Political Activism and Emotional Labilities[1]: The Case of Amhara struggle for survival in Ethiopia and Its Diaspora
By Girma Berhanu (Professor)

Introduction

This article presents my ongoing observations and a reflective approach to political activism, specifically focusing on the social, emotional, behavioral, and cognitive maturity of actors involved in the Amhara struggle for democracy, freedom, and equality. I must admit that I am deeply frustrated by the actions of certain individuals in this movement, whose unpredictable mindset, lack of commitment, and delusional thinking are undermining the unity of the cause. Although there aren't many of them, they have managed to infiltrate and dominate discussions on social media and in organizations that advocate for democracy in Ethiopia, particularly concerning the struggle of the Amhara people.

Several factors contribute to the fragmentation and polarization within this discourse, but here, I wish to focus on the emotional instability dimension. The ultimate goal of this reflection is to foster unity and help overcome the divisions among advocacy groups and the people of Amhara.

It is important to approach this question with nuance and care. Activism, at its core, is about advocating for social, political, or environmental change, and people become activists for a variety of reasons, such as a desire to address perceived injustices or to help marginalized communities.

Being an activist does not imply mental instability. In fact, many activists are deeply committed to causes they believe will improve society. People may feel intense passion or frustration about the issues they care about, which can sometimes be misconstrued or stereotyped as instability (In this paper I use Emotional lability and Emotional liabilities interchangeably).

Mental health is a complex and personal issue, and it is important to avoid stigmatizing people based on their advocacy or personal experiences. Activism, in many ways, is a response to societal issues, and people involved in it may simply be channeling their emotions and energy into efforts for change.

It is essential to recognize the diversity within activist movements and to avoid generalizations about people's mental health based on their involvement in activism. I am aware that extreme political engagement does not inherently indicate or correlate with psychiatric problems. Political involvement, especially when it is intense or passionate, can stem from a wide range of motivations, including personal beliefs, a desire for social change, or frustration with societal issues. People with diverse mental health profiles can be found in any political movement, and while some individuals might experience mental health challenges, this is not a defining feature of political engagement or activism.

Yet, there are instances where intense political engagement can be linked to psychological distress, particularly when individuals feel threatened, isolated, or overwhelmed by the issues they are confronting. In some cases, political beliefs can become distorted, revealing underlying mental health conditions such as delusional thinking or paranoia. However, these situations are the exception, not the rule. Political engagement is a multifaceted aspect of

human life, and it should not be automatically associated with mental instability. Each person's reasons for engaging in politics must be understood within the broader context of their life experiences and mental health status.

I have been reflecting on these themes for the past five years, particularly regarding those involved in Ethiopian political activism. I've often wondered: who are these individuals, and why are they drawn to activism or political engagement? In my observations, I've noted a troubling prevalence of rage, instability, unpredictability, immaturity, and a lack of sincerity among a significant segment of this group. I've found myself confused and saddened by how I might channel my own energy to become a voice for the voiceless and help facilitate peace and freedom in that part of the world. At times, I've almost resigned myself to the idea that meaningful change may be out of reach.

This reflective essay follows the tradition of autoethnography. Autoethnography is a research method that blends personal experience with cultural analysis to explore how an individual's personal life intersects with broader social, cultural, and political contexts. It involves using one's own experiences as primary data, reflecting critically on those experiences, and connecting them to larger societal issues or themes. While autoethnography is a powerful tool for understanding complex social issues, it requires a careful balance between personal insight and rigorous analysis.

In addition, this essay can also be understood as a form of therapeutic writing—a practice of expressive writing aimed at personal healing and self-exploration. It focuses on writing as a tool for emotional release, self-reflection, and personal growth, helping to clarify and understand one's emotions and experiences.

Social Media, Expression of Indecent Behavior, and Emotional Liability
This reflective essay is tied to my recent article where I expressed concerns about social media with the title *Social Media in Amhara Politics: Disinformation and Misinformation in an Existential Struggle*. There is nothing new in voicing concerns over the possible negative effects of social media. Indeed, there is nothing particularly original in stating that these drawbacks are categorical. What is less often mentioned, however, is how the normalization of misinformation and disinformation—two of the main ulcers afflicting social media—causes much more than extreme views and polarized politics. In some cases, its negative effects can be measured in blood.

My interest in the previous article was to reflect on the vicious and toxic interactions that currently dominate social media interactions around Amhara politics and its struggle. I have been actively observing these interactions on Facebook, TikTok, Twitter (X), and WhatsApp accounts via group meetings. Of particular concern is understanding why the civility of conversation—even online conversation—has reached such low standards. These social platforms and online forums are rife with aggressive and abusive interactions, dominated by shocking political statements that flirt with murder and larger calls for mass killings. What should have been a positive social movement to defend Amhara interests in the face of state-sanctioned persecution from the current Ethiopian government seems to have degenerated into a cesspit of accusations, chauvinistic declarations, and mob abuse against Amharas who have dared to voice slightly differing views. This toxic online environment is not only harmful to users but is also affecting the Fano insurgency. Intellectuals and elites in the diaspora are not immune to this harmful communication; in some cases, they are even greater

troublemakers. Their role in organizing intellectual discourse is often misdirected and distorted.

For example, some observers suggest that social media sites spur greater schadenfreude—the emotional experience of pleasure in response to another's misfortune—perhaps as a result of the dehumanization that occurs when interacting through screens on computers and mobile devices. Some studies also suggest a strong tie between heavy social media use and increased depression, anxiety, loneliness, and feelings of inadequacy. However, in the case of Amhara politics, there is an intentional, organized, and malicious agenda advanced by both learned and less informed participants; and of course, some of the participants involved in the spread of misinformation and fake news may have some personal scores to settle, too.

Psychologists have observed that we lose some of our usual inhibitions when communicating online, especially when our identity is unknown. That can work well to open up debate, but it also removes the social barriers to saying hurtful things. The online platform is an ideal place for vicious actors, mentally unwell and disruptive elements. In this paper, I am not going to talk about social media as such. It is about the participants in those forums and the general psychological makeup of the so-called activists, including the ones I interact with in different tasks.

I must confess that I have struggled to come up with the title of this essay. Knowing all too well what I aim to explain, I am equally aware that the wrong phrase, or a poor choice of words, can immediately offend certain readers. An offended audience is rarely receptive to constructive conversations but instead tends to react defensively.

As a teacher of research methodology, I am well acquainted with the concept of generalizations, both in quantitative and qualitative research. I should also mention that I teach subjects on ethnicity, race, and education. While this makes me cautious about using stereotypes regarding population, race, or cultural groups, I also recognize that stereotypes often hide a kernel of truth. In social psychology, a stereotype is a fixed condition, an over-generalized belief about a particular group or class of people. A simple, neutral example may concern the Japanese: most people readily identify this population as "methodical," "self-disciplined," and "good with technology and innovation." On the same token, few people would identify Japanese as "rowdy" or "prone to rash reactions." The stereotype, therefore, has an element of truth in it: take a look at Japanese society, its economic development, and its recent history, and the issue becomes self-evident. But, obviously, Japanese are much more than these stereotypes, and indeed, many Japanese probably bear little relation to them. While it is important to recognize a "certain background quality in a society," it is equally important not to over-generalize or to accept that a society or, for example, Ethiopian activists, can be defined by only that quality. That quality is emotional lability and affective instability. I do not dare say that I have the full answer for how and where the problem originates, as the causal factors are complex and intertwined. Of course, culture also plays a role.

Culture, Politics, and Activism

Some of the behaviors I have noticed in activism and the struggle for freedom processes have led me to question if some of the problems stem from culture or if so-called politicians or political activists are a particular sort of personalities gravitated to activism. Or is it what they call the "Culture, stupid" or "Culture Made Stupid"?

As a polite Ethiopian, I struggle with keeping away from the word "stupid." I know it is difficult to discuss culture. I argue, though, that culture is a neglected but important determinant of democracy and political participation. Some findings show that countries with individualist cultures democratize earlier than collectivist cultures, which tend to remain stuck for a long time with relatively efficient autocracies[2]. Individualistic culture tends to create a demand for democracy, as individual freedom is fundamental for self-achievement. Equality before the law and the limited framework government provided under democracy help protect individual freedom. Collectivist cultures like Ethiopia instead focus more on the necessity of a benevolent ruler to create stability between different "clans" and groups. The emphasis is more on hierarchy and order, while freedom can be seen as endangering stability[3]. Culture, politics, and activism are deeply intertwined. Culture informs our identities and values, politics shapes how those values are expressed or suppressed, and activism works to realign power structures for a more equitable society. Together, they are a powerful force for change.

Some Observations: Elitism, Moral Indecency, Dishonesty, and Distrust
These are some observations I've made during my autoethnographic journey: elitism, moral indecency, dishonesty, lack of commitment, and distrust—qualities I believe are undermining the Amhara struggle for freedom. Whether these traits stem from a "mental imbalance" or contribute to it remains unclear at this point in my reflection process. More robust and carefully gathered data is needed to explore this further. The purpose of this reflection is not solely to identify the issues I see as damaging to the struggle but also to find solutions. The aim is to address individuals exhibiting these qualities within key organizational platforms and media forums while being more discerning in selecting compatriots with whom we build solidarity. My limited data shows that moral indecency is not uncommon.

Moral indecency (*Gibregeb Alba ግብረ-ገብ አልባ*) refers to actions, behaviors, or attitudes that violate the ethical or moral standards of a particular society or community. These behaviors are observed as harmful, disrespectful, or inappropriate and typically lead to negative judgments about a group's or a person's character or integrity. While what is considered morally indecent can vary across age groups and personal belief systems, it generally reflects a breach of norms related to respect, honesty, decency, and kindness—values that Ethiopians hold dear and are recognized for by outsiders. This breach of norms, particularly within the diaspora, has severely damaged the struggle for independence. I have witnessed several organizations or associations established to support this cause disband due to a lack of respect, decency, as well as the presence of exaggerated self-esteem or elitist, arrogant behavior.

The type of indecency I have documented involves breaking the unwritten ethical codes that govern behavior within a working group. These codes typically include principles like honesty, fairness, and respect for others' rights. In the groups I have associated with, lying for personal gain or deliberately deceiving others for selfish reasons is unfortunately not uncommon. I have consistently observed misrepresentation of the truth, causing harm to

others and breaking trust. There seems to be little tolerance for groups with similar interests. For example, in one European country, there are eight Amhara associations, and in one major city, there are three associations. Discriminatory discourse, such as treating people unfairly or unjustly based on characteristics like *GoT ጎጥ* mentality (provincial, e.g., Gojame, Gondere, Woloye), is not rare. This behavior is considered morally indecent because it violates the principle of equal respect and dignity for all people working to prevent the genocide of the Amhara. As I write this, I have noticed similar issues even in Sweden, where character assassination against Amhara groups or individuals persists, despite everyone claiming to share the same cause. Some TikTok or YouTube personalities—not sure if they are agents provocateurs or real activists—have actively engaged in acts or used language that dehumanizes others, such as bullying, hate speech, or causing emotional harm. This behavior has led many intelligent Ethiopians to distance themselves from the struggle.

The impact of moral indecency—within the diaspora movement to support Ethiopia and stop the carnage against the Amharas—is primarily the erosion of trust. When individuals or groups engage in morally indecent behavior, it erodes trust within the community or society. I don't think many people are fully aware of this. One major problem I observe in the Amhara struggle is that people have become skeptical, suspicious, or fearful of one another, which undermines the social cohesion that is essential in a freedom struggle.

Moral indecency and emotional lability seem to lead to emotional distress, feelings of betrayal, and long-term harm for those affected, as well as for people suffering in Ethiopia. More broadly, the widespread moral indecency I observe among some so-called Fano supporters or groups in the diaspora [for ethical reasons, I do not mention their names] can contribute to the breakdown of social norms and cultural decay. If such behaviors go unchecked, they can foster a culture of corruption, inequality, and injustice, ultimately jeopardizing the Amhara struggle for freedom and equality.

Another serious observation I've made is the misleading enthusiasm and fervor to join the movement, which in reality is often followed by a lack or absence of true commitment that gradually becomes evident. This behavior occurs when an individual or group fails to fully dedicate themselves to a goal, bond, responsibility, or cause. It reflects a lack of consistency, effort, and emotional investment in the struggle. This is partly linked to issues of competence and elitism. In an ideal world, commitment is associated with a sense of duty, determination, and follow-through. However, it occurs too often in many associations and groups in the diaspora and has contributed to the disappearance of groups that were once fully functional. Because this commitment is either absent or weak, individuals may fail to take necessary actions, sustain their efforts, or remain engaged over time—ultimately hindering progress in the Amhara struggle.

I have seen many people who lack commitment abandon projects when the initial excitement fades or when faced with obstacles. They don't have the resolve to push through difficult moments in the struggle. This lack of commitment often involves constantly changing priorities, making it difficult to focus on any one task or goal long enough to make meaningful progress. Due to these shifting priorities, inconsistent behavior, and lack of determination by my compatriots, I myself have left several movements or organizations.

My understanding of the causes behind the observed lack of commitment among my fellow countrymen and women can be twofold: a lack of clear goals or purpose regarding the Fano movement and the greater Amhara freedom struggle, and fear of failure. When the stakes

feel too high, some resist making a long-term commitment out of fear of failure or disappointment. I understand that without strong internal motivation or passion for a cause, it becomes difficult for a person to fully commit to the movement. In such cases, it may sometimes be better to step away and retire from the movement.

It is also understandable that a lack of commitment can stem from emotional or physical burnout. One genuinely committed friend of mine once said, "I am overburdened with responsibilities because others are doing nothing. I'm the one who shows up on time for meetings, the one who formulates letters, the one who keeps the minutes, the one who pays more for various expenses, and the one who reaches out to others." Tragically, to cope with this exhaustion, he eventually disengaged and withdrew from his commitments.

The Amhara struggle for freedom is an essential fight for the survival, dignity, and recognition of a people who have faced historical and ongoing marginalization. However, the role of elitism in the movement must be critically examined to ensure that the voices of all Amhara people are heard, respected, and included. Elites have an important role to play in organizing and advocating for the Amhara cause, but their influence must be balanced with grassroots participation and a commitment to unity and equality. Only then can the Amhara people overcome the forces of oppression and achieve true freedom and justice.

To address the challenges posed by elitism, the Amhara struggle for freedom must aim for a more inclusive and democratic movement:

1. **Decentralized leadership**: The movement needs to foster a more democratic structure where leadership is distributed across various groups within the Amhara community, ensuring that a broader range of voices is heard and that decision-making reflects the needs of the entire population.

2. **Grassroots involvement**: There should be a concerted effort to involve ordinary Amhara people in the struggle at every level, ensuring that their lived experiences, needs, and desires inform the political discourse and strategy.

3. **Collaborative efforts**: The elites and grassroots must work together in ways that are mutually respectful. While elites can bring valuable resources and strategic vision, the grassroots must be empowered to take ownership of the movement and drive it forward on their own terms—in alignment with the strategic vision and goals.

4. **A focus on unity**: Rather than fostering division, the movement must focus on unity— acknowledging differences within the community but working together toward a shared goal of freedom, justice, and equality for the Amhara people. This requires eliminating hierarchy and embracing inclusivity and solidarity.

Final Reflections

The concerted attack on the Amhara social fabric has been a multifaceted and strategic effort aimed at dismantling their cultural and social institutions. By targeting both internal practices and external relations, the current authoritarian Ethiopian regime seeks to weaken and isolate the Amhara people, rendering them vulnerable to continued oppression and marginalization. The ongoing, systematic erosion of Amhara identity and cohesion

underscores the urgent need for greater international awareness and intervention to address these injustices and support the Amhara community in their struggle for existence, recognition, and justice[4].

Given the existential threat facing the Amhara people, the last thing we should do is contribute to the fragmentation of their struggle. While the behaviors and attitudes I've mentioned earlier contribute to this fragmentation, they must not be allowed to dominate the movement. Unity remains essential if the Amhara are to stand resilient in the face of such adversity.

The Amhara people, one of Ethiopia's largest ethnic groups, have historically been deeply involved in the country's political struggles, and this involvement continues within the diaspora. Many Amharas have left Ethiopia due to political unrest, conflict, or persecution, and this displacement has shaped their political activism in various ways. The diaspora serves as a critical space for the continuation of political struggles, but it also creates a unique dynamic where people can be emotionally charged due to the stressful combination of exile, loss, and the desire to advocate for their people.

The emotional aspect is central to diaspora political activism. Many in the diaspora experience frustration and helplessness, holding a deep emotional connection to their homeland while being physically removed from it. This distance can lead to emotional lability, where intense feelings of injustice, grief over losses, or frustration with the Ethiopian state's failure to address Amhara rights can fluctuate rapidly. These emotions can fuel activism but can also result in actions that are reactive or difficult to sustain over time.

For many in the Amhara diaspora, their identity is tightly bound to Ethiopia's political landscape. The emotional weight of their experiences, coupled with the lack of direct involvement in Ethiopian politics, may result in intense emotional outbursts or feelings of alienation and frustration. In today's diaspora experience, social media platforms allow for the rapid spread of information (and misinformation), which can amplify emotional reactions. For those involved in political movements, this leads to more frequent emotional highs and lows, as they are constantly exposed to discussions, debates, and media reports that may trigger strong feelings.

Emotional liabilities and or emotional labilities play a critical role in shaping the behavior of political activists, especially in diaspora settings. In the case of the Amhara diaspora, the emotional weight of historical grievances, marginalization, and the trauma of displacement can create highly charged emotional reactions. Such emotions are often expressed in online spaces, where political discussions can quickly escalate, fostering both solidarity and division. These emotional responses may mobilize individuals for political action, but they can also undermine the stability and long-term focus of the movement. In some cases, activists may act impulsively based on intense feelings rather than on a rational, well-thought-out strategy. The emotional volatility within the diaspora can lead to fragmented movements or internal conflicts.

This paper does not provide direct solutions but aims to provoke discussion on the way forward. My ongoing observations and engagement continue, and I hope to present a more thorough ethnographic analysis and critical insights in future work.

[1] Emotional lability is the tendency to shift rapidly and dramatically between different emotional states. People with high emotional lability are often described as "sensitive" or having "thin skin." The term comes from the Latin word labilis, which means "to totter, sway, or move in an unstable manner." Other terms for emotional lability include labile mood, labile affect, and reactivity. Emotional lability is commonly seen in people with personality disorders such as borderline personality disorder but can also occur in conditions like bipolar disorder and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Emotional lability is different from moodiness or someone with a "short fuse." People with high emotional lability experience sudden, dramatic changes that are not always triggered by something specific. Their feelings fluctuate rapidly and unpredictably. They may feel fine one minute and then angry or sad the next without warning. These sudden shifts in mood can be extremely frustrating for family and friends who struggle to understand what triggers these changes and how they might respond when a person with emotional lability is upset. What Is Emotional Lability?

[2] Gorodnichenko, Y, and G Roland (2010a), "Culture, Institutions and the Wealth of Nations", CEPR Discussion Paper 8013.

[3] Gorodnichenko, Y, and G Roland (2015), "Culture, Institutions and Democratization", CEPR Discussion Paper 10563.

[4] Birara, D. (2024). Criminalization of traditional practices as a facet of cultural genocide: the case of enbedade amongst the Amhara community in Ethiopia. *African Identities*, 1–25. https://doi.org/10.1080/14725843.2024.2440088