



Graduate School of Development Studies

**Youth and Politics in Post 1974 Ethiopia:  
Intergenerational Analysis**

A Research Paper presented by:

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(Ethiopia)

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for obtaining the degree of  
MASTERS OF ARTS IN DEVELOPMENT STUDIES

Specialization:  
**[Children and Youth Studies]**  
**(CYS)**

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The Hague, The Netherlands  
November, 2009

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## Acknowledgment

Glory to the Almighty!!!

My academic journey at the ISS started when I send my application for admission in late 2007. Since that moment until the finishing of my paper, Dr. Linda Herrera has been the most influential person in my life. You contributed a lot in my academic mellowness since the first day of our contact in 2008/2009 CYS class. You deserve my heartfelt gratitude for understanding my passion for issues of youth and politics and helping me in shaping and re-shaping my thoughts and understandings about the subject matter. I would also like to thank Prof. Dr. Mohamed Salih for his contribution of ideas on my research design and first draft.

So many people have contributed to the final success of finishing this research paper in different ways. I do not have the intention to mention all and to express everything here. But I am so grateful to the Ethio-Eriterians group of the 2008/2009 batch including Bilisuma, Filimon, Rediet, Nebil and Ana Rodriguez from Portugal for their brotherly and sisterly love during my stay at the ISS. Especially Ambassador Tecklemichael, you were so helpful in challenging my ideas from the very beginning while we discuss and argue on different issues and by being discussant during my seminar. My CYS classmates, especially Marie Angelie Bacaltos Resurreccion, and all the 2008/2009 batch students (esp. Jessica, Mary, Sanjukta, Rino, Heather, Daniela and Nadya) have a special place in my memories about ISS.

The respondents that I interviewed during my field work in Addis Ababa deserve special thanks since it would not be possible at all to write this paper without their cooperation. Especially I want to say thank you for the young respondents who sacrificed their time twice by participating in the focus group discussion. Prof. Gebru Tareke, thank you so much for the valuable advice you gave me during my visit to your office in Addis Ababa. Girma Tesfaw from Addis Neger newspaper helped me a lot in sharing his ideas and contact number of people I wanted to interview.

Friends, both near and far, Mefine, Elsiki, Essiye, Ezana, Meli, Dr. Efi, Sofi, Addisye, Dani ... you made my seven weeks in Addis memorable through the times we spend, valuable through the discussions we had. Dani and Hallelujah helped me to find two most valuable books for my research and showed who they are for me ☺. Yirga I learned a lot from your ideas while we chat, and thank you. Tsediye, I have no words to tell you how I am indebted to your love and care. Lia, the positive vibes that you were sending me kept me strong and smiley during my hard working hours, thanks a lot.

Last, but not least, my sisters and brothers especially Jerry, Joxey, Bexé, Yonexé, Mimi, Maki, Micky and Sebli thank you very much for your moral support while I am away and feeling homesick almost always. Dad and Grand Ma, your worries for the little boy keeps me safe always.

Finally, Mahlet Mairegu, your willingness to help me in editing my paper in the final hour is so valuable and thanks a lot for your help.

## Preface

This paper is a result of my experience in student and youth activism for almost seven years, since I was a sophomore student at the Addis Ababa University. The lifelong learning process started with Afroflag Youth Vision in 2002 while we were organizing various discussion platforms in the Main Campus. Especially the last two academic years (Sept. 2003 – July 2005) were very crucial to broaden my experience and attitude. My fulltime engagement in the organization after July 2005 until I joined ISS in different positions on various project activities gave me an ample exposure to work, talk, live and breathe issues of youth participation day- in-day-out.

Because of the passion we shared to realize active and meaningful citizenship engagement mainly among the youth, those who established the organization and employed in it worked tirelessly to transform Afroflag to be the most professionally equipped, youth initiated and youth-led civic organization in Ethiopia. The experiences that I got working in the organization mainly in the governance programme, the various conferences, seminars and trainings that I attended, facilitated and organized at national, continental and international level on a range of issues related to youth were real learning experiences that initiated me to study youth related subject at the Masters level. And thus I joined the MA programme at ISS in the Children and Youth Specialization. I believe that I have first hand information both about the potential and the challenges that Ethiopian youth have particularly in the areas of political participation. My practical experience was sharpened by the academic exercise that I was doing during my stay at the ISS and this research paper is a witness for this.

My previous work as a youth activist helped me a lot to see the topic of my research from inside as well as to easily talk to young people from different youth groups. For me this research is the beginning of another big endeavour that I envision to embark on both in my academic as well as professional career starting from now. And I want to reiterate that anyone who reads this paper should know that it is written for the sake of not only academic purpose but also a personal vision.

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## List of Acronyms

AAU – Addis Ababa University  
AAYF- Addis Ababa Youth Forum  
AESM – All Ethiopian Socialist Movement  
AEUP – All Ethiopian Unity Party  
AYV – Afroflag Youth Vision  
CUD – Coalition for Unity and Democracy  
EDP – Ethiopian Democratic Party  
ESM – Ethiopian Students’ Movement  
EPRP – Ethiopian People Revolutionary Party  
EPRDF – Ethiopian People Revolutionary Democratic Front  
ESUE – Ethiopian Students Union in Europe  
ESUNA – Ethiopian Students Union in North America  
EYA – Endurance Youth Association  
YNSD – Youth Network for Sustainable Development  
TYA- Talent Youth Association  
MP – Member of Parliament  
MSB- Micro and Small Business  
NYDP- National Youth Development Package  
NYP – National Youth Policy  
OLF – Oromo Liberation Front  
OPC- Oromo People Congress  
PPG – Provisional Peoples’ Government  
TPLF – Tigray Peoples’ Liberation Front  
UDJ – Unity for Democracy and Justice  
UEDF – United Ethiopian Democratic Front  
USUAA – University Students Union of Addis Ababa

## **Abstract**

The interaction and relationship between consecutive generations is seldom a neutral process. It always involves a process of domination and contestation between the generations where the manifestations of the power relations are both explicit and implicit in their nature. Taking this assumption as a premise this paper attempts to examine the relationship between youth and politics across the historical trajectories of Ethiopian politics since the 1974 revolution. The way youth is understood, socialized and integrated into the political scene and their interplay with the older generation until the present time is the main focus of the study. This paper explains how politics is perceived and practiced among the youth and the role of the intergenerational interaction towards this. It is strongly argued that the influence of the older generation particularly in the ruling party of Ethiopia creates a new meaning of politics for the youth. The findings show that politics become a system of creating opportunities and benefits and a structure where young people become significant in numbers rather than in their 'youthful' insights and thoughts.

## **Relevance to Development Studies**

This paper contributes to the understanding of youth as a social group where its inclusion and exclusion in a political process is a result of the wider societal and historical process. By showing how the relationship between generations is influential enough in determining the social role of youth, the study argues for the consideration of the interaction between generations in any development endeavours in a particular society. It further contributes to the understanding of age as a social category where the capacity to influence decision in every aspect of society's life is ascribed or achieved.

## **Keywords**

Ethiopia, Youth, Young People, Generations, Politics

# Chapter 1

## 1.1 Introduction

The 1960s and early 1970s is of significant historical importance for our discussion at hand. This period sees involvement of the masses from both the global North and the global South in a variety of causes. It was the era of decolonization for many African countries, the emergence of civil rights movements throughout the US, the upstart of Anti-Vietnam War sentiments around the world, a period plagued by students' movements in France and the US as well as revolutionary movements in Portugal and Ethiopia. Moreover, let's not forget that the Cold War between the East and the West which propelled the rest of the world into the sphere of political influences amongst these two dominant camps forcing most global movements to embrace ideological dogmas and spirits based on their political alliances. For the anti-West camp individuals like Che Guevara, Ho Chi Minh, Castro and Mao Zedong played significant roles by becoming the icons of these movements. The involvement of students and young people in almost all movements that happened during this period is a common factor that is witnessed irrespective of the geographical location and the cause of the action.

Although the period has been characterized by its intensity and the rise in the concern and global voices of many people across the nations and continents; the fact that there is always a particular course of history that triggers and channels the reality of a specific country is unquestionable. It must never be forgotten that each country experienced the tide of change and revolution differently due their respective social, economical, political and historical realities on the ground. The case of Ethiopia is a perfect example indeed.

With the role of young people in the political process at its focus this research starts with the 1974 revolution and seeks to look at the historical trajectories of Ethiopian politics for almost four decades. The Ethiopian Students' Movement (ESM) which aptly represented Ethiopians role in the periods of the 60s and 70s continued to have its leading role in the political



process of the country through its members until today. The kind of interaction between the generation that have had leading role in the ESM and young people of today that are actively involved in the political process of the country is the focus point in this paper.

This paper argues that the current political process of Ethiopia is a scenario where we find a strong intergenerational relation where the revolution period generation is still assuming a dominant position in its interaction with the young generation. Findings which explain how the intergenerational relation between the 'young' and the 'old' actors in the political sphere of the country is presented discussed and analyzed accordingly.

## **1.2 Statement of the Research Problem**

The 1960s and 70s movements for social and political transformation manifested in a 'global pandemic of youth revolt' (Esler, 2001) in many parts of the world, either initiated and/or included a good number of students and youth from almost all walks of life. In many African contexts, the role of youth and students movements in the political system was legitimate form of action in the state formation process contrary to the most common protest minded movements in the West in the 1960s. Students in particular, arguably the most vibrant and 'socially active subcategory of youth' (Sherrod, et al, 2006) rose to shape and play crucial roles in independence movements.

It was within this kind of global socio-historical and political context that the Ethiopian Students' Movement (ESM) came into existence. Though it has the name 'students' movement' the main engagement of its members was to bring about political change in Emperor Haile Selassie's Ethiopia. The questions against national oppression and the feudalistic land tenure system under the motto 'Land to the Tiller' and the quest for democratic rights were the major issues echoed by the students (Tadesse, 1999: 57-109; Tiruneh, 1993; 136). The need to transform the socio-political scene and facilitate the emergence of a democratic system compelled members of the ESM to establish the first political parties in Ethiopia's history which are the All Ethiopian Socialist Movement (AESM) as of 1968 and the Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Party (EPRP) in 1972 (Gudina,2002:78). Though the two parties

were established by students who were studying in the US and Europe, and operated in clandestine manner in Ethiopia, their movement was heavily supported and in close cooperation of the University Students Union of Addis Ababa (USUAA) who were instrumental in instigating range of opposition demonstrations and student strikes against the Imperial rule from within.

The inability and unwillingness of the regime to acknowledge and deal with the movements' call for reformation in the entire socio-economic and political system of the country, the growing frustration of the population (teachers, taxi drivers, workers, peasants), America's support for the regime, and the enthusiasm with the success of the Soviet as well as China's achievement under Mao made the students to embrace a 'radical socialist position' as an alternative. Hence, by adopting Marxist-Leninist ideological line both parties that emerged from the ESM began seeing Ethiopia's situation across class and ethnic struggle (Gudina, 2002: 75, Kebede, 2003: 178-185).

The unavailability of any organized political party or the limited means of articulating peoples' political interest in the country during the imperial regime facilitated the creation of a power vacuum during the revolution which was easily manipulated and controlled by the military, the Derg (Gudina, 2003: 150; Tiruneh, 1993: 71). The competition among AESM, EPRP and Derg to assume a commanding role in the changing political environment, resulted in a political turmoil which claimed the lives of many political activists. Notwithstanding their claims to be vanguards of the revolution and Marxist-Leninist, the three camps were not able to agree on how to handle the country's future after dethroning the Emperor and establish a popular government. Their differences reached climax when political assassinations become a common occurrence among members of the three groups. The "Red Terror" was a strategy used by the Derg to eliminate its opponents and to consolidate its power (Addis Hiwot, 1975: 36-37; Zewde, 2007: 246-248; Tareke, 2009: 41-42; Markakis and Ayele, 2006: 191-205).

The young generation of Ethiopia of the 60s and 70s, played a leading role in the country's politics for almost four decades. After the downfall of the Derg regime in 1991, the 'multiparty political system' introduced by the new

regime allowed the younger generation to enter the political arena. However these Ethiopian youths came of age during times of political turmoil, civil war and excessive violence. It can therefore strongly be argued that their memories and understanding of politics was clouded by the experience of the country, the stories told by their families and the state controlled media. The incumbent regime via the only media available in the country showed the atrocities committed by the previous government. Mass graves, violence against innocents and testimonies from survivors were replayed over and over again to the public. Indeed the youths' practical exposure to political reality as actors and active citizens in recent years is also a significant factor.

It is against the aforementioned historical backdrop that this paper seeks to understand the current role of youth in the political sphere of the country. The analysis of the research broadens its focus by critically examining how 'youth' is understood and perceived by relating it the way that the past generation is playing its role in the political sphere of the country. The interaction between the generations, the old and the young, has both implicit and explicit manifestations which are located into the societal understanding of youth, politics, and political participation mainly in the formal and institutionalized political space.

Hence, this research is about examining the intergenerational relationship that is observed in Ethiopian politics. It is about how the different points of influence and dominance, expressions of conformity and resistance can be analyzed to understand the relationship between generations in terms of politics and political participation. This helps to understand the meaning of politics for the young generation and how it is perceived and practiced by them. To this end, an intergenerational approach is adopted to identify and analyze the changing features of political behaviour among young people in the political history of the country. The research would like to shed light on the way that youth is being treated and the role they have been able to assume by questioning the existing understanding of this significant social group. By establishing a strong relationship between the two generations as social groups whose interaction involves power relation, this paper attempts to examine the

nature of political position the youth have taken in the formal and institutional political system of Ethiopia.

### **1.3 Relevance of the study and Research Objective**

#### ***Relevance of the Study***

The existing policy framework in Ethiopia and also in Africa (National Youth Policy and African Youth Charter) takes the concepts of ‘youth’ and ‘young people’ as one and the same. This research questions such kind of understanding by showing the social construction, relational position and social status of being ‘youth’ which is more than a mere demographic and biological category of ‘young people’. Moreover, it seeks to contribute to the ‘youth’ themselves who are participating in the political process of the country in different positions, either as youth activists or young/youth politicians to question their role in the process, their interaction among each other and with the older generation. Given the fact that there is not much research about youth and politics in the current context of Ethiopia, the research contributes its part as an input for further studies.

#### ***Research Objective***

- General Objective: to examine the interaction between ‘the young’ and the ‘old’ generations of Ethiopia in the political sphere
- Specific Objectives:
  - to introduce a new understanding of ‘youth’ into the discourse of youth issues in Ethiopia
  - to see how the youth are participating in the political sphere of the country
  - to analyse the significance of the various historical incidents since the 1974 revolution in informing political understanding among the youth

### **1.4 Research Question:**

How is politics being perceived and practiced among politically active Ethiopian youth?

***Sub Questions:***

- What is the role of political socialization on youth?
- What are the manifestations of the interrelationship between the generations?

## **1.5 Research Methodology**

***Primary Data***

This paper benefits from the intensive in-depth interviews and a focus group discussion. An attempt was made to understand the ‘political biography’ of the respondents and to relate it with the wider political and historical trajectory of the country. During each interview the young respondents were asked to discuss at length the vivid memories of their childhood, how they understand and interpret politics and how they view the changes. With regard to the other elder respondents, a similar approach was used in order to bring forth their political activism and to identify the reasons that compelled them to join the political arena.

In total, 24 individuals were interviewed and a two hours long focus group discussion with a total of 10 of the young respondents was conducted. Among the 24 respondents 17 were young respondents, including two women, whilst the remaining seven are political party leaders. The young respondents are either leaders of the youth initiatives, associations or youth groups of the political parties. 12 of the young respondents are from the youth associations and initiatives whereas the remaining five are from the youth groups of the political parties. And among the seven political party leaders three of them are Members of Parliament (opposition) and the one from the ruling EPRDF party, who is currently the Government Communication Affairs’ Minister.

Youth activism in Ethiopia occurs mainly through organized groups. This organized movement has basically two features. The youth are organized either along the regional administrations and have the name of the regional associations or based on different topics of interest like environment, art, culture, anti-HIV/AIDS and reproductive health with different names.

Most of the time the regional youth associations claim to have thousands of members and are mostly considered by many as ‘supporters’ of the incumbent government, hence not neutral. On the other hand, the theme focused youth groups consider themselves as neutral. For the sake of clearly differentiating them we shall refer the regional based youth groups as ‘Youth Associations’ and the other youth groups ‘Youth Initiatives’.

As these initiatives and association are visible and have extensive experience working on issues of youth ‘empowerment and participation’, they are good candidates for the study. However attempts to include one of the regional youth associations, Addis Ababa Youth Association, which has been operating for more than 11 years unfortunately failed because of the ‘unwillingness’ of the leaders to provide information, to answer phone calls and not being available during appointments in their office (five times). Moreover, with regard to conducting the interview with the youth league leader of the ruling party EPRDF, I conducted the interview during the last week of my field work after a month long trial of reaching the league leaders and expression of their unwillingness to give any information. I was not able to include a representative of the ruling party youth league into my focus group discussion and finally, when I conducted the interview, the chairperson of the Addis Ababa youth league was not willing to give a recorded interview. Except his part, all the interviews and the focus group discussion are recorded. The regional youth associations, except Oromiya Youth Association, operate with branch offices in Addis Ababa with their head offices in their regional capital hence I interviewed chairpersons of the branch offices which have similar structure and function like the headquarters.

The youth initiatives and associations included in the research are: Addis Ababa Youth Forum (AAYF), Oromiya Youth Association (OYA), Tigray Youth Association, Addis Ababa Branch (TYA-AA), Amhara Youth Association, Addis Ababa Branch (AYA-AA), Southern Ethiopia Youth Association, Addis Ababa Branch (SEYA-AA), Youth Network for Sustainable

Development (YNSD), Endurance Youth Association (EYA) and Talent Youth Association (TYA).

The Young politicians interviewed are from All Ethiopian Unity Party (AEUP), Ethiopians Democratic Party (EDP), Oromo Peoples' Congress (OPC), Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) and Unity for Democracy and Justice (UDJ)

Finally, I interviewed seven political party leaders from six major political parties. The parties are All Ethiopian Unity Party (AEUP), Ethiopians Democratic Party (EDP), Oromo Peoples' Congress (OPC), and Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), Unity for Democracy and Justice (UDJ – 2 persons) and Medrek.

### ***1.5.2 Secondary Data***

A variety of secondary sources from academic analysis to autobiographies, journals and newspaper articles were consulted in order to provide a fuller picture of the historical era in question. As an understudied subject in Ethiopia's history, the paper was hampered by the lack of academic work focussing on the context of the current Ethiopian youth and their role and engagement in the national politics.

## **1.6 Limitations of the Study**

The primary research conducted involved a total of 24 participants. Two basic limitations can be seen within this research. On the focus of the research, though I took youth as the main subjects of the study, my analysis does not dwell enough on differences among youth themselves particularly based on their socio-economic status, gender, ethnic background and other similar elements. I intentionally limited my focus on youth who are actively engaging themselves in the political sphere of the country either by engaging themselves in the political parties or through youth initiatives and associations irrespective of their other social difference. The other limitation of the study is the fact that the current administration system in Ethiopia which is Ethnic federalism is taken as a point of departure for many political analysis concerning the current situation of Ethiopia. Once again, I recognize the different political

reality created in the country during the incumbent regime by introducing this form of governance, but I opted to focus on the issues of youth and generations and to use it as my analytical framework. These elements might be used as additional cross-cutting issues for future analysis.



## **Chapter 2**

### **Theoretical Framework**

#### **Background**

This section is used to lay the theoretical foundation of the research paper. The main concepts of understanding youth both as social and political category beyond an age category and the explanation about generations and generational relations are discussed in detail. The other additional theoretical explanations like power and power relations, political socialization and participation are also given enough consideration in line with discussing the other two basic conceptual frameworks.

#### **2.1 Conceptualization of Youth**

The categorization of people into different social groups is not a neutral process. Age can be taken as the most basic social category of human existence based on which further decisions are made in conceding prestige and access to power with the attached roles and responsibilities (Braungart and Braungart, 1986:205). Dealing with the issues of ‘youth’, its characterization, the roles and responsibilities assigned to it and the general way in which it is being perceived needs serious scrutiny. Questioning this characterization and perception will also help us to understand the different reasons which trigger certain kinds of insights about youth as a ‘political category’.

While the concept youth has some biological and psychological meaning attached to it, it is analytically misleading to understand it only in terms of demographic or biological terms (Tyyska, 2005). Beyond being an age category, youth is also a social construction and a political category which is usually understood within a society in relational terms. Hence, people belonging to the youth category can best be understood in relation to other groups, either their elders or their followers. Such kind of sociological understanding of youth focuses mainly on how they interact with other members of the society and how they play their role in the existing societal structure. There are certain social circumstances in which youth becomes an

influential social category, a marginal group or an obsolete social status (Christiansen et al, 2006:10). Hence, it is wise to question an *a priori* meaning of youth as well as recognizing the contextual feature of its existence in the wider societal relation (ibid). Such kind of approach gives us a significantly different insight in demystifying issues related to youth from other ways of dealing with it either as a rite of passage or as a developmental phase<sup>1</sup> (Jones, 2009).

Hence, understanding youth as a social and relational location in a society is a crucial step to examining their role, aspiration and expectation of themselves as well as from the society. According to Durham, the way that youth are treated in the social imagination of a society either in the inclusion and exclusion of the political system, in the economic production system or in the societal transformation process can be examined only if it is understood as ‘a historically constructed social category’ (Durham, 2000:114). In doing so, we will be in a better position to understand the existing power relation in the construction of the ideas related to youth, issues of agency, rights and personhood as well (ibid). On the other hand it will also help us to see youth both as social *being* and social *becoming*: ‘... as a social position which is internally and externally shaped and constructed, as well as part of a larger societal and generational process, a state of becoming’ (Christiansen et al, 2006:11). Here, it is imperative to note that this social positioning is a two way process both by the society to define youth in a certain manner in the society as well as the different contexts whereby the youth seek to position themselves. This entails a continuous construction and counter-construction of youth in the societal interaction process (ibid). It is at this juncture that the role of power can be identified. Especially by taking power as a set of relations that is embedded in the day – to – day social interaction among people whereby its actors and manifestations are hardly identified at ease (Mills, 2003; 67-79). The social positioning is not something that should be taken for granted rather as a continuous process of influence and manifestation of authority in everyday life. Though the kind of power relation that we are discussing has a subtle and hidden nature, we also find it in everyday language that is being used in describing youth and their role in the society. It is not uncommon to hear that ‘youth are holders of bright future’, ‘tomorrow’s leaders’ and ‘actors of

tomorrow'. Such kind discursive notion of locating youth in the uncertain future holds a vital position in determining the role of youth in their society at the present. Despite the fact that the Ethiopian National Youth Policy and the African Youth Charter define 'youth' as 'young people' between the ages of 15 – 29 and 15 – 35, respectively (NYP, 2004; AYC, 2006); it is argued in this paper that the definition of youth must consider other factors as mentioned above. And thus, the relational and sociological understanding of 'youth' is found more appropriate to deal with it as a 'political category'. The varied societal perceptions of young people in relation to their socio-economic status, race, gender, ethnicity and other characters cannot be accommodated in a merely age based understanding of youth.

As part of their given society the political orientation that young people acquire in their social life, must be understood in view of the kind of political socialization that they pass through and the different agents playing the socializing role. Fred Greenstein argues, political socialization is '...the deliberate inculcation of political information, values and practices by institutional agents who have formally been charged with this responsibility' (as quoted in Rush, 1992: 92-96). This deliberate action includes all kinds of formal and informal, intentional and unintentional acts of political lessons at all stages of the youth's life cycle which includes other aspects of non-political information and behaviour that may have politically relevant feature (ibid). A broad understanding of political socialization may also overlap with the concept of political culture which is a pattern of individual orientations and behaviour expressed towards politics by members of a political system (ibid). When we talk about political socialization of young people the main points we are dealing with are: 'what is learned', 'when it is learned', 'how it is learned' and the impact of the political socialization on the political behaviour expressed. But, this learning process of political values is seldom a neutral process. The implicit and explicit purpose of the socialization agents (family, school and media) and their perceptions towards youth play a crucial role in the socialization process. Moreover, existing political systems have also a crucial role in influencing what is being learned and the political values passed on.

On the other hand, in spite of many peoples' argument about politics as essentially an activity of only few, the concept of political participation includes almost everyone in a political system. Political participation is about the involvement of people in the political system which in turn ranges from 'non-involvement' to running for an office (Rush, 1992: 110-1112). Young peoples' political participation can be explained in terms a hierarchy from the lowest to the highest. But the explanation about their participation is also very much dependent on the kind of political socialization they passed through which is also subject to the wider political culture.

There are various levels of political participation from belonging to a political party, active involvement in quasi-political organizations, participating in an informal politics, holding a political position, to just casting a vote to a simple interest in politics (ibid). But the driving motives behind deciding to participate in politics are found to be the main points of argument in the academic world. The two main theoretical orientations in explaining political participation are those who understand political participation as an instrument and as a means to achieve a particular end; Instrumentalists, and on the other hand those who take political participation as a crucial character of an ideal citizen and a way of exercising societal responsibility; in the developmental theory of political participation (Uhlener, 1986: 552-553; Rush, 1992: 124).

In this paper, political socialization and participation of youth is taken as a point of analysis to understand the role that a previously active young generation plays in informing the political behaviour and perception of youth in the current context by adopting an intergenerational approach.

## **2.2 Generation and Generational Relations**

An alternative approach that may offer us a better understanding of youth beyond a biological or developmental position or a mere age category is by locating this group into the wider socio-historical process. Some social processes and historical incidents have more impact in influencing peoples' experiences, and the meanings and manifestations drawn from these social incidents differ from one social group to the other (Christiansen et al, 2006:10). Identifying these influences will help us to avoid the risk of homogenizing

youth, and guard us from overlooking or undermining a variety of defining factors that may have paramount impacts in the life course of people. It is clear that certain socio-historical phenomenon does not affect the entire society at equal level. They neither have the same impact on people that belong to the same age category. Karl Mannheim's seminal essay, *the Problem of Generations* (1952), in conceptualizing generation and generational consciousness and the defining features of the emergence of new or young generation in a society is the main point of reference with this regard.

In the case of Ethiopia, the role that students and young politicians played in the socio-political and historical period of the country during the revolution and in its aftermath has been seen as a generational achievement by the then youth. Here, the common generational consciousness developed by the past generation and its leading role in the political sphere of the country is analysed in relation to the potential generational features and characteristics of the current young generation. By focusing on youth and political participation in the current Ethiopian context, Mannheim's work is found very crucial particularly in understanding the different phases of a generation, the nature of these phases as well as the possibilities of playing a significant role in the societal transformation.

In his work, Mannheim argues that people who belong to the same generation will develop a sense of belongingness not only because of their common age cohort but also because of their exposure to similar socio-historical realities that forces them to build common world views and shared consciousness (p.291). According to him, a generation is different from just a mere group of people or a concrete group which can hardly exist either physically or virtually without actual knowledge and physical proximity among members. Neither does a generation resembles with group of people who have associations of certain purpose which might not necessarily needs physical proximity among their members. Mannheim argues that a generational location is a social phenomenon which exists objectively without the conscious recognition of its members who share a common location in their society (ibid: 301-302).

Mannheim's theoretical explanation of generations constitutes three major features in which he explicitly mentioned the degree of their influence in the societal transformation process. Sharing a particular location within the socio-historical process and, having a common destiny and life chances is considered as a potential stage in making an influential generation (ibid: 303). This generational potentiality will be transformed into an "actuality" when "a concrete bond is created between members of a generation because of being exposed to the social and intellectual symptoms of a process of dynamic destabilization" (ibid). This is the particular point where people began to make meanings out of their objectively created location and unwittingly shared experiences. By doing so, they will develop "a common consciousness, or identity" which will become a distinctive framework in interpreting the life experiences of members who belong to the same generation (Alanen, 2001:15).

Members of a generation who have developed common consciousness will also begin to react collectively to the particular social realities they are exposed to (Mannheim, 1952:303, Alanen, 2001:15). This is called "generational unit" which has more intense face-to-face interaction of its members than "actual generation" and is constituted by members who "...work up the material of their common experiences in different specific ways" (Mannheim, 1952:304). There is a high probability of having more than one generational unit which may also have conflicting agenda and priorities (ibid). Having only a small segment of an entire age cohort as an active generational unit can also be one of the characteristics of generational movements (Edmund and Turner, 2005).

Understanding youth issues in the context of generation and generational positions as discussed above helps us to give the appropriate focus on the social processes that contributes to the materialization of a generation, as a social category. As it is argued in Christiansen et al:

*Generational positions, such as youth, are, in other words, intricately tied to social processes, and it is only when we move our focus from the realm of chronology or biology to the sphere of social life that we become able to fully realise the complexity*

*of the position and able to illuminate how it is negotiated and unfolds in relation to dynamics of social interaction. (2006, 12)*

Regarding intergenerational relations, former generations have an interest in thwarting the current generation's opportunity to transform from a 'potential generation' to 'actual generation'. Some argue that an active generation which successfully achieved in realizing an intergenerational change and societal transformation during its period is likely to be followed by a passive generation which will simply interact with the existing order in a less confrontational manner (Edmund and Turner, 2005). Others also argue that there will be an unavoidable interaction, contestation and contradiction attitudes and world views between two consecutive generations (Demartini, 1985). Such kinds of contradictions and contestations may hardly make the interaction between two successive generations a harmonious one (ibid).

Moreover, two consecutive generations will interact as social groups each with an implicit and explicit intention of influencing the other or showing dominance and power. Some people argue that power is something to be performed as a strategy and embedded in everyday interaction among people and functioning as a net-like system of organization where its actors and manifestations are barely identified easily (Mills, 2003:72; Hindess, 1996:99-101). Such kind of conceptualization of power within the wider framework of societal relationship is an important analytical tool to examine and critically synthesize intergenerational relations within a particular society. As it is mentioned in the earlier section the discursive nature of representation, creating a particular knowledge and opinion involves power. In a society, there are some powerful social groups who have seemingly legitimate, authoritative and exclusive access to decide the public discourse (van Dijk, 2003:356). If we take generations as social groups with their distinctive consciousness and priorities, their interaction will involve a power relation of claiming the position of influencing the main public discourse. It can be generally argued that the older generations have the upper hand in the intergenerational interaction and particularly in the political sphere. And this dominance of the older generation over the younger generation is usually maintained through the

inculcation of more or less similar ideas and outlooks among the young by the older generation in order to keep the already established system and structure intact. New insights and consciousness by the youth usually creates rupture into the already established system hence might not be welcomed by the older generation at ease.



## **Chapter 3**

### **Youth in Ethiopian Politics: across the Historical Trajectory**

This chapter provides the historical context to the topic of youth and political participation in Ethiopia and the African continent. After a brief examination of youth and politics in post-colonial Africa, the Ethiopia case is presented in four major sections; the revolution period, the ‘Red Terror’ period, the Derg regime and the EPRDF regime. The last section where I discussed the incumbent regime (EPRDF’s regime), I divided the 18 years period into three sections for further analysis of some historical incidents in detail manner.

The Ethiopian Students’ Movement (ESM) is used as a spring board for further analysis of youth and politics in Ethiopia for two major reasons. Initially, though the entire movement during the Emperor regime called under as students’ movement, most of the driving questions forwarded by the students were beyond mere concerns of students, like academic freedom and quality of education. In fact, broader national and political issues including the question of nationalities, a change in the land tenure system, the question of democracy and equality were echoed by the students. Moreover, their movements were driven by Marxist ideology which makes the movement very political and revolutionary at the same time. And the second reason is that almost all members of the Ethiopian Students’ Movement were young people in their age who fulfil the characteristic definition of ‘youth’ as a social category as well as a ‘generation’ in terms of their social position, common experience as well as the common consciousness they have developed.

#### **3.1 Youth and Politics in Africa**

If we take the political history of Africa in the post-colonial period as the main point of reference, the young generation during the independence and anti-colonization struggle periods can be considered as the most successful generation in transforming the social, political, economic as well as historical reality of most African countries. The 1960s which is usually known as ‘decade

of Africa's independence' where thirty-four countries achieved their political independence from their colonizers constituted the first global generation with a global consciousness (Edmunds and Turner, 2005:564-565). The Cold War period, 1970s and 1980s, in most parts of Africa was a period of protracted civil wars, coup d'états and political instabilities (Meredith, 2005). Jon Abbink further argued that, the socio-economic as well as the political environment through which today's youth have been brought up is so inconvenient that society's role to positively impact the lives of its youngsters was compromised. He attributed this situation to the fact that most societies in Africa, mainly after the independence, have passed through an impoverished situation of violent conflict and marginalization (Abbink, 2005:2). Such kinds of uncomfortable social contexts contribute for the perception of youth in Africa as people who are always involved in crime, crisis, violence and other social evils (ibid).

Indeed, the cyclical poverty situation in which the youth grew up and currently living in is also a vital factor in influencing their participation in the political system of their respective countries. By taking the fact that, there is a demographically significant portion of youth in most African countries and their desperate situation of social deprivation and poor economic power, some people argue that they are easily recruited to join political parties and armed movements or criminal groups (ibid). Moreover, there are also other scholars who correlate the increasing nature of population and its young members in Africa as a direct cause for civil conflict and strife to emerge in societies (Goldstone, 2002; Cincotta, et al, 2003).

In general, one can explain the marginal role of youth in African politics particularly since the 1960s both in absolute and relational terms. As it is argued by Abbink '... [T]o be young in Africa came to mean being disadvantaged, vulnerable and marginal in the political and economic sense. A long historical process, shaped by authoritarian colonialism, post-colonial state failure and a generally problematic engagement with material modernity has yielded the conditions of crisis and upheaval under which youth in Africa growing up' (Abbink, 2005:7).

But as it is argued in the introduction part of this paper, in spite of the influential socio-political context at the international and continental level in the 1960s, the unique national context in Ethiopia created a different venue for the youth and the students to engage into the political system differently. The following parts of this chapter elaborate this unique feature.

### **3.2 Ethiopian Youth and Students in History (1960 - Present)**

#### ***The Ethiopian Students' Movement (ESM) and the Revolution (1960s -1974)***

The Ethiopian Students' Movement (ESM) which was the main political platform of the then young generation in the 1960s and 70s began taking shape in the 1950s (Tiruneh, 1993:29). The main actors in the students' activism were University Students' Union of Addis Ababa (USUAA) which represents all the colleges in the capital from inside and Ethiopian Students Union in Europe (ESUE) and Ethiopian Students Union in North America (ESUNA), that were functioning from abroad.

The students' movement, 'the most implacable opposition' to the imperial regime under Emperor Haile Selassie –I regime (Zewde, 2007:220), wanted an end to the feudalistic socio-economic and political structure. The frequent demonstrations organized by the students and the clashes with the security guards, the Imperial Bodyguard, mainly in the capital, Addis Ababa, demanding for real reform in the system of governance (land redistribution and democratic rights) were one of the major channels of raising the political consciousness of the wider society. On the other hand, the students' movement happened at a particular verge of world history and had some internal and external triggering factors. Two major external factors played a vital role. First, the post-colonization period in other parts of Africa facilitated the presence of other African students at the University College Haile Selassie I (now Addis Ababa University) through scholarship who brought a spirit of fighting against injustice and operation with them into the students' movement (Tareke,2009:26;Zewde,2007:222). Secondly, the revolutionary spirit of that particular period of 1960s, 'the popular and cultural movements in the West',

the students' movements in Mexico and France in 1968, the anti-hegemonic struggles, anti-Vietnam war as well as the civil rights movements were also vital elements that inform the ESM in the country (Tareke,2009:27). Most historians agree on the point that the students' movement, in spite of its timeliness and paramount importance of raising the social and political problems of the country, it has a steady radicalized position in analysing the situation of the country as well as the remedies proposed to deal with the problems identified (Kebede,2008;Zewde,2007:222;Tareke,2009: 25).

Internally the challenges of the *ancien régime* were escalating from different angles. The land alienation and feudalistic administration which benefits the royal family at the expense of the majority poor peasants triggered peasant rebellions in different parts of the country (Zewde, 2007:215). Moreover, the nationalist movements against centuries old oppression, the class struggle against the feudalistic elite which were both analysed through a Marxist-Leninist ideological line were also growing. From the nationalist movements the 'separatist' movement in Eritrea, the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) was the most advanced one. Gudina argues that the 1974 revolution is a convergence of class, national and ideological struggles in different fronts (Gudina, 2002:76).

The students created different platforms of discussion, debate and dialogue like newspapers: *News and Views* at the University College of Hale Selassie I and the theoretical organs of the students' unions; USUAA's *Struggle*, ESUNA's *Challenge* and ESUE's *Tateq* ('Gird yourself'), and eventually the movement become radicalized the extreme left. Marxism-Leninism became 'a creed rather than as a system of thought' to systematically scrutinize the Ethiopian situation by that time (Zewde, 2007:225-226). As Gebru Tareke argues, the inflexible and staunchly ideological nature of the students movement with its commitment for dogmatism and intolerant way of settling ideological disputes promoted '... secrecy, mendacity, suspicion and intrigue while devaluing openness, trust and candour – survival tactics ... ' (2009:30). Indeed the ESM was a ground-breaking action by the students. Especially if we consider the past history of the country before the ESM, we hardly find any

socio-political context in the country that may be used as a fertile ground for such kind of movement to be realized by the youth generation (Tareke, 2009:25; Zewde, 2007:226).

The 1974 Ethiopian revolution occurred suddenly even by the standards of the radical students who were calling for revolution (Tareke, 2009:34; Tiruneh, 1993:139; Zewde, 2007:228). The urban upsurge which involved students, teachers, unemployed youth, civil servants, taxi drivers and the soldiers reached its climax in February 1974. The continuous popular up-rising which was facilitated by the crucial factors like the famine that has happened a year before, the peasants rebellion in the rural parts of the country, and the deteriorated economic situation of the urban dwellers compromised the existing legitimate authority of the Emperor. Not having an organized guidance for this bloodless revolution, the leadership and the control of the entire uprising fall under the military which exploited the power vacuum between February and September 1974 and finally officially ousted the Emperor from his throne on September 12, 1974 (Gudina, 2003:150).

### ***The Red Terror Period (1976 – 1978)***

Immediately after controlling power by dethroning the Emperor, the Military (Derg) outlawed any popular uprising like strikes and demonstrations, and declared that the revolution has achieved its goal. Whereas for others, especially for the civilian left mainly composed of students, this was the moment where the aspired revolution was derailed. (Zewde, 2007:236) The two political parties; the Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Party (EPRP) and All Ethiopian Socialist Movement (AESM) become in confrontation with the Military which has established a Provisional People's Government (PPG). In spite of the fact that both political parties adopted Marxist-Leninist ideological line of analysis, later also joined by the Military, to materialize their objectives there was a significant difference among them, particularly on 'democracy and the national question' (Zewde, 2007:237; Tareke, 2009:41). AESM changed its position from becoming an opposition to the Derg and its PPG to providing what they call '*critical support*' which helped AESM to win the heart of the Derg for a while. This difference precipitated the Red Terror

which was used as a mechanism by the Derg to eliminate all its rivals and consolidate power into its hands at any cost. According to Gebru Tareke, '[B]oth organizations (*EPRP and AESM*) grossly underestimated the soldiers' lust for power and their ability to quickly learn the Marxist vocabulary and the Leninist methods of organization and propaganda. Missteps and tactical errors enabled the soldiers to neutralize the civilian revolutionary groups and to condemn their former allies as enemies of the people and the revolution' (2009:41).

The Red Terror roughly took two years with its heydays mainly mid- 1977 against EPRP (May – June, 1977) and end of 1977 and early 1978 which was used to suppress the potential threat from AESM (Tiruneh,1993). The atrocious action by the Derg on the EPRP members reached its peak on May 29, 1977 when the anti-government demonstration organized by EPRP in line with May Day ended up with the killing of more than 500 demonstrators over a night.

*The massacre continued in the following days; according to the Secretary General of the Swedish Save the Children Fund, over 1,000 youth had been executed by 16 May and their bodies were left in the streets and ravaged by hyenas at night. School children of eleven years of age and above were at the forefront of EPRP demonstrations. It is widely reported that hospitals often refused to treat the wounded on the grounds that they were reactionaries, and charged anything up to 100 US dollars and 25 US dollars for the release of students' and workers bodies, respectively, to cover the cost of bullets wasted in killing them (Tiruneh, 1993:211).*

This was in addition to those who were detained in thousands in prisons and police stations and local administration offices under the suspicion of being members of EPRP or sympathizers who were also tortured and massacred and buried in mass-graves in the outskirts of the capital. Estimates of the number of people killed during the Red Terror period are as high as from 150,000-200,000 from which more than three quarter of them were youth political

activists.<sup>1</sup> By the end of 1978, the Derg championed all the threats against its wish to control power and established a ‘one man rule’ under chairperson of the Derg Colonel Mengistu Haile Mariam who stayed in power until May 1991.

### ***The Derg Regime (1978 -1991)***

The Derg established itself as a Socialist regime under the control of the Military and in line with the Marxist – Leninist political ideology. For that reason, the entire state structure was governed by Leninist type of mass organization of workers, youth, farmers, urban dwellers and women as well. It was in this context that the Revolutionary Ethiopian Youth Association and Revolutionary Ethiopian Women Association become institutionalized to supposedly address the interest of the youth but more of to reign in control young people (Ofcansky and Berry, 2007).

The students’ movement also resulted in insurgent movements in the rural parts of North Ethiopia the country to fight back militaristic and authoritarian regime. The Ethiopian Peoples’ Revolutionary Front (EPRP) and the Tigray People’s Liberation Front (TPLF) – February, decided to wage war against the military regime in 1975 by locating themselves in the Northern part of the country, Tigray and Gondar. The two armed insurgent groups could not reconcile ideological differences and engaged in a clash where TPLF emerged as victorious to eradicate the EPRP force from the Tigray region in 1978 (Zewde, 2007:260-261).

An insurgent group which was initially started by TPLF then transformed into Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Front (EPRDF) finally become a victorious power to over throw Derg in May 28, 1991 triumphantly. The Derg regime tried to mobilize students from Addis Ababa University in March 1991 –

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<sup>1</sup>[http://www.eprp-ihapa.com/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=36&Itemid=77](http://www.eprp-ihapa.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=36&Itemid=77)  
(accessed on June 18, 2009).

nearly three months before its downfall, to give military training so as to resist the advancement of the insurgents to control the capital. The university senate which is largely constituted by members of the Derg voted to send students to the military camps for training where in the meantime the Mengistu Hailemariam, the President, fled the country a week before the control of the capital (Balsvik, 2005:107-108). On the other hand, the changing global world order in late 80s and early 90s – the end of the Cold War Era -also played a significant role to the changing situation of the political landscape of the country.

### ***The EPRDF Regime (1991 – Present)***

#### **1991 – 2005; the first 15 years of the regime**

After 17 years of war, EPRDF become in control of the government where the chairperson of the party, Melese Zenawi who was a medical student at Addis Ababa University, a student activist and a congress member of USUAA become the president of the transitional government (ibid;109). A new constitution was drafted and he assumed the Prime Ministerial position since 1994.

His regime had a few challenges from the Addis Ababa University students in its early years particularly on the issues of Eritrean referendum (1993) and the Land Reform Proclamation in 1997. Student demonstrations in both cases were dealt with harsh responses from the government (Ahmed, 2006:40; Balsvik, 2007:127-129). Moreover there were also incidents where students were target of political problems, particularly students from the Oromo ethno-linguistic group were targeted by the government security forces for being suspected of pro-OLF (Oromo Liberation Front), an armed opposition group. Students have been also striving for the establishment of an independent students' union in the university which was also a challenge they had to face with the government policy of which encourages 'organization according to ethnic origin' (Balsvik, 2007:130). Their demand for independent students' press and union and for the replacement of armed campus police with civilian police reached its climax in April 2001 when the students went on strike to stop class and government security forces enter the campus to harshly



beat and arrest students. The incident that started in the AAU campus spread to the city where violence between the police and mostly urban unemployed youth resulted a death of more than 40 people and imprisonment of thousands including opposition party leaders. The government accused opposition parties for instigating the strike and the violence. Some argue that the disproportional reaction of the government using heavy-handed armed forces against armless demonstrating students is an indication of the perception of the government about the students' riots which might not have only academic cause. The reaction of the students after the deadly incidents to flee to Kenya and Djibouti in a significant number also shows the seriousness of the incident; a degree just above being only a students' movement, and its challenge to the existence of the regime (Ahmed,2006:40 , Balsvik,2007:148 -156)

### ***The 2005 National Election***

For the first time in its regime the EPRDF government faced a real challenge from opposition parties during the 2005 national election where the wider society engaged in the political debates significantly. The main actors during the election were the ruling party, Ethiopia Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), and the two major opposition parties Coalition for Unity and Democracy (CUD) and United Ethiopian Democratic Forces (UEDF). Especially the CUD party had a great impact in bringing the people to come out and vote *en masses*. Some argue that the 2005 election can be taken as 'the second political earthquake' which won the hearts of millions of Ethiopians in the post revolution period after the mass movement by EPRP (Tegegn, 2008:273). Both the electronic and print media as well as the civil society were involved immensely in sensitizing the mass about each and every details of the election campaign and providing civic/voter education<sup>2</sup>. An estimated number of 25 million people which is more than 80% of the electorate turned out to cast a vote on the Election Day (Balsvik, 2007:170)

The demonstrations organized by the ruling party and the two main opposition (CUD and UEDF) parties a week before the election, on May 7 and 8, 2005 respectively, is a major evidence to show how the parties galvanized

the spirit of the people. An estimated number of more than 3 million people participated in the demonstration organized by the opposition parties which is second to none to any kind of political movement in the country's history (Balsvik, 2007:169; Tegegn, 2008:273-274). Unsurprisingly, the majority of the demonstrators were young people, who never had such kind of widely opened space to exchange and express their political views<sup>3</sup>. Though the figure politicians and leaders in both sides are people who were part of the ESM in the 60s and 70s, the young people who did not participate in those periods embrace the new opportunity of engaging into politics fearlessly.

All the problems with regard to the election happened after the voting day where the opposition parties started accusing the ruling party for fraud and vote rigging which was followed by protest demonstrations and conflicting situations with the security and police officers (Balsvik, 2007:166-176). The two main protest demonstrations that happened mainly in Addis Ababa (on June 8 and November 1, 2005) claimed the lives of 193 civilians and 6 police officials, according to the Independent Inquiry Commission which was established by the government to investigate the post election crisis, whereas thousands were imprisoned for their protest<sup>2</sup>. On the other hand, Melakou Tegegn put in his article the number of people 'massacred as they demonstrate' to 400 and those imprisoned up to 17,000 (Tegegn, 2008:303). Needless to say, the majority of those who were either killed or imprisoned during the demonstrations were young people<sup>4</sup>. In brief the national election in 2005 raised the political sentiment of the country to the unexpected level and ended up with the death of more than 190 people, the imprisonment of the main opposition party leaders, journalists and even civil society activists.

#### ***Post 2005 and the Reaction from the Government (2005 – Present)***

After the 2005 election the government make major decisions of focusing on youth issues. The formulation of the Youth Development Package (YDP) in mid 2006 focusing on the urban, rural and pastoral youth is one of the

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<sup>2</sup>< <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/6064638.stm>>, accessed on September 9, 2009

justifications for the major decision by the government<sup>5</sup>. The other key measure taken by the incumbent regime is the establishment of youth forums particularly in the capital, Addis Ababa<sup>6</sup>. In late 2006 and early 2007 EPRDF organized a series of discussion platforms with the residents of Addis Ababa which finally resulted in the establishment of Addis Ababa Youth Forum (AAYF), Addis Ababa Women's Forum (AAWF), and Addis Ababa Inhabitants Forum (AAIF). Both the government and leaders of AAYF claim that the Forum is established as a tri-partite platform to engage the youth, the government and the Care taker administration on their issues of common concern and to ensure the meaningful engagement and participation of youth in the decision making process.

The AAYF and the EPRDF Youth League, which is also established shortly after the May 2005 election, organized two 'National Youth Conferences' in August, 2007 and February, 2009 with the Prime Minister. According to the media reports and the organizers more than 7,000 young people have participated in each conference. Moreover, by taking the words of the Prime Minister and his call for the establishment of a common platform of youth associations and organizations in the second 'National Youth Conference', the National Youth Council of Ethiopian Youth is established in July 2009.

## Chapter 4

# Politics of Fear and Despair among the Youth

### Background

With the intention of understanding how politics is being perceived and practiced among young people in Ethiopia, a group of young people who are actively involved in youth initiatives, associations and political parties were selected and interviewed. Political party leaders were also interviewed in order to obtain a fuller understanding of the situation on the ground. The findings and the analysis of the field work is presented in this and the following chapter. This chapter mainly focuses on providing an insight how the political history of the country since the revolution has influenced the political perception of young people and their decision to participate in politics. It also examines the impact of the political processes in which today's young people have participated in i.e. the 2005 national election.

### 4.1 Youth vs. Politics; *Poletikana korenti*

The young respondents are between the ages of 23 to 31 and thus, were born and raised during the civil war. In order to understand how they were exposed to politics and to identify the impacts that the political socialization process had on their political behaviour, they were asked about their vivid memories of politics since their childhood and to reflect on the perception of politics among their fellow young people and youth activists. To questions such as, 'what was your impression about politics when you were a child?', 'what is your first memory about politics?' and 'what is the impact of your first memory?', young Habtamu Ayalew responded as follows:

*'... young people of that time [the Derg regime] interpret politics in terms of bullets and guns, and also in terms of the forced revolutionary army recruitment when they become old enough to be soldiers'* (Habtamu Ayalew, 24, Chairperson, AAYF).

Politics was taken as a process where people lost their lives, killed each other, get imprisoned or run away from their country. These were the early memories that almost all young respondents share from their childhood. As a

result, all of them almost unanimously agreed with the fact that this was the framework of reference used by the majority of today's young people in their understanding about politics and political process of their country. The information they were exposed to about politics also had a durable impact. Particularly, stories from the 'Red Terror' period were influential enough to repel young people from getting involved in politics. As one of the respondents stated,

*'...my family was so close to politics. I have older brothers who were tortured during the "Red Terror" and two sisters who luckily escaped from being massacred after being taken out of the prison. Hence, they used to tell me that political involvement is seriously dangerous'* (Kassahun Belete; Director, 31, YNSD).

These types of stories were part of at least every neighbourhood if not every family and today's young people grew up with this in mind. For some respondents politics is totally misunderstood because of the historical reality that young people heard and read.

*'... some people even have demonstrated fear towards the word "politics" since people always refer it to what happened to those young people and students who stood for a good cause ...'* (Girum Abebe, 28, EYA)

Of course, there are others whose initial childhood memory about politics started during the incumbent regime, i.e. after 1991. For example, Ermias Balkew who is 24 and member of the central committee of Ethiopian Democratic Party (EDP) said the political discussion in his family, the different historical books he read and the media were the main sources of information for his understanding about politics. But the kind of perception that he developed was a hatred to the current system.

*' ... I did not have positive thoughts but rather hatred for the current government of EPRDF,... and it was this hatred that brought me into politics. But after getting involved into politics, mainly in the EDP, I totally changed my perception and started to believe that we should not have this kind of hard feelings since differences and disagreements on ideas is a must.'* (Ermias Balkew, Central Committee member of EDP).

A common trend that is visible among all youth is that from an early age their perception of political discourse was synonymic with the sense of fear

and despair. The saying '*poletikana korentin beruku*' ('politics should be avoided just like electricity') is the most common way of expressing the level of alienation and cynicism young and old alike harbour towards politics. As one of the political party leaders puts it; '*... it's a pity that many members of the past generation are dormant in their political activities these days. The majority is saying "poletikana korenti ..." ... there were so many intellectuals who were politically active but now we find only few of them*', Dr Hailu Araya, Vice Chairperson of Unity for Democracy and Justice - UDJ party (former student leader, ESUNA).

Therefore, generally speaking, the social environment through which today's young people of Ethiopia have lived through did not encourage political activity on their behalf but instead repelled this group from taking a more active role in politics and political process of the country. Nevertheless the events of the 2005 general election go a long way to discrediting the above mentioned view.

## **4.2 Perceptions Challenged and Reaffirmed**

The 2005 election was a unique experience in Ethiopia's political history. The level of political participation and the eagerness to have a role in the political process by the entire society was considerably high bearing in mind the nation's history. The high level of participation by the young people during the election campaign period, in demonstrations and the high voters turn out are few examples that demonstrate the unique features of the 2005 election.

### ***The 2005 National Election and its aftermath***

Many believe that the youth have played a significant role in the entire election process from both the ruling and opposition parties' side. Both the print and electronic media played a significant role in sensitizing the wider public and the growth in readership of newspapers among the youth was high as well. It was a period of complete revival to see many young people very active during the campaign period like using of telephone text messages. Young people were also creative enough to use the mobile technology to send political messages and information during the post election violence among each other. It was the first national election after a wide expansion of mobile

networks, especially the pre-paid mobile phones in Ethiopia (2003), and young people exploited the opportunity to express their political sentiments. Cutting down the text message service was also the first action that the government security forces took during the post election violence. The huge demonstration by the opposition a week from the Election Day which was first of its kind in the country's political history was made possible mainly because of the significant number of students and young supporters. The post-election violence has also claimed the lives of many young people and the majority to be thrown to jail. The youth group leader of UDJ party argued,

*‘... it was a revival period for youth political participation, but it was also the youth that was heavily stricken during the post election violence’* Ababayehu Deme.

The youth initiative leaders and opposition party youth group leaders believe that, though the 2005 election was an eye opening moment for the involvement of youth in politics; the killings, the imprisonment as well as the chaotic situation that happened after the election were used as enough justifications to reaffirm the belief that ‘politics should be avoided just like electricity’. On the other hand, heads of the branch offices of the regional youth associations, head of the newly established Addis Ababa Youth Forum and the ruling party youth league leader (EPRDF) argued in the same manner that meaningful youth political participation significantly increased after the election and mainly after 2007.

In fact, it was widely observed that the opposition party which galvanized the majority of the population during the 2005 election has won the hearts of many young people. And this massive involvement of young people in support of the opposition made the ruling party to reconsider its relationship with the youth after 2005.

On the other hand, deeper analysis of the role that young people played during the election may give us a different picture. Given the nature, the intensity and the degree of its influence, we can say that the 2005 election is a real and significant socio-historical phenomenon that the current youth shared. It can be also argued that the youth of this period achieved the characteristic features of a generation in potential by their common location and experience

of historically significant reality in Ethiopian politics. But this potentiality was not fully realized in order to bring real transformation in the youth's relationship with the national political process. The interviewees were asked what kind of role did the youth take on, how influential were they in promoting their own agenda and how 'youthful' was their participation?

They responded by stating that the role the youth played during the election should not be undermined. But most agreed that the influential capacity of the youth, in spite of their significant number was unquestionably low. Rather, it was the older generation which was able to shape the outcomes and the course of events. Particularly the 'bipolar opposition' thinking which took control of the minds of young people was one of the causes for the violence to occur. As it is mentioned earlier, it was for the first time that the youth tried to have major role in election process of the country. But this eagerness to influence the political process went hardly beyond showing their support and commitment for the parties during campaigns and demonstrations and going out *en mass* for the election. After the Election Day, when the parties were quarrelling amongst each other and the situation become tense, the significant support rendered to the parties in the pre-election period by the youth and the students was not powerful enough to shape the outcome. Rather it was either silenced or made to follow only the decisions of the party leaders. For instance, the June 8 violence, started in the Main Campus of Addis Ababa University, and was triggered by the tense situation among pro-government students who were reporting opposition supporter students and student leaders<sup>7</sup> to the security forces (Balsvik, 2007:173). Those young people who came out to the streets and get killed by the security forces were by no means influential enough to push both sides to compromise. Indeed, failing to compromise and not having any room for negotiations and dialogue has continued to be one of the characteristic features of Ethiopian politics since the "Red Terror" period. The seemingly 'powerful' role of the youth stopped at the Election Day. This situation showed where the power to influence the political course lies. At face value, because of the high mobilization of young people and their eagerness and enthusiasm to engage and because of their physical presence at the front might give an impression that the 'youth' are



exercising their power. Of course they were doing so. But the degree of their influence was negligible in relation to the power of the old generation, which even set the framework of the political sphere for the youth to engage and determine the discourse used and the emotions exerted. This can be also understood as the result of taking number wise participation of young people as an end by itself. Their physical presence is given more value than their substantive contribution of ideas.

With regard to the impact of the 2005 election, generally there are two different reactions from the respondents. The youth initiative leaders said they are no longer interested to work on issues of civic education, human rights, democracy and good governance to put the 'risky' situation of politics at a distance. The two youth initiatives, EYA and YNSD, have participated in the civil society's election observation team in the 2005 election and their participation in this process brought them a threat during the post election violence. Members of their respective organizations who participated in election monitoring group were thrown to jail during the post election crisis and some of them run away from the country because of the constant threat they were receiving. Their involvement in the election process was not welcomed mainly by the ruling party officials in their local administrations. Kassahun, Director of YNSD recalled, '*...we were not able to compile the election monitoring and observation report and send it to the Civil Society Secretariat because we were receiving anonymous calls from people who threaten us*'. EYA leaders said they always try to avoid working on issues of good governance, democracy or human rights since the 2005 election not to jeopardize their organization's existence and to avoid confrontation with local administration officials. YNSD in its part tried to provide civic education programmes for youth leaders and it was challenged by the participants why it teaches them about laws and principles that are not applicable in anyways.

However, leaders of the regional youth associations argue that though the post election violence had some negative impacts on the political participation of youth, the current situation is very conducive and the level of participation has increased considerably. Chairperson of a newly established youth group in

2007, Addis Ababa Youth Forum, Habtamu said ‘... *we were afraid of politics in the past. But now we created the sense of concern among young people on political issues and they are involved in every decision making in every Kebele.*’<sup>8</sup> Likewise, both leaders of Oromiya and Southern Ethiopia Youth Associations said that the existing constitutional framework which guarantees political participation as one of the democratic rights is the base that should be considered in this regard. And both argue that mainly after 2007, youth political participation has been improving in their respective regions. For instance, Alemayehu Tulu, 26, chairperson of Oromiya Youth Association said, ‘... *currently more than 80% of the woreda<sup>9</sup> administrators are young people and fresh university graduates*’. The year 2007 is mentioned as a turning point for those who argue that youth political participation has been changing positively since then.

As it is mentioned in the previous chapter the incumbent government took lessons from the 2005 election and massively engaged in activities that directly targeted young people. The formulation of the Youth Development Package (YDP) in mid 2006, the establishment of the Addis Ababa Youth Forum (AAYF) in 2007 were the major steps taken. Even the youth league of the party was established after the post election crisis<sup>10</sup>. Moreover, the EPRDF leader said,

‘...*after 2005 we have come to understand that it is not possible to sideline the youth and we also cannot address the concerns of the youth without their active participation.*’  
(Bereket Simon, Minister of Government Communication Affairs Office)

Though EPRDF argued that the AAYF is established and controlled by its members, others strongly argued that it is another system of controlling the people in an institutionalized manner. Ato Seeye Abraha, who was one of the core founders of the ruling party and member of the central committee until 2001, but now member of an opposition group argued that ‘... *the ruling party still adheres to the Leninist type of organizational principles to organize workers, youth, women, teachers and others so as to control the mass and ensure its existence*’.

The AAYF chairperson does not agree with the idea that the initiative is part of the political programme of the ruling party. He rather strongly asserted that; though the founders of the Forum were initially invited by EPRDF to

participate in a consultation meeting about the youth issues in the city, it was their sole interest to continue to engage with the party and the administration in a formal manner. He argued that it is after the establishment of their Forum that young people began to participate in politics actively and meaningfully. On the other hand, the other youth initiative leaders still believe that the Forum is another extension of the ruling party's work to organize youth around itself. It is only among young people who are supporting the ruling party or participating in the regional youth association and the Forum whose participation in political issues has been increasing.

Generally, one can say that the present political behaviour of today's young people of Ethiopia is a result of both their political socialization and their practical experience. Their socialization is heavily influenced by the political turmoil after the revolution and the civil war whereas the 2005 election gave them a practical lesson. Indeed the lessons learned vary based on their position in the political process. It was another actual point of reference to adhere to the '*poletikana korenti ...*' mentality among many in contrary to the others, mainly the ruling party affiliated youth, who took it as a good turning point to boost youth political participation in the country. Moreover, it is here that we can clearly see the influence of the older generation onto the youth, not by history of the past rather through the experience and the practical exposure of the youth themselves. The 2005 national election is a historical evidence, where the entire course of action was crafted, lead and determined by the older generation and young people played their role only in number wise without a real influence on the outcome. This urges us to critically examine the generational dimension of the political process, the intergenerational relation and the manifestations of the relationship. It is also important to see the interplay between the two generations in the current context of Ethiopian politics in the aftermath of the 2005 election. The following chapter attempts to throw some insights with this regard.

## **Chapter 5**

### **The Generational aspect of Ethiopian Politics**

#### **Background**

In present day Ethiopia, the majority of the current political figures and leaders were activists during the students' movement in the 1960s and 1970s, leaders of the rebel groups or officials during the Derg regime. On the other hand we have the young generation joining the political scene and belong to none of the above categories. In this chapter the relationship between generations is analyzed in a context of power relations, and through political discourses of the country. If the ability to control the way that one social group expresses itself and communicate with each other is one form exercising power (van Dijk, 2003:354), then it can be argued that the older generation in Ethiopia is controlling the language of the young generation, the broader thinking framework and the possibility of bringing an alternative discourse that fits to its context; is a clear manifestation of the power relation. In this chapter the research question how politics is being practiced among young people of Ethiopia is addressed. The characteristic feature of getting involved in the political process by the youth is analysed in relation to their interaction with the older generation that has more power and commanding role in the political process.

#### **5.1 Young in age, old in thinking**

Ethiopia's political culture, especially after the "Red Terror" is characterized by 'culture of binary opposition' (Tegegn, 2008:279) where people are always categorized either as a 'supporter' or as an 'opponent' of a particular political party in power. In such context not supporting either of the two groups is more dangerous than supporting any. Ever since the post revolution political turmoil, the political discourse at all level, both among the political leaders as well as the wider society is more of exclusionary and mainly constructed with the intention of destructing the existence of 'the other' to make sure one political ideology/outlook governs all (ibid).

In today's Ethiopia, young people are also interacting with each other with similar mentality of 'binary opposition'. It may not be a surprise to see such kind of inclination among the older generation given their 'radical commitment for Marxism – Leninism' (Kebede, 2008), which is still shown in their political discourse these days. As one of the only two female respondents explained, the young supporters of mainly the ruling party are influenced by their elders to label anyone who is not supporting them as a supporter of the opposition parties. She argues that, *'If you criticize anything from the government, you are advocating for the opposition, thus a threat. You will never be considered as someone with a neutral or different outlook'* (Mekdes Abebe, 26, EYA). Such kind of thinking framework makes the activities of the youth initiatives so difficult to the extent that interacting with the local government in need of any cooperation is jeopardized. The non-partisan position of the youth initiatives is not appreciated as a neutral stand rather as an opposition. The main challenge these youth initiatives are facing is not directly from the older generation, rather from their fellow young people who are members of regional youth associations and the ruling party youth league. Of course, none of the young respondents from the regional youth associations, the ruling party youth league as well as the AAYF accept the accusation.

The implicit nature of power relation between the older generation and the young generation politicians is also something worth mentioning here. This influence is mainly noticed among the regional youth association leaders (most of them are members of EPRDF), the ruling party youth league leader and chairperson of AAYF, in terms of the common vocabulary they use, the similar comparisons and explanations they give about the current socio-economic and political reality of the country and the examples they provide. It was a bit strange to hear similar words and arguments from these young respondents and the EPRDF official. For example, the students' movement members in the late 60s and 70s as well as the political officials of the Derg regime used to use the words '*struggle*' – "*Tigil*"; in Amharic and '*comrade*' – "*Gnadoch*" widely in the middle of their conversations. These words are highly associated with Marxist-Leninist ideological leaning and hence usually used by the older generation repeatedly. Surprising enough, the young respondents,

especially those who have direct relationship with the ruling party, use these words repeatedly. The literal meaning these two words have in Amharic<sup>11</sup> is highly associated with the use of force, militaristic and hierarchical. And it is being used by the young respondents either wittingly and unwittingly. The EPRDF Addis Ababa Youth League chairperson was saying the motto they had when they establish the youth league was *'though the nature of the struggle is different, it will continue with the new generation'*. On the other note he said that the main objective of the youth league is to uphold *'... the principles that comrades have sacrificed their lives'*. The AAYF chairperson on the other hand mentioned, *'...the Forum is creating a platform for the youth to struggle for a change of policies that are found less effective and to praise those which are advantageous and to influence for their implementation'*. Head of the Southern Ethiopian Youth Association Addis Ababa Branch, who is also member of the EPRDF youth league, constantly mentioned the role of 'struggle' in bringing a desired change; *'... we have to create a conducive environment through a struggle ... we can bring a better situation through process and struggle... this generation has a better opportunity and ... if things are not going well (that means) a struggle is required, then we have to struggle.'* Andarge, vice – chairperson of Amhara Youth Association Addis Ababa Branch and also member of EPRDF youth league said *'...young people should organize themselves in associations and struggle for their benefit. ... Most people think those of us in EPRDF are seeking for benefits and opportunities, but there nothing in EPRDF, except to struggle'*. On the other hand Ato Bereket Simon, the EPRDF official mentioned the role of 'struggle' a few times during the interview. When he was commenting about the role of the newly established National Youth Council, he said that it should be a platform for the youth *'... to struggle for their common question irrespective of their political attitude and background'*. About the role of the youth league, he said, *'... it has a vital role in achieving the struggle to answer the question of the youth'*.

The other dominant discourse with regard to youth in the current regime is their participation in Micro and Small Business (MSB). The exactly similar phrase that everyone is using is *'ensuring participation and benefit of the youth'*, which is a phrase from the Youth Development Package. Even questions about political participation of youth in the decision making process are answered by both the ruling party official as well as the regional youth association leaders

and the ruling party youth league leader within the context of the increasing involvement of youth in the MSB. Habtamu, chairperson of the AAYF said *‘there is a massive youth movement in the economic sector particularly in micro and small business. The government is providing us with a work place and clustered shades in different parts of the city and we are striving to ensure the economic benefit of youth’*. Ato Bereket is also arguing that opportunity creation, access to finance and job creation through micro and small business are the main activities of the government through the youth development package. Everything related to youth and politics issues are easily hijacked to be interpreted in terms of securing economic benefit of youth and their opportunity to secure job. This is also the picture that the government media, which is solely controlled by the ruling party, echoes about youth every now and then. Though it is undeniable that ensuring economic empowerment is one part of the capacity to influence decision making, the direct relationship between influencing political decisions in political parties is less visible. The influence of the politicians in securing support and votes is more viable than the beneficiaries influencing the politicians. Still the power to decide who should get the opportunities and benefits is in the hands of the politicians and the number wise increasing feature of political participation among young people is a means used to secure the benefits.

## **5.2 ‘Commercialization of Politics’ among the Youth**

Among the major arguments raised by those who contend that youth political participation is increasing in the country’s political platform is the fact that there are many young civil servants in the government offices holding different positions and responsibilities. The number of young members in the youth league of the ruling party is also increasing significantly. Many are very critical about the increasing number of EPRDF youth league members. Most opposition political parties accuse the ruling party for recruiting young members by promising job opportunities and by giving government office works only for those who have party membership identity cards.

*‘Even those of our friends and party members who were very critical about the political ideology of EPRDF now changed their party and assume different administration positions,*

*like becoming a mayor and regional parliament member.*' (Bayissa Dinssa, 23, from Oromo Peoples' Congress (OPC) and youngest member of the regional parliament)

Bayissa argues that this is a clear example how the ruling party is recruiting its members from the younger generation. Likewise, Dr. Merera Gudina, chairperson of OPC and MP, call this process '*commercialization of politics*' which is a process that the ruling party embarks on extensively by taking the economical poor background of the majority and mainly the youth. The EPRDF official said '*... we had around 600,000 members during the 2005 election across the country which reaches more than 4.5 million at this moment... and the majority are young people*' (Ato Bereket Simon). Fresh graduates from universities are the main targets of the ruling party where it claims having more than 80% of them as its members (Addis Admas Newspaper, August 4, 2009). Most university graduating class students openly said that they are joining the party for the sake of securing job when they are returning to their locality (ibid). Even the MSB which the incumbent regime is proud of in providing economic opportunity to young people is used as a means of winning the hearts of young people. As one of the respondents said, '*... the micro and small business are all dependants of EPRDF*' (Mamushet Amare, AEUP, youth group head). Indeed, the ruling party has also mentioned it explicitly that issues of youth have been prioritized by the government since the 2005 national election, where more than 100,000 jobs were created mainly through the MSB sectors. Ato Bereket (EPRDF) did not deny the indictment against his party's recruitment strategy for new members, mainly students and young people. But he strongly argued that the problem is not the result of the party's principle and recruitment policy and he believes in the need for a rigorous method of membership recruitment. On the other hand he also mentioned that the current economic growth in the country is seen as an opportunity for many to change their lives and his government wants to maintain this feeling. And he argued '*... though acquiring personal benefit at the expense of others is wrong; striking the balance is a sensitive issue. Some sacrifice is necessary to avoid unintended results*'



The creation of opportunities for young people is something that needs to be appreciated. But the problem is the attempt to create a patron-client relationship between the political party and the youth. The ruling party is using the economic opportunity as a means of securing vote during elections. On the other hand, young people, rather than getting involved into politics with a clear understanding of the political ideology as well as processes within the broader framework, they are taking the opportunity to benefit from the ‘big-pie’ in the name of being a member of the ruling party. This is the result of the implicit intention of the ruling party to depoliticize young people in their engagement in the political system. Their capacity to analytically articulate the political process of the country is clouded by the economic benefits and opportunities provided for them. Both approaches from both side is hindering the development of a genuinely engaged and concerned ‘youth’ group that sees political engagement as a serious business, not as a means to economic benefit. This should be also seen from the perspective that being ‘youth’ is also a social status beyond an age group (Tyyska,2005:4), where young people are seeking for their independence, economic independence with this regard, from their parents or adult members of their family. The opportunities provided by EPRDF are intended to exploit this reality that the youth are living in with an implicit motion of fulfilling a political agenda. One of the respondents, Ato Seeye argues that if we can say the past political feature of Ethiopian politics during the ESM full of conspiracies, we can also characterize the current youth political movement as materialistic.

### **5.3 The Push for Political Space**

One of the major points that came out during the data collection process is the understanding of ‘youth’ and ‘young people’ with regard to their political participation. Almost every interviewee from the youth initiatives, youth associations and political parties took the National Youth Policy of Ethiopia (NYP) as a benchmark to define and categorize youth in their respective structures. The NYP categorically argues that age based definition of youth is ‘... most suitable for research and policy purposes’ (NYP,2004:3). And everyone seems in agreement with the age based definition of ‘youth’. As it is

argued in chapter two, the age based category – ‘young people’ is significantly different from the social category of ‘youth’. The age based conceptualization and understanding of ‘youth’ appears to be the main reason for the youth associations and for the ruling party to focus on the quantitative aspect of youth participation which is in thousands and millions, - and seems very satisfying for them. This also holds true for the other actors too, both opposition political parties as well as the youth initiatives that are implementing their programmes and activities by taking the concept ‘youth’ for granted. Indeed, everyone acknowledges the unique aspiration, expectation and role of ‘young people’ in the society and they can easily articulate the ideas they have for a better and meaningful participation of youth in the political sphere. But the approach they adopt is by far unrealistic to achieve what they aspire for.

Of course, it is true that two “National Youth Conferences” were organized in 2007 and 2009 and a National Youth Council is also established which, in principle, is believed to be a common institutional framework to ensure meaningful youth participation in the country in all areas. Ensuring young peoples’ participation in number wise is indeed increasing. For example the AAYF has 55,000 members after its establishment in 2007, the South Ethiopian Youth Association Addis Ababa Liaison Office has 42,000 members, EPRDF youth league has 1.2 million members across the country after its establishment in mid 2005 and the Addis Ababa branch 41,000 members. Even mobilizing 7,000 participants for each national conference from all parts of the country is an achievement by itself. But still the question is how meaningful and youthful is their participation. For instance, the youth initiative leaders were asked about their role in the establishment process of the National Youth Council (NYC). EYA have participated in the early stages of the formulation process but they quit their participation when they realized that the ruling party youth league and pro-government youth associations are controlling every process which made their role negligible. One of the respondents from EYA said that everything was predetermined before the consultation process. The other two youth initiatives, YNSD and TYA were not totally involved rather heard the establishment of the council through media. Both organizations have excellent reputation in their work. For example

YNSD is a network organization of more than 30 youth clubs and associations operating in six regions of the country. The chairperson of the facilitation committee who is also chairperson of EPRDF Addis Ababa youth league on the other hand argued that the process of the establishing the NYC was impartial, transparent and all inclusive, and there are still rooms for youth initiatives to join the council either at regional or national level<sup>12</sup>.

On the other hand, almost all of today's political leaders were young in their age when they started political activism. For example, today's Minister of the Government's Communication Affairs office, Ato Bereket Simon said, '*I was only 33 when we entered Addis Ababa (in 1991) and I assumed different leadership positions since I was 20, indeed everyone of us were young and around the same age*'. This can be a particular example to show us how a strict age based definition of 'youth' might miss some realities. In spite of the fact that the majority of the political leaders realized the potential of their unique 'youthful' understanding of the country's situation in their time, they keep on locating today's youth in the uncertain tomorrow, by sayings like 'tomorrows' leaders', 'the future leaders', 'holders of a bright future' and the like. The strong influence of this discourse can be observed in the responses of the young politicians who are saying that they are preparing themselves under the mentorship of their elders to assume better decision making position in the future. Mamushet, a youth group leader of All Ethiopian Unity Party (AEUP) strongly argued, '*we have a lot to learn from the past generation ... politics is a system to lead a country we should not consider it as simple as a kindergarten*'. Indeed, most of the young politicians believe that they are also influencing decisions in their parties, though not to the expected level. Especially those who are participating in the central committees of their respective parties contend that they have enough room to propose agendas and participate in the decisions of the party by voting.

The fact that there are many young people participating in the political process, particularly in the regional youth associations and the ruling party youth league is usually portrayed as a positive change from the apathetic nature of the youth in the past. And even the will and the decision to be active in the political process especially in a political culture that does not promote such

kind of engagement is something to be appreciated. But a deeper look shows that today's youth participation in the political process is less substantial in content rather mainly significant only number wise. And some argue that this is because of the existing feature of the political space which is dominated by the older generation who are very skilful in political intrigues and not ready to entertain new insights and perspectives. The young people who join political parties usually end up being just members of the parties than to have an influence. For example, as one respondent argued,

*'... the youth has never had a major decision making role in the political parties. Most of the time they are simple followers of their elders' ideas. And the older generation is busy with indoctrinating the young in their ideologies rather than working genuinely for the empowerment of the youth , I observed this from both the ruling party as well as the opposition parties side'* (Ato Mohammed Ali, MP and Chairperson of the National Council of UDJ)

Such kind of only number wise participation in the political parties, especially in the ruling party which claims to have more than 1.2 million youth league members is something to question. For example, the other female respondent who is a chairperson for Amhara Youth Association Addis Ababa branch said that she initially joined the AAYF after having a discussion with two of her friends about joining either the Forum or the EPRDF youth league. When I asked her how she gets interested in politics, she answered *'...I never had the interest about politics but I'm just a member of EPRDF'* (Hirut Amde, 23). It sounds that she took it for granted to become a member of the ruling party. The other respondent who run for local council for EPRDF during the 2008 local elections described how he become a member of the party by saying *' I used to have my own business running an urban farm in a small garden. And when they [youth league leaders] saw me that I'm successful in 'they' make me a member'* (Andarge Teshome, Vice chairperson of Amhara Youth Association, Addis Ababa Branch). On the other hand the EPRDF official, Minister Bereket Simon, argued *'... the EPRDF youth league is established by young people who consider themselves Revolutionary Democrats ... and it is a major section in our party structure'*. Especially among ruling party affiliated young people, being a member of a youth

association or the youth league is seen as an end by itself and the maximum degree of political participation.

Except being critical of the way the ruling party is recruiting young people into its party structure, the opposition parties have almost the same conceptualization of youth in their political discourse, 'as a potential in the future'. '*... We rhetorically recognize the youth as a potential but we never take concert steps, but we had to ...*' (Dr. Hailu Araya, vice-chairperson of UDJ). On the other hand he is critical about the ruling party by saying, '*... the incumbent government is using four strategies in recruiting youth; by offering them with opportunities like education and work, by threatening them, by controlling them in different ways like by establishing different youth structures at all levels, and by indoctrinating by its Revolutionary Democracy ideology*'. He further argues that the current youth structures are similar in their nature with the youth structures of the Derg regime, which had its youth and women mass based associations used as ideological instruments.

Though this is the easy picture that one can easily grasp from the political process of the country, this does not necessarily mean that there are no youth politicians who are engaged in the politics with a clear vision of what they are doing and with a strong fervour of doing it. Even the surprisingly increasing number of young members in ruling party, though it might not be for genuine politics, show, to some extent, the will and the desire among young people for more political space.

In general, the generational aspect of the political process in today's Ethiopia illustrates the changing feature of politics and political participation among youth. This is the result of the interaction between the older generation and the younger generation. The power of the older generation in controlling the entire political discourse is one of the manifestations of the interaction between the two generations. The urge to have active and meaningful role in the political process by the youth is taken as an opportunity by the ruling party to recruit them as members by offering opportunities. This effort of depoliticizing the nature of political participation among the youth is also exercised through organizing youth in different institutions; forums, league, associations and council.

## Conclusion

The issues of youth is discussed and analysed throughout this paper by taking Ethiopian politics as the main sphere of analysis. The presentation and analysis of the theoretical framework, the historical trajectories, the literatures and the findings are intended to grasp a better understanding of youth and politics in the current situation of Ethiopia within the eye of intergenerational relations. Adopting such kind of analytical line gives us a critical insight towards both the explicit and implicit features of the interaction between the generations. These varying features have also their impact on how youth is being perceived and positioned by the wider society, how the youth are positioning themselves and the nature of the relationship between the 'young' and the 'old'.

As it is argued in the theoretical part, the social position of youth and its role in the political system of the country has been changing across the historical trajectories. The youth and students were the main leaders and social agents of the socio-political transformation of the country during the revolution. After that, the youth become a suppressed and co-opted group on the one hand, as well as agents of change on the other, at the same time during the Derg regime. During the incumbent regime, where this paper focused most, the youth are playing a role as an influential group because of their potential and their numerical value, a marginal role because of their inability to influence the main political discourse of the country as well as because of the dominance by the 'older' generation, and finally assuming an obsolete social status because of their fear and pessimism to be active political agents in the country's politics.

The changing perception and practice of politics by the youth is also presented in this paper in context of intergenerational relation. Politics was perceived as something that needs to be avoided by the majority and this perception remains still valid among many. Those who opted to challenge this perception during the 2005 election found themselves in the same state of cynicism towards political activism after the post election crisis. On the other hand, a few young people decided to be members of the ruling party and become 'politically active'. Here comes the changing feature of political

practice among the youth. In the analysis, it comes out clearly that the way that young people are interacting with the political elite, mainly with the ruling party elite, is based on securing their mutual interest. Politics is interpreted here as a give and take game, where the ruling party provides opportunities and benefits and the youth provide their 'support'. It is no more a platform of debate and dialogue among the majority who are members of the ruling party. This feature becomes institutionalized through the establishment of regional and currently national youth structures that claim to represent thousands and millions of Ethiopian youth. The ruling party took the opportunity to alienate the youth from meaningful political positions by 'commercializing' the political process and 'depoliticizing' the youth in spite of their presence in the political scene. The millions of young people who are organized under the regional youth associations, forums, and the ruling party youth league do not have any power beyond their number. Those at the front of the groups try to show their maturity and knowledge about the political process but the influence of the older generation is highly visible in their thoughts and words.

From the opposition side, the youth are using neither their significant number because of their fear to be in politics nor their new insights because of the unbalanced nature of the power relation between the 'old' and 'young' generations. Though these two pictures dominate the political engagement of youth in the formal systems of Ethiopian politics, the zeal to meaningfully engage into the process is also a real phenomenon but subordinated and marginalized.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The works of Margaret Mead (1943), Evans-Pritchard (1951) and Jean Piaget (1972) can be consulted with this regard.

<sup>2</sup> The organization that I worked for, Afroflag Youth Vision (AYV), participated in the entire election starting from the voters' registration period, providing civic and voters' education training for young people and observing and monitoring the election. And I was involved in all the activities.

<sup>3</sup> I did not participate in the demonstration because my family took me out of town on purpose to make sure that I will not go to the demonstration.

<sup>4</sup> I physically witnessed the first demonstration on May 30, 2005 at Addis Ababa University, which paved the way to the demonstration in the city on June 1, 2005 against the state of emergency decree by the Prime Minister.

<sup>5</sup> Though there is already a National Youth Policy which was formulated in 2004 and whose ten year sectoral development plan and five year strategic plan is produced by the Ministry of Youth Sports in consultation with stakeholders (I participated), the government decided to abandon it and produce another document based on the programme of the ruling party.

<sup>6</sup> The opposition party, CUD, which won the entire seats in the capital in the 2005 elections boycotted parliament and refrained from taking the administration of the capital. Hence, EPRDF which 'won' the majority seats in the parliament and controlling the central government assigned a "Care taker administration" which is apolitical in principle and composed of professionals.

<sup>7</sup> I was personally threatened indirectly by supporters of both sides in the university because of my role as leader of the students' club – Afroflag Youth Vision, AAU Club; because each group thought that I'm supporter of the other

<sup>8</sup> Kebele – the lowest administration unit

<sup>9</sup> Woreda – the next higher level of administration unit which constitutes several kebeles

<sup>10</sup> Notes from an interview with EPRDF Addis Ababa Youth League leader who refused to give a recorded interview

<sup>11</sup> The working language at Federal level in Ethiopia and the language used for the interview

<sup>12</sup> Notes from the interview