

THE DISCURSIVE CONSTRUCTION OF POLITICAL IDENTITIES ON FACEBOOK AND ITS DEMOCRATIZATION POTENTIAL IN ETHIOPIA

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ABSTRACT

This study was conducted to examine, the discursive construction of political identity on Facebook and its democratization potential in Ethiopia. The study, has analyzed the Facebook pages of two major and competing political parties in Ethiopia namely the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), and Semayawi (Blue) party. The study specifically employed a Qualitative Discourse Historical Approach (DHA) among the multi-methodical approach in Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) whose analysis revealed that the selected political parties, for the most part, used Facebook to construct positive self and negative other images in Ethiopian political sphere. Facebook has also been found to serve as a forum to create polarized collective identity and discourses typified by fragmentation, flaming and incivility in Ethiopia.

Key words: Democracy, discursive identity, Facebook, politics, public sphere.

1. INTRODUCTION

Social Network Sites (hereafter SNSs) are essentially endowed with unique features of interactivity which evidently enable users to have active role in the process of generating, sharing, rating, and consuming the user generated contents.

Most importantly, the SNSs have the potential to reconfigure communicative power relations through the use of an ever easier networking and user centered innovation which in fact enable users to challenge the monopolistic control of the media production and dissemination (Loader &Mercea, 2011). As a result of which, people are no longer considered as passive recipients of the media message. The technology rather enables them to have active and instant role in the production, distribution and interpretation of media message.

SNSs are typified not only by allowing individuals to meet strangers but they are also essentially endowed with enabling users to articulate and magnify their social networks (Boyd & Ellison, 2008). Most importantly, they have also been considered as important tools for political communications. Various politicians in the contemporary elections have used the SNSs as efficient means to connect with their potential voters regardless of geographical distances (Bor, 2013).

Facebook, as one of the most prominent and widely used SNSs, is progressively retaining public attention and rapidly becoming an integral part of modern lives (Boyd & Ellison, 2008; Lai & Yang, 2014; Wills & Reeves, 2009). Currently, Facebook is estimated to have more than one billion active users worldwide (Facebook, 2015). This meteoric rise of Facebook users makes it the premium social media service in the world (Safranek, 2012).

Among other things, Facebook has often been observed to have a role of strengthening social ties. It evidently encourages group formation that enables users to maintain a strong network (Slotnick, cited in Bor, 2013). It is thus regarded as a 'networked public' that support sociability (Boyd cited in Boyd and Ellison, 2008). Most notably, it enables like-minded individuals and organizations to form a group and maintain relationships with one another, and connect them on the basis of shared interest, political views and other common motives (Boyd & Ellison, 2008; Lai and Yang, 2014).

On the flip side, however, Facebook has also been observed to have a subversive potential role that can possibly harm the lives of individuals which in effect may hamper social interaction unless it is used wisely and responsibly (Baruah, 2012; Crivellaro et al., 2014). "Despite rapid adoption, a growing concern and skepticism regarding the use of the social media exist in the public sector" (Khan, Swar & Lee, 2014, P. 605). It fundamentally raises a concern of privacy and fragmentation (O'Brien & Torres, 2012).

Like many other SNSs, Facebook is also regarded as an appealing site for politicians (Bor, 2013). It has been immensely adopted by politicians, and political activists as a tool to engage, organize and communicate with the public (Loader & Mercea, 2011). It is also noted to have a potential to develop citizens' knowledge and awareness of political issues which in effect may facilitate participation in political life. This distinct characteristics of Facebook makes it a special place for political expression (Boulianne, 2015; Mor et al., 2015).

Unlike the traditional media that restrict audiences only to consume political content, the SNSs such as Facebook offer citizens opportunities to reach out and respond by interjecting their opinion into the political sphere in ways that were not possible before (Bor, 2013).

Facebook is also evidently gaining a growing popularity in Ethiopia albeit lower internet penetration rate in the country. According to the data of Internet World Stat, only 3.7 % of the population have been reported to have internet access in Ethiopia by the end of 2015. The same number of people have also been reported to use Facebook in the country by the end of 2015 (Internetworldstat.com, 2015).

Despite very limited internet penetration rate in the country, Facebook appears to be the most popular SNSs in the country (Tesfaye 2013; Human Rights Watch, 2015). It is also regarded as one of the most preferable media in Ethiopia compared to the traditional media such as radio, television and newspaper (Sileshi, 2014).

As far as political parties and politicians in Ethiopian are concerned, they have evidently been observed to use predominantly the traditional top down communication strategies that include political campaign via state owned television and radio, press, and billboard ads to communicate with their electorate especially in times of election contests.

The rise of the SNS especially Facebook, seems to open up a leeway for various politicians and political parties in Ethiopia to use them as an alternative platform to address their political agendas and further their political interests.

Currently, almost all political parties including the ruling party in the country have Facebook pages whereby they post and update various political messages to engage and organize their supporters into their political process, and to counter argue competing political parties in the country.

Despite a growing prominence of the political use of Facebook among different political parties in the country, researching it is still embryonic and seems to be relegated in Ethiopia. Thus far, no significant body of research have been undertaken to examine how political parties use Facebook as their political communication tool and how it helps them shape their political agenda.

This study, therefore, aims at scrutinizing the discursive construction of political identity on Facebook and its democratization potential in Ethiopia.

1.1. REREARCH QUESTIONS

This study sought to answer the following research questions:

1. How does each political party present itself on Facebook?
2. How does each political party present other political parties on Facebook?

3. How does the political use of Facebook contribute for the democratization of the political sphere of Ethiopia?

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1. THE PUBLIC SPHERE

The notion of Public sphere dominantly owes much credit to Habermas's, seminal work of Structural Transformation of Public Sphere: An inquiry into a category of bourgeois society. His seminal work has been famously reiterated by a number of scholars and observers as a focal point as far as discussion regarding public sphere is concerned. It is a good starting point for defining a positive arena for political communication (Westling, 2007).

The idea of public sphere has been noted to have a close tie with democratic ideals that actually calls for citizen participation in public affairs (Papacharissi, 2002). It mainly focuses on the role of interaction among citizens in the political process" (Dahlgren, 1995, P.7). Public sphere is, therefore, highly entangled with public participation and opinion formation which are noted to be basic components of democracy.

Political parties have also been viewed as central components of public sphere (Garnham cited in Curan, 2011). As Papacharissi (2002) also pointed out, the notion of public sphere has a lot to do with open exchange of political thoughts which historically took a root back in the ancient Greek Agoras, the New England town hall, the coffee house etc.

The public sphere emerges whenever citizen who assemble and form association as their rights and gather as a public body to deal with various issues of concern especially of politics. (Dahlgren, 2005). In other words, public sphere encourages active citizen participation, which is one of the fundamental principles of democracy.

Papacharissi (2002) also noted that informed and logical discussion could enable the public to reach on consensus and make decision which best reflects the tradition of democracy. An integrated democratic society with equal participation and free discussion should be regarded as the ideal model of public sphere (Habermas cited in Jinrong&Enyi, 2011).

2.2. THE INTERNET AND THE VIRTUAL/PUBLIC SPHERE

The rise of the internet has maintained a mainstream research agenda among scholars in communication and has preoccupied them in investigating whether the internet has a potential to revive the allegedly declined public sphere or not.

In the past, scholars' research on public sphere were dominantly focusing on the real existence of public sphere. But the emergence of the internet has shifted their attention towards virtual public sphere as an online information exchange platform and a new stage of development of public sphere (Jinrong&Enyi, 2011). Thus, the virtual public sphere mainly shows how the political use of the internet affect public sphere.

There appears to be two opposing views regarding whether the internet has an impact on public sphere or not: the proponents of cyberspace or believers, and the skeptics or e-pessimists (Brants , 2005; Papacharissi, 2002; Dahlgren, 2005).

The proponents of the cyber space asserted that the alleged decline of public sphere can be halted by the democratizing effect of the internet. They hail internet as offering not only new ways of obtaining information but also revolutionizing democratic society by transcending the limitation of time, space, and access. They also believe that internet promotes interactive and deliberative citizens who cannot be hindered by the elite oriented nature of the traditional mass media (Dahlgren, 2005; Brants , 2005; Papacharissi, 2002).

Moreover, they also argued that the inherently nonhierarchical nature of the internet would offer citizens to take a bottom-up initiative which has traditionally been ignored (Brants , 2005). In other words, the internet has an emancipatory role to empower those who have been overlooked in the traditional, elite oriented approach of public sphere. It is also claimed that the internet resonates with such ideas of openness, transparency, and publicness. "It provides more ideal discussion environment and space of showing freewill to the participants than the real public sphere does" (Jinrong&Enyi, 2011, P.346). Therefore, this groups hold the view that internet can revitalize or expand public sphere.

The skeptics, on the other hand, argued that the potential guarantee of the internet in reviving the public sphere is far from the reality as internet in the first place is not universally accessible to all. Rather it is dominated by a few which is not terribly different from the bourgeois public sphere in the 17th and 18th centuries. It has also been argued that it frequently induces nonsensical, fragmented and enraged discussion. What is more, they also question the potential ascribed to the internet in mobilizing those who are politically uninterested (Dahlgren, 2005; Brants, 2005; Pappacharissi, 2002).

Departing from the opposing views, Dahlgren asserts that it is not as such a simple task to arrive at a simple and definitive conclusion. It would rather be an equivocal to say that the internet does or does not have an impact on public sphere given the variation in democratic system around the world, as well as the extent of change in the socio-political as well as technological differences

in different corners of the world (Dahlgren, 2005). Therefore, it is hard to make a universal claim. Rather, it should be context specific.

To understand the virtual public sphere, Papacharissi underlined, there is a need to differentiate public space with that of public sphere. He argued that the internet as a public space provides a forum for political deliberation. And, the internet as a public sphere is regarded to facilitate discussion that promote democratic exchange of ideas and opinions. Thus, a virtual public space enhances discussion while a virtual public sphere promotes democracy (Pappacharissi, 2002).

3. METHOD OF THE STUDY

Among the multi-methodical approaches in Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), this study drew its particular interest on the analytical methodology of Discourse Historical Approach (DHA) to analyze the discursive construction of political identity in Ethiopian political sphere on Facebook, and its potential role in democratizing the political sphere in Ethiopia.

DHA takes politics as its basic focal point in which it strives to develop conceptual framework in political discourse (Wodak& Meyer, 2009).

DHA as a problem oriented, and an interdisciplinary approach of analytical methodology, has long been employed mainly to critically examine discourses pertaining to politics and discrimination, and identity (Wodak& Meyer, 2001).

3.1. DESCRIPTION OF EMPIRICAL MATERIAL AND SAMPLING

This study basically took some of the Facebook page postings of major and contesting political parties in Ethiopia as empirical material. Facebook pages of two major political parties in Ethiopia, namely the Ethiopian People Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), which is the ruling political party in the country, and the Semayawi (Blue party), which is one of the major opposition political parties in the country, were identified and taken as targets of the study. They were chosen on the basis of the number of 'likes' each political party's Facebook page has. They are the ones with significant number of 'likes' on their Facebook pages.

While Semayawi party was the leading one with 70, 366 'likes' in its Facebook pages, EPRDF was in the second position among political parties in the country with 42,096 'likes' in its Facebook page by the time the data were collected.

This study employed purposive sampling technique to generate relevant qualitative data pertaining to the political use of Facebook as a tool of political communications among political parties in the context of Ethiopian political arena.

The study took the May 2015 Ethiopian Federal and Regional election as a point of reference to generate relevant data to this particular study.

The 2015 Ethiopian Federal and Regional election campaign has been officially declared to begin from 14th of February and to end on 21st of May, 2015. The election has been carried out on 24th Of May, 2015. The result of the election has been announced on 22nd of June, 2015.

Hence a total of four weeks data ranging from two weeks before the election and two weeks after the announcement of the election result were purposefully chosen from the original Facebook pages postings of the selected political parties in Ethiopia. The rationale to choose this time frame is because of the fact that it was the climax period where election maintained a prime agenda in the country. A total of 19 screenshots were taken as samples out of the corpus of data which were available online.

Therefore, this study selected the original text, picture as well as some video postings which were posted on the walls of the selected political party's Facebook pages on the selected time frame as status update.

3.2. PROCEDURES IN DATA ANALYSIS AND SAMPLING

This particular study went through two levels of analysis: the entry level analysis and the in-depth analysis.

In the entry level analysis, macro discourse topics from the Facebook postings of the selected political parties were selected. In other words, boundaries of discursive themes were identified. It was then followed by a process of coding which involves a process of sorting and organizing data into chunks or segments (Creswell, 2009). The selected data were therefore sorted and down sized through coding categories with careful consideration of context, research questions, and theoretical assumptions.

In the level of in-depth analysis, the study identified and presented discursive strategies with a special focus on topoi and supporting elements so as to critically show the actual characteristics and features of discursive construction of political identity on Facebook.

Under the level of in-depth analysis, efforts were also made to triangulate the data through making use of intertextual and inter-discursive analysis of competing discourses to critically

examine the discursive practice of politics on Facebook in the context of Ethiopian political sphere.

4. FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

4.1. THE DISCURSIVE PRESENTATION OF SELF AND OTHER

A critical examination on the discursive construction of political identities on the Facebook pages of the selected political parties revealed that both parties used different strategies in the discursive presentation of self and in the discursive presentation of others.

The parties used the following topoi (reference to the Discourse Historical Approach) as argumentation strategies to justify their discursive presentation of self and their discursive presentation of others:

EPRDF	Semayawi (Blue)
Topos of usefulness/advantage	Topos of authority
Topos of responsibility	Topos of abuse
Topos of reality	Topos of danger
Topos of history	Topos of threat
Topos of number	Topoi of law and right

Table 1.. List of discursive strategies (topoi)

4.2. STRATEGIES OF THE DISCURSIVE PRESENTATION OF SELF

4.2.1. EPRDF

The results of the study with regard to a discursive presentation of self on the Facebook page postings of EPRDF indicated that the party was found largely to employ a discursive strategy of positive self-presentation.

The predicative strategy of self-attribution of the party indicated that EPRDF was found to attribute itself more or less positively using different positive-self attribution strategies such as successful, efficient, far-sighted, anti-poverty, emancipatory, inclusive, bright etc. The party justified such use of predicative attributions of positive-self using a number of argumentation strategies or topoi.

In the following Facebook page postings of EPRDF, the party described itself as a successful political party in terms of achieving remarkable developments in the country. In this regard, the

party used topos of history and topos of number as argumentation strategies to describe itself as a successful party.



Fig1. The Facebook page postings of EPRDS

The written text on the above EPRDF's Facebook page postings (posted on May1, 2015) goes saying "Within 24 years of our journey, we are able to secure a remarkable achievement in the sector of power generation and distribution, as well as in road construction." In this text, the party did try to justify the predicative attribution of success to itself by tracing back the timeline (history) which the party went through over the last 24 years.

Similarly, EPRDF also used topos of number in the above postings as an argumentation strategy to justify its attribution of success to itself. In the above Facebook posting, the party did try to support its attribution of success with symbolic meaning such as graphs and statistical data (number) indicating the historical timeline in which the party scored a rising progress in the sector of power generation and road construction.

On May 22, 2015, EPRDF on its Facebook page also posted an election campaign by Prime Minister Hailemariam Dessalegn arguing that the party has been successful so far in bringing the intended change in development in the country using topos of history.

It is EPRDF ever in the history of our country which could bring double digit economy in the country (posted on May22, 2015).

The other positive self-referential strategy which EPRDF tried to attribute to itself is a predicative attribution as an efficient party. In its discursive presentation of self on its Facebook page postings, the party was found to positively present itself as an efficient party. Here, the party seems to employ topos of responsibility to justify its discursive self-attribution as an

efficient and far-sighted party. Extraction from the written text on the Facebook page of EPRDF below supported how the party attributed itself as a far-sighted and efficient party.

EPRDF works by dreaming tomorrow... (Posted on May 2, 2015).

Visually, EPRDF also did try to attribute itself as a far-sighted and efficient party committed to bring development in the country. The following background profile pictures have been selected from the Facebook page of EPRDF to visually illustrate and support the party's positive predication of self. In this picture, by making use of an implicit symbolic meaning, the party tried to depict itself positively as a capable, efficient and far-sighted political party.



Fig.2 the Facebook Wall of EPRDS

As vividly portrayed above, the Facebook background picture of the party is composed of arrangements of pictures in a series together with a superimposed text slogan which goes saying “EPRDF’s developmental and democratic strategy is the only guarantee for a journey towards our renaissance.” Each picture in a sequence seems to have its own implicit symbolic meaning to support its self-predication as an efficient, capable and a far-sighted party.

The first picture from the left depicts the construction of the Ethiopian Grand Renaissance Dam (GERD). It is a multibillion mega project which is still being constructed. Hence, using a picture showing the ongoing construction of a dam visually implies that the party seems to give priority to developmental issues.

The next picture from the left depicts women participating in voting during election. This picture seems to have two potential implicit meanings: on the one hand, it is implying that the party strives to maintain equal participation of females in every sector in the country. On the other hand, it also seems to imply that the party prioritizes a multi-party election system.

The third picture from the left depicts the Grand Renaissance Dam generating and supplying hydroelectric power to various development sectors which the party aspires to realize in the years to come in the country. Particularly, symbolic use of this picture seems to imply the vision that the party aspires to achieve in its long way to go.

It may be hard to grasp the implied meaning of each picture standing alone just without having pictures arranged in a meaningful sequence one after the other. If each picture is singled out and deconstructed, it would have different meaning. But when it comes in a series, then the meaning of one affects the meaning of the other. To put it more precisely, the first picture on the left determines the meaning of the third picture from the left which would in turn support the efficient and far sighted predication which the party attributes to itself.



Fig.3 the Facebook walls of EPRDF

Thus, the above picture on the left, is what is actually existing on the ground. It is a huge construction scheme which is still being constructed. However, the picture on the right is what the party is aspiring the country to be in its future by constructing such grand hydroelectric plant. Hence, the first picture seems to determine the meaning of the next picture.

What is more, the party has also been found to attribute itself as an emancipatory political party in the country that strives to liberate women from social inequality and the one which strives to benefit them the most. The following paragraph illustrates the party's self-predication of emancipation using topoi of usefulness/advantage.

Thousands of female dwellers in Addis Ababa mingled together at Addis Ababa Stadium and expressed their commitment to support EPRDF. They assured to give their voice for EPRDF which liberate them from the yoke of barbarism and enable them to benefit most (posted on May 16, 2015).

4.2.2. SEMAYAWI (BLUE) PARTY

The result of the study regarding the self-presentation of Semayawi party on its Facebook page revealed that the party largely referred and predicated itself as a disadvantaged and oppressed political party using some intensifying expressions. It also employed different argumentation strategies (topoi) to justify self-referential attributions which the party discursively constructs to present itself on its Facebook page. The party mainly used such expressions as abused, political prisoners, tortured, killed, harassed and deprived of justice etc. as predicative strategies just to present itself.

In the following paragraph, the party attributed itself as political prisoners using topos of authority.

Appeal has been made against the release of WoinshetMolla and other prisoners. After remaining in custody for some time waiting for court trail in connection with charges made against them, they were convicted at Federal high court Kerra branch on June 22, 2015 and sentenced to two months in prison. The judge, however, ordered their immediate release on the basis that they had already served their time. But a day after their release, ignoring court order, the police and security officials rearrested WoinshetMolla, Daniel Tesfaye, and BethelhemAkalework, and appeal has been made against their original verdict at high court, lideta branch, still they are in prison (posted on June 30, 2015).

In the above Facebook post, the party tried to show how powerful and ultimate decision makers are authorities of the ruling party to violate and act against the court decision, “ignoring court order”, and “rearrested”, opposition political party members at any time.

Using topos of Danger, Semayawi party also discursively attributed itself as an abused, tortured and imprisoned political party in the country. It depicts itself as a party in danger.

Never forget my struggle in case I die ... (posted on July 5, 2015)

Arresting semayawimemebers still continues (Posted on July 5, 2015).

The first post was a call for a commemoration of the killing of Ato Samuel Awoke who was a member of Semayawi party. Thus the message ‘never forget my struggle in case I die’ indicated that he was expecting that he might be killed due to his political struggle.

The second post also indicated that party members are in danger of being arrested on account of being members of Semayawi, opposition political party.

Using topoi of abuse the party also discursively tried to show how its party members have been tortured and harassed in the following Facebook posts:

...SileshiDechasa a Semayawi party member has been arrested by police and security forces after abducting him out of his home and beating him ruthlessly. He is severely injured on his legs and hands due to senseless beatings (posted on July 12, 2015).

4.3. DISCURSIVE NOMINATION AND PREDICATION OF 'OTHERS'

This study was also intending to critically investigate and examine the discursive presentation of 'other' political party on the Facebook pages of EPRDF and Semayawi (Blue) party. Accordingly, the findings of the study revealed that the parties used different strategies to discursively present 'other' political parties on their Facebook pages.

4.3.1. EPRDF

A critical examination on the discursive presentation of other political parties on the Facebook page postings of EPRDF indicated that the party dominantly seems to employ a discursive strategy of ignoring others. It was hard to find any posting, especially text posting in its Facebook page directly referring other political parties in the country either positively or negatively or in a neutral tone. In most of its Facebook postings, the party was rather discursively presenting itself positively (a strategy of positive self-presentation).

Nevertheless, the intertextual and interdiscursive analysis of the study indicated that the party sometimes used an implicit predication strategy to negatively representing other political parties on its Facebook page. Some of its Facebook postings indicated that the party covertly tried to equate other political parties in the country with the previous regime which has been considered as undemocratic and authoritarian.

For example, in a televised political debate on Policy of foreign affairs and national security which has been posted on the Facebook page of EPRDF on May20, 2015, the party's minister of foreign affairs pigeonholed all opposition political parties in the same basket and clearly associated them with Dergue, the previous regime which EPRDF labeled it as barbaric and undemocratic in many occasions.

Moreover, in one of its Facebook postings which has been posted on May 16, 2015, EPRDF also tried to indirectly point out other parties as undemocratic presupposing that they cannot liberate women who have been under the yoke of barbarism (the previous regime). And it portrayed other political parties as if they are replica of the previous regime.

The use of the word ‘only’ in a text slogan superimposed in the profile background picture of EPRDF, which goes saying “EPRDF’s developmental and democratic strategy is the only guarantee for a journey towards our renaissance,” also indirectly predicate the negative presentation of other political party.

To put it in a nutshell, despite EPRDF has been found largely to employ ignorant strategy to discursively represent others, intertextual and interdiscursive analysis of the study indicated that the party also used implicit predicative strategy to discursively represent other political parties just negatively.

4.3.2. SEMAYAWI (BLUE) PARTY

The examination on the discursive presentation of other political parties on the Facebook page postings of Semayawi party also indicated that the party dominantly presents other political parties, especially the ruling party, EPRDF, just negatively.

Using different argumentation strategies (topoi) the party predicatively represents EPRDF negatively using negative and intensifying attributions.

In the paragraph below, Semayawi party predicatively described EPRDF as a perpetrator using topoi of law and right.

Semayawi’s party representative also noted that the party in Borda district of Gamogofa zone has been forced not to make campaign on Saturdays and Sundays by EPRDF cadres arguing that they are market days. As of the directives of Ethiopian electoral law, however, election campaign should be made 500 meters away from market places; but the law does not say that campaign should not be taken place during market days (posted on May 18, 2015).

Similarly, EPRDF has also discursively been represented as intimidator on the Facebook postings of Semayawi using topoi of threat in the paragraph below:

A representative of Semayawi party in Gamogofa zone inform to Negere Ethiopia that EPRDF Cadres in Kucha and Borda district are forcefully taking voting cards from voters and giving them back attaching EPRDF’s candidature symbol (Bee) to vote for EPRDF. Moreover, Cadres in those districts are organizing dwellers into a group of 1 to 5 and giving them voting cards attaching EPRDF’s candidature symbol, and forcing them to vote for EPRDF (posted on May 18, 2015).

In the picture below posted on May 18, 2015, Semayawi party also did try to predicatively attribute EPRDF as a cheater using topos of Abuse.

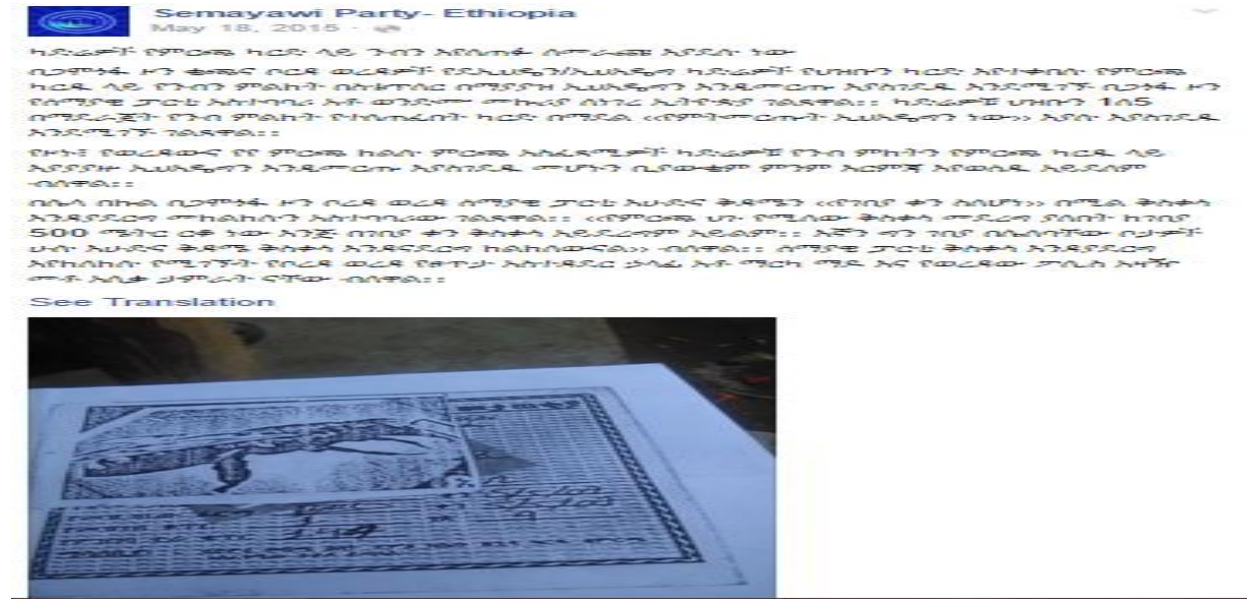


FIG.4. the Facebook page posting of Semayawi

The above picture tries to depict an election card attached with EPRDF candidature symbol (Bee). The sentence above goes saying “Cadres of EPRDF are giving election cards to voters attaching with EPRDF’s candidature symbols (Bee)...” Thus, using the above visual evidence, Semayawi Party tried to depict how EPRDF is abusing the rules and regulation of the Ethiopian election directives. It is strictly forbidden by law to give an election card attached with any political candidature symbol.

All in all, the analysis of the study on the discursive presentation of other political parties on the Facebook page postings of Semayawi party indicated that the party, using various argumentation strategies (topoi), tried to discursively present other political parties, especially EPRDF, in a negative light.

4.4. THE DEMOCRATIC POTENTIAL OF THE POLITICAL USE OF FACEBOOK IN ETHIOPIA

A critical examination of the political use of Facebook among different political parties in the context of Ethiopian multi-party political sphere and its potential role in promoting deliberative democracy in the country indicated that Facebook has rather largely been used to harbor political polarization among the selected political parties in the country.

Instead of making reasoned and reciprocal debate, parties were rather found to use Facebook as a platform to make fragmented and enraged discussion. It was found that the parties failed to set a common agenda or common concern and make a deliberative, reasoned and reciprocal political discussion and debate using Facebook as a virtual public sphere. They rather have been raising polarizing issues which cannot come closer for dialogue and discussion in a reasoned and reciprocal manner.

The study indicated that the parties rather use Facebook as a virtual space to run fragmented political issues. Most of the issues that EPRDF has been trying to raise on its Facebook page were dominantly focusing on development related issues such as the construction of the dam, the generation of hydroelectric power plant, the construction of roads etc. All in all, it was trying to show how the party was able to bring development in the country so far and is still striving more to take the country into a group of countries with double digit economies.

The Facebook postings of Semayawi (Blue) party, on the other hand, have largely been focusing on human right issues which the party has long been deprived of. The party in many ways has been trying to show its concern that it has long been deprived of justice. In many ways it also raised its concern that there is lack of suitable political atmosphere for opposition political parties to thrive in the country. Through to the end, the party was, therefore, raising its concern about the arrest, intimidation and ill-treatment of its party members in many corners of the country.

4.5. CONCLUSION

Despite the fact that parties were able to entertain discursive diversity on their own Facebook pages which is in fact an element of deliberative democracy, they were not able to bring them closer in a common ground and handle them in a reasoned, coherent and reciprocal argument. Therefore, such lack of space for dialogue and rational debate evidently harbor political polarization in the country.

The discursive presentation of positive self and negative other or making a political dichotomy of 'us versus them' also seems to exacerbate polarization of the parties and prevent them to come closer and minimize their political strain.

The discursive presentation of negative other has largely been characterized by political insults and hatreds between parties. Parties seem to be preoccupied with negating and radicalizing each other's political thoughts than trying to minimize animosities and come closer for a deliberative political conversation in a reasoned and reciprocal manner. The parties' political use of Facebook has thus been typified by flaming as a major roadblock towards a political transition to democracy in the country.

The findings of the study, therefore, seem to comply with the views of the skeptics or e-pessimist of cyber space which contend the fact that internet frequently induces fragmented and enraged discussion (Dahlgren, 2005).

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