

**ETHNIC PROTEST IN ETHIOPIA:  
THE POLITICS OF MOBILIZATION AND POLICING IN OROMIA REGION**

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Abstract: This paper examines protests that erupted in the Oromia region of Ethiopia after the disputed 2005 parliamentary elections. Using the logic of an informational cascade model, I argue that the public revelation of political cleavages among ethnic Oromo affected the decisions made by would-be protesters, thereby influencing the duration of protests at the district level. Data based on unpublished government records are used in negative binomial regression analyses to show that a larger number of effective parties at the district level significantly reduced the number of protest days. I further show that the government's deployment of federal police to select districts served to prolong protests through a spiral of violence between ethnic Oromo protesters and non-Oromo police.

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## 1. Introduction

Protests erupted in Ethiopia on 1 November 2005 after the Ethiopian People's Democratic Revolutionary Front (EPRDF) and opposition parties failed to reach an accord on the composition of a new parliament based on disputed election results. Violence broke out when opposition supporters demonstrating against the ruling party's alleged vote rigging were confronted by state security forces on the streets of Addis Ababa and towns across the country.<sup>1</sup> While attention was focused at the time on protests in the capital, where tens of thousands were detained in a matter of weeks,<sup>2</sup> far less is known or understood about the protests in the region of Oromia, the country's largest and most populous state. Based on unpublished government records, I estimate that Oromia experienced 205 days of anti-government protests in the year following the election. Specifically, from November 2005 through May 2006, over half of every month in the region was given over to protests. The protests in Oromia resulted in more than 15,000 detentions and 80 reported deaths.

The protests in Oromia could be explained through a straightforward narrative of ethnic grievance (Gurr 1970; Horowitz 1985). Over the past fifty years, organizations ranging from self-help associations to liberation movements have given concrete expression to an Oromo ethnic identity based on common origin, language, and territory. In the process, many Oromo have come to perceive themselves as a group that has been politically marginalized and

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<sup>1</sup> The EPRDF and the opposition were at an impasse for nearly six months after the 15 May 2005 elections. The EPRDF claimed that its coalition and affiliate parties had won over two-thirds of the seats in the 547-member parliament. For their part, the major opposition parties challenged results in 299 constituencies. Had the EPRDF's terms been accepted, the combined opposition would have been allocated 173 seats; the opposition had held 12 seats in the outgoing parliament. Negotiations shut down when 131 opposition party leaders and civil society representatives were arrested on charges of treason and violence against the constitutional order. The analyses by Smith (2007) and Lyons (2008) provide essential background to this period.

<sup>2</sup> Personal communication with Frehiywot Samuel Tuloro, chairman of the independent inquiry commission established by the Ethiopian parliament in December 2005. The 11-member commission found that 199 people had been killed and nearly 30,000 detained during the government's efforts to suppress protests in the capital. See his testimony before the US Congressional Committee on International Relations (Frehiywot Samuel Tuloro 2006).

economically exploited since the formation of the modern Ethiopian state in the nineteenth century (Asafa Jalata 1993). And it is in this context that the 2005-2006 protests have been commonly understood. The Oromo Liberation Front (OLF), which has been engaged in an intermittent, low-level insurgency against the EPRDF since the early 1990s, claimed credit for mobilizing— though without much evidence—a “popular uprising” against a government seen as hostile to the interests of the Oromo.<sup>3</sup> The Ethiopian government confirmed this interpretation. Federal Police Commissioner Workineh Gebeyehu, who happens to be an EPRDF member of parliament from Oromia, reported (2005) that the OLF had collaborated with Eritrea to mobilize a proto-rebellion in the region with the aim of overthrowing the government.<sup>4</sup>

While a shared sense of ethnic grievance among the Oromo explains the group’s propensity for anti-government mobilization, it offers an insufficient explanation for the puzzling patterns associated with the protests in terms of their spatial distribution or their varying levels of violence. In examining records collected by an inquiry commission established by the Oromia State Council to investigate the causes of the protests (Komishinii 2007), I find that protests in the region were highly concentrated in 31 of 178 districts, as seen in Figure 1. Also, I find that the violence associated with the protests varied significantly across those districts, as reflected in the extent of property damage, the number of wounded, and the total number of protest days.

—Figure 1—

This paper explains the variation in protest mobilization across Oromia as the product of intra-Oromo political cleavages. Building on an informational cascade model of collective action

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<sup>3</sup> See the multiple statements issued by the Oromo Liberation Front, including “The Uprising of the Oromo People is Directed Against the Repressive Regime But Not Against Any People,” Press Release, Washington, DC, 19 November 2005; “Oromo Uprising Nearing Three Months,” Press Release, Washington, DC, 20 January 2006; “Popular Uprising in Oromia Reaches a Critical Stage,” Press Release, Washington, DC, 15 February 2006.

<sup>4</sup> Workineh Gebeyehu represents Shashemene constituency in East Shoa zone as a member of the Oromo People’s Democratic Organization (OPDO), which is the EPRDF-member party in Oromia.

(Schelling 1978; Kuran 1991; Lohmann 1994), I argue that the degree of heterogeneity in political preferences among ethnic Oromo, ranging from accommodation with the current government to radical reform of the entire political system, influenced the duration of protest at the district level. The 2005 parliamentary elections—the first in Ethiopia’s history to be contested by opposition parties nationwide—provided citizens with common knowledge about the distribution of political preferences within their districts. Knowing this distribution enabled individuals to calculate whether the risk of joining a protest might outweigh the benefits. Employing negative binomial regression analyses, I demonstrate that the cross-district variation in the effective number of parties, as a proxy for revealed political cleavages, significantly influenced the number of protest days. Protests were mobilized wherever individuals could discern that most neighbors shared their preferences and might therefore join them on the streets, lowering the probability of being singled out for punishment by the state’s security forces.

I further show that the EPRDF used information on the distribution of political preferences to determine its policing strategies. In Ethiopia’s ethnic-based federal system, police forces are organized at the federal, state, and local levels, presenting the government with an approximation of in-group versus out-group policing options (Fearon and Laitin 1996). While protests had broken out in opposition as well as EPRDF-won districts, federal police were only deployed to a subset of opposition districts within range of the capital. The negative binomial regression analyses confirm that this deployment prolonged protests: violence appears to spiral only where ethnic Oromo protestors were confronted by federal police, who are recruited nationally and therefore not co-ethnics. When compared to opposition districts with local policing, opposition districts with federal policing experienced, on average, nearly two weeks of additional protest and seven times as many wounded.

I briefly review explanations for protest mobilization in the following section. I then discuss how political cleavages among Oromos might affect the mobilization of protest in the context of the informational cascade model. Section four provides an overview of data sources and methods. I present the empirical analysis in section five. The conclusion discusses how these findings relate to the literatures on political violence, state repression, and institutions.

## **2. Explanations for Protest**

Several plausible theories could explain the patterns seen in the Oromia protests. Recognizing that collective action often fails to occur due to the free rider problem (Olson 1965), scholars have been particularly aware of the need to identify the conditions that induce individuals to assume the cost of participating in dissent in non-democratic settings. I consider here four potential hypotheses based on ethnic grievance, resource mobilization, informational cascades, and regime responses.

Ethnic grievance is conventionally seen as the principal means by which mass political action is realized in multiethnic countries. Perceived as having a mobilization advantage over other interest groups (Rabushka and Shepsle 1972; Bates 1974; Horowitz 1985), ethnic groups can cultivate a collective sense of injustice stemming from political, economic, or social discrimination (Gurr 1970). Such grievances induce individuals to rebel against the government because their own welfare is seen as linked to the group's status, particularly when discrimination by other groups leaves socioeconomic expectations unfulfilled. Recent scholarship yields conflicting results on the grievance hypothesis with some claiming to find strong evidence (Gurr and Moore 1997; Gurr 2000; Saxton 2005) and others no evidence at all (Collier and Hoeffler 2000; Fearon and Laitin 2003). Nevertheless, ethnic grievance is a central

theme in academic treatments of the Oromo in Ethiopia. Standard histories of Ethiopia conventionally acknowledge the unequal treatment faced by this group in the distribution of state resources: “The Oromo keenly felt this discrimination, since many believed that their taxes probably paid for the north’s disproportionate number of clinics, orphanages, and other social services” (Marcus 1994, 165).

H<sub>1</sub>: Indicators of economic deprivation or political marginalization should be associated with longer protest duration.

Claiming that grievance is too common a condition to explain the actual variation in political mobilization, other scholars have focused on the resources available to dissidents as an explanatory variable (McCarthy and Zald 1977; Tilly 1978). The resource mobilization hypothesis suggests that groups overcome the free rider problem by using resources to facilitate communication, offer selective benefits, or impose sanctions. The capacity to control and organize resources is what ultimately determines a group’s mobilization. Empirical support for the idea that collective action increases with greater access to resources finds support in some studies (Khawaja 1994), while others claim that the relationship is not necessarily linear (Jenkins et al. 2003). In Ethiopia’s Oromia region, variation in the access to education and similar resources may explain why some districts have historically been more prone to mass mobilization (Mohamed Hassen 1998; Ezekiel Gebissa 2007b). As occurred in other parts of Africa (Posner 2003), the Oromo in the area of Wellega acquired access to literacy and developed the capacity for autonomous organization through the missionary activities of Lutherans who helped establish the Mekane Yesus Church (Eide 2000).

H<sub>2</sub>: Measures reflecting greater control of resources, whether organizational or material, should be associated with longer protest duration.

Another approach to collective action emphasizes the informational constraints on individual choices. Scholars working in this tradition employ cascade models premised on the notion that individual actions have informational effects on the likelihood of mass mobilization (Schelling 1978; Kuran 1991). This suggests that the lack of information on how others might behave is a chief impediment to political mobilization because an individual's decision to join in collective action will depend on her expectations about what others will do, particularly when political mobilization might provoke a punitive response by the government. In short, an individual's likelihood of joining collective action increases along with her expectations about the number of others who will do the same, which would lower the costs of her participation. Lohmann (1994), for example, grafts a signaling game onto a tipping model to explain how popular demonstrations represented an informational cascade that publicly revealed information about the East German regime.

This insight on the informational constraints faced by would-be protesters raises questions about the heuristic value of ethnicity in the context of Oromia, where 85% of the population belongs to the titular group. As I discuss further in the next section, Oromos upset by the government's post-election position had to consider the most recent piece of information relevant to mass mobilization—the parliamentary election results. These results provided common knowledge on the distribution of political preferences within districts, which overlap single-member parliamentary constituencies. Concerned about being punished for their dissent, would-be protesters might have used the election results to assess the likelihood that their neighbors would join them on the streets to challenge the government. A measure of the effective

number of parties suggests that districts across Oromia varied widely in their degree of political homogeneity, ranging from one to four effective parties.

H<sub>3</sub>: The revelation of fewer effective parties at the district level should be associated with the longer duration of protests.

Research on state repression has underscored the reciprocal relationship between political mobilization and regime responses (Lichbach 1987; Olzak 1989; Davenport 1995, 2007).

Governments have an incentive to suppress protests as quickly as possible, lest they become more threatening forms of dissent. But greater resistance can also be provoked when governments apply repression indiscriminately. Scholars claim that escalating levels of repression can lead to a backlash by stoking a sense of outrage that foments further anti-government mobilization (Mason and Krane 1989; Francisco 1995, 1996), though others find that the effect of repression on dissent is nonlinear, leading either to an increase or decrease in violence (Rasler 1996; Moore 1998). Survey data analyzed by Bratton and Masunungure (2006) suggests that repression in Zimbabwe produced greater resistance to Mugabe's regime because police on the ground were unable to distinguish opposition voters from others.

Much of this repression literature, however, has remained silent on how the ethnic nature of political mobilization might affect the outcomes produced by a government's policing strategies. Fearon and Laitin (1996) suggest that in-group policing, in which ethnic groups punish their own, is less likely to produce widespread violence because co-ethnics can use better information to mete out punishment in a targeted manner. A rapid escalation in violence occurs under out-group policing because punishment occurs in an indiscriminate manner due to the lack of information across ethnic groups. In Ethiopia, the federal system offers the government policing options that approximate this in-group versus out-group distinction. Each of Ethiopia's



states is constitutionally empowered to organize police forces at the state and district levels, which usually means that the titular group of that state will constitute such forces. At the federal level, the government organizes a federal police force, which is recruited nationally, and operates somewhat like France's Gendarmerie Nationale.

H<sub>4</sub>: Out-group policing should be associated with an increase in the duration of protests.

### **3. The Revelation of Political Cleavages in Oromia**

Anti-government mobilization among the Oromo seems overdetermined by most historical accounts. Whether the Oromo are seen as being incorporated through an organic process of social accommodation (Levine 1974) or colonized by an imperialist state (Holcomb and Ibssa 1990; Asafa Jalata 1993), there has been a constant tension between whatever regime has been in power in Addis Ababa and the Oromo who literally surround the capital.<sup>5</sup> Controlling the Oromo has been a preoccupation of Ethiopian rulers since the nineteenth century because the people and their lands form the country's keystone, as the map in Figure 1 illustrates. The region remains the most important source of cash crops, comprising over one-third of coffee- and over one-half of khat-growing districts. The Oromo are also the country's single largest ethnic group, having a population larger than neighboring Kenya and accounting for 34.5% of Ethiopia's total population (Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia 2007).

But the historically-rooted grievances of the Oromo are insufficient to account for the patterns seen in the 2005-2006 protests. Instead, in line with the informational cascade

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<sup>5</sup> The poorly understood history of the Oromo has generated an ongoing controversy over how they should be understood in Ethiopian historiography (Asafa Jalata 1996; Clapham 2002; Ezekiel Gebissa 2007a). It was not until the 1970s that Oromo gradually replaced Galla, a derogatory term, as the proper appellation for this group. Leenco Lata (1998, 130) notes that the OLF was required to educate their would-be allies as a result of the confusion created by the two names: "As late as 1990, an EPLF trainer reportedly asked his OLF trainees, 'what are the Gallas doing while the Oromos are fighting the Derg?'"

hypothesis outlined above, I argue that Oromos were unlikely to sustain anti-government protests in districts where multiple political cleavages were revealed through the 2005 elections. Even in districts won by the opposition, any would-be protester concerned by the cost of challenging the government—in practice this means being jailed, beaten, wounded, or possibly killed—had to question whether Oromos who voted for other opposition parties would be willing to join her. The would-be protester living in a politically heterogeneous district could speculate that supporters other parties might have different thresholds of tolerance for the government’s post-election behavior. And she would probably conclude that the cost of protest was too high. By contrast, the would-be protester in a politically homogeneous opposition district could reason that other voters would not only be outraged by the EPRDF’s post-election behavior, but would also be likely to share her inclination to take to the streets, thereby reducing the individual cost of protest. To justify this logic in the context of Oromia, I provide below a short overview of the informational constraints faced by Oromos, the political cleavages that emerged among them, and their expectations of repression in response to protest.

### *Informational Constraints*

Until the 2005 elections, it would have been difficult for most Oromo to know the distribution of political preferences within their districts. Historically, modern Ethiopian governments actively sought to prevent the development of autonomous Oromo organizations, which partly accounts for the late emergence of Oromo nationalism (Keller 1995; Mohamed Hassen 1998).<sup>6</sup> In no part of Ethiopia had the local distribution of political preferences been publicly revealed in a multiparty contest: Haile Selassie (1930-1974) banned political parties; Mengistu Haile Mariam instituted a single-party regime (1977-1991); and the current ruling

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<sup>6</sup> The public use of Afaan Oromo was banned in education, liturgy, and media between 1942 and 1974.

party, which has been in power since 1991, did not encounter real opposition in the 1995 or 2000 parliamentary elections. Most opposition parties boycotted the 1995 parliamentary elections and then only grudgingly competed in fewer than half of the country's districts in the 2000 parliamentary elections to preserve their legal registration.<sup>7</sup> By 2005, 11 opposition parties were sharing 18 of 547 parliamentary seats; 12 others were held by independents who voted with the opposition.<sup>8</sup>

Besides lacking the opportunity to reveal political preferences, Ethiopian voters have lacked an information infrastructure that would enable them to discern the true distribution of local preferences. The media has been tightly controlled by every regime. Today, the country has one state-owned national television network, one state-owned radio network, and a separate radio network operated by the ruling party. Nearly all newspapers are capital-based and run a small circulation that is printed on government-owned presses.

These constraints were not relaxed until the run-up to the 2005 elections, which were remarkable in the Ethiopian context precisely for the amount of information conveyed in the process. Political parties were allowed to freely hold rallies in most parts of the country. Party debates on issues like poverty alleviation, education policy, and rural development were broadcast on television and radio. Candidate lists, including party emblems, were posted outside district and sub-district offices before the election, while results were similarly posted after the election. By November 2005, most voters in Oromia could easily know the distribution of political cleavages in their districts.

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<sup>7</sup> Opposition parties disapproved of the conditions for the 2000 elections, but claimed to have been obliged to participate because Article 38 of "Political Parties Registration Proclamation No. 46/1993" stipulates that a registered party can lose its legal status if it fails to participate in two national or regional elections.

<sup>8</sup> In the parliamentary delegation from Oromia, independent candidates won three seats and the Oromo National Congress (ONC) and the Oromo Liberation Islamic Front (OLIF) each won one seat.

## *Political Cleavages*

Oromo politicians of all stripes invoke a common discourse regarding their historic exploitation under the *neftenya* (rifleman) who forced their ethnic group to become a *gebbar* (tribute payer) during the formation of the modern Ethiopian state. Yet, while Haile Selassie tried to forcibly assimilate the Oromo (Gilkes 2007) and Mengistu sought to control them by sheer force (Keller 1988; Henze 2004), the EPRDF has arrived at a different political arrangement with the Oromo since 1991. The system of ethnic federalism implemented by the EPRDF offers the possibility of self-rule—in a restricted sense—by enabling ethnic Oromo to share in resources at the national level and to staff the entire administrative apparatus at the regional level, including conducting government business and education in Afaan Oromo.

To be sure, the EPRDF signaled early on that it would not tolerate competition for power. The Oromo Liberation Front (OLF), which had initially joined the Transitional Government of Ethiopia, withdrew when it became apparent that the EPRDF sought to sideline them with the establishment of the Oromo People's Democratic Organization (OPDO) as a competitor in the region (Pausewang et al. 2002). Moreover, the EPRDF's commitment to Oromo self-rule has fluctuated over time. Administrative control of Addis Ababa, for example, has become a metaphor for the political status of the Oromo within Ethiopia. As a concession to the OLF in 1992, the EPRDF agreed to recognize Addis Ababa as the regional capital of Oromia (Getahun Benti 2007). However, in 2004 the EPRDF announced plans to transfer the regional capital from Addis Ababa to Adama (Nazareth).<sup>9</sup> In 2006—after the post-election violence—the EPRDF again reversed its decision, choosing to relocate the regional capital back to Addis Ababa.

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<sup>9</sup> The Mecha Tulema Self-Help Association provides another such bellwether. Founded in 1963 to promote Oromo culture and language, this organization was banned in 1967 because it was seen as a threat for encouraging Oromo nationalism. The ban was lifted by the EPRDF in 1991. However, the ban was re-imposed in 2004 after the EPRDF accused the association of encouraging Oromo students to protest the capital move.

Oromo elites have fragmented under these political conditions, presenting voters in Oromia with a range of political options.<sup>10</sup> The OLF insists on outright autonomy at one extreme by continuing to pursue its low-level insurgency against the EPRDF, while the OPDO has become a vehicle for EPRDF patronage at the other extreme.<sup>11</sup> Independent opposition parties such as the Oromo National Congress (ONC) and the Oromo Federalist Democratic Movement (OFDM) have positioned themselves on a shaky middle ground, though through different strategies.<sup>12</sup>

The ONC, which has become the largest Oromo opposition party since its establishment in 1996, has promoted a platform demanding greater regional autonomy within the existing federal system. ONC leader Merera Gudina, who was jailed as a political prisoner under Mengistu's regime, has staked out political positions that have put him at odds with Oromo elites who accuse him of sacrificing Oromo interests for political convenience.<sup>13</sup> Controversially among Oromos, ONC leader Merera Gudina vocally rejects independence for Oromia and has sought to build alliances with non-Oromo opposition parties. He led one of the two largest opposition coalitions in the 2005 elections, the United Ethiopian Democratic Forces (UEDF), which won 41 seats in Oromia.

OFDM leader Bulcha Demeksa has sought to offer an alternative to Merera's ONC. A former vice minister of finance under Haile Selassie and founder of Awash International Bank, he claimed before the 2005 elections that other Oromo parties, including the ONC, were either co-opted or ineffectual. OFDM's platform called for the wholesale reform of the existing

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<sup>10</sup> The former US ambassador to Ethiopia, David Shinn, describes some of these persistent differences among Oromo activists over objectives and tactics in his notes (2004) on a conference held at Bergen, Norway, in September 2004.

<sup>11</sup> It might be claimed that the unusually large number of share of Oromo from Arsi in the leadership of the OPDO reflects the regime's efforts to co-opt the Muslim plurality in the region.

<sup>12</sup> The Oromo National Congress (ONC) has since been renamed the Oromo People's Congress (OPC).

<sup>13</sup> Personal communication.

political system, including a directly elected president rather than a parliamentary system, the recognition of Afaan Oromo as a national language, and greater regional autonomy. OFDM won 11 seats in Oromia in 2005.

The Coalition for Unity and Democracy (CUD), though not an ethnic Oromo party, did win 16 seats in Oromia during the 2005 elections, though mainly in multiethnic urban districts. The CUD campaigned on a platform stressing individual rights and national unity. CUD leaders criticized the existing ethnic federal system, announcing they would seek to amend the constitution to remove the secession clause, redraw regional boundaries, and privatize rural land. While these proposals are widely perceived by many Oromo to be antithetical to their interests, the size of CUD's electoral sweep in the 23 districts of Addis Ababa, which is encircled by Oromia, suggests that a considerable proportion of Oromos in the capital voted for the party.

### *Repression Expectations*

By November 2005, it was obvious to would-be protesters in Oromia that their political mobilization would be met with force by the Ethiopian government. On the evening of the 15 May 2005 elections, Prime Minister Meles Zenawi went on state television to announce a ban on mass gatherings and demonstrations in the capital for one month. In subsequent days the EPRDF announced that it had won enough seats to form a new government and the opposition countered with its own claims of victory and allegations of electoral malfeasance. The conflict between the EPRDF and the opposition then escalated when security forces opened fire on opposition supporters protesting in the streets of Addis Ababa on 1 June 2005. Within a month of the elections, the government placed opposition politicians under house arrest, an ONC parliamentarian-elect was killed in his Oromia district, thousands of suspected opposition

supporters were detained, and over 30 protesters were killed and at least one hundred more wounded. Rumor of those events must have spread to the surrounding region of Oromia over the following weeks and months, enabling would-be protesters to update their expectations. For its part, the Ethiopian government surely updated. The Federal Police Commissioner's report to parliament acknowledges that the government interpreted the June violence as a sign of things to come, leading it to recruit an additional 5,500 riot police officers and purchasing new anti-riot equipment worth 8 million birr or about \$920,000 before the second round of violence in November 2005 (Workineh Gebeyehu 2005).

#### **4. Data and Method**

Information on the Oromia protests is limited. Because the standard sources for this kind of research are unavailable—the print media in Ethiopia is limited and would not offer consistent coverage of non-urban areas—it becomes difficult to adjudicate between conflicting claims about what exactly occurred in the region in 2005-2006. At the end of November 2005, for instance, the Ethiopian government announced that the protests had been effectively contained by claiming, “the attempts of the OLF are nipped in the bud.”<sup>14</sup> But two months later, in February 2006, Prime Minister Meles Zenawi was compelled to respond to the criticism of international human rights organizations by reaffirming on the floor of parliament that the protests had been contained: “I have been given detailed information regarding the situation but the president of Oromia himself has assured me that the situation has been put under control and that no federal intervention was needed.”<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> “Gov’t Says Oromiya Unrest Quelled,” UN Integrated Regional Information Networks, 21 November 2005.

<sup>15</sup> Human Rights Watch had criticized the Ethiopian government for continuing to suppress dissent in Oromia months after the protests had begun. See Human Rights Watch, “Ethiopia: Hidden Crackdown in Rural Areas,” News Release, New York, 11 January, 2006. Human Rights Watch had released another earlier report, “Suppressing

In these circumstances, the best source of data comes from an inquiry commission established by the Oromia State Council, which is the elected regional parliament.<sup>16</sup> Empowered by proclamation no. 107/1998 on 24 March 2006, the 13-member commission was tasked with investigating the causes of the protests and assessing potential human rights violations (Komishinii 2007).<sup>17</sup> The commission issued a report that offers a narrative of events in select locations, including estimates of the number of protesters involved, e.g., 1,000 in Tikur Inchini, 2,000 in Kiltu Kara, and 3,000 in Guduru. The report, perhaps not surprisingly, claims that the “the underlying cause for the violence, including loss of life, property damage, and physical injuries, was the opposition,” whose members allegedly carried OLF flags and chanted, “Let us destroy *Woyane*.”<sup>18</sup> However, the commission also finds that “in the name of protecting the constitution and the rule of law, the human rights of our people were violated,” noting that federal police were more likely to commit such abuses, ostensibly because they had panicked when overwhelmed by the sheer number of protesters.

Setting aside the analysis in the inquiry commission’s report, I rely on the records collected by the commission’s investigators, who visited nearly all of the districts in which

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Dissent: Human Rights Abuses and Political Repression in Ethiopia's Oromia Region 17 (7), New York, 2005. The Ethiopian government subsequently released its own press statement to refute Amnesty International’s allegations that thousands had been detained in Oromia. See “Ethiopia Denies Amnesty Report of Mass Oromo Detentions,” Agence France Presse, 1 February 2006; “Meles in Row with the Opposition over Situation in Oromia,” *The Reporter* (Addis Ababa), 4 February 2006.

<sup>16</sup> International pressure played a role in the formation of the inquiry commission. Opposition MPs in the Ethiopian parliament had attempted in December 2005 to table a discussion of the ongoing unrest in Oromia, but the ruling party’s speaker in the House blocked the move. The Oromia State Council only moved to form an inquiry commission after a January 2006 visit to Ethiopia by Britain’s international development secretary, Hillary Benn, who specifically called for an investigation into human rights violations in Oromia. Presumably such action was required for the British government to resume disbursing \$88 million in direct budget support that had been withdrawn after the protests began in November 2005. See “Britain Withholds Direct Budget Support,” UN Integrated Regional Information Networks, 19 January 2006; “Meles Accepts UK’s Proposal for Investigation into ‘Human Rights Violations’ in Oromia,” *The Reporter* (Addis Ababa), 21 January 2006.

<sup>17</sup> The commission was intended to be a neutral body. This was probably supposed to be signaled by the chairman’s title of *Qesiis*, which indicates that he is a priest in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church.

<sup>18</sup> *Woyane* is a colloquial appellation for members of the Tigray People’s Liberation Front (TPLF), and sometimes Tigrayans more generally. Prime Minister Meles Zenawi is from Tigray. The name comes from the revolt launched in that region against Haile Selassie in 1943.



protests erupted and interviewed some 1,400 individuals, including district administrators, opposition party members, and civilians. I worked with two native speakers of Afaan Oromo to translate the information.<sup>19</sup> I coded the data by type of protest-related act (property damage, detained, wounded, and killed) and the actor responsible for carrying out the act (federal police, state police, local police, army, civilian, and unknown).<sup>20</sup> This yielded 970 individual-level observations for which both pieces of information are identified along with their corresponding districts, which are known as *woreda* in Amharic and *aanaa* in Afaan Oromo. This enabled me to identify which police forces—local, state, or federal—patrolled the districts where protests occurred.

The identification of districts where federal police operated suggests that their deployment was not based on the intensity of protest. Rather, the selection of districts was based on political considerations. Using the inquiry commission records, I find that federal police were sent only to a subset of districts where Oromo opposition parties won parliamentary races. And I further find that federal police were deployed in close proximity to Addis Ababa: districts with federal policing were, on average, 151.5 kilometers from the capital, while districts with only local policing were, on average, 297.3 kilometers away.<sup>21</sup> Taken together, these selection criteria suggest that the ERPDF was concerned with ensuring its control of the capital (Herbst 2000; Englebert and Hummel 2005) as well as those districts which it had lost in the election, possibly fearing that they could not trust local officials to contain protests that might reach Addis Ababa.

Tables 1 and 2 provide a summary of general patterns in the data. Table 1 shows that most property damage was committed by civilian protesters, as would be expected. These

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<sup>19</sup> I worked with one to do the initial set of translations, which I then cross-checked with the second.

<sup>20</sup> Uniforms usually identify the distinct police forces, e.g., federal police wear blue camouflage uniforms.

<sup>21</sup> A simple difference-of-means test confirms that districts with federal policing are significantly closer to Addis Ababa (p-value=0.0013).

protesters were focused in their actions: 76% of the records for property damage show that they targeted government-related buildings such as district offices, sub-district offices, schools, and agriculture extension offices. Table 1 further reveals that the work of detaining protesters was shared almost equally among the federal, state, and local police forces. However, the federal police are far more likely than their state and local counterparts to wound civilians.<sup>22</sup> And civilians are nearly as likely as the federal police to inflict wounds. This is because the two types of actors are clashing in districts with federal policing.

—Tables 1-2—

Table 2 indicates that the distinction between which party won a district is less important to the level of protest-related violence than the type of policing. Opposition districts with federal policing have seven times the rate of wounded as opposition districts with local policing despite having half the rate of property damage. These two facts may be related: the presence of federal police in a district may have encouraged protesters to shift their attention from one symbol of state power to another, that is, from government buildings to government representatives. The patterns in Figure 2 suggest that federal police and civilians were responding to one other, as the number of wounded produced by each moved in tandem with the other. Districts with federal policing appear to be more violent partly because, on average, their protests last much longer: 11 days in EPRDF-won and 15 days in opposition-won districts with local policing versus 28 days in opposition-won districts with federal policing. These patterns are evident in Figures 3 through 5, which show that protest-related acts in opposition districts with federal policing continued well after having ended in opposition districts with local policing.

—Figures 3-5—

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<sup>22</sup> Wounded is a category for injury by gunshot, explosion, knifing, stoning, or beating.

Using the data from the inquiry commission, I test the relationship between protest duration and the hypotheses discussed in previous sections by estimating a negative binomial regression model for event counts.<sup>23</sup> The units of analysis are 160 districts, which overlap with single-member parliamentary districts in most cases.<sup>24</sup> Because districts in which protests break out appear to be geographically concentrated, I cluster the standard errors at the level of the zone as a way of compensating for possible spatial autocorrelation among the observations.<sup>25</sup> The dependent variable is a count of the number of days for which protest-related acts were recorded in each district. The estimated number of protest days is based on the inquiry commission's individual-level data (Komishinii 2007). The independent variables are constructed using election results from the National Electoral Board of Ethiopia and socioeconomic information from the Central Statistical Authority (Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia 1998, 2007). Table 3 provides descriptive statistics, and Table 4 shows a correlation matrix.

The principal independent variable of interest is the effective number of parties, which I employ as a proxy for revealed intra-Oromo political cleavages. I hypothesize that a larger number of effective parties will have a dampening effect on protest days, since individuals will surmise that they face higher costs for taking to the streets because their neighbors are unlikely to join them. I use the 2005 vote shares for all political parties and independent candidates at the district level to calculate the effective number of parties according to Laakso and Taagepera's (1979) measure. The sample mean is 1.749 parties.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> The distribution of protest days shows signs of overdispersion, so I employ a negative binomial model rather than a Poisson regression model.

<sup>24</sup> These districts were delineated under the Mengistu regime and they have been retained intact by the EPRDF.

<sup>25</sup> The zone is the level of administration between the state and district levels. This decision makes intuitive sense because districts are largely grouped into zones that have historic relevance, e.g., East Wellega, West Wellega, Arsi, Bale, etc.

<sup>26</sup> I use the original results produced through the 15 May 2005 elections. I do not use results from re-run elections held entirely or partially in 31 districts on 21 August 2005.

An Oromo opposition victory for a parliamentary seat is coded dichotomously as a secondary independent variable in line with the argument advanced in this paper. Would-be protesters should interpret an opposition win as a strong signal that a sufficient number of others are likely to join them in challenging the government at the district level. This variable is coded as 1 if a candidate of the Oromo National Congress (ONC) or the Oromo Federalist Democratic Movement (OFDM) won the parliamentary seat in the 2005 elections. A win by a candidate of the Coalition for Unity and Democracy (CUD) is not similarly coded because it was not considered a vehicle for Oromo interests even when fielding ethnic Oromo as candidates (Posner 2007). ONC candidates won 41 seats across Oromia; OFDM candidates won 11 seats.<sup>27</sup> Oromo opposition parties taken together won 29% of districts in the sample.

Ethnic fractionalization at the district level was constructed with data on ethnic identities from the 1994 national census. All categories of self-identification were used in calculating the scores. If part of what is fueling protest is a sense of ethnic grievance, then lower fractionalization scores should be associated with additional days of protest. Ethnic homogeneity may be one of the heuristics that would-be protesters consider when deciding whether a sufficient number of others will join the protest, thereby reducing the cost of participation. The sample mean for ethnic fractionalization is 0.234.

Federal police intervention is a coded dichotomously for districts where this force was deployed once protests began. This coding is based on the individual-level data collected through the inquiry commission's investigation: districts are coded as 1 wherever individuals claimed that they had been detained by federal police (Komishinii 2007). Protests in such districts are thought to be prolonged because federal policing, when contrasted with local policing, leads to

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<sup>27</sup> Ethiopia's former president, Negasso Gidada, is counted here as a member of OFDM although he won his seat as an independent due to rules barring former executives from running on party candidates; otherwise, it is quite likely that he would have run on the OFDM ticket.

greater indiscriminate punishment by forces that are attempting to control individuals who are not their co-ethnics (Fearon and Laitin 1996). This might induce resistance among the local population, thereby setting in motion a spiral of violence. Federal police intervened in 3.8% of the sample.

The percentage of population living below the poverty line is used to test the relative deprivation hypothesis (Gurr 1970). Would-be protesters might be more likely to mobilize against the government in areas with higher levels of poverty because their lived reality does not accord with their socioeconomic expectations. Alternatively, the resource mobilization hypothesis would suggest that individuals require material and organizational resources to overcome the problems of collective action (McCarthy and Zald 1977): higher levels of poverty should be associated with a smaller number of protest days. The sample mean is 39.9%.

The percentage of the district population living in urban areas is used as another test of the resource mobilization hypothesis. Individuals living in cities and towns are more likely to have access to the resources needed to organize and sustain collective action. And because literacy is so highly correlated with urbanization, it is used here as an alternative measure for the resource mobilization hypothesis. The number of protest days should therefore be higher in districts with larger urban populations or higher rates of literacy. However, a rival relative deprivation hypothesis could also be considered in light of the history of urbanization in Oromia. Most of the urban areas in the region were originally garrison towns used by the Ethiopian state to impose its control in conquered territories, so they might become flash points for individuals seeking to challenge the government. The sample means are 13.2% for urbanization and 28% for literacy.

The distance to the capital is added as a control. The distance in kilometers was calculated from the each district seat to Addis Ababa, the national capital. Districts near Addis Ababa are likely to have better access to information, resources, and transport, all of which might facilitate the mobilization of protest.

## **5. Empirical Analysis**

Table 5 reports the results from the negative binomial regression analysis of protest days. The trend across the models shows that intra-Oromo political cleavages, as captured in the effective number of parties, strongly influenced protest mobilization in 2005-2006. The estimated coefficients on the effective number of parties have their expected negative sign and are significantly different from zero in every model specification. They are robust to the inclusion of any other independent variable. Protests lasted longer in politically homogeneous districts, while being less likely to be sustained in districts with multiple political tendencies. Based on estimates from Model 6 in Table 5, moving from the mean of 1.75 parties to 1.26 parties at the 25th percentile is associated with a prolongation of protest from 1.15 to 3.96 days in opposition-won districts, holding other variables at mean values and dichotomous variables at zero.

An Oromo opposition party victory provided a clear signal to would-be protesters. The estimated coefficients on this dichotomous variable are consistently positive and statistically significant. Protests were far more likely to persist in districts won by a candidate from one of the principal Oromo parties, either ONC or OFDM. The estimated coefficient in Model 6 suggests that, when compared to an ERPFD-won district, an opposition-won district was effectively guaranteed one day of protest, holding all other variables at mean values and

dichotomous variables at zero. Interestingly, no protests were mobilized where the “wrong” party, namely, the CUD, won in Oromia (Posner 2007) even though these districts were often nearest the capital. While protests in Addis Ababa were associated with supporters of the CUD, no protests were recorded in any of the 16 districts won by CUD candidates in Oromia, which suggests that these protests had a distinct foundation.

Ethnic fractionalization constrained the possibility of protest across Oromia’s districts. As shown in Table 5, the estimated coefficients are negative, as expected, and consistently significant, though the magnitude of the estimated effect declines with the inclusion of other controls. The estimated coefficient from Model 6 suggests that a high degree of ethnic homogeneity was associated with protest mobilization. The mean ethnic fractionalization score in protest districts is 0.12. In fact, increasing homogeneity from the mean of 0.23 to 0.11 at the 25th percentile would raise the expected number of protest days from 1.15 to 3.88, holding other variables at mean values and dichotomous variables at zero.

While the intrinsic political and demographic characteristics of districts affect their propensity for anti-government protest, the EPRDF’s policing strategies also played a role in influencing the duration of such mobilization. Indeed, the intervention of federal police may be the single most important factor in determining how long protests lasted in any single district. The coefficient on this dichotomous variable in Model 6 indicates that simply switching from local to federal policing in an opposition-won district was associated with an additional week of protest, that is, from an estimated 1.15 days of protest under local policing versus an estimated 8.94 days under federal policing, holding other variables at their mean values.

The potential spiral of violence created by federal policing becomes apparent when examining how dramatically protest duration increases under political and ethnic homogeneity.

In opposition-won districts with federal policing, the estimated number of protest days jumps to 35.18 when the effective number of parties moves from the mean of 1.75 to 1.26 at the 25th percentile. Similarly, the number of estimated protest days rises to 29.65 days when ethnic fractionalization decreases from the mean to the 25th percentile.

None of the independent variables used to test the resource mobilization or relative deprivation hypotheses proved to be statistically significant in a fully specified model. The poverty, urbanization, and literacy variables appear to have no impact on the duration of protest. While districts across Oromia vary in the degree to which they have been politically or economically marginalized over time, this seems to have played little, if any, role in fomenting the anti-government protests of 2005-2006.

## **6. Conclusion**

While ethnic grievance may play a role in motivating anti-government protests in many countries, it is often an insufficient explanation for the variation in protest duration or violence seen within countries. This paper shows that a complete explanation requires an account of intra-ethnic political cleavages and government policing strategies. In Ethiopia, Oromos may have a common perception regarding the problems faced by their ethnic group vis-à-vis the state, but the partisan preferences expressed in the 2005 elections suggests that they do not necessarily agree on the solutions. This diversity of political views among Oromos critically shaped anti-government mobilization: would-be protesters understood that their actions would be met with repression and were accordingly concerned about how many others would join them on the streets to challenge the government. Protests were more likely to be sustained in politically homogeneous districts, while ending more quickly in politically heterogeneous districts.



Moreover, the Ethiopian government's own choices over policing strategies significantly influenced protest duration. Protests were more likely to escalate wherever federal police were deployed, possibly because they exacted punishment indiscriminately among protestors who were not their co-ethnics.

The findings from this paper contribute to the literatures on political violence and state repression. Much of this scholarship relies on cross-national data with country-years as the units of analysis. Ethiopia in 2005 (and less obviously in 2006) would be coded as a 1 or something similar on a measure of political violence in most datasets. However, this focus on national level statistics would have almost certainly obscured the actual conditions shaping political mobilization across time and space within the country. But as the region investigated here demonstrates, neither protest behavior nor government responses are uniformly distributed in any single country-year. Only through disaggregation could these patterns have been established.

The protest patterns in Oromia also help to illuminate two mechanisms by which institutions might dampen the outbreak of ethnic conflict in multiethnic countries (Davenport 1999; Saideman et al. 2002; Chandra 2004; Brancati 2006). First, even in countries where democracy has yet to be consolidated, multiparty elections may help to encourage stability, but not because they provide greater freedom or equality. Elections can reveal the local distribution of political preferences, thereby making it more difficult for political entrepreneurs to convince others to mobilize when repression is expected to be the government's likely response. Second, federal or decentralized policing may help to contain the degree of violence associated with protests because local police will have better information and therefore be less likely to carry out repression indiscriminately, minimizing the likelihood of a backlash from the local population.

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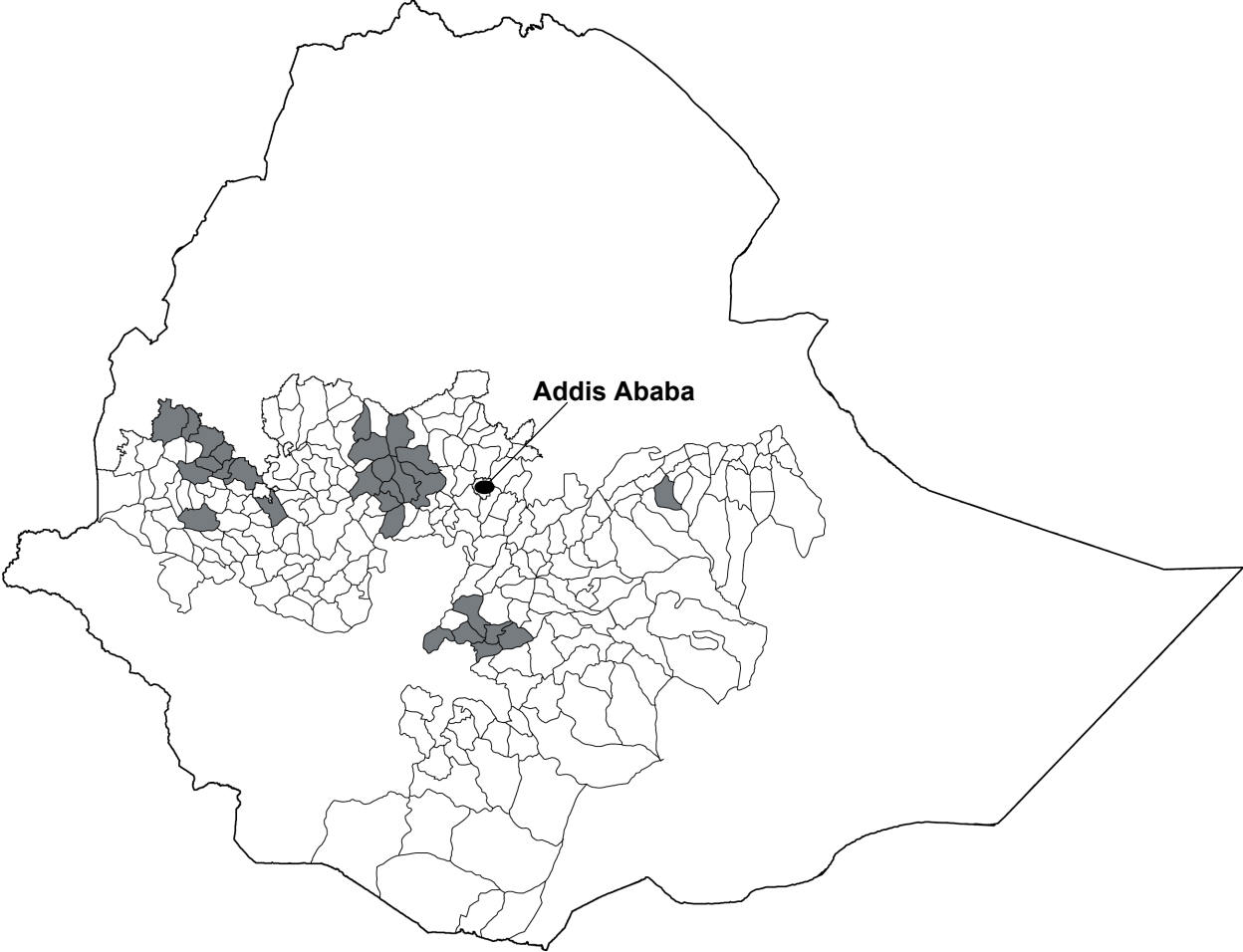
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<sup>28</sup> I follow the practice of listing Ethiopian names by the first name; the second name is not a family name.

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**Figure 1. Distribution of Protests across Districts of Oromia State in Ethiopia**



**Table 1. Relative Frequency of Protest Acts by Responsible Actor**

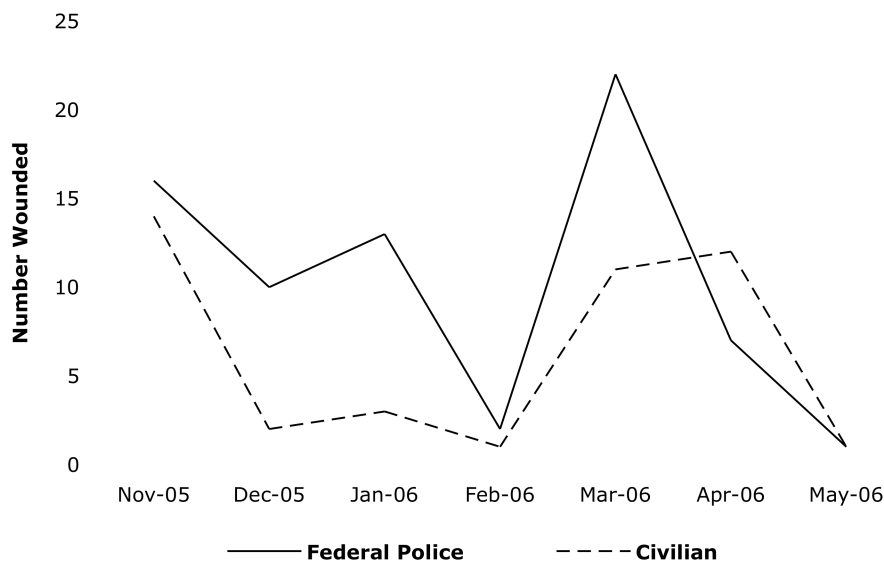
|          | Federal | State | Local | Army  | Civilian | Unknown |
|----------|---------|-------|-------|-------|----------|---------|
| Property | 4.33    | 0.00  | 0.25  | 1.02  | 59.80    | 34.61   |
| Detained | 27.73   | 27.27 | 38.64 | 6.36  | 0.00     | 0.00    |
| Wounded  | 28.88   | 4.33  | 9.75  | 6.14  | 23.83    | 27.08   |
| Killed   | 8.24    | 4.71  | 4.71  | 12.94 | 11.77    | 57.65   |

Note: Figures in cells are row percentages.

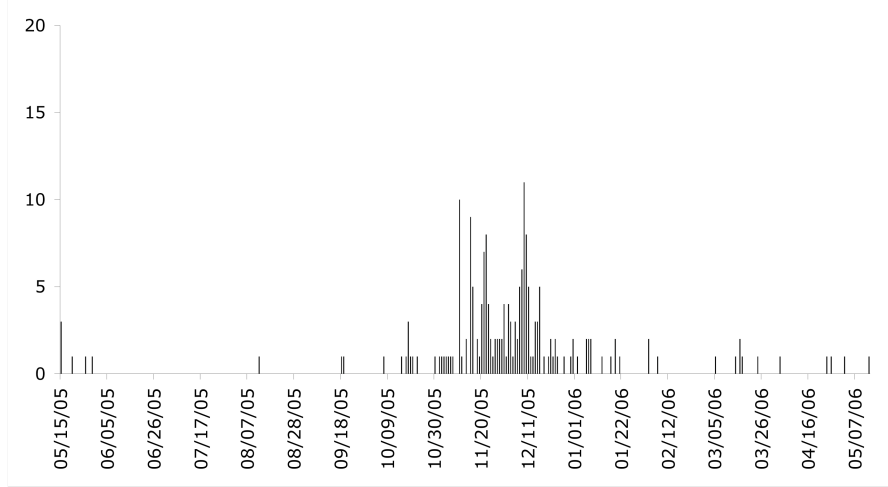
**Table 2. Mean Protest Acts (Per 10,000 Residents) by Winning Party and Police Strategy**

|                 | Ruling Party   | Oromo Opposition | Oromo Opposition |
|-----------------|----------------|------------------|------------------|
|                 | Local Policing | Local Policing   | Federal Policing |
| Property        | 2.05           | 1.64             | 0.82             |
| Detained        | 0.33           | 0.62             | 0.67             |
| Wounded         | 0.17           | 0.17             | 1.26             |
| Killed          | 0.16           | 0.25             | 0.31             |
| Total Districts | 9              | 8                | 9                |

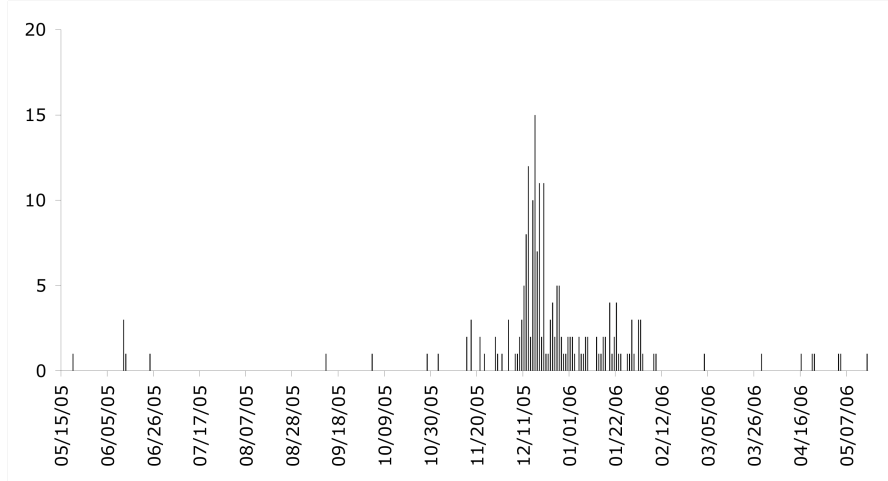
**Figure 2. Number of Wounded by Responsible Actor in Districts with Federal Policing**



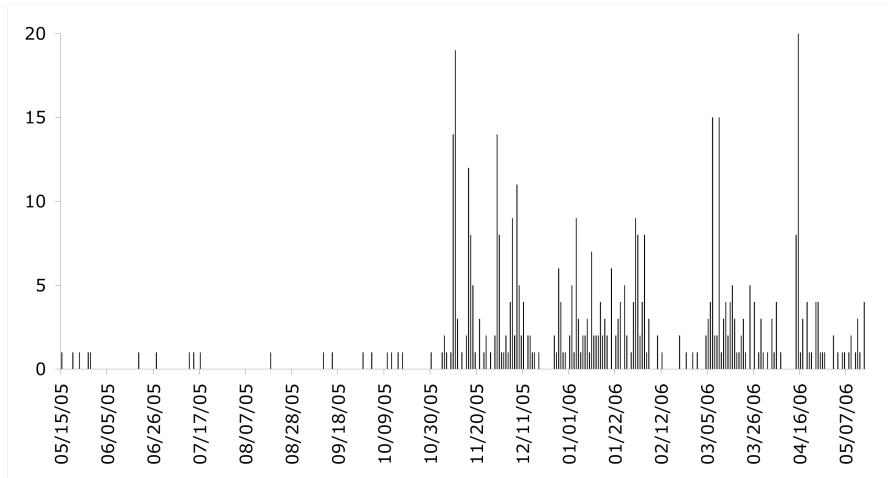
**Figure 3. Total Protest Events in 9 Ruling Party Districts with Local Policing**



**Figure 4. Total Protest Events in 8 Oromo Opposition Districts with Local Policing**



**Figure 5. Total Protest Events in 9 Oromo Opposition Districts with Federal Policing**



**Table 3. Descriptive Statistics**

|                              | Mean  | SD    | Min   | Max   | Obs |
|------------------------------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-----|
| Effective number of parties  | 1.749 | 0.609 | 1     | 4.474 | 160 |
| Oromo opposition party       | 0.288 |       | 0     | 1     | 160 |
| Ethnic fractionalization     | 0.234 | 0.153 | 0.011 | 0.681 | 160 |
| Federal police               | 0.038 |       | 0     | 1     | 160 |
| Below poverty line (%)       | 0.399 | 0.071 | 0.182 | 0.667 | 160 |
| Urban (%)                    | 0.132 | 0.135 | 0.014 | 1     | 160 |
| Literacy (%)                 | 0.280 | 0.077 | 0.182 | 0.667 | 160 |
| Distance to capital (log km) | 5.262 | 0.703 | 2.565 | 6.410 | 160 |

**Table 4. Correlation Matrix**

|                          | Parties | Ethnic | Poverty | Urban | Literacy | Distance |
|--------------------------|---------|--------|---------|-------|----------|----------|
| Effective parties        | 1.00    |        |         |       |          |          |
| Ethnic fractionalization | 0.25    | 1.00   |         |       |          |          |
| Below poverty line       | 0.04    | 0.31   | 1.00    |       |          |          |
| Urban                    | 0.35    | 0.48   | 0.01    | 1.00  |          |          |
| Literacy                 | 0.32    | 0.40   | 0.12    | 0.91  | 1.00     |          |
| Distance to capital      | -0.31   | -0.34  | 0.19    | -0.33 | -0.25    | 1.00     |



**Table 5. Negative Binomial Analysis of Protest Days**

|                                | 1                     | 2                    | 3                     | 4                     | 5                     | 6                    |
|--------------------------------|-----------------------|----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|----------------------|
| Effective number parties       | -2.031***<br>(0.501)  |                      |                       | -2.786***<br>(0.692)  | -2.560***<br>(0.674)  | -2.544***<br>(0.649) |
| Oromo opposition party victory |                       | 2.940***<br>(0.711)  |                       | 3.088***<br>(0.952)   | 2.877***<br>(0.869)   | 2.250***<br>(0.686)  |
| Ethnic fractionalization       |                       |                      | -13.451***<br>(2.919) | -11.821***<br>(3.411) | -10.963***<br>(2.769) | -9.772***<br>(2.653) |
| Federal police                 |                       |                      |                       |                       |                       | 2.015**<br>(0.992)   |
| Below poverty line (%)         | -16.910***<br>(5.088) | -12.510**<br>(5.953) | -0.562<br>(8.203)     | 2.888<br>(10.500)     | 0.667<br>(9.151)      |                      |
| Urban (%)                      | -0.354<br>(3.547)     | -2.278<br>(2.968)    | 2.562<br>(3.808)      | 3.828<br>(3.740)      |                       |                      |
| Literacy (%)                   |                       |                      |                       |                       | 4.781<br>(4.992)      |                      |
| Distance to capital (log km)   | 0.389<br>(0.510)      | 2.184***<br>(0.482)  | -0.321<br>(1.047)     | -0.066<br>(0.669)     | -0.009<br>(0.640)     |                      |
| Constant                       | 8.299***<br>(2.097)   | -7.525***<br>(2.863) | 4.230<br>(4.170)      | 3.853<br>(3.058)      | 3.137<br>(2.970)      | 4.402***<br>(1.085)  |
| N                              | 160                   | 160                  | 160                   | 160                   | 160                   | 160                  |
| Wald ( $\chi^2$ )              | 34.91                 | 31.98                | 82.43                 | 154.19                | 142.69                | 68.02                |
| Dispersion                     | 24.02                 | 19.93                | 19.22                 | 12.63                 | 12.74                 | 11.84                |

Robust standard errors in parentheses are clustered by zone.

\*\*\* p<0.01, \*\* p<0.05, \* p<0.1