

Living up to Expectations? A critical analysis of *Coffee* Oromia, Ethiopia

A policy brief

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I. Executive Summary

This policy brief analyzes *Coffee* Oromia (Oromia National Regional State Council) on the basis of its communication approaches and expectation from the constituency, and the role of the media in people-parliaments' interface. The piece sheds light on the interplay between the *Coffee* as an institution, elected representatives, constituencies and media in Ethiopia's democratization experiment. The empirical data for this research was collected from five zones, namely East and West Guji, Borana, West Wallaga and Oromia Special zone surrounding Finfinne between February 2019 and June 2020 at different intervals through qualitative research methodology. These zones were purposively selected on the basis of geographical representation as well as the presence of critical socio-economic and political problems. To this end, informants were selected purposively and through snowball method on the basis of their knowledge about the topic under discussion. Abba Gadaas (Gadaa leaders), local elders, members of the *Coffee* and local government authorities were included into the research. Accordingly, 10 FGDs and 30 key informant interviews were conducted. Moreover, data were collected from three news media – Oromia Broadcasting Network (OBN), Oromia Broadcasting Service (OBS) and Oromia Media Network (OMN).

The research findings show that despite the presumably comprehensive constitutional framework that grants citizens with the right to elect their representatives through free and fair election, empirical information from the five cases studies present a quite different picture of Ethiopia's rhetoric of representative democracy. There is a big rift between the elected representatives and their constituencies in terms of representation, loyalty and communication whereby party loyalty overrides representatives' loyalty to the constitution, constituencies, and conscience.

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II. Conceptual Background

In modern conceptualization of representative democracy, an elected representative represents the will of his/her constituency in the decision-making process (Sengupta 1974). Drawing on the case from U.S congress, Kimball and Patterson (1997: 701) also argue that no matter how rudimentary, citizens carry with them different sorts of expectations from their representatives, and such “expectations may develop in the form of fuzzy images of the institution as a whole, arise from very partisan or ideological perspectives, biases, and distortions, focus on particular institutional actions or events, or concern the characteristics or attributes of the institution's members”. In principle, people’s representatives are accountable to the constitution, their constituency and their conscience both in decision-making as well as carrying out their political activities. Likewise, the institution denoting people’s representatives and the legislative branch of the government – whatever terminology attached to its naming – is, in principle, presumed to echo the will and demands of the people. Its legitimacy is often shaped by decisions it passes, competence of its members, and overall performance of the institution vis-à-vis broader local, national and international contexts.

Media, which is often considered to be the fourth branch of government in maintaining check and balance, plays a great role not only in informing the public about decisions enacted by representatives, but also in making representatives accountable for their actions and promises. The media is one of the most important actors involved in helping the public enjoy its ‘right to know.’ Along with parliament, the media shares a responsibility to contribute to political, economic and social development in ways consistent with democratic principles by pursuing fact-based, fully substantiated reporting (McNair, 2011). However, in the context where societies are divided along ideological, political, religious, ethnic and linguistic divides, the media landscape also tends to lean towards one or more of these lines of polarization than being non-partisan.

III. The politics of representation in Ethiopia

Ethiopia's authoritarian political system under successive regimes deterred citizens from freely electing their representatives as a means/an instrument to gain democratic rights. The first general election in the country's modern history – the 1957 general election for the House of Chambers – for example, was nominal as it did not provide democratic platforms for political parties to compete for office. Rather, individuals competed for office as it granted them with prestigious economic, political as well as social leverage. Thus, election into the House of Chambers was vehicle for individual self-promotion rather than a forum of popular representation (Zewde 2001: 207). Likewise, electoral representation was unthinkable under the military regime (1974-1991).

Although the post-1991 political order in the country apparently opened the space for a multiparty system and periodic elections in order to provide the citizens with the right to elect their representatives at local and national federal government, the last three decades witnessed electoral authoritarianism (Lyons 2010). Except some signs of opening up for multiparty competition in 2005, the TPLF dominated EPRDF established a de facto single party system by systematically weakening opposition parties (Gudina 2011). Consequentially, the absence of competitive election and the eventual institutionalization of dominant single party system in the country opens the way for “elected” officials and representatives to evade responsibility for their failures, corruption and maladministration as the next election is almost guaranteed. In representative democracy, representatives are accountable to the constitution, conscience and constituency. The constitution and other government institutions established on the basis of the constitution are used in creating checks and balances and in setting frameworks for performance monitoring/evaluation. Likewise, as decision-makers on matters that affect the lives of citizens, representatives are also believed to be guided by their conscience, rationality and intellect. More importantly, some scholars argue that at the core of representative democracy lies the condition where representatives are believed to represent the “will” of their constituencies and of the general citizens at large (Sengupta 1974; Kimball and Patterson 1997). On the contrary, absence of competitive election, institutionalization of authoritarian system of government, and the weakening of civil society organizations and free media as well as the narrowing of political spaces for opposition parties over the last three

decades contributed to the establishment of electoral authoritarianism whereby “elected” officials were not representing the “will” of their constituencies; rather they represent the interest of the party in power.

IV. The Case Study: *Caffee Oromia: Representative of the people or the party?*

Establishment and Mandates Caffee members

Oromia National Regional State is the largest and the most populous of the ten regional states of Ethiopia as per the post-1991 federal arrangement. It was constitutionally established as one of regional states of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (FDRE Constitution 1995) whereby the legislative power of the region vests in the council (the *Caffee*) (Oromia Regional State Constitution 1995: Art 46:1). Members of the *Caffee* are representatives of the Oromia National Regional state’s people as a whole. According to Art. 48 (3), they are governed by the Constitution, the will of the people and their conscience. Constitutionally, it has been clearly stipulated that members of the *Caffee* shall be elected for a term of five years on the basis of universal suffrage and by direct, free and fair elections held by secret ballot (Oromia Regional State Constitution Art. 48 (1)).

In addition, Members of *Caffee* shall be elected from candidates in each electoral district by plurality of the votes cast by virtue of Art. 48 (2) of the same constitution. *Caffee* Oromia shall conduct at least two regular annual meeting based on Art. 51 (1) of the same constitution. Moreover, the constitution has vested the power to *Caffee* as it shall decide the policy, strategy and design the plan for the betterment of socio-economic development of the region base on Art. 49 (3), (i).

V. Major Findings

a) Mismatch between Constitutional mandate and empirical reality on the ground

For the expediency of clarity, we analyze our data on the basis of representation, communication channels, loyalty and accountability and transparency of decision-

making process. Unless specific presentation is required for more clarity, data from the five case studies are presented together.

❖ **Representation:** our key informants and participants in focus group discussions (FGDs) unanimously share the view that except for the representatives of specific localities, local people do not know their representatives at both the Federal and State's Councils. An elderly man from Guji stated, "during election periods, we see the picture of two or sometimes more people on papers. Kebele [village] officials and people assigned for the election tell us to choose a particular person. After that, sometimes we see that person may be once in five years or we don't see him at all". Another informant from West Wallaga also stated, "I know one person from a nearby kebele has been in *Caffee* Oromia for the last fifteen years but I haven't heard him for a single day speaking about our problems. You see, we have thousands of problems, but nobody speaks on our behalf. They are there only for their salary". As [Kimball and Patterson \(1997\)](#) argue, constituents have expectations from their representatives to present their will and interest at different decision-making levels, and representatives are not fulfilling these expectations.

A member of *Caffee* Oromia from East Guji zone was asked whether she brought the people's critical question about environmental and health impacts related to MIDROC Laga-Dambi Gold Mine that, according to local communities, caused stillbirth, disabilities, miscarriages and loss of life to humans and animals over the last twenty years. The following excerpt from the *Caffee* member illuminates how the representation is merely nominal:

I live in this area, and I know very well about the problem. The company has destroyed the land, the ecosystem and led to death of humans and our cattle. My colleagues in the *Caffee* and I tried to raise this problem during some of the sessions. However, we couldn't get it to be accepted. There has not been freedom to raise critical questions. Sometimes, they say this needs political and administrative decisions. Last year [2018], I tried to speak to the Speaker of the *Caffee* ahead of the meetings but I was told that this should not be raised on such sessions. My people ask me if I raised it at the *Caffee* but I don't have the possibility. I am now feeling that my presence is meaningless but I hope it improves in the future.

- ❖ **Loyalty:** In contrast to the views of *Coffee* member interviewed above, local key informants from all the study sites claim that Representatives are loyal to their parties and higher government officials, rather than to their constituencies. An informant from Laga-Tafo says, “Members of the *Coffee* and House of Peoples’ Representatives speak what their party decided or wants to decide. They don’t care whether people are dying. They know about problems we face but if they think our questions are different from the interest of their parties, they don’t speak on our behalf. Over the last two years, they approved State of Emergency and Command Post knowing that it would affect the liberty of the people. They did it because that decision was in line with interest of the party on power”. Thus, party loyalty overrides the Representatives’ loyalty to their constituencies as well as their morality.

- ❖ **Transparency and communication mechanisms:** In any representative democracy, representatives are expected to serve as channels through which citizens present their interest, aspiration, problems and challenges in areas of socio-economic and political spheres that require government intervention in the form of policy, strategy and programs. In addition to executive bodies of the government, representatives also serve to channel down to their constituencies policies and programs in order to get inputs, feedbacks, critics and concerns before, during and after promulgation of new policies. On the contrary, our informants unanimously reflected the view that policies and programs have been designed in purely top-down approach without any consultation with the society. Referring to the Great Ethiopian Renaissance Dam, participants in FGD in West Wallaga, for example, stated that government officials brought the decision to the society only after it was finally decided at the higher level. In Ethiopia, participation is often nominal whereby people are mobilized to support what is already politically or administratively decided.

Informants from the five case studies were asked whether *Coffee* members conduct meetings with constituencies in order to gather their concerns and forward to the *Coffee* sessions. The responses were similar across the board – *Coffee* members do not initiate specific meetings with their constituencies except in cases they attend

meetings organized by local government administrations and may indirectly get the people's concerns. Rather, they regularly attend meetings with government structure (at zone or district levels) but not with their ordinary constituencies. Abba Gadaas (leaders of the Gadaa system) in Guji and Borana also claim that there is no horizontal relationship between the *Coffee* and Gadaa system though the latter are more closer to the society and could provide constructive inputs on governance challenges such as conflict and security, resource management, cultural issues and inter- and intra-group relations.

In the communication between people and parliaments, media plays a paramount role. When parliamentary sessions and debates are made open for the media, citizens would see themselves represented – through their representatives but mirrored via the media. Media also serves in ensuring transparency of the parliament about what it decides, how it decides and how power relation within the system is configured. Nevertheless, the media landscape in the last three decades has been dominated by strong censorship and insensitivity to professionalism, rather than partisanship. As media space has been almost closed to free media, state-owned media outlets remained to be highly partisans.

Likewise, *Coffee* sessions were not live televised until 2018 and it became open only to the state-owned Oromia Broadcasting Network (OBN) since then. As a result, news outlets had access only to information about the sessions in the form of news through interview of members who, according to private media outlets, were also not ready to give interviews to these channels. On the other hand, all the three media outlets share also common weaknesses in tracking community problems from its roots to different chains and addressing the problems and concerns to responsible government authorities. Only in the brief period between early 2018 to early 2019 were the OBN, OMN and OBS able to conduct a few investigations in areas of corruption, environmental pollution, land grabbing and other socio-economic discontents of the Oromo people. Now, while OBN retreated back to the notion of “developmental journalism”, the window of media freedom is closed to OBS and OMN.

- ❖ **Meeting schedule:** The constitution provides a time framework for the *Coffee* to conduct at least two meetings per year. However, given tremendous issues in the region, meeting only twice a year limits prompts the institution to prioritize agenda items. Accordingly, the council often dwells on party issues

and annual budget reports and plans with limited focus to societal problems from different parts of the region.

- ❖ **Competence:** policy formulation and decision-making at higher levels such as State and Federal council (House of People’s Representatives) require professional competence and skill. Academic competence, rather than party loyalty, is indispensable to understand global dynamics and local contexts, and thus to design policies and strategies that improve socio-economic, environmental, political, cultural and other issues affecting citizens. Regrettably, though it was not possible to analyze the profile of the entire *Caffee* members, our discussions with insiders as well as constituencies show that the majority of the members have low education profile with some of them below secondary school. One of our informants (a *Caffee* member), was a fifth-grade student in 2019 and she was in her second term in the council – that means she probably she was not enrolled into school when she was “elected”.

VI. Conclusion

The establishment of electoral authoritarianism in Ethiopia under EPRDF regime has led to loss of accountability of the “elected” representatives to their constituency, and instead, to the rise of party loyalty. In other words, lack of competitive election has developed among the *Caffee* members that removal from the post is not through the ballot box but by party decision, and thus the position would be guaranteed if they remain loyal to the party. In addition, the notion of “democratic centralism” within the EPRDF does not give space for differences of ideas and perspectives. As a result, *Caffee* members were not able to raise ideas that depart from the party’s position.

It can be concluded that single party dominance, party loyalty, lack of competence and top-down approach in decision making have made *Caffee* Oromia an institution that is apparently party (OPDO-ODP-PP)³ representative rather than people’s representative for over quarter of a century.

³ OPDO denotes Oromo People’s Democratic Organization that was carved by the TPLF (Tigray People’s Liberation Front) few months before the downfall of the military regime in 1991. It re-branded itself in 2018 as ODP (Oromo Democratic Party) and finally vanished into Prosperity Party (PP) in late 2019.

Recommendations

Based on the findings and conclusion of this research, we recommend the following actions to be considered for improvement of relationship between elected representatives, the *Caffee* as an institution and the people – the constituencies:

1. *Shifting the political space from electoral authoritarianism to democratic election:* This helps to ensure competitive, free and fair election. When election becomes competitive, elected officials and people's representatives can be made accountable for their failure at least during the next election. Competitive electoral system also prompts elected representatives to be governed by the constitution, the constituency and their conscience, rather than being mere loyal to their party.
2. *Setting a new legal framework and criteria for candidacy to the Caffee based on merit:* As the *Caffee* is a higher decision-making body with the power to promulgate policies that affects the lives of millions, members should have the competence to understand and analyze local, national and international phenomenon. Such skill and competence comes only if candidacy to the *Caffee* is based on merit (i.e. political parties nominate their candidates based on academic qualification rather than merely on the basis of commitment to their party, as it used to be).
3. *Media freedom and transparency of Caffee decisions should be ensured:* Since 2018, *Caffee* sessions have been live televised. This is a positive signal. However, it should be open to all media outlets rather than state-owned media. In addition, the media should be able to track issues from the society, take it to the government and back to the society through investigative journalism.
4. *Communication:* It would be essential if *Caffee* members could meet their constituencies on a regular basis, collect information, concerns and challenges from the society and address it to the *Caffee* sessions/meetings. In order to do so, *Caffee* annual meeting schedules should be increased from two to at least four per year so that members get chance to raise issues from their constituencies.

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