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**Digitalization, Marketization and Authoritarianism in
Ethiopia: Towards New Political Economy of Power**

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Doctoral Dissertation

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1. Introduction

The marketization of politics, involving policy decisions ungoverned by institutional structures and procedures, is apparently observed. Democratic freedoms and economic growth aside, if this remains unregulated, the rich can do whatever they like with their money. So long as everything is a commodity, any rich person can buy a minister, who then buys an activist, a commodity to serve the political market. Then, a network of one YouTuber, one minister and one rich person will perform any political function of interest, as is practically happening (EBC, 2023a).

Abiy Ahmed,
Prime Minister of Ethiopia

1.1. Study Background

The rapid advancement of information and communication technologies (ICTs) has transformed economic, political and social landscapes globally, ushering in an era of “digitalization” (Bloomberg, 2018; Gorenšek & Kohont, 2018). Digital technologies have evolved into powerful agents that shape social structures and foster new economic relations, political processes, and policy responses (Gilardi, 2021; Howard, 2011). Unlike pre-digital times, the market now operates through intricately computerized economic networks, where human beings are reduced to mere numbers and data points that constitute pivotal information within the digital systems (Hart, 2010, p. 43). This shift is marked, *inter alia*, by a growing dependence on digital information and a universal trend toward data-driven competition across all aspects of human life, whereby *homo economicus* become not only an ‘entrepreneur’ but an “entrepreneur of himself” (Joppke, 2021, p. 15). Therefore, digitalization has essentially accelerated the marketization of societies, expanding market mechanisms, strategies, and related discourses beyond the realm of traditional commodity exchanges (Melegh, 2023a).

This global shift toward digitalization and market dynamics intersects with evolving governance structures characterized by growing authoritarian turn. Empirical studies show that while autocratic regimes declined globally from the mid-1970s until the turn of the century, this trend reversed in the early 21st century, marking a significant resurgence of authoritarianism (Svolik, 2012). The Varieties of Democracy Institute describes this shift as a “wave of autocratization,” with nearly three-quarters of the global population now living under autocracies, up from 46% a decade ago, highlighting that political freedom is at a critical tipping point (V-Dem, 2023). Similarly, Freedom House reported a sharp decline in political rights and civil liberties worldwide over the last fifteen years, warning of “democracy under siege” (2021), indicating that only a fifth

of the world's population resides in states designated as “free” (Freedom House, 2022). The political trajectory of Ethiopia mirrors these global patterns of authoritarian resurgence, along different phases of marketization.

Following the downfall of the military Derg regime in 1991, digitalization, coupled with market-oriented reforms, has significantly influenced the nation's economy and governance since the accession of the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) to state power. GDP grew from \$11.2 billion in 1992 to \$105.7 billion in 2022, with a rise in per capita income from \$215 to over \$850 during the same period (World Bank, 2022). Substantial investment was evident, especially in the telecom sector, with ICT imports surging from about 33 million Ethiopian Birr (ETB) in 1991/92 to 8 billion ETB in 2016/17, consistently exceeding 20% of the annual commercial service imports (NBE, 2017). Access to internet and cellular connections advanced rapidly after mobile technology's introduction in 1999, with mobile subscriptions rising from below 1% in 2005 to over 61% by 2023 (World Bank, 2024), reflecting the increasing role of digital connectivity in socio-economic and political life. These advancements, however, also equipped the Ethiopian government with sophisticated tools for surveillance, enhancing its capacity for political control and repression.

While early reforms under the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) showed democratic premises, long-term data obtained from various indices of democracy reveal a steep decline in political freedoms and growing authoritarianism, particularly after 2005. This aligns with a global trend where digitalization and marketization reinforce authoritarian power in contemporary societies, a phenomenon requiring a proper explanation. Hence, this study explores how digitalization shapes political control in Ethiopia, emphasizing its dual role as a driver of market expansion and a tool for authoritarian persistence. Using a mixed-methods approach, it investigates the interplay between digital technologies, market forces, and governance, providing critical insights into Ethiopia's political economy in the age of information.

1.2. Statement of the Problem

Digitalization has become a defining feature of contemporary societies, profoundly reshaping economic, political, and social landscapes worldwide. Consequently, it has gained significant attention in academic and policy circles, with the number of research articles rising from

approximately 16,000 in 2000 to 180,000 in 2022,¹ a testimony to the growing interest in understanding this vast and intricate process that is shaping the course of human history (Google Scholar, 2022). While earlier research primarily emphasized the technical, economic and managerial aspects of digitalization, recent studies increasingly recognize its deep social, ethical and political implications.² It is within this vantage that Horváth and Vicsek's (2023) study examined the social and ethical aspects of digital technologies by analyzing Hungarian artificial intelligence (AI) developers' visions of the future of work and their roles. Herke & Vicsek's (2022) study in Hungary found that social values tied to the "meaning" of work and discourses on a work-based society are key to understanding youth attitudes and political debates on addressing technology-driven job losses. These empirical findings align with Gagliardone's (2016, p. 13) assertion that the popular discourse tends to "privilege the functions technology can serve, as if there were a consensus on its purpose," reducing experts' discussions to matters of efficiency.

Far from being neutral tools, digital technologies embed and reflect diverse, often conflicting, societal values and aspirations, spanning from "economic growth" versus "political repression" (Grinberg, 2017), "freedom" versus "privacy" (Lovrinić, 2019), "opportunities" versus "risks," and "social change" versus "maintaining *status quo*" (Lee A. , 2018; Lokot, 2018). Therefore, digital technologies should, rather, be viewed as "sites of multiple conflicts" (Gagliardone, 2016), where social, economic, and political values are embedded, accepted, or contested, underscoring the importance of examining both their intrinsic values and the social structures that shape them (Klein & Kleinman, 2002). These conditions suggest the need for critical exploration of how digitalization interacts with societal structures, amplifies market dynamics, and influences governance, echoing Virilio's view that "the question of technology is the question of our time" (Kellner, 1999, p. 103).

Moreover, it is also essential to address a major discourse rooted in the concept of the global "technological divide," with developing countries often portrayed merely as passive recipient within the technological landscape and perceived top-down process of digitalization (Howard,

¹ Google Scholar search hits for »digitalization« rose from 221,000 in 2019 (Gorenšek & Kohont, 2019) to 603,000 in 2022 (Google Scholar, 2022).

² Reis *et al.* (2020) have found that the distribution of scholarly publications on "digitalization" across major fields of study is still dominated by Management & Accounting (30%), which is now followed by Social Sciences (26%), Engineering (10%), Economics & Econometrics (8%), and other fields taking the remaining share.

2011). However, this perspective neglects the complex and contested ways in which such nations adapt digital technologies to their unique socio-economic and political realities. In this regard, Ethiopia serves as a striking example, where digitalization intersects with neoliberal marketization and authoritarian governance. These dynamics justify Polányi’s analytical framework and concepts that provide a critical lens to understand the transformative impact of digital technologies in embedding market logic into social systems and consolidating power in increasingly authoritarian regimes.

Polányi’s perspectives, particularly the concepts of ‘fictitious’ commodities, ‘commodification’ and “counter movements,” are vital in explaining how global historical developments and digital technologies embed market logic into social systems, while simultaneously consolidating authoritarian power in societies (Melegh, 2023a; Bugra & Agartan, 2007). Drawing from Karl Polányi’s concepts, Bugra (2007) argues that the commodification of knowledge as a central pillar of the knowledge economy, highlighting its role in shaping modern productive orders beyond traditional fictitious commodities like land, labor, and money for examining contemporary market societies. In this context, Reitz (2019) underscores Polányi’s relevance for analyzing how capitalism reconfigures inherently non-market entities, transforming them into commodities, in ways that challenge conventional theories.

The Neoclassical economists, for instance, have introduced concepts like network effects and public expenditure to address the unique features of information, such as its non-scarcity³ and the difficulty of restricting access, while Marxist theorists are forced to reinterpret labor’s role in the production and exploitation of knowledge. Reitz argues that Polányi’s framework rather offers an alternative perspective for analyzing the commodification of information and metrification of intellectual labour as cognitive goods, relational assets, situating knowledge as “fourth” fictitious commodity. Similarly, Zuboff’s (2019a; 2019b) comprehensive exploration of “surveillance capitalism” articulates how digital technologies instrumentalize information as a fictitious commodity, a pivotal mechanism driving wealth and power accumulation in the 21st century. This

³ There is an ever-increasing demand for more data, though abundant. Nearly 7 million gigabytes of information were consumed *per person per day*, as each minute of the day more than 347,000 Tweets were posted, 300 hours of new video were uploaded to YouTube, 4 million posts were ‘liked’, and 4 million Google searches were conducted (Park, 2017). The volume of digital information available on the internet has grown exponentially, especially after the COVID-19 outbreak.

trend is particularly significant among regimes identified as “informational autocracies” (Gurieff & Treisman, 2019), where the instrumentalization of digital tools enables political control while simultaneously fostering economic participation.

Despite the growing recognition of these dynamics, empirical research is still in its infancy in applying Karl Polányi’s conceptual and theoretical perspectives to analyze the political economy of digitalization within the context of marketization that feature contemporary societies. To this effect, this study seeks to address this gap by investigating the role of digitalization in shaping Ethiopia’s political economy. Through the lens of Polányian theory, the research will examine how digital technologies have been utilized to reinforce authoritarian power structures, commodify information, and align market dynamics with political control. By situating Ethiopia’s trajectory within the broader global context of neoliberal capitalism and digital transformation, this study aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the interplay between digitalization, marketization, and governance in developing societies.

1.3. Research Questions and Aims

This study aimed to examine the complex interaction between digitalization, marketization, and autocratization through empirical exploration of the social and political consequences by considering developments in Ethiopia. In doing so, it is purported to explain that marketization of societies and increasing use of digital technologies as mutually reinforcing vital factors that contribute to the entrenchment of authoritarian political control. To this end, the fundamental question of this study is:

RQ₁: How does the extensive use of digital technology contribute to the consolidation of pre-existing power structures in societies with authoritarian political legacy, considering historical tendencies and inherent political values/discourses embedded in these technologies?

By addressing this question, the study attempts to critically analyze the political history and economic developments, examining the interplay of digital technology and authoritarian legacy in the evolution of power dynamics in Ethiopia. In doing so, it provides an analysis of the *modes operandi* of authoritarian regimes and identifies specific mechanisms (surveillance, propaganda and control of economic resources) used to leverage digital technology to maintain or strengthen their control. The study also explores how various actors (agencies, citizens, and interest groups)

engage with digital technology in politics, uncovering its patterns, motives, and impacts. Through qualitative and quantitative data analysis, it offers empirical insights as to how digitalization reinforces, rather than disrupts, authoritarian power dynamics.

The second major research question is:

RQ2: How does digitalization-driven marketization of societies reinforce and consolidate authoritarian political control?

The main rationale for addressing this question lies in the intent to explain the intersection between the marketization of societies and autocratization processes as articulated by Polányi. This is meant to provide a comprehensive analysis of the role of digitalization in intensifying the integration of national economies into the global neoliberal market, which reinforces authoritarianism, thus, undermining the possibility of democratization.

1.4. Hypotheses of the Study

It has already been noted that digitalization is a complex process that massively influences the power dynamics in societies. In this regard, the mainstream thesis upholds that advancement in modern digital technologies empowers dissent and facilitates democratization efforts by enabling citizens to organize, share information, and challenge authoritarian rules more effectively. Many have tried to explain the so-called “cyber revolution” or the Arab Spring that occurred about a decade and a half ago, from the same perspective arguing that increasing digitalization and use of digital technology foster avenues for democratization and challenges dictatorial regimes due to increased access to information, communication, and leverage these technologies to counterbalance or even overthrow authoritarian rules including those with entrenched historical structures *via* mobilizing grassroots movements, and international influences. However, this line of argument cannot adequately explain the failure of Middle Eastern countries in the effective transition to democracy envisioned during the Arab Spring, despite the change of governments.

These facts suggest the need for development of an alternative hypothesis subject to empirical investigation. Castells (2010b) notes that the nature, magnitude, and effects of digitalization are *hitherto* mixed, but the outcome of extensive use of digital technologies appears to be entrenching the already existing power relations. This is particularly evident in societies with authoritarian

political settings, most notably in Asia and Africa, including countries like China, Singapore, Myanmar, Iran and Russia; but also Morocco, Kenya, and Uganda (Xu, 2020; Hou, 2019; Cabestan, 2020; Stevens & Haines, 2020; Baarda, 2018; Dean, 2017; Michaelsen, 2017; Errazzouki, 2017; Badurdeen, 2018; Bowman, 2019; Grinberg, 2017). Hence, this study hypothesizes:

H₁: In societies with autocratic political legacy, extensive use of digital technology tends to strengthen authoritarian power relations mainly because of historical tendencies and inherent political values embedded therein.

Another widely acclaimed thesis posits that integration into the market economy fosters economic diversification by creating new opportunities that result in the empowerment of individuals, mobilization of civil societies, and the emergence of alternative power structures that challenge authoritarian political control. These are factors that arguably lead to increased social pluralism that would pave the way for democratization, *albeit* initial appearances of market integration seem to reinforce authoritarianism. However, empirical observations suggest that the marketization of societies spurred by digitalization has rather intensified the commodification of information as a new economic imperative of neoliberalism that contributes to the consolidation of authoritarianism. Building on the same line of argument, the second hypothesis, thus, holds:

H₂: Digitalization accelerates integration into the market economy that reinforces authoritarian political control of some form as a phenomenon of autocratization process.

1.5. Scope and Definitions

Although authoritarian rule has recently become a worldwide phenomenon, particularly over the last three decades, this study is basically designed to investigate and explain the new form of autocracy in one of the oldest and poorest nations on the globe. In doing so, the study examines the role of digital technology in Ethiopia emphasizing the developments in the post-Cold War era. The main theme is bound to the analysis of the structural economic and political conditions that interact with the dynamic process of digitalization as crucial factors explaining the sustained persistence of autocratic rules and the rising trend of authoritarianism in new form in the contemporary market society under the global neoliberal economic order. Accordingly, the basic concepts and terminologies of the research subject, used in this dissertation, were operationalized

in such a way as to refer to the phenomenon of interest as follows.

Authoritarianism refers to the principles, characteristics and practices of regimes that formally or informally restrict political rights and civil liberties, limit political pluralism, suppress anti-regime activities, and drive legitimacy through appeals to people's emotions (Linz, 1964). It encompasses systems of government that function based on "obedience to authority" whereby citizens are subjugated to the political power of the incumbent with "no" or "nominal" democracy (Bedeski, 2009). *Democracy*, on the contrary, denotes the type of government where self-governance is maintained through representation; human rights, civil liberties, and political freedoms are upheld; and citizens are guaranteed equal treatment under the rule of law. In this study, the notion of *authoritarianism* was quantitatively assessed through lower values on the democracy index, in line with the methodologies of Lührmann *et al.* (2018) and Boese *et al.* (2022). Following Boese *et al.*'s (2022) framework, it denoted the level of democracy (*Dem*), represented by annual standardized scores, whereby a sustained decrease in these scores indicated a process of *autocratization*, while a significant upward trend reflected *democratization*.

Commodities are objects produced for sale on the market, where the *market* refers to the actual contracts between buyers and sellers. And, *fictitious commodities*, conceptually distinct from "real" commodities, refer to things that are not originally produced to be bought and sold on a market (Polányi, 2001).

Digital technologies refer to electronic resources that generate, organize, process, or store data *via* the use of binary code (0s and 1s) to analyze information that enables various functions such as communication, automation, entertainment, etc. These include devices, tools and systems ranging from computers, smartphones, the internet, social media, the internet of things, cloud computing, and artificial intelligence (AI) to big data analytics.

Digitalization, otherwise known as *digital revolution*, refers to the process of transformation and reorganization of social, economic, and political life of human society around digital communication and media infrastructures (Gorenšek & Kohont, 2018; Park, 2017).

Information is an organized and processed "data" that has been given meaning by way of a relational connection to solve problems or understand a phenomenon. Here, *data* has been defined as raw symbols that represent properties of objects, events, and their environment (Park, 2017).

Marketization is used in this study to refer to the proliferation of market mechanisms into social domains traditionally governed by non-market principles and institutions, denoting the expansion of market society (Polányi, 2001). This phenomenon is characterized notably by market control of economic functions previously managed and coordinated under some form of social, communal, or state ownership, but also development of certain social relationships like social media or “info-society” that are increasingly dominated by market interests (Melegh, 2023a).

1.6. Structure of the Dissertation

This dissertation is organized into seven chapters, followed by a concluding section. The first chapter outlined the general background of the study, including its scope, objectives, hypotheses, and the operational definitions of key concepts. The second chapter presents a comprehensive review of relevant theories, concepts, and existing literature, along with the analytical framework employed. Chapter three examines the historical trajectory of Ethiopia’s political and economic developments, spanning from the formation of the modern Ethiopian state to the most recent political reforms. Chapter four details the study’s methodology, covering the research approach, design, data sources, and methods of analyses.

The fifth and sixth chapters focus on the empirical findings. Chapter five presents the results of qualitative data analysis, while chapter six provides the major insights gained from quantitative models. Chapter seven delves into the intricate relationship between digitalization, marketization, and authoritarianism, offering an interpretative discussion of the study’s empirical findings on digitalization and authoritarian control in Ethiopia. Finally, the conclusion synthesizes the key findings and their broader implications, paving the way for future research and practical applications.

2. Review of Literature

Nothing was further from the mind of Smith than such a glorification of Physics. Political economy should be a human science; it should deal with that which was natural to man, not to Nature.

Karl Polányi

2.1. Overview

This chapter is set to lay out the conceptual and theoretical map of the study that serves as the foundation for understanding the complex interplay between digitalization, marketization, and authoritarianism. To this effect, it critically examines the existing scholarship to contextualize the study and identify gaps within the prevailing intellectual landscape. At its core, the review explores key concepts and definitions, clarifying the multifaceted nature of digitalization as a transformative force, marketization as a process reshaping economic and social structures, and authoritarianism as a dynamic mode of governance. Historical approaches to information and power provide a backdrop for analyzing how digital technologies reconfigure these relationships, amplifying both opportunities for civic engagement and mechanisms of control. Theoretical perspectives are engaged to unravel the dualities of digitalization, juxtaposing optimistic views of technology as a democratizing force against more cautious or pessimistic interpretations emphasizing surveillance and manipulation.

The Chapter emphasizes the Polányian political economy framework, complemented by theories of surveillance capitalism and informational autocracies, to explore the deep interplay between economic structures and political authority. Through this synthesis, the chapter positions digitalization and marketization not as isolated phenomena but as mutually reinforcing processes that both sustain and reshape authoritarian governance. By tracing global trends and theoretical insights, the review establishes a foundation for contextual understanding of the dynamics of the digital technology and political power in contemporary market society, paving the way for the analytical framework that will guide the study. In the next section, the core concepts involved in the study are dissected to establish a shared standing point pertaining to these multifaceted constructs as per their relevance to the topic under investigation.

2.2. Core Concepts and Definitions

2.2.1. Digitalization

The concept of “digitalization” is very complex and has no unified definition as its (mis)usage is not only diverse but also adverse. To begin with, an attempt to define “digitalization” as the effect of information and digital technology on social systems (cultural, economic, or political) is misleading, as it lacks conceptual distinction between the “digitalization process” and “role of digital technology” in the context of changing society (Gorenšek & Kohont, 2018). Nevertheless, the concept involves two essential elements.

The first element is “digitization,” which basically refers to the process of converting “analog” data such as images, video, text, etc., into “digital” format (Gorenšek & Kohont, 2018). This process of “digitization,” along with standards like transmission control/internet protocols (TCP/IP), has enabled the transmission and exchange of various types of data through a single universal system of binary code (0s and 1s), which allows information to be shared with anyone, anywhere, at any time (Park, 2017). The second element of digitalization implies the increase and acceptance of the use of digital technology in everyday life (Gorenšek & Kohont, 2018). These technologies include computers, smartphones, tablets, digital cameras, social media, online games, and applications, as well as more complex systems like artificial intelligence, cloud computing, and the Internet of Things (IoT). The significant increase in the utilization of, and reliance on, advanced information and communication technologies have intensified the global transformation in the economic, political, and social domains of human life, particularly towards the end of the second millennium, giving rise to a unique social formation labelled as “network society” by Manuel Castells (2010a) and regarded as “info-society” by Attila Melegh (2023a). Digitalization, thus, broadly refers to this process of change and restructuring of socio-economic life around digital communication and media infrastructures.

There is no consensus on the impact of digitalization either, as observed in the diversity of scholarly debates on the subject. In various social arenas, digitalization is argued to have resulted in new types of relationships manifested in the flourishing of networks, most notably the virtual communities (Castells, 2010a). Some studies conclude that digitalization practically meant increasing social isolation due to further atomization of society, “nightmare vision” of

surveillance, erosion of privacy, “moral panic” and authoritarian political control, just in the same way it assists political endeavors aligned to democratic causes (Hou, 2019; Fuchs, 2012; Howard, 2011; Castells, 2010b). The variation in conceptualization of the process, and the socio-political and economic implications associated with digitalization have, thus, yielded multiple competing theories, which will be presented in the proceeding sections.

2.2.2. Marketization

The concept of “marketization” is also very complex, involving intricate processes and multifaceted development of market mechanisms into social domains traditionally governed by non-market principles. Polányi (2001) regarded this phenomenon as an “expansion of market society.” According to Melegh (2023a), the phenomenon of marketization extends further beyond the realm of economics to influence social, cultural, and political dynamics involving multitude of changes in contemporary societies. While typical features of marketization notably include privatization and market control of economic functions previously managed and coordinated under some form of social, communal or state ownership, it is equally relevant to capture certain social relationships, like social media or “info-society” that are increasingly dominated by market interests (Melegh, 2023a). This process is closely associated with economic (neo)liberalization that has featured the increasing commodification of goods, services, and even social relationships or other spheres like education, healthcare, social services, and various aspects of governance to influence social, cultural, and political dynamics.

In the political spheres, commercialization of public services, transforming them into commodities through marketization, does not only undermine the role of government, portraying human society merely as economic beings whose lives are subjected to pervasive competition. The increasing dominance of market interests over social spheres, *inter alia*, fosters a culture of consumerism, framing individuals primarily as consumers rather than citizens or members of a community, as personal identities and social status are often tied to consumption patterns. This process also fundamentally reshapes individual attitudes, characterizing them as entrepreneurs of their own selves (Joppke, 2021), at the disposal of shared values and collective responsibility. This suggests that greater dependence on market logic to shape policy decisions and social outcomes adversely affects governance by weakening the principles of equity, justice and accountability. Hence, the nexus between increased marketization and autocratization is multifaceted and worth exploring.

2.2.3. Authoritarianism

The concept of “authoritarianism” broadly refers to the political behavior of government systems whereby the ruler wields substantial power over numerous aspects of citizens’ lives. It is characterized by an emphasis on “obedience to authority,” often at the expense of individual rights and freedoms (Bedeski, 2009, p. 2). Unlike democratic political systems that ensure self-rule in certain sphere *via* representation, recognize human rights and freedoms, and entitle every individual to equal treatment under the law (Freedom House, 2021) *via* curtailing the arbitrary power of the state.

Authoritarian regimes resemble dictatorships that also function by subordinating individuals to the political authority of the state. Apparent in the literature, there is a conceptual distinction between “authoritarianism” and “dictatorships” even though the two are often considered as synonyms. According to Bedeski (2009), the term “dictatorship” originated from “dictator,” which meant for the ancient Romans, a “temporary magistrate granted extra powers to deal with state emergencies.” In its modern usage, the notion of “dictatorship” denotes a form of government in which there is little or no constitutional limit to absolute political power concentrated in one leader or small elite unaccountable to the people. This implies that dictatorships constitute a type of government where a single ruler or a small group holds complete, unrestricted authority, unchecked by constitutional limits or laws. Carl Schmitt’s (2005 [1932]) notion of the “state of exception” illuminates how such regimes suspend or instrumentalize legality in the name of sovereign necessity, a logic visible in Ethiopia’s recurrent reliance on emergency rule and discretionary executive authority.

Authoritarian governments differ from other variants of autocracy like “totalitarian” regimes in that the former often “lack a highly developed ideology, but tolerate a degree of pluralism in social organization, usually exercises its power within limits” (Bedeski, 2009, p. 2). The notion of “totalitarian government” refers to a system of government that aims to dominate virtually every aspect of life in both thought and action by regulating all political, economic, and social dimensions, including the personal beliefs, values, and attitudes of its citizens. Hannah Arendt (1951) superbly articulated the conception of totalitarianism by emphasizing ideological monopolization, mass atomization, and the suppression of political plurality, all of which resonate with Ethiopia’s long-standing efforts to neutralize dissent and depoliticize civil society. Similarly, Friedrich and Brzezinski’s (1956) empirical framework, centered on a dominant ideology, mass

party, centralized economy, control of communications, and organized terror, offers a comparative lens to understand how contemporary autocracies selectively adopt elements of totalitarian governance.

Bedeski (2009), then, notes that “authoritarianism” is “a set of analytical characteristics” that provides the conceptual framework for understanding modern non-democratic regimes characterized by such political behaviors as systematic coercion and suppression to hold control, but also employ propaganda tools to maintain popular support. Yet, authoritarian political systems are institutionalized through legal, moral or customary mechanisms built upon social and economic conditions that legitimize effective social control in a polity by the leaders that strive to stay in political power. This point leads us to a brief discussion of the major typologies of authoritarian regimes.

One method for classifying authoritarian regimes rests in the mode of management and organization of economic functions pursued by the state. In this regard, authoritarian regimes can be categorized as “radical” or “conservative” depending on the socio-political orientation and relative role in the economic engagements (Bedeski, 2009). According to Bedeski (2009), the political systems adopted in the Soviet Union and many Communist industrial nations of Eastern Europe were radical authoritarian regimes that relied on “technocratic” institutions, which permeated the repression of popular political pressures, and the management and distribution of investment by the state towards economic growth. Václav Havel’s (1985) concept of post-totalitarianism, particularly his emphasis on bureaucratic coercion, symbolic conformity, and self-censorship, helps explain the more subtle, technocratic mechanisms of repression in contemporary world.

On the contrary, the conservative authoritarian regimes of the 1960s and 1970s in Southern Europe and Latin America, such as Franco’s Spain and Pinochet’s Chile, repressed rival political organizations by using military force, but also “granted considerable freedom to private enterprises for the purpose of economic growth” (Bedeski, 2009, p. 3). The latter category also included most of the post-WWII Afro-Asian states, where the crises of nation-building, ethnic friction and poverty justified the emergence or consolidation of one-party political systems or military regimes. It should be noted, however, that the distinction between radical and conservative authoritarian regimes is rather conceptual, as the same regimes can also have radical and conservative phases,

while some post-totalitarian or late totalitarian regimes like Brezhnev's Soviet Union may be regarded as stagnating variants.

Yet, the most conventional taxonomy of authoritarian regimes has depended on the peculiarity of modes of accessing and maintaining political power. In this regard, the most prevalent modes of power maintenance throughout history include: (i) hereditary or lineage succession, (ii) the actual or threatened use of military force, and (iii) the institutionalization of competition in popular elections, which correspond to three generic types of regimes: monarchies, military governments and electoral regimes ranging from “no-party” to nominal “multiparty” regimes (Wahman, Teorell, & Hadenius, 2013). In fact, Ethiopia's political history over the past century demonstrates a sequential evolution of these generic types of authoritarian regimes, a theme that will be explored thoroughly in the next chapter. The pre-1974 imperial monarchy relied on hereditary succession and traditional legitimacy rooted in religious narratives. The Derg military regime (1974–1991) pursued revolutionary socialism, sustaining power through coercion and military force. The EPRDF era (1991–2018) combined economic liberalization with centralized ethnic federalism, employing developmental policies that rationalized authoritarian political control. Under the Prosperity Party (2018–present), Abiy Ahmed intensified economic liberalization and adopted populist rhetoric, using nominal elections and digital tools to manage dissent and ethnic tensions. These transitions illustrate the evolving strategies of power maintenance in Ethiopia.

Therefore, the above discussion suggests that authoritarian regimes include various systems of government that, nonetheless, function based on obedience to authority, whereby the incumbent wields strong power by subordinating citizens to the political power of the state. The contemporary usage of the term “authoritarianism” encompasses soft political dictatorships including the states that exhibit nominally democratic institutions such as loyal political parties, symbolic legislatures and elections meant to entrench absolutist rule *via* centralization of power, deterring political contest or undermining representations. As already alluded to, in this study, the Linz's (1964) conception of the “authoritarianism” is used as an operational definition, to refer to the principles and practices of regimes that: (i) restricts political rights and civil liberties, (ii) limit political pluralism, (iii) suppress anti-regime activities and (iv) derive legitimacy through appeals to people's emotions. Nevertheless, contextually placing the classical theories of totalitarianism and dictatorship by Schmitt (2005 [1932]), Arendt (1951), Friedrich and Brzezinski (1956), and

Havel's (1985) perspectives on post-totalitarianism, the dissertation reframes authoritarianism in Ethiopia not as a deviation from modernity but as a historically grounded, ideologically adaptive, and digitally mediated form of political order.

This approach enables a more nuanced theorization of emerging forms such as “informational authoritarianism” and “digital developmentalism,” in which control is exercised not solely through overt repression but through the fusion of market rationality, surveillance technologies, and institutionalized legal control. Ethiopia thereby exemplifies a regime where the boundaries between authoritarianism, totalitarian logic, and post-totalitarian accommodation are increasingly blurred, necessitating a broader theoretical synthesis to understand the dynamics of authoritarian rule in the digital age.

2.3. Pre-digital Scientific Approach to Information and Power

A glance at literature reveals that the states, since ancient times, collect information on their subjects often through “rudimentary and brutal but effective” mechanisms (Castells, 2010b, p. 341), for propaganda or other essential political purposes. However, the most visible impact of information on political communication unfolded just a few decades ago along with eminence of digital transformation (Körner, 2019). The scientific approach to the study of information is also a relatively recent phenomenon.

The birth of “cybernetics” and the emergence of “information theory” were the two post-WWII developments that could be regarded as a landmark in the history of the science of information. The notion of “cybernetics,” derived from the Greek word “*kybernētēs*” meaning “steersman” or “governor,” was originally applied to the theory of control mechanisms by the American mathematician, Norbert Wiener. Eventually, it evolved into an interdisciplinary science dealing with communication and control systems in living organisms, machines and organizations (Verdú, 2009). Information was, then, regarded as a “freedom of choice” (Verdú, 2009) that could be measured per the laws of probability, in such a way as to control the behavior of humans, or other subjects, in an orderly manner by counteracting the natural tendency towards disorganization (McEliece, 2009). Similarly, the “information theory” originated from the work of another American mathematician, Claude E. Shannon, who was initially interested in understanding and addressing problems of transmitting and storing information accurately from a mathematical point

of view. Verdú (2009) argues that the science of information, thus, arose out of problems encountered during WWII in the development of so-called “electronic brains” and “automatic-control mechanisms” for such military apparatuses as bombsights.

Accordingly, the birth of information science has often been attributed to the problems faced in the use of electronic devices by the military during the War, and many scholars recognize the theoretical contribution of the pre-WWII theories, particularly in precisely measuring the uncertainty inherent in the process of sending and receiving information (McEliece, 2009). However, others have heavily criticized “information theory” arguing that it is rather a “theory of communication,” not a complete theory of information, as it simply presupposes information as a material sometimes needed for transmission (Koopman, 2019). Two things are, nonetheless, of paramount importance in the works of post-war information theorists. These are: (i) the instrumentalization of information, and (ii) the motive for “control,” automated or otherwise.

The notion of “control” is, particularly, important because it denotes “power relations.” It could equally be argued that attempts towards automation of control mechanisms, which continued to date, essentially implied the inherent human desire to advance its power, and the critical relevance of information in that same process. Therefore, the contribution of early theorists is crucial in the consolidation of preexisting information practices that later led to a revolution in digital systems, more specifically, the transmission, storage and internet systems (Koopman, 2019) that eventually became the main drivers of political and economic power relations in the dawn of an information era. This configuration of power relations, in which digital technology enabled stunningly widespread use to fit the economic logic that structures the political life of society, comprehensively constitutes the new political economy of information. Before delving deeper, however, let us briefly examine the conventional and competing theoretical approaches to digitalization.

2.4. Conventional Theoretical Approaches to Digitalization

2.4.1. Pessimist and Optimist Perspectives on Digital Technology

The most common approach to study the effects of digital technology on societal life has been to follow the dichotomized perspective of the so-called “techno-optimism” vs. “techno-pessimism.” From this vantage, the “technology” is regarded as a “neutral instrument,” but the socio-economic

consequences of technology in general, and that of digital technology in particular, could be summed up as ‘positive’ vs. ‘negative’, or ‘good’ vs. ‘bad’, or ‘beneficial’ vs. ‘detrimental’ to the society.

For the techno-pessimists, the impact of digital technology is generally unfavourable, meaning that digital technologies, such as internet, have necessarily bad consequences thereby causing negative phenomena in the society (Königs, 2022; Fuchs, 2012). In this regard, a range of scholarly works have explored the relationship between surveillance capitalism, big data, and the emergence of a new type of “datafied citizenship” or “netizens” (Barassi, 2019), whereby the private, unregulated, unaccountable, “opaque entities” are believed to have monopolized the online virtual power often pairing with the governments in the move towards a worldwide surveillance society with unprecedented and unknown long-term ethical, legal and political consequences (Stojanov, 2019).

Contrary to the belief of techno-pessimists, techno-optimists uphold the view that technology’s impact is favourable (Königs, 2022). It should be noted that techno-optimists do not deny the possibility of a negative outcome of technology altogether. Instead, they recognize that unleashing the “forces of technological progress” has various consequences that could be inhibited, regulated or even halted (Königs, 2022, p. 2). In this regard, they argue that recently individuals are increasingly swayed towards sacrificing some degree of their privacy in favor of placing trust in “smart” technologies as a means to combat the formidable foe of poverty, as the case with Social Credit System (SCS) in China, or as an instrumental opportunity to achieve individual success as seen in Singapore (Lee & Lee, 2020; König, 2019; Liang, Das, Kostyuk, & Hussain, 2018). However, the counterargument posits that this is nothing more than a systematic coercion of digital participation that forces citizens to give up personal data (Barassi, 2019).

Nonetheless, framing the socio-economic impact of digitalization as simply good and/or bad is overly simplistic. As Fuchs (2012) notes, viewing the digital revolution through a lens of “cyber-utopianism” is as reductionist as the techno-pessimistic view that reduces digital technology’s role in politics to mere “mob expression.” Instead, the process of digitalization should be approached within a broader historical context, examining how it aligns with the evolution of economic and political structures of societies, as the case with constructivist theoretical perspectives.

2.4.2. Constructivist, Instrumentalist and Deterministic Approaches

A more refined version, drawn from functional and constructivist sociological perspectives such as social construction of technology (SCOT) and techno-politics (Klein & Kleinman, 2002; Kellner, 1999), provides an opportunity to approach the study of digitalization and social change from three different angles, namely: techno-instrumentalism, techno-determinism and constructivism. Whereas the notion of technology as a “neutral instrument” has nearly lost popularity, the instrumentalist approach views digital technology as value-free and neutral tools in the hands of those using it for good or evil (Adams & Prins, 2017). On the other hand, the perspective of technological determinism regards digitalization as an irresistible force that follows its own logic, upon which the economy and society are organized. The constructivist approach, which appears to be dynamic, evaluates digital technology both as cause and effect of societal change (Adams & Prins, 2017). For instance, the “cyberterrorism” is as equally relevant to “civic Islam online” as it was also “made problematic by the active production of such content by Western security agencies attempting to sow dissent, as well as distrust among militant organizations” (Howard, 2011).

A wide range of empirical literature, consistent with constructivism, also presents the “opportunities and risks” that the use of technology brings into the political realms as tools that simultaneously serve political mobilization vs. repression, social change vs. social control. For instance, Lovrinić (2019) and Lee (2018) contended that digital technologies such as social media present new opportunities for the youth, who were previously excluded from formal channels of political participation; but also, increasingly, subjecting them to “high-risk political climates” through surveillance, censorship, and other forms of repression. In the same fashion, Lokot (2018) explained the tension between being secure and being visible, as “be safe” or “be seen”, in an environment of constant state surveillance in Russia. Hence, one of the major paradoxes in contemporary society is that young people are at the forefront of global campaigns promoting social justice, sustainability, and rights; yet, governments that consistently claim to encourage youth participation do all they can, from surveillance to violent repression, to control and repress this political activity (Bessant & Grasso, 2018).

2.4.3. Clicktivism, Slacktivism and the Big-Brother Effect Theories

Drawing upon the above conventional insights, other theoretical perspectives have emerged to the study of impact of digital technologies, notably the internet and social media, from three standpoints. These are slacktivism, clicktivism, and the big-brother effect, all of which should be treated as simultaneous depictions of different aspects of the same phenomenon. Slacktivism, also called “cyber-skepticism,” upholds the view that the digital infrastructure such as internet have just little or no impact on civic engagement and may even decrease participation as genuine political actions are being increasingly replaced by less meaningful online activities (Jasper, 2022; Howard, Savage, Saviaga, Toxtli, & Monroy-Hernández, 2016).

On the contrary, clicktivism, based on the creeds of the “mobilization theory,” argues that the political and economic impact of digital technologies is eminent (Jasper, 2022). In this regard, wide range of studies have revealed the political benefits of digitalization, particularly in making public engagement easier and faster, thereby transforming political processes in three key areas: “political participation, political communication and policymaking” (Gilardi, 2021, p. 4). Adherents of this perspective argue that public engagement over digital platforms such as social media is always “an addition” to the citizens’ political lives that, as Howard *et al.* (2016, p. 58) note, help them “build their political identity” and consciousness through complimenting the “intake of information about politics, elections, and public policy” thereby allowing “people to be more omnivorous in their information diets.” Internet and social media are considered as instrumental in democratic endeavors of societies as it creates new types of political coordination, agency and activism, as happened in the so-called “Arab Spring” (Adams & Prins, 2017). Accordingly, digitalization is viewed as vital component in new political processes of mobilization and organization *via* “globalizing local struggles” (Howard, 2011, p. 11).

The big brother effect, otherwise known as “reinforcement theory,” contend that the internet and social media further fragment political identities that strengthens existing power structures (Jasper, 2022). Manuel Castells (2010b, p. 341) has eloquently captured this phenomenon stating that:

What the power of technology does is to extraordinarily amplify the trends rooted in social structure and institutions: oppressive societies may be more so with the new surveillance tools, while democratic, participatory societies may enhance their openness and representativeness by further distributing political power with the power of technology. Thus, the direct impact of new information technologies on power and the state is an empirical matter, on which the record is mixed.

Building upon the reinforcement viewpoint, a strand of empirical research delves into how the state gains political leverage through the adoption of digital technology. Within this realm, numerous studies have revealed that in many authoritarian regimes, particularly in Asia and Africa, the proliferation of digital technology strengthens state power, reinforcing autocratic governance and intensifying the difficulties of democratization efforts (Cabestan, 2020; Bowman, 2019; Hou, 2019; Baarda, 2018; Dean, 2017; Michaelsen, 2017; Errazzouki, 2017; Badurdeen, 2018). Similar assessments have also been documented, particularly in the post-COVID studies, indicating concerns of extensive health surveillance mechanisms leading to data centralization (Stevens & Haines, 2020) that would later serve political interests (Couch, Robinson, & Komesaroff, 2020).

Some have noted that critical theories are yet in the process of development to adequately analyze and explain the “online power” dynamics that is set sustain marginalization, domination and unequal relations within and between societies (Megarry, 2018). Other scholars emphasized that the limited focus on the institutionalized standards of monitoring the production and dissemination of new knowledge (Stehr & Ruser, 2017) and the use of non-traditional security discourse would continue to strengthen state power & social stability (Aljunied, 2019). Moreover, the growing alignment of unaccountable business entities with governments geared towards private securitization and a worldwide surveillance society is worth noting (Stojanov, 2019; Low, 2017).

Overall, the above discussions indicate that the mainstream theoretical perspectives mostly offer a simplistic categorization about the impact of digitalization, as they do not provide the context to the broader process of marketization in a historical perspective along with the impact of digitalization on the neoliberal political and economic order. The conventional approaches and perspectives are substantively inadequate to capture the multidimensional impact of social change taking place along with the process of digitalization. “We live in confusing times,” adds Castells (2010a, p. xvii), as the intellectual categories used to understand social conditions are coined in “different circumstances, and can hardly grasp what is new by referring to the past.” As is the case with most of the studies reviewed, too much focus on technology implied the abstraction of societal problems thereby attributing the causes of, and the solution to, these problems to technology. Fuchs (2012, p. 386) described this phenomenon as “technological fetishism,” in which various expressions of “techno-deterministic” ideologies rely on “fetishism of things” and neglect complex social relations in explaining the structural causes of problems in contemporary societies.

Yet, argues Castells, “a deeper, more fundamental trend is at work, actually undermining the nation-state’s power: the increasing diffusion of both surveillance capacity and the potential for violence outside the institutions of the state and beyond the borders of the nation” (2010b, p. 341). Hence, there is a necessity of transcending the conventional theoretical box to acquire a comprehensive picture of the contemporary social reality and outcome of the ongoing massive digitalization around the world.

2.5. Theoretical Frameworks in Political Economy

2.5.1. Polányian Analytical Approach to Contemporary Society and Economy

In his famous work, *The Great Transformation*, Karl Polányi wrote that “political economy” and the “discovery of society were closely interwoven” as the “form, in which the nascent reality came to our consciousness was political economy” (2001, p. 88). Polányi argued that the political economy was introduced within two opposite perspectives, i.e. “progress and perfectibility on the one hand, determinism and damnation on the other” (2001, p. 89). In fact, so is its translation into practice through two contradictory principles, “harmony and self-regulation on the one hand, competition and conflict on the other” just as the “economic liberalism and the class concept were pre-formed in these contradictions” (Polányi, 2001, p. 89), ascertaining that the entire “history of the human political economy is the history of property and power” (Wassihun, 2020, p. 72). In doing so, Polányi’s analytical framework presented a departure from his predecessors, particularly in understanding the fundamentals of “market” and “economy” in relation to “society”. Traditionally, economists regarded the concept of “economy” as set of “integrated markets” that automatically functions through price mechanism leading towards equilibrium of supply and demand (Stiglitz, 2001). This misconception basically emanated from the limitation of economic historians, who mostly relegated the “primitive economics” to “prehistory” and focused on the study of recent human history “in which truck and exchange were found on any considerable scale” (Polányi, 2001, p. 46).

Building on a comprehensive analysis of recorded history, Polányi objects the notion of economy as an interlocking system of self-regulating markets. For him, this notion merely denotes the formal concept of economy based on pricing, without which it ceases to exist, assuming the rational choice of factors of production being scarce. Hence, Polányi alternatively used the

substantive concept of economy that was based on different forms of integration. In fact, for the most part of human history, he argued, the idea of “self-regulating market was unknown” and “regulation and markets, in effect, grew up together” (Polányi, 2001, p. 71). He empirically defined “market” as a “meeting place for the purpose of barter or buying and selling” (Polányi, 2001, p. 59), and where such pattern was most developed, “as under the mercantile system, they thrived under the control of a centralized administration” (Polányi, 2001, p. 71). Therefore, the “self-regulating market” should be understood as a specific type of market that emerged comparatively in recent period of history.

Prior to the 19th century, Polányi argued, human economy was always embedded in social systems. In fact, he noted that even the word “economy” itself was derived from the Greek “*oikonomia*” that referred to the principle of householding, i.e. production for one’s own use (Polányi, 2001, p. 56). According to Polányi, the pre-industrial societies had different economies organized based on social principles of reciprocity, redistribution, and householding, as well as market institutions that maintained an “orderly production and distribution of goods” through the “patterns of symmetry, centrality and autarchy” (Polányi, 2001, p. 57). This implies that “market economy,” as well, is just a specific type of economic system developed dominantly based on social pattern underlying the principles of barter or exchange. The “market economy” could, then, be operationally defined as an “economic system controlled, regulated, and directed by market prices” whereby self-regulating mechanisms are entrusted to ensure “order in the production and distribution of goods” assuming that “human beings behave in such a way as to achieve maximum money gains” (Polányi, 2001, p. 71).

Nonetheless, as a matter of rule, the “economic system was absorbed in the social system,” regardless of the “behavior predominated in the economy, the presence of the market pattern was found to be compatible with it,” meaning that “market economy” could function only in a “market society” (Polányi, 2001, pp. 60,71). Therefore, “Adam Smith’s suggestions about the economic psychology of early man were as untrue as Rousseau on the political psychology of the savage” (Polányi, 2001, p. 46). Further elucidating on this point, Polányi (2001, p. 48) wrote:

Man’s economy, as a rule, is submerged in his social relationships. He does not act so as to safeguard his individual interest in the possession of material goods; he acts so as to safeguard his social standing, his social claims, his social assets. He values material goods only in so far as they serve this end. Neither the process of production nor that of distribution is linked to specific economic interests attached to the possession of goods; but every single step in that process is

geared to a number of social interests which eventually ensure that the required step be taken. These interests will be very different in a small hunting or fishing community from those in a vast despotic society, but in either case the economic system will be run on noneconomic motives.

From this perspective, economic activities are deeply embedded in social relationships, with people prioritizing social standing and obligations over material self-interest. Production and distribution are driven by social motives, adapting to the norms of each society rather than purely economic goals. However, the expansion of the market system in the nineteenth century transformed market liberalism almost into a religion, whereby the economy operates with excessive autonomy leaving the society with minimal control over it, thus, resulting in a complete reversal of the trend of development (Polányi, 2001, p. 145). Contrary to the historical pattern of the human economy, the self-regulating markets required subordinating society to the logic of the market (Block, 2001) that “human society was now in danger of being shifted to foundations utterly foreign to the moral world of which the body politic *hitherto* had formed part” (Polányi, 2001, p. 121). It is this subjugation of human society to the logic of the market that led to marginalization of political will, a central problem that mankind faces to-date.

The origins of the cataclysm lay in the Utopian endeavor of economic liberalism to set up a self-regulating market system. Such a thesis seems to invest that system with almost mythical faculties [...] these fundamentals, in the last resort, shaped in one common matrix, the self-regulating market. For the origins of the cataclysm, we must turn to the rise and fall of market economy (Polányi, 2001, p. 31).

For Polányi, the catastrophic consequences of the market economy stem from the utopian attempt to create a self-regulating market system that its rise and fall reveal the inherent flaws, rooted in its unrealistic and destabilizing principles. He explained this phenomenon by using the concepts of embeddedness, double-movements and fictitious commodities.

Polányi used the concept of “embeddedness” to capture the notion that the human economy, including the market institution, was most of the time subordinated to broader social organization. This notion implies that the economy is not as autonomous as envisaged in mainstream economic theory, but subordinated to social institutions such as politics and religion, as the market pattern itself rely on non-economic factors such as trust, mutual understanding, and legal enforcement of contracts, or directly integrated into other social relations (Block, 2001; Stiglitz, 2001). Yet, the market has its own peculiar motive, capable of creating institutions, to organize the whole society as the vitality of economic reason to the existence of society precludes any other factor.

Since the economic system operates based on “separate institutions” with “specific motives,” the society should be organized “in such a manner as to allow that system to function according to its own laws” (Polányi, 2001, p. 60). This entails that market society essentially means nothing but “the running of society as an adjunct to the market,” whereby the “social relations are embedded in the economic system” as opposed to the “economy being embedded in social relations” (Polányi, 2001, p. 60). However, Karl Polányi regarded such an attempt of disembedding the economy from the society implied in the “self-adjusting market” as a “stark utopia” that “could not exist for any length of time without annihilating the human and natural substance of society” (2001, p. 3).

To this effect, Polányi’s in-depth analysis located the origin of the subordination of mankind to market in the inventions of “fictitious commodities”⁴ namely: *land*, *labor* and *money*. This process of commodification denoted that ‘nature’ could be translated into the market as ‘land’ or ‘real estate’; whereas ‘human life’ could be subordinated to market dynamics as ‘labor’ to be bought and sold, and finally, money could be reborn as a token of exchange though it did not enter the economy as commodity (Polányi, 2001; Zuboff, 2019b; Bugra, 2007; Reitz T. , 2019). The same phenomenon, referred to by Hart as “commoditization,” denoted the evolution of the social division of labour from an embryonic stage, where human activity is alienated in the form of material products, to the advanced condition of modern service economies in which people are evaluated through complex information-processing systems and paid *via* computerized transactions that “represent human subjects as numbers” (Hart, 2010, p. 43). This suggests that advancement in digital technology has immense contribution to marketization in contemporary societies, reconfiguring many aspects of social life into commodities valued primarily, if not entirely, based on market rationales, but also takes “human society to risk” (Block, 2001, p. xxv).

This phenomenon has been explained *via* the concept of “double movement,” implying that the development of market organization accompanied by the rise of powerful institutions against the “perils inherent in a self-regulating market system” (Polányi, 2001, pp. 79-80). As vividly encapsulated by Polányi, the economic progress has always seen a radical transformation in social structures, often accompanied by social dislocations that have annihilating effects on the lives of the people, which, in turn, necessitates the eruption of “protective counter-moves” to curb such

⁴ Polányi (2001, p. 71) conceptually differentiated the “fictitious commodities” from the “real commodities” that are produced for sale on a market, thus, ruling out land, labor, and money as “they were not originally produced to be sold on a market.”

“self-destructive mechanisms” (Polányi, 2001, p. 74). These counter movements were evident in the fact that:

liberal state was in many countries replaced by totalitarian dictatorships, and the central institution of the century – production based on free markets – was superseded by new forms of economy. While great nations recast the very mould of their thought and hurled themselves into wars to enslave the world in the name of unheard-of conceptions of the nature of the universe, even greater nations rushed to the defence of freedom which acquired an equally unheard-of meaning at their hands (Polányi, 2001, p. 29).

The counter-movements that Polányi described were empirically observed in the historical shift in the early 20th century, where advanced liberal states eventually gave way to the rise of totalitarian dictatorships such as the Nazi and Fascist regimes, and the untamed competition among major powers led to devastating wars that human society had never seen. The central economic system of free market production did not only lead to the economic crisis, notably the Great Depression of inter-war period, but replaced by new models such as economic nationalism and communism.

Advanced countries that promoted human rights and freedom took on new but the most brutal, barbaric, violent and unprecedented process to conquer the vast territory (land and natural resources) and people (labour) of today’s Global South, notably Africa, under the guise of ‘development’ and ‘modernization’. The expansion of global capitalist market beyond the domestic boundaries of the “core” economies, led to the emergence of what Lenin described as the “highest form of capitalism,” namely imperialism, that necessitated colonialism. This process was a key factor in the development of modern state in Africa *via* disintegration and displacement of various modes of pre-colonial social formation and economic structures long maintained in the continent. Today, Africa is not a continent at peace. It suffers from a disproportionate share of social, economic and political disasters and the relentless tales of military takeovers and civil wars (O’Kane, 1993). The long process of market-based colonial state formation in Africa was also accompanied by a countermovement that featured conflict and wars, fragility, tensions and instability instead of stability, harmony, unity and social progress (Bereketeab, 2021).

To sum it up, the social history of modern societies exhibited a process of massive commodification that featured marketization, disembedding the economy from society. Meanwhile, this process is accompanied by a counter movement, characterized by the development of powerful institutions against inherent problems arising from market economy, thus, the transition to a “democratic system and representative politics involved a complete

reversal of the trend” (Polányi, 2001, pp. 79-80). Recently, the expansion of market mechanisms into various spheres of society has entered another phase as digitalization profoundly affects social structures and power dynamics characterized by autocratic developments. As scholars like Peck (2013) and Block (2003) have noted, the universal applicability of Polányi’s “double movement” has been contested, and future research could more explicitly grapple with these tensions to refine its relevance to non-Western and contemporary authoritarian contexts. Hence, Polányi’s framework is ideal-typical, rooted in a historically specific narrative of capitalist transformation, and can benefit from engagement with more critical and pluralistic perspectives.

2.5.2. Critiques of Polányian Framework

Polányi’s conception of an embedded economy, where economic life was once governed by social norms, reciprocity, and moral obligations offers a compelling critique of market liberalization. Hence, this study appreciates Karl Polányi’s engagement with the original “moral world” that featured the pre-market social order. Yet, Polányi’s framework could be critiqued, especially given the historical and political-economic particularities of the Global South. Critics such as Block (2001) and Dale (2010) have already noted that Polányi inclined to idealize pre-market societies, understating the forms of domination and exclusion that often characterized them. Fraser (2014) warns against interpreting social embeddedness as inherently just or egalitarian, emphasizing that non-market social orders can also be deeply patriarchal, hierarchical, and exclusionary, sharply resonating the Ethiopian case.

While Ethiopia has experienced limited and uneven market expansion over time, it has also exhibited a strong and enduring authoritarian legacy, from imperial absolutism and military dictatorship to the technocratic developmentalism of the EPRDF and beyond. Contrary to what Polányi’s binary might suggest, the absence of fully dis-embedded markets has not coincided with the presence of a morally grounded economic order. For example, the imperial land tenure system, based on feudal principles, reflected neither market freedom nor moral reciprocity, but rather elite control and peasant subjugation. Similarly, under the Derg and later EPRDF, centralized redistribution and state-led development functioned more as tools of authoritarian consolidation than as manifestations of a moral economy. Ethiopia’s traditional and statist economic systems have often operated through clientelist, hierarchical, and coercive structures, lacking transparency, equity, or democratic accountability. This implies that contemporary Ethiopia’s moral, social, and

political crises stem not only from market disembedding, but also a historically entrenched entanglement of authoritarian state structures with selective market mechanisms, which could be viewed as a form of authoritarian capitalism or lately informational autocracy.

Hence, this study acknowledges the limitations of Polányi’s perfectionist conception of embeddedness, as raised by Fraser (2014), Block (2001), and Dale (2010), recognizing that non-market arrangements in Ethiopia were not inherently moral, but often embedded in coercive power relations. In doing so, the dissertation aims to contextualize Polányi’s reading via strengthening the theoretical rigor while also aligning the framework with the empirical complexity of Ethiopia’s political economy where marketization and authoritarianism have coexisted and co-evolved rather than simply replaced one another. The next section discusses how digital technologies feature the commodification of information, representing the development of new type of capitalism, which Zuboff (2019a) labelled “surveillance capitalism,” beginning with Reitz’s (2019) reconceptualization of Polányi’s notion of “fictitious commodities.”

2.5.3. Surveillance Capitalism and the Dawn of Instrumentarian Power

In the twenty-first century, as societies undergo massive integration into the global capitalist market, the way knowledge and information work economically and politically have significantly transformed. A few decades ago, information was a major source of power, subject to regulatory mechanism, and meticulously protected by its owners, creating an asymmetry that established a hierarchy in the economy and society (Park, 2017). With digitalization, however, the impact of information on the power structure has dramatically increased. According to Reitz (2019), the largest companies in the internet economy generally offer free services and host user-generated content rather than selling proprietary information and content.

In this regard, it could be argued, beside various algorithms, the major assets of tech giants like Google, Facebook and Amazon, are the attention of billions of users and vast amounts of user data primarily meant for advertising and marketing (Reitz, 2019). The same applies for the “platform capitalists” that provide paid information services, such as Uber, Airbnb, and dating sites, but do not primarily depend on strong property rights but instead focus on attracting and retaining a large user base, which allows leveraging massive amounts of data to dominate markets and drive innovation (The Economist, 2017). These phenomena could not be adequately explained *via* the

conventional theories including the neoclassical or Marxist variants, suggesting the reconsideration of Polányi’s perspectives.

Revitalizing Polányi’s conception, Reitz posits that fictitious commodities do not only refer to goods that are not produced for markets, but also the outcomes of processes that are organized, measured, paid for, and controlled similarly to market-driven production. It is within this context that he highlights the commodification of knowledge and information, also the implications of such processes for political economy, as knowledge is not a mere technical tool but socially embedded and deeply intertwined with dynamics of power relations (Reitz, 2019, p. 194). This conception resonates with Foucault’s (1977) understanding of “power” as a relational pattern that flows throughout society. The notions of power and knowledge are intertwined in that the formation of knowledge and the increase in power regularly reinforce one another in a circular process. It is only when certain groups of people control the knowledge that oppression becomes a possibility (Foucault, 1977).

In his analysis of power relations that mainly focussed on technologies that affect the interests, perceptions and actions of individuals, Foucault argued that power and knowledge come from observing others. Instead of using violent methods such as torture, technologies such as panopticon⁵ offered a powerful and sophisticated internalized coercion through constant observation of the subjects as a control mechanism, in which a consciousness of uninterrupted surveillance is internalized (Foucault, 1977). This suggests that visibility itself becomes a means of control, serving as a trap for those under observation *via* usage of modern technology. Accordingly, Foucault regarded modern society as “not of spectacles, but of surveillance” (1977, p. 217). This is especially true under modern digital capitalism that permeated sophisticated mechanisms in which the tacit knowledge is formalized into expert systems or smart machines (Reitz, 2019), denoting the centrality of information as a crucial fictitious commodity.

As Zuboff (2019a) notes, this commodification of information through utilization of digital technology is a systematic economic creation, labelled as “surveillance capitalism,” a “new capitalism and its unique production of power are as untamed by law” (Zuboff, 2019b, p. 12).

⁵ Bentham’s Panopticon was a machine meant to create and sustain “a power relation independent of the person who exercises it” as its main effect remains to induce a “state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power” (Foucault, 1977, p. 201).

Surveillance capitalism is an “economic creation because it embodies a new logic of accumulation” (Zuboff, 2019b, p. 11). The Economist’s briefing referred to this new phenomenon as “data-driven economy,” whereby data has become the “new oil,” a critical resource “giving rise to a new economy” (The Economist, 2017). Similarly, Sadowski (2019) regarded ‘data’ as a new form of capital, positioning “data collection” as a process driven by the relentless pursuit of capital accumulation in the creation of a data-centric world, which allows a deeper understanding of the meaning, practices and implications of “datafication” as a political economic regime that influences many key decisions about business models, societal governance and technological development.

While data enables better decision-making, personalized services and predictive analytics, there are apparent monopolistic tendencies, privacy risks, fairness of competition and protection of consumer rights and regulatory challenges in this data-driven economy (The Economist, 2017). As Bartus (2021) rightly captured, in the neoliberal based digital economy, far beyond the relentless self-optimization and self-exploitation, the Big Data reduce individuals into mere numbers, transforming them into commodities in the process. Polányi (2001) already noted, constant attempt of disembedding the economic order from society happens *via* creating separate institutions based on new market logic and marketizing previously non-market aspects. The new economic system of neoliberal order, the governing principle of today’s market society, denotes “intelligence-based production systems” *via* delivering human experience as a behavioral data to machine thereby creating a social order, in which surveillance capital overrides preexisting reciprocities within societies “wielding its machines to transform us into the raw material for its own production” (Zuboff, 2019b, p. 20).

In doing so, neoliberalism primarily focuses on regime creation and institutional building that has successfully expanded the global agenda beyond a mere *real politik*, military strategy, as “(micro)economics is now the *prima donna* of the show” (Pramono, 2004, p. 116). As Joppke notes, even Foucault’s notion of “governmentality” in modern states could be adequately understood only in the context of neoliberal development as the power of “ruling at a distance,” whereby economic “rationality does not only erode the public-private distinction, but also invades the private sphere itself thereby erasing the possibility of opposition” (2021, p. 15). Accordingly, the phenomenon of competition for surveillance revenues bears down on every individual, thus,

challenging “human autonomy and democratic sovereignty in a battle for power and profit as violent as any the world has seen” (Zuboff, 2019b, p. 11).

Further elucidating on this phenomenon, Shoshana Zuboff, the Harvard economist, has come up with the concept of “instrumentarian power” as a defining element of digital-based neoliberal economic order. The notion of “instrumentarian power” refers to the “ubiquitous and computational power” that operates through the “instrumentalization of human behavior for the purposes of modification, prediction, monetization, and control” (Zuboff, 2019b, p. 20). Unlike the classical autocracies that operated through the means of violence, the instrumentarian power functions through the means of behavioral modification, in which the social relations and economic exchanges occur across the “medium of robotized veil of abstraction” (Zuboff, 2019a).

Through surveillance, censorship, content moderation and algorithmic manipulation of public space, the modern autocrats monitor dissent, amplify propaganda, and suppress opposition voices. Digitalization, thus, enables strategic control over information that ensures a more subtle and pervasive form of social conformity, making authoritarianism more resilient in the information age. Nonetheless, it would be vital to illuminate the role of digital technology in the ‘repression’ and ‘co-optation’ of opponents, thus enhancing the materialization of economic and political interests of authoritarian governments.

2.5.4. Informational Theory of Repression and Co-optation

The informational theory of “repression and co-optation” is one of the relevant perspectives that provides a key explanation on how digital technologies can address the so-called “information problem” (Xu, 2020). In authoritarian political systems, there are two primary types of information problems. The first is the “horizontal information problem,” which affects dissenting political actors and citizens, who are unaware of each other’s anti-regime sentiments (Xu, 2020; Edmond, 2013). This lack of awareness hinders effective political coordination and collective action against dictators. In these situations, digital technologies are believed to facilitate the horizontal flow of information, significantly improving political coordination among citizens (Edmond, 2013).

On the other hand, authoritarian regimes also encounter a “vertical information problem” due to lack of critical media and freedom of speech (Xu, 2020). Besides, citizens’ fear of repression leads them to misrepresent their anti-regime sentiments, making it difficult for dictators to obtain

accurate information necessary to maintain social order and address political grievances. This problem has traditionally compelled dictators to implement costly co-optation policies to prevent moderates from aligning with radical opponents. Additionally, dictators have a constant incentive to prevent everyday protests and maintain social order to ensure sustainable production, investment, and overall economic growth to extract more rent from the economy (Xu, 2020). The modern technologies, thus, help dictators overcome the vertical information problem by leveraging the extensive digital data, or “surplus behavioral data” (Zuboff, 2019b), generated by citizens’ use of ICT. Governments use this data, notably in more targeted campaigns, to identify radical opponents and prevent coordinated uprisings (Xu, 2020). According to this theory, dictators also utilize digital information to monitor and analyze online activities, gauge public opinion, and preempt threats before they materialize into coordinated actions like protests, by optimally balancing the cost-benefit of repression and co-optation, while also performing anti-enemy actions.

It is true that information and communication technologies, generally, support learning new approaches to social mobilization, political representation and process of new organizational strategies with potential of cognitively extending the prospects for political transformation from one context to another (Howard, 2011). Yet, in political systems characterized by vertical asymmetry of power relationships, the access and use of digital technology empowers those at the top and bottom of the pyramid in a disproportionate way, thereby capacitating the incumbents by sophisticating the mechanisms of oppression. As the trade-off outweighs, authoritarian regimes in established states ensure, instead of blocking, the massive use of digital instruments to enhance social control through targeted repression, despite the same technology eases the horizontal information problem among anti-regime political dissents.

Hence, digital technology shapes the political economy of authoritarian regimes, determining “who gets what, when and how” to ensure its survival at lowest possible cost. In so doing, the instrumentarian power perfectly fits into the political economy of authoritarian regimes, where the incumbents ideally prefer to “dissuade mass mobilization” by targeting key actors rather than the traditional “indiscriminate repression” due to the political and economic costs associated with it (Xu, 2020). This evolution in political strategy of social control demonstrated in the growing centrality of the “monopoly of narratives,” than the traditional “monopoly of violence,” is, therefore, crucial to comprehend the new model of authoritarianism in the context of digitalization.

2.5.5. Theory of Informational Autocracies

It is crucial, here, to reiterate the new model of authoritarianism that Guriev and Treisman (2019) labeled as “informational autocracies” to explain the peculiar, otherwise puzzling, features of the Post-Cold War dictators in view of contemporary political economy.

Autocratic regimes traditionally maintained control by overtly instilling fear among the populace and political figures. Such a political establishment preserves its power through widespread repression, enforcement of specific ideologies, use of physical coercion, establishment of robust security apparatuses, and propagation of mass intimidation tactics, sometimes targeting specific community or group of community (e.g. Jewish communities, etc.). These measures are employed to both legitimize the regime’s authority and eradicate any potential political opposition, thus ensuring social control. The following *Table 1* presents the changing characteristics of authoritarian states, comparing the old and new autocrats.

Table 1 – Comparing the Classical and New Authoritarian Regimes

Parameters of Comparison	Most Vivid Political Characteristics	
	<i>Old (Overt) Autocrats</i>	<i>Informational (Covert) Autocrats</i>
Pol. Rationale & Purpose	Creating anxiety among people & political actors	Convincing citizens & political actors of incumbent leadership success
Strategy of Social Control	Extensive repression; imposition of ideologies	Targeted repression; administrative & regulatory procedures
Source of Legitimacy	Physical force; strong security networks	Economic performance, nominal elections, & nationalist rhetoric
Discursive Framework	Propaganda embracing threats & fear	Conceal repression; manipulate info., mapping attitudes & sentiments
Management of Threats	Mass arrest, political assassinations	Cooptation, encouraged emigration, harassment & humiliation of elites
Info. & Comm. Infrastructure	Mostly analogue; pre/proto digital technology	Shift towards digital tools, systems & platforms made by big companies

Source: Own Formulation Based on Discussions of Guriev & Treisman, 2019.

Unlike classical (overt) dictatorships, new authoritarian regimes or “informational autocrats” prefer to persuade both citizens and political figures of the effectiveness of the current leadership, showcasing economic achievements, conducting nominal elections, employing nationalist discourses (Wodak, 2015), encouraging emigration, intimidating perceived threats through harassment and humiliation (through social media, for instance), selectively repressing dissent, besides co-opting the elites (Guriev & Treisman, 2019).

Yet, the key element of the theory of informational autocracy is the gap in political knowledge between the “informed elite” and the “general public.” The elites are assumed to have the ability to accurately observe the limitations of an incompetent incumbent, while the public is susceptible to the political discourses advanced by the rulers (Guriev & Treisman, 2019). As indicated in the above table, discursive frameworks, in the context of informational autocracies, are usually aligned with political rhetoric such as “defending the nation” or “safeguarding the traditional values,” then widely employed often *via* developing and leveraging advanced digital mechanisms like software, systems, platforms, and applications to follow people based on concerns of the wider population. This suggests that digitalization enables authoritarian regimes to shift from controlling populations through violence to dominating narratives by leveraging digital technology. The acquisition of digital technologies, which the traditional autocrats lacked for their most part, enable the new authoritarian governments mapping public attitudes and sentiment analysis to manipulate information and obscure state repression through creating or further controlling of the political narratives, while covertly subverting democratic institutions. Therefore, the adoption and function of digital technologies should be explored within the political and economic framework in which they are embedded, as an essential step in understanding why and how ICTs are accepted, rejected, or reshaped by different actors (Gagliardone, 2016).

Moreover, Guriev and Treisman (2019) argue that authoritarian regimes sustain themselves as a phenomenon of adaptation, especially in the post-Cold War era, through the “change of leaders” or “change in leaders.” In the former, “modern” autocrats succeed their predecessors, while in the latter, incumbents adjust to new conditions to maintain power upon learning from experience. The transformation and replacement of leadership, while also preserving authoritarian regime, is also driven by the economic interest of elites, seeking alternative ways to secure material resources, leading to the expansion of market institutions and mechanisms.

2.5.6. Critiques and Tensions among Theories on Digital Authoritarianism

The key theoretical and scholarly contributions to the study of authoritarianism, discussed above, in the digital age have introduced varied conceptual and methodological frameworks to understand how regimes deploy information technologies for control. While these frameworks have enriched our understanding, they diverge in fundamental ways, especially in their assumptions about state capacity, citizen agency, and the mechanisms through which power operate. *Table 2* below

provides a comparative summary of the major theories on digital authoritarianism discussed above.

Table 2 – Comparative Overview of Key Theories

Theory	Assumption	Strengths	Limitations
Surveillance Capitalism	Corporate logic; capitalist democracies	Strong on tech-capital nexus	Weak on state power; limited to liberal states
Theory of Repr. & Co-optation	Rational autocrats; high state capacity	Strategic logic; repression-cooptation	Assumes state strength; less useful in weak states
Informational Autocracies	Media manipulation over brute force	Explains soft control, legitimation	Less apt for unstable or coercive regimes

Source: Own Summary, 2025.

Zuboff’s Surveillance Capitalism (2019a) positions digital technologies primarily as tools of corporate power in liberal democracies, driven by behavioral prediction and modification, i.e. “instrumentarian power.” While this is compelling in analyzing tech giants like Google and Facebook, critics argue the theory downplays the role of the state and overlooks coercive, state-driven surveillance in authoritarian regimes (Morozov 2020; Feldstein 2019). Zuboff’s normative focus on liberal democratic erosion also limits applicability to contexts like Ethiopia, where such values are not foundational so to speak.

In contrast, Xu’s Informational Theory of Repression and Co-optation (2020) emphasizes how authoritarian states strategically use digital tools to monitor, repress, and preemptively co-opt potential threats. Rooted in rational choice, it assumes strong state capacity, an assumption questioned by scholars when applied to hybrid or weak states (Roberts 2020; Truex 2017). Ethiopia’s fragmented bureaucracy and uneven digital infrastructure illustrate such limitations, demanding contextual adaptation of Xu’s model to capture authoritarianism in the Global South.

Guriev and Treisman’s Informational Autocracies (2019) marks a shift from traditional overt repression to media control, selective transparency, and performance-based legitimation. While this model innovatively distinguishes modern autocracies that “hide the truth” rather than “crush dissent,” it assumes stable regimes and extensive media penetration. Critics argue it fits post-Soviet or resource-rich regimes better than volatile states like Ethiopia where soft and hard power tools coexist uneasily (Frantz & Kendall-Taylor 2017; Arriola & Lyons 2016). These theoretical frameworks offer valuable but partial insights into the nexus between digital technologies and

authoritarian control. Zuboff's framework helps unpack the commodification of data but lacks a robust account of state-driven repression. Xu's model theorizes strategic authoritarian governance but overestimates institutional capacity in weak states. Guriev and Treisman foreground manipulation over repression, yet their model may underplay the role of coercion in contexts marked by violence and instability.

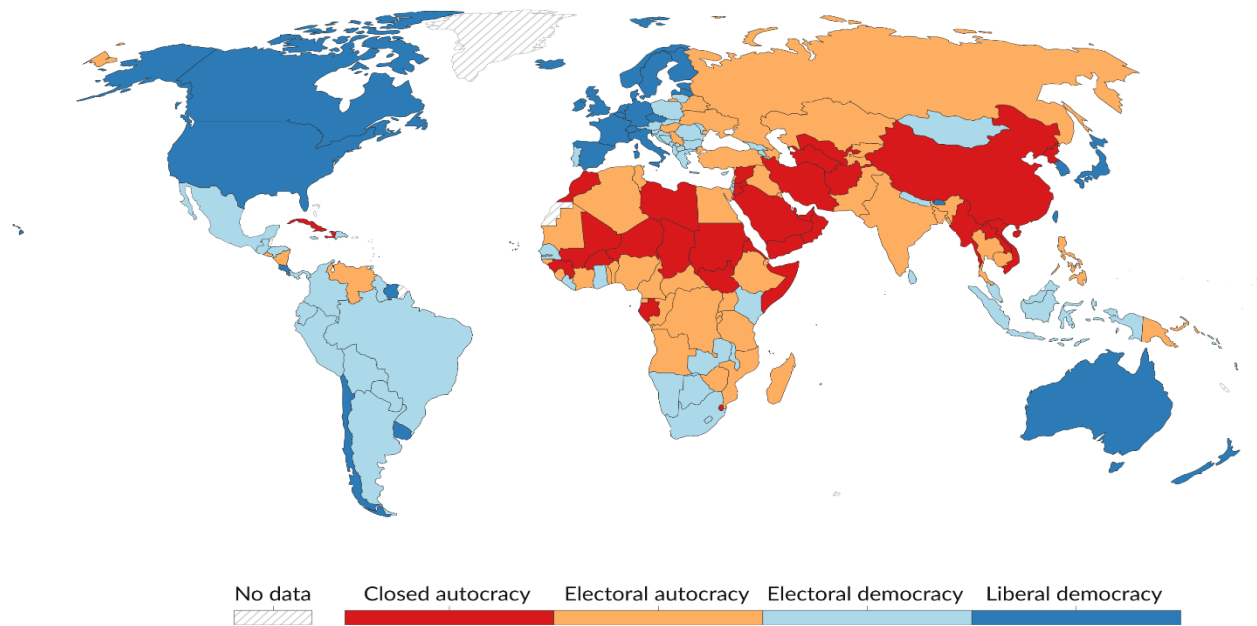
To this effect, this dissertation builds on these theories while addressing their limitations by developing a hybridized political economy framework that accounts for both commodified and coercive uses of digital technologies in the context of Ethiopia, where the intersection of authoritarian legacy, fragmented state capacity, and externally driven digital modernization cannot be fully explained by any single theory. Hence, this study integrates Polányi's critiques of marketization with informational theories of authoritarian resilience to explain how digitalization is simultaneously a vehicle for neoliberal reform and authoritarian consolidation. The next section discusses the increasing shift towards marketization and its impact on authoritarian resilience.

2.6. Authoritarianism and Marketization of Societies in the Age of Information

2.6.1. Global Trends in Authoritarian Turn: Digitalization and Political Control

Empirical studies revealed that the share of authoritarian states in the global political landscape has increased from WWII up to mid-1970s but declined until the turn of the century (Svolik, 2012). This trend deviated from Huntington's (1991) "third wave democratization" thesis, which posited that the end of the Cold War and the retreat of communist influence would promote democratization in many nations. Instead, the early 21st century has seen a significant global shift towards authoritarianism, with the share of world's population under autocracies increasing from about 45% in early 2010s to over 72% in a decade (V-Dem, 2023). The V-Dem Institute, affiliated with the Department of Political Science at Gothenburg University, describes this trend as a "wave of autocratization" (V-Dem, 2023, p. 11). the Freedom House described this worldwide expansion of authoritarian rule as "democracy under siege" (2021) and "a dire threat" to "global freedom" (2022) as observed in sharp decline of the country-specific assessment scores on political rights and civil liberties. Similarly, the V-Dem reports highlight that, for the first time in over two decades, there are now more closed autocracies than democracies, as shown in *Figure 1* below.

Figure 1 – Distribution of Autocratic and Democratic Regimes across the World



N.B.: The classification of regimes is based V-Dem Data (2024) and Lührmann *et al.* (2018).

Source: Our World in Data (2025).

In fact, the reports note that the decline in global freedom accelerated in the last fifteen years, although a long trend in the rise of authoritarianism has already been underway across the world for the last three decades (Freedom House, 2021). Today, only 20 percent of world population live in states designated as “free” implying that the “global order is nearing a tipping point” as the authoritarian model will prevail at the disposal of democracy (Freedom House, 2022).

In this regard, Rhodes (2021) identifies three structural factors that precipitated the global authoritarian turn. First, intensified globalization and capitalism have deepened economic inequality, fueling identity-based crisis, to the point where migration has become a relevant factor causing tensions, as in several countries of Europe (Melegh, 2023a; Joppke, 2021). Second, the post-9/11 era’s militarization and securitization have enabled autocrats to justify repression under the pretext of combating terrorism. This aligns with Freedom House (2015, p. 4) report that authoritarian regimes increasingly exploit terrorism-related threats as part of a broader reliance on “blunt, retrograde tactics” in the efforts to maintain their grip on power. Finally, digital platforms, initially designed for connectivity, have become vehicles for autocrats to control populations.

In this age of information, where digital tools and systems are part of everyone’s daily life,

controlling the societal narratives is crucial for the state, as ‘power’ is deeply “rooted in dominant discourses” that shape “individuals’ self-regulation, perceptions, interests and actions” *via* knowledge and technologies (Bevir, 2011, p. 461). In this regard, earlier dreams regarded digital technologies mostly as tools of empowerment and emancipation that enhance transparency and accountability in modern information societies (Howard, 2011). Indeed, modern ICTs have assisted the emergence of network of domestic and international political actors thereby influencing the political behavior and decisions *via* reporting and exposing (Feldstein, 2021; Castells, 2010b).

Practically, however, digital tools have equally empowered authoritarian regimes by providing unparalleled cyber capacity that serves a range of political interests, and complex mechanisms of “co-opting or circumventing the norms and institutions” of basic human rights *via* monitoring, tracking and controlling their citizens (Freedom House, 2022; Feldstein, 2021). This suggests that digitalization has rather sophisticated established authoritarian rules, while marking a retreat of democracy in liberal states (Feldstein, 2021). To this end, although many scholars acknowledge that the new digital technologies have “clear roles both in entrenching and starting new democratic processes” (Howard, 2011, p. 3), recent studies have substantially discarded such claims that digitalization yields democratic institutions.

Digitalization, characterized by the “compression of time and space” (Quah, 1999), has fostered a “knowledge society” reliant on digital technologies, and electronic integration of the world economy. The reshaping of economies into information-based systems has essentially amplified the global spread of market forces, empowering transnational corporations (Scheiring & Szombati, 2020). This transformation enhances the ability of authoritarian regimes to consolidate power by controlling capital flows, leveraging technological innovation, and adapting to shifting economic dynamics.

2.6.2. Marketization and Authoritarianism

The nexus between increased marketization and authoritarianism is multifaceted. It is observed in different parts of the world that marketization usually results in the concentration of economic power in large corporations that seek to wield significant influence over political processes and public policies in their favor. Such a tendency often leads to the consolidation of power,

repositioning the existing relational structures with the possibility of moving toward new alliances among business and ruling elites, weakening the accountability institutions that pave the way for authoritarian capitalism (Scheiring & Szombati, 2020). Authoritarian regimes leverage market principles to consolidate power and maintain control, allowing economic liberalization to stimulate growth and appease certain segments of society, while simultaneously suppressing dissent and opposition (Guriev & Treisman, 2019). This implies that market-driven capitalist transformations can yield economic success while hindering the development of free institutions, as in Japan, where the ruling elite preserved existing social structures by introducing reforms that extracted surplus from peasants for profit (Moore, 1967). Moore (1967) observed that such systems rely on strong political institutions to maintain order, often through alliances between the state and “new money,” emerging economic elites, ensuring mutual benefits and sustaining authoritarian rule.

Empirical studies also indicated that economic inequality would be apparent as wealth becomes concentrated in the hands of a few due to marketization that leaves out many marginalized. Evident through imposition of neoliberal economic policies, marketization of societies has rather featured capital accumulation, dispossession, and upward wealth redistribution (Koussa, 2023). In the long run, these structural conditions exacerbate economic crises by amplifying the volatility, insecurity, and instability of markets, setting the stage for authoritarian leaders to exploit. This phenomenon has been well noted by Bedeski (2009), who argued that authoritarian rules have historically emerged as a response to crises such as economic stagnation, income inequality, poverty, social unrest, and polarization that often justified oligopolization of the state through elitist dictatorship or monopolization of the state apparatus through personality cult. Digital technology further amplifies this process, as marketization enables the concentration of media ownership in the hands of powerful corporations, allowing powerful actors instrumentalize information to suppress dissent and manipulate public opinion, thus, shaping political discourses that reinforce authoritarian power (Melegh, 2023a; Guriev & Treisman, 2019).

Socio-economic crises linked to increased marketization often provide authoritarian leaders with opportunities to exploit fear (Wodak, 2015), uncertainty and mass discontent, justifying tighter control over society and abuses of human rights. Marketization, which typically involves deregulation to foster innovation and efficiency, can also lead to corruption, rent-seeking, and the consolidation of power by incumbents. In post-colonial Sub-Saharan Africa, the adoption of

neoliberal economic policies promoted by Bretton Woods Institutions resulted in a range of austerity-induced economic hardships and global market pressures, which often spurred the emergence of authoritarian regimes in response to mass protests in 1970s–1980s (Sanches, 2022; O’Kane, 1993). In the late 1980s and early 1990s, the structural adjustment programs (SAPs) imposed by the World Bank and IMF further exacerbated the economic crises and social instability, in countries including Kenya, Madagascar, Niger, Nigeria, and Zambia, fueling public discontent (Sanches, 2022), paving the way for new authoritarianism through right-wing populism.

Similarly, mass protests triggered by another phase of marketization unfolded in the 2000s. Economic inequality, unemployment, and food insecurity, arising from market-driven reforms of neoliberal economic policies, often provoked popular protests, particularly after the 2007 global financial crisis and the eventual commodity price hikes, as seen in the Arab Spring movements and Africa’s “food riots” (Sanches, 2022). These mass grievances and anti-system movements led to regime change, as in Ethiopia, Senegal, Burkina Faso, Democratic Republic of Congo, Gabon and Sudan, but not necessarily democratization (Koussa, 2023). Instead, new regimes often intensify the same marketization policies that caused the unrest, using the rhetoric of social order and stability to justify authoritarian measures. As Arrighi (1994) sought to explain, capital accumulation is the basis of state formation that evolved alongside capitalism, which underwent different systemic cycles characterized by dominant economic power and structural inequality. These cycles demonstrate not only the compatibility between neoliberal marketization and authoritarian resilience by aligning economic restructuring with the elite’s interests for control and state mechanisms that suppress democratic transitions. They also suggest the relevance of understanding the complex phases of marketization (Melegh, 2023a), and their nexus with waves of authoritarianism (Joppke, 2021).

In their seminal analysis of competitive authoritarianism, Levitsky and Way (2010) argue that the failure of regimes to democratize is rooted not simply in elite manipulation or lack of mobilization, but in deeply embedded structural and institutional constraints including weak civil society, limited access to independent media, and fragmented opposition. Where international democratic leverage is minimal, as in Ethiopia, incumbents can manipulate electoral and legal mechanisms to maintain control under a façade of democratic legitimacy. In this context, digitalization serves to entrench, rather than dismantle, authoritarian power, providing new instruments for surveillance, narrative

control, and repression. Rather than creating space for pluralism, digital tools are routinely co-opted to reinforce hegemonic authority, suppress dissent, and manufacture consent.

Doner, Ritchie, and Slater (2005) similarly highlight the importance of systemic vulnerability, the presence of elite threats, economic scarcity, and institutional fragility, as a key condition for the emergence of inclusive and developmental regimes. In Ethiopia, the absence of such vulnerability, combined with a legacy of centralized power, ethno-federal fragmentation, and external support, has produced a political economy in which digital infrastructure reinforces authoritarian resilience rather than reform. The adoption of technologies such as biometric surveillance, internet shutdowns, and algorithmic propaganda has locked the regime into a path-dependent trajectory of institutional closure. Moreover, digitalization accelerates marketization and economic growth, particularly in fintech, logistics, and digital governance, thereby expanding the regime's resource base and technological capacity. This enables coercive institutions to acquire increasingly sophisticated tools through domestic competition or global procurement, further embedding repression in a technologically modernized authoritarian order. While there is an apparent democratic backsliding in many parts of the world, the context has been set, here, in such a way to reflect that marketization do not reverse democracy in Ethiopia but reshape and reinforce authoritarian governance in new ways due to structural and institutional constraints, and digitalization in Ethiopia merely locks in these non-democratic dynamics including surveillance, digital repression, market capture, and technocratic control.

2.7. Rationales for Utilizing the Political Economy Perspective

The phenomenon of persistence of authoritarian regimes and the global resurgence of new forms of autocracy in contemporary society needs a proper explanation. The sociological and political science literature attempted to explain the debate over the survival of authoritarianism and the prospects for democratization *via* cumulative layers of theoretical tradition mostly rooted in modernization theory, political culture and Marxist perspectives. The scholarly works inspired by the grand modernization theory posited that economic growth and technological progress would naturally foster political development. Economic advancement and technological progress, it argued, would lead to political development through improved mechanisms of communication, organization and governance, resulting in rule of law, representation, accountability and transparency, which characterize the Western democracies (Lipset, 1959; Lipset, 1960).

However, empirical realities have contradicted the political target envisioned by the classical theory of modernization. The unprecedented levels of economic progress, technological advancement, and social transformation witnessed globally have not translated into democratization but, paradoxically, a shift toward reconfigured authoritarian systems. Based on the evidence from different parts of the world, empirical studies have astonishingly disproved the claim of modernization theory that regards economic development as a prerequisite for the transition to democracy. In certain contexts, economic growth and higher revenues rather enhanced institutional mechanisms for distributing rents, thereby legitimizing the persistence of authoritarian regimes, as seen in “rentier” states of Middle Eastern monarchies, sheikhdoms, and sultanates (Hinnebusch, 2006).

Moreover, authoritarian regimes, with the imperative to preserve power, have also continuously demonstrated adaptability of their political strategies and technical cannons for social control in response to evolving historical and socio-economic conditions. In some cases, authoritarian rule has been maintained by co-opting elements of democracy without conceding full pluralism or inclusivity, permitting elections to maintain an illusion of competition, while controlling critical institutions (Hinnebusch, 2006). As Bedeski (2009) notes, the persistence of autocratic rule is a function of dominant parties that effectively control key sectors of the society, particularly the economy, media and education. In authoritarian systems, control over the economy enables resource allocation to reward loyalty and deter opposition, while control over education allows indoctrination, shaping the beliefs, values, and ideologies of the population from an early age. Media is relevant to managing public perception, propagating government-approved narratives and propaganda that glorifies the incumbent, but also vilifying or silencing critics suppressing critical voices. The management of these key aspects helps to dominate societal narratives, control resources, and uphold a facade of legitimacy, all vital for the stability and longevity of modern authoritarian systems (Guriev & Treisman, 2019).

In general, the above discussions suggest that digitalization enhances authoritarian regimes endeavor for strategic control through leveraging sophisticated technologies to shape public perception, suppress dissent, and bolster their legitimacy by disseminating carefully crafted narratives. By promoting digital adoption under discourses such as economic growth, political stability, or social order, authoritarian regimes exploit digitalization to expand market mechanisms

while entrenching their power structures (Xu, 2020). Hence, in today's market-driven society, with the commodification of information, the main pillar of its political economy, the interplay between digitalization and marketization should be understood as mutually reinforcing phenomena with broader implications for societal governance. The contemporary shift toward authoritarianism is also closely linked to global neoliberal digital transformations.

As historical-structural analyses emphasize, such developments are not coincidental but relational and multi-dimensional. Melegh (2016), for example, underscores the need for historical and structural approach to understand how “national pride” political discourses are used to “discipline the post-socialist” states, reinforcing authoritarianism amid the “jungle war” of global capitalism. Thus, understanding authoritarian persistence in Africa, too, requires thorough analyses of structural political and economic conditions and the enduring impact of (neo)colonial histories shaped by global neoliberalism (Koussa, 2023; Sanches, 2022). Radicalized mobilizations, fragmented identities, and polarized narratives, such as in Ethiopia, deepen this trend.

It is within this framework that the study aspires to contribute to the ongoing scholarly debate by employing Karl Polányi's approach, while also adapting other theories on digital autocracies to explore the intersection of digitalization with governance structures, economic systems and power relations. Through this lens, it seeks to shed light on the political and economic dynamics to unravel the entanglement of digitalization, marketization, and authoritarian resilience.

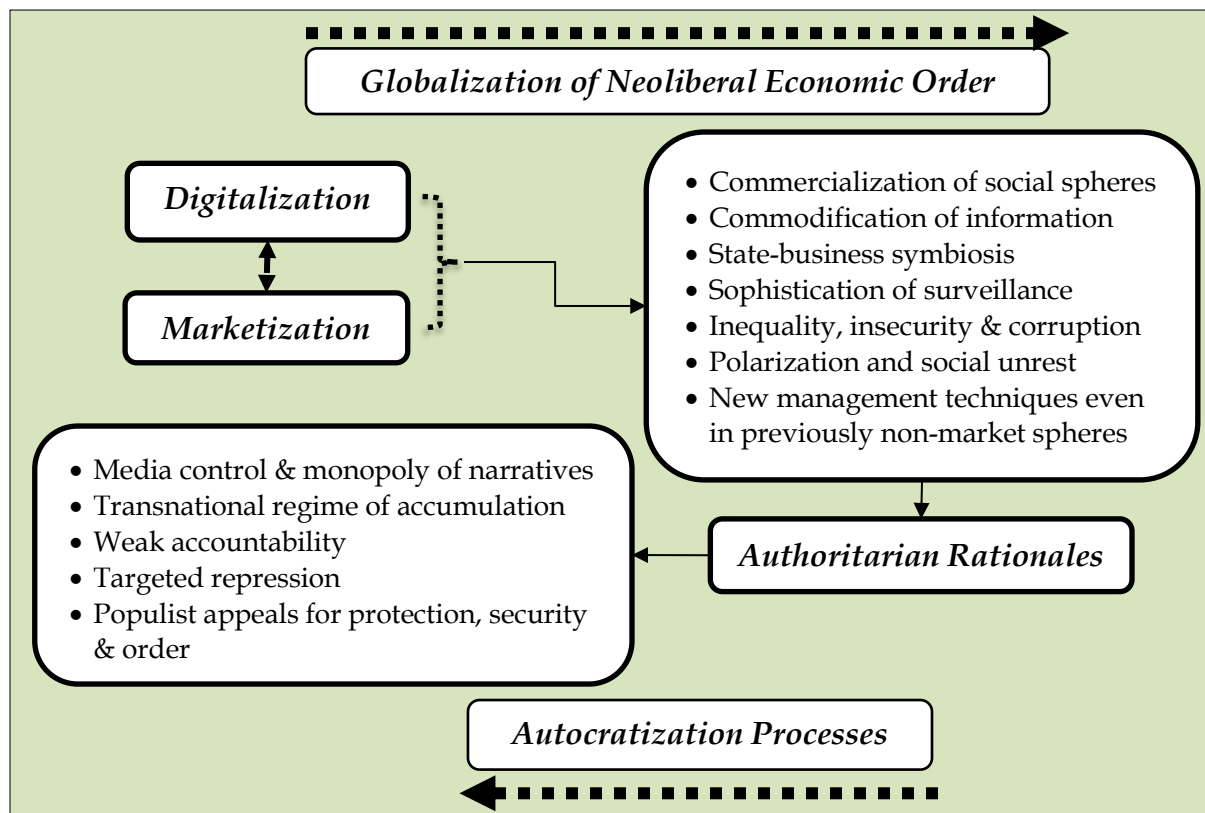
2.8. Conceptual Framework of the Study

This study employed a mixed research approach, following the “theory-then-research” procedure, consistent with Jon Elster's (2007) “hypothetico-deductive” method. In doing so, the existing theories have been integrated into a relevant analytical framework to critically examine the study concepts and explain the variables during data analysis and report writing.

Drawing mainly upon Polányian analytical framework, and other scholarly works, the notion of “digitalization” has been treated as a dynamic process that interacts with marketization of societies, which functions primarily *via* commercialization of conventionally non-marketable spheres of human society under neoliberal digital order. This process of expansion of market mechanisms into various spheres of society has profound social and political implications, shaping the political conditions and structures of power through constantly disembedding economic order.

As alluded to, the same process does not only represent the commodification of information, state-business symbiosis, and sophistication of surveillance or other management techniques also in previously non-market spheres, but it also exacerbates socio-economic inequalities, polarization, corruption, conflict, insecurity and unrest, constituting the political rationale for authoritarian persistence. As shown in *Figure 2*, the conceptual framework is drawn from theoretical, empirical and methodological literature review.

Figure 2 – Conceptual Framework of the Study



Source: Own Design, April 2024.

Hence, the analytical model of the study was built in such a way that key elements defining marketization and digitalization denote the major explanatory factors, whereas, authoritarianism has been regarded as an outcome variable, a phenomenon of autocratization, representing political processes and institutions enhanced *via* further expansion of market logic.

Accordingly, the data generated and obtained from key informants and relevant political actors, as well as survey, were analyzed mainly *via* utilizing Polányian conception of embeddedness, fictitious commodities and counter-movements. In addition, Foucauldian notion of panopticism

has also been used, along with other relevant works, notably of Zuboff (2019a; 2019b), Xu (2020), and Guriev and Treisman (2019) in such a way to offer fresh and thorough insights to the political economy of contemporary market societies undergoing digitalization.

Nevertheless, exploring country specific historical developments including the nature of the state formation, legacy of past dictatorships, and discursive frameworks in understanding digitalization in the context of marketization. It is within this perspective that the next chapter presents the political and economic developments in Ethiopia.

3. Ethiopia: State Formation to Informational Autocracy

3.1. Overview

This chapter is meant to provide a comprehensive context of the development trajectory of Ethiopia since its foundation. The history of building the modern Ethiopian state from the imperial monarchy, through a Marxist military dictator, to the new authoritarian regime in the post-Cold War era, has been reviewed focusing on the political and economic aspects. Accordingly, the legacy of authoritarianism has been identified as a crucial historical condition besides the country's gradual integration into global capitalism, especially in the post-1991, in view of explaining the rise of new authoritarianism, i.e. informational autocracy, alongside the marketization of societies and emergence of a trans-national regime of accumulation in the post-Cold War Ethiopia. In doing so, the salient characteristics of the new authoritarianism have also been explored in the context of digitalization process, as a phenomenon of double-movement whereby the development of counter-authoritarian struggle led to the entrenchment of autocratic rule in a new way.

3.2. State Formation: The Genesis of Competing Nationalisms

Ethiopia, with a population of over 120 million and more than eighty ethnic groups, has a parliamentary federal system consisting of 11 regional states, designed for self-governing ethnic groups, and 2 chartered cities. It is regarded as one of the oldest polities in sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), founded by the Christian highland kingdom of Abyssinia, that “managed to sustain an unbroken chain of historical civilization free of foreign intervention” (Tibebu, 1996, p. 414). This antique polity is typically African in terms of ethnic and socio-cultural composition, though unique in the manner of its creation (Markakis, 1989). According to Markakis (1989), the Abyssinian state exhibited a long period of medieval decline, but emerged as a prominent regional political entity in the second half of 19th century, successfully competed in “the imperialist scramble” *via* containing the Egyptian expansion and the Italian conquest in the Horn of Africa. It took its present shape around 1900 following the conquest of Emperor Menelik II (r. 1888-1913) that resulted in the expansion of Abyssinia, incorporating the then self-governing political entities in the west, south, east and southeast into today's Ethiopia. This marked the inception of “competing nationalisms” in the political development of modern Ethiopia, with the most controversial political figure, Menelik, at the center of the contemporary body politic consisting rival political camps, often leading to conflicts along ethnic cleavages.

The notion of “competing nationalisms” was used by Merera (2003) to capture the various national identities informed by adverse political narratives broadly summarized as: the national unification, national oppression and the colonial discourses. The *unitarists* uphold the nationalist view that usually regarded Menelik as an icon of unity and his territorial endeavors as restoration of the historic empire of the forefathers. His leadership has been portrayed as a precursor to “Pan-Africanism” and anti-colonialism as exemplified in the Adwa victory against Italy in 1896. Thus, the nationalist discourse interprets major political changes in Ethiopia in view of national interest and unity of all diverse societies in the country, thus, forming a political camp of pan-Ethiopian nationalism or Ethio-nationalism. Today, the nationalist political forces basically advocate the presence of a highly centralized government and national symbols towards ensuring the unity and territorial integrity, rule of law, order and stability, and realization of the natural rights to life, security and work in different regions of the country divided along ethnic cleavages.

The national *oppression* thesis argues that the formation of modern Ethiopia denoted the development of its predecessor, i.e. the Christian highland kingdom of Abyssinia constituted by Amhara and Tigrayan people of the country’s north, that militarily subordinated many ethno-national groups. The domination of the empire state by one or two ethnic groups, since the time of its creation, ended up in the development of subsequent systems of oppression and exploitation of several ethno-national groups. Emperor Menelik, ethnic Amhara, is considered responsible for the mass-killing and evicting the indigenous people in southern Ethiopia off their land and privileging Amharic language and Christianity that laid the basis for injustice and inequality in the socio-economic and political structures of the current Ethiopia.

The *colonial* discourse, on the other hand, upholds that the motives and objectives of political elites during the creation of modern Ethiopia were nothing less than colonialism except that it did not directly involve the white masters but the *neftegnas*⁶ that institutionalized a system of domination, subjugation and marginalization through modern European armaments. Adherents of this narrative argue that Menelik was rather a “black colonizer” or “second Hitler”, who at the height of his power, had extensively competed against the big European powers in the adjacent colonies in the Horn of Africa that resulted in the subjugation of autonomous self-governing

⁶ *Neftegna* is literally translated as “gun carrier,” but politically understood as a system of rule imposed and sustained by the barrels of gun. It should be noted that most urban centers in southern Ethiopia were originally garrison settlements, serving as administrative centers of the military (*neftegna*) rule in the new peripheries.

territorial entities of Oromo, Wolayita, Kaffa, Somali, and many other ethnic groups in southern part of today's Ethiopia. Accordingly, the political agencies that represent the *colonial* and *national oppression* narratives constitute the second grand political camp namely the “*ethno-nationalists*” or (*con*)*federalist*. The proponents of political ethno-nationalism have, therefore, long struggled for recognition of diversities and autonomy of ethno-national groups, in some cases secession from the Ethiopian empire.

Yet, the review of literature on multi-culturalism, ethnonational conflict and state formation in Ethiopia (Merera, 2008; Aalen, 2006; Abbink, 2006; Markakis, 1989) makes it clear that the country is neither a creation of one ethnic group; nor can the process be equated to colonialism (Gebbru, 1996). Nevertheless, the divisive nature of the narratives that inform political orientation in Ethiopia and divergent sentiments about the polity's past and present (Belachew, 2009; Alemseged, 2004; Henze, 1984), necessitate the investigation of socio-economic developments in the context of changing political “ethnoscape” (Nagy & Breuil, 2015).

3.3. Political Changes and Authoritarian Legacy in Ethiopia

Ethiopia took its current form around 1900 after the conquest of Emperor Menelik II, incorporating various self-governing regions into Abyssinian kingdom. Following Menelik's death, his grandson, *Lij* Iyasu, briefly ruled from 1913 to 1916, but his reforms were seen as a threat by the nobility and clergy, leading to a coup by Defense Minister Habte-Giorgis. In 1916, Empress Zewditu was crowned, and Ras Tafari (later Haile Selassie I) became regent and heir to ensure political stability. Tafari, a key figure in Iyasu's downfall, eventually eliminated rivals and became Emperor in 1930.

The codification of the fundamental laws of the country in 1931 provided the legal basis for the political rationales of the feudal empire state ruled by the emperor, whose sovereign power was constitutionally dignified as inviolable, indisputable and unquestionable. Under the guise of modernization and nation building, Haile-Selassie sought to markedly centralize the state power that enabled the last monarch to rule for over four decades. Considering his *de facto* leadership during Empress Zewditu Menelik (1916-1930), it could be argued that Haile-Selassie dominated the Ethiopian politics for nearly three quarters of the twentieth century. Thus, personification of the state in Ethiopia was, by no means, a surprise, as the “emperor” virtually meant the “empire”.

For the emperor, who portrayed himself as the “Ethiopian Moses,” any involvement, real or perceived, that celebrated the accomplishments of other statesmen, whether deceased or living, and viewed as a political threat to his personality cult and the regime’s legitimacy, was relentlessly hunted down.⁷

Nevertheless, the imperial regime, eventually, saw growing political challenges following the post-WWII socio-economic transformations in the country, as well as the incorporation of Eritrea and the aborted *coup d’état* of 1960. Opposition to the imperial regime intensified, especially during the last fifteen years of Haile-Selassie’s reign, due to the peasant rebellions across various provinces (notably Tigray, Eritrea, Ogaden, Bale, Sidamo and Gojam) and the uprising of leftist students that unsettled the very foundation of the empire by upholding the popular motto of “Land to the Tiller!” and the equality of ethno-national groups (Fisseha, 2019; Gebru, 1996). In fact, the Ethiopian Students’ Movement (EMS) was regarded as the engine of the social revolution since early 1960s *via* organizing and coordinating set of loose political networks and associations of the youth throughout the country.

Haile-Selassie’s strategies to co-opt and persuade the leaders of the students’ movement by the elders and religious leaders proved futile. The credibility of the *ancien régime* was further undermined by its failure to handle not only the 1972 famine that claimed more than 200,000 lives in Tigray and Wollo provinces, but also the rise in the petroleum and food prices (Berouk, 2010). The reform agenda that proposed the constitutional monarchy was too late to be heard amidst the heated revolution. The military was extensively used to suppress ethnic and regional rebellions until the army itself overthrew the emperor (Vaughan & Tronvoll, 2003).

By mid-1970s, the military seized the state power in Ethiopia amidst the revolution accompanied by frequent political and social violence, but then, only to mark the succession of one of the longest serving autocrats by another, i.e. the absolute monarch by the military dictator. Although *Meison* (an Amharic acronym for All-Ethiopian Socialist Movement) and the Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Party (EPRP), both evolved from the Marxist students’ associations in Europe and

⁷ In an interview, the late Professor Mesfin Welde-Mariam, a former opposition figure, recounted an incident where Emperor Haile-Selassie personally warned a historian not to write a book about the achievements of Menelik II. This was despite the fact that Haile-Selassie himself had erected a statue of Menelik II, whom he regarded as his “great predecessor,” on the day of his coronation (Mesfin, 2020).

North America, prevailed as the only civilian revolutionary political parties, they were organizationally incapable and politically too inexperienced to assume state power. Hence, the committee of military personnel, known as the *Derg*, effectively controlled the state apparatus to fill the political vacuum created by the absence of capable civilian party. Later, the Committee declared itself *de jure* government of the Provisional Military Administrative Council (PMAC) on 12 September 1974 (Mohammed, 2002).

In the power struggle that featured the military government, Mengistu Haile-Mariam emerged as triumphant after successfully removing successive leaders of the governing PMAC. The first chairman of the Council, General Aman Andom, a senior officer of Eritrean background, was subjected to death on 23 November 1974, for conspiring against the revolutionary members of the *Derg* besides allegedly supporting the Eritrean secessionists' cause. The general was killed on the same date that the *Derg* summarily executed fifty prominent leaders of the previous regime and members of the nobility. Similarly, General Tafari Banti, considered as moderate Marxist and "figurehead" chairman of PMAC, was killed in February 1977, along with six other council members, for reportedly attempting a coup against the revolution (Goemans, Gleditsch, & Chiozza, 2009). The removal of Tafari practically meant an elimination of institutional mechanisms including the "reorganization plan," the alleged cause of disagreement between the two officers, as it aimed at curbing the unlimited powers of Colonel Mengistu, the then vice chairman of the Council (Goemans, Gleditsch, & Chiozza, 2009).

Upon stepping up to the chairmanship of the *Derg*, Mengistu's government had to heavily rely on the political capital and technical support of *Meison*, but eventually estranged itself from all civilian political organizations (Merera, 2008), as the tension escalated due to radicalization of rivalry between *Meison* and EPRP. Particularities attributed to the conflict between the EPRP and *Meison* are subject to contests that lack consensus even today. However, the most reported point of contradiction was the priority of class and ethno-national identity in the post revolution political settlement. The political disagreement was also evident in the urgency of civilian government for reconstructing Ethiopian society in the aftermath of the revolution.

Nonetheless, the ideological conflict between the two revolutionary parties transformed into violent assassination and counter-assassination campaigns. The EPRP launched an urban guerilla warfare campaign known as *nech shibir*, an Amharic for "white terror," against the ideologues and

supporters of *Derg* at all levels of government administration starting from *kebele* leaders to higher ranking military officials. The leadership of *Meison*, *Derg*'s partner that accepted the supposedly short-term hegemony of the incumbent military by providing technical political support, thus, suffered heavily, the notable victim being Dr. Fiqrie Mer'ed, the Party's Polit Bureau member. The then *Derg*'s vice-chairman, Mengistu Haile-Mariam, also barely survived an assassination attempt on 23 September 1976.

These conditions provided a solid ground for Mengistu to violently respond through the red terror campaign known as the *key shibir*, aimed at eliminating the EPRP, eventually *Meison* as well. In fact, of all the atrocities committed by the military dictator, the red terror was one of the most heinous crimes, in which Ethiopia lost a generation of vibrant and revolutionary youth (Berouk, 2010; Merera, 2008). Human rights organizations described the situation as the "most systematic uses of mass murder by a state ever witnessed in Africa" (Goemans, Gleditsch, & Chiozza, 2009, p. 515). However, the expulsion of EPRP, later *Meison* and host of other political entities such as the monarchist Ethiopian Democratic Union (EDU), by the *Derg* created not only resentment but also reproduced more organized political resistances in various forms including armed struggle.

Once organized political opposition was eliminated, the military dictator created mass organizations like the All-Ethiopian Associations of Women (*Aisema*) and Youth (*Aiwema*) as tools of social control. He also restructured and co-opted vocal professional associations such as the All-Ethiopia Trade Union (AETU), Confederation of Ethiopian Labour Unions (CELU), and the Ethiopian Teachers' Association (ETA) (Fikadu, 2022). Over time, Mengistu gained further power with the adoption of the People's Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (PDRE) constitution, which solidified his rule, transitioning from a military leader in uniform to the head of state and chairman of the newly formed Workers' Party of Ethiopia (WPE), officially ending the fifteen-year rule of the "provisional" government. Therefore, from a holistic perspective, it was evident that the military coup served as a vehicle for the institutionalization of another autocratic rule under the guise of *Ye Itiyopia Hibrete sebawinet*, the Ethiopian socialism, and its rhetoric motto, *Itiyopia Tikdem*, set to make "Ethiopia First" via social transformation as envisioned during the revolution.

The *Derg* government was heavily criticized for its economic policies of socialist transformation, which ignored the actual social, political and economic conditions on the ground. As in many less-developed nations, the pre-revolutionary Ethiopia predominantly exhibited a subsistence economy

characterized by family-based small-scale production that operated *via* various modes of reciprocity due to un(under)development of market institutions. This social reality suggested a development path of “non-capitalist mixed economy,” over the possibility of socialist transformation (Szigeti, 2021; Girma, 1987). Yet, *Derg* adhered to socialism aiming to “consummate the transition” in the absence of significant “national capitalists and working class” (Girma, 1987, p. 1). Moreover, the socialist policies of collectivization, villagization, and resettlement failed to improve people’s lives as political motives surpassed economic objectives (Tadesse, 2001). The creation of new villages served as vehicles for totalitarian political control, making the PAs (peasants’ associations) and UDAs (urban dwellers’ associations) centers of both economic contribution and military recruitment. Resettlement aimed to dislodge armed political opponents from their social base but led to massive social dislocation in the process. In general, the forced imposition of textbook socialism, under the guise of social progress and transformation, destroyed homes and displaced pre-existing indigenous institutions and production systems.

After a decade and a half of human suffering (Tadesse, 2001), “agrarian socialism” ultimately became synonymous with the “ideology of poverty” in the minds of peasants (Dessalegn, 1994, p. 247). The *Derg* acknowledged that creating a socialist economic kingdom was far from reality and officially declared the “mixed economic policy” in March 1990 as part of the reforms to abandon socialism, allowing private persons to own more capital. However, it was too late to address the challenges posed to the government from below, and the reforms simply represented a “top-down counter-revolution” as significant to peasants as the great reforms of March 1975 (Dessalegn, 1994). Finally, an enduring civil war, the great famine of mid-1980s and social unrest, and the wind of international change as a result of the collapse of the USSR, the major socialist partner that preserved Mengistu in power *via* sustained economic support and uninterrupted supply of military hardware, all precipitated the downfall of the socialist military regime in the hands of rival political forces that the *Derg* labelled as *shifita* (bandits) and *wonbedie* (robbers), besides the secession of Eritrea, barring Ethiopia from the access to the sea.

In 1991, the socialist military regime was replaced by the Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), a coalition created and led by the Tigrayan People Liberation Front

(TPLF).⁸ After a four-year period of transition, the EPRDF formally reorganized the economy based on market principles and instituted a federation to address, at least in principle, the question of nationalities *via* granting the ethno-national groups the right to “self-determination, including and up to secession” (FDRE, 1995). Notwithstanding the democratic rhetoric in the legislative framework, the EPRDF’s rule, as we shall see in the proceeding sections, has empirically proven the emergence of yet another authoritarian government, namely “informational autocracy” that slightly differed in context and structure from its predecessors. *Table 3* (below) summarized the evolution of political governance in Ethiopia, since the era of absolute monarch to the incumbent Prosperity Party’s (PP), highlighting how each leader rose to power, ideological underpinnings, and forms of authoritarian rule over time.

Table 3 – Authoritarian Legacy across Regimes in Ethiopia

Dimensions of Comparison	Regimes Across Years			
	Imperial Regime (1931-1974)	Derg Regime (1974-1991)	EPRDF Regime (1991-2018)	PP Regime (Since 2018)
Regime Leaders	Haile-Selassie I	Mengistu Haile-Mariam	Meles Zenawi ⁹	Abiy Ahmed
Accession to Power	Heir to throne	Social revolution	Armed Struggle	Mass protest; popular resistance
Ideological Basis	Feudalism; capitalism	Socialism	Revolutionary democracy; developmental state	Towards free market system
Form of Authoritarianism	Absolute Monarchy	Military Dictatorship	Dominant Party Authoritarian System	Informational Autocracy

Source: Own Formulation, 2022.

As indicated in *Table 3* (above), the variants of absolutists rule clearly show the evolution and legacy of authoritarianism in the Ethiopian state. Reiterating the definitions given by Bedeski (2009), and Guriev & Treisman (2019), the Haile-Selassie and Mengistu’s regime exemplify the classical overt autocracies, characterized by a centralized and absolutist rule, though the military’s government featured a strict dictatorial control, marked by widespread repression and human rights abuses. The last two regimes that ceased the state power after the end of the Cold War, manifested the increasing reliance on free market economic policies, maintained effective authoritarian

⁸ Besides TPLF, members of the coalition are the Amhara National Democratic Movement (ANDM), Oromo People’s Democratic Organization (OPDO) and Southern People’s Democratic Movement (SPDM). In fact, EPRDF’s rule also relied on regional “allies”: the Afar National Democratic Party (ANDP), Benishangul Gumuz People’s Democratic Party (BGPDP), Gambella People’s Democratic Movement (GPDM), Somali Democratic Party (SDP), Harari National League (HNL) and Harari Democratic Party (HDP).

⁹ Although Haile-Mariam Dessalegn, the ex-Foreign Minister, assumed the premiership following the death of Meles in August 2012, the TPLF dominance remained intact until his resignation in December 2017 amidst heated popular protest and internal power struggle.

control *via* allowing certain degree of political pluralism (Hinnebusch, 2006), and limited the space for genuine opposition. Both Meles Zenawi and Abiy Ahmed's governments, unlike the *Derg*, employed less overtly violent methods of social control, relying instead on manipulative narratives and control over key state institutions. This shift clearly reflects the evolution of authoritarianism into a more covert form, apparently denoting Guriev and Treisman's (2019) "informational autocracy" in the digital age. The following sections examine the salient characteristics of this emerging authoritarian political system and its economic underpinning.

3.4. The Political and Economic Contexts to the Post-Cold War Ethiopia

3.4.1. Understanding the Salient Features of New Authoritarianism

As already alluded to, the new authoritarian regimes had generally depended on the "quasi-democratic camouflage that allowed them to survive and prosper in the post-Cold War world" despite some instances of "return to the iron fist" (Freedom House, 2015, p. 4). Similarly, upon the seizure of state power in 1991, the EPRDF replaced overt military autocracy with nominal democracy, launching a range of political and economic reforms adhering to the new rules of game set by globalization of neoliberalism.¹⁰ The EPRDF's ambitious reforms sought to *de jure* decentralize the state, democratize politics, and liberalize the economy (Vaughan & Tronvoll, 2003). The regime adopted a democratic facade, resorting to manipulative rhetoric, particularly through the FDRE Constitution (1995), which dedicated a third of its content to human and democratic rights. This exemplified modern authoritarianism consistent with Guriev and Treisman's (2019) framework of informational autocracy, characterized by its blend of repression, propaganda, and the manipulation of democratic institutions.

Despite outwardly embracing democratic norms, such as constitutional guarantees of human rights and multiparty elections, the regime systematically undermined these mechanisms to consolidate power. Central to its strategy was the practice of "democratic centralism," described by Howland (2017) as a hierarchical political system in which lower ranks unquestioningly followed directives from higher authorities. Although the officials claimed that this practice was meant to prevent

¹⁰ Though ardently resisted neoliberalism, Meles Zenawi, the chairman of EPRDF, frequently admitted that his government had no option other than adhering to the rules of globalization to survive in the global market competition. It happened once, in a televised appeal by local shoe manufacturers who sought state protection against global giants, Meles responded "EPRDF is not an angel," implying that the government could not shield them against all odds of free market, but to comply with its rules.

factionalism and ensure discipline (Markakis, 2001), it enabled the core elites to make binding decisions, often after internal debate, that suppressed internal dissent and eliminated rivals.¹¹ Instruments like *gimgema*, a performance evaluation process involving “criticism and self-criticism,” were ostensibly intended to ensure accountability but were often manipulated to remove rivals and consolidate control (Vaughan & Tronvoll, 2003). Furthermore, the EPRDF often publicly admitted its mistakes during each *tehadiso* (meaning “renewal”) as a gesture of transparency but, in practice, intended to instill renewed hope among the public thereby securing political legitimacy for the regime.

Control over information was another cornerstone of the EPRDF’s authoritarian strategy. While the constitution nominally guaranteed press freedom and access to information, the regime ensured dominance over political narratives by controlling media outlets but also sources of news such as Walta Information Center and the Ethiopian News Agency. These state-affiliated platforms acted as the regime’s mouthpiece, disseminating propaganda while marginalizing dissenting voices (Vaughan & Tronvoll, 2003). Private media faced significant barriers, including restrictive licensing requirements, legal harassment, and financial pressures, which led to a sharp decline in independent publications. Accusations of “disseminating false information” and “inciting racial hatred” were frequently used to justify the closure of newspapers and the imprisonment of journalists (Vaughan & Tronvoll, 2003). This systematic control of information aligned with Guriev and Treisman’s (2019) observation that informational autocracies capitalize on the public’s limited political knowledge to manipulate perceptions and conceal repression.

The regime also managed political threats through targeted repression, particularly against educated elites and urban residents, who were often at the forefront of opposition politics. Unlike the *Derg* regime, which relied on widespread violence, the EPRDF adopted subtler methods, such as public shaming, fabricated charges, and co-optation of opposition factions (Vaughan & Tronvoll, 2003). While the regime occasionally resorted to traditional coercion, such as military campaigns against the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) and the Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF), it predominantly relied on strategies that destabilized organized opposition without overt

¹¹ Dr. Aregawi Berhe, a founding member and former chairman of the TPLF, repeatedly stated that he left the organization due to its pervasive anti-democratic practices and internal factionalism, particularly with the rise of Meles Zenawi’s clique to power. While in exile, he founded and led the Tigrayan Democratic Party (TDP) and returned to Ethiopia following the change of government in 2018.

brutality. Following the 2005 election, for instance, major opposition groups, like the Coalition for Unity and Democracy (CUD) and the Oromo National Congress (ONC), were deliberately fragmented through the creation of puppet factions and the criminalization of core leaders.

Economic development was another pillar of the EPRDF's strategy for sustaining its rule, portrayed as a trade-off for limited political freedoms. Bedeski (2009) underscores the regime's argument that democracy could only flourish under conditions of political stability and economic progress. This narrative fostered a leadership cult around figures like Meles Zenawi, whose governance was credited with Ethiopia's significant economic growth, including a rise in GDP from \$10.5 billion in 1991 to \$84.3 billion in 2018 (World Bank, 2022). The regime frequently used economic achievements to substantiate its legitimacy and reinforce the perception of its leadership's competence, a characteristic feature of informational autocracies, as described by Guriev and Treisman (2019). While economic growth was accompanied by improvements in sectors like education and healthcare coverage, the emphasis on numerical achievements often overshadowed tangible societal benefits. The state media and affiliated outlets consistently highlighted the narrative of "double-digit" economic growth over two decades, promoting the concept of "developmental journalism." This approach aimed not only at curbing the Western media's focus on crises but also to undermine investigative journalism, which frequently exposed human rights abuses and corruption. By branding such critiques as "anti-development," the regime sought to shield itself from scrutiny and maintain its narrative of progress.

Finally, elections under the EPRDF, though outwardly democratic, were manipulated to ensure the regime's dominance. Opposition parties were fragmented and marginalized, often through targeted repression and co-optation. The 2005 election briefly challenged the regime's hegemony, but the resulting crackdown, including the killing of protesters, mass arrests, and the imprisonment of opposition leaders (Freedom House, 2008). Subsequent elections in 2010 and 2015 further entrenched the regime's control, with the EPRDF and its allies claiming near-total parliamentary dominance (Grinberg, 2017). As Vaughan and Gebremichael (2011) note, the regime openly admitted its commitment to a "dominant party system," using nominal democratic institutions to maintain its rule while curtailing genuine political competition.

In summary, the EPRDF regime, "although it described itself as democratic, was anything but" (Cochrane & Zewde, 2019, pp. 3-4). It embodied modern authoritarianism, blending democratic

rhetoric with systematic repression *via* control of information, highly centralized party structure, targeted repression, and economic narratives to legitimize nearly three decades of its rule, epitomizing Guriev and Treisman's (2019) concept of informational autocracy. However, its political and economic experiment has sparked polarized views since its inception. As Gagliardone (2016, p. 5) observed, Ethiopia under the EPRDF is often described as either a "closed authoritarian state" ruled by ethnic minority *via* fear, or a "developmental state" achieving "double digit" economic growth and improving livelihoods. Both perspectives hold merit, as the regime combined authoritarian governance with notable economic performance. Therefore, this duality does not reflect contradictory interpretations but represents complementary aspects of the political economy of Ethiopia's new authoritarian regime shaped by marketization and further integration into global economy. This process has also been enhanced by digitalization, enabling the regime to control information and public perception to project an illusion of democratic and market reforms, while setting the stage for capital growth and a new regime of accumulation.

3.4.2. Market Economy and the New Regime of Accumulation

The deepening of Ethiopia's integration into the global capitalism in the post-Cold War was self-evident in the institutionalization of free market economy and the surge in foreign direct investment (FDI). The Transitional Government of Ethiopia (TGE) initiated privatization by lifting restrictions on property ownership imposed by the *Derg*, leading to the formal institutionalization of a market economy under the 1995 constitution. However, Article 40§2 of the constitution retained public ownership of land, declaring it "common property" not subject to sale or exchange (FDRE, 1995). This allowed the state to firmly control land, the most critical factor of production. The political motive became apparent as soon as the government began to selectively distribute land to targeted domestic and foreign investors under Article 40(6), which permits land use rights for payment.

This apparent contradiction aligns with neoliberal models where state intervention underpins capital accumulation, which is often "articulated through the power of the state to impose, drive, underwrite and manage" the domestic and international dimensions of production "under the perverse ideological veil of promoting non-interventionism" (Fine & Saad-Filho, 2017, p. 687). The state becomes even more eminent in Ethiopia, whose political economy invariably depended on the control of land, the prime material resource, whereby access to the state power has always

been the ultimate mechanism for such control that determines the economic privilege and social status (Vaughan & Tronvoll, 2003). Moreover, the incumbent regime effectively used the apparatus of the state that has a long history of “dynastic power and property centralization” (Wassihun, 2020, p. 72) that explained the persistence of a “heavy-handed central government” in a constitutionally “democratic” federal polity with “autonomous” regional units, and a tightly controlled economic system in a legally instituted free market.

It should be noted that the Ethiopian state, argued Markakis (1987), is an “ethnocratic state” founded on the “explosive conjunction of antagonistic class and ethnic divisions that made it inherently unstable” (Vaughan & Tronvoll, 2003, p. 82). The distribution of state power in Ethiopia was historically based on “ethnic calculus” that favored an *Amhara*, or *Amharized*, ruling class (Vaughan & Tronvoll, 2003), prompting the TPLF to employ the discourse of “historical inequality” to justify state control over land. This strategy aimed to prevent the Amhara nobility from dispossessing poor farmers of other ethnic groups, framing such a scenario as a potential “re-feudalization.” Beneath the preamble of the new constitution, which emphasized rectifying “historically unjust relations” (FDRE, 1995), lay the TPLF’s effort to replace the Amhara-dominated class with a new Tigrayan ruling and business elite, entrenching an “ethnic economy” through rent distribution across state and party structures (Cochrane & Zewde, 2019). Centralizing economic control, the TPLF-led regime used state-owned enterprises and party-affiliated endowment funds like EFFORT (Endowment Fund for Rehabilitation of Tigray),¹² dominating the market and stifling competition as investments increasingly favored Tigrayan businesses while alienating others, thus, fueling political polarization as much of private sector aligned with opposition groups (Wassihun, 2020; Vaughan & Gebremichael, 2011). This economic dominance marked the rise of a new “transitory class” (Melegh, 2021),¹³ fostering the entrenchment of authoritarian system that enjoyed the privileges long infatuated by the former ruling elites.

Moreover, the EPRDF, founded by the Marxist-Leninist ideology of the TPLF, came to power

¹² As of 2010, the EFFORT owned 16 major companies, operating in manufacturing, mining, construction, agro-processing, trade and service sectors (Vaughan & Gebremichael, 2011), against which any domestic firm could hardly compete within the prevailing market structure.

¹³ Melegh (2021) argues that the development in post-socialist Hungary where the neoliberal elites aligned with intellectuals and technocrats did not only form a new “transitory class” that spearheaded privatization under the guise of modernization, the same process eventually led to the marginalization of the leftist critical voices, consolidating authoritarian rule through “civilizational discourses.”

through armed struggle but only to embrace “free market” amidst the triumph of the global neoliberal order. Initially advocating for “revolutionary democracy” and later transitioning to the “developmental state” model, both inspired by Eastern ideologies, the EPRDF eventually incorporated the Western term “democracy” into its narrative. This strategic blending of ideologies enabled the EPRDF to secure substantial aid from both the East and the West that fitted its own political and economic agenda (Gagliardone, 2016).

The market reforms, supported by international financial institutions (IFIs), equally attracted significant inflow of FDI, rising from negligible levels in 1992 to 6% of GDP by 2017, surpassing its regional rival, Kenya, and other market-oriented economies such as Nigeria and South Africa (World Bank, 2022). With the net annual FDI inflow increasing from USD 170 thousand to 4 billion in during the same period, Ethiopia became the primary investment destination in Sub-Saharan Africa, receiving capital from Western partners, particularly the EU and USA, within the “Washington Consensus.” In fact, the EPRDF regime pursued a careful promotion and regulation of foreign actors that absorbed capital also from the Asian giants including China, South Korea, Japan and India, as well as the Middle East kingdoms. Notably, Chinese state-owned companies such as CCC constructed key infrastructure projects and its banks like EXIM financed them, although few life-long TPLF/EPRDF partners such as the Italy’s *Salini Costruttori* remained the incumbent’s favourite for the construction of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD). By 2018, Ethiopia’s public debt, driven by Chinese loans, reached nearly one-third of GDP (World Bank, 2024), reflecting its strategic alignment with China’s development financing framework under the “Beijing Consensus” and Sino-African cooperation arrangements.

This surge of foreign capital strengthened the expanding “oligarchy of wealth” (Wassihun, 2020, p. 81) led by the emerging Tigrayan elites and unfolded the emergence of a transnational economic class, forming a new “regime of accumulation.” According to Scheiring and Szombati (2020), a similar condition has been observed in the post-socialist Hungary where the political entrepreneurs impelled the formation of a “new regime of accumulation” by reconfiguring the relations between the state, transnational and domestic capital. This development led to a complex entanglement of new institutional and populist authoritarianism, eroding democratic rights, polarizing politics and demobilizing society (Scheiring & Szombati, 2020). In Ethiopia, too, a new regime of accumulation emerged to serve the economic and political interest of new local elites,

simultaneously augmenting the domestic privileges of the relevant foreign businesses, as neoliberal (re)organization of “economic reproduction” leads to the creation of new agents, structures and rules of the political game for “different regime of accumulation” (Fine & Saad-Filho, 2017, p. 686). This new regime of accumulation also set the new basis for economic growth upon which the political legitimacy of the new authoritarian regime dwelled, while also impoverishing and disempowering others, as in the race for the “land grab” as shown in *Table 4* to offer a partial insight into the phenomenon.

Table 4 – Partial List of Large-scale Land Transfers in Ethiopia

S.N.	Origin of Capital	Land Size (Hectares)
1.	India	211,000
2.	UK	85,000
3.	German	63,000
4.	Israel	30,000
5.	Italy	30,000
6.	USA	28,000
7.	Pakistan	28,000
8.	Egypt	20,000
9.	Denmark	15,000
10.	Dubai	5,000

Source: Own Summary Based on the Discussion by Wassihun, 2020.

According to the Freedom House (2015), in less developed regional states such as Gambella, where land grab was so rampant, the leasing of vast tracts, usually in “opaque deals” with foreign governments, resulted in the eviction of over 70,000 people. To this effect, the oligarchy of wealth built upon the mass eviction of smallholder peasants by the EPRDF’s political economy of accumulation, eventually deepened inequality and fueled social unrest. This aligns with Evans’ (2010) critique of governments exploiting the developmental state narrative for over-centralization of economy, corruption and rent-seeking which undermines policy effectiveness. Lacking “embedded autonomy” as conceptualized by Evans (2010), the TPLF-led regime fostered elite capture and distorted its developmental goals, leading Wassihun (2020, p. 72) to describe the regime as a “development pirate” rather than a “developmental state.”

In Ethiopia, the new trans-national regime of accumulation featured the emergence of new version of authoritarian rule, “informational autocracy,” through democratic rhetoric that enabled the political entrepreneurs to endure the domestic political rivalry and fierce international competition

in unescapably digitalized global market economy. Therefore, the making of informational autocracy as a system of rule, in the post-Cold War Ethiopia, could hardly be understood without analyzing its economic logic as rationalized and structured by the global capitalist market that rendered political legitimacy, along with the monopolization of narrative set in certain discursive framework, besides the acquisition and management of information.

3.5. Digitalization and Instrumentarian Power in Ethiopia

The end of the Cold War marked a revolution driven by advancements in ICTs, leading to the marketization of societies through digitalization, a trend also seen in Ethiopia under the EPRDF. This new political economy, rooted in neoliberalism and digital technology, allowed authoritarian regimes to thrive *via* instrumentalization of information as a fictitious commodity (Zuboff, 2019a; Zuboff, 2019b). Ethiopia's integration into the global capitalist economy was evident in the rise of foreign direct investment (FDI) and a significant increase in ICT exports, from 5.4 million USD in 1992 to 78.2 million USD in 2017 (World Bank, 2022). Between 2006 and 2011, Ethiopia received substantial Chinese investment in ICT development, including a 3 billion USD investment from Huawei and ZTE for expanding EthioTelecom (Gagliardone, 2016). Although the country lagged in digitalization, internet usage surged during the last years of EPRDF rule, with nearly a fifth of the population becoming subscribers by 2017.

As Grinberg (2017) explains, however, the unprecedented growth in digital technology use comes up with an apparent “authoritarian dilemma,” involving the difficult choice between expanding digital infrastructure for national development and participation in the global information economy, or restricting the same to control political dissent and maintain regime power. It has already been indicated that modern authoritarians have the incentive to encourage widespread use of digital technologies, rather than blocking, as the users’ “surplus behavioral data” (Zuboff, 2019b) can help resolve the “vertical information problem” (Xu, 2020). Accordingly, the EPRDF recognized the political advantage of mass digital engagement, using users’ metadata for purposes such as legal evidence or during interrogations, which facilitated targeted repression of opposition and human rights activists.

Additionally, digital technologies can complement authoritarian rules through various conditions. Empirical studies reveal that digital networks such as internet and social media essentially amplify

divisions through “echo-chamber effects” that reinforce existing social cleavages or create new ones (Gilardi, 2021). In this sense, digitalization, while bringing people together, often fosters “mutual othering” rather than “mutual understanding,” amplifying within-group divisions instead of bridging differences. In Ethiopia, where over 80 ethno-national groups coexist, political rivalry remains the *modus operandi*, fueled by an ethnic economy and a “power equation” that asymmetrically favors the center (Keller, 2002), dominated by the ruling class at the expense of the ostensibly “self-governing” regional entities. In this multi-ethnic state that features a complex set of diversities and political organizations based on allegiance to competing nationalisms, the massive digitalization of the last decade only exacerbated the preexisting social cleavages, heightening political polarization that led to violent conflicts. Such conditions become even more eminent in many societies like Ethiopia with low levels of digital literacy,¹⁴ the skills required to effectively and safely use digital technologies (UNESCO, 2018), further limiting the empowering potential of digitalization (Park, 2017). Instead, societal polarization, accompanied by the recurring violence and insecurity, has been used to justify state repression, presenting an opportunity for the incumbent to target, undermine, and, when necessary, eliminate political opponents, who are framed as the scapegoats for any unrest.

Moreover, as the ruling class tightly controls the economy, marketization enables the government to acquire, adopt, and develop highly sophisticated digital tools and systems. These technologies significantly boost the state’s cyber capacity, further enhancing its instrumentarian power, used for authoritarian political purposes, including surveillance, censorship, and targeted repression (Zuboff, 2019b; Xu, 2020). Studies show that the EPRDF regime used its economic influence to access all forms of communication, including phone calls, SMS, landlines, and VSAT (Grinberg, 2017). Notably, the government acquired “FinSpy,” a surveillance tool from the British’s Gamma Group, which enabled live monitoring of Skype, webcam and microphone surveillance, file extraction, and the recording of email and VoIP communications (Grinberg, 2017).

Similarly, ZTE’s contribution is significant, providing the EPRDF with the “ZSmart” database technology, which granted the government and the National Intelligence and Security Service

¹⁴ Park (2017, p. 169) defines “digital literacy” as the ability to effectively and safely access, manage, integrate, communicate, evaluate, and create information using digital technologies for required purposes. He argues that digitalization empowers individuals only when they possess “information fluency,” the digital skills to navigate vast information, identify what is relevant, and apply it to achieve specific goals.

(NISS) unrestricted access to mobile communication data from 2009 onward (Grinberg, 2017). This technology enabled extensive surveillance, including deep inspections of opposition groups, human rights activists, and diasporic dissenters, while also blocking over 100 websites to conceal crises like droughts (Grinberg, 2017). State agencies like the Ministry of Communications and Information Technology (MCIT) and the Information Network Security Agency (INSA) also utilized similar tools to monitor online content and suppress government criticism, calibrating more sophisticated methods against political opponents depending on the perceived levels of threat (Grinberg, 2017). Mobile phones were particularly targeted due to their dual role in censorship, enabling both internet access and communication through SMS and calls (Grinberg, 2017), despite the constitution guaranteeing citizens' rights to private communications.¹⁵ Hence, the ruling elite capturing the state not only dominates other social agencies but can also outcompete them in local and global markets in acquiring and utilizing digital technologies, which are increasingly market-driven.

Nonetheless, the rapid digitalization in Ethiopia, however, led to a gradual transformation in the political landscape, as the widespread availability of mobile phones and internet access provided an alternative source of information to the traditional print and electronic media, which the EPRDF had effectively monopolized in various ways. While state-owned or affiliated print and electronic media dominated the domestic political scene, private satellite TV and radio channels, such as Ethiopian Satellite Television (ESAT) and Oromia Media Network (OMN), played a significant role in mobilizing and organizing the diaspora. This shifted resistance to a new level, challenging the information monopoly and, consequently, the political power.

The EPRDF took further legislative, administrative and technical measures to address the dilemma, tightening requirements for purchasing SIM cards and operating internet cafés. In June 2012, the government passed a law criminalizing VoIP services like Skype and Google Voice for calls over 30 minutes, with penalties of 3 to 8 years in prison and fines. Users of illegal phone services faced up to 15 years in prison and heavy fines. The government also blocked the Tor network and gave EthioTelecom the power to restrict video chatting, social media, email, and other data transfer services. Despite these measures, social media and blogs continued to play a role in

¹⁵ *Article 26§2* of the Constitution states that citizens have “inviolable rights” to own correspondence including communications made *via* telephone, telecommunications and electronic devices (FDRE, 1995).

political communication, exposing the ineffectiveness of these controls, leading to internet shutdowns during politically sensitive times and a violent crackdown on opposition. For example, the Zone-9 bloggers were arrested and charged with terrorism for their online activities (Venturebeat, 2023; Freedom House, 2015). This dynamic demonstrated the growing sophistication of authoritarian power, alongside an emerging counter-authoritarian movement, weakening the TPLF-led government and the transnational regime's interests. Thus, the same process that institutionalized free markets and entrenched authoritarian rule also fueled anti-authoritarian struggle, marking a shift from one autocrat to another under market capitalism.

3.6. The Counter-EPRDF Movements

The EPRDF's refusal to engage with political opponents not only underscored the government's anti-pluralist and exclusionary nature but also gradually transformed the dynamics of opposition. This shift occurred from being external to emerging within the EPRDF, from structured organizations to more spontaneous and unorganized mass protests, particularly following Meles Zenawi's death. It also evolved from confrontational armed struggles to digital warfare and cyber resistance. These dynamics, combined with escalating economic and political crises, ultimately led to the EPRDF's downfall in 2018.

Fisseha (2019) identifies two structural forces that drove Ethiopia's most recent political reforms. Over the past decades, Ethiopia has undergone significant socio-economic changes, particularly since the 2000s, marked by economic growth and improved access to education, health, and media. These changes, combined with advancing technology, fostered a "demanding society." However, political institutions stagnated, serving as tools for economic control and political dominance under the EPRDF. Public frustration was further fueled by maladministration and the perception that TPLF's "ethnic politics" and "ethnic economics" favored a minority at the expense of others (Cochrane & Zewde, 2019; ORTO, 2017). For most Ethiopians, poverty, daily survival struggles, widespread corruption, youth unemployment, and human rights abuses remained pressing realities. This resentment grew as the Oromo and Amhara, the two largest ethnic groups, voiced grievances over being "shut out of power by the TPLF minority," which dominated the ruling coalition, EPRDF (Felter, 2018).

Between 2015 and 2018, widespread protests erupted in Ethiopia, primarily in the Oromia and

Amhara regions, later spreading to parts of the country. Triggered by the controversial “Master Plan” for Addis Ababa’s expansion, regarded by the *Qeerroo* (the Oromo youth movement) as a scheme by the TPLF to displace Oromo farmers, the demonstrations known as the “Oromo Protest,” highlighted the deep-seated grievances. The government’s response grew increasingly repressive, particularly after declaring a six-month state of emergency in October 2016, granting sweeping powers to security forces. Human Rights Watch (2019) reported that more than a thousand protesters were killed and tens of thousands detained during the unrest. Despite the suppression of formal political opposition through institutional and technical mechanisms, social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter enabled decentralized coordination, with exiled activists playing a key role in mobilizing youth-led resistance (Felter, 2018).

Finally, the political upheaval ultimately fractured the oligarchic authoritarian rule of the EPRDF, driven by an intense internal power struggle. A faction within the ruling coalition aligned itself with the people’s demands, later positioning itself as “progressive forces” or “agents of change” and ascending to state power. This shift led to the resignation of Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn in February 2018 and the selection of Abiy Ahmed as the new prime minister through a vote within the ruling party.

3.7. Change of Government and Continuity of Informational Autocracy

Abiy Ahmed became Ethiopia’s Prime Minister in April 2018, following Hailemariam Desalegn’s resignation amid mounting protests and public dissatisfaction with the TPLF-dominated EPRDF coalition. Before assuming office, Abiy gained extensive political experience as a member of OPDO/EPRDF, serving in various roles, including military officer during the Ethio-Eritrean War, director of the Information Network Security Agency (INSA), member of parliament, minister of science and technology, and vice-president of Oromia Regional State (McKenna, 2024). Despite restrictions on studying while in office, he earned degrees in computer engineering, business administration and transformational leadership, mostly from private colleges of lesser academic reputation, but a doctorate in peace and security studies from Addis Ababa University, portraying himself as a technocratic politician.

Abiy rose to prominence during an internal power struggle within the EPRDF, emerging as part of “Team Lemma,” a reformist faction led by Lemma Megersa. His leadership was seen as a

response to the public's demand for democratic governance, rule of law, and political reforms, which he echoed in his inaugural speech, pledging democracy and comprehensive economic reforms to address inequality, poverty and unemployment (Cochrane & Zewde, 2019). Early in his tenure, Abiy's government introduced significant reforms, improving human rights, press freedom, and political space while working toward institutional autonomy.

The restructuring measures introduced by the new Ethiopian government were evident in several key areas. The opening of political space saw the return of opposition groups like the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF), Patriotic-Ginbot 7, and others, who had been exiled or suppressed. This followed the lifting of the state of emergency and repeal of laws labeling them as threats. The Prime Minister also pardoned around 45,000 political prisoners and released over 100,000 from regional prisons, signaling a shift away from repression (Fisseha, 2019; HRW, 2019). This was accompanied by the government's decision on media freedom, allowing the exiled broadcasters to return and granting full freedom to traditional media that seemingly ended the EPRDF's media monopoly. Digital censorship was lifted, at least temporarily, unblocking over 260 websites. By the end of 2018, no journalists were in government custody for the first time since 2004 (Mumbere, 2019; Fisseha, 2019). Political dialogue and public discourse flourished as a result.

The executive branch was restructured, reducing the number of ministries from 28 to 20 to improve accountability. New service charters were introduced to assess executive performance, though the legislature's initial assertiveness eventually faded. Gender reforms saw women appointed to key positions, including defense, revenue, and the Federal Supreme Court, while a former judge was made head of the national electoral commission, reflecting a commitment to fair elections. Justice sector reforms aimed to rectify the past role of the judiciary as a tool of repression. Many human rights activists and journalists returned, and oppressive laws like the anti-terrorism proclamation were amended, through dialogue with opposition parties, although the practical effect was negligible. The Prime Minister emphasized reconciliation, treating opposition members as fellow citizens rather than enemies (Mumbere, 2019).

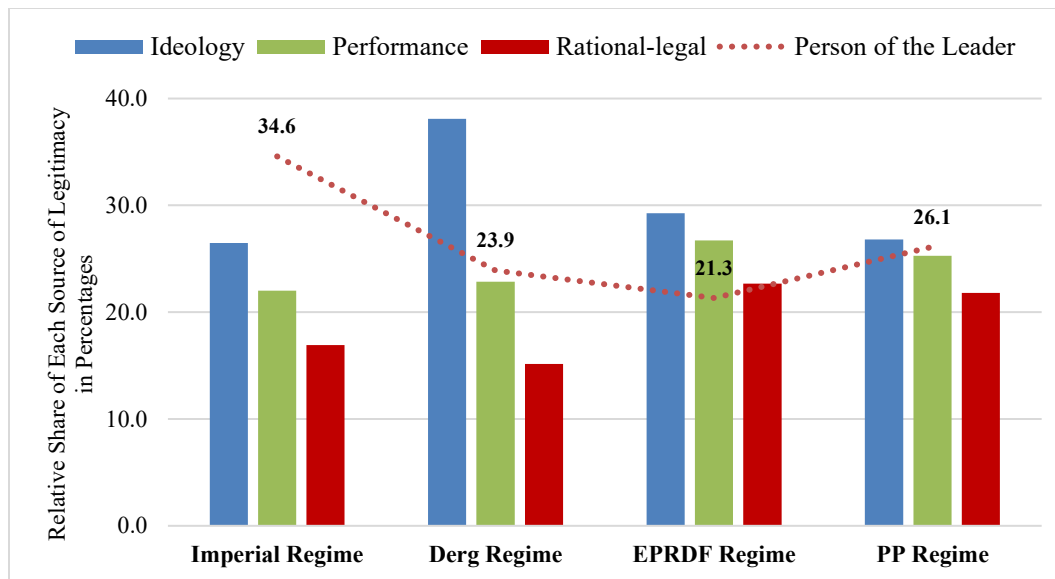
Overall, these political measures implemented by Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed's administration were widely perceived as significant steps toward addressing Ethiopia's longstanding issues of ethnic division, political stagnation, and authoritarianism. These efforts fostered hopes for a more inclusive society, social justice, and genuine federalism. The government denounced the TPLF as

“day-time hyenas,” associating them with corruption and mismanagement during their time in power. Abiy presented himself as the solution to these problems, stating that “Ethiopians need democracy and that they deserve it” (Cochrane & Zewde, 2019, p. 3). However, a towering set of challenges emerged soon to threaten the reform agenda (Felter, 2018).

Abiy Ahmed’s swift decision to dissolve the ruling coalition, the Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), and form the Prosperity Party (PP) was met with strong opposition from the Tigray People’s Liberation Front (TPLF), which chose to remain outside the new party. While some TPLF officials initially viewed Abiy’s actions as a reversal of previous government policies, others supported him, believing that the reforms aimed to rebrand the EPRDF and incorporate regional allies into a unified party. However, tensions soon escalated, revealing that the supposed peaceful transition was fraught with challenges, particularly over the speed and approach of merging the EPRDF and its regional allies into a single party. Emphasizing on national unity beyond ethnic identity, Abiy labelled the TPLF leaders as “the cancer of Ethiopia,” accusing them of betraying the Ethiopian state and its identity for the refusal to join the PP-led government. Despite the growing opposition, the transition to the Prosperity Party was realized. The party adopted “medemer,” an Amharic term meaning “addition” or “synergy,” as its foundational political principle.

Unlike the *Derg* and EPRDF regimes, which adopted popular ideologies like socialism or revolutionary democracy, Abiy promoted “medemer” as an indigenous philosophy that sought to bridge Ethiopia’s ethnic, religious, and social divides, rejecting foreign models in favor of homegrown solutions. This concept, also the title of Abiy’s book, was quickly embraced by media outlets as a symbol of Ethiopian identity. In fact, Abiy used nationalist rhetoric from the outset, declaring in his inaugural address: “We Ethiopians, while alive, we are Ethiopians; when we die, we become Ethiopia.” This emphasis on the nationalist rhetoric to build a personality cult around Abiy clearly signaled populist authoritarian trends seen in many parts of the world. The following *Figure (3)*, summarized from V-Dem’s (2024a) data, clearly indicates that the legitimacy of Abiy’s government increasingly relied on the personal characteristics of the leadership figure, compared to other sources of legitimation seen in previous regimes.

Figure 3 – Sources of Legitimacy¹⁶ across Regimes in Ethiopia



Source: Own Design, Based on V-Dem, 2024a.

As illustrated in the figure above, while overall government performance and the Weberian “legal-rational” institution have progressively become a relevant source of authority across regimes, leadership figure is a key mechanism of legitimation for the current government. Abiy’s leadership was often described as extraordinary by some, with his followers even labeling him “nebiy” (prophet), suggesting a divine mission to save Ethiopia. At times, Abiy depicted himself in ways reminiscent of Ethiopia’s past emperors, once remarking that his mother had foretold that he would become the seventh king of Ethiopia.

Moreover, the PP’s government implemented a strategy of monopolizing and manipulating information to consolidate its grip on power, continuing the informational autocracy established by the previous regime. The new administration recognized the significance of the internet and social media, in organizing protests and political actions that had contributed to the TPLF/EPRDF regime’s downfall. Yet, Abiy is aware of the pivotal role of digital technologies in political endeavours, particularly in maintaining power. On 30 November 2020, the PM stated that over two and a half years, there were 113 violent conflicts (37 in Oromia, 23 in Amhara and 14 in Addis

¹⁶ V-Dem operationalized each source of legitimacy (codes of the response variable in brackets) as follows: (i) *ideology* (v2exl_legitideol) – codified set of beliefs or models of societal relations, (ii) *key leadership figure* (v2exl_legitlead) – extraordinary attributes such as father of the nation, heroic, moral, pious, wise, etc., (iii) *performance* (v2exl_legitperf) – economic growth, poverty reduction, non-corrupt governance, ensuring security, etc., and (iv) *rational-legal* (v2exl_legitratio) – norms, regulations, rules, etc. used to justify their rule (2024b).

Ababa, and the rest across various Ethiopian regions), suggesting that, on average, at least one major conflict occurred each week, resulting in civilian casualties and significant property damage (EBC, 2020). In his report, the PM points to the political opponents like the TPLF and the role of digital platforms and media in amplifying ethnic and religious differences, portraying the adversaries as instigators of unrest. In response, Abiy's government continued to craft narratives, blaming opponents for undermining social stability and development agenda, as a political weapon to justify government's crackdowns on opposition forces.

Political tensions continued to grow, especially after June 2018, when Abiy narrowly survived an assassination attempt, and escalated into a full-scale military conflict in Tigray by October 2020. Coupled with the ongoing armed conflict in Oromia, the ensuing war resulted in significant human and economic losses, marking a dramatic shift from the government's earlier reformist and pro-democracy stance to the reemergence of authoritarian practices. This phenomenon was accompanied by free-market reforms, signaling a departure from the earlier developmental state model and embracing more liberal economic policies. However, this economic shift was paired with subtle authoritarian tactics, including information control, to manage public perception and maintain power, all while portraying nominal aspects of democratic principles.

3.8. Summary

In this chapter, an attempt has been made to briefly provide a comprehensive exploration of Ethiopia's political and economic transformations, focusing on the interplay between internal and global factors that have shaped its governance and state structures. Beginning with the analysis of Ethiopia's complex state formation and the emergence of competing nationalisms, the chapter elucidated how ethnic diversity, and rivalries have influenced political dynamics and governance. Tracing the evolution from absolute monarchy to informational autocracy, the chapter evaluated three major political upheavals: (i) social revolution that removed the *ancien régime* of Emperor Haile-Selassie from office and brought *Derg* military junta to power in 1974, (ii) the armed struggle that removed the socialist military regime in 1991; and (iii) the 2018 political reform that brought Abiy Ahmed's government to power following the popular protest in the country.

The chapter investigated internal political and economic dynamics within the context of Ethiopia's multi-layered social contradictions, identifying "authoritarian legacy" as a defining feature of its

political history across successive regimes. Drawing on Melegh's (2023a) assertion that historical processes should be studied in their "totality and unity," the chapter examined the global structural developments, particularly the processes of marketization and digitalization. It is within this vein that it highlighted the institutionalization of covert authoritarian rule in the post-Cold War era, characterized by information control, populism, and power consolidation, further emphasizing the critical role of digitalization and market expansion in shaping modern governance.

Ethiopia emerges as a compelling case study for understanding how digital technologies are integrated into political strategies to facilitate social control and political dominance (Gagliardone, 2016). This dynamic is exemplified by the advent of informational autocracy under the EPRDF, and its continuation under the Prosperity Party (PP) government after 2018. However, the chapter also notes the growing demand for democratization and socio-economic justice, signaling the potential for significant political change in a state historically marked by dictatorship and poverty. The next chapter provides the methodology and approach employed in this study, aimed at comprehensively analyzing the political and economic dynamics underlying these transformations.

4. Data and Methods

4.1. Overview

This chapter outlines the methodological framework of the study, starting with the discussion of the overall research approach. It delves into the exploratory sequential design, detailing its rationale, approach, and sequential phases and levels of integration. Then, the chapter presents the qualitative research methods employed, describing the sources and methods of data collection, recruitment of informants, and steps followed during thematic analysis. This is followed by the discussion of the quantitative research used for macro and micro-level analyses, highlighting the study variables, indicators, and measurement, data sources, and statistical model selection. Finally, it highlights the mechanisms pursued during the analysis and interpretation of the research findings, ensuring adherence to ethical standards throughout the study.

4.2. The Research Approach

Combining basic elements of both qualitative and quantitative methods within a single study has recently become a paradigm in research. This is essentially attributable to the general agreement among scholars that a mixed research approach can help gain a comprehensive understanding of the topic under investigation (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Whereas the quantitative aspect provides numerical data and insights, the qualitative dimension offers rich contextual information about the perspectives and experiences of the study subjects (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2011). In addition, qualitative techniques are often used to explore a phenomenon, generate hypotheses, and develop theoretical frameworks. Such endeavors could, then, be complemented with the quantitative methods that may be employed to test hypotheses, triangulate and cross-validate patterns identified qualitatively, and generalize findings to larger populations (Doyle, Brady, & Byrne, 2009).

This iterative process of exploration and confirmation strengthens the rigor and validity of the research. The same rationales justified the selection of a mixed research approach for this study, integrating the quantitative and qualitative methods to enhance the triangulation of findings, corroboration of results, and provide a more nuanced interpretation of the outcomes (Van Griensven, Moore, & Hall, 2014). The details of the study design employed, research procedures, and strategies of data collection and analyses adopted are discussed in the proceeding sections.

4.3. Exploratory Sequential Design

4.3.1. Rationale for Selecting the Exploratory Sequential Design

As repeatedly alluded to, the main purpose of this study is to capture the long-term political and economic developments driven by globalized market forces, spurred by digital technology in post-Cold War Ethiopia. To achieve this objective, an exploratory sequential design (ESD) was selected in such a way as to guide the research process whereby the qualitative aspects of the study come first to be followed by the quantitative. More specifically, the exploratory sequential design (ESD) of mixed methods has been used by adhering to the so-called “theory-then-research” path of inquiry, which is common in social sciences.

Exploratory Sequential Design (ESD) is often justified as an effective approach for integrating qualitative and quantitative methods to investigate complex phenomena, with qualitative data collection and analysis typically preceding the quantitative phase. The qualitative phase generates hypotheses, uncovers underlying mechanisms, and provides contextual insights, while the quantitative phase enables broader generalizations and statistical validation. This sequential approach facilitates the comparison of findings across methods, revealing convergences, divergences, or complementary insights, and is particularly useful for interpreting unexpected quantitative results (Dawadi, Shrestha, & Giri, 2021; Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Creswell & Clark, 2018). By employing a smaller qualitative sample alongside a larger quantitative one, as the case with this study, ESD ensures both in-depth exploration and rigorous analysis, offering a comprehensive understanding of research issues (Creswell & Clark, 2018). These reasons justified the selection of ESD as appropriate research design that fits the purpose of the study.

4.3.2. Research Sequence, Weighting and Levels of Integration

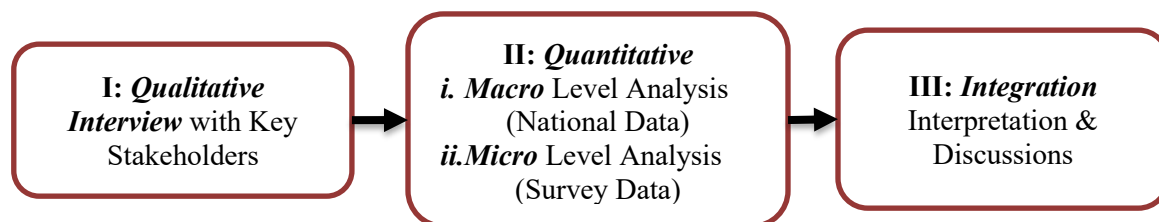
It is worth noting that ESD, of mixed methods research, involves more than merely deciding the order and type of data collection, but it also includes choosing the methods for data processing and presentation, which often come with significant challenges (Toyon, 2021). Yet, the literature is consistent about the operational phases of exploratory sequential design. ESD is usually set to begin with the acquisition and analysis of qualitative data forming the first phase, whereby the quantitative methods constitute the follow-up phase of the research (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Researchers often use the first phase to qualitatively identify the relational mechanisms of the

study variables and then design quantitative methods to explain or test those relations in detail (Dawadi, Shrestha, & Giri, 2021). Similarly, this study was conducted in two phases in such a way to provide a comprehensive explanation of the study phenomenon, consistent with Creswell & Creswell (2018), Creswell & Clark (2018), and Dawadi *et al.* (2021).

The first phase began with a desk review to analyze patterns of political development and the growth of digital technology, focusing on the intersection of digitalization, marketization, and (de)democratization. This involved document analysis of both published and unpublished works, alongside qualitative data collection through in-depth interviews with experts from ICT institutions, political actors, and academicians. The qualitative data was thematically analyzed to explore perspectives, experiences, and underlying reasons, which facilitated the identification of key variables and the formulation of hypotheses. These insights were instrumental in determining specific indicators and tools for organizing and analyzing quantitative data, which were later integrated into statistical models to test the hypotheses and substantiate qualitative findings.

The second phase centered on quantitative analysis using statistical techniques to test the hypotheses and examine the relationship between digitalization and authoritarianism. A conceptual framework guided the operationalization of democracy levels and statistical modeling, revealing significant trends such as the instrumental role of mobile phones. Survey data from 2013 and 2020 provided micro-level insights, highlighting also the continuity in institutional behaviors and political outcomes across two successive governments, despite slight differences in approach. This two-phase approach enabled a comprehensive understanding of how digitalization contributes to the persistence of authoritarianism in Ethiopia. *Figure 4* below summarizes the sequence of data collection, analyses, and integration of findings.

Figure 4 – Sequence of Data Collection and Analyses

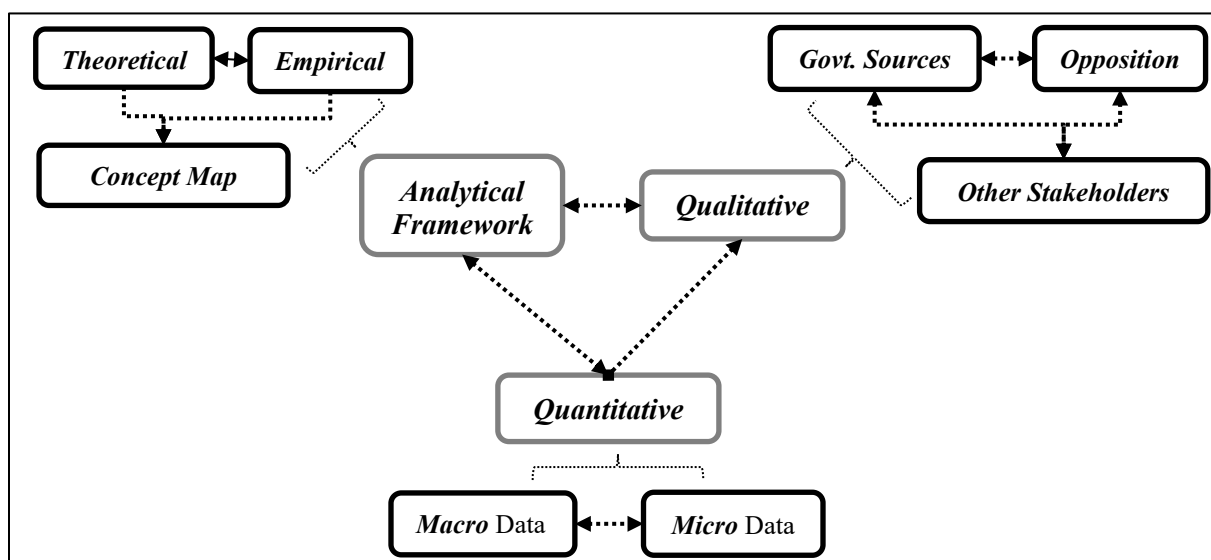


Source: Own Formulation, April 2024.

In terms of weighting, the study sought to balance qualitative and quantitative elements by allocating relatively equivalent levels of importance to both, ensuring their findings were meaningfully integrated to leverage the strengths of each. The quantitative analysis spanned from 1999 to 2023, incorporating the entire period covering the development in the subjects of interest to this research, whereas the representative survey data collected at different intervals helped minimize biases in observations or subgroups. Both macro- and micro-level analyses received equivalent emphasis, recognizing their complementarity in examining Ethiopia’s political and economic processes.

Integration was achieved through triangulation, cross-comparing findings from various data sources to validate and corroborate them at multiple levels of analysis, interpretation, and discussion. The results of qualitative analysis obtained from interviews with ruling party officials, opposition leaders, and political rights activists were triangulated and cross-validated against the theoretical and empirical literature as per the conceptual framework of the study. Then, the findings obtained from macro quantitative analyses were triangulated against that of the micro level, in such a way as to, finally, cross-validate the quantitative results with qualitative analyses, as illustrated in *Figure 5* below.

Figure 5 – Integration and Triangulation of Analysis



Source: Own Formulation, April 2024.

4.4. Qualitative Research

It has already been mentioned that the qualitative assessment of the topic was undertaken in the initial phase of the research to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the subject. This phase was instrumental in generating hypotheses and identifying key variables through an in-depth exploration. Additionally, the flexibility of the qualitative method allowed for the incorporation of emerging insights during the quantitative analyses, enhancing the study's overall rigor by triangulating data from multiple sources, thereby increasing the reliability and validity of the research outcomes.

4.4.1. Sources and Methods of Qualitative Data Collection

This study utilized both secondary and primary sources for the qualitative component. Secondary data were gathered through document reviews and desktop research from various sources, including books, journal articles, policy papers, laws, research reports, and published or unpublished materials from official websites and online platforms. Primary data, on the other hand, were collected through semi-structured interviews with key informants such as government officials, political party leaders, human rights activists, civil society leaders, academicians, ICT experts, and selected citizens. These diverse sources provided a comprehensive perspective on the study topics.

Semi-structured interviews (SSI) were employed as the primary tool for collecting empirical qualitative data, following practical guidelines proposed by Rabionet (2011). The interview process included designing an interview protocol, adhering to ethical guidelines, and conducting and recording the interviews. The interview guide was developed in alignment with suggestions from Adams (2015) and Kallio *et al.* (2016), featuring core themes and follow-up questions designed to elicit informants' perceptions and experiences (*See Appendix – I*). Questions addressed topics such as the evolution of digital communication in Ethiopian politics, the role of social media, big data analytics, and concerns about privacy and government surveillance. This approach provided valuable insights into the political applications of digital technology, technical analysis methods, and associated ethical and security concerns.

4.4.2. Recruitment of Informants

This study employed the “information power” model proposed by Malterud *et al.* (2016) to guide the qualitative sampling process. This model suggests that the number of participants required depends on the relevance of the information they provide, with fewer participants needed if the study’s aim is focused, supported by established theory, and involves strong dialogue and in-depth longitudinal analysis. Guided by this framework, key informants were prioritized based on factors such as age, expertise and political affiliations of the person, as provided in *Table 5* below.

Table 5 – Characteristics of the Key Informants

Parameter	Informant’s Domain	Frequency	Percentage
<i>Denomination</i>	Ruling Party	9	34.6
	Opposition	6	23.1
	HR Advocate	1	3.8
	Media	2	7.7
	Academics	8	30.8
<i>Age</i>	Minimum	31	
	Maximum	56	
	Range	25	
	Mean	40.19	
<i>Gender</i>	Male	24	92.3
	Female	2	7.7
<i>Education*</i>	High School	1	3.8
	BA/BSc	3	11.5
	MA/MSc/MBA/MPH/MPM	19	73.1
	Ph.D./Ph.D. Candidate	3	11.5
<i>Place Residence</i>	Addis Ababa	9	34.6
	Jimma	7	26.9
	Goba	2	7.7
	Robe	2	7.7
	Mekelle	2	7.7
	Nekemte	1	3.8
	Edmonton, Calgary & Dubai	3 (1 Each)	11.5

**See Appendix – II for the detailed profile of informants.*

Source: Own Summary, April 2024.

Accordingly, a total of 26 interviewees were selected to provide a comprehensive understanding of diverse roles and perspectives within the political landscape, ensuring the collection of rich and insightful data while minimizing data saturation. While the sample included individuals with varying ages, educational backgrounds, social roles, and political affiliations, the predominance of male participants reflected both the political sensitivity of the topic and the underrepresentation of

women in academia and local politics. Despite this limitation, the range of perspectives offered by the informants contributed to a nuanced understanding of the study themes. Young participants and IT experts of key government institutions provided fresh viewpoints and technological insights, particularly regarding digital integration in political and administrative realms. Engagement with senior politicians proved essential for gaining extensive experience and information pertinent to changing political discourses and leadership across both ruling and opposition parties. Human rights activists, legal advocates, and media professionals, alongside academicians, represented robust educational backgrounds that enriched the research with profound critical analysis, thus enhancing the diversity of intellectual insights.

4.4.3. Methods and Procedures of Qualitative Data Analysis

Thematic analysis is a widely used qualitative research technique in the social sciences, designed to identify, analyze, and report patterns or themes within various data forms, including text and audio-visual materials. This method serves as a foundational skill for qualitative researchers, often supporting other analytical approaches such as narrative analysis and grounded theory (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Known for its flexibility and accessibility, thematic analysis enables researchers to meaningfully organize and interpret recurring ideas within datasets while uncovering complex insights. Although the process can be time-consuming, its versatility makes it particularly effective for exploring multifaceted phenomena. In this study, thematic analysis was employed to investigate the interplay between digitalization, autocratization, and the increasing marketization of societies, providing structured yet adaptable empirical insights.

The procedural steps for conducting thematic analysis, as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), were applied in this study. First, interview recordings were transcribed into text data, followed by iterative listening and reading to familiarize the researcher with the content and identify initial patterns. This led to the development of draft codes and themes focused on key topics: the evolution of political communication, the role of digital media in youth mobilization and political engagement, the use of big data and advanced social media analytics, security and privacy concerns tied to data commercialization, and government practices in monitoring and surveillance. Additionally, the analysis highlighted the dual political impact of digital technologies, where social media access fosters both political empowerment and vulnerability.

The initial themes were subsequently reviewed, refined, and renamed to better align with the key findings of the qualitative study. Ultimately, the thematic analysis offered valuable insights into the transformative role of digital media in shaping political communication and engagement, emphasizing the intricate dynamics and tensions between technology, politics, and commercialization within the Ethiopian context.

4.4.4. Limitations of Qualitative Data Collection and Mitigation Strategies

Interview-based qualitative research always carries limitations such as social desirability bias, recall bias, or emotional framing, especially in the context of politically charged data. While this study employed a purposive sampling strategy based on the “information power” model to ensure data richness and relevance, it is important to acknowledge inherent limitations and biases in the interview process in a politically sensitive environment like Ethiopia, where issues of trust, surveillance, and social desirability can shape what participants are willing to disclose. On the one hand, the political nature of the topic, and the reluctance of some interviewees because of it, led to some limitations. On the other hand, there was concern that participants with strong political opinions or vested interests may have been more willing to participate, potentially skewing the findings toward more vocal or polarized perspectives.

To mitigate these effects, several strategies were employed: (1) including participants with diverse political orientations, professional backgrounds, and institutional affiliations to capture a range of perspectives; (2) triangulating interview data with secondary sources such as official documents, media reports, and academic literature; and (3) practicing reflexivity throughout the research process. Besides, the interviewer’s positionality has been consistently maintained to earn trust from respondents, assuring them that the interview data would be used neutrally and transparently for academic purposes on the basis of anonymity of informants. These steps do not eliminate bias entirely, but they strengthen the credibility and contextual sensitivity of the findings *via* balancing the information power with diversity of sources, purposefully including the dissenting or ambivalent voices as deliberate choices justified by the research goals and context. Yet, perfect diversification was equally challenging.

Nonetheless, divergent views were documented and analyzed to avoid bias from selective interpretation and enhance reliability. Thematic analysis followed a rigorous coding protocol to

cross-check interpretations. Discrepancies among themes were identified through iterative process. Direct quotations of interviewees included in the thesis were selected to illustrate core themes and represent a diversity of perspectives, not to cherry-pick evidence. Where possible, findings were shared with selected participants for validation and feedback, which helped ensure authenticity of the interpretations. The full qualitative dataset is archived for potential audit and verification.

4.5. Quantitative Research

Pursuant to the objective of the study and its long-term orientation, the quantitative analyses were conducted in two stages during the second phase of the research. These analyses, carried out at both macro and micro levels, aimed to comprehensively examine the interaction of the study variables at the national scale, ultimately triangulating the impact of digitalization with society's everyday political experiences.

4.5.1. Macro-level Analysis: Operationalization of Variables

The macro-level quantitative study operationalized key variables to build a statistical model grounded in the study's analytical framework. Drawing from theoretical and empirical literature, *authoritarianism* was, thus, operationalized as a set of characteristics describing the political behavior of autocratic regimes, including diminished human rights protection, restricted political freedom, curtailed civil liberties, and poor electoral quality, consistent with the definitions of Linz (1964) and Bedeski (2009). Quantitatively, authoritarianism was measured using lower scores on the democracy index, following the approaches of Lührmann *et al.* (2018) and Boese *et al.* (2022). Accordingly, the state of democracy (*Dem*) has been treated as an outcome variable, denoted by annual standardized scores, where a significant long-term decline indicated autocratization, and a notable increase signified democratization, as operationalized by Boese *et al.* (2022).

The identification of relevant variables for the macro-level analysis in this study is grounded in existing theoretical and empirical literature discussed in the preceding chapters. The increasing trend of autocratization is intertwined with the rise of an “information society” driven by advancements in digital technology and the intensification of neoliberal economic systems in the post-Cold War era (Castells, 2010a). This dynamic has led to the commodification of information (Zuboff, 2019b), creating or sustaining authoritarian institutions aligned with new market logics

that erode traditional redistributive and allocative systems. Empirical studies further link authoritarianism to neoliberal free-market economies (Koussa, 2023), making it essential to incorporate variables that capture these structural and economic transformations. Using Polányian (2001) framework, the analysis sought to examine how marketization fosters counter-democratic conditions by institutionalizing authoritarian mechanisms amidst socio-economic crises.

Key explanatory variables have been identified to examine these dynamics. Capital formation (K) serves as an indicator of economic performance, often used by authoritarian regimes to legitimize their rule (Guriev & Treisman, 2019). Trade openness ($TrOpn$), i.e. the ratio of the sum of a country's imports and exports to GDP, as a proxy for globalization, reflecting a country's integration into global markets, influencing institutional changes and political regimes (Neumayer & De Soysa, 2005; Melegh, 2023b). However, the process of globalization has never been straightforward, but exhibits a “rhythm of expansion and contraction,” following a cyclical pattern of market development, which is crucial for understanding how national economies are profoundly reshaped through foreign direct investment and accompanying institutional changes (Melegh, 2023a). Hence, foreign direct investment (FDI) is included to capture the impact of transnational wealth on domestic political conditions, as rising foreign investments often reshape state-capital relations and reinforce authoritarian tendencies (Scheiring & Szombati, 2020).

Digitalization is represented by mobile subscriptions (Mbl), a key proxy for access to and usage of digital technologies. Changes in mobile subscription rates reflect market dynamics, digital divides, and disparities across demographic and regional groups, highlighting barriers such as affordability, infrastructure, and digital literacy. Previous studies have already noted that, in countries like Ethiopia, the expansion of technologies involving mobile phones serves as a key indicator of digitalization, illustrating citizens' access to digital tools for economic and political engagement. As Grinberg (2017) notes, the mobile phones are rather crucial digital instruments for authoritarian control due to their “dual censorship” function as users predominantly access the internet *via* mobile, besides its SMS and call services. Hence, mobile subscription data is a valuable indicator for assessing the extent of digitalization, particularly as a reflection of citizens' access and usage of digital tools and systems for economic and political communication, coordination, and organization, predominantly through smartphones, thus, forming an integral part of digital politics such as internet and social media (V-Dem, 2024b). To this end, the annual change in the

share of mobile phone subscribers in the total population has been regarded as a proxy for levels of digitalization in our modeling.

Moreover, authoritarian regimes often invest heavily in public security to maintain political control and social stability. Expenditures on law enforcement, such as police, security services, courts, and prisons, are key indicators of a state’s repressive capacity, enabling governments to carry out “detentions, monitoring, harassments, beatings, and torture of local activists and dissidents” at various levels of administration (Xu, 2020, p. 6). Thus, the proportion of government expenditure on security (*Scrt*) in the total government budget is a critical variable for analyzing authoritarianism in the quantitative model. The list of variables, notations, and measurements used for the macro level quantitative analysis are mentioned in *Table 6* below.

Table 6 – Indicators and Measurements of Variables Used in Macro Level Analysis

Variable	Notation	Indicator	Measurement
Authoritarianism	<i>Dem</i>	V-Dem’s democracy index	Interval [0-1]
Mobile Subscription	<i>Mbl</i>	Mobile phone subscr. in population	Percent (%)
Security Budget	<i>Scrt</i>	Share of security in govt. budget	Percent (%)
Capital	<i>K</i>	Growth rate of capital formation in GDP	Percent (%)
Trade Openness	<i>TrOpn</i>	Ratio of imports & exports to GDP	Percent (%)
Foreign Direct Investment	<i>FDI</i>	Share of FDI inflow in the GDP	Percent (%)

Source: Own Formulation, March 2024.

Bringing these variables together, authoritarianism, operationalized as the state of democracy (*Dem*), is the outcome variable to be estimated as a function of digitalization (*Mbl*), capital formation (*K*), trade openness (*TrOpn*), foreign direct investment (*FDI*), and security expenditure (*Scrt*), using a simple functional model, as follows:

$$Dem \sim f(Mbl, K, TrOpn, FDI, Scrt)$$

Yet, the study strives to examine the evolution of social processes influencing Ethiopia’s political developments by analyzing patterns of material change over time. The authoritarian rule stems not only from contemporary dynamics but also from historical developments, particularly market expansion, as “one step of marketization leads to further marketization” (Melegh, 2023a). The study links Ethiopia’s current authoritarianism to both its absolutist political legacy and structural changes driven by marketization and digital advancements. Drawing on Jebb *et al.*’s (2015) assertion that “no theory is truly time-independent,” this study employs a longitudinal multivariate

time series model to analyze the state of democracy (*Dem*), authoritarianism, as a social phenomenon at macro level, accounting for historical trajectory and associated structural processes. These factors ultimately made vector auto-regression (VAR), a multivariate time series model, an appropriate statistical tool for estimating and analyzing the outcome variable. VAR was chosen for its capacity to capture key variance sources from the dependent variable's past states and the combined effects of changes in explanatory variables (Jebb, Tay, Wang, & Huang, 2015). Moreover, it facilitates Granger causality testing, which clarifies causal relationships and aids in interpreting dynamic interactions among variables (Teamrat, Muhdin, & Sisay, 2018)

Mathematically, VAR can be viewed as the reduced form of a system of dynamic simultaneous equations making up matrices. In our case, taking the functional relation in the model building indicated in the above equation, the VAR denoting a matrix of six interacting variables at a time 't', with a defined lag 'n', can be expressed as follows:

$$\begin{bmatrix} Dem_t \\ Mbl_t \\ Scrt_t \\ K_t \\ TrOpn_t \\ FDI_t \end{bmatrix} = \begin{bmatrix} c_1 \\ c_2 \\ c_3 \\ c_4 \\ c_5 \\ c_6 \end{bmatrix} + \begin{bmatrix} \beta_{11} & \beta_{12} & \dots & \beta_{16} \\ \beta_{21} & \beta_{22} & \dots & \beta_{26} \\ \beta_{31} & \beta_{32} & \dots & \beta_{36} \\ \beta_{41} & \beta_{42} & \dots & \beta_{46} \\ \beta_{51} & \beta_{52} & \dots & \beta_{56} \\ \beta_{61} & \beta_{62} & \dots & \beta_{66} \end{bmatrix} \begin{bmatrix} Dem_{t-n} \\ Mbl_{t-n} \\ Scrt_{t-n} \\ K_{t-n} \\ TrOpn_{t-n} \\ FDI_{t-n} \end{bmatrix} + \begin{bmatrix} \mu_1 \\ \mu_2 \\ \mu_3 \\ \mu_4 \\ \mu_5 \\ \mu_6 \end{bmatrix}$$

In the equation, Dem_t , Mbl_t , $Scrt_t$, K_t , $TrOpn_t$, and FDI_t are the interacting variables; $c_1 \dots c_6$ are the intercepts; $\beta_{11} \dots \beta_{66}$ are the coefficients of each independent variable, representing the slope of the relationship between each predictor and the dependent variable; and $\mu_1 \dots \mu_6$ are the error terms, commonly known as the *white noise disturbances*, that capture the discrepancy between the predicted and actual values of the outcome variables for every equation in the model.

Scholars agree that a time series should be long enough to capture the phenomena of interest, with a minimum length of 20 observations (Jebb, Tay, Wang, & Huang, 2015). In this study, the data for all independent variables used in the macro-level analysis consisted of time-ordered (yearly) observations spanning from 1999, a pivotal year that earmarked a departure in Ethiopia's history due to the introduction of mobile phones, propelling the subsequent digital revolution to a new height.

4.5.2. Rationales and Limitations of VAR Model

This study employed a statistical tool known as Vector Autoregression (VAR) to analyze temporal and dynamic relationships between digitalization, marketization, and political control. VAR is common in time-series econometrics, because it allows all variables in the model to be treated as interdependent and endogenous, a critical advantage when studying the co-evolving and reciprocal nature of political and economic variables.

Unlike standard regressions that require designating independent and dependent variables, VAR treats all variables as endogenous, allowing the model to trace how shocks to one variable propagate across others over time. This is particularly appropriate for analyzing political-economic systems, where feedback loops (e.g., digital expansion reinforcing state capacity, which in turn fuels further digital control) are expected. The ordinary least squares (OLS) or other single-equation models tend to assume simple and clear dependent-independent variable structure, making the VAR better suited to capture mutual influences and feedback loops over time. For example, it enables analysis of how a change in political control might affect digital development, while simultaneously accounting for how digital expansion might also influence political control.

Therefore, the choice of VAR over alternative regression techniques was motivated by the following considerations. First, the availability of longitudinal (time-series) data across multiple variables. Secondly, the theoretical expectation of bidirectional and evolving relationships, rather than unidirectional causality. Finally, the need to account for lagged effects, where the impact of a policy or digital shift might only become evident after several time periods. This underlines VAR's capability to capture significant sources of variance stemming from the previous states of the dependent variable itself, and the combined effects of changes in the explanatory variables (Jebb, Tay, Wang, & Huang, 2015). Together, these methods help illuminate temporal dynamics and structural linkages that would be obscured by cross-sectional or static models.

Additionally, the selection of VAR enables Granger causality testing, which helps determine the direction of causality between variables in a system, aiding the interpretation of dynamic interactions among them (Teamrat, Muhdin, & Sisay, 2018). Granger Causality, despite its name, does not determine true causation but tests whether one time-series variable systematically precedes another in a statistically significant way. In this study, it is used to examine whether

developments in digital infrastructure or market reforms tend to predict changes in authoritarian governance indicators.

However, VAR models also come with limitations. VAR, *inter alia*, requires stationary data; ensuring this may involve differencing or transformations that may obscure substantive interpretations. VAR models are data-intensive and sensitive to sample size, which may undermine the accuracy of the results in conditions where long-term high-frequency data is limited. VAR models also attribute associational direction inferred from data patterns, avoiding bias but risking overlooking structural mechanisms unless interpreted carefully.

To address these limitations, this study used pre-estimation statistical diagnosis and tests for stationarity, normality, autocorrelation, co-integration, stability and optimal lag length selection to enhance the robustness of the VAR outcomes. The results were complemented with micro-level quantitative results, qualitative data and theoretical frameworks considering historical and institutional contexts. Besides, the macro-level statistical findings were cautiously interpreted, as indicative rather than determinative patterns, to reveal how digital investment, economic changes, and political events influence one another over time without imposing strict *a priori* causal directions.

4.5.3. Data Sources of Macro-level Quantitative Analysis

The study utilized data on authoritarianism from the Variety of Democracy (V-Dem) index, known for its detailed assessment of electoral performance, political rights, and civil liberties, making it a preferred tool for macro-level analysis (V-Dem, 2024b). V-Dem's transparent methodology and global coverage enable tracking governance changes with detailed numerical data, earning credibility in academic and policy circles (Pernia & Radiamoda, 2023). For instance, Lührmann *et al.* (2018) used V-Dem data¹⁷ to develop the “Regimes of the World” typology based on Dahl's

¹⁷ The Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) project aggregates data through expert surveys, utilizing a broad panel of country specialists to code complex aspects of democracy. While V-Dem provides comprehensive long-term data (since 1789), potential limitations include subjectivity of expert assessments and challenges in capturing informal political dynamics. Regional instability and restricted access in Ethiopia may also affect data accuracy. As a means of mitigation, the study used V-Dem data alongside other sources to mitigate single-source bias. Cross-referencing V-Dem indicators with other official statistics such as Economic Intelligence Unit's (EIU) democracy index and freedom house reports provided a more balanced understanding.

concept of “polyarchy,”¹⁸ while Boese *et al.* (2022) utilized its liberal democracy index (LDI) to assess democratization or autocratization, focusing on constraints like civil liberties, rule of law, and checks on executive power. Accordingly, data on the state of democracy were extracted from V-Dem-CY-Full+Others-v14.DTA, downloaded on 06 March 2024 from <https://www.v-dem.net> (V-Dem, 2024a), the open-access database of V-Dem Institute of Gutenberg University, Copenhagen. Aggregated annual data pertinent to long-term socio-economic and ICT development including mobile subscription, trade openness, and foreign direct investment were collected between September 2021 and April 2024 from World Bank’s database, available at <https://data.worldbank.org/>. The quantitative data on the capital formation of the Ethiopian economy were obtained from the website of the National Bank of Ethiopia (<https://nbe.gov.et/publications-statistics/publications/>); whereas the financial aspects of the government budget, expenses on law enforcement, public order, and security activities, for all fiscal years under observation, were compiled, between February and March 2024, from the online databank (<https://www.mofed.gov.et/resources/budget/>) of Ministry of Finance and Economic Development (MoFED), both are publicly available.

Other metrics of digital politics embedded in V-Dem including digital media freedom, online media polarization, social cleavages, coordinated information operations, and internet regulation, were also utilized, whenever necessary, to examine the complex impacts of digital technology, such as the internet and social media, on various societal layers (V-Dem, 2024a).

Before running the VAR, however, all appropriate statistical tests and fitness diagnostics were performed to explore the long-term interactions of digitalization and authoritarianism, ensure the model’s validity, and enhance the required estimates (*See Appendix – III*). First, the Augmented Dickey-Fuller (ADF) unit root test was performed for each variable and their first-lag differences to evaluate data stationarity (Dickey & Fuller, 1979), with $Z(t)$ statistics interpreted using MacKinnon’s (1996) approximate p-value to critical values at 1%, 5%, and 10% significance levels (-3.75, -3.00, and -2.63, respectively). The test statistic indicates that the time-series data become stationary after first differencing, demonstrating first-order integration at the 1% and 5%

¹⁸ “Polyarchy” is a concept used by Robert Dahl to refer to the plurality, participation and competition in modern representative governments as the “rule of many,” implying that they are not truly “rule of people” as the original Greek term “democracy” suggests (Dahl, 1971).

significance levels. Next, the optimal lag length was determined following Teamrat *et al.* (2018) by using test statistics including the likelihood ratio (LR), Final Prediction Error (FPE), Akaike Information Criterion (AIC), Schwarz Bayesian Information Criterion (SBIC), and Hannan-Quinn Information Criterion (HQIC). As shown in *Table 7* below, four of these five criteria suggest the second observation point as the optimal lag order.

Table 7 – Information Criteria for Optimal Lag-order Selection

Sample: 2001 through 2023 (N=23)								
Lag	LL	LR	Df	ρ	FPE	AIC	HQIC	SBIC
0	-298.332				12540	26.4636	26.5381	26.7598*
1	-256.983	82.698	36	0.000	8872.39	25.9985	26.52	28.072
2	-205.406	103.15*	36	0.000	5012.79*	24.644*	25.6125*	28.4948

* *Optimal lag*; Endogenous: *Dem Mbl Scrt K TrOpn FDI*; Exogenous: *constant*.

Source: Own Computation, April 2024.

Accordingly, the lag order of our VAR model with the maximum likelihood estimation (MLE) for our prime outcome variable was determined to be two (2) years. Once the lag length was established, the Jarque-Bera test was conducted using a Chi-square distribution to test the null hypothesis that the residuals' skewness and kurtosis are both zero, indicating normal distribution of the residuals. The Jarque-Bera test indicated high ρ -values for all equations, showing no evidence of residuals deviating from normality in the VAR model. Similarly, the Lagrange Multiplier (LM) test revealed no significant autocorrelation, confirming the absence of serial correlation in the residuals at the optimal lag order.

Additionally, Johansen's (1995) multiple-trace test was performed to verify the persistence of co-integration among the model's equations. The results, supported by the Schwarz Bayesian Information Criterion (SBIC) and Hannan-Quinn Information Criterion (HQIC), indicated the presence of up to five co-integrating equations in the VAR model, validating the long-term relationships and autoregressive terms. The stability of the VAR model was also assessed by examining the eigenvalues of the coefficient matrix to ensure they had absolute values less than 1. The results confirmed that all eigenvalues met this condition, verifying the stability of the VAR model. Finally, the VAR equation using maximum likelihood estimation (MLE) for our primary outcome variable becomes:

$$Dem_t = c_1 + \beta_{11} \cdot Dem_{t-2} + \beta_{12} \cdot Mbl_{t-2} + \beta_{13} \cdot Scrt_{t-2} + \beta_{14} \cdot K_{t-2} + \beta_{15} \cdot TrOpn_{t-2} + \beta_{16} \cdot FDI_{t-2} + \mu_{Dem}$$

Dem_t is the state of democracy at period t , with a lag length of *two* years, where c_1 is the intercept, $\beta_{11} \dots \beta_{18}$ are the coefficients of the lagged variables, Dem_{t-2} , Mbl_{t-2} , $Scrt_{t-2}$, K_{t-2} , $TrOpn_{t-2}$, and FDI_{t-2} , denoting the values of predictors from two years earlier.

4.5.4. Micro-level Analysis: Modeling, Variables and Data Sources

In this study, the macro-level statistical estimates were undertaken to examine the citizens' access to digital tools and political experience pertaining to democratic processes under the two last two Ethiopian governments, based on the data obtained from two nationwide surveys. The ordinal logistic regression is selected as fitting model based on the existing literature that demonstrates its effectiveness in analyzing ordinal outcomes based on survey data. Li (2017) utilized logistic regression to study political trust and public satisfaction, conceptually aligning with the object of this study in assessing the state of democracy at the grassroots-level through survey data collected over multiple periods. Neundorf *et al.* (2024) and Jones *et al.* (2019) also explored how various factors influence authoritarianism and democracy, emphasizing the need to incorporate multiple socio-economic and demographic predictors such as education, and ethno-national identity in understanding citizens' experiences with democracy. Solt (2012) revitalizes the importance of considering how social and demographic factors shape political outcomes, justifying the inclusion of other variables like age, education and employment status in the model. Including mobile ownership as a variable sheds light on how individual level access to digital technologies interacts with governance to influence democratic outcomes.

Collectively, the studies of Li (2017), Neundorf *et al.* (2024), Jones *et al.* (2019) and Solt (2012) provide a strong methodological precedent for modeling ordered categories such as different levels of democracy, while accounting for non-equidistant intervals. Mou *et al.* (2011) further justify this approach by demonstrating predictive modeling in politically constrained environments with limited freedom, which parallels the political context of Ethiopia. Therefore, the ordinal logistic model perfectly fits the study's overarching goal of analyzing the political economy of digitalization, marketization, and authoritarianism in the context of Ethiopia's evolving political landscape. *Table 8* below provides the study variables and data measurements used for micro-level analysis.

Table 8 – Indicators and Measurements of the Study Variables

Study Variables	Notation	Measurement
<i>Socio-demographic</i>		
Gender	<i>Gdr</i>	Nominal [1, 2]
Age	<i>Age</i>	Scale
Education	<i>Educ</i>	Ordinal [0 – 4]
<i>Place of Residence</i>		
Urban – Rural	<i>Urb_Rur</i>	Nominal [1,2]
<i>Economic</i>		
Country's Economic Conditions	<i>Eth_Eco</i>	Ordinal [1 – 5]
Employment Status	<i>Empl</i>	Nominal [0 – 2]
Mobile Ownership	<i>Mbl</i>	Nominal [0 – 1]
Govt. Intervention vs. Free Market	<i>Intv_FrMkt</i>	Nominal [0 – 2]
<i>Political</i>		
Ethnic vs. National Political Identity	<i>Ethn_Ethio</i>	Nominal [1 – 3]
Federal vs. Unitary government	<i>Fed_Untr</i>	Nominal [1 – 3]
State (Extent) of Democracy in Ethiopia	<i>Dem</i>	Ordinal [1 – 4]

Source: Own Formulation, April 2024.

Now, in our ordinal logistic regression, we aim at mathematically estimating the probability of outcome variable *Dem*, the level of democracy based on the respondents' rating, with four ordinal categories, where the unobserved continuous latent variable (Y^*) falls within certain thresholds (cut points). Hence, the general equation of an ordered logistic regression model is drawn, denoting the probability of the outcome variable being in one of the categories, given the constant odds ratios of the outcome as a linear combination of all relevant predictor variables as follows:

$$Y^* = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \cdot Mbl + \beta_2 \cdot Gdr + \beta_3 \cdot Age + \beta_4 \cdot Educ + \beta_5 \cdot Empl + \beta_6 \cdot Ethn_Ethio + \beta_7 \cdot Intv_FrMkt + \beta_8 \cdot Fdr_Untr + \beta_9 \cdot Urb_Rrl + \varepsilon$$

In the equation, Y^* is the unobserved latent variable; ε is an error term; and $\beta_1 \dots \beta_9$ are the coefficients of the independent variables, i.e. mobile ownership (*Mbl*), gender (*Gdr*), *Age*, level of education (*Educ*), employment status (*Empl*), economic decisions (*Intv_FrMkt*), ethno-national self-identification (*Ethn_Ethio*), viable state structure (*Fdr_Untr*), and respondent's place of residence (*Urb_Rrl*) respectively.

Finally, post-regression estimates are also computed. The average marginal effects (AME) are calculated after the regression, to estimate how a unit change in each category of the independent variable affects the predicted probabilities of each outcome, *ceteris paribus*. Similarly, the odds of

the dependent variable occurring for a one-unit change in the predictor are computed by exponentiating the coefficients and then converting them into percentages for a clearer description of the differences between categories within predictor variables. By doing so, the quantitative results enhanced the exploration of socio-economic structures, and the digital revolution influenced individual political experiences and the persistence of authoritarian control, complementing the macro-level trends by offering insights into micro-level conditions. The micro-level statistical analysis used data from two Afrobarometer surveys conducted in 2013 and 2020¹⁹ by ABCON – Research & Consulting. *Table 9* below provides the respondents’ socio-demographic profiles and spatial distribution of responses.

Table 9 – Characteristics & Spatial Distribution of Respondents in Percentage

Characteristics of Survey Respondents		Survey 2013 (%)	Survey 2020(%)
<i>Administrative Regions</i>	Tigray	6.04	4.71
	Afar	3.23	4.37
	Amhara	22.97	19.85
	Oromia	23.64	29.02
	Somali	6.04	5.05
	Benshangul-Gumuz	3.35	3.36
	South Nations, Nat. & Peoples	19.78	16.15
	Gambella	3.27	4.37
	Harari	3.35	4.37
	Addis Ababa City	4.99	4.37
	Dire Dawa City	3.35	4.37
<i>Place of Residence</i>	Urban	24.60	28.34
	Rural	75.40	71.66
<i>Gender</i>	Male	50.00	50.04
	Female	50.00	49.96
<i>Age Groups</i>	Youth (18-35)	58.32	58.99
	Adults (35-50)	26.43	27.07
	Elderly (Above 50)	15.25	13.94
<i>Level of Education</i>	No Formal Educ.	44.52	39.11
	Primary Educ.	32.24	35.69
	Secondary Educ.	15.51	14.20
	Post-secondary Educ.	5.35	5.65
	University and above	2.38	5.35

Source: Author’s Computation from Afrobarometer, 2013 & 2021.

¹⁹ The 2020 data was publicly available on the Afrobarometer website (<https://www.afrobarometer.org>), while the 2013 data was obtained through a special request in September 2023, with consent and usage guidelines provided, enclosed as an *Appendix – III*.

The surveys collected from nationally representative data through random stratified probability sampling from 2,386 Ethiopian adults in the first round and 2,378 in the second. The two rounds reflect the structural conditions at the time, enabling comparisons of citizens' political experiences across two governments and enhancing the statistical results' reliability. As per Afrobarometer (2021), the sample size ensures a margin of error of ± 2 percentage points at a 95% confidence level.

4.6. Ethical Considerations

This research adhered to all relevant institutional, national, and international ethical guidelines and regulations to ensure the protection and respect of all participants involved. Ethical approval has been obtained from the Doctoral School of Sociology and Communication of Corvinus University of Budapest (CUB).

The interview participants were made fully aware of the purpose, methods, and significance of the research, upon which the informed consent was obtained. They were informed about their rights, notably that participation was voluntary, and they could withdraw at any time. Given the sensitivity and political risks involved, confidentiality and anonymity were given the utmost importance. The empirical data, particularly the audio recordings of the interviews, were stored securely. During analysis and reporting of the findings, the relevant data were used only with anonymity to protect participant identities such that the participants would not be at the receiving end of any potential harm. The findings of the study are reported transparently, accurately, and honestly, without fabrication, falsification, or inappropriate data manipulation with appropriate credit given to all sources in view of upholding the proper academic standards and ethical integrity.

5. Results of Qualitative Data Analyses

5.1. Overview

This chapter is meant to provide a comprehensive result of qualitative data analyses, focusing on the multifaceted aspects of the intersection between digital media, public engagement, and political control strategies in the context of contemporary Ethiopia. In doing so, it begins with a brief institutional context for the mandates governing information management, setting the stage for the other findings discussed subsequently. The chapter explores the digital mechanisms utilized for political engagement in Ethiopia, highlighting the sophisticated techniques of social media analysis, including network and sentiment analyses. These advanced methods are crucial for understanding the dynamics of digital politics. Additionally, the chapter examines the diversity of engagement strategies employed by various actors, supported by illustrative examples of varied approaches to digital political participation. The analysis also addresses the critical issues of user data management and political vulnerability arising from digital political engagement.

5.2. Major Findings of Qualitative Study

The semi-structured interviews were conducted with the informants at different times between 17 July 2021 and 04 December 2023. The topics of discussion mainly focused on the use of digital technology in the political context of Ethiopia. More specifically, the conversations covered various aspects such as propaganda, big data, and social media platforms in the context of digitalization, marketization, and erosion of democracy. The interviews also explored the variation of usage of digital technology among different political actors in Ethiopia's political landscape, focusing on mobile communication, the technical aspects of advanced data analytics as well as ethical concerns about data privacy and government surveillance. Before delving into other details about the utilization of digital technology in Ethiopian politics, it is important to have an institutional context of information management within the framework of marketization and digitalization.

5.2.1. Information Management Mandates: An Institutional Context

It has already been discussed in the previous chapters that marketization is a cumulative process, capable of creating its demand, spheres and institutions. In Ethiopia, as elsewhere, marketization

and digitalization have been interconnected phenomena that have been shaping the country's economic, social, and political landscapes. The process of transforming the Ethiopian society and economy to be more market-oriented gained momentum mainly during the EPRDF *via* privatization of state-owned enterprises, deregulation, and the promotion of free-market principles. Initially, it was a gradual process, with some sectors remaining under government control. Recently, even enterprises that have long maintained state-ownership such as telecommunications, banking and energy have seen significant reforms aimed at increasing efficiency, fostering competition, and enhancing service delivery. As a result, digitalization, involving the integration of digital technologies into various aspects of society and the economy in Ethiopia, has been rapidly advancing, driven by the expansion of internet access, mobile technology, and digital infrastructure.

The marketization phenomenon evident in increased privatization in the economy, remarkable development in the import of IT goods due to openness to international trade, and increased presence of investment by foreign firms, together represent the process of digitalization justified and facilitated by market logic in Ethiopia. In the same manner, the increasing adoption and reliance on digital technology has enhanced the expansion of the market rationales in private and public spheres as a cumulative process, described by Melegh (2023a) as a condition whereby “one step of marketization leads to further marketization” in societies. The most interesting aspect of this interaction of digitalization and marketization has been the strong institutional support as explicitly observed in government policies. In this regard, three government institutions have been briefly examined below.

The first entity is the *Ministry of Innovation and Technology* (MinT), previously known as the Ministry of Science and Technology (MoST), which has undergone several institutional reforms since its inception in 1975 due to changes in government. Recognizing the increasing significance of digital technologies, the EPRDF government merged it with the Ministry of Information in 2010, rebranding it as the Ministry of Communication and Information Technology (MCIT). Proclamation No. 916/2015 expanded its mandate to promote the growth and development of ICT for national advancement, leading to the creation of a national ICT policy two years before a change in government (MCIT, 2016). The government's policy envisions enhancing the lives of Ethiopians by developing widespread digital literacy and a workforce equipped with ICT skills,

ensuring that “every aspect of Ethiopian life is ICT-assisted.” In addition to boosting economic productivity and efficiency, the government aims to utilize ICT for political purposes, claiming to modernize public services and promoting good governance with the goal of transforming Ethiopia from “poverty to a middle-income economy and society with deep-rooted participatory democracy and good governance based on the mutual aspirations of its peoples” (MCIT, 2016).

While the ministry reverted to its original name, the Ministry of Science and Technology (MoST), in the final years of the EPRDF era when the current PM was a minister, the change of government saw the establishment of the Institute of Technology and Innovation *via* Regulation No. 1097/2018. The Institute was tasked with several key responsibilities: developing research infrastructures for innovation and technology, especially in new and emerging technological fields; and enhancing innovation and technology within government-prioritized service and manufacturing sectors. The institute aimed to ensure that ICTs were accessible, affordable, open, and secure, while also implementing appropriate cybersecurity measures, most importantly “collecting, organizing, storing, and analyzing information” (MinT, 2024), supposedly to support research innovation and development initiatives.

In October 2018, MoST was reorganized as the Ministry of Innovation and Technology (MinT) by Proclamation No. 1097/2019, with the mission to coordinate, encourage, and support science and technology activities to drive the country’s social and economic development (MinT, 2024). With a vision of harnessing the capacities needed for rapid learning, adaptation, and utilization of effective technologies, MinT has been widely involved in the development of supportive legal measures necessary to regulate online trading transactions to create favorable conditions for a national digital economy. In July 2021, Abraham Belay, the minister of MinT and later the minister of defense, reported that over 300 billion ETB in e-commerce transactions occurred during 2020/21, while also mentioning that Commercial Bank of Ethiopia (CBE) and Ethiopian Airlines (EAL), both state-owned enterprises, were leading in digital economic exchanges and promoting e-commerce. Additionally, more government services were set to be digitized in the 2021/22 Ethiopian fiscal year (ENA, 2021). Based on its institutional mandate for information management and technical capabilities, MinT could even provide the government with secure email accounts or ensure the delivery of critical communications *via* SMS in uncertain times, showcasing its

reliability and technical capability to guarantee the safety and security of communications, whenever deemed necessary (MinT, 2024).

The interviews with IT experts revealed that government agencies have significant capabilities to analyze online activities, track social media influencers, and identify trends that may pose political implications. A former INSA employee, who later worked for MinT, described the institutional structure as follows:

Our office is named “Digital Transformation,” directly accountable to the minister d’état of the Ministry of Innovation and Technology. Within the Digital Transformation office, there are numerous departments, many of which I’m not fully familiar with. For instance, there are teams specializing in surveillance, cybersecurity, etc. who are responsible for redressing incidents such as hacking, and so forth (Informant 08: Male, 35, September 14, 2021).

During the post-interview exploration, it happened that the Office of *Digital Transformation* is a crucial organ entitled to the institutional authority of information management by two experts, one being our informant. This office pays between 60K – 80K ETB to its ICT experts possessing the most advanced digital skills *via* the World Bank’s support meant to enhance democratization and improve governance. It was found that the Office is rather a key institutional actor in generating, structuring, and managing users’ data of high magnitude to enhance the instrumentarian power of the informational autocrat.

The second important government institution is the *Information Network Security Administration* (INSA), established by the Council of Ministers Regulation No. 130/2006 during the EPRDF rule, in the aftermath of the disputed 2005 election. INSA aims to develop a globally competitive cyber capability to protect Ethiopia’s national interests. It officially strives to build robust national cyber power, providing technical intelligence to support government decisions, and enhancing data and computing capacity to transform the high-tech and security industries (INSA, 2023a). With Abiy Ahmed, the current PM, serving as its director from 2008-2010, INSA played a crucial role in internet monitoring and filtering of websites. Integrated with EthioTelecom and other security organs, INSA facilitated access to citizens’ private digital communications for security and police forces. Consequently, despite being relatively new, INSA quickly became a powerful branch of the security apparatus, even compared to the government organs formally responsible for intelligence in Ethiopia, i.e. the National Intelligence and Security Service (NISS), the military, and the federal police (HRW, 2014).

Following the 2018 government change, INSA expanded its authority, issuing a directive on November 23, 2021, requiring the registration of all digital and communication devices owned by citizens, diplomats, and various entities. This measure aimed to update ownership data for national security, addressing alleged concerns over potential misuse by terrorists for surveillance and activities threatening Ethiopia's sovereignty and territorial integrity (FBC, 2021). Highlighting its role in protecting digital and developmental infrastructures, INSA reported that it successfully prevented the loss of 23.2 billion ETB through its actions against 6,959 cyber-attacks and online hacking encounters in the 2022/23 budget year, achieving a success rate of 96% (INSA, 2023b). However, according to a former employee of INSA, the "*Ethiopian net systems including that of financial institutions are among the most vulnerable to hacking. Yet, INSA always reports only a few of allegedly defended despite the widespread prevalence of hacking in Ethiopia*" (Informant 08: Male, 35, September 14, 2021).

Nevertheless, these endeavors were later legally entrenched *via* the resolution of the Council of Ministers, passed on 30 October 2023, authorizing INSA as a primary agency to regulate digital technologies and tools encompassing computers, smartphones, satellite tools, GPS instruments, and other appliances such as smart cameras, including those used in cars. Hence, INSA, directly accountable to the PM, possesses substantial information management mandates ostensibly intended to ensure the security of information for lasting peace, democratization, good governance, and development (INSA, 2023a).

The third relevant institution of information management is *Ethio Telecom*. The EthioTelecom, formerly known as Ethiopian Telecommunication Corporation (ETC), is one of the few oldest and longest-serving state enterprises, along with CBE and EAL, that run businesses based on market logic, enjoying the autonomy of economic decisions. While its economic contribution is obvious, its role has been immense, particularly in facilitating information as a fictitious commodity that has both market and political value in the face of digitalization. As an informant stated:

Ethio Telecom has never faced and will never face the losses or risks that typical businesses do. Essentially, it profits from selling access to the Ethiopian airwaves. By investing in infrastructure, it can easily harvest revenue by selling these airwaves, either wholesale or retail, to Ethiopians (Informant 18: Male, 39, 28 July 2021).

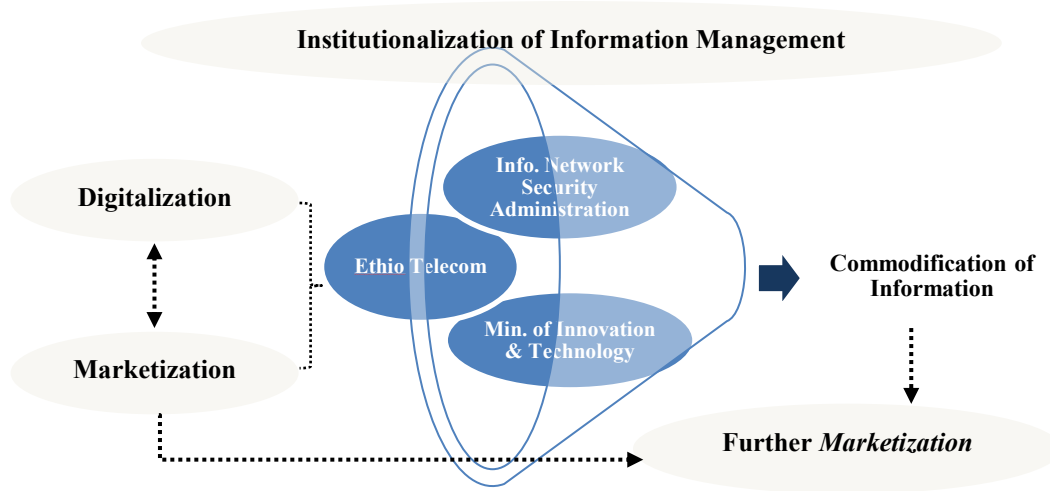
It is notable that the EPRDF government consistently opposed privatizing the telecommunications sector because it generated consistent revenue, which grew rapidly due to high rates of mobile

subscriptions, especially among the youth population. Additionally, the users' metadata is mined from mobile services such as internet usage, voice calls, and SMS carries significant political functions beyond the market value of generating monetary income.

In his report at the *Fourth Regular Session of the Second Year* of the House of People's Representatives (HPR) on 15 November 2022, PM Abiy thoroughly discussed the substantial advancements in digitalization across Ethiopia, emphasizing its positive impact on connectivity, economic efficiency, and business profitability, implying the relevance of market logic in his government endeavors. He indicated, *inter alia*, that the number of EthioTelecom's subscribers has surged from 37 million to 68.9 million in the 2021/22 Ethiopian fiscal year. Additionally, since its inception in 2021/22, mobile banking has garnered 25.5 million users, facilitating transactions worth over 134 billion ETB within a year, thereby significantly contributing to financial development (EBC, 2022). Furthermore, approximately 40 services in about 20 government offices have been automated or digitalized since 2021, including traffic charges now payable *via* mobile banking, which has not only enhanced service delivery but also arguably reduced corruption. In the private sector, the scale of digitalization is even greater, with around 200 services automated through EthioTelecom, alongside various proprietary software developed by individual businesses (EBC, 2022).

Yet, with the ongoing privatization and digitalization endeavors, the government has granted a license to Kenya's telecom giant, Safaricom, which launched its mobile network in Ethiopia in October 2022, becoming the first private operator in one of Africa's largest markets (Reuters, 2022). Additionally, recent partnership arrangements have seen South Africa's Vodacom Group entering the sector, presenting another phase of competition for EthioTelecom with no cross-border business experience. Nevertheless, in addition to its role as a financial intermediary for online payments, EthioTelecom is playing a key part in the government's recent initiative to digitize national identification cards, rationalizing it for purposes such as criminal record tracking and assessing economic creditworthiness. Just like the China's credit score system that the state claims would enhance the "mentality of honesty" among citizens (Joppke, 2021), this process could potentially lead to advanced levels of digital profiling and targeting. *Figure 6* below provides an illustrative summary of the institutionalization of information management, interacting with marketization and digitalization.

Figure 6 – Marketization, Digitalization & Institutionalization of Information Management



Source: Own Design, April 2024.

5.2.2. Digital Mechanisms of Political Engagement in Ethiopia

The interviews highlighted the palpable phenomenon that, traditionally, mobile phone SMS and voice calls were vital for political communication. However, with the widespread adoption of smartphones and internet access, digital politics has become increasingly significant in the country’s political landscape. This digital transformation involves using platforms like social media, websites, and online tools for political engagement and influencing public opinion. There has been a notable shift from traditional methods towards leveraging advanced digital technologies for accessing information, communication, and various activities such as political advertising, online fundraising, and social media campaigns. This enables targeted messaging and advertisements tailored to specific social groups, resembling commercial endeavors. The digitalization of politics also meant that various social actors should compete in the boundless jungle of cyberspace in order to secure popular support.

In the Ethiopian political context, the commonly used digital mechanisms are social media platforms. Interviews indicated that social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter (currently “X”), and Telegram are heavily used among political actors for propaganda purposes to influence public opinion and garner support. Government and opposition groups actively engage in digital strategies to influence public perception, mobilize support, and counter-narratives. Yet, lower

levels of digital competencies, especially among the political opposition, are evident in the lack of technical capability and practical usage of digital mechanisms including less advanced ones such as targeted ads, and smart canvas, which are rarely used to reach out and influence. As one of the informants indicated:

Less complicated mechanisms such as targeted ads are not commonly used in politics. On Facebook, you have the possibility to boost the number of your followers, as high as 30-40k followers per 1 USD per post, which is cheaper in Ethiopia compared to any other country. However, that is mostly used for business advertisement purposes (Informant 07: Male, 36, 13 April 2023).

This indicates that political entities, other than the government, in Ethiopia seldom use the cost-effective methods available to boost followers and augment their outreach to a broader audience. However, during tense political situations, the consequences of existing communication platforms cannot be underestimated. In an interview conducted amidst the tense political climate of the Tigray war, which began in November 2020 between the TPLF and the PP's central government, a senior academician recounted recent events, stating that:

A recent post going viral on Facebook, for example, shows a photo of Tigray People's Liberation Front rebels in front of a bank in Lalibela town, demonstrating that they are advancing towards the capital and taking control of strategic towns of economic and military relevance (Informant 19: Male, 39, 19 December 2022).

While the posts are in fact real, the most important is the political implication. Lalibela, a historic town in the Amhara region, is one of the major tourist destinations in Ethiopia. The capture of the town and other bigger cities in Wollo Zones was a testimony to the progress of TPLF forces marching southwards to the capital. For many Ethiopians, this represents the news of the PP's loss in the battle from the region, which has been cut off from telecommunication, the internet, and national and international news media. As another interviewee adds, "*Besides the actual effect of war in conflict-ridden areas, the effect of social media is by far high. I think, the number of displaced and refugees is rising in the capital, because many are convinced the war was approaching them, seeing the posts on Facebook*" (Informant 21: Male, 41, 27 December 2022).

This signifies the negative political effect on the government arising from social media usage by the opponents and critics, which the incumbent must deal with. An informant, who conducted and published research on the EPRDF's rule, summons up the consequences of digital platforms during the former government, stating that:

Social media is the main factor that benefited the current leaders, including Abiy, in bringing about the current "political change," if it is a "change" as it is called. We know that it played a crucial

political role, especially in Oromia, by continuously exposing the human rights abuse of EPRDF, and organizing protests across the region, and beyond (Informant 25: Male, 40, 20 June 2021).

A former INSA employee verified that the so-called “Team Lema,” which became a cornerstone of new leadership under Lema Megerssa and Abiy Ahmed, played a substantial role in the popular uprising by sharing insider government information. The leaked information frequently functioned as source material for opposition news outlets such as Ethiopian Satellite Television (ESAT) and Oromia Media Network (OMN) and served as content for YouTube videos as well as posts on Facebook and Twitter within the diaspora community. Consequently, protests in one town often sparked similar protests in others. This suggests that the current officials, with extensive experience under their predecessors, are aware of the pivotal role of digital media in their accession to power, following popular protests across regions. An interview with a senior member of the ruling party confirmed that *“the current PM and his circles had built enough capacity to strategically use the digital technology, because he has observed its long-term political relevance from his experience, notably as leader of INSA and MoST”* (Informant 01: Male, 59, 29 July 2022).

Hence, government critics are not directly deterred, because numbers are crucial in the political market, like commercial techniques. The government leverages the prevalence of a high number of online critics as an indication of the “democratic” posture, showcasing the degree of the regime’s tolerance for dissenting opponents including those “offending” the current administration.

Those criticizing the government or ruling party should somehow exist. I think it is needed for statistical purposes. For instance, if you always collect about the offenders of the government, the numbers will not be okay. To be considered right, it has to, somehow, be portrayed as balanced by collecting the data from the other side too (Informant 09: Male, 31, 17 September 2021).

One of the interviewees indicated the relevance of the number of users in digital politics and some mechanisms used to further increase the same, when necessary, in the following manner:

For political campaigns on Twitter, for instance, it is possible to utilize Twitter’s Application Programming Interface (API) to produce automated accounts that can increase the number of campaigners and enhance popularity. However, this approach requires contacting Twitter to obtain permission and has certain limits, such as a cap of 10,000 tweets per day (Informant 08: Male, 35, 14 September 2021).

These automated accounts are known as “Twitter bots.” A Twitter bot is a software application developed using programming languages like Python and JavaScript, leveraging the Twitter API to automate interactions. As Caldarelli *et al.* (2020) note, bots perform automated tasks such as

tweeting, retweeting, liking, following, and direct messaging, often imitating human behavior on the platform, and can serve various purposes, including marketing and promotion, information dissemination, social and political campaigns, and entertainment. And, the Ethiopian government widely utilizes Twitter bots, recognizing their powerful impact, especially in terms of enhancing user engagement and disseminating political information regardless of ethical considerations and adherence to the platform guidelines. An informant serving as an ICT expert in a local government bureau, with a specialization in e-commerce, has the following to say:

From a technical viewpoint, it depends on the capacity of the computer server. Depending, therefore, on the capacity, as much as 20-30k of such [fake] accounts can be generated unless you are not bored of creating an account. The good thing about Twitter is that it doesn't require a phone number to create an account other than email. So, you create an email, then you can create Twitter bot accounts, which you can use the way you want (Informant 07: Male, 36, 13 April 2023).

The informant also indicated that, of course, countless fake accounts on Facebook, as well, are created in an automated way to browse and then collect the data, if deemed important. This highlights the institutional endeavors of the government in the usage of readily available digital mechanisms that some platforms offer to augment online popularity and influence, or even contravening the imposed limits whenever deemed relevant for the extraction and analysis of an unlimited amount of data by continuously navigating the boundless online contents.

It could be argued that the dramatic rise in social media users is basically driven by the platforms themselves, which monetize the views of published digital content. For instance, YouTube's motto, "broadcast yourself" has a significant role in attracting more users and increasing the overall user base. While this condition massively contributed to self-objectification and self-exploitation (Bartus, 2021), it also helps the generation and management of massive data that can serve relevant political purposes. Besides the revenue it generates, the presence of large number of users allows analysis that yields better accuracy and broader political insights, much like how a higher number of customers benefits more powerful businesses *via* a broadening profit base.

In this regard, an informant highlights the reasons that necessitated the development of algorithms for Big Data analysis in Amharic and Afan Oromo, mentioning the advantage of ample online data available from their speakers that make up the majority of country's population.

There is a strong rationale for Big Data analysis being performed in Amharic and Afan Oromo. There is ample online data available from speakers of the two languages, together constituting two-thirds of the country's population. This abundance of data meets the requirement for a large dataset to achieve better accuracy. However, this is not the case for Tigrinya, which has only about 6

million speakers. Although there was a political need to include Tigrinya, the data from a small percentage of the Tigrayan internet users is insufficient to adequately train the machine, besides some problems arising from its use of the Sabaean script shared with Amharic. Nevertheless, the government's intent remains intact (Informant 08: Male, 35, 14 September 2021).

However, when events unfold rapidly and potentially become uncontrollable, the government may opt to completely shut down the internet. For example, on 29 June 2020, news of the killing of Hachalu Hundessa, a prominent Oromo artist and political activist, spread rapidly within hours in the evening. This led to widespread mobilization and protests across the Oromia region before sunrise, resulting in hundreds of deaths in Ethiopia's largest state. As a direct response, the government imposed a nationwide internet shutdown for nearly a month, despite the significant losses amounting to billions of ETB due to the blackout. This development actually followed similar other incidents that unfolded since Abiy Ahmed's government came to power in April 2018. These include the assassination of engineer Simegnaw Bekele, the chief manager of the Grand Ethiopia Renaissance Dam (GERD), in Addis Ababa on 26 July 2018 (DW, 2018).

Additionally, there were the killings of Ambachew Mekonnen, President of the Amhara regional state, his advisor Ezez Wassie, and regional prosecutor Migbaru Kebede on 22 June 2019, in Bahr Dar, and on the same day in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia's army Chief of Staff Seare Mekonnen and a senior general were also killed (BBC, 2019). Another notable incident occurred on 23 October 2019, when Jawar Mohammed, a prominent Oromo activist, who had a noticeable role in the protests that ended the rule of the EPRDF, survived an assassination attempt, which resulted in clashes between protesting youth and security forces, leading to numerous deaths across various cities in Oromia (Africa News, 2019). During such incidents, the political effect of social media is immense, hence, a complete or partial shutdown of the internet is obvious. There are also instances when the government renders the network "dysfunctional" despite the signal appearing on mobile devices. By doing this, the government can assert that the network is operational, which helps to mitigate the criticism from millions of Ethiopians and other stakeholders due to the associated political and economic implications.

In sum, the above discussions underscore the transformative role of digitalization in Ethiopian politics, with social media platforms emerging as pivotal tools to influence public perception, mobilize support, and challenge opposing narratives. While digitalization empowers both dissent and governance, the Ethiopian government's advanced cyber capabilities, supported by

institutionalized channels and experts leveraging Big Data analytics and machine learning, give it a decisive edge in maintaining political control. This technological dominance has deepened the digital divide, leaving opposition groups disadvantaged due to limited resources and digital competence. Yet, tragic events during political unrest are ostensibly amplified by social media, controlled and manipulated, serving as cycles of repression and autocratic measures often under the guise of social order and stability.

5.2.3. Diversity of Medium and Engagement Strategies among Political Actors

The use of digital technology varies among different political actors in the Ethiopian political context. Government bodies, opposition groups, and human rights activists utilize different social media platforms that serve distinct purposes. *Table 10* below provides the advantages and disadvantages of major social media platforms affecting the preferences among political actors.

Table 10 – Determinants of Platform Preferences among Political Actors

Platform	Advantages	Disadvantages
Facebook	• Widely used in Ethiopia, effective for reaching domestic audiences • Allows detailed users' data, facilitates targeted messaging • Popular figures highly influential, posts perceived as credible	• Extensive misinformation due to the perceived truthfulness of posts • Algorithmic limits on pages reach without paid promotions • Privacy concerns, proliferation of fake accounts
Twitter	• Influencing international stakeholders & engagement with global audiences • Real-time updates, trending hashtags facilitate rapid dissemination	• Character limit, restricted depth of communication • High volume, information overload, echo chambers, misinformation
Telegram	• Emerging as a favorite for domestic influence in Ethiopia • Enhanced privacy, end-to-end encryption • Unlimited dissemination capacity among users in groups and channels	• Less globally used compared to Facebook and Twitter • Complex interface for new users. • Potential misuse for coordinating illicit activities due to encryption

Source: Own Summary Based on Informants' Responses, April 2024.

Table 10 above provides summaries of informants' reflections on the pros and cons of each platform that determines their strategic utilization in Ethiopia for political influence as described in the interview context. As alluded to, Facebook remains dominant for domestic influence due to higher user engagement. Despite algorithmic limits in terms of outreach when using personal profiles and page features, Facebook groups are widely preferred because they have higher engagement. A post in a group can reach a large portion of the group's members compared to the

content posted on pages or personal profiles. Many users prefer posting in groups because they know their posts will reach out to a significantly high number of followers.

Facebook offers more flexibility in data extraction. While an account is needed to view user profiles, posts on Facebook pages are public and, therefore, easily extractable without logging in. But, here in our department [at the Ministry of Innovation and Technology] there is no limit. There is flexibility to use an infinite amount of data, by scrolling down and opening each account of interest (Informant 08: Male, 35, 14 September 2021).

From the perspective of political entities, Facebook is perhaps the most effective digital platform to influence domestic politics *via* engaging the local population. The Ethiopian government has mostly been using Facebook intending to dominate the domestic digital space with the conviction that it is the primary political base. The PM, who rarely holds open press conferences with international media, stands first in the number of Facebook followers, and so are many of the officials holding various posts of the incumbent. A senior government zonal administration officer admits: *“It has been a challenge until we eventually came to know how to manage these online political processes”* (Informant 01: Male, 56, 29 July 2022).

A member of the government cabinet at a district level mentioned that the “government has been doing good”, especially after the establishment of *“Raayyaa Dijitaalaa,”* translated as “digital army,” an unofficial task force that works to enhance the public image of Abiy’s government through constant online activities, posting same or similar contents on social media (Informant 02: Male, 48, 09 August 2022). This is consistent with a claim of an informant, former journalist of VOA Afan Oromo, who cited government insider sources, revealing that *“currently [at the time of interview] there are about 30,000 persons carrying out online government propaganda”* (Informant 17: Male, 38, 07 September 2023). An interview with the chief of a district-level Youth and Women’s League indicated that another informal body of devotee youth *“gaachana sirna,”* literally “shield of the regime,” paid to showcase *via* online or offline chanting that no threat will be able to ascend to power as they stand behind the government, thereby creating an image that the regime has a solid political backing of the young generation (Informant 03: Female, 41, 11 August 2022).

According to another experienced district political official, besides the *“overt influence via digital political engagement, the government also does covert activities to get things done right”* (Informant 04: Male, 48, 13 August 2022). The informant underscored the relevance of yet another government another secret organ known as *“koree nageenyaa,”* the “security committee,” at all

tiers of administration, with the members of core officials, who command highly trained serial killers that could take immediate and safe actions whenever called unto duty. Meanwhile, in political actions, like organizing campaigns, some things matter more, notably the target to be influenced. These days, international stakeholders are especially important. In this regard, an ICT expert recites the inter-platform effect of digital politics:

When political campaigns need to be organized on Twitter or Facebook, preliminary communications are typically conducted via Telegram channels. These messages briefly outline the campaign's topic and schedule, for example, stating "Let's tweet or post about Topic 'X' at 8:00 AM!" Consequently, Telegram's role in organizing has become increasingly eminent (Informant 08: Male, 35, 14 September 2021).

This is attributed to evident concerns, particularly among the opposition, over traceability and government surveillance, indicating a growing emphasis on privacy and anonymity in political discourse. The informant also highlighted that platforms like Telegram are preferred for their security features, such as anonymity and refusal to share user data with governments, which makes it ideal for political communication. As indicated above, the messages of Telegram groups certainly reach all members without any restriction of viewers to its accessibility like Facebook, which was previously significant in Ethiopian politics. Moreover, unlike other social media like Twitter, Telegram doesn't give the users' data to governments, rejecting them when asked on grounds of security laws, etc.

During the war in Tigray, the TPLF supporters, mobilized and organized notably by “*digital woyane*,” embracing the historic name of Tigrayan liberation movement, managed to significantly influence the international community, especially the US official that had long maintained an alliance with former TPLF ruling class. This led to counter-engagement by the PP government including advertisement *via* Ethiopian Broadcast Corporation (EBC), the state-owned television and radio, to familiarize Twitter and increase its use, intending to ensure digital superiority through *online flooding* with its supporters amidst growing acceptance of TPLF among not only USA but also the UK and major countries of EU such as Germany.

Eventually, the government that effectively cut off communication to and from the Tigray region, had to deal with the individual and collective economic and arms sanctions from the major powers, and resorted to another populist and nationalist rhetoric campaign known as the “no-more campaign,” while also turning face towards Russia, Turkey and Iran for military supplies including the import of drones, thereby changing the balance of military power in favour of the central

government. An informant revealed the extensive deployment of “Twitter bots,” i.e. automated and programmed accounts that can tweet, re-tweet, post, etc. Furthermore, numerous individuals independently create and manage fake accounts, reportedly without direct funding from the ruling party, driven instead by their strong anti-TPLF sentiment and support for the government.

However, a letter from the PM Office, on 21 September 2020, ordered an advance payment to social media influencers and members of mass media recruited by the government to augment the popular acceptance of the PP regime. Accordingly, six domestic social media influencers were to receive an advance payment of 1,371,838 ETB in total for the following six months (October 2020 – March 2021), whereas seven members of the Ethiopian diaspora including three journalists and four social media influencers were set to receive 263,405 USD, allegedly for playing an exemplary role in the government’s image building. An official letter written on 02 December 2020, Ref. No. 01/04-117/831, signed by the then vice-president Chaltu Sani, revealed that the Office of President, Oromia Regional State, paid a lump sum of 750,000 ETB to artist Lencho Abdishakur for producing a song mobilizing the people to support the realization of the reform endeavors but also to stand by the side of the national defense forces fighting the TPLF forces in Tigray.

Nonetheless, the overall political aim stands to boost the trustworthiness of political actors on social media, thereby wielding a significant public influence by shaping perception *via* increasing the visibility of the information that every political actor posts in its respective domain. This indicated that politicians and political entities leverage these platforms targeting key stakeholders to sway domestic and international perceptions. While Facebook evidently serves as a major channel to influence domestic users, Twitter functions as an outlet to influence foreign stakeholders due to its proven meaningful political effect abroad. Moreover, the interviewees highlighted that there is a major concern among political opposition and human rights activists over surveillance and privacy arising from the extensive data collection and analysis capabilities of government agencies that monitor online activities for security purposes. Hence, more radical opponents such as TPLF and Oromo Liberation Army (OLA) heavily rely, for obvious reasons, on platforms like Telegram and WhatsApp, employing strategies including the use of predetermined texts for campaigns on notable occasions because of the end-to-end encryption and other security features, making them relatively safe for political communications.

In the case of Telegram, for instance, if someone creates a channel for use, it is difficult to identify who created it, as it enables maintaining anonymity, unlike other platforms that are easily traceable by the government but also can't be certain about the identity of the user you are communicating with. This further strengthens the claim of an informant, a political activist, arguing that it is more unlikely that people use SMS or phone calls for political purposes unless there is evident unavailability of internet services (Informant 16: Male, 33, 28 July 2021). A former officer of International Relations for an opposition party posited that there has been a long-standing fear, among the Ethiopian public, of discussing anti-government matters and reflecting critical political views on phone calls compared to SMS, although both are equally monitored by the state (Informant 13: Male, 39, 21 June 2023).

In general, it can be inferred from the above discussions, the variation in strategic use of digital platforms, particularly social media, among different political agencies underscores the deep entanglement of technology and politics in the country's evolving landscape. The implications for Ethiopia's political economy are profound, as digital platforms not only serve as tools for political propaganda but also as battlegrounds for competing ideologies, both domestically and internationally. These dynamics raise critical questions about the ethical use of technology, the erosion of privacy, and the deepening divide between government capabilities and opposition strategies, all of which are central to understanding the intersection of digitalization, authoritarianism, and political control in Ethiopia.

5.2.4. Political Implications of Fake News and Digital Illiteracy for Authoritarianism

Experts use the notion of “fake news” to refer to a false or misleading information presented as legitimate content through various means such as elite communication, online messages, advertisements, or articles published in form of *misinformation*, *disinformation* and *malinformation*. According to Gilardi (2021), “misinformation” refers to the communication of deceptive content in good faith without having the intention of harming others; “disinformation” is the spreading of fabricated false, inaccurate, or misleading information designed, presented and promoted to intentionally cause some desired public harm including in politics, business, etc.; and, “malinformation” denotes harmful communications like hate speech, defamation, harassment, and other similar behaviors.

According to an informant, who has ICT expertise, and conducted empirical research on social media in Ethiopia, fake news is generally produced in either of the three forms. First, fake news could take the form of *text*, i.e. written statements that could be generated almost exclusively. Second, it can take an *image* format, whereby a photograph taken at one place is misleadingly used as a depiction of an incident in another place, or something that has happened years ago could be used out of context. With the increasing technical ability and uses of software such as Photoshop editing, some of them are even difficult to identify by detecting systems. Thirdly, there is the so-called *deep-fake*, taking the form of *video*, with the increasing tendency to use advanced AI mechanisms, e.g. adding an audio element to a picture can make a video of someone giving a political statement. According to the interviewee, the first two constitute the common forms of fake news in Ethiopia, whereas Facebook remains to be the main platform characterized by fake contents.

Active social media users including Facebook, Twitter, Telegram, and others, numbered 6.7 million, 5.8% of total population, in 2014 E.C., grown by 8.1% from the preceding year. In the study conducted in 2013 E.C., involving contents of 300 Facebook accounts, we found that 14,000 (46%) posts out of 31,000 examined were fake news including disinformation and hate-speech. About 3.1 million Facebook users either shared those contents or commented on them, thereby, contributing to the spreading of such information (Informant 09: Male, 31, 17 September 2021).

This affirms the results of an online poll conducted on 20 November 2021 by *Ethiopia-Check*, an online fact-checking channel of professionals, which surveyed 1,001 random internet users about where they came across hate speech, fake news, or content inciting violence. The results revealed that 18% reported encountering such content on Twitter, 64% on Facebook, 11% on Telegram, 18% on YouTube, and 2% on Instagram. This survey indicates that the dominance of Facebook in terms of problematic content that users face, while also highlighting the issue is not confined to a single network but prevalent across various platforms, further testimony to the findings of the European Institute of Peace, which reported, in April 2021, that social media fake-news constitute about 73%, extremely high compared to the traditional electronic and print media (Informant 09: Male, 31, 17 September 2021). It also underscores, as much as it brought an opportunity, the significant challenge posed by the rapid pace of the adoption of digital technology *via* misinformation on social media platforms and the role of users in perpetuating the dissemination of such content.

Users, instead of checking the credibility of the content, would just share whatever they get on Facebook because they believe it is fact. Highlighting the underlying reasons, *Informant 09*

mentioned lower levels of digital literacy (16%), which, in his opinion, simply has exacerbated, if not created, the ongoing socio-political problems in Ethiopia, referring to the widespread misinformation and polarizing content on social media that contribute to political instability and social unrest. Another informant, a former journalist of an opposition media outlet, confirms that Facebook is the most widely used digital platform and is generally trusted as a reliable source of information due to limited public awareness.

In our country, it is Facebook that is widely used. Unfortunately, there is huge trust as whatever is written on Facebook is, by-and-large, considered as true or fact. Especially, if a popular person writes something, people believe that it is true even if it is a white lie. And, our people's awareness is still far behind, they do not question its credibility (Informant 18: Male, 39, 28 July 2021).

This trust often leads to a lack of critical evaluation, as most people tend to accept whatever is written on the platform as true or factual, which the informant finds worrisome. This tendency to unquestioningly believe all posts are true without reasonable scrutiny, associated with low levels of digital literacy and immature use of social media, often results in engagements in “mob politics” that could potentially create a cycle of crises and social unrest, contributing to political and economic instability.

The above problems are exacerbated when popular figures post information, as their statements are readily believed even if they lack grounded evidence to verify. This situation underscores the urgent need for improved media literacy and critical thinking among the population to help them better evaluate the information they encounter online and reduce the spread of misinformation. Nevertheless, the prevalent levels of digital literacy among users leads to the acceptance and dissemination of digital content published in popular social media exacerbates pre-existing and new social divisions due to network echo-chamber effects, resulting in violence and social unrest. These conditions provide authoritarian governments with a rationale to suppress dissent under the guise of maintaining law and order or ensuring public safety and political stability. This takes us to the next section, which provides details of advanced digital techniques of online data analyses along with the political purposes meant to serve.

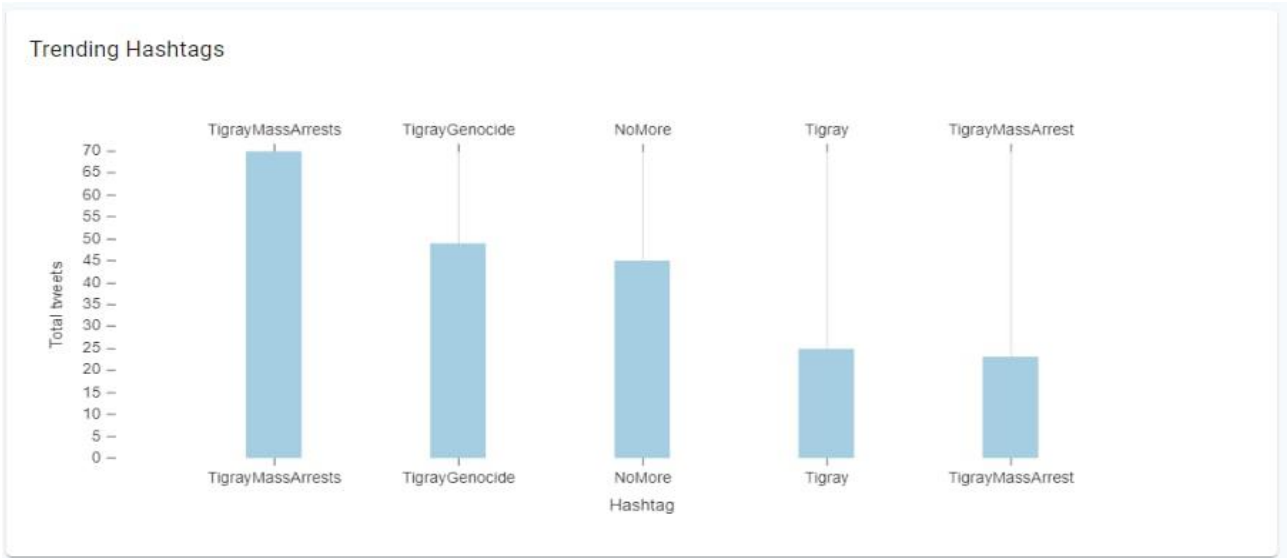
5.2.5. Advanced Techniques of Social Media Analyses

The voluminous and diverse online information is known as the “Big Data.” Scholars use the notion of “Big Data” to refer to the “high-volume, high-velocity, and high-variety” (3 ‘V’s) information assets, with magnitude often reported in multiple terabytes and petabytes, thus, require

advanced, innovative, and cost-effective methods for processing, storage, management, and analysis to enhance insights and decision-making (Gandomi & Haider, 2015). Big Data encompasses vast amounts of structured and unstructured data generated daily through digital interactions. Due to their scale and complexity, traditional processing methods are inadequate. However, advancements in AI and machine learning have made it possible to process Big Data effectively, enhancing predictive analytics and political decision-making.

An informant revealed that experts in the Digital Transformation Office of MinT analyze Big Data from internet sources using AI-powered machine-learning algorithms. While they often develop custom AI models tailored to political directives from top officials (usually the PM), they occasionally use freely available tools like Google’s TensorFlow or Twitter’s API, particularly for analyzing English-language content to classify and target different groups by specifying the period of interest, i.e. daily, monthly, year, or even more. For example, on September 14, their daily analytic model examined trending Ethiopian political topics from 21,948 Twitter accounts, analyzing tweets, retweets, comments, hashtags (#), and mentions (@), as illustrated in *Figure 7* below.

Figure 7 – Trending Topics on Ethiopian Politics via Twitter Hashtags (#) on 14 Sept. 2021



Source: Informant 08: September 2021.

In the above figure, four of the five major trending campaigns were organized against the government and mobilized to stop the mass arrest and “genocide” of Tigrayans. Hence, this summary report obtained from Twitter enables the government to design counter-digital

campaigns but also easy filtering of user data and classification of their political stances as either *pro-government* or *anti-government*.

Nevertheless, the most common data analytics algorithm is BERT (Bidirectional Encoder Representations from Transformers). By utilizing algorithms like BERT, IT specialists in the department can create models to train high-performance computing (HPC) systems with large-capacity servers through machine learning. This process involves analyzing vast amounts of social media data by accessing specific accounts of interest. Machine learning enables the system to develop models for any language by processing substantial initial data inputs, training to recognize patterns, and accurately organizing and classifying information into predefined categories. According to interview responses, Big Data has been pivotal in analyzing the spread of politically significant online content and identifying patterns of communication and influence.

Big data is mostly used in a highly political context. There is something known as “eco-chamber.” It helps to get to the starting point of everything on social media. It is a network analysis that is done as to know who shared information, and who commented on it could easily be identified based on network eco-chamber (Informant 08: Male, 35, 14 September 2021).

Techniques like echo chambers are used to track the spread of information and identify key social media influencers. An echo chamber is a condition on social media platforms where certain narratives are amplified, reinforcing existing beliefs among like-minded users. While this reinforces social divisions and contributes to polarization, it also allows governments to mine metadata for network analysis, revealing the source, timing, and key actors behind the information. The government’s institutional and technical capabilities enable the use of advanced methods to analyze the political dynamics of digital platforms. These techniques offer valuable insights into public opinion, influential users, and the flow of political content, highlighting the role of data analysis in shaping political strategies *via* network and sentiment analyses.

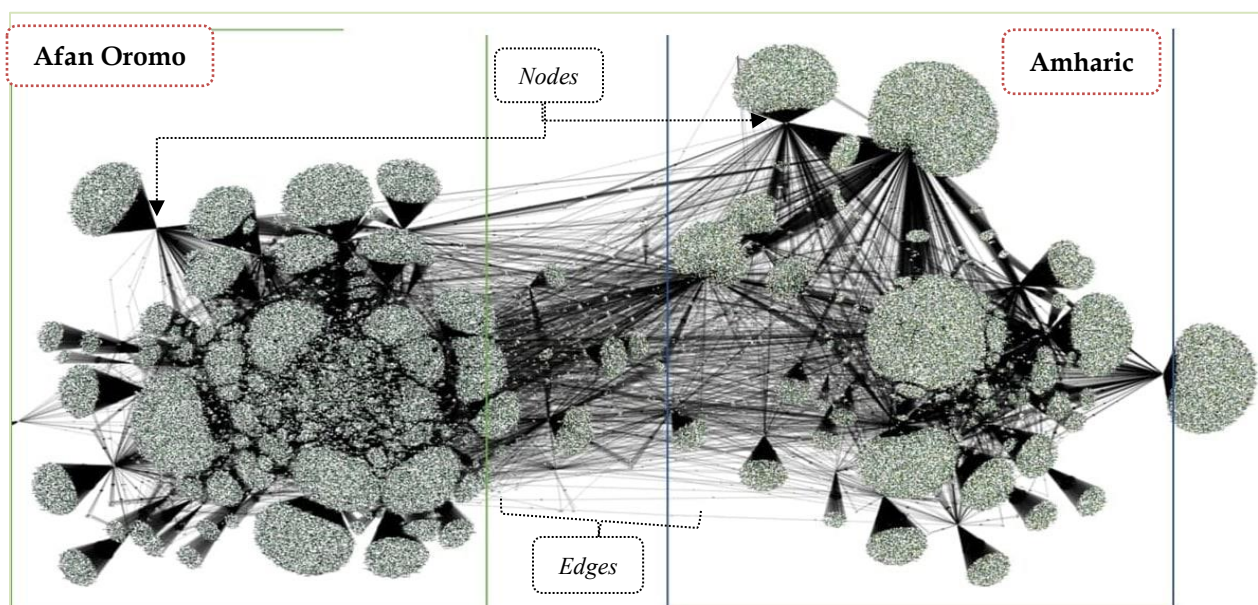
Network analysis is the process of examining social structures using relationships (edges) between entities (nodes) in a network that provide insights into the structure and dynamics of the system (Hevey, 2018). In Big Data, network analysis is used to study complex relationships within large datasets, uncovering patterns, detecting anomalies, and understanding the behavior of interconnected entities. Experts noted in an interview that network analysis is a critical method for analyzing political dynamics on major social media platforms in Ethiopia. This approach is

particularly effective for tracking and mapping connections between social media accounts to identify influential users. An interviewee explains this condition as follows:

Consider a post made by an influential social media user: you have the person who posted it, those who like it, share it, comment on it, and so forth. This results in a vast amount of data, capturing detailed information not only about the number of likes, shares, and comments but also about the identities of the individuals involved and the content of their comments. For example, a post with a thousand reactions could generate millions of related data points. Network analysis is conducted based on this data. Sometimes, the output isn't generated all at once. This output is then channeled through the network echo chamber (Informant 08: Male, 35, 14 September 2021).

The excerpt highlights that network analysis is a vital technique used by the Ethiopian government for online tracking to identify and trace the source of information, key actors, and targeted content, as well as its impact on others. While the large volume of data may sometimes hinder the generation of comprehensive reports, network analysis is particularly effective for mapping social media connections to identify influential users by leveraging the concept of a network echo chamber. An empirical study by Cota *et al.* (2019) suggest that echo chambers are prevalent, with users primarily engaging and sharing content with those holding similar views. This echo chamber effect enables a deeper understanding of information flow on social media and helps pinpoint influential actors and their networks. *Figure 8* below provides a graphic report of the network analysis performed on 10 November 2021 based on data generated from social media platforms.

Figure 8 – Result of the Network Analysis of Major Social Media Platforms



Source: Informant 08: November 2021.

The network analysis report, shown in the above figure, maps the intricate web of information flow from sources to users, highlighting key actors and their influence. The report features *nodes* representing key actors and *dots* for users sharing similar content, with *lines* indicating interactions like likes, shares, or comments. The thickness of the edges and the density of dots reflect the relative influence of each actor. The thickness of the edges and the cumulative density of the dots indicate the relative influence of each node, highlighting the social media actors in the summary report of network analysis. This tool is particularly valuable for the Ethiopian government to monitor and control information, identify sources of politically significant content, and assess its public impact. Algorithms used in the analysis are trained to create predictive models that analyze communication patterns and information flow across languages, demonstrating a significant inter-language data flow, especially between Afan Oromo and Amharic users on opposite sides of the network. Conducted in real-time, the analysis allows experts to trace information flow and identify key influencers by focusing on specific details. Access to the report is restricted to a few officials, such as ministers, *via* secure internal networks, likely to enhance security and minimize hacking risks.

The government officially claims that social media data analysis is conducted to identify offensive content, categorizing users as *offenders*, *neutrals*, or *supporters* (Informant 08: Male, 35, 14 September 2021). Offensive content is further classified as fake news, violence-inciting, or hate speech. However, politically, an “offender” often refers to individuals or groups critical of the government. While “digitally-amplified problems” encompassing “inauthenticity, data insecurity, and disinformation” (Dowling, 2020) are real, the process is frequently used as a tool to suppress dissent and target political opponents, labeling them as threats under various pretexts often scapegoating them for any political unrest..

This approach extends beyond domestic politics, as seen on November 19, 2021, when the Ethiopian Media Authority accused international outlets like BBC, CNN, and Reuters of spreading “fake news,” misrepresenting the “law enforcement operation” as “genocide,” denigrating the humanitarian efforts in Tigray and falsely depicting the government as using “hunger” and “rape” as a “weapon of war,” thus aligning with the TPLF’s agenda (EPA, 2021). These accusations framed critical reporting on Tigray as unethical and politically motivated. The PM’s statement, shared in a March 29, 2023, tweet by Alemu Sime, that “media freedom does not mean imposing

the yoke of burden on people,” underscores this trend, allowing the restriction of civil liberties like freedom of expression.

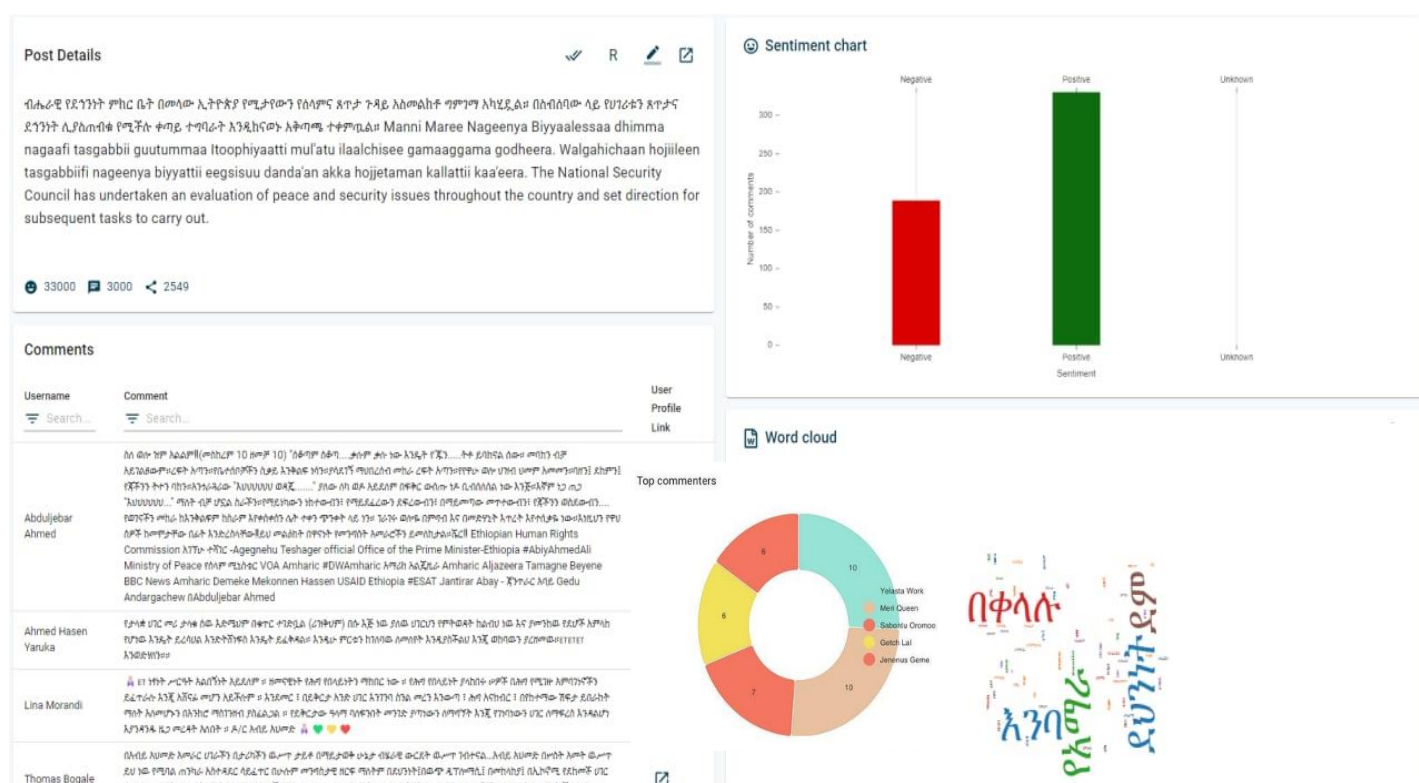
Another advanced technique used in mapping social media users’ data is *sentiment analysis*. Sentiment analysis, or opinion mining, examines opinions, attitudes, and emotions to evaluate public sentiment on specific topics. It allows classification of contents as positive, negative, or neutral using computational methods, often employing machine learning to analyze slang, symbols, and sarcasm commonly found in social media posts (Singh, Tomar, & Sangaiah, 2020; Drus & Khalid, 2019). Sentiment analysis is particularly useful for detecting consistency between government actions and statements (Budiharto & Meiliana, 2018). Agrawal *et al.* (2011) note that social media platforms like Twitter play a key role by enabling the collection of data through hashtags, providing insights into public opinion through real-time, concise posts. These posts not only reflect public sentiment but also serve as a valuable resource for political scientists studying activism, public opinion, and social networks (Hopkins & King, 2010).

In Ethiopia, the government utilizes Big Data from platforms in both Amharic and English to summarize public sentiment to summarize public sentiments as *positive*, *negative*, and *unknown*. A comprehensive sentiment analysis report includes key comments, top commenters, pictorial sentiment charts, and word clouds summarizing frequently mentioned terms. These word clouds are further categorized into emotions like admiration, joy, or anger. Comments involving sarcasm or Amharic texts written in English characters are often grouped under the “unknown” category. Additionally, an informant noted that machine learning initiatives for Big Data analysis were originally designed for public use, aiming to enhance government performance through feedback and help social media users identify fake news *via* MinT’s official website. However, the Prime Minister later restricted these efforts, directing sentiment analysis to focus solely on ministerial offices and high-ranking officials active on social media. An experienced employee from a government digital information management office further elaborated:

Here is a sentiment report [showing it to me]. This one is for Abiy, which I can access due to some responsibilities assigned to me. However, I can’t access the full contents of reports for other ministers under him. Currently, the sentiment analysis is conducted for a total of 48 accounts, which I can see in our database, but I don’t have access to the detailed contents. I also don’t know why sentiment analysis is done only for these officials (Informant 08: Male, 35, 14 September 2021).

As a result, sentiment analyses are now focused on selected top officials. The original plan to use machine learning for public purposes was abandoned, though the system continues to undergo intensive training for potential future use. *Figure 9* below shows a sentiment chart analyzed by one of the two experts at MinT, which assessed public sentiment regarding Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed's Facebook post on 20 September 2021, written in Amharic, Afan Oromo, and English, stating: “*The National Security Council has undertaken an evaluation of peace and security issues throughout the country and set direction for subsequent tasks to carry on.*”

Figure 9 – Analysis of Social Media Users’ Sentiment on PM Post on Facebook



Source: Informant 08: September 2021.

The sentiment analysis aimed to assess the political climate among most Ethiopian audiences, particularly local, national, and international political actors. While over 300 users provided mostly positive feedback, nearly 200 negative comments stood out, revealing significant political opposition to the Prime Minister's intentions and potential measures. The frequent mention of “security” signaled the government's effort to frame all political actions outside the ruling party as security issues. This analysis occurred amid a tense national context, with the Tigray war at its peak and the aftermath of Ethiopia's controversial June 2021 election, where opposition parties

boycotted, and the ruling Prosperity Party claimed a near-unanimous victory. The Prime Minister's post appeared to be an attempt at "self-legitimization," asserting the government's control and its entitlement to use violence in the name of "public order and security." As such, sentiment analyses are performed to monitor public opinion and political discourse on key issues of interest.

5.3. Summary

The qualitative study underscores the intricate relationship between digitalization, marketization, and authoritarian governance in Ethiopia. As digitalization rapidly advanced alongside market reforms, these processes became mutually reinforcing. Marketization, driven by privatization and deregulation, fostered the expansion of digital technologies, with a particular emphasis on mobile communication, internet infrastructure, and digital services. This has been pivotal in reshaping Ethiopia's economy, particularly with the privatization of key sectors like telecommunications and banking. The liberalization of these sectors, while promoting competition and efficiency, also facilitated the growth of digital tools and platforms that can be harnessed for both economic and political control. As digital technologies proliferated, they provided the government with enhanced capacities to monitor, regulate, and even control public opinion, creating a space where market principles of efficiency and service delivery could coexist with state-driven objectives of governance and surveillance. The increased adoption of digital technologies has thus enhanced the expansion of market rationales, which are often framed as integral to Ethiopia's development strategy, while also consolidating the state's grip on power. This interaction between digitalization and marketization exemplifies how one process can fuel the other, reinforcing a political system that benefits from both economic growth and technological control.

Key government institutions, such as the Ministry of Innovation and Technology (MinT), the Information Network Security Administration (INSA), and Ethio Telecom, have played instrumental roles in institutionalizing information management practices that both support and expand the reach of digital surveillance and control. Through their work, the government has been able to create a tightly controlled digital ecosystem in which political discourse can be monitored and manipulated. For instance, sentiment analysis tools and advanced data analytics provide the government with real-time insights into public sentiment, allowing for strategic interventions to suppress dissent and amplify pro-government narratives. This control over digital platforms has enhanced an authoritarian environment where opposition voices are marginalized, and public

opinion is shaped by state-driven digital campaigns, which can easily target and neutralize perceived threats. Moreover, the government's use of digital tools to label dissenters as offenders and classify content as "fake news" or "hate speech" has led to the suppression of political opposition under the guise of maintaining public order and stability.

The findings of qualitative analysis suggest that these digital tools, while presented as mechanisms for improving governance and efficiency, serve a dual purpose in maintaining and enhancing cycles of authoritarian rule. The ability to monitor and control information through advanced data analytics, sentiment analysis, and surveillance technologies enables the Ethiopian government to exert significant influence over political discourse, limit the flow of dissenting opinions, and solidify its hold on power. The strategic use of digital platforms as tools for propaganda, coupled with the suppression of opposing voices, contributes to a broader environment of repression. This digital dominance has not only exacerbated political polarization and social division but also enabled the government to justify its authoritarian measures, framing them as necessary for maintaining national security, stability, and public order. Thus, the convergence of digitalization and marketization has not only transformed Ethiopia's economic and political landscape but has also reinforced the cycles of authoritarian governance, making it more resilient and pervasive.

Building on the qualitative insights, the next Chapter will provide the results of macro and micro-level quantitative analyses through a detailed examination of broader and more granular data trends within Ethiopia's digital political environment.

6. Results of Quantitative Data Analyses

6.1. Overview

This chapter presents the findings of quantitative data analyses, examining the relationship between digitalization and socio-political variables. It begins with a macro-level analysis, exploring the socio-political correlates of digitalization and the long-term interactions between digitalization, marketization and authoritarianism. The chapter provides the pertinent details of quantitative results obtained through the VAR estimates and interprets the results and post-estimation Granger causality test. The micro-level analysis follows, offering descriptive statistics on democracy, trends in mobile ownership, economic decision-making regarding intervention policies, and micro-level estimates of the state of democracy, but also providing key quantitative findings, illuminating the intricate dynamics between digitalization, socio-economic variables and political governance.

6.2. Results of Macro-level Quantitative Analysis

6.2.1. Socio-political Correlates of Digitalization

By including 25 years of pre-mobile era (1974-1998) as a control observation points against the last 25 years (1999-2023) following the introduction of mobile technology in Ethiopia, a point-bi-serial correlation coefficient has been computed, *as per* the suggestions of Kemery *et al.* (1988) to determine the strength of association between the state of democracy and mobile subscription denoted as a binary variable. The results indicate the strength of statistical association based on point bi-serial correlation coefficient is -0.77 at 95% confidence level, suggesting a strong inverse association between the presence of mobile communications technology and the state of democracy in the country over the last quarter of a century, compared to the 25 years preceding the introduction of cellular phones.

Additionally, Pearson's bi-variate relational coefficients were computed to further examine the linear correlation of digitalization, denoted by mobile phone connectivity, with changes in various socio-economic and political indicators for about a quarter of a century in Ethiopia, summarized in *Table 11* below.

Table 11 – Socio-political Correlates of Mobile Connectivity

Correlates of Digitalization	Pearson Correlation Coefficients
	Mobile Subscription (N=25)
Property rights	.913**
Private civil liberties	-.412*
Freedom of expression	0.173
Freedom of peaceful assembly	0.048
Rule of law	0.245
Access to justice	0.099
Alternative sources of info.	0.298
Media Bias ^δ	-.582**
Pol. infl. of state-owned media ^δ	-.653**
Elites abuse of Defamation/Copyright laws	.675**
Online media fractionalization	.456*
Polarization of society ^δ	-.751**
Mass mobilization	.734**
Political Violence	.829**
Domestic Autonomy	-.698**
International Autonomy	-.728**
State Authority over Territory	-.642**

Legend: * $\rho < .05$, and ** $\rho < .001$.

^δ Denotes that lower measurement values, implying a higher prevalence of the phenomenon.

Source: Author's Computation from V-Dem (2024a) & World Bank (2024).

The results presented in *Table 11* above indicate the strength of statistical association and direction of relationships between different socio-governance variables with cellular phone subscription rates as denominators of the phenomenon of digitalization. The results of the correlation revealed that there is no sufficient evidence of increased use of digital technology correlating with political rights and civil liberties such as freedom of expression and peaceful assembly as well as the rule of law and access to justice. The empirical evidence suggests that higher subscriptions to mobile phone connections may not be found in the contexts of significantly diversified sources of information as one would normally expect. Nevertheless, results indicated that there is a very strong positive correlation between better protection of private property rights, and connectivity *via* mobile subscriptions, suggesting a significant association between digitalization and marketization denoted by privatization.

The results presented in *Table 11* above also suggest that societies with higher levels of mobile subscriptions tend to experience serious polarization, higher levels of mass mobilization, and

political violence.²⁰ This suggests that prevailing social conditions, such as ethnic and economic divisions that drive political mobilization and instability, are central components of the autocratic cycle. These conditions often constitute political rationales of spiral authoritarian control and anti-democratic measures, framed as the only viable solutions, particularly evident, in the context of internet and social media, in the securitization of political narratives during periods of social unrest.

Increased mobile connectivity is also accompanied by higher levels of media bias against opposition groups, abuse of defamation and copyright laws by elites, and dissemination of false information domestically by the government, implying a potentially high prevalence of mal-information activities among the elites with higher connectivity in societies. The production of fake news by the government, combined with low digital literacy and rising mobile connectivity, reinforces authoritarian rule in Ethiopia by amplifying state propaganda and suppressing opposition narratives. Citizens' limited ability to critically assess information allows state-controlled media to dominate, while defamation and copyright laws are weaponized to silence dissent. Increased connectivity broadens the reach of state-sponsored misinformation, deepens public distrust and fragmentation, weakening collective resistance, thereby entrenching authoritarian control by shaping perceptions, marginalizing opposition, and maintaining legitimacy through informational dominance. In this context, political activities have increasingly shifted to digital platforms, making the internet and social media key arenas of influence that all political actors (state, opposition parties, civil societies, public figures, etc.) aspire to control.

Moreover, the above findings highlight that increased mobile connectivity in Ethiopia is associated with diminished domestic and international autonomy and weakened state authority over territory, suggesting the erosion of state sovereignty in the face of rapid globalization. This implies that the global market's expansion amplifies the problems of territorial integrity and violence, fostering societal polarization and instability, which interact with the dynamics of digitalization and marketization along the spiral of authoritarianism. While marketization inherently benefits those controlling state power, incumbents leverage advanced technical capacities to monitor, analyze,

²⁰ The “polarization of society,” here, refers to the degree to which political differences impact social relationships, with highly polarized societies exhibiting reluctance among opposing political supporters to engage in friendly interactions; while “political violence” meant the use of physical force by non-state actors to achieve political objectives, excluding non-physical and profit-driven actions (V-Dem, 2024b).

and pre-empt potential political threats in the digital space (Xu, 2020). Consequently, an attempt has also been made to examine the state’s “cybersecurity capacity”²¹ as a measure of its ability to effectively dominate the digital political environment. *Table 12* further explores the correlation between government cyber capacity and selected variables, shedding light on the state’s use of advanced cyber techniques to control internet and social media dynamics.

Table 12 – Correlates of Government’s Cybersecurity Capacity

Correlates of Government’s Cybersecurity Capacity (N=24)	Coefficients
Internet Subscribers	.743**
Online media existence	.842**
Online media perspectives	0.09
Govt. dissemination of false info. ^δ	-.729**
Govt. internet filtering in practice ^δ	-.789**
Arrests for political content ^δ	-.781**
Elites’ soc. media use to org. offline action	.897**
Govt. social media monitoring ^δ	-.934**
Govt. social media shut down in practice ^δ	-.791**
Govt. social media alternatives ^δ	-.773**

Legend: * $\rho < .05$, and ** $\rho < .001$.

^δ Denotes that lower measurement values, implying a higher prevalence of the phenomenon.

Source: Author’s Computation from V-Dem (2024a).

The correlation coefficients in *Table 12* above indicate a strong positive relationship between the government’s cyber capacity and higher internet subscriptions, as well as the greater presence of online media platforms, despite a lack of diverse perspectives in online media. This dominance of government viewpoints in major domestic media outlets reflects the state’s control over the digital information space. Additionally, the government’s higher cybersecurity capacity strongly correlates with an increased prevalence of false information dissemination, stricter filtering practices, widespread virtual surveillance, and frequent internet shutdowns, particularly in restricting access to social media. These findings suggest that the government’s digital resources

²¹ The notion of “cybersecurity capacity” refers to a range of methods used to counter digital threats aimed at breaching private digital networks through exploiting software vulnerabilities, cracking passwords, and using social engineering to deceive individuals into revealing sensitive information, with goals ranging from data theft to operational disruption (V-Dem, 2024b).

have led to a more tightly controlled online environment, limiting citizens' ability to freely navigate the digital space.

Moreover, the data reveal that as the government's digital resources advance, there is an increased likelihood of arrests related to online political content, including activity on popular social media platforms. This indicates a narrowing of alternatives for political engagement in the digital space, pushing elites to rely on social media for organizing offline political actions. To further understand the political implications of these digital engagements, it is crucial to examine the types of offline actions mobilized through digital platforms, particularly social media. *Table 13* presents correlation coefficients between various types of organized actions identified by V-Dem (2024b) and key metrics, shedding light on the political outcomes linked to digital mobilization.

Table 13 – Types of Political Actions Organized via Social Media

Types of Political Actions/ Organization	Correlation Coefficients (N=24)	
	Mobile Phone	Internet
Petition signing	-.475*	-0.371
Voter turnout	.621**	.498*
Street protests	-0.173	-0.195
Strikes/labor actions	-.497*	-.523**
Riots	0.248	0.146
Organized rebellion	.778**	.655**
Vigilante justice	0.351	.428*
Ethnic cleansing/genocide	.560**	.689**
Others	.599**	.615**

Legend: * $p < .05$, and ** $p < .001$.

Source: Author's Computation from V-Dem (2024a) & World Bank (2024).

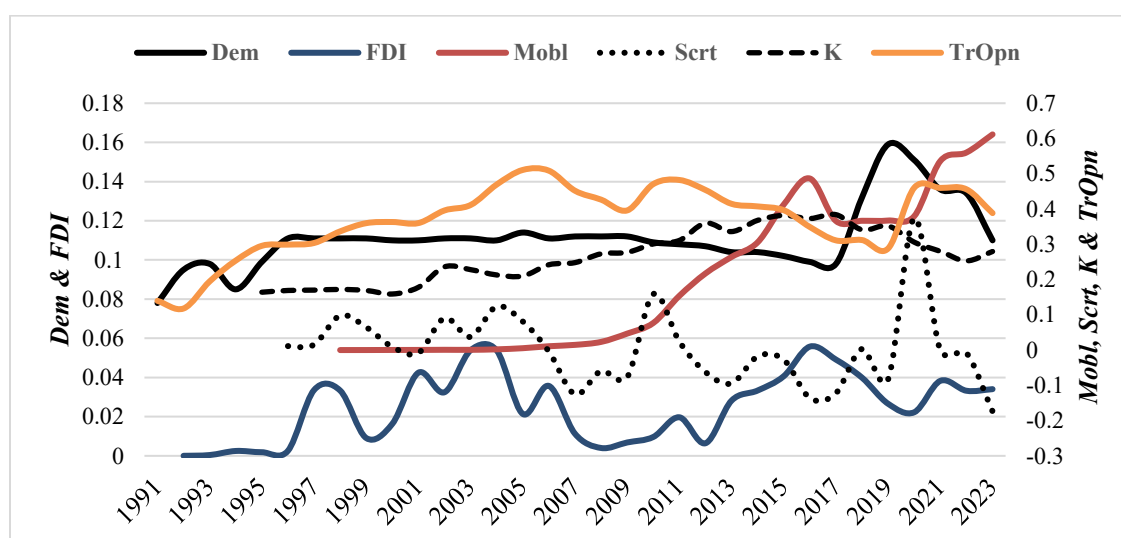
The results show varied correlations between types of organized political actions and mobile/internet subscriptions. Higher mobile and internet subscriptions are positively associated with increased voter turnout, organized rebellion, ethnic cleansing/genocide, and other unspecified actions. A moderate positive correlation between mobile phone usage and internet access with vigilante justice involving mob lynching and stalking harassment. Conversely, there is a moderate negative association between petition signing and strikes/labor actions. For street protests and riots, the correlations are weak, indicating little or absence of a meaningful association. This suggests that increased access to mobile and internet services is linked with certain forms of

political and social actions, particularly those involving more radical political measures, which usually lead to repression attempts by the incumbent.

6.2.2. Descriptive Statistics of Time Series Data and Results of the VAR Estimates

Over the period from 1999 to 2023, the variables in the dataset reveal significant long-term trends reflecting Ethiopia's socio-economic and political transformations. *Figure 10* below provides a graphic depiction of the development patterns in the time-series data.

Figure 10 – A Depiction of Long-term Development Pattern of the Study Variables



Source: NBE (2024), MoFED (2024), V-Dem (2024a) & World Bank (2024).

As shown in the above figure, Ethiopia saw a remarkable expansion in mobile subscriptions, indicative of the rapid adoption of digital infrastructure and connectivity, enabling greater access to communication and digital services. Trade openness and foreign direct investment (FDI) showed mixed trends, with trade peaking in the mid-2000s before declining, and FDI rising until 2016, tied to infrastructure investments and market liberalization, but declining in the later years due to political unrest and global economic conditions. These trends equally reflect shifts in Ethiopia's trade policies and its balance between export-led growth and domestic market development, particularly during EPRDF. Capital formation steadily increased, reflecting economic growth, until 2017, after which it stabilizes or slightly declines, due to disruptions caused by political instability. Security spending, while starting from a low base, also shows a steady rise over the years.

Despite economic growth and advancements in digital technology, the state of democracy featured slight fluctuation, indicative of an authoritarian political system. However, in 2018, following the change of government and the subsequent political opening, the state of democracy saw a noticeable increase. This improvement is attributed to political reforms introduced by the new leadership, including the release of political prisoners, the opening of political space, and efforts to promote dialogue with opposition groups. However, this improvement was short-lived as unresolved structural issues highly centralized power, and growing ethnic conflicts, which led to a regression in democratic governance after 2019, further exacerbated by the Tigray War and crackdowns on dissent. The decline in democracy underscores the difficulty of sustaining political reforms without addressing deeper institutional and systemic challenges.

Together, these trends suggest that while mobile connectivity and economic development advanced, security remained a priority, and the political system, although undergoing reforms, continued to face challenges in fully embracing democratic growth. *Table 14* below presents the summary of descriptive statistics of the time series data used in the VAR model estimates.

Table 14 – Descriptive Summary of Timeseries Data

Variables	N	Range	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Error	Std. Dev.
<i>Dem</i>	25	0.061	0.098	0.159	0.11508	0.00306	0.015302
<i>Mbl</i>	25	0.611544	0.000104	0.611648	0.208403	0.042574	0.212869
<i>Scrt</i>	25	0.012411	0.011986	0.024397	0.018944	0.000565	0.002825
<i>K</i>	25	0.225	0.159	0.384	0.282384	0.013702	0.068508
<i>TrOpn</i>	25	0.222714	0.288153	0.510867	0.412191	0.012219	0.061095
<i>FDI</i>	25	0.051752	0.00401	0.055762	0.028973	0.00318	0.0159

Source: Author's Computation from NBE (2024), MoFED (2024), V-Dem (2024a) & WB (2024).

The descriptive statistics in the table above highlight notable differences in variability among the factors, as indicated by their standard deviations. Mobile penetration (*Mbl*) exhibits the highest standard deviation, reflecting significant year-to-year variability and rapid technological adoption over the 25-year period, transitioning from negligible levels to widespread usage. In contrast, the state of democracy (*Dem*) has a low standard deviation, indicating limited variability and stagnation in governance reforms, with only minor improvements or declines. Similarly, security expenditure (*Scrt*) shows very low variability, suggesting slow and steady progress in investment in repressive capacity. Capital formation (*K*) and trade openness (*TrOpn*) have moderate standard deviations, reflecting periods of growth interspersed with fluctuations tied to investment cycles

and policy shifts. Foreign Direct Investment (*FDI*) shows sporadic inflows, influenced by both domestic political stability and global economic trends. These variations reflect that while technological progress has been dynamic, other areas like governance and institutional development have experienced limited or inconsistent change. Consequently, the Vector Autoregression (VAR) model is employed to capture the long-term dynamic interrelationships among these study variables, as indicated in the methodology section. The following *Table 15* presents the results of the VAR model estimation with a lag length of two periods, each row corresponding to the estimated coefficient of the lagged independent variable, and the significance of impacts on the respective dependent variable in each equation denoted in the columns.

Table 15 – Estimates of the VAR Model

Variables	Equation					
	<i>Dem</i>	<i>Mbl</i>	<i>Scrt</i>	<i>K</i>	<i>TrOpn</i>	<i>FDI</i>
Dem L_2 .	0.12491	177.974	25.5105	-149.052	2.0982**	431.825
Mobl L_2 .	-0.00022**	0.32512	-0.04416	0.10947	0.00066	0.7273
Scrt L_2 .	-0.00036*	-0.34344	-0.16877	0.3893**	-0.0015	-0.2147
K L_2 .	-0.00045*	0.40036	0.17058	-0.0559	0.0006	-0.2321
TrOpn L_2 .	-0.10233**	14.7430	23.0238	29.9484	0.22194	-618.983
FDI L_2 .	-0.00003	-0.01378	-0.02714	0.00241	0.00006	-0.0896
Constant	0.15085***	-11.8395	-11.1017	2.3855	0.06961	160.79

Legend: * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

Source: Author's Computation from MoFED (2024), NBE (2024), V-Dem (2024a) & WB (2024).

The above table of VAR estimates provides insights into the direction, magnitude, and significance of the relationships between the lagged independent variables and the current value of each outcome variable set to be estimated *via* the respective equation. The scope of this study is, however, bound to the first column representing the estimates of the current values of democracy based on the lagged values of significant predictors (*See Appendix–V* for remaining equations).

The results of VAR indicated above suggest that the lagged value of democracy does not have a significant impact on its current value. However, holding other variables constant, a percentage increase in the growth in mobile subscription rates two years ago is associated with a decrease of 0.00022 units in the current score of democracy. This effect is statistically significant at the 0.05 level, indicating that changes in mobile subscriptions have a significant impact on the state of democracy. Similarly, the coefficient of security budget implies that a one percent increase in the

investment in the security apparatus of the state, before two years, is associated with a decrease of 0.00036 units in the current score of democracy, statistically significant at the 0.05 level, other variables remaining constant. The estimates also reveal, other things being equal, a one-unit increase in the lagged value of growth rate in capital formation and trade openness leads to a statistically significant decrease in the current score of democracy by 0.00045 and 0.1023 units respectively. Although the lagged values of FDI are also associated with a decrease in the current score of democracy, the statistical evidence does not suggest that changes in the FDI have a significant impact on the dependent variable.

Overall, the analysis revealed that, while the lagged values of democracy and FDI do not have statistically significant effects, the growth rate in mobile usage, increased government investment in security, enlargement in capital formation, and further intensification of trade openness have significant negative effects on the current state of democracy, thus, augmenting authoritarian political systems. Accordingly, the long-run relationship of the state of democracy (*Dem*) can be estimated based on predictors' coefficients *via* the following equation.

$$\Delta Dem_t = 0.151 + 0.125*(\Delta Dem_{t-2}) - 0.00022*(\Delta Mobl_{t-2}) - 0.00036*(\Delta Scrt_{t-2}) - 0.00045*(\Delta K_{t-2}) - 0.102*(\Delta TrOpn_{t-2}) - 0.00003*(\Delta FDI_{t-2}) + \mu_{Demt}$$

Here, ΔDem_t represents the change in democracy at time t , and ΔDem_{t-2} indicates the change in the state of democracy two years ago; $\Delta Mobl_{t-2}$, $\Delta Scrt_{t-2}$, ΔK_{t-2} , $\Delta TrOpn_{t-2}$, and ΔFDI_{t-2} denote the changes in the respective endogenous variables, i.e. mobile subscription, security budget, capital formation, trade openness, and foreign direct investment, two years ago; and μ_{Demt} represents the error term.

6.2.3. Interpretation of Post-regression Granger Causality Estimates

Following the VAR model estimation, the Granger causality Wald test was performed to determine whether the independent variables in a time series can predict another. *Table 16* below provides the predictive power and direction of the “Excluded” variables on the state of democracy (*Dem*). The Granger causality Wald tests, in the table, suggest that the growth in mobile subscription and the economy's trade openness Granger causes the state of democracy at 1% level of significance, while the causality flow from the change in share of security budget and capital formation affecting the extent of democracy is evident at 5% significance level.

Table 16 – Results of Granger Causality Wald Test

Excluded	Equation: <i>Dem</i>		
	<i>Chi-square</i>	<i>Df</i>	<i>Prob. > Chi²</i>
<i>Mbl</i>	6.9655	1	0.008
<i>Scrt</i>	4.5016	1	0.034
<i>K</i>	3.9477	1	0.047
<i>TrOpn</i>	9.11	1	0.003
<i>FDI</i>	2.1325	1	0.144
<i>All</i>	36.888	5	0.000

Source: Author's Computation, April 2024.

However, there is no sufficient evidence to reject the null hypothesis that FDI does not Granger cause *Dem*, suggesting that changes in FDI do not predict changes in the state of democracy at any conventional significance level, although the association between the two is apparently negative.

Overall, the variables have significant predictive power for *Dem*, either individually or collectively, and there is very strong evidence to reject the null hypothesis that all variables together do not Granger cause *Dem*. This implies that, collectively, the five independent variables can predict changes in *Dem* at a 1% significance level, suggesting that the cumulative effect of digitalization is more significant on capital growth than the change in its previous (re)productive capacity. The Granger Wald test also suggests that prior state of democracy and security conditions Granger cause trade openness at 5% and 10% levels of significance respectively. Finally, trade openness was also found to have a Granger causal effect on FDI at a 5% level of significance.

6.3. Results of the Micro-level Quantitative Analysis

Consistent with the macro-level analysis, the key variables are authoritarianism, digitalization and marketization. Authoritarianism, the dependent variable, measured as lower levels of democracy with a statistically significant shift from higher to lower levels reflecting autocratization. At the micro-level, citizens' mobile phone usage serves as a proxy for digitalization. Meanwhile, responses reflecting agreement with various economic roles of government and support for free market principles are used to gauge the extent of marketization over time. To this effect, logistic regressions were run to corroborate the magnitude, direction and statistical significance of the changes in the three major variables of the study across the two survey years, as shown in the following *Table 17*.

Table 17 – Changes in the Major Variables of the Study between Survey Years

Models	Summary Statistics			Category	Estimated Coefficients		
	$\rho > \chi^2$	Pseudo-R ²	Variables		Survey Year		Cons.
I.	0.000	0.0244	<i>Mobile Own.</i>	No (Ref.)	.	.	.
				Yes	.	0.74***	-0.15***
II.	0.000	0.1729	<i>Economic Decisions</i>	Neither (Ref.)	.	.	.
				Govt. Intv.	-1.27**	5.46***	.
				Free Mkt.	0.99*	3.51***	.
III.	0.000	0.1029	<i>Levels of Democracy</i>	Highest	.	-2.05***	.
				Moderate	Cutoff 1	.	-3.77***
				Low	Cutoff 2	.	-1.97***
				No	Cutoff 3	.	0.11**

Legend: * $\rho < .05$; ** $\rho < .01$; *** $\rho < .001$

Source: Author's Computation from Afrobarometer, 2013 & 2021.

The results of regressions summarized in *Table 17* above indicate a positive and statistically significant coefficient (0.74), with a higher log odd of mobile ownership in 2020 compared to 2013. This suggests, holding all else constant, the likelihood of owning a mobile phone during the last survey year is more than double compared to previous, reflecting technological advancements and wider accessibility across this period.

Regarding marketization, the negative and statistically significant coefficient (-1.27) indicates that, in 2020, individuals were substantially less likely to support government intervention, with the odds of favouring interventionist decisions decreasing by approximately 72% relative to 2013. Conversely, the positive and statistically significant coefficient (0.99) reflects about a 169% increase in support for the free market in 2020 compared to 2013. These findings highlight a notable shift in economic preferences over time, marked by declining support for government intervention and a growing endorsement of market-driven ideologies and non-intervention principles. Meanwhile, on the levels of democracy, the negative and statistically significant coefficient (-2.05) suggests that, in 2020, respondents were significantly less likely to rate democracy at higher levels compared to 2013.

These results demonstrate a substantial decline in the observed state of democracy between the two surveys, reinforcing the hypothesized downward trend in democratic conditions over time. Overall, mobile ownership and free market tendencies remarkably increased between the survey

years, accompanied by a substantial decrease in the government's role in economic decisions as well as an apparent decline in the level of democracy, indicating the condition of autocratization.

6.3.1. Descriptive Statistics on the Levels of Democracy

In the quantitative analysis, Ethiopian citizens' rating of democracy was used as an empirical indicator of political governance across two time periods under successive governments. However, the meaning of "democracy" varies among individuals. Generally, it is conceptualized as encompassing political rights, freedoms, and equality, influencing government decision-making and ensuring that political freedoms are more than formalities (Munck, 2014). Procedurally, democracy emphasizes free elections and civil liberties, while substantively, it includes social equality and economic growth (Baviskar & Malone, 2004).

In Ethiopia, Afrobarometer survey of 2013 asked respondents to identify essential characteristics of democracy. Choices included narrowing economic inequality, free elections, public accountability, and freedom of expression. A third of respondents prioritized economic issues like inequality and job creation, reflecting a substantive view of democracy, while free and fair elections followed. Respondents also rated Ethiopia's democracy on a 0-10 scale across three periods: the *Derg* regime (viewed as highly undemocratic, with mean ~1), early EPRDF rule in 2003 (mean ~5, moderate democracy), and 2013 (mean ~7.3, improved democracy). Aspirations for the future were high, with a mean score of 9.52, indicating near-perfect democratic expectations. Despite initial progress under EPRDF, rising autocratization led to mass protests and a government change in 2018. However, the trend of autocratization persisted, as reflected in survey data from 2013 and 2020.

The distribution of responses on the state of democracy (see *Table 18* below) shows no significant variation across age groups, indicating consistent intergenerational observations of political realities and similar political behaviors regardless of changes in government. However, gender-based differences are notable, with women rating higher levels of democracy compared to men, who were more likely to view democracy as absent or problematic. This disparity may stem from policies promoting gender equality, such as improved access to resources, female literacy, maternal health, and affirmative action, which benefited women in recent decades within

Ethiopia's traditionally patriarchal society. *Table 18* below provides descriptive statistics about the levels of democracy relative to different socio-demographic factors.

Table 18 – Descriptive Statistics of Responses on Levels of Democracy

Variables	No. of Obs.	Levels (Categories) of Democracy Rated (%)				Pearson <i>Chi</i> ² Test for Column Proportion	
		No Democracy (A)	Low (B)	Moderate (C)	Highest (D)	Chi ² (Df)	Sig.
<i>Gender</i>							
Female	2,152	8.46	22.40	37.04	32.11 ^{ABC}	28.9 (3)	.000*
Male	2,320	9.57 ^D	24.57 ^D	40.99 ^D	24.87		
<i>Age Groups</i>							
Elderly	632	8.70	24.84	38.77	27.69	2.55 (6)	0.862
Youth	2,632	8.97	22.99	39.89	28.15		
Adults	1,190	9.41	24.20	37.65	28.74		
<i>Education</i>							
No Formal Edu.	1,750	7.83	21.20	35.26	35.71 ^{ABC}	150.5(12)	.000*
Primary	1,565	8.95	22.36	40.45	28.24		
Secondary	696	9.63 ^D	27.30 ^D	42.96 ^D	20.11		
Post-secondary	259	9.65 ^D	27.80 ^D	46.72 ^D	15.83		
Univ. & above	182	17.58 ^{CD}	36.26 ^D	39.56 ^D	6.59		
<i>Employment</i>							
Unemployed	1,726	10.95 ^{CD}	24.39	37.20	27.46	16.3 (3)	.001*
Employed	2,728	7.77	22.95	40.40 ^A	28.89 ^A		
<i>Place of Residence</i>							
Rural	3,246	7.89	21.81	38.17 ^A	32.13 ^{ABC}	94.2 (3)	.000*
Urban	1,226	12.07 ^{CD}	28.06 ^D	41.52 ^D	18.35		
<i>Survey Year</i>							
2013	2,149	2.42	7.82	43.74 ^{AB}	46.02 ^{ABC}	1112.5 (3)	.000*
2020	2,323	15.15 ^{CD}	38.05 ^{CD}	34.78 ^D	12.01		

* Significance of χ^2 at .05; and, A, B, C & D denote significant category, where the superscript letter of a key category with smaller column proportion appears under the larger column for each significant pair.

Source: Author's Computation from Afrobarometer, 2013 & 2021.

As shown in *Table 18* above, employment status significantly influences the rating of observed levels of democracy. Employed respondents were more likely to view the government as democratic compared to the unemployed, highlighting the critical role of economic factors in shaping opinions on the democratic nature of governance. The descriptive results presented above indicate the rating of democracy also varies between rural and urban areas, with urban residents more likely to view the government as less democratic. This is attributed to post-1991 policies prioritizing rural and agricultural development, which significantly improved living conditions in

villages and boosted small-scale farming productivity, reducing poverty nationwide. This disparity also explains why urban areas have remained strongholds of opposition and government critics. Moreover, the test statistics suggest the likelihood of the government being considered more democratic significantly decreased in 2020 compared to 2013, indicating eventual autocratization on the ground at the time of conducting the respective surveys.

In general, the above findings suggest that political experience pertaining to the state of democracy in Ethiopia vary across socioeconomic and demographic variables, reflecting both progress and persistent challenges. The lack of variation across age groups implies a continuity of authoritarian political conditions across generations due to a shared history of absolutism. Gender-based differences highlight the positive impact of policies promoting gender equality, which have improved women's view of democratic improvement in a historically patriarchal society. Meanwhile, the influence of employment status underscores the role of economic conditions in rating democracy, with employed individuals viewing the government more favorably.

6.3.2. Micro-level Estimates of the State of Democracy

As repeatedly alluded to, the micro-level quantitative analysis is undertaken by treating authoritarianism, the dependent variable, measured as the observed level of democracy, with digitalization and marketization as the primary explanatory variables, consistent with the macro-level analysis. In line with Chapter Four (section 4.5.4), the micro-level estimates also include socio-economic and demographic factors such as gender, age, education, and ethno-national identity to analyze citizens' democratic experiences.

The results of the ordinal logistic regression (see *Table 19*) suggest that age, employment conditions, and regional variations do not have a statistically significant effect on the predicted probabilities of the state of democracy. It is very interesting to note that the rating of the state of democracy didn't significantly vary across the ethnic-based administrative units of the federation despite regional differences in ethnocultural composition, population size, level of urbanization, type of major economic activities, as well as membership in the ruling coalition, suggesting the country-wide nature of autocratization. Similarly, the absence of difference in the rating of democracy among the youth, adults, and the elderly, could mean the inter-generational consensus about the authoritarian political behavior of the incumbents. The estimated coefficients indicated

that other variables have a meaningful impact on the categories of the outcome variable, alongside the average marginal effects, as shown in *Table 19* below (See *Appendix – VI* for detailed results).

Table 19 – Estimates of the State of Democracy via Ordered Logistic Regressions

Summary Statistics: Dependent Variable <i>Level of Democracy</i>				
		Pseudo R ²	0.1117	
		Wald Chi ² (10)	969.34	
		Prob. > Chi ²	0.0000	
Predictors		Coefficients	Odds Ratio	AME
Mobile Phone Own. (Ref. No)				
	<i>Yes</i>	-0.29***	0.75	-0.045
Gender (Ref. Female)				
	<i>Male</i>	-0.26***	0.77	-0.039
Age				
		0.02	1.02	0.004
Education (Ref. No Educ.)				
	<i>University ≤</i>	-0.47***	0.63	-0.073
Employment				
		-0.05	0.95	-0.008
Economic Decision				
	<i>Free Market</i>	-0.31***	0.73	-0.048
Ethno vs. Ethio. Nationalism				
	<i>Only feel Ethiopian</i>	0.16*	1.17	0.024
Federation vs. Unitary				
	<i>Agree strongly with Unitary</i>	-0.46***	0.63	-0.070
Residence (Ref. Rural)				
	<i>Urban</i>	-0.47***	0.63	-0.072
Regions				
		0.01	1.01	0.001
Year (Ref. 2013)²²				
	<i>2020</i>	-1.78***	0.17	-0.272
	Cutoff 1	-4.12***	.	.
	Cutoff 2	-2.30***	.	.
	Cutoff 3	-0.12	.	.

Legend: * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; and *** $p < .001$.

Source: Author's Computation from Afrobarometer, 2013 & 2021.

Consistent with the descriptive statistics above (see *Table 18*), the results in *Table 19* indicate a significant variation in the rating of democratic experience among the two genders, as the male

²² The two-survey data were merged for greater predictive power, and to observe change across time *via* increasing sample size, variation, and longitudinal comparison by way of pooled cross-sectional analysis meant to capture temporal heterogeneity. Hence, “Year” is used as a dummy variable in a way to control for temporal fixed effects (changes in context, events, or policy), not to predict outcomes directly, but to hold constant shifts that may influence all responses.

respondents were less likely to observe the state of democracy as being in a higher state. The probability of the state of democracy being in the highest category decreases by approximately 3.9 percent for male respondents compared to females. This is basically due to the men's domination in political participation, including engagements in oppositions, which often leads to frequent imprisonment, harassment, and other forms of abuse of political rights and freedoms among male politicians, activists, or followers. Contrary to male respondents, who largely felt that democracy in Ethiopia is either nonexistent or severely flawed, female respondents generally reported higher levels of democracy that could be partly explained by the mushrooming of policies promoting gender equality and affirmative actions that recently benefited the women and girls, the historically marginalized stratum in the Ethiopian society.

The political participation of women has also risen dramatically at all levels of government administration since EPRDF. With Abiy Ahmed coming to power in 2018, one of the crucial features of the "political reforms" in Ethiopia was the gender reform that allocated half of the posts of the new government's cabinet to women. Then, the key ministerial posts such as defense, revenue, and customs, and the Federal Supreme Court president were filled by women, as well as the first female president (head of state). Similarly, a former judge and critic of the ruling coalition has been appointed as the chair of the national electoral commission and tasked with building capacity to ensure that the next election will be free, fair, and credible.

An assessment of the level of democracy on the ground among respondents significantly varied based on educational status, as the most educated respondents were less likely to report higher levels of democracy. The probability that the government is regarded as democratic decreases by approximately 7.25% among the highly educated respondents. These findings are consistent with Guriev & Treisman's (2019) theory of "informational autocracy," which argues that modern authoritarian leaders preserve their political power *via* the exploitation of disparity in political knowledge between the educated class and the public. As opposed to the masses that are subjected to the persuasion of incumbent's propaganda discourses, portraying opponents' alternative agenda as delusion, the "informed elite" could easily recognize and articulate the incompetence of ineffective leaders. Consequently, the highly educated are typically more critical in countries ruled by authoritarian regimes.

An increase in mobile phone ownership is also significantly associated with a lower likelihood of observed state of democracy being in a higher category. This suggests, holding other variables constant, the likelihood of the level of democracy moving to a higher category decreases by approximately 0.29 units for each unit increase in the number of individuals owning mobile phones. Therefore, all else equal, mobile connectivity is associated with a decreasing probability of the levels of democracy, observed by respondents, being in the highest category by approximately 4.5%. Similarly, the increasing tendency of non-interventionist economic decisions and free market orientation among respondents is associated with a significant negative coefficient (-0.31), suggesting a lower likelihood of democracy being in a higher category. Other things remaining constant, the growing interaction with the free market decreases the probability of a democratic state being in the highest category by 4.8% but increases the probability of the same in the lowest category by about 2.7%.

It has already been noted in Chapter Three that competing nationalisms are crucial factors that determine the political contours, often denoting the fundamental basis of social polarization, in the Ethiopian political landscape. Hence, the political view, evaluation, and experience greatly differ along the self-identification based on citizenship as “Ethiopian,” or as “ethnonational” political identity based on membership to a defined linguistic and cultural community. In our case, now, political self-identification along the Ethiopian nationalism has had a marginal positive effect on the rating of state of democracy that could be significant at a 5% level. The presence of very strong Ethiopian nationalism, compared to those feeling both their own ethnic and Ethiopian, is observed along with the increased probability of the highest level of democracy by 2.4%.

The preference for a unitary administrative structure, as opposed to a decentralized federation, is negatively and significantly associated with the likelihood of the state of democracy at a higher level. Preference for a unitary administrative structure is associated with a decrease in the probability of the highest level of democracy by 7%. Although federalism as a principle of governance entails the spatial aspect of democracy as it involves territorial division of power and vertical accountability, its implementation in Ethiopia under EPRDF, which continues to date, featured the highest level of power centralization that lacked a genuine democratic impetus as the federal(union), regional and local political institutions were effectively subverted into ruling party’s apparatus.

Responses on the level of democracy also significantly differ between urban and rural residents. We have already noted above that post-1991 government policies, focusing on rural and agricultural development, significantly improved living conditions in villages and increased the productivity of small-scale farms, thereby reducing poverty nationwide. This earned the ruling coalition wider political support from the rural areas with which it was largely engaged during its insurgency. However, better education and access to modern technological infrastructure in urban areas inevitably provide more informed alternative mechanisms of political engagement, mobilization, and coordination *via* exposing human rights abuses. Being an urban resident is associated with a decrease in the probability of the state of democracy being at the highest level by 7%. Thus, cities and towns have long been strongholds for opposition and critics. The above results are just evidence of the general fact that, under authoritarian governments, the residents of cities and towns were more inclined towards opposition and critics, thereby reducing the likelihood of the incumbent being viewed as democratic.

The rating of democracy levels also significantly dropped in 2020 with lower likelihood to be in the top category compared to the base year as observed in a very high negative coefficient (-1.78). The probability of democracy being in the highest category decreased substantially by approximately 27% in 2020 compared to 2013. While interpreting the descriptive test-statistic above, we have already indicated that the likelihood of government being considered more democratic significantly decreased between the survey years, indicating the political conditions of the time, and suggesting the necessity of understanding the reasons behind the temporal trend where outcomes have worsened over time. It is worth mentioning, here, that the aura of the last political change (2018), which arrived after nearly three decades, and the hope of transition to a democratic political system began to fade away soon after the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic.

For the new Ethiopian government, the global pandemic crisis offered a fertile political opportunity to end the power struggle by centralization of state power in the hands of the new elites and clearing off the rivals. In the early days, many observers praised the centralization efforts of the government, some regarded it as a strategy tailored to the local context besides rationalizing the same, arguing that the COVID-19 crisis required a multi-dimensional but unified response to

ensure coordinated and cost-effective community mobilization efforts that cannot be handled by the conventional public health management.

However, the pandemic crisis provided the government with an opportunity to enforce strict contact tracing measures under the pretext of controlling COVID-19 through isolation, quarantine, and treatment. The federal government's centralized authority enabled it to micromanage daily life, postpone the May 2020 national election unilaterally, and imprison critics questioning the constitutional validity of the delay, consolidating the ruling party's dominance. Government control over broadcast media during the pandemic limited citizens' access to critical information, endangering millions, particularly in areas with internet and phone service shutdowns. Where the internet was accessible, political dissent carried significant risks, as authorities detained young people for criticizing the government's pandemic response on social media.

The report by the Human Rights League of the Horn of Africa (HRLHA) (2020), admitted by the government's Ethiopian Human Rights Commission (EHRC) on 13 May 2020, highlights systemic state-led violence against civilians under the guise of "law enforcement operations" during periods of unrest (see *Appendix – VII*). This became particularly evident following the nationwide State of Emergency (SoE) declared on 10 April 2020, to combat COVID-19. The state of emergency further expanded the central government's power, leading to massive arbitrary arrests of independent journalists accused of spreading misinformation. Soon, it became apparent that these centralization efforts were driven more by political motives than public health concerns. The politicization of the crisis and the normalization of power abuses further entrenched anti-democratic tendencies within Abiy's government.

6.3.3. Perceptions of Freedoms and Political Engagement in the Context of Digitalization

Multinomial logistic regressions were run to analyze political freedoms (speech and association) in relation to respondents' frequency of political discussions and membership in political organizations, considering the growing impact of digitalization through mobile phone adoption alongside other relevant variables. The results presented in *Table 20* below indicate the variation of perceptions of freedom and political engagement across socio-demographic variables including age, gender, and education. Older individuals and the educated are more likely to perceive and exercise political freedoms, while gender disparities persist in actual participation. Males are

significantly more likely than females to discuss political topics (0.602 coefficient, or 82.6% higher) and affiliate with political parties (0.259 coefficient, or 29.6%), though there is no meaningful gender difference in perceptions of freedom of speech or political organization.

Table 20 – Freedoms of Speech vis-à-vis Political Discussion & Party Membership/Affiliation

Statistical Summary	Freedom of Speech	Freq. of Disc. Pol. Topics	Freedom to Join Pol. Org.	Party Membership /Affiliation
Wald Chi ² (7)	253.43	353.88	137.75	234.01
Prob. > Chi ²	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000
Pseudo R ²	0.0257	0.0417	0.0137	0.0462
Variables	Coefficient	Coefficient	Coefficient	Coefficient
Age	0.008***	0.0001	0.007**	-0.001
Gender (Ref. <i>Female</i>)				
Male	-0.034	0.602***	0.034	0.259***
Education (Ref. <i>No Educ.</i>)				
≥University	-0.082	0.837***	0.224	0.542**
Employment (Ref. <i>Unempl.</i>)				
Employed	-0.006	0.095	-0.04	0.03
Mobile Phone Own. (Ref. <i>No</i>)				
Yes	0.001	0.453***	-0.038	0.647***
Residence (Ref. <i>Rural</i>)				
Urban	-0.317***	-0.058	-0.178*	-0.420***
Year (Ref. <i>2013</i>)				
2020	-0.838***	0.565***	-0.641***	-0.890***
Constant	.	.	.	-1.135***
Cutoff 1	-2.911***	0.496***	-2.340***	.
Cutoff 2	-1.967***	2.903***	-1.400***	.
Cutoff 3	-0.296**	.	-0.016	.

Legend: * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

Source: Author's Computation from Afrobarometer, 2013 & 2021.

Education emerges as a critical determinant of political engagement. Individuals with university-level education are more likely to discuss political topics and more likely to affiliate with political parties (0.542 coefficient, or 71.9%) compared to those with no formal education. This underscores the role of education in fostering political awareness, critical thinking, and participation. However, education does not significantly impact perceptions of freedom of speech or freedom to join political organizations, suggesting that higher education primarily influences active engagement rather than perceived political liberties.

The results indicated above also reveal that mobile phone ownership has no significant impact on perceptions of freedom of speech. This implies that, in restrictive environments, increased mobile

penetration may not necessarily empower individuals to express their views freely, as broader authoritarian controls like surveillance and repression continue to undermine free speech regardless of digital connectivity. However, mobile phone ownership significantly increases the likelihood of discussing political topics by 0.453 coefficients, i.e. odds rising by 57.3%. This highlights the enabling role of digitalization in fostering political dialogue, likely through easier access to information, online forums, and social media platforms. Mobile phones have become critical for political engagement, allowing individuals to discuss and share political views more freely, even in restrictive environments, suggesting that digital tools may create informal spaces for dialogue that bypass traditional restrictions.

Similarly, mobile phone ownership has no significant effect on perceptions of freedom to join political organizations. This indicates that while digital tools may facilitate political awareness and communication, they do not necessarily translate into structural or institutional changes that allow greater freedom to associate with political groups. In authoritarian settings, digitalization may even reinforce fear or reluctance to join political organizations due to heightened surveillance capabilities. Nevertheless, mobile phone owners have a significant likelihood of membership in or affiliation with political parties by 0.647 coefficients, i.e. 91.1% higher odds. This suggests that mobile phones serve as a key tool for political mobilization, recruitment, and participation. Through messaging apps and digital campaigns, parties can reach and engage potential members more effectively. However, the relationship also raises questions about whether such affiliations are voluntary or driven by state/party propaganda leveraging digital platforms. Meanwhile, the significant urban-rural divide in political freedoms and engagement provides another lens to understand digitalization. Urban residents, despite having greater access to digital tools, perceive less freedom and exhibit lower political affiliation than rural residents. This suggests that urban digitalization may coexist with more pronounced political repression or greater awareness of restrictions, which rural populations experience differently.

In sum, the interplay of digitalization across political freedoms and actual engagement underscores a complex dynamic. While mobile phones enhance political discussions and affiliations, their impact on perceptions of freedoms (speech and association) is minimal or negative. This discrepancy reflects the dual role of digitalization in authoritarian contexts, where it acts as both a liberating force for dialogue and a potential instrument of control. Surveillance technologies

enabled by digital tools may inhibit individuals from perceiving genuine freedom, even as they engage in political discourse or affiliate with parties. Yet, the temporal comparison (2013 vs. 2020) highlights a significant decline in perceptions of political freedoms alongside increased political discussions. This further illustrates the paradox of digitalization in authoritarian settings: while fostering dialogue and mobilization, it does not necessarily mitigate structural constraints on freedoms. Instead, it might amplify awareness of such restrictions, resulting in diminished perceptions of freedom.

Further analyses provide a comprehensive understanding of the interplay between demographic, contextual, and structural factors in shaping perceptions of electoral freedoms and related political engagements. Accordingly, age, gender, education, employment, and urban residency significantly influence political participation in varying ways, as shown in *Table 21* below.

Table 21 – Voting Freedoms and Political Engagements in the Context of Mobile Connectivity

Statistical Summary	Freedom to Vote	Attend Elec. Campaign	Worked for Cand. / Party	Voted in Last Elec.	Attend Protest/Demons.
Wald Chi ² (7)	283.98	188.32	55.23	456.79	257.41
Prob. > Chi ²	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000
Pseudo R ²	0.0308	0.0356	0.0295	0.1194	0.0283
Variables	Coefficient	Coefficient	Coefficient	Coefficient	Coefficient
Age	0.009***	0.016***	0.004	0.046***	-0.009***
Gender (Ref. <i>Female</i>)					
Male	0.103	0.402***	0.651***	0.321***	0.487***
Education (Ref. <i>No Educ.</i>)					
≥University	0.169	0.444**	0.677*	-0.227	0.312
Employment (Ref. <i>Unempl.</i>)					
Employed	-0.002	0.332***	0.286	0.738***	0.01
Mobile Phone Own. (Ref. <i>No</i>)					
Yes	0.109	0.215**	0.399*	0.17	0.194**
Residence (Ref. <i>Rural</i>)					
Urban	0.114	-0.023	-0.153	-0.344***	0.049
Year (Ref. <i>2013</i>)					
2020	-0.996***	-0.400***	0.123	-0.935***	0.795***
Constant	.	-1.691***	-3.876***	-0.169	.
Cutoff 1	-2.794***	.	.	.	1.128***
Cutoff 2	-1.788***	.	.	.	1.937***
Cutoff 3	-0.404***	.	.	.	2.742***
Cutoff 4	.	.	.	.	3.622***

Legend: * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

Source: Author's Computation from Afrobarometer, 2013 & 2021.

The results in *Table 21* above indicate that older individuals are more likely to engage in institutionalized political activities, such as voting and attending election campaigns, but less likely to participate in protests. Men demonstrate higher overall political engagement, while education strongly promotes formal political involvement, with the most educated being more likely to attend campaigns and work for candidates, though their voting rates decline due to political disillusionment or the realization that election outcomes are often predetermined in authoritarian regimes. Employment correlates positively with voting and campaign participation, while urban residents perceive greater voting freedom but are less likely to vote, possibly reflecting fear or political vulnerability in authoritarian contexts.

Access to mobile phones significantly enhances political engagement of users to attend election campaigns by 0.215 coefficients (24%), work for candidates or parties by 0.399 coefficients (49.1%), and join demonstrations or protests by 0.194 coefficients (21.4%), compared to non-users. This highlights the role of mobile technology in enhancing political communication and mobilization. However, mobile phone use has no substantial impact on voting, as concerns about voting security and perceived restrictions on electoral freedom lead to lower participation, reflecting a more politically active but increasingly apprehensive population. Looking at the temporal dimension, respondents' perceptions of electoral freedoms were significantly lower during the last survey, with a substantial decline in voting turnout in the election preceding 2020 compared to 2013. Similarly, individuals were highly less likely to attend election campaigns, whereas participation in demonstrations or protests has seen a significant increase.

Overall, the above findings reveal that various forms of political participation widely vary across demographic, technological, and contextual factors, with older individuals, men, the employed, and mobile phone users are more likely to engage in institutionalized activities such as voting or attending campaigns. In contrast, younger individuals and men are more inclined toward grassroots activism. Nonetheless, there is notable decline in institutionalized political participation and surge in heightened protests or demonstrations across years alongside evolution of political context.

6.3.4. Diversity of News Sources and Political Instrumentality of Digital Platforms for Misinformation

Separate statistical analyses pertaining to usage of diverse news platforms reveal that mobile ownership significantly increases the likelihood of using diverse sources of news, though with

varying impacts (see *Appendix – VIII*). The strongest effect is observed for internet news, with higher odds for daily usage, and internet news consumption notably increased in 2020. While no significant changes were found for radio and television news between 2013 and 2020, newspaper usage declined during this period. These findings highlight considerable variability in news source usage, with mobile ownership emerging as a strong predictor, particularly for internet news. However, as indicated above, increased news consumption, in the context of declining state of democracy, reflects the tension between greater access to information and authoritarian control, as digital platforms equally facilitate the spread of misinformation.

This condition potentially undermines democratic processes, increasing public dissatisfaction and mass mobilization amid political polarization. An attempt has, thus, been made to examine the frequency of spreading false information among key political actors including the government, political parties, activists, journalists, and social media users, based on the survey responses (see *Appendix – IX*). The results indicate that mobile ownership is positively and significantly associated with the likelihood of frequent spread of misinformation among these actors, suggesting the dual-edged role of mobile technology in enhancing access to information while also amplifying the spread of false narratives.

From the perspective of the highly educated respondents, government officials and political parties are the most important agents of false information dissemination, with equal coefficients, followed by the news media agencies and journalists associated with the highest likelihood of spreading false information. Educated individuals have greater media literacy, enabling them to critically evaluate information sources, but they are also more exposed to and aware of misinformation from various actors. Similarly, urban residents, with higher exposure to digital platforms due to internet penetration and mobile usage, mainly saw the political activists and parties as frequent sources of false information.

These findings suggest that a higher frequency of false information originating from key political actors, including the government, eventually erodes public trust in institutions, further enhancing fertile ground for authoritarian narratives. In authoritarian political systems, the spread of false news can provide governments with justification to tighten digital control, such as implementing censorship, monitoring mobile and internet usage, and suppressing dissent under the guise of

combating misinformation. Besides, the amplification of false information *via* digital platforms intensifies societal polarization, with different groups blaming opposing actors, which benefits authoritarian regimes by weakening collective action and fragmenting opposition. Although policies aimed at digital literacy and fact-checking mechanisms are crucial to counter misinformation, the generation and instrumentalization of fake news are rather apparent in authoritarian settings to further suppress dissent. Hence, it can be argued, while digitalization obviously fosters greater access to information, its misuse in spreading false news serves as a tool for authoritarian regimes to consolidate power, undermine democratic accountability, and stifle public discourse.

6.4. Summary of Statistical Results

Through a multi-faceted approach, the chapter dissected both macro and micro-level data to provide a comprehensive understanding of how digital advancements interplay with political structures and societal behaviors based on the quantitative results, synthesizing the findings on the interactions between digitalization, marketization, and authoritarianism. In the Ethiopian context, the use of social media among key political agencies, notably the government, to disseminate misleading viewpoints or false information to influence domestic politics has been widely observed.

In the macro-level analysis, the long-term interactions between the major independent variables and authoritarianism were explored utilizing a Vector Autoregression (VAR) model. The VAR estimates revealed that lagged values of growth in mobile phone subscription, higher investment in the security apparatus of the state, development in capital (re)production, and further integration into the international market, were strongly and negatively associated with decline in the state of democracy, suggesting digitalization and economic opening-up led to authoritarian consolidation. The post-regression Granger Wald estimate indicated the same, suggesting the strong collective and individual predictive power of the major independent variables for the state of democracy at a 1% significance level.

Similarly, the micro-level estimates of the state of democracy reveal that individual mobile users, highly educated and urban residents tend to report lower satisfaction with the prevailing political conditions, potentially due to greater access to diverse news and critical perspectives. The findings

also indicate that mobile connectivity significantly increases participation in campaigns, protests, and other political activities. However, perceptions of political freedoms (electoral, expression and association) remain low, particularly among urban and mobile-connected individuals, suggesting that they are active but afraid of authoritarian control, which is growing according to macro-statistics.

Moreover, mobile ownership significantly increases reliance on diverse news sources, especially internet-based platforms, which have seen notable growth between 2013 and 2020. However, digital platforms are also identified as key conduits for misinformation, with social media activists and political actors often blamed for spreading false narratives, suggesting the transformative but contentious nature of digitalization. While digitalization facilitates political engagement and access to diverse information, it also exposes citizens to misinformation and state propaganda, fostering democratic fragility. The spread of misinformation through digital platforms deepens societal divisions and erodes confidence in government, media, and political actors, posing challenges to collective action.

In summary, increased political engagement driven by digitalization, in authoritarian contexts, often provokes state backlash through state overreach *via* censorship, surveillance, and crackdowns on dissent, further restricting freedoms. This implies that increased digital connectivity potentially heightens citizens' awareness about the incumbent and instrumentality of digital mechanisms for online and offline political actions, further contributing to polarization and unrest, justifying autocratic tendencies, allowing more organized authoritarian practices based on the employment of advanced techniques in meta-data analysis.

In the next chapter, further discussions on some key aspects of the research findings are provided to substantiate the complex interrelationship between digitalization, marketization and autocratization.

7. Discussions

By integrating both quantitative and qualitative findings, this discussion seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of how digital connectivity influences the state of democracy, civil liberties, marketization and authoritarian persistence in Ethiopia. In doing so, it attempts to complement the dynamic patterns observed in the qualitative findings with quantitative estimates obtained from macro and micro-level analyses, to provide a comprehensive picture of how digitalization, marketization, and government actions interact in Ethiopia. Below is a structured integration of the quantitative results to support the findings of qualitative analysis.

7.1. Digitalization and Marketization: A Complex Nexus

The qualitative analysis provided that the introduction and expansion of digital technologies have significantly transformed socio-economic and political landscapes. It revealed that the integration of digital technologies into various sectors of Ethiopian society and the economy has been progressing swiftly. This progress is driven by the expansion of internet access, mobile technology and other digital infrastructure. The shift towards a market-based economy, aimed at enhancing efficiency, fostering competition and improving service delivery, has been evident through increased privatization of previously state-owned enterprises, along with significant growth in IT goods imports due to international trade openness, and rise in foreign investment. Similar empirical studies, such as the one by Vu *et al.* (2025) on Vietnam's transitional socialist market economy, revealed that digital transformation (expansion of ICT infrastructure such as mobile and broadband coverage) promotes economic growth *via* enhancing capital and labour productivity and reducing transaction costs, but also amplifies productive FDI inflows. In Ethiopia, too, these factors collectively illustrate the process of digitalization propelled by market dynamics. Additionally, the widespread adoption and reliance on digital technology has further extended market principles into both private and public sectors.

A notable aspect of this interplay between digitalization and marketization is the robust institutional support, particularly visible in government policies. In 2024, the IMF approved \$3.4 billion under a four-year Extended Credit Facility (ECF) to support Ethiopia's reform agenda, with the potential to unlock \$16.6 billion from the World Bank (IMF, 2024; Bloomberg, 2024). In

December 2024, the World Bank approved \$700 million to modernize Ethiopia's financial sector and public services, support the liberalization of key sectors like telecommunications, and attract investment and drive sustainable growth (World Bank, 2024). These initiatives highlight the incumbent's substantial commitment toward a market-oriented economy under the guise of "homegrown" economic reform agenda.

The above qualitative finding is quantitatively supported by micro-level analysis that revealed a notable increase in mobile ownership and free market tendencies between 2013 and 2020 surveys, indicating a growing adoption of digital technology and marketization trend in the population, accompanied by a significant decrease in the government's roles in economic decisions. Similarly, the macro-level quantitative findings indicate that mobile phone adoption correlates strongly with better protection and enforcement of private property rights, suggesting that increased digital connectivity fosters marketization. This implies the reinforcing relationship between digitalization and marketization in Ethiopia, where economic reforms and digital connectivity align to support privatization and liberalization through access to information, efficiency, and competition. The rapid adoption of digital tools amplifies the expansion of market mechanism globally, promoting trade liberalization and foreign investment, but at the cost of national sovereignty, societal inequalities, economic divisions and political polarization. Hence, the global market dynamics often exacerbate domestic instability, aligning digital and economic reforms with the priorities of the ruling elites rather than broader societal interests.

7.2. Marketization and Autocratization

The qualitative observations indicated that market-oriented policies, driven by marketization trends, led to a range of economic problems often accompanied by an authoritarian turn. This claim aligns with the negative democratic impact of marketization trends observed *via* quantitative analyses. The significant shift towards free market preferences and reduced support for government intervention corresponded with the broader contribution of market integration to autocratization, thereby contributing to authoritarian practices. In this regard, the quantitative findings provided a cohesive narrative on how digital and economic transformations interact with anti-democratic processes.

The quantitative evidence further suggests that while digitalization and marketization are progressing in Ethiopia, they do not necessarily contribute to democratic development at the macro level. The macro-level VAR estimates and Granger Wald test confirm the collective predictive power of digitalization and economic variables in shaping the state of democracy or long-term growth of authoritarian governance in Ethiopia. The estimates indicate that FDI does not directly affect the political state of democratic condition in a statistically significant way, despite contributing to economic development. The results equally suggest that increased capital formation and trade openness are associated with reduced democratic scores. These findings suggested that economic growth and global market integration do not necessarily lead to democratic progress but might enhance the consolidation of power for social control and limit democratic space. Similarly, an increased security budget negatively affects democracy, indicating that heightened security measures, potentially used to suppress dissent or maintain regime stability, contribute to the erosion of democratic norms, thus enhancing more authoritarian practices. As economic liberalization deepens societal inequalities and economic divisions, engagements through digital mechanism often leads to violent and radical political actions, which strengthens authoritarian measures under the guise of maintaining order, particularly in the context of heightened unrest, contributing to the “autocratic spiral” of conflict and control.

This pattern is also actually reflected in the results of micro-level survey data among those promoting free market and actively using digital tools in their hands. Rather than fostering democracy, these trends appear to align with a shift toward autocratization, where greater economic and digital engagement fails to translate into enhanced democratic conditions. The micro-level analysis of the survey data further substantiated these findings, revealing that the shift from supporting government intervention to favoring free-market policies between 2013 and 2020 strongly correlated with a decline in citizens’ ratings of democracy. This suggested that while economic liberalization might be popular, it does not necessarily enhance the state of democracy and may even contribute to worries of authoritarian consolidation. The significant decrease in democracy aligns with a higher likelihood of autocratization, supporting the macro-level finding of a negative relationship between marketization and democratic conditions.

7.3. Digital Connectivity and Autocratization

While digitalization in Ethiopia has arguably been correlated with some positive socio-economic outcomes, it has also brought significant challenges to democratization endeavours, posing risks to political rights and civil liberties. Qualitative findings from interviews revealed that the increased use of digital technologies in Ethiopia implied the political instrumentality of the internet and social media platforms that facilitate mass mobilization and political activism, which then make the government more afraid and strive for repressive interventions. Available platforms are often employed by the elites for propaganda purposes, in a context of low digital literacy and widespread misinformation, leading to societal polarization and political violence, driven by the echo-chamber effect that tends to exacerbate political instability and social unrest due to the widespread acceptance of unverified information.

The quantitative analysis supports this insight, indicating a strong inverse relationship between the proliferation of digital technology and the state of democracy, characterized by further autocratization in Ethiopia over the years. The findings from the micro data analysis suggest that the impact of mobile technology usage is strongly associated with significantly reduced perceptions of freedoms in areas like speech and other forms of political expressions, a testimony to the panopticon effect of digitalization. Yet, digital connectivity may promote certain organized political activities like voting, protests, and marches by improving communication, coordination and organization. However, in some instances, elites exploit digital platforms to mobilize social actions, which can deepen social divisions and conflicts, thereby justifying authoritarian control.

The statistical survey results further revealed that higher digital connectivity is associated with greater perceived misuse of laws by elites and increased mass mobilization, leading to more political violence, suggesting that increased digitalization may contribute to societal polarization, media bias, and political competition for influence over the media. This finding is consistent with Melegh's (2023a) argument that heightened polarization and conflicts in market societies are rather outcomes of competition in societal spheres. An empirical study by Boese *et al.* (2022) examined the political developments in 40 countries and confirmed that digitalization increased political polarization entrenching authoritarianism, further indicating the "toxic" nature of polarization reinforcing autocratization to form a "vicious cycle," which has increasingly harmed democracy, especially under anti-pluralist regimes.

Long-term analysis that examined the macro-level interaction between digitalization and the state of democracy also indicates that an increase in mobile subscription rates leads to an increase in authoritarian conditions, suggesting that digital access does not necessarily enhance democracy. At the micro level, mobile ownership is strongly associated with lower democratic but higher autocratic experiences among citizens. This indicates that, despite the potential for technology to empower citizens, in Ethiopia, increased connectivity and digital advancements have been used to reinforce authoritarian practices rather than promote democratic engagement.

7.4. The Role of Advanced Digital Techniques

The findings presented in the preceding chapters revealed the role of digital technologies in both enhancing and restricting civil liberties, contingent on the political context. The quantitative estimates suggest lack of substantial evidence that digital connectivity significantly improves the rule of law, access to justice, or political freedoms in Ethiopia. This implies that digitalization alone does not inherently bolster these civil liberties. While digitalization holds potential for economic development and political mobilization, it also poses significant risks to civil liberties and democratic governance, particularly in contexts where authoritarian regimes exploit these technologies for control and surveillance.

The qualitative findings from the interview reveal the double-edged impact of digital platforms in that citizens are both beneficiaries and victims of the political contents of social media platforms. While social media provides platforms for organization and expression, it also serves as a platform for misinformation, dissemination of violence incitement, and fake news. The high prevalence of such content increases the vulnerability of users. Qualitative insights also indicated that the Ethiopian government employs advanced digital techniques, such as Big Data analysis, to monitor and influence social media discourse. Utilizing AI and machine learning, the government analyzes vast amounts of data to understand the dissemination of politically relevant information and identify influential political actors. Techniques like network analysis and sentiment analysis enable the government to trace information flow, gauge public opinion, and classify users based on their political stances on specific topics. These mechanisms also provide insights into the political temperature of the audience and help the government tailor its strategies, accordingly, to consolidate control over political discourse.

Recently, PM Abiy acknowledged that the policy decisions and political actions of his government are subject to sets of debates informed by diverse and adverse narratives and interpretations of history, sustaining societal polarization. He strongly underscores that digital technology and artificial intelligence play a transformative role in replacing adversative historical narratives. These technologies are, thus, envisioned as tools to help Ethiopia prevail as a nation, unite within its diversity, prosper and get rid-off poverty by promoting what he calls “from indebtedness to gains” as new grand discourse (EBC, 2023b). This implies that the institutional and technical sophistication of the government are vital in managing digital information and narratives but also shaping political behavior, thus confirming Zuboff’s assertion about the instrumentality of digital tools in utilization of users’ surplus meta-data for “behavioral modification” (2019b). In this regard, the combination of low digital literacy, widespread misinformation, and advanced monitoring technologies further enable the Ethiopian government to leverage Big Data and AI for surveillance, censorship, and propaganda, reinforcing authoritarian control.

The above findings are consistent with the macro-level quantitative results, which indicate a strong correlation of government cybersecurity capacity with various undemocratic measures, underscoring the vitality of cyber resources for state control. High correlations between the cyber capacity of the state and online media existence show that greater capacity is associated with more extensive digital infrastructure. The correlation estimates also indicated that greater cybersecurity capacity is associated with increased usage of online mechanisms among elites for offline political actions, suggesting the citizens’ and elites’ preference for alternative coordination as a mechanism of averting the potential risk of engagement in a tightly controlled online political space by sophisticated cyber resources of the government.

The macro data analysis also revealed that government’s higher cybersecurity capacity is strongly associated with government dissemination of false information, indicating prevalent internet filtering practices, surveillance and control over social media, and increased likelihood of arrests for political content. However, the lack of diverse online media perspectives suggests that the government utilizes this capacity to manipulate and control information, allowing for a monopoly of the digital narrative. In the same vein, the results of survey analysis show that mobile connectivity enhances the diversity of news sources such as internet-based platforms, which are

also major channels for spreading misinformation and false narratives, often attributed to social media activists and political actors including government officials.

The spread of misinformation through digital platforms deepens societal divisions and erodes confidence in government, media, and political actors, posing challenges to collective action. This implies that digitalization enhances political engagement and access to diverse information, while it also exposes citizens to misinformation and state propaganda, fostering democratic fragility. These findings further assert the results of previous studies that noted the widespread misinformation being used to manipulate public opinion, particularly in autocracies and countries undergoing autocratization. Boese *et al.* (2022) referred to this phenomenon as “autocratic regression” as manifested in Myanmar, Chad, Mali, and Guinea, with the “epidemic of coups” in 2021, shifting them from “electoral” autocracies to “closed” autocracies.

Overall, the strength of statistical associations highlights the complex role of technical resources of the state in influencing the dynamics of internet connectivity and various aspects of social media usage, pointing to the relevance of the government’s cyber infrastructure development as a possible factor in the context of growing digital restriction and political repression. This further attests to Zuboff’s (2019a; 2019b) central argument that digitalization, driven by market rationales, essentially augment the state’s “instrumentarian power,” the government’s ability to leverage advanced techniques for its own economic and political benefits by utilizing the “surplus behavioral data” generated by citizens’ extensive use of digital tools and systems.

8. Conclusion, Contribution and Future Directions

8.1. Summary of the Findings and Conclusion

Marketization and digitalization in Ethiopia have progressed significantly, influenced by privatization, deregulation and integration of digital technologies. This transformation, particularly in the telecommunications, banking, and energy sectors, has been supported by government policies aimed at fostering competition and enhancing service delivery. The study also attested that digitalization has spurred market rationales into both the public and private sectors, improving economic productivity, while also levitating government digital overreach. The quantitative findings confirmed these observations, indicating that, while digitalization correlates with improved economic conditions and marketization, it also aligns with reduced political freedoms and increased authoritarian conditions. The shift towards free market principles, coupled with the reduced economic roles of the state, emerges as a key factor associated with the decline in the observed political conditions. Further statistical evidence revealed a strong inverse relationship between mobile subscriptions and democracy indices, as the increase in mobile and internet subscriptions correlates with heightened government control, reduced political freedoms and increased societal polarization.

Additionally, the study offered the Ethiopian government's strategic use of digital technologies to enhance its control over information management, marketization and political engagement. Institutions like MinT, INSA, and Ethio Telecom play crucial roles in this digital transformation, which includes advancements in cybersecurity, data analysis, and digital surveillance. The study found that the prevalent use of digital technologies by the government for surveillance and the suppression of dissent, thereby contributing to further autocratization. This has been supported by statistical evidence showing a significant decline in democracy associated with increased mobile subscriptions, security budgets, and capital formation, further underscoring the long-term predictive relationship between digitalization and authoritarianism.

The findings also indicated the growing importance of social media in political communication, with the government leveraging advanced digital tools to dominate online space. Opposition groups, however, face challenges due to lower digital competencies and government-imposed restrictions like internet shutdowns. This aligns with quantitative estimates, showing that mobile

ownership is positively associated with political discussions and participation in protests, but also with the spread of misinformation and decreased perceptions of political freedoms, such as freedom of speech.

Findings obtained from the interview responses highlighted the challenges posed by fake news and low digital literacy, which exacerbate socio-political instability and allow for greater governmental control. Statistical evidence echoed these issues, with data showing that increased mobile ownership and internet usage are associated with the spread of misinformation, particularly on social media platforms. This contributes to societal polarization and justifies government actions that suppress dissent.

To conclude, the integration of qualitative and quantitative findings paints a comprehensive picture of how digitalization in Ethiopia intersects with political power, societal dynamics and economic management. While digitalization has brought about significant advancements and opportunities, it has also facilitated greater governmental control, contributed to democratic backsliding, and amplified societal challenges such as misinformation and polarization. Balancing these outcomes with the need for economic development and civil liberties remains a critical challenge for Ethiopia's future.

8.2. Contribution

This research contributes to scientific knowledge by providing detailed, empirically grounded analyses of the impact of digitalization on political, social and economic aspects in Ethiopia, with broader relevance for implications and understanding digital transformation in similar contexts. Some aspects of its relevance are indicated below.

The *hitherto* available literature is built on the notion of the “technological divide” which regards the developed countries as the innovators of technology, while the developing nations are considered passive recipients of technology created by the advanced nations. Moreover, the differences among the developing countries, especially in Africa, are often ignored. However, this study is bound to reveal that technological adoption and adaptation always align with socioeconomic and political transformations based on unique social settings. This study situates the importance of digital technologies in contemporary societies denoting the market system, symbiotically developed with capitalism, as a predominant institutional process characterized by

exchange as a mechanism of social organization or integration of the economy (Polányi, 2001), which remained “invisible” to the *longue durée* historians, economists and sociologists adept to the “formalist” approach based on individualism and non-institutional economic generalizations (Cangiani, 2011). Thus, building on the Polányian approach that emphasizes market exchange, reciprocity and redistribution in the political economy analytical framework, this study adds value to the subject by bringing the notions of (dis)embeddedness, counter-movement and fictitious commodities into the study of digital political economy and, hence, have a paramount theoretical relevance underscoring the need for contextualizing the Polányian perspectives to investigate the processes of digitalization and marketization.

This research also attempted to bridge the gap between digital technology, political science, and socio-economic analysis, striving to provide a comprehensive understanding of how digitalization impacts political dynamics in Ethiopia. This *interdisciplinary integration* enriches literature by connecting technological advancements with political outcomes, offering fresh insights into the interplay between digital technology, governance and society. Through rigorous qualitative and quantitative analyses, the current research offers *empirical insights* on the relationship between digitalization and authoritarianism. It reveals how increased mobile and internet subscriptions are associated with declining democratic norms, heightened state control and increased societal polarization. To this end, the study contributes to the growing body of knowledge on the dark side of digitalization, particularly in developing countries with authoritarian tendencies.

Additionally, the *focus on an under-researched context* helps fill a critical gap in the literature by focusing on Ethiopia within the global framework of digitalization studies. By providing thorough case-specific insights, the current work adds to the diversity of knowledge and highlights the unique challenges and opportunities faced by countries undergoing rapid digital transformation in a complex political environment. By detailing the evolving landscape of political communication in Ethiopia, and the different strategies employed by various social actors, where the use of advanced digital tools and social media platforms have become a crucial element of digital political economy, the study could enhance the depth of the general understanding of digital political engagement in non-Western contexts, where digital literacy and access vary significantly.

By linking marketization with reduced political freedoms and democratic decline, the research also contributes to ongoing *debates* on the relationship between *economic orientations* and *political*

rights. It challenges assumptions that market-driven reforms automatically lead to political liberalization, providing evidence that, in some contexts, these reforms may rather exacerbate authoritarian tendencies. Moreover, the use of both qualitative and quantitative methods, including advanced techniques like Vector Autoregression (VAR) and Granger causality tests, *enhances methodological approaches* in sociology, political science, and digital studies. The robust empirical framework developed during the study can serve as a model for future research in examining the long-term effects of digitalization on political systems. Future work could further enhance this approach by applying structural VAR (SVAR) or integrating mixed methods modeling to better reflect causal pathways among similar study variables.

Finally, the practical *implications for policy and governance* are self-evident as the research provides valuable insights for policymakers and governance institutions by illustrating the dual-edged nature of digital technologies. It underscores the need for balancing the benefits of digitalization with the protection of civil liberties and democratic principles, offering a comprehensive perspective that can inform future policy decisions in Ethiopia and similar contexts.

8.3. Directions for Future Studies

This research heavily focused on the Ethiopian context, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other countries or regions. Ethiopia's unique political, cultural, and socio-economic environment might lead to outcomes that differ significantly from those in other settings, especially in more democratic or technologically advanced societies. Accordingly, future research could expand beyond Ethiopia by conducting *comparative studies* across different countries or regions. This would help to identify whether the trends observed in Ethiopia are unique or part of broader global patterns, particularly in other developing or transitioning nations.

The current study provides a critical examination of the adverse effects of digitalization, such as increased authoritarianism and reduced political freedoms. A more balanced analysis could provide a fuller picture of digitalization's role in society. To balance the narrative, future studies could explore other *positive aspects of digitalization*, such as its potential to enhance transparency, improve public service delivery, and foster greater civic engagement. Examining case studies

where digital technologies have contributed to democratic strengthening would provide a more comprehensive understanding.

This study captures a specific period in Ethiopia's digital transformation, which might not fully reflect long-term trends in the future. Rapid technological changes and evolving political dynamics mean that the findings might become outdated as new developments occur, limiting the study's applicability over time. Therefore, future research could focus on the *impact of emerging technologies* like artificial intelligence, blockchain, and big data analytics on governance and politics in Ethiopia and similar contexts. This would help to anticipate future challenges and opportunities as these technologies become more integrated into political systems.

Future studies could delve deeper into the relationship between *digital literacy* and the spread of *misinformation*, exploring how educational initiatives and media literacy programs can mitigate the negative effects of digitalization on political stability and public trust. Moreover, researchers could further investigate the *role of policy and regulatory frameworks* in shaping the outcomes of digitalization. Analyzing how different governance models and legal structures influence the balance between state control, market forces and civil liberties could offer valuable insights for policymakers.

By addressing these limitations and pursuing these avenues, future studies can build on the current work to deepen our understanding of the complex relationship between digitalization, governance and society, particularly in contexts like Ethiopia.

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Appendices

Appendix – I: Interview Guide for Different Groups of Informants

Part I: Interview with Key *ICT Experts*

I. Introduction:

- Thank you very much for your time. I appreciate your understanding of the academic essence of my research and your cooperation in participating as a key informant.

II. Themes and Specific Follow-up Questions:

Theme 1: General Use of Digital Technology in Politics

- How is digital technology used in the political context in Ethiopia?
 - Can you provide examples of the digital infrastructure used?

Theme 2: Techniques and Tools in Digital Politics

- How is big data used in the Ethiopian context?
 - Given several mechanisms of big data analyses in politics including smart canvassing, public sentiment analysis, targeted ads, etc., what specific techniques are employed in Ethiopian politics?
 - What methods or tools are used to aggregate data and derive meaning from social media posts and tweets? How effective are these tools?

Theme 3: Political Actors and Their Use of Digital Technology

- How do different political actors use digital technology?
 - Government: What are the benefits and disadvantages of their use?
 - Opposition groups: Which digital mechanisms are used? To what extent and in what context do they use digital technology?
 - Human rights activists: How do they use digital technology, and what are the purposes and contexts of their use?
- Which political actors use digital technology the most?
 - What is a significant factor that determines the use of specific digital technology among these groups?
 - Is there a tendency among political actors to favor certain digital mechanisms or platforms (e.g. social media)?

Theme 4: Institutional Structures and Rationales of Data Aggregation and Analysis

- What are the justifications, discourses, and objectives behind data aggregation and analysis?
- How is the structure within institutions organized to handle big data analysis?

Theme 5: Digital Political Engagement: Issues, Challenges and Opportunities

- What is the impact of digital media use on recent political developments in Ethiopia?
 - How do you perceive the opportunities and challenges of digital technology use among the youth for communication, mobilization, and organization?
 - Are citizens beneficiaries or vulnerable when it comes to political use of the internet and mobile phones?

Theme 6: Ethical Considerations and Data Use

- Is there any concrete piece of data I may use as evidence in my study, ensuring anonymity and confidentiality?

III. Conclusion:

- I hope we can continue the interview as developments occur. For now, I have finished my main questions. Is there anything you would like to add? If not, thank you very much for everything.

Part II: Interview with Members of the *Ruling Party* and *Opposition*

I. Introduction

- Thank you for taking the time to participate in this interview. Your perspectives are critical to understanding the role of digital technology in Ethiopian politics, and I greatly appreciate your input.

II. Themes and Specific Questions

Theme 1: Digital Technology in Ethiopian Politics

- How do political parties and organized agencies utilize digital technology in political activities?
 - Can you provide examples of digital platforms or tools that are central to your operations?

Theme 2: Digital Tools, Techniques and Methods in Politics

- What digital tools, methods and techniques are utilized among political actors? How effective are they?

Theme 3: Digital Technology Use Among Political Actors

- How does your institution use digital technology compared to your political opponents?
 - What advantages or challenges does digital technology present?
 - What platforms (e.g., social media) are most frequently used, and why?

Theme 4: Institutional Structures and Data Management

- How is your party structured to manage digital strategies and online data analysis?
 - What are the key political objectives behind these efforts?

Theme 5: Digital Political Engagement: Challenges and Opportunities

- How has digital technology influenced your engagement with the public, especially during recent political developments?
 - What opportunities does digital technology offer for political mobilization and communication?
 - What challenges, such as misinformation or surveillance, do you face in using digital tools?

Theme 6: Ethical and Strategic Considerations

- Do you believe digital technology is being used ethically in Ethiopian politics? Why or why not?
 - Are there specific data-related practices that your party avoids or embraces to maintain credibility and trust?

III. Conclusion

- Thank you for your valuable time and insights. Before we conclude, is there anything you would like to add?

Part III: Interview with *Media Professionals and Academicians*

I. Introduction

- Thank you for taking the time to participate in this interview. Your expertise and perspectives are invaluable for understanding the role of digital technology in Ethiopian politics. I greatly appreciate your input.

II. Themes and Specific Questions

Theme 1: Digital Technology in Ethiopian Politics

- How is digital technology shaping political activities and discourse in Ethiopia?
 - Can you provide examples of how digital platforms are influencing political communication and public engagement?

Theme 2: Tools, Techniques and Methods in Digital Politics

- How digital mechanisms are used in the Ethiopian political context?

- What prominent tools and techniques are used by political actors or human rights activists to analyze data from social media or other online platforms? How effective do you think these tools are?

Theme 3: Media and Academia's Role in Digital Politics

- How is the media using digital technology to cover major political developments?
 - What are the challenges and opportunities for the media in reporting political issues using digital platforms?
- From an academic perspective, how do you assess the impact of digital technology on Ethiopia's political landscape?
 - What are the key trends or patterns in digital technology use by political actors?

Theme 4: Digital Technology and Political Influence

- How do digital technologies shape public opinion and political mobilization in Ethiopia?
 - What role does social media play in amplifying political narratives or agendas?
- Are there specific platforms or tools that are more influential in driving political discourse?

Theme 5: Digital Political Engagement: Challenges and Opportunities

- What are the opportunities and risks of digital technology use for civic engagement and political participation in Ethiopia?
 - How has digital technology influenced youth engagement in politics?
 - To what extent do misinformation and digital surveillance affect political engagement and freedom of expression?

Theme 6: Ethical Considerations and Broader Implications

- What ethical concerns arise from the use of digital technology in Ethiopian politics?
 - How can the media and academia contribute to ensuring ethical and transparent use of digital tools in the political sphere?

III. Conclusion

- Is there anything you would like to add or clarify?
- Thank you for your valuable insights!

Appendix – II: Informants’ Profile, Place of Residence & Date of Interview

ID.	Role/Membership	Gender	Age	Education	Residence	Interview Date
1	Senior official	M	56	MA, Business Adm.	Jimma	29/07/2022
2	District Cabinet	M	48	BA, Educ. Mgmt.	Goba	9/8/2022
3	Women’s League	F	41	MA, Business Adm.	Goba	11/8/2022
4	District politician	M	48	MA, Business Adm.	Robe	13/08/2022
5	Ex-Comm. Bureau	M	39	MPM, Public Mgmt.	Jimma	17/06/2021
6	Leader, Youth Movt.	M	34	MA, Sociology	Jimma	24/08/2021
7	IT Expert of Bureau	M	36	MSc, IT	Jimma	13/04/2023
8	IT Expert in a Ministry	M	35	BSc, IT	Addis Ababa	14/09/2021
9	IT Expert in a Ministry	M	31	MSc, Info. & Comp.	Addis Ababa	17/09/2021
10	Member of EZEMA	M	39	MA, Development	Addis Ababa	3/4/2022
11	Member of OFC	M	41	MPH, Public Health	Addis Ababa	28/04/2023
12	Member of ARENA	M	43	MA, Development	Addis Ababa	19/05/2023
13	Ex-PR Officer, NaMA	M	39	MA, Int. Relations	Addis Ababa	21/06/2023
14	Member of OLF	M	42	BA, Gov. & Devt.	Edmonton	31/05/2022
15	Activist, OLF	M	43	High School	Dubai	4/12/2023
16	Lawyer, HR Activist	M	33	LLM, Law	Addis Ababa	28/07/2021
17	Journalist	M	38	MA, Journalism	Calgary	7/9/2023
18	OMN Journalist	M	39	MBA, Lang.& Lit.	Addis Ababa	28/07/2021
19	Mekelle University	M	39	PhD Cand., Security	Mekelle	19/12/2022
20	Jimma University	F	38	PhD, Development	Jimma	27/04/2023
21	Mekelle University	M	41	MA, Public Policy	Mekelle	27/12/2022
22	Wolkite University	M	37	MA, Devt. Mgmt.	Addis Ababa	3/10/2023
23	Jimma University	M	49	MA, Public Health	Jimma	25/07/2022
24	Wellega University	M	37	PhD Cand., Devt.	Nekemte	16/07/2021
25	Jimma University	M	40	MA, Human Rights	Jimma	20/06/2021
26	Mada Welabu Univ.	M	39	MA, Philosophy	Robe	15/08/2022

Appendix – III: VAR Model Diagnostics

1. Augmented Dickey-Fuller Test for Unit Root

Variables	Test Statistic [Z(t)]		Order of Integration (I)
	No Lag	First Difference	
<i>Dem</i>	-1.81	-3.01*	I(1)
<i>Mbl</i>	-3.41*	-2.39*	I(1)
<i>Scrt</i>	-4.67*	-3.32*	I(1)
<i>K</i>	-4.47*	-3.00*	I(1)
<i>TrOpn</i>	-2.27	-2.50*	I(1)
<i>FDI</i>	-5.61*	-4.53*	I(1)

* Indicates the significance of MacKinnon (1996) ρ -value for rejection of unit root. The Z(t) statistics are interpreted using ρ -value to critical values of -3.75, -3.00, and -2.63 at 1%, 5%, and 10% levels of significance respectively.

2. Multivariate Normality (Jarque-Bera) Test for Distribution of Disturbances

Equation	Chi-square	Df	Prob. > Chi ²
<i>Dem</i>	1.083	2	0.5818
<i>Mbl</i>	0.318	2	0.8528
<i>Scrt</i>	0.185	2	0.9119
<i>K</i>	0.838	2	0.6576
<i>TrOpn</i>	1.359	2	0.5069
<i>FDI</i>	0.335	2	0.8456
<i>ALL</i>	4.119	12	0.9812

3. Lagrange-multiplier Test for Autocorrelation

Lag	Chi ²	Df	Prob.>Chi ²
1	30.8707	36	0.71097
2	45.1017	36	0.14214

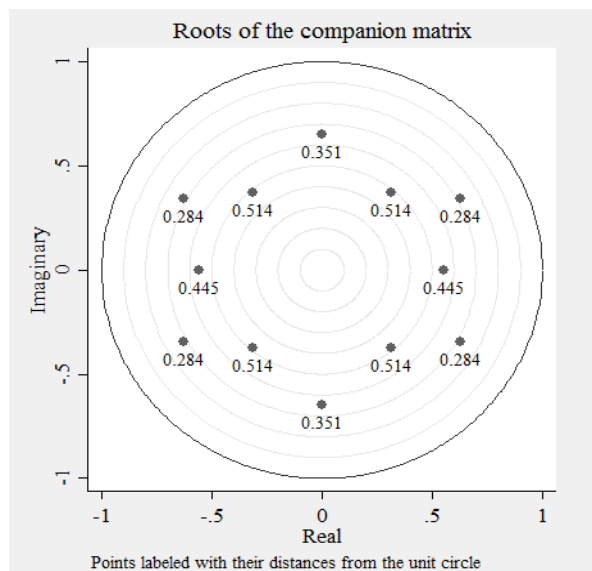
H_0 : No autocorrelation at the optimal lag-order.

4. Johansen's Multiple-trace Tests for Co-integration

Max. Rank	Params	LL	Eigenvalue	Trace Statistic	Critical Value	
					5%	1%
0	42	-291.66		172.5078	94.15	103.18
1	53	-257.185	0.95011	103.557	68.52	76.07
2	62	-238.362	0.80538	65.9123	47.21	54.46
3	69	-221.473	0.76977	32.1326* ¹	29.68	35.65
4	74	-211.887	0.56549	12.9615* ⁵	15.41	20.04
5	77	-205.935	0.40403	1.0575	3.76	6.65
6	78	-205.406	0.04494			

Note: *¹ and *⁵ are significance levels denoting the presence of cointegrating equations.

5. Eigenvalues of Coefficient Matrix for VAR Stability Condition



For the VAR model to be stable, all eigenvalues must have absolute values less than 1, ensuring that the roots of the characteristic polynomial derived from the lagged variable coefficients lie outside the unit circle in the complex plane.

Appendix – IV: Consent and Ethical Usage of Afrobarometer’s Survey Data

Afrobarometer Data Requests sent you Ethiopia data via WeTransfer

WeTransfer

To: Fikadu Ayanie

Mon 18/09/2023 12:54

datarequests@afrobarometer.org
sent you Ethiopia data

1 item, 2.44 MB in total • Expires on 25 September, 2023

Ethiopia data

Dear Fikadu,

Thank you for your interest in Afrobarometer. We are happy to inform you that we will be able to fulfil your request. Please see attached for round 5 Ethiopia data.

Kindly note the caveats to this round of data on our website, and note that Round 9 is not yet available.

<https://www.afrobarometer.org/data/data-sets/?select-countries%5B%5D=ethiopia&hidden-current-page=1>

It is important to download this data before it expires within 7 days.

For more information on the methodology and data quality issues, please refer to this paper <https://www.aiddata.org/publications/geocoding-afrobarometer-rounds-1-6-methodology-data-quality>

To protect the privacy of survey participants, the use of respondent-level data is restricted to researchers.

Kindly remember to offer any prospective publication that makes significant use of our data first to the Afrobarometer Working Paper series (which does not preclude later publication of a revised version elsewhere) as per the data usage and access policy. For further information on our Working Paper series, please contact Jeff Conroy-Krutz (editor) at jconroy@afrobarometer.org.

All the best with your analysis.

Kind regards,
Afrobarometer Data Requests

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Appendix – V: Results of Vector Autoregression

Sample: 2001 – 2023 Number of Obs.: 23

Equation	Variables	Coefficient	Std. Err.	Z	$\rho > z$	Conf. Interval [95%]	
<i>Dem</i>	Dem (L_2 .)	0.124911	0.13814	0.9	0.366	-0.14583	0.395651
	Mbl (L_2 .)	-0.00022	0.00008	-2.64	0.008	-0.00038	-0.00006
	Scrt (L_2 .)	-0.00036	0.00017	-2.12	0.034	-0.0007	-0.00003
	K (L_2 .)	-0.00045	0.00023	-1.99	0.047	-0.0009	-0.000006
	TrOpn (L_2 .)	-0.10233	0.03390	-3.02	0.003	-0.16878	-0.03588
	FDI (L_2 .)	-0.00003	0.00002	-1.46	0.144	-0.00007	0.00001
	Constant	0.150854	0.02142	7.04	0.000	0.108877	0.19283
<i>Mbl</i>	Dem (L_2 .)	177.9749	319.7694	0.56	0.578	-448.762	804.7115
	Mbl (L_2 .)	0.325122	0.188807	1.72	0.085	-0.04493	0.695176
	Scrt (L_2 .)	-0.34344	0.396873	-0.87	0.387	-1.12129	0.434422
	K (L_2 .)	0.400355	0.525773	0.76	0.446	-0.63014	1.430852
	TrOpn (L_2 .)	14.74301	78.48455	0.19	0.851	-139.084	168.5699
	FDI (L_2 .)	-0.01378	0.046751	-0.29	0.768	-0.10542	0.077846
	Constant	-11.8396	49.57901	-0.24	0.811	-109.013	85.33352
<i>Scrt</i>	Dem (L_2 .)	25.51056	123.6834	0.21	0.837	-216.905	267.9257
	Mbl (L_2 .)	-0.04416	0.073028	-0.6	0.545	-0.18729	0.098972
	Scrt (L_2 .)	-0.16877	0.153506	-1.1	0.272	-0.46964	0.132094
	K (L_2 .)	0.170579	0.203364	0.84	0.402	-0.22801	0.569164
	TrOpn (L_2 .)	23.02388	30.357	0.76	0.448	-36.4747	82.5225
	FDI (L_2 .)	-0.02714	0.018083	-1.5	0.133	-0.06258	0.008299
	Constant	-11.1017	19.17664	-0.58	0.563	-48.6872	26.48383
<i>K</i>	Dem (L_2 .)	-149.052	97.46343	-1.53	0.126	-340.077	41.97272
	Mbl (L_2 .)	0.109471	0.057547	1.9	0.057	-0.00332	0.222261
	Scrt (L_2 .)	0.389337	0.120964	3.22	0.001	0.152252	0.626423
	K (L_2 .)	-0.05591	0.160252	-0.35	0.727	-0.37	0.258174
	TrOpn (L_2 .)	29.94841	23.92153	1.25	0.211	-16.9369	76.83375
	FDI (L_2 .)	0.002412	0.01425	0.17	0.866	-0.02552	0.03034
	Constant	2.385497	15.11133	0.16	0.875	-27.2322	32.00315
<i>TrOpn</i>	Dem (L_2 .)	2.098213	0.710612	2.95	0.003	0.70544	3.490987
	Mbl (L_2 .)	0.000657	0.00042	1.57	0.117	-0.00017	0.001479
	Scrt (L_2 .)	-0.0015	0.000882	-1.7	0.088	-0.00323	0.000225
	K (L_2 .)	0.000602	0.001168	0.52	0.607	-0.00169	0.002892
	TrOpn (L_2 .)	0.221936	0.174413	1.27	0.203	-0.11991	0.563779
	FDI (L_2 .)	6.02E-05	0.000104	0.58	0.562	-0.00014	0.000264
	Constant	0.06961	0.110178	0.63	0.528	-0.14633	0.285554
<i>FDI</i>	Dem (L_2 .)	431.8253	1160.477	0.37	0.71	-1842.67	2706.318
	Mbl (L_2 .)	0.7273	0.685199	1.06	0.288	-0.61566	2.070264
	Scrt (L_2 .)	-0.2147	1.440294	-0.15	0.882	-3.03762	2.608229
	K (L_2 .)	-0.23209	1.908086	-0.12	0.903	-3.97188	3.507687
	TrOpn (L_2 .)	-618.983	284.8286	-2.17	0.03	-1177.24	-60.7295
	FDI (L_2 .)	-0.08957	0.169666	-0.53	0.598	-0.42211	0.242964
	Constant	160.793	179.9274	0.89	0.372	-191.858	513.4442

Appendix – VI: Results of Ordered Logistic Regression and AME Effects

i. Ordered logistic regression

Wald $\chi^2(11) = 969.34$

Prob > $\chi^2 = 0.0000$

Log pseudolikelihood = -4323.9757

Pseudo $R^2 = 0.1117$

<i>Dem</i>	Coefficient	Robust SE	Z	$\rho > z$	Conf. Interval [95%]	
Mbl						
<i>Yes</i>	-0.29381	0.070663	-4.16	0.000	-0.43231	-0.15532
Gdr						
<i>Male</i>	-0.25501	0.064812	-3.93	0.000	-0.38204	-0.12798
Age	0.023875	0.049249	0.48	0.628	-0.07265	0.120402
Educ.						
<i>University ≤</i>	-0.47353	0.135823	-3.49	0.000	-0.73974	-0.20732
Employment	-0.05433	0.067305	-0.81	0.42	-0.18625	0.077584
Intv_FrMkt						
<i>FrMkt.</i>	-0.31434	0.073009	-4.31	0.000	-0.45744	-0.17125
Ethn_Ethio						
<i>Feel only Ethio.</i>	0.15896	0.067435	2.36	0.018	0.02679	0.291131
Fed_Uniity						
<i>Strongly Unitary</i>	-0.45943	0.09316	-4.93	0.000	-0.64202	-0.27684
Urb_Rur						
<i>Urban</i>	-0.47092	0.074521	-6.32	0.000	-0.61698	-0.32487
Region	0.00774	0.011189	0.69	0.489	-0.01419	0.02967
Year						
<i>2020</i>	-1.7772	0.079855	-22.26	0.000	-1.93371	-1.62068
<i>/cut1</i>	-4.11637	0.196339			-4.50118	-3.73155
<i>/cut2</i>	-2.29676	0.186512			-2.66232	-1.9312
<i>/cut3</i>	-0.12357	0.18048			-0.4773	0.230166

Source: Author's Computation from Afrobarometer, 2013 & 2021.

ii. Average Marginal Effects

Predictors	Outcome	AME	Robust SE	z	p>z	Conf. Interval [95%]	
Mbl (Yes)	1	0.024755	0.005982	4.14	0.000	0.01303	0.03648
	2	0.029574	0.00713	4.15	0.000	0.0156	0.043549
	3	-0.00932	0.002313	-4.03	0.000	-0.01385	-0.00479
	4	-0.04501	0.010815	-4.16	0.000	-0.06621	-0.02381
Gdr (Male)	1	0.021486	0.005514	3.9	0.000	0.01068	0.032292
	2	0.025669	0.006525	3.93	0.000	0.012881	0.038457
	3	-0.00809	0.002161	-3.74	0.000	-0.01233	-0.00385
	4	-0.03907	0.009888	-3.95	0.000	-0.05844	-0.01969
Age	1	-0.00201	0.004148	-0.48	0.628	-0.01014	0.006119
	2	-0.0024	0.00496	-0.48	0.628	-0.01212	0.007318
	3	0.000757	0.001562	0.48	0.628	-0.0023	0.003818
	4	0.003657	0.007546	0.48	0.628	-0.01113	0.018448
Educ. (Univ. ≤)	1	0.039897	0.011462	3.48	0.000	0.017433	0.062361
	2	0.047664	0.013755	3.47	0.001	0.020705	0.074622
	3	-0.01502	0.004359	-3.45	0.001	-0.02356	-0.00648
	4	-0.07254	0.020879	-3.47	0.001	-0.11346	-0.03162
Employment	1	0.004578	0.005652	0.81	0.418	-0.0065	0.015656
	2	0.005469	0.006793	0.81	0.421	-0.00784	0.018782
	3	-0.00172	0.002116	-0.81	0.415	-0.00587	0.002423
	4	-0.00832	0.01033	-0.81	0.420	-0.02857	0.011923
Intv_FrMkt (FrMkt.)	1	0.026485	0.006298	4.21	0.000	0.01414	0.038829
	2	0.031641	0.007269	4.35	0.000	0.017394	0.045887
	3	-0.00997	0.002445	-4.08	0.000	-0.01476	-0.00518
	4	-0.04815	0.011138	-4.32	0.000	-0.06998	-0.02632
Ethn_Ethio (Feel only Ethio.)	1	-0.01339	0.005697	-2.35	0.019	-0.02456	-0.00223
	2	-0.016	0.006816	-2.35	0.019	-0.02936	-0.00264
	3	0.005042	0.002181	2.31	0.021	0.000767	0.009318
	4	0.024351	0.010336	2.36	0.018	0.004094	0.044609
Fed_Unity (Strongly Unitary)	1	0.038709	0.007883	4.91	0.000	0.023258	0.05416
	2	0.046245	0.009447	4.9	0.000	0.027729	0.064761
	3	-0.01457	0.003034	-4.8	0.000	-0.02052	-0.00863
	4	-0.07038	0.014325	-4.91	0.000	-0.09846	-0.0423
Urb_Rur (Urban)	1	0.039677	0.006441	6.16	0.000	0.027054	0.052301
	2	0.047402	0.007565	6.27	0.000	0.032574	0.062229
	3	-0.01494	0.002657	-5.62	0.000	-0.02015	-0.00973
	4	-0.07214	0.011372	-6.34	0.000	-0.09443	-0.04985
Region	1	-0.00065	0.000942	-0.69	0.489	-0.0025	0.001195
	2	-0.00078	0.001128	-0.69	0.490	-0.00299	0.001431
	3	0.000246	0.000355	0.69	0.489	-0.00045	0.00094
	4	0.001186	0.001716	0.69	0.489	-0.00218	0.004548
Year (2020)	1	0.149736	0.008883	16.86	0.000	0.132326	0.167147
	2	0.178886	0.008178	21.87	0.000	0.162858	0.194915
	3	-0.05637	0.005472	-10.3	0.000	-0.0671	-0.04565
	4	-0.27225	0.010652	-25.56	0.000	-0.29313	-0.25137

Source: Author's Computation from Afrobarometer, 2013 & 2021.

Appendix – VII: Arbitrary Arrests and Extra-Judicial Killings of Dissents amid COVID-19

Dates	Nature of Abuse/ Violence	Places (No. of Cases)	Victims (Occupation/ Gender)	Freq. (%)
26 April 2020 – 23 May 2020	<i>Political (Arbitrary) Arrests</i>	Horo-Guduru Wellega (11), West Wellega (7), Ilubabor (6), Borana (5), Burayu Town (4), East Wellega (2), Addis Ababa (2), Guji (1), West Arsi (1), Dukem Town (1), and Sululta (1)	Self-employed	17(41.5)
			Farmers	6(14.6)
			Students	6(14.6)
			Teachers	2(4.9)
			Artists	2(4.9)
			Others	8(19.5)
			Male	39(95.1)
03 May 2020 – 24 May 2020	<i>Killing of Civilians</i>	Kellem Wellega (7), W/Wellega (4), Horo-Guduru (2), E/Hararghe (1)	Female	2(4.9)
			Male	13(92.9)
12 May 2020 – 19 May 2020	<i>Bodily Harm & Injury</i>	W/Shawa (2), E/Wellega (1), W/Hararghe (1), Jimma Zone (1), W/Wellega (1)	Female	1(16.7)
			Male	5(83.3)
24 August 2019 – 14 April 2020	<i>Detention without Due Process</i>	West Wellega (Military Camp, Mandi Town)	Female	-
			Male	24(100)

Source: Own Summary from HRLHA's Report (2020).

Appendix – VIII: Variation in Sources of News Relative to Mobile Ownership

	Dependent Variables: <i>Sources of News</i>			
	Newspaper	Radio	Television	Internet
Prob. > Chi ²	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000
Pseudo R ²	0.0590	0.0403	0.0803	0.1083
Variables	Coeff.	Coeff.	Coeff.	Coeff.
Mobile Own.				
Yes	1.8***	1.3***	1.9***	2.5***
Year				
2020	-.5***	-0.097	0.026	.84***
Cutoff 1	3***	.18***	1.5***	4.4***
Cutoff 2	3.5***	.4***	1.8***	4.5***
Cutoff 3	4.3***	.77***	2.1***	4.7***
Cutoff 4	5.8***	1.8***	2.7***	5.4***

Legend: * $\rho < .05$; ** $\rho < .01$; *** $\rho < .001$

Source: Author's Computation from Afrobarometer, 2013 & 2021.

Appendix – IX: Frequency of Spreading False Information among Actors

	Dependent Variables: <i>Actors</i>				
	Govt.	Pol. Parties	Activists	Journalists	Soc. Media Users
Prob. > Chi ²	0.0000	0.0000	0.0000	0.0000	0.0000
Pseudo R ²	0.0072	0.0111	0.0111	0.0091	0.0351
Variables	Coeff.	Coeff.	Coeff.	Coeff.	Coeff.
Mobile Own.	0.195*	0.272**	0.232*	0.352***	0.378***
Education	0.144***	0.144***	0.124**	0.082*	0.207***
Gender	0.101	0.009	-0.038	-0.008	0.07
Age Groups	-0.028	0.096	0.047	0.101	0.012
Urban-Rural	0.085	0.224*	0.324**	0.206*	0.655***
Cutoff 1	-0.779**	-1.145***	-1.563***	-0.786**	-1.296***
Cutoff 2	0.691**	0.606*	-0.026	0.775**	0.371
Cutoff 3	2.098***	1.921***	1.135***	2.297***	1.570***

Legend: * $\rho < .05$; ** $\rho < .01$; *** $\rho < .001$

Source: Author's Computation from Afrobarometer, 2013 & 2021.