

Abstract

This article argues that the Ethiopian revolution was a generational achievement. Hence, its legacy and lasting social effects can be best examined through a sociological lens that highlights the inter-generational relations between the “Revolutionary Generation” of 1974 and today’s “Restrained Generation.” One of the significant legacies of the Ethiopian revolution is that it continues to instill fear in young people who are inclined to engage in politics. This culture of fear has grown out of the atrocious “Red Terror” period of the late 1970s plus the more recent persecution of political youth, including social media activists. Even as the young generation is attempting to create new platforms for political engagement, it continues to be under the heavy hand of the revolutionary generation. After nearly four decades, and the coming of age of a segment of the new generation with global awareness, participation in digital media and communications, and high rates of education, the methods of crushing youth political activism remain almost the same. This article seeks to offer insights into how Ethiopian youth pursue different strategies to deal with the structural impediments to their active political engagement. It is also an attempt to unravel certain practices by the older generation that are designed to keep youth in a political impasse.

Introduction

Friday, 25 April 2014 is likely to stand as one of the most dreadful days of contemporary Ethiopian youth activists. This day marks the Ethiopian government’s first crackdown on social media activists. Six young bloggers between the ages of 24 and 32—all members of an informal bloggers group called *Zone Nine*¹—were arrested by state security forces and sent to the notorious interrogation and detention center, *Maakelawi*.² Along with the bloggers, two young freelance journalists and a young editor of a weekly magazine were incarcerated in *Maakelawi* for nearly three months without charge. During mid-to-late 1970s thousands of young revolutionaries were imprisoned and tortured in *Maakelawi*.³ Scores of revolutionaries, the exact numbers of which remain disputed, were killed by extrajudicial murder, especially during the “Red Terror.”⁴ Four decades after the 1974 revolution, members of a new generation of politically engaged and media savvy youth, were sent to this same prison where they faced torture and inhuman treatment such as solitary confinement for 87 days before being charged with “acts of terrorism.” The formal charges against them

included, “conspiring against the constitution & constitutional order” and “intent to overthrow the constitutional order through organized terrorism acts and rebellion.”⁵

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

This paper identifies the 1974 Ethiopian revolution as a significant historical event with a legacy that includes the on-going repression of political engagement of younger generations. Since the Ethiopian revolution was a generational achievement, a perspective grounded in the sociology of generations can illuminate the lasting effects of the revolution on contemporary youth political engagement. This analysis, therefore, is especially concerned with inter-generational relations between the “revolutionary generation” of the 1970s and today’s “restrained generation.”

The “restrained generation” refers to those born between late 1970s and the mid-1990s and who share, broadly speaking, certain common experiences related to nationalism and a particular type of political socialization. While members of this generation have no direct memory of the “Red Terror,” they have come to know about it through oral history, the state media, and the widely circulating trials, testimonials, and memoirs written by its survivors. The “restrained generation” has the memory of the end of the civil war (1974 to 1991) and the time of relative stability under the current regime when the country has a new constitution and procedural democracy, a federal system of governance, political parties and regular elections. The “restrained generation” grew up with the popular saying, “avoid

politics like you would avoid electric shock” (*poletikana korentin beruqu*). This saying sums up their perception of politics.

Compared to the “revolutionary generation,” members of the “restrained generation” tend to be less ideological and distant from the Marxism-Leninism that still shapes the political structure and permeates the political discourse. In 2005 the younger generation attempted, for the first time, to enter the center of Ethiopian politics by participating in national elections on a large scale. Their fervor, however, was massively crushed as a result of the political rivalries that persisted among members of the “revolutionary generation” that still controlled Ethiopian politics. That they did not welcome new players to the political field is an understatement. The polarizing political environment led to post-election turmoil, mass killings and detention of thousands, many of whom were from the younger generation. The message was sent to the youth, loud and clear, that they should stay away from politics which could only bring them suffering. A few years on, with the emergence of the social media and new forms and platforms of communications, members of the “restrained generation” sought new ways to have a positive impact on Ethiopian politics; however, their efforts have met with politically orchestrated violence, disguised in legal terrorism charges and trials.

Within this political backdrop, we conceptualize youth as a socio-historical generational cohort as distinct from merely an age group and identify three strands to explain the impasse of the “restrained generation.” First, youth de-politicization occurs at the discursive and systemic levels, and these need to be understood in terms of inter-generational relations. Secondly, politically active youth, especially in urban areas, are increasingly using social media as a sphere to create an alternative space of political engagement. Most social media activists, who by definition are part of the younger generation, are critical about existing political parties which are largely dominated by the “revolutionary generation” with their exclusionary organizations and polarizing political discourses. Thirdly, even as social