religious liberties. This had little to do with the religious sensibilities of the new rulers, who had emerged from a similar Marxist, atheistic platform as their predecessors. Instead, the promotion of religious plurality and diversity dovetailed nicely with the new governing philosophy of multinational federalism. These liberties were enshrined in the 1995 Constitution, and in contrast to both the Imperial and the Derg governments, these legal provisions were largely respected in practice.

The religious communities in Ethiopia responded enthusiastically to the new liberties, and the decades since 1991 have seen a dramatic reinvigoration of religious practice – to a large extent driven by a range of both formal and informal religious reform movements. On the Muslim side, the main current of reform was Salafism, or Wahhabism as it often is referred to in Ethiopia. Salafism is a global phenomenon aimed at recreating the “golden age” of Islam as practiced during the time of the Prophet and his immediate successors by way of cleansing out assumed un- or pre-Islamic elements. Because of the intra-religious tensions this has created, Salafis are often portrayed as extremists and accused of uprooting peaceful inter-religious relations.¹⁷

On the Christian Orthodox side, Neo-Orthodox reform movements emerged in response to the spread of Protestantism, mostly prominently in the Mahabir Qidusan, a movement for youth and young adults aimed at recovering and rebuilding traditional Orthodox piety and spirituality as an essential Ethiopian national heritage while characterising Muslims and Protestants (including Charismatic movements within the Orthodox Church) as an erosive foreign force. Despite its continued claim to the country's national heritage and identity, the Ethiopian Orthodox Church (EOC) has been unable to reclaim the central political position it occupied before the Derg period, but has instead appeared subservient to the state at times.

Protestantism, with its many denominations, has expanded significantly over the last decades, and the Protestant population share rose from ten percent in the 1994 Census to 18.5 percent in 2007. Subsequent data from the Ethiopian Demographic and Health Survey (EDHS) suggests that their numbers grew further to over 27 percent in 2019.¹⁸ This remarkable shift in Ethiopia's landscape has largely come at the expense of the EOC, whose population share as still largest religion of the country has declined from just over 50 percent to 43.5 percent between the censuses of 1994 and 2007, and it fell further still to 41.5 percent in the latest EDHS.¹⁹

¹⁵ Elias Meseret. “Ethiopia's Prime Minister Fires Defense Minister.” *AP News*, 2020. <https://apnews.com/article/race-and-ethnicity-africa-c202a0d69052f497f2c881caef3bb097> (accessed 4 January 2021).

¹⁶ Anna, Cara. “Ethiopia Reshuffles Top Officials as Tigray Conflict grows.” *AP News*, 2020. <https://apnews.com/article/abiy-ahmed-africa-ethiopia-kenya-civil-wars-d8d6d6d2fdc993f5452b705ace378ff4> (accessed 19 December 2020).

¹⁷ There are also other, yet less visible, movements, such as the Jama'at al-Tabligh and the so-called Intellectualist movement. See Østebø, Terje. “The Question of Becoming: Islamic Reform Movements in Contemporary Ethiopia.” *Journal of Religion in Africa* 38, 4, 2008: 416-446.

¹⁸ Ethiopian Public Health Institute and ICF. “Mini Demographic and Health Survey 2019: Key Indicators,” Rockville, MD: EPHI and ICF, 2019, p. 8.

¹⁹In the past, the EDHS tended to overestimate the share of Orthodox Christians against Muslims, but was right in line with the Census figures on the trajectory of Protestants.

Similar to Islam, Protestantism now gained a much more visible public profile than before, and this is due in particular to its Pentecostalist forms, which seem to have pervaded most of the mainline Protestant churches as well.

While granting religious freedoms, the government continued to monitor movements within the different communities. This became particularly evident after the 2005 elections, with, for example, the 2009 Anti-Terrorism Law, which was levied against Muslims protesting government interference in matters of the Islamic faith, and the 2009 Civil Society Proclamation, which erected a wall of separation between religious advocacy and charitable works that proved problematic in some respects. Muslims, in particular, were the target of restrictions that gradually curbed the space they had cut out for themselves. Initially, the 1990s were marked by a much stronger presence of Islam in the public sphere through the reorganisation and formal recognition of the Ethiopian Islamic Affairs' Supreme Council (EIASC), the construction of new mosques, the emergence of Islamic publishing houses, and an increasing visibility of Muslim piety through clothing and the public performance of prayers and other rituals. Yet these developments and the new public presence of Islam were soon met with increasing unease by the government which feared the rise of Islamic extremism, particularly in the aftermath of 9/11 and Ethiopia's 2006 invasion of Somalia.²⁰

Muslim pushback against the government's pressure came in 2012 through widespread and unprecedented protests in Addis Ababa and other major cities. These protests were directed towards the introduction of the Lebanese al-Ahbash movement in July 2011 and subsequent enforced trainings aimed at teaching Muslims about the alleged rise of Islamic extremism in Ethiopia and instructing them to adhere to a more moderate version of Islam.²¹ The protesters accused the government of illegal interference in religious affairs and of violating the constitutional separation of state and religion. The protests continued until August 2013, when the authorities violently ended them. On the Christian side, there was much less political pressure, though the ousting of the orthodox patriarch Abuna Merkorios and subsequent installation of Abuna Paulos was generally seen as a case of political alignment and caused a split of the Ethiopian church with its exile synod.²² Abuna Paulos, and to a lesser extent his successor Abuna Mathias, have been seen as puppets of the EPRDF during times of unrest, mainly on account of their Tigray ethnicity and their failure to criticise the government. At the same time, the Orthodox political narrative, in particular in its Neo-Orthodox forms, has been that the Ethiopian Orthodox Church represents the country's national heritage and is the only religious institution that can guarantee the political and moral integrity of Ethiopia.

Protestants, on the other hand, largely stayed out of the political limelight in the first two decades of EPRDF rule. The politically most active church of previous years, the Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus, found it hard to balance its long-standing advocacy of Oromo rights (and its own internal arguments about Oromo rights) against accusations of sympathising with or even supporting the separatist cause of Oromo Liberation Front (OLF). Pentecostals, on the other hand, had developed a stance of political defiance in the years of political suppression they had endured since their emergence. They largely espoused a notion of "healing the nation" through personal conversion rather than party politics, with some of the larger Pentecostal churches even forbidding elders to become party members. However, with an influx of new Pentecostal theologies and a generation of Pentecostals no longer drawing predominantly on the experiences of the Derg period, there has been a greater interest in "occupying for Jesus" the seats of power. The most prominent expression of this tendency has been PM Abiy Ahmed, a Pentecostal himself, who claimed a prophetic calling to become prime

²⁰ See Haustein, Jörg, and Terje Østebø. "EPRDF's Revolutionary Democracy and Religious Plurality: Islam and Christianity in Post-Derg Ethiopia." *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 5, 4, 2011: 755-772.

²¹ Al-Ahbash is official name is the Association of Islamic Charitable Projects (AICP), and is a Lebanese organisation devoted to combat any form of 'extremist' Islam. The name al-Ahbash (Arabic) refers to the people of Ethiopia, and the explicit Ethiopian connection was embodied by Sheikh Abdallah ibn Muhammad ibn Yusuf al-Harari (1910-2006), a religious scholar from Harar, who after fleeing Ethiopia became the long-time spiritual leader of al-Ahbash in the 1950s.

²² See Haustein, Jörg, and Terje Østebø. "EPRDF's Revolutionary Democracy and Religious Plurality: Islam and Christianity in Post-Derg Ethiopia." *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 5, 4, 2011: 755-772.

minister more than a decade before his actual ascendancy.²³ Claiming the mantle of reformer once in power, he drew heavily on religious rhetoric in casting his vision of a new Ethiopia. As first prime minister to do so since before the Derg, he now ended his political speeches with the hitherto unthinkable phrase “May God bless Ethiopia and all its people.” While not shying away from high-profile appearances with Pentecostals, he was careful to extend his religious appeal to all Ethiopian faiths. Hailing from a mixed Muslim and Orthodox background, Abiy had built his political career on Christian-Muslim interfaith dialogue, and he knew how to approach Orthodox Christians and Muslims with respect and an inclusive demeanour. This took on tangible dimensions when Abiy inserted himself into the reconciliation processes within the EOC, and formed a new EIASC as well as a representative body for Protestants, lifting both to legal parity with the Ethiopian Orthodox Church.²⁴ The re-emergence of religious language at the heart of government was generally welcomed by the Ethiopian public, for whom religion not only plays an essential role in day-to-day life but also forms an integral part of their national identity. Orthodox Christians have for many centuries proclaimed Ethiopia as a land of God’s special favour, and for Muslims, Ethiopia is the land of the first Hijra. Abiy Ahmed’s integration of religious narratives into the articulation of his political vision of Ethiopia, therefore represents a renewed version of older religious narratives about the nation, perhaps presented in a more Pentecostal style and rhetoric than before, and certainly cast as an appeal to a multi-religious unity that would transcend inter-religious boundaries in the name of the nation

INSTANCES OF INTER-COMMUNAL VIOLENCE SINCE 2018

In contrast to Abiy Ahmed’s vision of multi-religious unity, Ethiopia has in recent years seen a number of incidents of inter-communal violence. Such incidents are not new in Ethiopia and have, in fact, punctuated the time of the EPRDF as well. But in the context of Abiy Ahmed’s reforms they are read by some as indications that the combination of new political liberties and insufficient law enforcement are bringing centrifugal, separatist tendencies to the fore, which could threaten to tear apart the country’s political and national fabric. While targeting of ethnic and religious minorities is one common thread, these incidents were each conditioned by very different political dynamics and triggers. This leads us to caution against overly broad analyses, in particular with regard to the ethnic and religious dimensions of these conflicts.

A particularly violent incident occurred on 4 August 2018 in Jijiga in the Somali Regional State, when young Somali men went on a spray looting and burning in the city, leading to the death of at least 58 civilians and the injury of 266 others, as well as property damages of 421 million Birr.²⁵ Due to an observable Somali resentment of Christian Amhara²⁶ and the rioters’ burning of churches and killing of priests, the Jijiga riot has sometimes been framed as an instance of inter-religious conflict.²⁷ It is particularly notable that a sense of religious persecution was amplified by the Pontifical Mission Societies and American conservative evangelicals, the latter

²³ Dereje Feyissa, and Hausteijn, Jörg. “The Strains of ‘Pente’ Politics: Evangelicals and the Post-Orthodox State in Ethiopia,” *Routledge Handbook on the Horn of Africa* ed. by Nicholas Bach. London: Routledge, forthcoming 2021.

²⁴ Endris Mekonnen. “Proclamation finally Decrees Equality for Ethiopian Muslims.” *Ethiopia Insights*, 2020. <https://www.ethiopia-insight.com/2020/09/16/proclamation-finally-decrees-equality-for-ethiopian-muslims/> (accessed 1 December 2020).

²⁵ “Attorney General Office Says Investigations into August Jijiga Violence Complete, Reveals Discovery of Mass Grave.” *Addis Standard*, 2019. <https://addisstandard.com/news-attorney-generals-office-says-investigations-into-august-jijiga-violence-complete-reveals-discovery-of-mass-grave/> (accessed 29 November 2020).

²⁶ Hagman, Tobias and Mustafe Mohamed Abdi. “Inter-ethnic violence in Ethiopia’s Somali Regional State, 2017–2018.” *LSE Conflict Research Programme, Research Memo*. London: LSE, 2020: 4

²⁷ The numbers of churches burnt ranges from 7 to 10 and the number of priests killed from 7 to 15. See “በሶማሌ ክልል የተለያዩ የክርስቲናን እምነት ተከታዮች ድብደባና ግድያ ተፈፅሏል” (Various Christians beaten and killed in Somali Zone), BBC Amharic, 12 August 2018.

<https://www.bbc.com/amharic/45080641> (accessed 4 November 2020); “Jijiga: 29 people killed and over ten Churches burned due to violence,” Borkena.com, 6 August 2018, <https://borkena.com/2018/08/06/jijiga-29-people-killed-and-over-ten-churches-burned/> (accessed 4 November 2020); “Jijiga : 29 people killed and over ten Churches burned due to violence”, World Watch Monitor, 14 August 2020, <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2018/08/ethiopian-pm-sends-condolences-to-orthodox-church-after-15-priests-killed/> (accessed 4 November 2020).

proposing a context of rising “Saudi-exported extremism.”²⁸ Yet it is important to note, first of all, that this event occurred in the context of internal political tensions in the region and a long-running Oromo-Somali border conflict, which had already produced large numbers of internally displaced people.²⁹ When Abiy Ahmed tried to rein in the power of the regional president, Abdi Mohammed Omar, the latter threatened to turn Jijiga “into Mogadishu”,³⁰ and was later indicted with organising and orchestrating the killing, looting, and rioting in the city.³¹

A little over a month later, on 15-16 September 2018, a new round of violence occurred in the town of Burayu, a town on the outskirts of Addis Ababa. As part of his political reforms, Abiy Ahmed had removed the “terrorist” label from the OLF and allowed it to return Ethiopia. When a big rally was held in Addis Ababa on 15 September to welcome the OLF leader Dawud Ibsa, minor clashes occurred as Qeerroo youth entered the capital the day before. Whereas the rally itself was a peaceful event, violent attacks on non-Oromo groups in Burayu occurred when people left the city again. At least 23 people lost their lives, many were wounded, and thousands fled to temporary shelters. Similar, but less deadly events occurred in other parts of Addis Ababa as well.³² Police was largely seen as inefficient or standing by as these clashes went on, which prompted an intense demonstration the next day against the failure of the state to protect its citizens.³³

In October 2019, the Oromo opposition politician Jawar Mohammed alerted his followers on Facebook, claiming that police had attempted to remove his security detail. Protesters rushed to protect Jawar in Addis Ababa, and riots in his defence broke out in the Oromia region. While these at first took the form of road blocks and clashes with the police, the public anger was soon directed against minorities in various towns in Arsi and Bale. On 23 October 2019, protesters in Bale Robe attacked and destroyed dozens of Christian/Amhara properties. The same happened in the towns of Asasa and Dodola, reportedly leading to the killing of 10 people and burning of property and looting in Dodola. Thousands of people were said to have fled their homes, finding shelter in churches and mosques.³⁴ Similar clashes also occurred in Adama, leading to over 40 people wounded and to the destruction of over 20 properties.³⁵ Due to reported damage done to Christian property in Bale Robe and to churches in Dodola, the attacks in lent themselves to being seen as instances of inter-religious violence, even as their proximate cause had come from the arena of national politics.³⁶

²⁸ See Jeffrey, James. “Fears that Saudi-Exported Extremism in Spreading Throughout Africa.” *The American Conservative*, 2019. <https://www.theamericanconservative.com/articles/saudi-exported-extremism-is-slaughtering-ethiopian-christians/> (accessed 4 November 2020); “Ethiopian PM Sends Condolences to Orthodox Church after 15 Priests Killed.” *Worldwatch Monitor*, 2018. cf. <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2018/08/ethiopian-pm-sends-condolences-to-orthodox-church-after-15-priests-killed/> (accessed 4 November 2020); “Churches Burned and Priests Killed in the Somali Region,” *Agenzia Fides*, 2018. http://www.fides.org/en/news/64614-AFRICA_ETHIOPIA_Churches_burned_and_priests_killed_in_the_Somali_region (accessed 4 November 2020).

²⁹ Hagman, Tobias and Mustafe Mohamed Abdi. “Inter-ethnic violence in Ethiopia’s Somali Regional State, 2017–2018.” *LSE Conflict Research Programme, Research Memo*. London: LSE, 2020.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, page 5.

³¹ *Ibid.* Abdi Mohammed Omar had been closely allied with the TPLF, which was a major reason for PM Abiy Ahmed’s efforts to reduce his power.

³² Manek, Nizar and Ermias Tasfaye. “Mob Killings Split Ethiopians as Political Fault Lines Tests Abiy’s Tent.” *Ethiopia Insights*, 2018. <https://www.ethiopia-insight.com/2018/09/26/mob-killings-split-ethiopians-as-political-fault-lines-test-abiy-big-tent/> (accessed 12 August 2020).

³³ Mahlet Fasil. “More than Twenty-Three Killed in a Spate of Mob Attacks in Burayu. Thousands Displaced.” *Addis Standard*, 2018. <https://addisstandard.com/news-more-than-twenty-three-killed-in-a-spate-of-mob-attack-in-burayu-thousands-displaced/> (accessed October 2, 2020); Schemm, Paul. “Ethiopia’s Ethnic Divides Rock Capital as Reports of Killings Prompt Angry Protests.” *Washington Post*, 2018. https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/ethiopias-ethnic-divides-rock-capital-as-reports-of-killings-prompt-angry-protests/2018/09/17/8701bd0a-ba74-11e8-bdc0-90f81cc58c5d_story.html (accessed October 2, 2020).

³⁴ “Ethiopia: Justice Needed for Deadly October Violence.” *Human Rights Watch*, 2020. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/04/01/ethiopia-justice-needed-deadly-october-violence> (accessed April 1, 2020).

³⁵ Hayalnes Gezahegn, Zecharias Zelalem and Bileh Jelani. “Tragedy Struck Ethiopia, Again. ‘We are Dealing with a Different Scenario.’” *Addis Standard*, 2019. <http://addisstandard.com/analysis-tragedy-struck-ethiopia-again-we-are-dealing-with-a-different-scenario/> (accessed 17 March 2020).

³⁶ “Security Crisis Unabated as Radical Qeerroo Unleash Rerror in Oromo Region of Ethiopia.” *Borkena*, 2019. <https://borkena.com/2019/10/24/ethiopia-crisis-unabated-as-radical-qeerroo-unleash-terror/> (accessed October 21, 2020); Zion K. “Anger and Shock in Robe in the Aftermath of Violence.” *Ethiopia Observer*, 2019. <https://www.ethiopiaobserver.com/2019/12/07/anger-and-shock-in-robe-in-the-aftermath-of-violence/> (accessed 21 October 2020).

The incidents in Mota and Shashemene that are at the centre of this report therefore occurred in a context of heightened awareness of inter-communal tensions and the dangers of violent conflict. More incidents could be added to this list. For example, rounds of violence erupted during the Christian Orthodox *Timket* (Epiphany) in Dire Dawa and Harar in January 2020, leaving one person dead in Dire Dawa, while clashes between Christians/Amhara and Oromo youth in the city of Harar left two people dead. In Harar, two buildings were set on fire, 11 buildings had their windows broken by stones thrown, and two cars were burned – all owned by Muslims.³⁷

Since each of these incidents did not follow a single trajectory of rising ethnic or religious extremism, but was driven by different contextual dynamics, a more detailed study is necessary, which not only highlights how national politics, ethnic affiliation and religious identities played out in a particular context, but also how these were fuelled by and in turn themselves fuelled a national crisis narrative. We have chosen two incidents for such a study: the attack on mosques and (mostly) Muslim properties in Mota in December 2019 and the burning and looting of non-Oromo residential and commercial compounds in Shashemene of July 2020. The reason for choosing these two cases is that each appear to represent two different lines of conflict; the first being explained primarily in reference to religious conflict and extremism, while the latter drew mostly on ethnic demarcations of difference. As our analysis will show, however, religion, ethnicity, and accusations of extremism intertwined in complex ways in both instances.

3. MOTA: ACCUSATIONS OF EXTREMISM AND INTER-RELIGIOUS VIOLENCE

On the night of December 20, 2019, four mosques were burned to the ground and a number of businesses and private homes, predominantly Muslim, were destroyed and looted in the town of Mota, roughly 250km northwest of Addis Ababa. Other than many other occurrences of inter-communal violence in Ethiopia, the Mota incident was an isolated event and not triggered by political events in the capital or the region. Moreover, the clash is most often understood as an attack by Christians upon Muslims and therefore framed as a purely inter-religious conflict with no clear ethnic overtones. In these interpretations, the question of religious extremism is particularly prevalent.

CONTEXT: RELIGIOUS DEMOGRAPHY AND SOCIO-ECONOMIC INDICATORS

Mota is located in the Hulet Ej Enese *wereda* (district) which is, like much of the Amhara region, overwhelmingly Christian. According to the 2007 Census, over 95 percent of the inhabitants were listed as members of the Orthodox Church and a negligible number as Protestants. Almost all of the remaining five percent of the *wereda* identified as Muslim, but this religious distribution is subject to a substantial urban-rural divide, with most Muslims living in towns. They are still a minority here, but a much more significant one. Mota currently has 11 mosques, which would make its Muslim community very visible in all four quarters of the town.

Ethnic homogeneity is very high. Less than 0.2 percent of the population in East Gojam Zone identified as non-Amhara, split between a broad range of ethnic groups. If broken down proportionally to Hulet Ej Enese *wereda*, these zonal numbers would only leave about 450 non-Amhara for the entire *wereda*, meaning that most Muslims

³⁷ "One Man Killed in Dire Dawa, Seven Wounded during Timkat." *Borkena*, 2020. <https://borkena.com/2020/01/21/ethiopia-one-man-killed-in-dire-dawa-seven-wounded-during-timkat/> (accessed 17 March 2020); Abdullah Sherif. "Harar without Hararis", *Ethiopia Insight*, 2020. <https://www.ethiopia-insight.com/2020/03/11/harar-without-hararis/> (accessed 24 March 2020).

in Mota must have identified as Amhara for the purposes of the census. This is noteworthy, as in popular parlour they would be unlikely to do so because of the identification of Amhara ethnicity with Orthodoxy, as explored further below.

Mota is by far the largest town in Hulet Ej Enese *wereda* in the East Gojam zone of the Amhara region. The *wereda* itself is mostly rural, with only 30,594 of its 275,638 inhabitants living in an urban setting in 2007.³⁸ The absolute majority of these (26,177) resided in Mota, and the rest were divided between the significantly smaller towns of Side and Keranio. As anywhere in Ethiopia, youth form the largest population share by far with around 73 percent of all inhabitants being under the age of thirty in both rural and urban settings of the *wereda*. When filtered for males only, this rises to 76 percent in urban settings against 72 percent in rural environments, which points to a considerable proportion of male youths moving to the towns to find an economic future.³⁹ This coalesces with a fairly high migration rate. About half of the *wereda*'s urban population were born elsewhere, and 57 percent of these had arrived in the three years prior to the census. At the same time, the economic activity indicators are lower in urban settings than in rural ones, whereas official unemployment figures are significantly higher here.⁴⁰ In Mota town, official unemployment was estimated at 9.8 percent, but this was based on an economic activity rate in urban settings of only 42 percent.⁴¹ Among the youth population, the fairly high economic inactivity rate is likely explained largely by educational enrolment,⁴² which for some, however, may be little more than a deferment of employment due to a lack of opportunities. In this macroeconomic setting, the fairly high migration rate can be seen as both an expression and a driver of economic uncertainties and frustrations, and therefore points to the socio-economic pressures coalescing in urban settings. Given that the next census is now overdue by more than ten years, these numbers will have increased along with Ethiopia's overall population, but they are unlikely to have changed substantially in structure. None of these factors explain by themselves, however, the sudden conflict, nor are they regularly invoked in local accounts of the incident.

THE CONFLICT OF 20 DECEMBER 2019 AND ITS AFTERMATH

At 5:20pm on Friday, December 20, 2019 smoke billowed up in the roof of the St. Giorgis church in Mota, a typical Northern-Ethiopian round church constructed of wood with a corrugated iron-sheet roof. Youths were meeting in the church at the time and promptly rushed out to ring the bell. The church's neighbours – Christians and Muslims as all witnesses emphasised – quickly came to the rescue, brought the fire under control. Soon, however, rumours spread that the fire had been arson, and that other churches in town had also been attacked. Mobs began to form and conducted "revenge" attacks on the city's mosques and (mostly) Muslim businesses.

According to a detailed report compiled by an investigative commission of the federal EIASC, four mosques were burnt down and 156 properties were attacked, looted and burnt – ranging from residential dwellings, small shops, and services, to large commercial buildings.⁴³ Well over ninety percent of the affected businesses were owned by Muslims, who also sustained nearly ninety-nine percent of the 330 Million Ethiopian Birr in damages recorded in the report. The EIASC sources all highlighted the swiftness of the violent escalation and destruction of property, which was echoed in our interviews. One of our informants, an Orthodox priest described the situation in these words:

³⁸ Office of the Population Census Commission. "The 2007 Population and Housing Census of Ethiopia: Statistical Report for Amhara Region." Addis Ababa, 2007.

³⁹ For females, the youth population in the towns (69%) is lower than in rural areas (74%).

⁴⁰ The Census utilised a "relaxed" definition of unemployment, counting only those as unemployed who at the time of the census were available to work, whether actively looking or not, but those in temporary "productive activity" would count as employed. For the urban environment of Hulet Ej Enesa *wereda*, this resulted in an urban unemployment rate of 8.9% against 0.6% in the rural parts of the *wereda*.

⁴¹ The economic activity indicator refers to persons from the age of 10, who are engaged or are available to be engaged in the production of goods and services.

⁴² These figures are only available for the Amhara region as a whole and therefore may differ for Mota.

⁴³ The Ethiopian Islamic Affairs Supreme Council. የኢትዮጵያ ለስልምና ጉዳዮች ጠቅላይ ምክር ቤት; በሞገግ ከተማ መስሊም ማህበረሰብ ላይ የተፈጸመውን የሽብር ጥቃት አጣሪ ለውክ በ-ድን የጉዞ ሪፖርት: ታህሳስ፣ 2012 ዓ.ል፣ አዲስ አበባ፣ ኢትዮጵያ. (Ethiopian Islamic Affairs Supreme Council, Report of the journey by the delegated investigative team on the terror attack inflicted upon the Muslim community in Mota. Addis Ababa, December/January 2019/20).

*'It was everyone, including the Muslim and the Christian community in the town, who came to put out the fire. [...] However, immediately after the fire was put out, the people who helped and others who were there, started to riot and destroy the Muslims' houses and mosques. The mob burned and destroyed Muslims' shops and mosques, and there were also some Christian shops, renting form Muslims that were burned.'*⁴⁴

Another informant, who is a Muslim leader in the town, described a similar situation, but especially highlighted the role rumours played in escalating the situation:

*'Then, on December 10 [Ethiopian calendar], around 5:00 pm we heard shotgun and people were going here and there. At first the talk was about St. Giorgis church which was burning. Community members, both Muslims and Christians, went out together and put out the fire. However, immediately after the fire at Giorgis was under control, another rumour that Gabriela church and then Medhanalem church were on fire started to circulate in the town. Then this turned into a religious conflict. [...] Next to almost all of the churches that were falsely said to be on fire, was a mosque which was targeted by violence.'*⁴⁵

Local police forces appear to have been overwhelmed by the situation. Two of our informants accused the police and security forces of standing by and failing to deescalate the situation. One even contended that the Mota town administration had explicitly instructed Bahir Dar, the regional capital, not to send the regional special forces. There were also widespread reports that the roads leading to Mota had been blocked in advance in order to delay the arrival of special forces. Nonetheless, another eye witness report cited by the EIASC investigative team suggests that the police tried to diffuse the situation by barring Muslims from going to the sites of conflict or even leaving their houses. This, however, was interpreted in the EIASC report as complicity with the attackers, preventing Muslims from defending themselves and putting out the fires to their mosques and shops. This arguable reflects the vulnerability and lack of help felt by Mota's Muslims in this situation.

By early next morning regional special forces had brought the town under control.⁴⁶ Five people "suspected of leading and organising the attacks" were arrested, and further arrests were made in subsequent days, including four security officers for failing "to execute responsibility and prevent religious-based attacks."⁴⁷ Yet details of the arrested persons have not been made public and to date no convictions or even indictments have been reported. Likewise, while some objects were confiscated from St. Giorgis as pieces of evidence, no report on the cause of the fire has been issued. This lack of investigative and legal progress has nourished conspiracy theories about the riot and continues to affect Christian-Muslim relations in Mota and the Amhara region overall. Arriving there in October, we found a deeply divided community, still shaken by the event and reluctant to speak about it, but also evidencing mistrust and misgivings about the religious "other".

Narratives of suspicion had been amplified in the aftermath of the violence. The team of investigators sent by the EIASC arrived in the town on 28 December, and thus began to assess damages and collect evidence while the trauma of the endured attack was still fresh. Their report was based almost exclusively on Muslim sources and sought to compile evidence that this was a long-planned attack on the Muslim community in town. Some

⁴⁴ Interview, 12 October 2020, Mota.

⁴⁵ Interview, 13 October 2020, Mota.

⁴⁶ The EIASC report notes in a few places that the violence and destruction only took two hours. This is taken here to highlight the efficiency of the attack, but it may also point to the swiftness by which the situation was either brought under control or was diffused.

⁴⁷ "The Islamic Council Threatens it will Call Nationwide Demonstrations." *Ezega News*, 2019.

<https://www.ezega.com/News/NewsDetails/7603/The-Islamic-Council-Threatens-It-will-Call-Nationwide-Demonstrations> (accessed 23 November 2020); "Security Officers Arrested for Failing to Protect Church, Mosques." *Ezega News*, 2019.

<https://www.ezega.com/News/NewsDetails/7616/Security-Officers-Arrested-for-Failing-to-Protect-Church-Mosques> (accessed 23 November 2020).

of the evidence presented consists of little more than claims about “odd” events on that day, such as a disruption of telecommunication. Others, like the blocking of roads leading in to Mota, have been reported elsewhere, but hard evidence is lacking. Moreover, the report uncritically recites allegations that Christians had been prewarned of the attack and that the attackers had systematically planned and proceeded to co-opt three members of the security forces. It also argued that even if overt collaboration could not be proven conclusively, so much destruction in so little time would have been impossible if police had not been complicit.

The EIASC report also cast doubt on the fire at St. Giorgis that is widely seen as having sparked the attack, listing a number of reasons for why this was a set-up: people only saw smoke but not the fire itself; arson by an outsider would have been impossible with the Orthodox youth gathered in the church; the building materials of the church would have quickly created a much larger blaze; and evidence for the fire was not presented to the investigative team as it had been taken away by the authorities.⁴⁸ In the end, the report cited the town’s Muslims as arguing that the fire was merely used as a pretext to ring the church bells, which then functioned as a signal for prearranged teams of attackers to come to St. Giorgis and assemble all in one place.⁴⁹ The rumours that other churches were on fire, accordingly are reinterpreted as secret codes shared by the attackers as to what nearby mosque to attack next.⁵⁰

Our own research highlighted how in the absence of official investigations and findings, such suspicions and conspiracy theories still informed the conversations about the incident roughly ten months later. One of our Muslim interlocutors basically echoed the EIACS report’s findings and alleged that it was “an organised incident and the town’s administration and religious leaders were involved.” An Orthodox informant, in turn, felt the need to tell us that the fire at St. Giorgis had been real: “I was at the church assembly when the smoke from the church came out and the I saw smoke coming out of the church. I saw this together with other people who serve the church.”⁵¹ When asked about who might be to blame for the fire, given that it had come from the interior of the church where only priests and deacons had access, he replied:

‘A lot of people could have done it. It could be people who work for the church, who may have received some money from people who want this thing to happen. And the ones who pay for that would be those who want to weaken the church. These could be from the Orthodox Tehadeso or from another religion that competes with the church, for example the Catholic church, but I don’t think politics has played a role here.’⁵²

It is clear that this informant pushed back against the idea advanced by the EIASC report that the fire was an Orthodox “inside job,” but he still held on to the notion that the fire was arson rather than an accident. He merely framed it as an attack by those seeking to harm the church: either the Ethiopian Orthodox Charismatic renewal movement (Tehadiso), which is seen by many Orthodox Christians as a pseudo-Protestant erosive influence, or another religious competitor like the Catholic church. Given that the Catholic Church is virtually inexistent in the area (the 2007 Census counted only two Catholics in the whole *wereda*), such a reference to a religious rival can only be read as a veiled implication of Muslims, who are the main religious competition in town. This was also evident in a later part of the interview, where the informant named Tehadiso and Muslim “extremism” side-by-side, while pushing back against the notion that Neo-Orthodox movements within the church might have played a role.

In line with their suspicions about what caused the event, our Muslims and Orthodox interview partners were unhappy with the aftermath of the conflict and saw inter-communal rifts as deepening since. One Muslim

⁴⁸ The report shows an indistinct photograph of a cell-phone picture depicting an unidentified item taken away by police for investigation. See the EIASC Report: 32.

⁴⁹ Ibid., page 30.

⁵⁰ Ibid., page 31.

⁵¹ Interview, 12 October 2020, Mota.

⁵² Ibid.

informant noted the community's discontent with the fact that the perpetrators of the violence were still walking around free, even though he seemed to acknowledge that some important political changes had taken place. Another Muslim informant saw no progress at all, but a further erosion of Christian-Muslim relations:

*'The community has lost its faith in the security force and the police. The people are still in pain after the things that happened on that day. Muslims and Christians are less likely to work together. People have donated money and a lot of money has been collected at the federal level to rebuild the mosques and pay out individuals whose property was damaged. These donations were beyond our expectation, but had a negative implication in that they created a negative sentiment within the Christian community. The Christians are saying that several churches burned in different part of the country, but the federal government has done nothing. However, when the Muslim community was affected, they did everything.'*⁵³

An Orthodox informant confirmed this sentiment:

*'Orthodox Christians in Mota town and everywhere that I talk with are not happy about things that happened after the incident. After the conflict in Mota, the government and other donors held a telethon and collected a lot of money in a day, beyond anyone's expectation. [...] The money collected can be used to build mosques, even more mosques than were burned, and some of the money is to be distributed to those whose property was damaged. However, this kind of thing has never been done when tens and tens of Orthodox churches were burning in Oromia and in other regions of the country.'*⁵⁴

In line with this sense of unfairness, this informant also suggested that media coverage and political attention had been uneven, with the BBC reporting about the Mota violence and politicians issuing clear condemnations, which, as the informant alleged, "didn't happen when churches were burning and Christians were targeted in other parts of the country." Furthermore, the person cited a peace-building gesture by Abiy Ahmed as particularly unhelpful, in which the prime minister gave a traditional cloth to the chairman of the Amhara Islamic Affairs' Council. Orthodox Christians subsequently rumoured that he had given a priestly garment to the Muslims as a sign of his intention to weaken the church for the benefit of Islam.

It is evident, therefore, that post-hoc narratives shape and continue to shape the analysis of events of inter-communal violence, and produce further tension. This is why special attention must be paid to not just political, religious, or socio-economic structures underlying such conflicts, but especially to the role of narratives about extremism in inciting conflict and hardening fronts thereafter.

ATTRIBUTING CAUSES AND THE ACCUSATION OF "EXTREMISM"

In the immediate aftermath of the attack a video went viral which claimed to show people dancing and singing "religious songs" in front of a burning mosque in Mota.⁵⁵ The burning building appears to be the Marzeneb Hotel rather than a mosque, and the chant is a popular celebratory song for weddings and other such occasions, which was, however, interspersed with invocations of Orthodox Christianity ("St. George is our father", "The Blessed Lady is our mother"). Accordingly, the two main interpretations of what triggered the Mota attack revolve around religion, and both draw on some notion of extremism. One essentially argues that a more or less unwarranted fear of Muslim extremists caused rising inter-religious tensions to explode on 20 December. The

⁵³ Interview, 13 October 2020, Mota.

⁵⁴ Interview, 14 October 2020, Mota.

⁵⁵ "አሸባሪ ኦርቶዶክስቶች የሞገስ ከተማን መስጫዲያ እቃጥለው ሲጨፍሩ/Orthodox Christian burned four Mosques in Mota, Ethiopia 2019." <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pgC6-hHBaAw> (accessed 2 November 2020). (The Amharic title actually translates to "Terrorist Orthodox dance after burning Mota town and mosque.")

other argues that this was a carefully planned campaign by Christian extremists, designed to intimidate and possibly drive Muslims out of Mota.

The available sources, including our own interviews, indicate quite uniformly that Christian-Muslim relations in Mota had been deteriorating for some time. EIASC's fact-finding report lists a number of incidents of anti-Muslim discrimination long predating the conflict. Among these are the re-purposing of a Muslim cemetery for a road-building project and a new industrial zone, incidents of physical abuse and attacks at night, as well as pressure from the community to close Muslim businesses on Sundays and Christian holidays.⁵⁶ All this took place in the context of a deteriorating national debate. One prominent example of this is a speech given by the Orthodox deacon Daniel Kibret, contending that Muslims were following a strategic master plan in opening hotels and other businesses in the Amhara region and other Christian areas, and calling the youth to put an end to this expansion before it was too late.⁵⁷ Our interviews appear to confirm this perception of worsening inter-religious relations in contrast to more peaceful earlier times, though the point of deterioration is not always clearly determined. One Muslim interlocutor began by noting that a noticeable "subjugation of the Muslim community" had been going on for about two years, but then immediately moved the beginning of this further back ("it seemed to start five or six years ago"), and ultimately argued that there was already "disdain" toward the Muslim community in the aftermath of the 2005 election.⁵⁸ Yet despite this clearly movable starting-point for when relations actually began to deteriorate, he upheld a nearly mythical notion of an original inter-religious peace:

*'In earlier times, when a Christian mother went to market or to collect water, she would leave her child with her Muslim neighbour, who would babysit the child and breastfeed it when it cried. The same was true with the Christian mother, she would breastfeed her Muslim neighbour's child until the mother came back. Things are different now; the church is teaching them to have no relationship with the Muslim community. A few religious leaders are preaching to hate Muslims. My female Christian neighbour stopped greeting my wife, and this is sad.'*⁵⁹

A Christian interview partner made similar claims about the past, but levied the accusation of bringing tensions against the Muslim community:

*'I can say that this thing didn't come suddenly. In Mota town some changes have occurred in the Muslim community. In the last few years there have been some members of the Muslim community who took a very different approach to their religion; the people in town call them Wahhabis. These are mostly young men who push the others in the Muslim community to avoid their century-long good relationship with the Christian community and become more serious [in their faith] and separate from non-Muslims.'*⁶⁰

Some also map the rising inter-religious conflict onto national politics. The interlocutor who had argued that the "subjugation of Muslims" began with the 2005 election, noted how in the aftermath of this contested election Muslims were accused of having voted for the EPRDF and thereby of siding with the central government instead of a regional opposition agenda. The same interviewee also saw anti-Muslim sentiment as coming from Tigray, while asserting that Abiy was locally associated with Islam. This suggests that Christianity and Islam were mapped onto a dichotomy of central government control versus an ethnic or local agenda, which is either identified with Amhara nationalism or the TPLF. It also shows the limits of a Muslim ethnic affiliation with

⁵⁶ The EIASC Report: 5f.

⁵⁷ "Daniel Kibret - Akrari Islmna wuhabiyoch", <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rvgrirApR74&t=13s> (accessed 5 January 2021). This speech was uploaded after the Mota incident but recorded and uploaded to Youtube in snippets before, see e.g. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Pylebu7LJso> (accessed 5 January 2021). This led some Muslims to accuse Daniel Kibret of having sparked the violence in Mota.

⁵⁸ Interview, 13 October 2020, Mota.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Interview, 14 October 2020, Mota.

Amhara identity. While Muslims will label themselves as Amhara for the census and similar administrative purposes, the category itself is charged with religious significance due to its alignment with Orthodox Christianity.

The deterioration of Christian-Muslim relations is usually punctuated with references to extremism (*akrarinet*), which form the predominant reference point for explaining the attack. One particularly intricate element of these extremism accusations was a letter by the Mota Islamic Affairs Council to the local Office of Administration and Security, which had raised fears of Muslim extremism in the town. This letter was leaked by a city official and circulated on Facebook a few weeks before the attack.⁶¹ It therefore became an anchor point for claims that fears of an impending Muslim attack suffice to explain the sudden turn against Mota's mosques when St. Giorgis burned. The letter indeed lent itself to such an interpretation. In it, the chairman of the Mota Islamic Affairs Council, Jamal Getaw notified the Office of Administration and Security that a group of Muslims had been meeting in Marzeneb Hotel, one of the commercial properties that was later burnt and looted in the attack. Naming the leaders of this gathering, the letter further alleged that people at this meeting were giving inflammatory speeches against the Mota Muslim Affairs Council and the town's Mosque Committee, concluding that the meeting's aim could only have been to "divide the town's Muslim community or even to create a conflict with the adherents of another faith." It is quite apparent that the letter was part of a local power struggle, whereby one faction tried to enlist the government's support against another. The timing was unfortunate, given that the letter, dated 15 November 2019, came only weeks after the attacks on Christian property in Bale Robe and Dodola and just a little over a month before the fire in St. Giorgis in Mota. The becoming public of these intra-Muslim accusations therefore lent them to be framed as the proximate cause in a tragic escalation of inter-communal fears.

The EIASC report pushed back strongly against this interpretation in its recounting of the events, calling it an unfounded "propaganda of lies" and a "cover-up for terrorists" by the country's mass media.⁶² Instead, it argued that the faction's gathering had been led by long-standing and well-established Muslim elders, who had hoped to reconcile a split within the town's Muslim community. As these discussions were difficult to have in the mosque, they moved the meeting to a hotel. When their efforts won support, their opponents began to mobilise against them, recruiting the local Islamic Affairs Council for their campaign. Yet, this campaign failed, the EIASC report argues, because the party seeking unity was soon exonerated by the *wereda's* Islamic Affairs Council and the EIASC itself. Therefore, the letter pointed to no more than an unfortunate internal affair, but was maliciously used by those leaking it ahead of the attack and those using it to explain the eruption of violence.

Our interviews in Mota found that the letter still formed a primary reference point in explaining the rising tensions and ultimately the attack. One member of the Muslim community upheld the view that the Islamic Affairs Council had fought extremists, but were misunderstood:

*'There was a segment of the Muslim community who would teach the Muslims to alter the century-long good relationship with the Christian community and even to avoid greeting the Christian community members. This extremist segment of the Muslims was rejected by the rest of the Muslim community and were fired from their positions in the town Muslim council. We fired them in order to keep our century-long good relationship with the Christian community, but people were not talking about our decision oust them. People were talking about Jawar [Mohammed] as being the one who organised this extremist segment, and they were saying that Jawar was in the meeting organised outside of the mosque. These messages were circulating on Facebook.'*⁶³

⁶¹ "What Happened in Mota?" *Ethiopian Observer*, 2019. <https://www.ethiopiaobserver.com/2019/12/24/what-happened-in-mota/> (accessed 1 November 2020). The leak was described by The Ethiopian Islamic Affairs Supreme Council Report: 58.

⁶² The EIASC Report: 56, 59

⁶³ Interview, 13 October 2020, Mota.

While the informant went on to argue that it was malicious conjecture to connect the attack on Muslims with this split, it is clear that the conflict around alleged extremism still formed a major reference point for him. On the Christian side, the idea that “extremist” Muslims were “up to something” also persisted, either in reference to the letter or other “suspicious” behaviour. One Christian interlocutor referred in detail to the conflict within the Muslim community and then added:

‘I believe the Wahhabis were working on something in secret one week or so before the incident. For example, there is a young man that I used to be close with as we grew up together. When I went to Mota I called him and asked him to help me with my thesis research in identifying informants. It was so hard to get through to him and he was so busy. I met him briefly two times, and one time there was a very luxurious vehicle from out of town that picked him when we were done. These activities were weird for me, and I have also seen a change in how he dressed and everything.’⁶⁴

Another Christian informant told us that Muslims themselves were “educating community members about Muslim extremism” and warned them that “Wahhabis may create problems in our city.” At the same time, this informant also noted that the Mahabir Qidusan fueled the fear of Muslim extremism by screening a film about churches burning elsewhere in the country, in order “to educate the Christians here about the cause of such activities including Islamic extremism and how we need to protect our church.”

The airing of anti-Muslim propaganda in the churches in and around Mota was also mentioned in the EIASC report, which builds them into a narrative of a carefully prepared and orchestrated attack on Muslims.⁶⁵ The report argues that an attack that could wield such a thorough and targeted destruction on the town’s Muslim community in just two hours would have needed much more time to plan than had elapsed between the letter and the Mota attacks. This only leaves a “terror attack” by Christian “extremists” as conclusion:

‘This proves, then, that this terrorist attack, conducted on 20 December 2019, was no accidental event, but arranged in months-long, intensive preparations, with direct involvement and cover-up by government bodies, with the aim not only to massacre and perform genocide on Muslims born and raised in Mota town simply on account of their religious difference, but also to exert heavy pressure for them to leave for good, planned by extremist Christians, whose constant desire is to be one body.’⁶⁶

The labeling of the Mota riot as a terrorist attack runs through the entirety of the report from the title to its last page, and this terminology is defended with a detailed comparison of the incident to the criteria for terrorism as defined in Ethiopia’s 2009 Anti-Terrorism Law.⁶⁷ Throughout the report, unspecified “extremists” are blamed for organising the violence, but in contrast to our interviews, the neo-Orthodox Mahabir Qidusan movement is not named. Instead, the report blames the Amhara Youth Association and the National Movement of Amhara (NAMA).⁶⁸ Nominally, the latter two are of course ethnically bounded entities, but in popular discourse, Amhara identity is, as noted, often conflated with Orthodox Christianity. This is evident in the common slogan “One Christianity, one Amhara, one Country,” which is also quoted in the report.⁶⁹ However framed, the fear that Christian extremists have prepared the Mota attack and might do so again, was prevalent in the Muslim community beyond the attack. Just eleven days after the attack, there was a widely shared social media post that Christians were airing an anti-

⁶⁴ Interview, 14 October 2020, Mota.

⁶⁵ The EIASC Report: 7

⁶⁶ Ibid., pages 66f.

⁶⁷ Ibid., pages 8f.

⁶⁸ The EIASC Report: 54, 69.

⁶⁹ This slogan is also quoted in the report, Ibid., page 69.

Muslim video in the Amhara town of Rema (140km south east of Mota), and Muslims there were concerned that a similar attack to the one endured in Mota was imminent.

It is clear, therefore, how references to extremism have framed and continue to frame the interpretation of the attack on both sides. As was seen from the local Islamic Affairs Council's letter, the accusation of extremism may be levied against members of one's own religious community as well, and there is a sense on both sides that a few problematic groups are poisoning inter-religious relations. In the absence of a proper investigation, conspiracy theories abound and continue to fuel further fears. In our estimation, there is not – at present – enough hard evidence to presume that this was a carefully planned and orchestrated attack as the EIASC report claims. As the narratives collected in our study show, the fear of extremist activities in itself would suffice as explanation as to what triggered this instance of inter-communal violence. Moreover, for Christians and Muslims alike, the attack itself only seems to have confirmed fears of religious extremism rising on the “other side,” and this interpretation continues to influence behaviour on both sides. Attempts by politicians and analysts to explain the attack with reference to extremism, therefore, is counter-productive, as it only adds to these fears and continued suspicion of some Christians or Muslims as harbouring malicious intent.

4. SHASHEMENE: RELIGION, ETHNICITY, AND VIOLENCE

Shashemene is located in the West Arsi Zone ca. 200 km south of Addis Ababa along the main highway leading to Moyale and then Kenya. It is considerably larger than Mota, with 100,454 residents according to the 2007 census. It is an important trading hub and a bustling town with a large business community, and its transitional character is made visible in its population statistics, where just over half of the town's inhabitants were classified as migrants and where the town's largest group, by far, were those with less than one year's presence in the town. Over 75 percent of its inhabitants were under the age of thirty in the 2007 census, with a larger youth ratio among women (77.6%) than men (73.2%). The official unemployment figures are nearly twice those of Mota, standing at 17.8 percent overall.⁷⁰ Whereas socio-economic conditions did not feature much in our informants' accounts, it is obvious that unemployment and disparity remain an underlying factor in producing grievances.

This also has an urban-rural dimension, which, as we will return to, in turn is connected to ethnic and religious differences – and which have given rise to a debate about nativism. The West Arsi Zone is, similar to the adjacent Bale and Arsi zones, predominantly Muslim (80 percent) and the rural areas are similarly ethnically homogeneous with ca. 93 percent Aris Oromo (Amhara count for only 1.5 percent in rural areas). Shashemene is, like other towns in southeastern Oromia, religiously diverse, where the largest religious group is Christian Orthodox (43 percent), followed by Muslims (31 percent), Protestants (24 percent), and Catholics (1 percent). This religious diversity coincides with an ethnic diversity as well, and nearly 19.5 percent of the town's population identified as Amhara, ca. 7 percent as Gurage, and ca. 62 percent Oromo.⁷¹

THE JULY 2020 VIOLENCE

Shashemene and many other towns in southeastern Oromia were in July 2020 the scene to inter-communal violence at a scale not seen in years in Ethiopia. A recent report from the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission

⁷⁰ Office of the Population Census Commission. “The 2007 Population and Housing Census of Ethiopia: Statistical Report for Amhara Region.” Addis Ababa, 2007.

⁷¹ Ibid.

(EHRC) said that 123 people were killed,⁷² while the Oromia regional police claimed the number to be at least 239, also claiming that 10,000 people were displaced.⁷³ It was sparked by the assassination of the famous Oromo singer Hachalu Hundessa by unknown assailants on the evening of 29 June. The day after, Jawar Mohammed, politician Bekele Garba from OFC, and others were arrested following skirmishes between them and security forces in Addis Ababa. The details about what ensued during the confrontation are still unclear, yet it seems to have revolved around where Hachalu should be buried.

The violence started only hours after the singer's death, and like the October 2019 clashes, it initially started with protests and road-blockades. It quickly morphed into inter-communal violence and continued through the night and until the next day. In addition to Shashemene and other towns in the southern Rift Valley, violent clashes also erupted in parts of Addis Ababa and spread to localities in Arsi, West Arsi, and Bale zones – in the towns of Dodola, Bale Robe, Agarfa, Gasera, and Asasa – and to Haramaya and Awaday towns in Hararge. In the towns of Agarfa in Bale and in Asasa in West Arsi, local government offices were burned to the ground.⁷⁴ In Bale Robe a few businesses were burned and destroyed.⁷⁵ Individual non-Oromo were targeted and killed in towns like Arsi Negelle, and in Dheera (Arsi Zone), a boy was found dead and disfigured in a ditch.⁷⁶

Shashemene, however, was hit particularly hard and saw widespread destruction of property. A list compiled by one of our informants, documented over 900 properties being destroyed.⁷⁷ In addition to numerous private houses, businesses including a hotel owned by the athlete Haile Gebrselassie and a private school were completely destroyed. In addition to burning down entire houses, the mob would also take out owners' belongings and set them on fire in order to prevent the spreading of the blaze to adjacent houses that were not targeted. While most residents were able to flee their homes before the attackers arrived, there were also dramatic incidents where they were caught by the violence. One of our informants narrated how he and his family remained in his house in an effort to save it. As the attackers were forcing the gate to his compound open, he, his wife, his two children (11 and 14 years old), and children of his relative hid in kitchen, watching their belonging being dragged from the house and burned. Suddenly they were discovered by a young girl who shouted to the others: "Qeerroo, asummaa jiraa, asumaa jiraa" (Qeerroo, he is here, he is here). As the crowd were banging on the kitchen door, the man decided to go out:

*'I told my family that I would confront them, thinking they would rather kill a man and that I might save my children. My wife tried to stop me, but I opened the door and stood in front of them. I said that they could kill me, but begged them not to touch my children, saying that history would never forgive you. At that moment two boys and one girl ran towards me and called me by my name. They took position in front of to protect me, telling the crowd not to touch me. My family was then brought out and we were told to follow the mob. I was sure they were taking us somewhere to kill us, but we managed to find shelter in a police station.'*⁷⁸

It is clear that the properties destroyed were deliberately targeted. According to one informant, "it was houses which they [the mob] thought belonged to non-Oromos and Amhara. If the next house was an Oromo house

⁷² Ethiopian Human Rights Commission. "መንግሥት ያለ አይመስልም ነበር" የአርቲስት ሃጫሉ ሁንዴሳ ግድያን ተከትሎ በተከሰተው የፀጥታ መደፍረስ ምክንያት የተፈጸሙ የሰብአዊ መብቶች ጥሰት ምርመራ ሪፖርት ("The government did not seem to exist." Study report of the Human Rights Violations conducted in the aftermath of the assassination of the artist Hachalu Hundessa), Addis Ababa: EHRC, 2020, 1.

⁷³ "Ethiopia Arrests Suspects over Haacaaluu Hundeessaa Killing." *Aljazeera*, 2020. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/07/10/ethiopia-arrests-suspects-over-haacaaluu-hundeessaa-killing/> (accessed 2 October 2020); "Chaos in the Rift: A Microcosm of Ethiopia's Brutal Polarization." *Ethiopia Insight*, 2021. <https://www.ethiopia-insight.com/2021/01/05/chaos-in-the-rift-a-microcosm-of-ethiopias-brutal-polarization/> (accessed 6 January 2021).

⁷⁴ Interviews (telephone), 4 & 10 July, 3 & 14 October 2020, Addis Ababa; 3 October 2020, Bale Robe.

⁷⁵ Interview, 14 October 2020, Bale Robe.

⁷⁶ Interview (telephone), July 16, 2020, Addis Ababa; Etenesh Abera and Bileh Jelani. "In-Depth Analyses: Spate of Targeted Attacks, Excessive use of Force by Security leave Death Trail, Destruction." *Addis Standard*, 2020. <https://addisstandard.com/in-depth-analysis-spate-of-targeted-attacks-excessive-use-of-force-by-security-in-ormia-leave-death-trails-destruction/> (accessed 4 November 2020).

⁷⁷ Interview, 18 October 2020, Shashemene.

⁷⁸ Interview, 19 October 2020, Shashemene.

they wouldn't burn it."⁷⁹ In one incident the attackers entered a house where they found a woman protecting her children, begging them in Amharic not to hurt them. One of the boys raised his hand to hit her with his machete, but was stopped by an intervening neighbour: "I told him in Afan Oromo 'she is an Oromo... she can't speak Afan Oromo, but she is one of us.' Then the boy stopped, and the mob got out of her house."⁸⁰ Being Oromo was the only escape from being attacked, and one informant narrated that "if you were not able to respond in Afan Oromo, then they would attack you and damage your property."⁸¹ While the victims of the violence seem to have been predominantly Amhara, they were not the only ones targeted. People from other ethnic groups like the Gurage, (Muslim) Silte, Wolayta, and even Muslim Arsi Oromo were among those attacked.⁸² There were, however, also other instances where people of different ethnicities and religions came to each other's rescue, as in the case of an Oromo Muslim who hid his next-door neighbour:

*'The mob came and start knocking and banging on his gate. He [the neighbour] climbed up a ladder and called me over the wall that separates our compounds, asking me to hide his child. I agreed and he handed me a 7-month-old infant over the wall. He then asked if he could bring his wife and his other children, which I also agreed to. They all climbed over the wall and hid inside my compound. Immediate after the mob managed to force the gate to his house open, and about 50 young boys and girls rushed into the compound. When they discovered that there was no one inside, the boys carried out everything they could find inside the house and threw it into a pile in the compound. I was watching everything from my balcony and saw the girls sprinkling gasoline over the belonging and setting it on fire.'*⁸³

All our informants agreed that the perpetrators were mainly youth from the rural areas surrounding Shashemene. Entering the city, they roamed around in the streets in small groups rather independently.⁸⁴ There seemed to be no internal discipline or coordination among the groups, and the violence was carried out impulsively. One informant reported that some of them were drunk, having stolen alcohol from a restaurant they had burned.⁸⁵ There has been some debate whether it was the Qeerroo that were behind the attacks. Oromo activists have vehemently denied this, claiming that these were unorganised rogue elements.⁸⁶ The Qeerroo is, as noted, not any organised movement and is in many ways simply another word for the Oromo youth. It is therefore hard to differentiate between the Qeerroo and attacking youth. Some informants claimed that the attackers had lists with names and ethnic affiliations. None of them actually saw such lists, however, and it is hard to envisage who could have made them and where they would come from. ID cards issued by local *kebele* offices reveal ethnic affiliation, but it is unclear whether they also have information about residences. While the question of such lists needs further investigation, it seems more likely that the selection of targets was done with assistance of youth from the different urban neighbourhoods.

While PM Abiy Ahmed praised the security forces for thwarting the violence,⁸⁷ many of our informants, similar to the Mota case, lamented of the passive role of the law enforcement agencies, and our informant who found shelter in a police station said that the police initially refused him to enter.⁸⁸ Units from the federal army and

⁷⁹ Interview, 19 October 2020, Shashemene.

⁸⁰ Interview, 18 October 2020, Shashemene.

⁸¹ Interview, 18 October 2020, Shashemene.

⁸² Etenesh Abera and Bileh Jelani. "In-Depth Analyses: Spate of Targeted Attacks, Excessive use of Force by Security leave Death Trail, Destruction." *Addis Standard*, 2020. <https://addisstandard.com/in-depth-analysis-spate-of-targeted-attacks-excessive-use-of-force-by-security-in-omomia-leave-death-trails-destruction/> (accessed 4 November 2020).

⁸³ Interview, 17 October 2020, Shashemene.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Interview, 17 October 2020, Shashemene.

⁸⁶ Mosisa Aga. "Qeerroo: A Regimented Organization or a Spontaneous Movement?" *Ethiopia Insight*, 2020. <https://www.ethiopia-insight.com/2020/08/21/qeerroo-a-regimented-organization-or-a-spontaneous-movement/> (accessed 5 November 2020).

⁸⁷ Mahlet Fasil. "PM Abiy Says Planned Attempt to Ignite Civil War, Communal Violence in Ethiopia Thwarted: Thanked the Law Enforcement Agencies, the Public." *Addis Standard*, 2020. https://addisstandard.com/news-pm-abiy-says-planned-attempt-to-ignite-civil-war-communal-violence-in-ethiopia-thwarted-thanked-law-enforcement-agencies-the-public/?fbclid=IwAR051f1pBlq4pB_FcqliUIIYRPgOjNJuWq1frLUb_LUb5A7_WN1yVJ1jqpo (accessed 5 November 2020).

⁸⁸ Interview, 19 October 2020, Shashemene.

Oromia regional special forces were stationed a few kilometers from Shashemene, but none of them seemed to be ordered to intervene.⁸⁹ There were even those who claimed that the local police were complicit in the attacks,⁹⁰ while others reported that the police were ordered not to intervene.⁹¹ Similar passivity from local police has been reported in other incidents of unrest, and in Harar during the *timket* celebrations in January 2020, police officers reported that they were explicitly told not to intervene.⁹² A number of local officials were, however, arrested in the wake of the unrest, accused of being involved in the unrest.

The July violence led to an immediate nationwide internet blackout, and it was not until 14 July that internet connections were restored. In the meantime, unrest continued, and in Ambo, for example, two people were killed during the tightly controlled funeral of Hachalu Hundessa. Calls for strikes, boycotts, and roadblocks emerged on 10 July, and sporadic protests were held, mainly in the southeastern parts of Oromia. The government now responded with massive crackdown, which according to the recent EHRC report left 76 people killed by security forces.⁹³ This also introduced a process of increased securitisation and a coercive mode of governance in this part of the region. In addition to Oromia special forces, the government deployed the federal army to towns across southeastern Oromia. In Shashemene and in other towns, people reported that “the police and the special force were terrorising and jailing the city community members.”⁹⁴ There were also complaints that the perpetrators had returned to the rural areas without being held accountable. A week after the incident, the government reported that it had arrested 3,500, and in August, it reported that over 9,000 people were arrested.⁹⁵ Among the arrested were, as mentioned, Jawar Mohammed, Bekele Gerba, and 33 other Oromo, as well as Eskinder Nega, the leader of the Balderas Party and Lidetu Ayalew (later released), the leader of the Ethiopian Democratic Party.

RELIGIOUS VIOLENCE – AND ETHNICITY

In contrast to Mota, only a few informants in Shashemene, all Christians, categorised the violence as religious and a result of what they called increasing religious extremism. One informant claimed that it was not only Amhara that were attacked, but any Christian Orthodox with different ethnic background, while Muslim non-Oromo, like Silte or Amhara-speaking Muslims, were spared.⁹⁶ One claim was that the increase of Salafi Muslims had sharpened boundaries between Christians and Muslims, saying that this new group were destroying “the century old social contract between the Muslim and the Christian communities.”⁹⁷ One Christian informant talked about how a close Muslim friend had changed after becoming a Salafi: “He stopped greeting Christians and even me, and he spends most of his time in the mosque... These people stopped any kind of social relationships with the Christian community.”⁹⁸ It was, moreover, said that the Salafis were – with the support of the government – promoting a narrative of suppression of Muslims by the EOC, and that this was a cause for the violence against Christians.⁹⁹ One informant claimed that there were some groups of attackers that went

⁸⁹ “Ethiopian Government Claims ‘Unrest’ Under Control.” *Borkena*, 2020. <https://borkena.com/2020/07/19/ethiopian-government-claims-unrest-under-control/> (accessed 21 November 2020).

⁹⁰ Interviews, 17 & 18 October 2020, Shashemene.

⁹¹ Interviews, 17 October 2020, Shashemene.

⁹² Østebø, Terje, and Kjetil Tronvoll. 2020. “Interpreting Contemporary Oromo Politics in Ethiopia: An Ethnographical Approach.” *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 14, 4, 2020: 613-632.

⁹³ Ethiopian Human Rights Commission Report: 51.

⁹⁴ Interview, 18 October 2020, Shashemene.

⁹⁵ Elias Meseret. “Ethiopia’s Week of Unrest Sees 239 Dead, 3,500 Arrested.” *Washington Post*, 2020. https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/africa/ethiopias-week-of-unrest-sees-239-dead-3500-arrested/2020/07/08/8eb30952-c100-11ea-8908-68a2b9eae9e0_story.html (accessed November 23, 2020); “More Than 9,000 Arrested Since June Killing of Singer.” *Aljazeera*, 2020. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/8/13/more-than-9000-arrests-in-ethiopia-since-june-killing-of-singer> (accessed 30 November 2020).

⁹⁶ Interview, 20 October 2020, Shashemene.

⁹⁷ Interview, 18 October 2020, Shashemene.

⁹⁸ Interview, 20 October 2020, Shashemene.

⁹⁹ Interview, 18 October 2020, Shashemene.

after Christians, including Christian Oromo, while others were targeting only non-Oromo.¹⁰⁰ The existence of such different groups was, however, not confirmed by any other informants. The religious dimension and the notion of extremism were something the EOC emphasised in the aftermath of the conflict. The Archbishop of the diocese in West Arsi, explicitly said that it was only Christians that were victims, denying that the conflict had a clear ethnic dimension.¹⁰¹ The EOC conducted its own investigation of the events, and published a report where it “confirmed the primary targets to be Orthodox Christians” and through an expression of moral outrage claimed that there was a systematic and deliberate religious persecution of Christians. The report did not explicitly identify the perpetrators, but said that “religious and ethnic extremists loyal to the government structure carried out a strategic and barbaric attack on the victims.”¹⁰²

By contrast, many of our informants argued that a religious conflict narrative was a too simplistic and the overwhelming majority of our informants interpreted the violence as ethnic, categorising the conflict as between Oromo and non-Oromo – mainly Amhara. One informant said that “it is not the result of religious extremism. If it had been religious extremism or something related to religion, churches would have been burned, but no church was burned... and no mosque was burned.”¹⁰³ There was one unconfirmed claim that one Protestant church burned in Shashemene,¹⁰⁴ while rocks were thrown at one Orthodox church in Bale Robe and the sign of another church was destroyed in Goba.¹⁰⁵ Informants said that “the victims came from all communities”¹⁰⁶ and argued “that the government media and the media that support Amhara nationalists had tried to make it religious conflict.”¹⁰⁷ Informants did, however, recognise that the violence had a religious *dimension*, which was interpreted differently according to their own religious affiliation.

In trying to make sense of these contradictory claims about the role of religion, the critical issue is to examine the different ascriptive categories groups apply to themselves and others. This means to take into account that these categories have religious and ethnic dimensions, and that this produces narratives of othering where these dimensions are intimately intertwined. The tendency is, however, for analysts to compartmentalise these dimensions, producing the misconception that conflicts are either ethnic or religious. This was underscored by an informant during an earlier study: “there is no doubt that region matters [in ethnic conflicts]. This is something that usually is not fully understood.”¹⁰⁸ One informant from Shashemene echoed this, saying “when an Amhara is attacked it is easy to label this as a Christian being attacked,”¹⁰⁹ while another complained that “anything done by the Muslim Oromo is considered Muslim activism.”¹¹⁰ A Muslim religious leader from Bale expressed this as follows:

‘Of course, it looks religious or Islamic. But deep inside we are struggling for Oromummaa [Oromoness] rather than Islaamummaa [Islam]. The majority here in Arsi and Bale or in Harar is Muslim, and whenever we take actions, it is automatically labelled as religious. It should be clear that our struggle is about Oromummaa, it is not an Islamic struggle.’¹¹¹

¹⁰⁰ Interview, 18 October 2020, Shashemene.

¹⁰¹ “Archbishop Henok Speaks Out about Massacre of Orthodox Christians.” *Borkena*, 2020. <https://borkena.com/2020/07/12/ethiopia-archbishop-henok-speaks-out-about-massacre-of-orthodox-christians/>

¹⁰² Medihane Ekubamichael. “Ethiopian Orthodox Church Releases Grim Report on Recent Attacks on Parishioners.” *Addis Standard*, 2020. <https://addisstandard.com/news-ethiopian-orthodox-tewahedo-church-releases-grim-report-on-recent-attacks-on-parishioners/> (accessed 2 December 2020).

¹⁰³ Interview, 18 October 2020, Shashemene.

¹⁰⁴ Interview, 18 October 2020, Shashemene.

¹⁰⁵ Interview, 14 October 2020, Bale Robe; Interview, October 15, 2020, Goba.

¹⁰⁶ Interview, 17 October 2020, Shashemene.

¹⁰⁷ Interview, 22 October 2020, Shashemene.

¹⁰⁸ Interview, 12 February 2020, Haramaya University.

¹⁰⁹ Interview, 24 October 2020, Shashemene.

¹¹⁰ Interview, 12 October 2020, Bale Robe.

¹¹¹ Interview, 3 October 2020, Bale Robe.

The relevance of religion as conflictual force can be captured in the Oromo proverb *anafi si, akka Islaama fi Amhara* (I and you are like a Muslim and an Amhara) – with the equivalent Amharic እኔና አንተ ልክ እንደ አማራ እና እስላም ነን. Although it refers to religious difference, it is not merely or necessarily about religion, but refers to enmity in its broadest sense. The fact that religion is the metaphor of seemingly unbridgeable division, points to the salience of a religious division within Ethiopia.¹¹² The proverb’s reference to “Amhara” – as opposite to the religious category “Muslim” – points to how Amhara as a category always has had a distinct religious dimension – signifying Orthodox Christianity. While people in the core Amhara areas usually referred to themselves according to localities such as Gondar, Gojam, or Wollo, Amhara as the encompassing and collective term was related to being a Christian. As expressed by one informant: “you would be an Amhara if you are born of Amhara parents, but also you could be Amhara if you are a Christian.”¹¹³ Still today, Amhara is the word for a Christian among Muslim Oromo, and the Arsi Oromo, for example, refer to “Christian meat” as *foon Amhara*. The notion Christian meat denotes the fact that Christians and Muslims cannot eat meat of animals slaughtered by the other – a boundary that is expressed in the Amharic couplet: በልቼ መጣሁ ከስላም ጋራ ከጎግዲህ ምኔ አማራ (I came and ate with a Muslim, and I can no longer be considered an Amhara.) This latter aspect is important and points to an additional complicating layer wherein simply being a non-Oromo Christian means being Amhara. Several of our informants argued that the attackers in Shashemene viewed all non-Oromo as being an Amhara “by default,” saying that anyone who belonged to groups like Gurage, Hadiya, or Kambata was labelled as an Amhara and attacked.¹¹⁴

Conversely, the intertwined religious and ethnic dimensions are inherent to Oromo peoplehood in the southeast. Prior to the 1980s, when the word Oromo became a common designation, the Oromo in those areas often referred to themselves as *Islaama*. The religious connotation is obvious, but the ethnic dimension remained intimately integrated as part of *Islaama* peoplehood.¹¹⁵ This has, however, gradually changed over the last decades, producing a distinction between being Oromo and being Muslims; the former perceived as primordial and the latter a choice.

The relevance of the religious dimension in relation to ethnicity is particularly noticeable with regard to the Shoa Oromo living in the Muslim dominated southeastern parts of Oromia. The Shoa Oromo are predominantly Orthodox Christians, and have a history of siding with the state and opposite the Arsi Oromo when the latter resisted the state. This created a still strong resentment among the Arsi Oromo – perceiving the Shoa Oromo as being on the “wrong side” of the popular Oromo struggle.¹¹⁶ Such sentiments were also recorded during our fieldwork in Shashemene, where one informant claimed that the Muslim Oromo “call the Shoa Oromo and few Arsi Christians as the bastards of the Amhara.”¹¹⁷ Such intra-ethnic divisions were evident during the Qeerroo-led protests starting in 2015, where the Shoa Oromo in areas like Bale were reluctant to join the movement. When violence erupted in Bale Robe in October 2019, the religious division was in full display. As rumours spread through the town that Christians deliberately were attacked, the Christian youth – including Christian Shoa Oromo youth – took revenge destroying Muslim property. Clashes erupted between Shoa Oromo and Arsi Oromo Qeerroo groups in Bale Robe, and a number of Muslims were chased out of Shoa Oromo and Christian dominated neighbourhood, leaving the town even more ethnically/religiously divided.¹¹⁸ This illustrates the strength of religious affiliation and how this supersedes ethnic affinities.

¹¹² It is important to add that the Muslim Oromo in the southeast viewed the Amhara as Christian intruders and that Menelik’s campaigns and the forceful integration of the south in the late 19th century were not only seen as submission to an alien and hegemonic regime, but also to a Christian kingdom.

¹¹³ Interview, 19 October 2020, Shashemene.

¹¹⁴ Interview, 18 October 2020, Shashemene.

¹¹⁵ Østebø, Terje. 2020. *Islam, Ethnicity, and Conflict in Ethiopia: The Bale Insurgency (1963-1970)*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 52f.

¹¹⁶ “*Sirna Araaraa Arsii Baalee fi Tuulama Baalee*” [“Reconciliation Decision among the Arsi of Bale and the Tulama of Bale”], unpublished document, 11 November 2019.

¹¹⁷ Interview, 19 October 2020, Shashemene.

¹¹⁸ Interview, 17 January 2020, Bale Robe.

The relevance of the religious dimension is further demonstrated by the situation in the western parts of Oromia, where the majority of the population is either Orthodox or Protestant Christian and where – albeit not always – shared religion allows for inter-marriage between Oromo and Amhara – to the extent that it is “difficult to identify who is really Amhara and Oromo. Most family would be mixed; having some from Amhara or other groups.”¹¹⁹ The mixing of different ethnic groups through intermarriage is a clear – albeit indirect – demonstration of how crucial religious boundaries are. Inter-ethnic marriages within the same religious group have been common throughout Ethiopia, yet marriages between Christians and Muslims remain an anomaly, and usually means that the woman converts to the man’s religion. This pattern of intermarriage tells us something of how demarcated religious boundaries are in Ethiopia.

NATIVE-SETTLER AND THE NEFTENYA DISCOURSES

While religion intersected with ethnicity certainly was important, it does not capture the whole picture. Also important was the native-settler dimension and the portrayal of non-Oromo as foreign settlers occupying Oromo land. This also has, as noted, an urban-rural dimension, as urban centres in Oromia – and in the south in general – emerged after the Menelik conquest in the late 19th century (as garrison and trading towns) and came to be dominated by outside settlers – who have lived there for generations. Native populations which largely remained in the rural areas, looked to the urban centres with disdain, which, coupled with the disparity between non-Oromo urban merchants and rural farmers, seem to be a factor for rural mobs attacking Shashemene and other towns.¹²⁰

In contrast to previous administrative structures, when Amharic was the working language across the country, the formalisation of multinational federalism made local languages the administrative languages in the different regions: Afan Oromo in the case of Oromia. This obviously made it difficult for those not fluent in such language to be hired in regional and local administrations, causing a situation where Amhara or Amharic-speaking groups have over the last decades been losing the competition over public sector jobs, which inevitably has led to growing frustrations. Such sentiments were clearly echoed by our non-Oromo informants in Shashemene who argued that they were being discriminated by local administrations.¹²¹

The native-settler discourse has been accentuated increasingly over the last years. This was evident during the Oromo protests and through the “Oromo First” rhetoric of Oromo activists like Jawar Mohammed who underscored Oromo ownership, regional self-governance, and control over the Oromia region’s resources. According to one informant interviewed early in 2020: “It is all about Oromo first, and then Ethiopia. If we are able to govern and build Oromia, then we can build Ethiopia.”¹²² Another informant said that the Oromo struggle “is to free ourselves from having non-Oromo controlling Oromia; public positions, land, and wealth.”¹²³ Informants underscored, at the same time, that non-Oromo minorities would be protected, and it was said that the Amhara “can live here as Amhara, they will be respected, but they cannot live as rulers as before.”¹²⁴ These notions reflect how the Oromo ethno-nationalist has viewed its *qabso* (struggle) as liberation from historical serfdom and suppression. Although one talks about building a new future, this future is constantly mirrored in a history of Oromo suffering, and embedded in a distinct Oromo victimology. Many of our non-Oromo informants underscored how the attackers during the violence in July 2020 explicitly referred to the settler narrative during the violence: “You would overhear them saying ‘we are still getting killed by Amhara, we should get rid of the Menelik settlers from our land... and if we can’t get rid of the Amhara now, they would eat us.’”¹²⁵

¹¹⁹ Interview, 16 February 2020, Addis Ababa.

¹²⁰ “Chaos in the Rift: A Microcosm of Ethiopia’s Brutal Polarization.” *Ethiopia Insight*, 2021. <https://www.ethiopia-insight.com/2021/01/05/chaos-in-the-rift-a-microcosm-of-ethiopias-brutal-polarization/> (accessed 6 January 2021).

¹²¹ Interview, 19 October 2020, Shashemene.

¹²² Interview, 19 February 2020, Bale Robe.

¹²³ Interview, 10 February 2020, Dirre Dawa.

¹²⁴ Interview, 11 February 2020, Haramaya University.

¹²⁵ Interview, 19 October 2020, Shashemene.

Another informant said that “anyone who is not born in Oromia and who is from any ethnic groups in Ethiopia living in Oromia is called a *mete* (newcomer) and would be the target of the attack.”¹²⁶

Many claimed that the EPRDF ideology behind multinational federalism had contributed to producing ethnic divisions and exacerbating tensions. One informant said that “the government were telling the Oromo that the Amhara had come and taken Oromo land.”¹²⁷ There is little doubt that the EPRDF government has portrayed the previous Amhara-dominated governments, particularly that of the Imperial Government, as hegemonic suppressors of other ethnicities, and it is interesting point to see how current developments and incidents of violence have also spurred an Amhara victimology. While there is no doubt that Amhara minorities in Oromia find themselves in a difficult situation, notions like “Amhara genocide” and claims of systematic ethnic cleansing of Amhara have been actively promoted by Amhara ethno-nationalists like NAMA and others.¹²⁸

One aspect intertwined with the native-settler narrative, and critical for understanding why recent unrest has turned into inter-communal violence – different from unrest in the form of anti-government protest – is the *neftenya*, or *neo-neftenya* discourse. While *neftenya* literally means a “man with a gun” and historically referred to Amhara settlers in the south, it has over the last decades increasingly been used by the Oromo as a pejorative term for Amhara. This has intensified over the last years, dovetailing with and accentuating processes of ethnic and religious othering and the native-settler narrative. This was on full display during the violence in July 2020 – seen by how the term *neftenya* was actively used during the attacks. One informant narrated that “Haile Gebrselassie [the athlete] was called a *neftenya* and it was said he didn’t like the Oromo” and that this was the reason his hotel was destroyed.”¹²⁹ Others said that the word *neftenya* was connected to Emperor Menelik’s conquest in the late 19th century, claiming that current non-Oromo were referred to as “*Menelik sefare* [settlers of Menelik] who should be chased out.”¹³⁰ Similarly, it is interesting to note how the term *neftenya* was – at least in one instance – appropriated by the Amhara, where slogans used by Amhara youth during the unrest at *timket* in Harar included “*enya neftenya, Harar yenya*” (we are nefteгна, Harar is ours).¹³¹

What is crucial here is how the notion of *neftenya* is coupled with PM Abiy Ahmed’s policy and the formation of the PP – believed to be aimed at abolishing multinational federalism and bringing back a more centralised rule. The Oromo youth are convinced that Abiy Ahmed is determined to end the federal system, and that this, by implication, would bring back a unitary state and Amhara dominance. This narrative of coupling together the notion of the *neftenya*, Abiy Ahmed’s reforms, and perceived Amhara dominance was explicitly invoked during the July 2020 violence.¹³² Informants referred to how the “youth believed that the government want to return to the past ideology of *neftenya* of one language and religion [Amharic and Orthodox Christianity].”¹³³ This was confirmed by one of our informants: “we believe that the government is a *neftenya* government and that it is working against federalism – which we benefited from. Abolishing federalism will mean that self-rule become history.”¹³⁴

Beyond this erosive effect on Abiy’s political support among the Oromo, however, it is important to note that the categorisation of Abiy Ahmed and his PP government as *neftenya* and Amhara has also effectively blurred

¹²⁶ Interview, 18 October 2020, Shashemene.

¹²⁷ Ibid.

¹²⁸ “The Amhara Genocide Ignored by the World.” *Moresh Wogene Amhara Organisation Research and Study Department*, 2020. <https://welkait.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/AMARA-GENOCIDE-IN-ETHIOPIA-from-1991—2015-STUDY-MORESH-WEGENIE-AMARA-ORGANIZATION.pdf> (accessed 4 December 2020); Zelalem Attlee. “Attestations of the Amhara Genocide and Ethnic Cleansing in Ethiopia.” *Ethiopoint*, 2020. <https://www.ethiopoint.com/attestations-of-the-amhara-genocide-and-ethnic-cleansing-in-ethiopia/> (accessed 4 December 2020).

¹²⁹ Interview, 17 October 2020, Shashemene.

¹³⁰ Interview, 19 October 2020, Shashemene.

¹³¹ Interview, 11 February 2020, Harar.

¹³² “Chaos in the Rift: A Microcosm of Ethiopia’s Brutal Polarization.” *Ethiopia Insight*, 2021. <https://www.ethiopia-insight.com/2021/01/05/chaos-in-the-rift-a-microcosm-of-ethiopia-brutal-polarization/> (accessed 6 January 2021).

¹³³ Interview, 17 October 2020, Shashemene.

¹³⁴ Interview, 18 October 2020, Shashemene.

the boundaries between resistance toward the state and attacks on civilians – thus opening the door to inter-communal violence. While the Oromo protests were focused on opposing the authoritarian rule of EPRDF, they have gradually shifted towards violence against ordinary people seen as complicit in perceived changing national politics: “protests in Oromia were previously against the *Weyane* [TPLF]. But what is recently observed is that people are against Abiy Ahmed who is believed to be manipulated by the Amhara.”¹³⁵ The Amhara, rebranded as *neftenya*, are seen as the main actors behind Abiy Ahmed’s perceived policy of moving away from multinational federalism – and thus, viewed as legitimate targets.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Our findings make it clear that a multi-faceted approach is necessary to understanding inter-communal violence in Ethiopia. None of the incidents can be generalised and understood along a one-dimensional dynamic, but need to be considered in relation to the multiple contextual variables or parameters at work in each of them. Important here is to pay attention to the interplay between broader national developments and discourses and local incidents of violence. What we see is how a changing religious landscape has contributed to extremism narratives in interpreting and anticipating inter-communal violence. Similarly, important is how politics of ethnicity and ethno-nationalist discourses have affected demarcation of community boundaries and intensified processes of othering, wherein religious identities are becoming intertwined. This, in turn, produces and reinforces images and accusations of extremism. Instances of inter-communal violence thus reciprocally feed into such broader dynamics, confirming and strengthening existing narratives, and inevitably causing heightened suspicions and preparing conflicts elsewhere. Social media plays an important role here through indiscriminately disseminating information and misinformation and amplifying conflict narratives, notions of extremism, and communal stereotypes. In 2019 alone, it was reported that that over 95 percent of posts related to religion and ethnicity in Ethiopia contained hate speech, and that most of this originated in the Ethiopian diaspora.¹³⁶

Our main findings can be summarised and grouped as follows:

1. Religious reformism and extremism

- Religious reform movements are prevalent in the country and contribute to an intensification of personal piety as well as a stronger adherence and loyalty to one’s religious community/tradition. The accusation of extremism was prevalent in many narratives about the violence in Mota and Shashemene, but typically only wielded against the other party of a conflict, not one’s own. The resulting climate of suspicion arguably drove the conflict in Mota to a large degree, and in both Mota and Shashemene, the framing of the perpetrator as extremist plays a big role in the establishment of victimhood and the anticipation of further violence.
- The accusation of extremism tends to operate in generalised tropes. Certain Muslims are characterised as “Wahhabi” and accused of destroying peaceful inter-religious relations, while attacks by Orthodox Christians are attributed to the Neo-Orthodox movement of the Mahabir Qidusan. Politicians tend to further amplify such generalised messaging by merely pointing to unspecified “extremists” as disturbing a long tradition of inter-communal peace. In their generality, such accusations are easily refuted and contribute little to understanding the particular dynamics, forces, and actors behind inter-communal conflict.

¹³⁵ Interview, 24 October 2020, Shashemene.

¹³⁶ Skjerdal, Terje and Mulatu Alemayehu Moges. “The Ethnification of the Ethiopian Media.” *Fojo Media Institute and International Media Support*, 2020: 17f.


- It is important to understand that reform movements are highly diversified and may also lead to conflict within religious communities rather than uniformly pushing its members to “extreme” or “fundamentalist” positions. More specific studies are necessary to understand how Islamic reformists as well as Neo-Orthodox movements operate in the current political climate in Ethiopia. Such studies must consider the intra-religious politics of negotiating religious change and how the accusation of “extremism” may be used in such negotiations to discredit one faction or apply political pressure.

2. Religion and ethnicity

- Religion and ethnicity are not fully separate identity markers, but intertwined in complex genealogies and cultural attributions. Muslims in Mota, for example, may identify as Amhara for the purposes of the census, but would unlikely claim this identity elsewhere due to how it is associated with Orthodox Christianity. In Shashemene, the Oromo attackers were also implicitly identified as Muslims, due to them sparing Muslim businesses and households. It is therefore important to recognise and deconstruct the political and ad-hoc character of the invocation of ethnic and religious difference, rather than reifying them in conflict analysis.
- Given the non-fixed expressions and complex relations of ethnic and religious identity markers, community boundaries are not articulated uniformly in the various conflict situations addressed by this report. Instead, they draw on specific local parameters and genealogies, including narratives of a deterioration of inter-religious or inter-ethnic relations. Connections to broader political discourses are also evident here, seen through violent attacks against the “settler” and the “*neftenya*” are reflection of debates about multinational federalism.
- Moreover, while informants in general often emphasise how “mixed” ethnic and religious identities are common, one of the disruptive consequences of conflict is that it cuts right through these intertwined relations. This also pertains to post-conflict narratives, which tend to follow the clear demarcations drawn by a given clash in attributing the cause of violence or defining the community of victims, even where there are more complex stories to be told.

3. Socio-economic and political context

- Our findings make clear that is insufficient to assume that poor socio-economic conditions and, in particular, high youth-unemployment are the key underlying drivers of conflict. Like the rest of Ethiopia, both Mota and Shashemene have a high proportion of both unemployed and under-employed youths, many of whom have migrated from the rural areas but find their aspirations at a steady income frustrated while being faced with additional living costs in the urban environment. While such conditions need to be considered, we have here demonstrated that there are other more important dynamics that need to be explored to show how and why conflict erupts in a particular locality.
- Nonetheless, the demographic shift toward a huge youth population combined with the rise of social media have had a clear impact on the social fabric of local communities, weakening socio-cultural cohesion, increasing fragmentation, and reducing the influence of elders and religious leaders. They have also limited the efficacy of traditional conflict resolution mechanisms – at a time when they are really needed. The erosion of traditional conflict resolution mechanism is further accelerated by the national-political context. PM Abiy Ahmed’s reforms have heightened the sense of a constitutional reordering of Ethiopia, which has meant that many conflicts arise in and are interpreted through a combination of local tensions and national conflict narratives.
- State institutions have proven to be ineffective to stop violent attacks and prevent deaths of innocent civilians. Our findings indicate that regional law enforcement agencies remained passive during the violence – and some even claim that they facilitated attacks. The government has similarly failed to hold perpetrators accountable, and while there have been massive arrests – particularly in the case of the July 2020 violence – no one has been indicted or convicted of the crimes. Furthermore, lack of transparency both on what



happened and on the authorities' handling of the violence have negatively affected the opportunity to mend the communal effects of conflicts. Very few, if any, initiatives aimed at reconciliation have left visible scars in the local communities. This has made our informants were generally pessimistic about the future, envisioning a further increase of hatred and violence.





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