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*Full Length Research Paper*

# The internal and external roles of Iraqi popular mobilization forces

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**This paper empirically examines the internal and external roles of the popular mobilization forces (PMF) or al-Hashd al-Shaabi. First, the paper examines the PMF's role in the fight against the Islamic State/Daesh and governance in Iraq. Second, it highlights the PMF's external links with Iran's Revolutionary Guards Corps and Lebanon's Hezbollah. The question of whether the PMF is a tool of expanding Iran's influence and interventionism across the region is thoroughly scrutinized. The paper examines the role of the PMF in increasing the level of sectarianism and paves the way for protracted social conflict in the region. Rising sectarianism offers a fertile breeding ground for Sunni extremism and radicalism, and lethal anti-Shiaism; feeding into a vicious cycle of sectarian violence. These conditions may shape the genesis of protracted regional social conflict between the two main branches of Islam.**

**Key words:** Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), Islam, conflict.

## INTRODUCTION

This paper examines the internal and external roles of the predominately Shia<sup>1</sup> Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF)/*al-Hashd al-Shaabi* in Iraqi and regional politics. In order to do so, the paper draws on the literature concerned with the role of sub-state actors in world politics. Sub-state actors are establishing themselves at domestic as well as international levels. There is a growing body of literature that addresses the engagement of sub-state actors in the international arena (McGrew 2011; Jian, 2005; Peter, 2011).

In order to address the research question, the paper is structured into three sections. The author, first, explains how the PMF was established and describes its structure. Second, the PMF's role in the fight against the Islamic

State/*Daesh* (IS) is examined and evaluated. From internal to external level, the researcher considers different possible threats posed by the PMF to the individual and collective security of Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states<sup>2</sup>. At present, regional security of the Middle East in general seems to be influenced, either positively or negatively, by non-state actors, including sub-state actors, at unprecedented level.

### Significance of the study

This topic is relatively controversial because there is academic and political debate on assessing the role of

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PMF in the counter-IS war. In addition, the PMF plays an important role in the game of competing camps in the Middle East. More important, studying the PMF would facilitate the revisit of other related phenomena, including extremism, radicalization, sectarianism and terrorism. With the comparison between the experience of the PMF and the experiences of Hezbollah in Lebanon and that of the Iran Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and first-hand information through in-depth interviews, this study may contribute to understanding the role of PMF in the making of a new Iraq and perhaps a new regional political order.

## METHODOLOGY

The paper deploys a range of methods. First, in-depth interviews were conducted with Emirati diplomats, including Assistant Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation for Security and Military Affairs, and ambassadors to Iraq and Iran. Similar interviews were conducted with foreign diplomats in Abu Dhabi, including the American and Iraqi ambassadors, Russian and Lebanese deputy chiefs of mission in the United Arab Emirates. The rationale for choosing foreign diplomats as interviewees was to explore the research problem from different perspectives of various interested regional and international parties. Second, the comparative method was used to compare between the Hezbollah experience in Lebanon and that of the PMF in Iraq. The comparison was not, however, applied only to the two cases, but it also covered the Iran Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) to develop a better comprehension of the threats posed by the PMF to GCC states.

## DISCUSSION

### Popular mobilization forces (PMF)

#### *Establishment and structure*

After the Islamic State (IS) swept westwards through Syria and took Mosul in June, 2014, the Grand Ayatollah Ali Al-Sistani, the senior Shia cleric of Iraq, issued a fatwa calling on Iraqis to fight against IS. He declared the fight “a sacred defense” (Tollast, 2016). The effect was to spur a flood of Shia volunteers into the militia forces rather than the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF)<sup>3</sup>. As a result, many of the Shia militias were reinvigorated, and Shia volunteers in particular responded to Al-Sistani’s call. This is how the PMF was formed in the summer of 2014 (Al Zaabi, personal communication, January 16, 2017)<sup>4</sup>. According to the Iraqi ambassador in Abu Dhabi, Raad Al-Alusi (personal communication, February 28, 2017), the bottom line is that the PMF appeared because of the inability of ISF to counter the IS offensive.

The Iraqi government created the Popular Mobilization Directorate to organize, fund, and arm these disparate paramilitary (militia and volunteer) forces. After the appointment of current Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi, the body was renamed the Popular Mobilization Committee, affiliated to the Ministry of Interior (Robinson, 2016). The idea of the PMF is not new. During the Iraq-Iran war

(1980-1988), the IRGC established the Badr Corps/Organization, perhaps the most prominent Iranian proxy, and other PMF Iraqi militia to fight Saddam Hussain’s regime<sup>5</sup>. The PMF is composed of several core militias or units, almost exclusively Shia (The Economist, 2015). Particularly, they comprise four elements: (1) the Shia volunteers, who responded to Al-Sistani’s call to defend the country; (2) a collection of newer Shia militias such as Kata’ib al-Imam Ali [the Imam Ali Battalions] and Firqat al-Abbas al-Qataliya [the Al-Abbas Combat Division]; (3) the long-standing Shia groups, including Badr Organization, Kata’ib Hizballah (KH) or Hezbollah Brigades, Asa’ib Ahl al-Haq (AAH) or League of Righteous People, and Saraya al-Salam (SAS) or Peace Brigades, previously the Mahdi Army led by cleric Muqtada al-Sadr (Robinson, 2016), and (4) a nascent Sunni tribal force. There are different estimates of the Sunni element in the PMF, which vary from 15,000 to 17,000 tribal fighters<sup>6</sup>. However, Knights, (2016) believes that the available combat forces seem to be under 6,000 fighters. The actual percentage of Sunni fighters in PMF ranks amounts to about 8% of the total force (Sattar, 2016).

Though the Iraqi government was committed to enlisting 30,000 Sunnis into the PMF, this never happened. In fact, the PMF is not a permanent vehicle for Sunni incorporation. After all, the Iraqi government remains ambivalent about arming Sunnis to fight against IS. And it seems that the Iraqi government did not embrace the idea that the government would be more secure with more Sunnis serving in the security forces (Tollast, 2016)<sup>7</sup>. Roughly half of the PMF units were formed from pre-existing Shia militias, some of which fought against Saddam Hussein’s regime during the Iraq-Iran war in the 1980s and/or against the United States-led invasion of Iraq in 2003. Almost 80% of the PMF military effort is conducted by four main factions, including SAS, Badr Organization, KH, and AAH (Rawabet Center for Research and Strategic Studies, 2016).

The leaders of the long-standing Shia militias are acting as PMF battlefield commanders. For example, Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, KH commander, is the deputy chief of the Popular Mobilization Committee established in July, 2014 (Robinson, 2016; Knights, 2016). The rest of the PMF units are new formations, mobilized by religious and political leaders<sup>8</sup>. Most of the volunteers have ended up in new Shia formations, organized by and answerable to the Shia clerical authorities in Najaf and Karbala (Haddad, 2015).

Most sources put the number of PMF units at forty, while Al Zaabi estimates that there are around seventy-two PMF militias (personal communication, January 16, 2017). Other sources<sup>9</sup> put the number at sixty-seven. The actual number of PMF is definitely more than forty units. However, Al-Alusi (personal communication, February 28, 2017) claimed that the number can be counted on the fingers of one hand.

Katzman and Humud (Katzman and Humud, 2015)

estimated the total strength of the PMF to be 100,000, while Robinson (2016) estimated the number between 80,000 and 100,000. Knights put the number at 120,000-strong army with at least 80,000 fighting under the banners of Iranian-backed militias (Knights, 2016). The actual number is likely to be around 110,000 fighters and is increasing in number. In any case, the PMF's size is more than the size of the ISF, whose strength is between 64,000 and 100,000. In Shia areas at least, the PMF is held in higher regard than the army. However, Al-Alusi (personal communication, Feb. 28, 2017), claimed that the size of the PMF is a few thousand.

In November, 2016, Iraq's parliament passed a law making the PMF an official component of ISF, subject to military law, with equal status to the army. Earlier that year, Prime Minister Hayder al Abadi issued an order that officially incorporated the PMF into the ISF and established it as a permanent military formation that is on par with the Iraqi Counter-Terrorism Service<sup>10</sup>.

Legalizing the PMF's status was necessary because Iraq's constitution of 2005 prohibits militias. In addition, a number of Iraqi political leaders have called for the integration of the PMF into the regular forces or their demobilization to avoid permanent militia dominance of the security and political landscapes. Ironically, there was persistent pressure from Iran and the US to incorporate the PMF into the ISF. Iran requested that the militia should take part in the battle of Mosul. The law passed by Iraq's parliament was greeted warmly in Iran Al Mazrouei, personal communication, January 29, 2017<sup>11</sup>. The US requested that any PMF unit that wishes to receive air support must fall under the Iraqi military chain of command in order to receive such support (Future Center, 2017; Al Shehhi, personal communication, January 22, 2017)<sup>12</sup>. In this regard, Pavel Rassadin, the Russian deputy chief of mission in Abu Dhabi, in an interview with author on March 1, 2017 mentioned that the PMF received air support from the global coalition against *Daesh* (the Islamic State).

The PMF chain of command is as follows: at the top of chain sits Prime Minister al-Abadi, Commander in Chief of the Armed Forces, to whom the PMF must report. Faleh al-Fayad, Iraq's National Security Adviser, was appointed as the Chairman of Popular Mobilization Committee. He is officially in command of the PMF in charge of planning operations through negotiations with PMF commanders. His deputy is al-Muhandis, the head of KH (Tollast, 2016)<sup>13</sup>. Though a part of the ISF, the PMF is still an independent military formation, but maintain a semi-official relationship with the state. It will take a reasonable amount of time to build full integration. The prime minister's ability to command the PMF remains a source of disagreement and debate. However, Al-Alusi (personal communication, February 28, 2017) assured that the official chain of command of PMF is working perfectly. In practice, the PMF is run by the "Shura Council of the Islamic Resistance," headed by "Abu Mahdi Mohandes, and Hadi al-Amiri," and include in membership nine commanders of

the main Shia militias. Nevertheless, each PMF group has its own commander who reports directly to the top command of the formation, that is, Hadi al-Amiri, Qais al-Khazali and Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis (Future Center, 2016; Rawabet Center, 2016)<sup>14</sup>.

The primary problem with the PMF is one of disorganization. Even if its senior officials issue orders forbidding abuses, they find them hard to enforce among all militias that fall under their nominal command. According to Anderson, "the problem with [the PMF] is that it is not one organization, with one leadership". He added that there are "certain organizations that are very powerful, including the Badr Organization, but they are unable to control where other groups go or what they are doing" (Anderson, 2016). In an interview via e-mail with the author, on January 22, 2017, Hasan Al Shehhi (the United Arab Emirate (UAE) ambassador to Iraq) stated that each PMF faction has its organizational structure, leadership, area of influence, and terms of reference.

The Iraqi budget provides salaries for the PMF, with funding allotted in proportion to the provincial population. In the government budget adopted in December, 2015, 30% of the PMF would be raised from the provinces where the IS fight is occurring (Robinson, 2016).

PMF Shia volunteers and militias are motivated, organized, and well equipped. They are well trained and heavily armed, equipped with armored vehicles, IEDs, rocket-propelled grenades (RPGs), improvised rocket-assisted mortars, rockets, M1A1 Abrams tanks, armored HMMWVs, and M113 armored personnel vehicles. In addition, most Shia militias receive significant funds and arms from Iran, as will be illustrated later. On the contrary, Sunni volunteers incorporated into the PMF are ill-funded, ill-trained and poorly equipped (Robinson, 2016; Sattar, 2016).

### **The PMF's role in the fight against the Islamic State/Daesh**

As earlier explained, the *raison d'être* of the PMF was to prevent IS sweeping into Baghdad and to fight against the terrorist organization elsewhere. In the beginning, the PMF managed to push IS back from the Iranian border, halted the IS advance on Baghdad in 2014 and cleared a cordon around the city (The Economist, 2016; Salem and Slim, 2016). The PMF played an important role in the counter-IS campaign. The coordinated assault between the PMF, ISF and the Kurdish Peshmerga scored significant successes in various parts of Diyala, Babil, and Salah al-Din provinces, including the recapture of Tikrit (the provincial capital) in March, 2015. The PMF, along with the ISF, launched a successful counter-assault on Ramadi that began in October, 2014 and came to a close in mid-May, 2015 (The Economist, 2016; Salem and Slim, 2016).

In separate interviews with the author on January, 18 and March 1, 2017, respectively, Barbara Leaf, the US



Ambassador to the UAE, and Pavel Rassadin, the Russian deputy chief of mission in Abu Dhabi, agreed that the PMF played an effective role in fighting Daesh, especially in Fallujah, Ramadi, and Baiji. For Beydoun and Zahawi, the PMF has contributed significantly in the liberation of Iraq and as such, remain a critical part of the peace and stability in the country (Beydoun and Zahawi 2016). The PMF forces have made a fundamental difference in the battle against IS. The ISF could not have fought these battles alone<sup>15</sup>.

The PMF forces are hailed as heroes in Iraq because they have reaped significant political benefit as saviors of the country in a time of national emergency. Not only have the PMF become popular; they have also become increasingly powerful. With the militia's successful operations against IS in many places in the capital city, and central Iraq, it has become abundantly clear that they are a force to be reckoned with (Robinson, 2016; Anderson, 2016). In spite of many Iraqi and international objections, the PMF took part in the battle for Mosul, the largest city under IS control, which began in mid-October, 2016, and the battle of Tal Afar, its last remaining stronghold in Iraq. However, the role of the Shia militias, dominant within the PMF, is problematic, as they have a record of committing abuses and implication in sectarian reprisal attacks against Sunnis. Many international human rights organizations, most notably Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, have accused the Popular Mobilization Forces militia of committing war crimes and ethnic cleansing in Sunni areas of Iraq (Amnesty International, 2017).

In addition, the mere presence of these militias is viewed as an Iranian incursion into Iraq because of the existence of strong ties between both parties. The PMF militias are trying to use their military leverage over the Iraqi government, much like Hezbollah has been doing in Lebanon. The militias openly portray the Prime Minister of Iraq as a weak, ineffective puppet of the US (Kalian, 2016). Furthermore, there is a possibility that the PMF will be transferred into a formal, organized political structure, as its leaders have hinted. Two models are available for the PMF to follow; Hezbollah in Lebanon and the IRGC in Iran. Al-Rashed argues that the PMF project is similar to Hezbollah, which has practically controlled Lebanon without having to destroy the existing political institutions (Al-Rashed, 2017). Hadi Hashem, Lebanese deputy chief of mission in Abu Dhabi, in an interview with the author on January 25, 2017, denies the PMF as having political aspirations in Iraq. On the other hand, the Iranian IRGC (the PMF's mentor) has reinterpreted its *raison d'être* of guarding the revolution and has transformed over the course of decades into dominant military institutions with political, economic, and cultural influence.

### **PMF's threats to GCC states**

The GCC states have taken a common stand regarding

the rise of IS/Daesh. They, particularly Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Qatar and Bahrain, have been active partners in the US-led coalition against IS/Daesh since its launch in September, 2014. In 2016, the UAE offered to strike Daesh's targets in Iraq<sup>16</sup>. Nevertheless, the incorporation of the predominantly-Shia PMF into the course of fighting IS/Daesh makes GCC states take a firm stance regarding the future impacts of this development. First of all, GCC states still hold the view of the need for legitimate state monopoly over violence, owing to the view that these mobilized units may later not be integrated into the security units (Beydoun & Zahawi, 2016). More importantly, the structure, discourse, behavior and external links of the PMF make GCC states suspicious of al-Hashd phenomenon. In fact, GCC decision makers are restructuring their policies toward the developments of Iraqi crisis because of the rise of the PMF. From a GCC strategic perspective, the militias pose threats to GCC security, collectively and individually. The GCC states consider the PMF as a destabilizing force in Iraq and the region (Roggio and Toumaj, 2016; Ardemagni, 2016; Ataman, 2016; Robinson, 2016).

Hence, the question arises, "What are the kinds of threats that the PMF poses to GCC security?" Or, "How does al-Hashd phenomenon pose threats to GCC states?"

### **PMF's external links**

Most PMF factions are related officially and ideologically with Iran, and their leaders are aligned to Iranian interests in the region. Both share an ideological vision reinforced by long-term strategic interests such as protection of the Shia faith, Shia holy sites and Shia Muslims and resistance to the influence of the US and of Sunni states in the region. Another objective is the export of the Islamic Revolution to other countries. Key PMF leaders, who are beholden to Iran, are open about their ideology with its promotion of Iran's brand of Islamic identity. In fact, non-Iranian Shia groups across the Middle East began to declare their loyalty not to their national political leaderships, but to the Iranian religious authorities. Iran's supreme leader Ali Khamenei describes the PMF as "a great wealth, a major resource for today and the future of Iraq," which "should be supported and consolidated". Iranian support for PMF militias takes many forms, including the production and distribution of propaganda, training and advising, financial support, armaments, and diplomatic support. This active support is primarily handled by the IRGC Ardemagni, (2016)<sup>17</sup>.

More importantly, Tehran has been cultivating for a long time strong relations with Shia leaders, who are now in charge of PMF factions. For example, Hadi Al-Amiri fought alongside Iran during the Iran-Iraq War and is a close friend of Qassem Soleimani, the commander of Iran's Quds Force, an elite branch of the IRGC responsible for asymmetric warfare beyond Iran's borders. He has been accused of overseeing flights of Iranian weapons

shipments headed to Syria. Qais Al-Khazali is notorious for supposedly backing Iran during the Iraq-Iran War. Mahdi Al-Muhandis, a former advisor to Iran's Quds Force, openly received training and funding from the Quds Force and Lebanese Hezbollah, and worked with the IRGC during the Iraq-Iran War (Kalian, 2016; Anderson, 2016).

The rationale behind Iran's support to PMF was to create an Iraqi version of the IRGC; a parallel military force with the Iraqi army that would help in projecting Iranian influence in Iraq and beyond<sup>18</sup>. In fact, leading Shia groups imagine the PMF as a permanent revolutionary guard, similar to the IRGC, protecting Shia dominance in the state against future threats<sup>19</sup>.

Iranian and Lebanese Hezbollah military trainers are heavily engaged in training elements of PMF militias. Hezbollah has provided explosives experts to help train and advise local Shia militiamen. Iranian combat advisors often appear on the battlefield aiding the PMF. The PMF fighting against IS is being coordinated mainly by Iran, notably by Soleimani, who took a leading role in the battle for Tikrit in March, 2015. Iran has even launched airstrikes supporting the PMF militias fighting in northern Iraq (Knights, 2016; The Economist, 2015a).

Tehran appointed Eraj Masjedi, senior advisor to Soleimani, as its new ambassador to Iraq. Masjedi was heading the elite forces that fought in Iraq, and he was coordinator between IRGC and Iraqi opposition after the Iraq-Iran war. He once argued that the establishment of PMF is an extension of Iran's plan to export the revolution, which keeps war against Sunni extremists from reaching the country's borders. Masjedi serves as the communication link between the IRGC and the PMF<sup>20</sup>.

The rise of the PMF unnervingly mimics multiple aspects of Hezbollah's rise in Lebanon. There are parallels between how Hezbollah and factions of the PMF use politics, foreign influence, and propaganda to increase their power. There are also strong parallels between how the Iraqi PMF imitates Hezbollah by sidelining any non-Iranian-backed Shiite groups or figures, as Hezbollah has done with the Amal movement. In effect, with the help of the former Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, the PMF's greatest ally in government, the PMF accomplished in two years what Hezbollah took twenty years to achieve<sup>21</sup>. According to al-Rashed (2017), the concept of the PMF is similar to what Khomeini's followers did after the Iranian revolution of 1979 as they established the IRGC to position themselves in power and eliminate other Iranian groups, which were also part of the revolution (Al-Rashed, 2017).

There are many similarities between the PMF and Hezbollah. First, both of them are financed and supported by Iran. Second, they are levers for Iran to implement its regional agenda. They are also tools for Iran proxy war against neighboring countries<sup>22</sup>. Third, both organizations emerged when state authorities were weak and not considered able to handle security/military affairs in the countries. In addition, both the PMF and Hezbollah are loyal to Iran and its supreme leader. Furthermore, they have common ideological grounds and are very adept at

using nationalist pride and collective national sentiment in order to bolster their cause. For example, KH has a near exact copy of Hezbollah's logo on its flag. The Badr organization's insignia is similar to the flag of Hezbollah. In fact, members of the Badr organization discuss their sister Shia group with a mixture of envy and pride (Kalian, 2016). However, there are two main differences between the PMF and Hezbollah. First, the former is funded by the Iraqi government, while the latter depends on its own resources and donations from the Shia population. Second, the PMF is now part of the Iraqi military after the new law, while Hezbollah is not part of the Lebanese army. In addition, according to Hadi Hashem (personal communication), Hezbollah was created as a resistance organization, while the PMF was established to fight against Daesh and to help prevent the collapse of the Iraqi state into the hands of the terrorist organization.

The problem is that the PMF has similar political aspirations to Hezbollah and the IRGC (its mentors) to ascend to power in Iraq and to project its control across the country, as will be illustrated in the following:

**Expanding Iran's influence across the region:** Some Shia militias affiliated to PMF are active in politics, with end-goals not necessarily in line with those of the Iraqi government. Also crucial will be the possible emergence of political wings of armed groups that have not participated in politics thus far, such as al-Nujaba and Kataib al-Imam Ali<sup>23</sup>. The PMF leaders may transform the militia into an organized political structure, following the model of Hezbollah in Lebanon or the IRGC in Iran.

Al-Rashed argues that the PMF project is compared with Hezbollah, which has practically controlled Lebanon without having to overturn political institutions as it has weakened the presidency, the cabinet and the parliament and made them incapable of governance (Al-Rashed, 2017). According to Toumaj, a research analyst at foundation for defense of democracies, the PMF has similar aspirations to its mentors (the IRGC and Hezbollah) to ascend to power in Iraq and to be transformed over time into dominant military institution(s) with political, economic, and cultural influence (Toumaj, 2016). For others, the Shia militias "want Iraq to become the Islamic Republic of Iraq, with leadership not from some senior clerics in Najaf but from Ayatollah Khomeini in Iran" (Kalian, 2016). In this view, the PMF is a proxy of Iran. And the PMF is used to impact Iran's political and military influence in Iraq. Iran would also use the Shi'a militia to control the region, and progress its agenda to have wider geographical influence.

Since the invasion of Iraq, Iran has utilized pan-Shiaism as an instrument of its regional expansionist policy. And with the advent of the Arab uprisings in 2011 onwards, Tehran has focused on all Shia-related groups and mobilized them for its foreign policy objectives (Ataman, 2016), including what is called "the Shia Crescent/Arc"<sup>24</sup>. The Shia Crescent is a symbol for Iranian expansion and stretches from Lebanon on the Mediterranean Sea, across

Syria in the Middle East heartland, to Iraq and Bahrain on the Gulf, and to Yemen on the Red Sea. It is gathering in strength, cementing linkages that transcend political and linguistic borders and could lead to a new map of the Middle East. With its PMF proxies, Iran has developed a game plan to build an over land corridor from Iraq to Lebanon.

From the GCC perspective, the PMF is used by the Iranians as a tool to project its influence on other countries in the region. In fact, Iran's regional expansionist policy has been one of the most important factors influencing foreign policies in the Middle East and poses the most pressing national security threat confronting the GCC states. In this regard, Al Shehhi (personal communication) believes that the political and military role of the PMF is linked with the grand Iranian imperial project in the region.

A number of indicators were presented to support that perspective. In January, 2017, the PMF conducted a military exercise on the Iraqi-Saudi border. In an in-depth interview with Al Zaabi, he mentioned that this military exercise was a message from Iran to Saudi Arabia and other GCC states that Iran is sharing borders with through other countries. He also added that Hadi Alameri of the Bader organization has announced that Saudi Arabia is a legitimate target for the PMF. The militia, Sayyid al Shuhada, is led by a specially designated global terrorist who is directly tied to Iran's Qods Force and has announced that Saudi Arabia is a legitimate target for the PMF (Roggio, 2015). However, Al-Alusi (personal communication) assured the author that the mission was only to secure Iraq's borders and not to threaten its neighbors.

Recently, Harakat al Nujaba, a Shia militia affiliated to the PMF, has made threats to Kuwait and is seen as a destabilizing force along the Kuwaiti-Iraqi border. The militia challenges implementing the navigation agreement signed in 2012 between Iraq and Kuwait regarding Khour (inlet) Abdullah, claiming that it was a serious violation of Iraqi sovereignty (Al Khaldi, 2017). It seems that the next stage for the PMF is the Arabian Gulf, particularly the eastern part of the Arabian Peninsula: Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Bahrain. Furthermore, the PMF militias have condemned the war in Yemen and announced their willingness to aid the Houthis (Wehrey, 2016).

Clearly, one could argue that Iran helped nurture the PMF in Iraq as part of its efforts to extend its influence in the country and the region. Thanks to non-Persian militias and regional chaos, Iran is extending its political and military reach to what it considers its rightful sphere of influence: Mesopotamia and the areas of the Eastern Mediterranean and Arabian Peninsula with sizeable Shiite communities. In other words, Iran is committed to achieving control in the region, and that is what makes GCC states feel increasingly threatened (Osman, 2017; Goldman and Rapp-Hooper, 2013).

**Sectarianism, protracted social conflict and instability in the region:** Shiaism, Shia resistance theology, and

*tashayyu*<sup>25</sup> are essential components of the belief system of the PMF. To create a uniform belief system, the PMF units emphasize on Shiaism. To justify their actions, there is stress on Shia resistance theology, specifically the martyrdom of Hussein<sup>26</sup> and the protection of Shia shrines. Furthermore, Shia PMF militias are engaging in politically motivated *tashayyu* in Iraq and Syria and may extend their activities to the GCC states (Kalian, 2016; Knights, 2016; Ataman, 2016). According to Al Mazrouei (personal communication), the PMF's current strategy is based on fanning dangerous sectarian grievances. For example, al-Khazali, commander of AAH, once stated that the "Mosul battle is revenge against the descendants of the killers of Hussein" (Kalian, 2016). The PMF's sectarian orientation is more important because it embodies a form of militant sectarianism.

Many international human rights organizations, most notably Amnesty International, have accused the Shiite Popular Mobilization Forces of committing war crimes and deliberate ethnic cleansing in Sunni areas of Iraq. In fact, there have been several attacks on Sunni residents and refugees, who were not allowed to return to their homes in villages that were now under the control of the PMF (Amnesty International, 2017). Sometimes, the PMF would target entire Sunni villages with artillery fire. In a personal interview with the Iraqi ambassador in Abu Dhabi, Al-Alusi did not deny the abuses of the Shia militia, but he justified them as revenge for previous IS deadly attacks against the ISF. Ironically, Rassadin, Russian Deputy Chief of Mission in Abu Dhabi, did not see any abuses coming from the PMF (personal communication). Lebanese Deputy Chief of Mission in Abu Dhabi, Hadi Hashem, claimed that Lebanon's government is not sure of alleged abuses committed by the PMF against civilian Sunni in Iraq (personal communication).

The abuses and destruction wrought by PMF on the ground, particularly in Anbar and Fallujah, feed into sectarianism and Sunni anger. Rising sectarianism offers a fertile breeding ground for Sunni extremism and provides more ideological space for radical networks such as AlQaeda and *Daesh*, and lethal anti-Shiaism, feeding into a vicious cycle of sectarian violence. Like a poison, sectarianism has exacerbated confessional and ethnic rifts for the purposes of power politics (El-Dessouki, 2015). In other words, the PMF's actions antagonize Sunni Muslims, stir their fears of the region and inflame sectarianism not only in Iraq but also in the whole region. For some analysts, sectarian hatred, because of the practice of Shia militia, among other factors, has now reached a perilous new pitch in Iraq and the Arabian Gulf area. The region is actually experiencing an alarming surge in sectarianism (Osman, 2017; Wehrey, 2016). These conditions will create devastating future problems between Sunnis and Shias in Iraq and the region, not least shaping the genesis of protracted social conflict, as described by Edward Azar (Azar, 1990). Since the 2003 invasion of Iraq, the Shias possess political power and use it to maintain dominance over other identity groups in the society, particularly the

Sunnis. In addition, the Shias are unresponsive to the needs of these groups. Political elites, especially in the PMF, use sectarian language to legitimize authoritarian rule, consolidate power, and rally against internal and external foes. Crucially, there is a client relationship between the dominant Shia group and the Shia-dominated government on the one hand and Iran on the other hand. Iran has used the sectarian divide to further its ambitions in Iraq and the region.

According to the Economist, Shia militias are exacerbating violence across the region. Although a number of Shia militia affiliated to the PMF, such as Saraya Al-salam, the Badr organization, KH, AAH and the Al-Abbas Combat Division, has deployed forces in Syria, top commanders of the PMF have openly discussed their future plans to push further into the country (The Economist, 2015a). While Barbara Leaf (personal communication) stated that the US will not tolerate the fact of PMF encroaching into Syria, Rassadin affirmed that Russia would not mind if Al-Assad's government approved the PMF's participation in the Syrian conflict (personal communication). For his part, Al-Alusi (personal communication) ruled out the possibility of the PMF's engagement in the Syrian conflict.

The PMF and Shia militias in general give support to Shia minorities in the GCC states which is considered a direct interference in their domestic affairs (Al Zaabi, personal communication). Shia militias are embroiled in inciting sectarian unrest in Shia-majority Bahrain, as well as in Saudi Arabia's Eastern Province. Saudi Arabia and Kuwait believe that Iraqi Shia militias support subversive activities among their Shia minorities. GCC states fear Shia militias' capacity to use religious symbols to undermine their regimes' legitimacy and facilitate collective political action, especially among Saudi Arabia's already disaffected Shia minority (Alaaldin, 2016).

To conclude this section, Roggio drew an analogy between Hezbollah and the PMF in terms of being a regional security threat. He reflected that the Middle East has been witnessing the growth of Hezbollah over the last 40 years supported by Iran, until it became a threat to neighboring states and a destabilizing element in the Middle East outside Lebanese government control. Roggio then argues that the GCC states are facing the same dilemma with the PMF (Roggio, 2015). The potential threat, as Kalian puts it, is heightened by the cross-pollination of the PMF, the Quds Force, and Lebanese Hezbollah as it is seen more clearly in the Syrian theater of operations (Kalian, 2016).

**Asymmetric threats:** There is growing evidence that asymmetrical conflicts have become a strategy of choice among radical groups, and have evolved into a major national and international security threat. Asymmetrical conflict refers to armed conflict to achieve political objectives, and involves a wide disparity (in conventional power and formal status) between the parties. In other words, the extreme imbalance of military, economic and

technological power between the parties is supplemented and aggravated by status inequality. Unlike most conventional conflicts, asymmetrical ones are usually initiated by the weaker side. The most basic form of such conflict is a confrontation between a non-state actor and a state, or states (Stepanova, 2008; Long, 2008).

The argument here is that the rise of the PMF would increase asymmetrical threats to the GCC's security. GCC states have concerns that the incorporation of the PMF into the Iraqi army would only be a prelude to establishing this militia as a force resembling the IRGC, which employs unconventional, and asymmetric (naval swarms, terrorists, human-wave ...) tactics against these countries. In fact, the PMF places religious belief at the core of the Iranian concept of asymmetric conflict. This concept rests on three components: political and religious prudence and faith in the *velayat-e faqih* (clerical rule); motivation and resilience in the face of adversity; and the culture of jihad and martyrdom (Haghshenass, 2008). Some analysts have even gone so far as to suggest the equivalence between the IS and the PMF. The latter, just like the former, has sectarian orientation, deploys asymmetrical conflict tools and has unquestionably committed excesses war crimes, even including the kidnapping and murder of many Sunni people and the wholesale destruction of Sunni villages. In other words, Iraqi Shia militias present a regional terrorist threat in a way that is similar to IS and their ilk. This pattern of conflict seems likely to prevail for the foreseeable future. The militias' political and operational horizons are far more focused on Iraq and its immediate surroundings. For all their anti-Sunni, particularly anti-GCC saber rattling, their ideology and strategy would lead the likes of the Badr Organization or AAH to target cities and communities in GCC states with terrorist attacks (Haddad, 2015). Such attacks, if they happen, would create massive social, political and economic costs and inflict enormous casualties.

The opposite scenario is the increasing level of Sunni revenge acts. According to Amnesty International (Amnesty International, 2017), the PMF has been carrying out mass killings, torture and kidnappings against the Sunni population with the support of Iranian generals, thereby fueling a cycle of revenge killings and ethnic hatred in Iraq and the region. Such a scenario raises the nightmare prospect of prolonged bloody violence between Sunni and Shia populations operating outside the control of politicians and their security services. All in all, these conditions further heighten the risk of a fresh explosion of unrest calling for revenge among Sunni population in Iraq and the region. This will lead to increase in the level of violence and terrorism across the region.

## Conclusion

This paper examined the roles of the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) or *al-Hashd al-Shaabi*, as a sub-state actor, in Iraqi and regional politics. The main findings of the

paper can be summarized as follows: (1) The PMF has been playing an important role in the counter-Islamic State (IS)/*Daesh* fight. However, the PMF's actions in Iraq and Syria inflame sectarianism in Iraq and across the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) region. Protracted social conflict between Sunni and Shia is on the making in the Middle East because of the PMF and Iran actions. (2) Most PMF units are related with Iran, in terms of ideology, chain of command and support. In fact, Iran wants to create an Iraqi version of IRGC, which is on the making. (3) The PMF is linked to Hezbollah of Lebanon, in terms of training and advising. (4) With other sub-state actors, the PMF is a tool of expanding Iran's influence across the Middle East. (5) The PMF increases asymmetrical threats, including terrorist acts, sectarianism and radicalism, to GCC states.

In fact, recent political developments in Iraq prove the validity of the thesis presented in this paper, that is, the PMF became the dominant political force in Iraq. How have the GCC states responded to the PMF threats? And how should they respond to these threats? GCC states consider the PMF unlawful. They have often demanded not to allow the PMF to participate in military operations against the IS/*Daesh* (Al Mazrouei, personal communication). They are operating the policy that only the Iraqi Government must have monopoly over military force in Iraq and all paramilitary militia, including the PMF, should be disarming and demobilizing.

Iraq is pivotal to the GCC states in that the success of either of the factions engaging in the IS war would mean this group taking charge in Middle East region and the vast resources in that area. In order to counter the many troubling trends in Iraq, the GCC states need to engage Iraq. In an interview with the author, Al-Alusi stated that the GCC states abandoned Iraq after the US invasion in 2003, which served as a platform helping Iran to heighten its influence in Babylon. The first element in an engagement strategy is support for the Iraqi government of Haider al-Abadi and the Iraqi Armed Forces as they campaign to defeat IS. That would effectively counter-balance Iran's influence in Iraq. In this regard, the visit of the Saudi Foreign Minister to Baghdad in February, 2017, the first such trip since 1990, presages a new approach which needs to be sustained.

Every major Iraqi political actor, especially in Sunni areas, seeks external support, and many currently look to the GCC states. These states, especially Saudi Arabia and the UAE, must work on engaging with the Sunni tribes of Iraq, if they hope to influence the course of Iraqi political and security development. GCC states should support post-war reconstruction efforts in the liberated Sunni regions of Iraq.

Although Shia Arabs make up the largest demographic in Iraq, their political factions do not uniformly support Iran's influence according to Hadi Hashem in an interview with the researcher. Hence, it is important for GCC states not to ignore all Shia factions and try to engage the ones who do not favor Iranian influence in their homeland such as the Sadrist Movement. Equally important, the GCC

states should focus on cultivating good relations with Shia clerics in the Najaf Seminary, some of whom show independent stance from Iran. More importantly, the GCC states should successfully engage their Shia population as full citizens, respect their role in building these countries, and accept their leaders as actors in Saudi society and politics.

In the medium and long run, the GCC states would have to have strategic hedging toward Iraq (and Iran). Strategic hedging is a smart way for the GCC to achieve their objectives toward Iraq. Strategic hedging is a new theory in international relations. This theory attempts to explain the behavior of small states that seek to develop their military and economic capabilities, while at the same time avoiding direct confrontation with threat-source states. Strategic hedging is generally used by smaller states as a strategic option to maximize gains and avoid dependency on great powers at the regional or/and international levels. It compensates for smallness and lack of 'hard' means of pursuing policies. As previous studies demonstrate, strategic hedging is a mixed strategy of cooperation and conflict, relying on both soft and hard power tools. In practice, this means a small state deliberately cooperates with its rival to escape threats while at the same time embracing elements of hard balancing against it (Salman, and Geeraerts, 2015; Sherwood, 2006).

The impact of strategic hedging behavior on foreign policies of hedging states is promising. Hedging allows a smaller power to offset and reduce the scale of threats to it in relation to regional powers without confronting any of them. In addition, hedging is less costly and includes low risk compared to the confrontation strategy, and creates a kind of "a geopolitical insurance strategy". In fact, anarchic, uncertain environments like the Gulf are particularly ideal for hedging strategies<sup>27</sup>.

Other measures that could be taken or significantly expanded in order to counter the Iran-affiliated PMF threats include using intelligence and influence to build relations with Ahwazi Arabs in Southern Iran in order to send a clear message to Iran on the importance of non-interference. The GCC governments may also cultivate good relations with the growing Iranian communities in their countries and/or the Iranian opposition groups abroad as a tool of pressuring the Iranian government to stop meddling in the affairs of the GCC states. More important, the GCC states should take advantage of the divisions along political loyalty among Shia militias affiliated to the PMF.

## CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The authors has not declared any conflict of interests.

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<sup>1</sup> This paper uses the term "Shia" as a noun and adjective because it is the simplest and the closest to the Arabic origin of the word.

<sup>2</sup> Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states include six Middle Eastern countries—Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Bahrain, and Oman.

<sup>3</sup> The Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) include the traditional security forces such as the Iraqi Army, the Iraqi Air Force, the Iraqi Navy, the Counter-Terrorism Service, the Federal Police, the Iraqi Police Service, the Department of Border Enforcement and Coast Guard, the various Facilities Protection Service and Oilfield Police units, plus bodyguard forces for leadership sites. Also now part of the ISF is the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), as it will be illustrated later.

<sup>4</sup> Saif Al Zaabi is the UAE Ambassador to Iran

<sup>5</sup> Saif Al Zaabi, personal communication.

<sup>6</sup> Robinson, Assessment of the Politico-Military Campaign, 24; the Economist 2016

<sup>7</sup> Robinson, Assessment of the Politico-Military Campaign, 1, 24, 31

<sup>8</sup> Tollast, Inside Iraq's.

<sup>9</sup> Rawabet Center, Popular Crowd Forces.

<sup>10</sup> Future Center Legalizing Sectarianism: Consequences of Incorporating the Popular Mobilization Forces into Iraq's Army. Policy Brief. No. 56, Aug 2016; B. Roggio, & Amir Toumaj (2016, December 17). Iraq's PMF is IRGC's "next step," senior Qods Force Commander says. FEDD'S Long War Journal. Retrieved from <http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2015/10/popular-mobilization-committee-militia-threatens-to-strike-and-destroy-the-saudi-government.php>.

<sup>11</sup> Fares Al Mazrouei is the UAE Assistant Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation for Security and Military Affairs.

<sup>12</sup> Hasan Al Shehhi is the UAE Ambassador to Iraq.

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- <sup>13</sup> Tollast, Inside Iraq's.
- <sup>14</sup> Future Center, Legalizing Sectarianism; Rawabet Center, Popular Crowd Forces.
- <sup>15</sup> Al-Alusi, personal Communication.
- <sup>16</sup> However, the UAE's offer was rejected. The author learned that from Fares Al Mazrouei, UAE Assistant Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation for Security and Military Affairs, in an interview conducted on January 29, 2017.
- <sup>17</sup> Roggio, & Toumaj, Iraq's PMF is IRGC's; Ataman, the impact of Iranian over-expansionism; Robinson, Assessment of the Politico-Military Campaign, 39.
- <sup>18</sup> Al Mazrouei, personal Communication.
- <sup>19</sup> Knights, The Future of Iraq, 56.
- <sup>20</sup> Al Zaabi, personal communication; Roggio, & Toumaj, Iraq's PMF.
- <sup>21</sup> Al Mazrouei, personal Communication; Kalian, Iran's Hezbollah.
- <sup>22</sup> Leaf, personal Communication.
- <sup>23</sup> Roggio, & Toumaj, Iraq's PMF is IRGC's.
- <sup>24</sup> The term was first used by King Abdullah II of Jordan in 2004 to warn against the expansion of Iranian influence in the Middle East after the toppling of Saddam Hussein in Iraq (The Economist 2015a).
- <sup>25</sup> *tashayyu* means to convert someone to Shiaism.
- <sup>26</sup> Imam Hussein, a descendant of the Prophet Muhammad, who was killed at Karbala in Iraq 1,323 years ago, and was thus denied the leadership of Muslims that Shias believe was his right. The Economist (2003, March 20). The Martyrdom of Hussein. Retrieved from <http://www.economist.com/node/1649403>.
- <sup>27</sup> Salman & Geeraerts, Strategic Hedging, 104-105; Sherwood, Small States.

*Full Length Research Paper*

# The status of political parties' in using social media for campaigns during the 2015 general election of Ethiopia

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Electoral campaigns are essential aspects of election. However, opposition political parties in Ethiopia have been challenged due to limited media alternative. In the 2015 general election, some political parties were using social media to conduct campaigns. Hence, this case study aimed to describe the status of these parties in the use of social media. The research utilized a qualitative approach as dominant method. Blue Party, Ethiopian Democratic Party (EDP), and Ethiopian People Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) were selected purposefully because they were active in social media use. In-depth interview, focus group discussions, and social media contents were used to collect data. The study used thematic analysis with a quantitative content analysis. The result revealed that political parties were introducing electoral symbols, policies, offline campaigns, and profiles of candidates through social media though there were discrepancies among them. The language predominantly used was Amharic that covers an average of 98% of the total messages. In terms of the mediums used, the study found that political parties were mainly releasing their messages through texts and a combination of texts and images. These two mediums cover an average of 77%. These imply the parties' concomitance with the interest of the audiences. Generally, despite the use of social media to conduct campaigns is at its infant stage, the political parties dedication to use as well as their view on the potential of these media indicate that social media are becoming alternative channels of electoral campaigns in Ethiopia.

**Key words:** Social media, political parties, Ethiopia, 2015 general election, electoral campaigns,

## INTRODUCTION

Electoral campaigns are serious communicative advertisements undertaken by electoral candidates. According to Norris (2004) there are three main channels of communication to conduct campaigns:

1. The people-intensive channels such as demonstrations, public assemblies, party meetings etc.

2. The mainstream media which involves the print and broadcast media; and

3. The new media, mainly the social media (Arulchelvan, 2014).

Empirical studies conducted by writers such as Arulchelvan (2014), Williamson et al. (2010), Davies

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(2014), and Small (2007) have shown that political parties have been using social media to conduct their campaigns in this digital society, and found to have great potentials. In this regard, Davies (2014) has written that:

“Mainstream media, such as the press, television and radio, pay relatively little attention to most EU elections. However, the Internet and social media have become important alternative sources of campaign information”.

In similar way, Arulchelvan (2014) who has studied the experiences of Indian political parties has stated that “many political parties have created their own websites, blogs and Facebook/twitter accounts. They are enthusiastically using the tools for the election campaigns. This paradigm shift has significantly helped them in reaching the voters”. Such literatures are asserting that the social media are becoming one of the essential channels of electoral campaign.

In Ethiopia, a study conducted by Sileshie (2014) has asserted that the majority of Ethiopians have labeled Facebook as media, and “it is becoming relatively preferred media outlet (32.5 %) to television (21.5%), radio (17%) and newspapers (6.1%)”.

In addition, the coverage of internet is improving and the internet penetration rate is growing fast. According to the recent report of Internet World Stat (IWS)<sup>1</sup> (2016), the internet penetration rate reaches 3.7% and the number of people surfing Facebook is equaled this number. On the other hand, the statistics released by Ethio-telecom (2016), indicates that the internet penetration rate reaches 12.5%, which tripled the estimation of IWS. Starting from the end of 1990s, the internet services mainly blogs were used by Ethiopians living outside to discuss various political issues (Megenta, 2010).

The existence of such literatures about promising potential of social media on the one hand and researcher's observation of parties in Ethiopia using social media as channel of electoral campaigns on the other hand (Sinetsehay, 2015) have motivated him to explore the experiences in this regard. Given these motivations, this study aimed to explore the status on how political parties were using social media to conduct electoral campaigns.

### Statement of the problem

In the past four round general elections held in the country, the people-intensive channels and the mainstream media were the only channels of electoral campaigns for both the incumbent and opposition parties. However, opposition political parties are always claiming that they lack enabling political space to conduct campaigns through people-intensive channels. People involved in these political

activities have been exposed to frequent threats and political measures, which lead the people to abstain from such activities (Alemayehu, 2010).

The mainstream media are also in a critical problem. The state owned media (both the print and broadcast media) are remaining the mouthpiece of the government to portray propaganda (Teshome, 2009). During electoral campaigns, the incumbent took the lion-share of campaigning airtime and columns allocated (Alemayehu, 2010). Making the situation worse, private media have been becoming the target of frequent crackdowns, mainly after the 2005 general election (Ashenafi, 2013; Teshome, 2009).

In addition, the intimidation, harassment, and detention of journalists are becoming worse which leads journalists to self-censor their reports (Teshome, 2009). These situations make Ethiopia's opposition political parties vulnerable in conducting their electoral campaigns effectively. With the aim of expanding their outreach, political parties used social media to conduct their campaigns in the fifth general election. Hence, conducting a research on their practice of using this option is essential, which is the heart of this study.

Although there are some studies on the issue by Tesfaye (2013) and Sileshie (2014), they have not addressed the situation of social media use by the legally registered political parties. They did not describe the condition on how political parties were using social media in campaigning. Hence, this study was conducted to fill the gap in relation to the status of political parties in using social media during the 2015 general election.

The general objective of this study was to explore the status of political parties' social media usage in conducting electoral campaigns during the 2015 general election of Ethiopia. The specific objectives of the study are:

1. Describe the contents that were conveyed through the social media bases of the parties.
2. Investigate the language and medium preferences of the selected political parties.
3. Analyze whether these preferences were concomitant to the audiences' interest or not.

Given the aforementioned objectives, the study intended to answer the following central questions:

1. What are the main contents that political parties were conveying through their social media bases?
2. What were the languages and mediums used by the selected political parties?
3. Were these linguistic and medium preferences concomitant to the interest of the audiences?

### Scope of the study

This study aims to explore the practice of political parties in using social media as channel of electoral campaigns in

<sup>1</sup> The IWS, however, underestimate the internet penetration rate of developing countries where many people can access internet by using a single internet route through internet cafes, government and private organizations, work places and academic institutions (IWS, 2016; Megenta, 2010).

Ethiopia by examining the experiences of selected political parties. Facebook and Twitter were the targets of the study from the different varieties of social media with a great emphasis to Facebook. The existence of relatively large number of Ethiopian online society surfing on these two social media types in comparison to other types of social media bases (Sinetsehay, 2015) has motivated the researcher to focus on these types of social media, mainly on Facebook.

In terms of the targeted group of the study, selected political parties contesting in the 2015 general election (Blue Party, EDP and EPRDF) were the central target of the study. Despite the critical problem of media space cited in the problem statement does not fit with it, the ruling party were also included in this group. The assumption of the researcher that this party will provide rich information concerning the issue given that it is an active social media user (Sinetsehay, 2015) is the rationality to include it. Methodologically, the study applied qualitative method backed by quantitative method for conducting this study.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

In this era of the new media, the use of social media to conduct political communications is getting a great momentum. USA candidates were the first in using social media as channel of electoral campaigns (Williamson et al., 2010). Starting from then onwards, electoral contestants in countries such as Ireland, Germany, Austria, Sweden, Finland, Denmark, Poland and UK have used these media for conducting their electoral campaigns (Davies, 2014). Outside the USA and Europe, countries such as Canada (Small, 2007), India (Arulchelvan, 2014), and Malaysia (Gong, 2011) have used the social media for channeling campaigns. The experiences in such different countries are asserting the praised potential of social media as indicated by the stated writers.

In states where only the political elites have controlled over traditional mass media, an uncensored Internet can bring about social and political change in at least two overlapping ways. First, it acts as an alternative source of information, counteracting the agenda-setting function of government-controlled media. Second, it provides the basis for social mobilization and organization by providing avenues of interaction between content providers and consumers (Gong, 2011).

All these indicate how the social media are becoming an essential channel of political communications for political parties and other stakeholders who needs to bring political reformations. Small (2007) who has studied the experiences of Canadian political parties through a content analysis by taking the campaign messages of political parties posted for a month via parties web bases has found that political parties were using the internet in order to introduce their programs to the electorate.

According to the content analysis, Small (2007) has

found that political parties did not narrowcast their policies to the various socio-economic groups. "The content analysis shows that, in general, Canadian party websites do not provide specialized campaign information for different regional or socio-demographic groups". Small (2007) also has studied the interactivity of the Canadian political parties to their followers. The study found that the political parties have shown limited interactivity though one of the essential quality of the internet based campaigning is interactivity. Though there were quests to the different political parties campaigned through internet, "Canadian parties are failing to respond to voter requests for information" (Small, 2007).

Arulchelvan (2014) who investigated the experience of Indian political parties' electoral campaigns through the new media have studied the nature of contents, colors of the text as well as mediums of campaign messages. The study found that political parties were mainly using the social media to campaign short mottos like "Vote for congress-DMK alliance, Vote for Corruption Free Government, to Fight against Price Rise and Terrorism Vote and Support and Elect BJP candidate" (Arulchelvan, 2014).

Emruli and Baca (2011) have investigated the internet and political communication of political parties in Macedonia. In their study, the content and the language version of political parties have been investigated by using content analysis. The language version in this study shows that, the political parties are mainly using their ethnic languages while few are bilinguals. "From analyzed Web sites, only 4 offer bilingual accessibility (30%), and others offer information only in the language of own ethnicity (unilingual content)" (Emruli and Baca, 2011).

In their study, the usage of foreign language, mainly English is covering 30% of the messages campaigned. A study conducted by Tesfaye (2013) on the challenges and prospects of online political communication in Ethiopia has found that English is predominantly used by the Ethiopian cyber society, and it is one of the challenges of non-English speakers of the country.

With regard to the mediums through which the messages were conveyed by political parties, the study conducted by Emruli and Baca (2011) is the one that have to be cited. By investigating the Macedonia political parties' Web bases, they found that most of the contents were conveyed through texts.

The results of this part of the research shows that most of the websites of political parties are filled with textual contents, but the textual content is not linked to the outside source (Out Links) 31% of websites, while the multimedia content nearly 46% of the websites of political parties have no photo gallery, 77% of websites of political parties have no audio clips and 38% of websites have no video clips (Emruli and Baca, 2011).

Hence, as illustrated in the aforementioned related literatures, the investigations of contents, mediums and the linguistic preferences of electoral campaigners are

common variables that ought to be investigated to describe how political parties are using social media to conduct their campaigns.

Regarding the theoretical framework, this study is mainly based on the Use and Gratifications theory. This theory assumes the audiences as active audience who can select the media and the content, which will satisfy their demands and hence the audiences have a control over the media (Ruggiero, 2000).

Hence, in order to analyze the concomitance of the audiences preferences on the contents, mediums and language usage of political parties, the use and gratification theory is used as a theoretical justification to the case from the side of the audiences (the activists in this case) while the political communication theory is considered as a theoretical justification for considering issues on the side of the senders (parties in this case).

## METHODOLOGY

The study used a concurrent embedded mixed research (qualitative as dominant and quantitative as supportive) approach with a case study research design. From the total of twenty three political parties contested at the national level (National Electoral Board of Ethiopia, 2015); three political parties (Blue Party, EDP, and EPRDF) were selected as cases of the study.

Given that the aim of this study is to render a on how the selected parties have been using the social media, a concern was given to the possibility of acquiring detailed information from parties that have better experiences. Hence, these political parties were selected by using intensity case selection method<sup>2</sup>.

The researchers believe that intense and deep information can be collected from these parties because they were found to be the leading in terms of social media followers and involvement at these media (Sinetsehay, 2015). Moreover, they are leading political parties in other issues including the number of candidates they had and finance they received (National Electoral Board of Ethiopia, 2015).

The research considered participants from both the demand and supply sides. Considering both sides is essential to have a holistic understanding about the issue (Small, 2007). By using intensity purposive sampling again, two individuals from each party (supply side) were selected. Staffs that were running the social media bases of the parties as well as personnel who were heading the electoral campaign of the fifth general election in each party were chosen, and the data were collected through an in-depth interview with them. The data were collected on different days from January 18, 2016 to February 17, 2016. Each interview session consumed 45 to 65 min.

Activists of these political parties (demand side) were the other participants. They were selected through snowball sampling from activists in Addis Ababa. It is justifiable because the largest social media users are based in Addis Ababa (Freedom House, 2015) as well as many of the political parties are urban centered, and their political activities which bring exposures to activists are undertaken at Addis Ababa (Smith, 2007).

Members of the political parties who are relatively in better performance in demonstrations, party meetings and discussions, their contribution of membership fee as well as active involvement at

the social media were identified through snowball sampling and a focus group discussion were undertaken with them.

A total of four focus group discussions (one in each party involving five to six members) were undertaken. Given the similarity of information collected from the participants of these different focus group discussions, the four focus group discussions were found to be sufficient. Each focus group discussion took about one and half to two hours.

In addition, the study used newspapers, government policies and statistics as well as contents of the parties' social media bases to collect data. Because the contents were analyzed quantitatively, the research consulted the whole contents posted from February 22, 2015 to May 22, 2015 via the social media bases of the selected parties to avoid the problem of representativeness. Accordingly, 145 and 20 messages from Blue party, EPRDF and EDP respectively were analyzed. The researcher selected the period stated earlier because it was the official campaign period (Neamin, 2015).

After the data were collected in these manners, they were analyzed through a mix of thematic and content analysis. The data collected by interviews and focus group discussions were analyzed thematically. The social media contents were analyzed through a quantitative content analysis. The researcher undertook an inter-coder reliability test for contents taken from the social media bases of the selected political parties and the percentage agreement for inter-coder reliability test of this study is 87%. According to Krippendorff (), an inter-coder agreement is good if it is above 80% and acceptable if it lies between 67 to 79%.

## RESULTS

### Brief profiles of the selected parties

As cited earlier, the cases selected for this study are Blue Party, EDP, and EPRDF. Blue Party is a newly established political party, which came in to the political space after the 2010 general election. Despite the fact it is a recent founded political party, it is one of the firsts to be immerse into the social media (Sinetsehay, May 2015).

This party has a Facebook page named *Semayawi Party-Ethiopia* followed by 70,500 users. The party has also an online newspaper named *Negere Ethiopia* with a Facebook page followed by 44,000 users. According to the informants from the party, *Negere Ethiopia* was formerly a print media. However, when publishers severed the challenges, this newspaper stopped its print publication and entered into online publication (interviewee 01, personal communication, April 28, 2016). The party has a Twitter page too named *Semayawi Party* followed by more than 800 users.

EPRDF was established in 1989 by ethnic based political parties. Despite the fact that the party is claimed to have unlimited presence via the mainstream media and people-intensive channels (Alemayehu, 2010; Teshome, 2009), it also avail itself at the social media bases starting from May 2014 as interviewees from the party have indicated. Now, EPRDF has followers of around 45,000 at its Facebook page named *EPRDF-official* and 6,000 at its Twitter account named *EPRDF-Ethiopia*.

EDP was established in 1992 and it is a member of Africa Liberal Network from Ethiopia as highlighted by interviewees from the party. Despite the fact that the party

<sup>2</sup> Intensity sampling procedure/or case selection method a technique that select samples and cases based on their capacity of generating intense and deep information (Mathews and Ross, 2010).



Figure 1. EPRDF's invitation to audiences to follow its campaign messages via social media.

has relatively long history of involvement in Ethiopian politics; its presence at the social media is a recent phenomenon as EPRDF. It was in 2014 that its Facebook page *Ethiopian Democratic Party* was created (Sinetsehay, May 31, 2015). Currently, the page has about 13,600 followers, which is the third largest next to Blue Party and EPRDF in terms of followers.

### The extent of use and the nature of contents conveyed

By creating social media bases as discussed so far, the selected political parties were using the media to conduct their campaigns along with an attempt to fulfill physical and human resources. In this regard, Interviewee 06 from EPRDF has said:

Our party is considering social media as one alternative channel of communication. Hence, we arranged the necessary personnel and physical equipment (office for the staffs, broadband internet service and computers) which were completed by the mid of May 2014. Then, we used the media to distribute our campaign messages.

After completing their preparation to use the social media, the political parties were inviting the online society to follow their campaigns at the social media at the beginning of the official campaigns (Figure 1). Regarding the extent of their parties' utilization of social media, Participant 05 from EPRDF focus group discussants has stated the following:

Let alone the party itself, it also strived to motivate us to use social media extensively by setting agenda, attacking false propagandas raised by the cyber society, and to share various messages of the party including the campaign messages. During the campaign periods, the party was releasing campaign messages that intended to

inform the party's policies, electoral symbols (see also Figure 5) and previous accomplishments.

Figure 1 shows is the message of EPRDF at its Twitter page that called the audiences to follow campaign messages via the social media bases of the party in addition to campaigns conducted through radio, television, and newspapers.

Interviewee 01 from EDP has also informed that their parties were using social media to convey their campaign messages though they were not using these media to the extent that they have to use both in terms of interactivity and in terms of status updates. The reason behind their limited usage is the overloading of activities during the campaign period and the existence of limited manpower with such responsibility. Participant 03 from Blue Party focus group discussants has stated the following concerning the status of Blue party at the social media:

Our party was using the social media to releases various messages such as electoral symbol, press release, and somehow policies of the party and I was following these campaign messages at the social media bases of the party (see also Figure 2 and Figure 4). However, it was not answering the question that I forward through comments.

Figure 2 is an example of electoral campaign posted by EDP that attempts to explain its position to be a third alternative between the oppositions and the incumbent. With the aforementioned consecutive interviews, the idea of focus group discussant and the sample snapshot reflect that political parties were using social media to conduct their electoral campaigns. The political parties were attempting to take preparation in terms of physical equipment and personnel though there were limitations particularly in terms of interactivity.

Regarding the contents they released, the interviewees have reflected that they were releasing their policies and programs, electoral symbols as well as their offline



Figure 2. EDP's campaign about its program (Retrieved from <https://www.facebook.com/ethiopiandemocraticparty/?fref=ts>).



Figure 3. Profiles of Blue Party candidates in Amhara region (Retrieved from <https://www.facebook.com/semayawiethio/?fref=ts>).

campaign activities via their social media. Based on the deep review of the Facebook Page of the selected political parties, the largest messages were focusing on introducing policies and electoral symbols, which cover an average of about 72 % (65.1% by Blue Party, 80% by EDP, and 64.5% by EPRDF) from the total messages. Blue Party also spent at about 30% of its messages for exposing irregularities committed by the government and the incumbent EPRDF. EPRDF on the other hand, had released about 5% of its message that portray misconducts by opposition and 30% of its message were dedicated to different news. EDP spent the remaining 20% for different news.

As pointed by Interviewee 04 from Blue Party, Blue

Party was additionally posting invitation to the offline activities (such as inviting to broadcast campaigns, rallies, and public meetings) and campaign messages rejected by the mainstream media. Moreover, it was posting profiles of candidates. Figure 3 shows the profile of candidates by describing their educational background, the seats they compete for, the district they represent, and the electoral symbol of the party along with the photo of the candidates. It was posted on the Facebook page of the party and also linked to its Twitter account.

Figure 4 portrays the political manifesto of EDP which is linked to its website as well as the party's electoral symbol (flower as you can see) that is used to represent the party during the 2015 general election. As one of the purposes



Figure 4. EDPs' political manifesto (Retrieved from <https://www.facebook.com/ethiopiandemocraticparty/?fref=ts>).



Figure 5. EPRDF's campaign with its logo (Left) and its electoral symbol (Right) (Retrieved from <https://www.facebook.com/EPRDFofficial/?fref=ts>).

of electoral campaigns is creating an informed voter (Kriesi et al., 2009), the study found that the selected political parties were using the social media to create an awareness about their policies and electoral symbols, and Blue Party went further in creating awareness about its candidates (Figure 3). Political parties were also posting their offline campaigns to mobilize the online voters, which is in line to the mobilization purpose of campaigns.

As of the frequency of status update of these political parties is considered, the research found the existence of difference among the selected parties. Based on the review made on the Facebook pages of the selected political parties, Blue Party performed better with 221 status updates with an average of 2.5 status updates per a day while EPRDF –which is claimed to have many opportunities– has posted 145 status updates with an average of 1.6 status updates per a day.

EDP on the other hand, which has shortage of personnel to run the social media as pointed by the respective interviewees from the party has low (20) status updates

when compared to Blue Party and EPRDF. This shows, though the parties try to update their posts; there were discrepancies in updating their messages.

Generally, from all the aforementioned data acquired through the various methods, it is possible to conclude that political parties were using the social media to channel their various messages such as electoral symbols, policies and programs, profiles of candidates, and offline campaign activities though there were discrepancies in their extent of use.

### The language version

The other variable that this study has explored under the description of social media campaign is the language use of the political parties. Exploring the language version is important when one attempts to explore how political parties use the social media for campaigning (Arulchelvan, 2014; Emruli and Baca, 2011). It is essential to know to

**Table 1.** Parties' language usage on their respective facebook pages: (The total numbers of messages analyzed were 221 from Blue Party, 20 from EDP and 145 from EPRDF).

Political party	Language used at the social media bases	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Blue party	Amharic	217	98.20
	English	01	0.45
	Oromifa	02	0.90
	Combination of Amharic and English	01	0.45
EDP	Amharic	20	100
	English	0	0
	Oromifa	0	0
	Combination of Amharic and English	0	0
EPRDF	Amharic	140	96.56
	English	01	0.69
	Oromifa	03	2.06
	Combination of Amharic and English	01	0.69

\*Because, EPRDF is a front formed by four constituent units, the language version of its constituent unit's social media bases are not included.

what extent political parties were performing in concomitant to the interest of the audience in terms of language.

Accordingly, as of the language that parties used to convey their message via the social media, the content analysis revealed that 98% of the messages were released through Amharic language while the remaining 2% of the messages were released through English, Oromifa languages and combination of Amharic and English as illustrated in Table 1.

As, it is possible to understand from Table 1, the language dominantly used by the studied political parties is Amharic which covers 98.2, 100 and 96.56% for Blue party, EDP and EPRDF respectively. When, the average is calculated, 98% of the messages were found to be conveyed through Amharic language. The choice of Amharic language by the parties was found to be concomitant to the interests of the activists of each political party though the activists also insist for the use of other local languages. In this regard, participant 02 from EDP focus group discussants has expressed his feeling as:

Because relatively large numbers of Ethiopians can communicate through Amharic, particularly when we come to the social media, it is important to use it. However, like that of the ethnic based political parties, it is also important for our party to campaign through the language of various groups as the party has done in the mainstream media. This is important to access the various linguistic groups as well as to attract their attention by showing that you are valuing their language as people are now highly attached to social cleavages such as language or ethnicity.

Interviewee 07 from EPRDF has stated that "our

constituent members are using their local languages to reach their respective people on the social media while the EPRDF's social media base was dominantly using Amharic language". Political parties do have different experiences regarding the usage of other local languages. Despite the fact that there were linguistic narrowcasting by the constituent members of EPRDF, Blue Party and EDP were not found to have such narrowcasting.

Given that our party is not established based on ethnic arrangement, we did not have specifically campaigned message made to reach certain ethnic groups at the official level. However, our supporters at the individual level were taking the idea, interpreting to local languages and posting via their individual accounts. (Interviewee 03 from Blue Party)

Participant 04 from EPRDF focus group discussants has stated the following regarding the language usage of their party:

I am following the social media bases of EPRDF, mainly its Facebook page. The party is releasing the messages through Amharic language. It is very important to reach many people. I am also following the official Facebook page of Oromo People Democratic Organization (OPDO), which is one of the constituent units of EPRDF. This page is usually releasing messages through Oromifa language. Hence, members can access campaign or other messages by the language they prefer by following both pages.

These data reflect the necessity to campaign through different ethnic languages in order to narrowcast the specific ethnic groups though campaigning through

**Table 2.** Mediums used by the respective political parties (221 messages from Blue Party; 20 messages from EDP and 145 messages from EPRDF were analyzed).

Political party	Mediums	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Blue Party	Texts	104	47.06
	Text and images	91	41.17
	Videos	13	5.89
	Videos and texts	03	1.36
	Others (images only, audio only)	10	4.52
EDP	Texts	12	60
	Text and images	01	5
	Videos	07	35
	Videos and texts	0	0
	Others (images only, audio only)	0	0
EPRDF	Texts	58	40
	Text and images	56	38.62
	Videos	18	12.41
	Videos and texts	07	4.83
	Others (images only, audio only)	06	4.14

Amharic is essential. Using Amharic language is supported because Amharic is communicated by the largest Ethiopian society (Cohen, 2008). However, as participants of different focus group discussions have pointed, the narrowcasting through different language is essential not only to reach voters that may not understand Amharic, but also to get the support of voters who are influenced by social cleavages such as language and ethnicity.

### Medium of messages (Text, Video, Audio)

The other variable needs to be described while one illustrates how political parties use the social media or the internet at large is the type of the medium (text, video or else) through which the messages are conveyed (Arulchelvan, 2014; Emruli and Baca, 2011). Accordingly, based on the content analysis made for the various messages taken from the official social media bases of the selected political parties, the research found videos, images, text, a combination of text and images, and a combination of texts and video as the main mediums used by the studied political parties.

Table 2 shows the frequencies and percentages of mediums used by political parties to convey their messages via the social media. As it can be seen from the table, the selected political parties were mainly releasing texts and a combination of texts and image messages. The average text message of the three political parties is 49.02%. The text and image messages also cover an average of 28.12%. This implies that textual oriented messages conveyed through texts as well as a combination of texts and images were dominantly used

(covers 77%) to channel messages through the social media.

According to the data collected from the interviewees and focus group discussants, the choice of text and combination of text and images is not done haphazardly. Instead, the choice is justified for the reasons of slow internet connection and the relatively higher price needed to upload and download video messages. Despite one of the essential qualities of the social media is an impressive presentation by combining text, video, pictures and the like, these presentations are less likely viewed by the followers of a page as raised by informants.

Because the quality and cost of the internet are very challenging to upload and download videos, we were conveying our messages via text, and a combination of texts and images. Although we tried to release video messages, the likelihood of our audiences to view such message was low due to these challenges. (Interviewee 03 from Blue Party)

The claim of political parties for their choice of the medium is also supported by the focus group discussants. According to these participants, price and quality concerns have found to influence their choice of the contents. In this regard, participant 06 from EPRDF focus group discussants has said:

I usually depend on contents released through Text. Because it takes long time to download or view/listen video and audio messages; and it incur costs that cannot be afforded at individual level except I am moving to areas that have Wi-Fi connections, I have been rarely accessing



video messages. Hence, I have been accessing messages released through textual oriented messages.

The idea proposed by EDP is slightly different in this regard, though still it uses text oriented messages by large, it has also posted video messages. Interview 01 from EDP has stated that:

We were using texts to release our messages for it is expensive to upload audio and video messages. However, we were sharing different videos related to our campaign messages and linked with the websites of the mainstream media such as Fana Broadcasting Corporate and Ethiopian Broadcasting Corporate.

Though, EDP was posting relatively many video messages (35% of the total messages on its page), the likelihood to be viewed by its followers is minimal as it was understood from the participants of focus group discussants selected from this party.

“Though there were some video messages, I didn’t open them since I am using a mobile data rather than Wi-Fi” (Participant 07 from EDP focused group discussants).

These entail how the medium preference of users is highly inclined to texts and combinations of texts and images than video messages due to the internet cost and the quality of internet connection. Generally, the data shows that political parties were using text-oriented messages than audio and video messages. As indicated earlier, the campaign messages released by text and a combination of text and images cover an average of 77% while video messages covers only 19.7%. Hence, it is possible to conclude that the studied political parties were performing in concomitant to the interest of the audiences in this regard because audiences rarely consume messages released through audio and video messages as presented so far.

## DISCUSSION

In this section, the researcher discusses the major findings of the paper presented under the result section in relation to other related studies and theoretical views.

### Extent of use and contents conveyed

The result of this study shows that political parties were using social media to conduct their electoral campaigns. The political parties were attempting to take preparation in terms of physical equipment and personnel. Regarding the extent of use as measured in terms of status updates, the study found that studied political parties were relatively updating their posts during the campaign period though

there were discrepancies among them.

The existence of discrepancies in the use of social media is not unique to Ethiopian political parties however. For example, the study conducted on the 2009 parliamentary election of India has indicated the existence of discrepancies in the use of new media for campaigns among the studied political parties (Arulchelvan, 2014). Emruli and Baca (2011) have also shown the existence of differences among political parties of Macedonia in their use of social media both in terms of covering different campaign issues and in terms of releasing frequent status updates.

However, when their interactivity is viewed, the ideas taken from the focus group discussants assert that the selected political parties do have limited interactivity. The studied political parties were not able to respond to the queries of the users given both in the comment section and via the inbox chats. This is however, in contradiction to one of the main importance of the social media. As outlined by different scholars such as Davies (2014), Small (2007) and Ruggiero (2000), one of the main quality of the social media is to support interactivity. However, the interactivity of the selected political parties was found to be very limited though it is also manifested by the political parties of different states.

A study conducted by Small (2007) that investigate the experiences of Canadian political parties in the use of social media for campaigns also found that political parties do have limitations in terms of interactivity. “Canadian parties are failing to respond to voter requests for information which may be very problematic for a party, creating the perception that the party is unorganized, understaffed and inefficient” (Small, 2007). Emruli and Baca (2011) have shown that in terms of interaction, political parties are not handled and did not use the opportunities of new media field”.

Regarding the contents conveyed by the political parties through their social media bases, the result shows that the selected political parties were using the social media to create awareness about their policies and electoral symbols; and Blue Party went further in creating awareness about its candidates. As one of the objective of electoral campaigns is creating an informed voter by informing on policies and electoral symbols (Kriesi et al., 2009), the study indicate that the selected parties were using the social media for this end.

A research conducted in India indicated that political parties were using the social media to channel short messages and mottos such as “Vote for congress- DMK alliance, Vote for Corruption Free Government, to Fight against Price Rise and Terrorism Vote and Support and Elect BJP candidate” (Arulchelvan, 2014). This is in slight differences with the finding of this paper where the selected parties were found to inform about their policy alternatives. Moreover, introducing the photo, educational background, district and the house they compete for of the candidates is somehow unique which the researcher could

not find in other studies being reviewed.

Moreover, the selected political parties were also posting their offline campaigns to mobilize the online voters, which is in line to the mobilization purpose of campaigns. Davies (2014) who has studied the experiences of different European states has stated that, "one of the main changes in campaigning with the advent of the Internet has been the use of social media's online capabilities to communicate and organize events that take place offline".

Gong (2011) who has studied the experience of Malaysian political parties has also outlined that uncensored Internet enables opposition bloggers to garner support. "They have used blogs to distribute information not otherwise available, but to promote their political platforms and agendas, and to organize collective action, such as announcing rallies and other public events" (Gong, 2011).

### **The language version**

In terms of language, Amharic was found to be dominantly used by the selected political parties to convey messages, and it was found to be in concomitant to the interests of the activists with a claim for the use of additional local languages.

This finding is in contrast to previous findings. Tetey (2001) who has explored the internet and democratization process in Africa has found that the language used at the internet-English language-was posing a challenge to communicate easily because local languages were not in use.

Similarly, Tesfaye (2013) has indicated that English was the dominant language used at the social media bases in Ethiopia, which substantially excludes many of the society. Moreover, Megenta (2010) who has studied the effects of democratization in semi-authoritarian regimes by taking Ethiopia as a case found that it was English language which was chiefly used for the internet communication.

However, this study came up with a finding that entails the situation that political parties have campaigned largely through local language, Amharic. According to the data obtained from the interviewees and the focus group discussants, the emergence of equipment that supports local languages has contributed for this change. This essentially helps political parties to act in accordance of the language interest of the largest online society as raised by the focus group discussants.

The study also shows the necessity to campaign through other ethnic languages though campaigning through Amharic is essential. Campaigning through Amharic is supported because Amharic is communicated by the largest Ethiopian society (Cohen, 2008).

Nevertheless, as participants of different focus group discussions have pointed, the narrowcasting through different language is essential not only to reach voters that may not understand Amharic, but also to get the

support of voters who are influenced by social cleavages such as language and ethnicity. A research also shows that ethnicity and language were the main determinant of voter's behavior during the 2005 general election of Ethiopia (Arriola, 2007).

Given that audiences are active that select contents based on their interest as the uses and gratifications theory indicates (Ruggiero, 2000), the use of language by political parties was found to be one area of interest for the audiences that need attention by political parties. Nevertheless, the experience of the selected political parties to use other local languages is negligible, except EPRDF which is an ethnic based party.

EPRDF was found using local languages under the social media bases of its constituent units. The other, EDP and Blue Party, were not using the ethnic languages and unable to narrowcast to specific ethnic groups. This is however, in contradiction with one of the benefits of social media. Social media is essential to narrowcasting messages to certain specific group such as ethnic group (Small, 2007).

### **Mediums used to channel messages**

The other objective was to identify the mediums that were used by the selected political parties in order to convey their messages via the social media. Accordingly, the result of this study shows that, the selected political parties were using texts, combination of texts and images, videos and combinations of videos and texts as the main mediums. Mainly, they were using textual oriented messages (texts as well as a combination of texts and images) to convey their message.

The utilization of video messages was minimal covering an average of 19.7% from the total messages of the selected parties released at their social media base. This is however, in contradiction with one of the essential qualities of social media. Social media are important to provide impressive presentations by combining different mediums such as audios, videos, texts, images (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010), the cost and quality of internet connection have been found to challenge the possibility of such impressive presentations both on the demand and supply side of the selected cases in this paper.

As the study shows, there are some video messages either out linked or posted by the parties themselves. However, the possibility of these messages to be viewed by the audiences is very limited as outlined by the focus group discussants. This claim is supported when the use and gratifications theory is considered. According to this theory, audiences who are active are selecting the mediums and the contents, which they think are compatible with their interests (Ruggiero, 2000).

Hence, though there are other mediums, the users are preferring textual and combination of text and image messages than videos and audios due to the quality and cost of internet connection. The study conducted on the

Macedonian political parties also asserted that political parties have largely used textual contents than audios and videos (Emruli and Baca, 2011) though the context is different from Ethiopia. Similarly, Arulchelvan (2014) also found that textual messages with short and powerful words were applied to convey campaign messages by Indian political parties.

## CONCLUSION

Based on the previous discussions and findings of the study, the researcher draws the conclusions as per the specific objectives of the study. The study was first tries to describe how political parties were using social media to conduct electoral campaigns.

Given the contention in the mainstream media and people-intensive channels, this research found that political parties were using social media to conduct their electoral campaigns and to undertake other forms of political communications. Political parties are being acquainted about the potential of the media and found to convey their electoral symbols, policies and offline campaigns activities via these channels in the fifth general elections to expand their outreach. However, the research found discrepancies in political parties' extent of use. Accordingly, Blue Party was found to be relatively better in status updates and coverage of different campaign issues followed by EPRDF.

Unlike the previous conversations made on the social media which predominantly used English language, political parties were releasing their message through local languages mainly Amharic, which is communicable by the largest society. However, the study also found the demand to use other local languages to convey messages to attract the attention of diversified linguistic groups. In terms of contents too, political parties were releasing contents that are more likely to be accessed by their audiences in consideration to the cost and quality of internet services. These reflect the situation how political parties perform in line with the interest of the audience in this regard both in terms of linguistic and medium preferences. The situation is again an indicative of how the social media become important channel of communications for political parties in Ethiopia.

Generally, though the political parties' involvement on the social is challenged by various problems, it is possible to conclude that social media become as alternative channel of electoral campaigns in the country given the problems in accessing other media alternatives. The political parties attempt to undertake preparation to use the media in the pre-election phase and their evaluation of the potential and their process in using these media in the post-election phase which imply the likelihood of social media to be relief for opposition political parties in Ethiopia.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

1. It is important if the administrators of the social media

bases of the respective parties can hold interactions by assigning the required personnel and by preparing campaign messages early: so that, they can get time to undertake interaction. It is also possible to take the questions of the majority and come up with a collective response.

2. For the sake of reaching large population, it is essential for the non-ethnic based political parties to undertake campaigns that are specifically able to reach certain linguistic groups as these media are suitable for such segmentations.

3. The poor quality of connection affects the opportunity of conveying messages by combining different mediums. Hence, meaningful efforts have to be made both to expand the connection well, and also to improve the quality of connection by the concerned organ.

4. Moreover, the price of internet is also found to be one of the challenges. Thus, it is essential to undertake a meaningful price discount to bring many users as well as to enjoy the impressive presentations that the social media supports.

## CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The author has not declared any conflict of interests.

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**Appendix 1.** A sample data that shows EPRDF's messages, the mediums it used, and language employed at its social media (attached based on a request by one of the reviewers).

S/N	Message and Content of the Message	Mediums	Language	Date
1	Illustrating Bee, which is the electoral symbol of EPRDF	Text and Image	Amharic	22/05/2015
2	Introducing policies on Job creation	Video	Amharic	22/05/2015
3	News : Ethio-Sudan Border demarcation	Text	Amharic	21/05/2015
4	Campaign on success of Small Scale Enterprise policy	Text and video	Amharic	21/05/2015
5	Posting the electoral symbol: Bee	Image	Amharic	21/05/2015
6	Campaign on success of the party in women empowerment	Video	Amharic	21/05/2015
7	Debates on good governance among parties	Video	Amharic	21/05/2015
8	Positing offline campaign: Addis Ababa youth support	Text and image	Amharic	21/05/2015
9	Posting offline campaign: Addis Ababa women support	Text and image	Amharic	21/05/2015
10	Posting offline campaign: Addis Ababa women support (repeated)	Text and image	Amharic	21/05/2015
11	Campaign on peace and security	Text	Amharic	20/05/2017
12	EPRDF's effort on women and youth empowerment	Text	Amharic	20/05/2017
13	Tewodros's statement on the success of EPRDF's foreign policy	Text and image	Amharic	20/05/2017
14	Campaign on the "elegant" Ethiopian federalism	Text	Amharic	20/05/2017
15	Complain on Blue party that it is violating the electoral law	Text	Amharic	20/05/2017
16	Reposted: Campaign on the "elegant" Ethiopian federalism.	Text	Amharic	20/05/2017
17	Campaign on foreign policy	Video and text	Amharic	19/05/2017
18	Song that celebrate the party	Audio	Amharic	19/05/2017
19	Campaign : EPRDF's commitment to empower women and youth	Text	Amharic	19/05/2017
20	Illustrating the qualities of Bee and correlate with EPRDF's quality	Text and image	Amharic	19/05/2017
21	EPRDF's success in improving the health conditions	Text and image	Amharic	19/05/2017
22	Illustrating the qualities of Bee and correlate with EPRDF's quality	Text and image	Amharic	18/05/2017
23	Song that celebrate the party	Text and video	Amharic	18/05/2017
24	Campaign as choosing EPRDF will ensure peace	Text	Amharic	18/05/2017
25	Reposted: Explaining the qualities of Bee	Text and image	Amharic	18/05/2017
26	EPRDF's effort in expanding health centers	Text and image	Amharic	17/05/2017
27	Campaign on EPRDF's success on education	Text and image	Amharic	17/05/2017
28	Speech of Meles Zenawi on the party's position on election: from file	Video	Amharic	17/05/2017
29	Speech of Bereket Simon on the importance of peace	Text and image	Amharic	16/05/2017
30	Reposted: Showing the offline support of youths and women in Addis Ababa	Text and image	Amharic	16/05/2017
31	Irregularities committed by Blue party	Text	Amharic	16/05/2017
32	Success of EPRDF on road construction and commitment to do more if chosen	Text and image	Amharic	16/05/2017
33	Success of EPRDF on the health sector and commitment to do more if chosen	Text and image	Amharic	15/05/2017
34	EPRDF's statement on that their source of power is the people	Text	Amharic	15/05/2017
35	A campaign on the importance of multiparty system to which the party has been struggle	Text	Amharic	15/05/2017
36	Press release: EPRDF is taking all the preparation to take part in the election	Text	Amharic	15/05/2017
37	Campaign : chose EPRDF	Text and image	Amharic	14/05/2017
38	Campaign: chose EPRDF	Text and Image	Amharic	14/05/2017
39	Reposted: Symbol of Bee	Image	Amharic	14/05/2017
40	Campaign on Job creation through animal breeding	Text and image (image of cattle)	Amharic	14/05/2017
41	Vote for EPRDF	Text and image	English	14/05/2017
42	Vote for EPRDF	Text and image of Bee	Oromifa	13/05/2017
43	Campaign on EPRDF's policy of agriculture and its success	Text	Amharic	13/05/2017
44	Campaign on EPRDF' economic development policy	Text and image	Amharic	12/05/2017

## Appendix 1. Contd.

45	Ideas of EPRDF's representatives about Federalism during a TV debate among political parties	Text and image	Amharic	12/05/2017
46	Campaign of EPRDF about its effort in providing houses for the urban dwellers	Text and image	Amharic	11/05/2017
47	Women empowerment under EPRDF	Text	Amharic	11/05/2017
48	Profiles of candidates in Addis Ababa	Text and image	Amharic	11/05/2017
49	Song of the party: Reposted	Text and video	Amharic	11/05/2017
50	Electoral symbol of the party	Image	Amharic	10/05/201
51	Notifying that the Addis Ababa people are committed to give their vote for it.	Text	Amharic	10/05/2017
52	News on the preparation of National Electoral Board to run the election	Text with an emblem of the Board	Amharic	10/05/2017
53	Campaign on job creation activities of EPRDF: Cobblestone	Video	Amharic	09/05/2017
54	The problem of Ethiopian oppositions to come up with alternative policies rather than blaming	Text	Amharic	09/05/2017
55	Campaign on job creation policies	Text and image	Amharic	09/05/2017
56	Vote EPRDF-Campaign	Text and image	Oromifa Amharic	08/05/2017
57	Invitation to follow campaign messages via the social media	Text and image	and English	08/05/2017
58	Debate among political parties about democracy and good governance	Video and text	Amharic	07/05/2017
59	Introducing tourist sites in Ethiopia	Text and image	Amharic	07/05/2017
60	Meles's speech on development: from file	Video	Amharic	07/05/2017
61	The practice of EPRDF in the protection of human right	Text	Amharic	07/05/2017
62	News: Ethiopia's Economy is growing	Video (out linked)	Amharic	06/05/2017
63	News :Ethiopia's economy is growing	Text	Amharic	06/05/2017
64	A debate on infrastructural development held during the 2010 election	Video	Amharic	04/05/2017
65	News: the situation of Libya returnees	Text	Amharic	04/05/2017
66	Campaign: the success of EPRDF on education and its vow to do more if elected	Text	Amharic	04/05/2017
67	Reposted : the success of EPRDF on education and its vow to do more if elected	Text	Amharic	04/05/2017
68	Poem on success of EPRDF	Text	Amharic	03/05/2017
69	Vow on feature development as "the Time is again Bright with EPRDF"	Text	Amharic	03/05/2017
70	News: about Addis rail way	Text and image	Amharic	01/05/2017
71	The success of EPRDF on road development	Text and image	Amharic	01/05/2017
72	Debate among political parties about multiparty system on EBC	Video	Amharic	01/05/2017
73	Facts about hydropower generation	Text	Amharic	30/04/2015
74	The success of EPRDF on power generation in general	Text	Amharic	28/04/2015
75	News about "martyrs" killed by ISIS in Libya	Text and Image	Amharic	28/04/2015
76	News: Artists has expressed their condolences to the families of those killed by ISIS	Text	Amharic	28/04/2015
77	News: inaugural ceremony of different infrastructures in Hawassa	Text and image	Amharic	27/04/2015
78	Complain that Blue party is playing a political game by the victims of ISIS	Text	Amharic	26/04/2015
79	Condemning Blue Party's members that they have committed a shameful act at the demonstration held to condemn ISIS	Text	Amharic	24/04/2015
80	Blue party is on the verge of leading the country to instability	Text	Amharic	23/04/2015
81	News: Ethiopians leaving in different areas have condemned ISIS		Amharic	22/04/205
82	News: Ethiopian muslin prayed for those killed by ISIS	Text	Amharic	22/04/205
83	News: demonstration held by the people of Dessie to condemn ISIS	Text and image	Amharic	22/04/205
84	News: speeches of Redwan Hussien that condemn ISIS	Video	Amharic	21/04/205
85	News: speeches of hailemariam Dessalegn that condemn ISIS	Video and text	Amharic	21/04/205
86	News: demonstration in Addis Abeba to condemn ISIS	Text and image	Amharic	20/04/205

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87	EPRDF' press release on the tragedy phenomenon committed by ISIS	Text	Amharic	19/04/2015
88	News: A three day national mourning has been declared for ISIS victims	Text	Amharic	19/04/2015
89	News: different government institutions have condemned ISIS	Text	Amharic	19/04/2015
90	News: the government of Ethiopia has condemned ISIS	Text	Amharic	18/04/2015
91	News: A press of mourning given by EPRDF and wish of condolences to Ethiopian people and the families of the martyrs	Text	Amharic	16/04/2015
92	Campaign : the success of Ethiopian foreign policy	Text	Amharic	15/04/2015
93	Campaign: vote EPRDF for peace and security	Text	Amharic	15/04/2015
94	News: discussion with Americas foreign minister	Video	Amharic	08/04/2015
95	Campaign: the success of EPRDF on investment	Text and image	Amharic	08/04/2015
96	The increasing involvement of the private sector in the economy	Text	Amharic	08/04/2015
97	Efforts on the expansion on development of Urban centers	Text	Amharic	06/04/2015
98	Efforts on the expansion on development of Urban centers: Reposted	Text	Amharic	06/04/2015
99	Poem about the "greatness" of Meles	Text and image	Amharic	06/04/2015
100	The success of EPRDF in increasing female students at primary school	Text	Amharic	05/04/2015
101	News: EPRDF's council meeting	Text	Amharic	04/04/2015
102	New song about GERD (Great Ethiopian Renaissance Dam)	Audio	Amharic	04/04/2015
103	News: Demeke's speech on the status of GERD	Text	Amharic	04/04/2015
104	The success of EPRDF in handling large projects such as GERD	Text and image	Amharic	02/04/2015
105	Facts about GERD	Text	Amharic	01/04/2015
106	Meles's speech on how to build the GERD	Text and image	Amharic	30/03/2015
107	The role of the GERD on building of national identity	Text and image	Amharic	28/03/2015
108	A happy wish to the 4 <sup>th</sup> year anniversary of GERD	Text and image	Amharic	27/03/2015
109	Campaign on agricultural development and vow to do more if elected	Video	Amharic	27/03/2015
110	Campaign on agricultural development and vow to do more if elected	Text	Amharic	26/03/2015
111	News: 42% of GERD is completed	Text and image	Amharic	26/03/2015
112	News:Oromo cultural center is built	Text and image	Amharic	26/03/2015
113	Campaign about EPRDF's effort in answering the question of nations, nationalities and peoples	Text	Amharic	26/03/2015
114	Misconducts of oppositions parties in Ethiopia	Text	Amharic	25/03/2015
115	Campaign about federalism	Video	Amharic	24/03/2015
116	The song of Oromo People Democratic Organization	Video (animated)	Oromifa	23/03/2015
117	Campaign: Ethiopia cannot continue to exist without federalism	Text	Amharic	22/03/2015
118	Campaign on the success of Ethiopia's federalism	Text	Amharic	19/03/2015
119	Vow to struggle against terrorism	Text	Amharic	19/03/2015
120	Campaign: EPRDF's role for Multiparty politics	Text	Amharic	19/03/2015
121	Adverting OPDO's Facebook page	Text and image	Amharic	19/03/2015
122	Appreciating the role OPDO in EPRDF	Text	Amharic	18/03/2015
123	News: about the lottery for condominium houses	Text and image	Amharic	18/03/2015
124	Campaign on EPRDF's position in fighting terrorism	Video	Amharic	18/03/2015
125	Campaign as EPRDF is a bases for peace in Ethiopia	Video	Amharic	16/03/2015
126	Campaign: EPRDF ensure the protection of human rights	Text and video	Amharic	11/03/2015
127	Campaign :vote for EPRDF	Text and image	Amharic	08/03/2011
128	News:The celebration of TPLF'S foundation day	Video	Amharic	06/03/2011
129	Campaigning about multiparty system	Text and image	Amharic	05/03/2011
130	Campaigning about multiparty system: reposted	Text and image	Amharic	03/03/2011
131	Campaign: Why EPRDF is the best?	Text	Amharic	03/03/2011
132	Campaign: EPRDF and Ethiopian renaissance	Text	Amharic	02/03/2011
133	Notifying to follow campaigns through the social media	Text and image	Amharic	01/03/2011
134	Campaign : chose EPRDF for bright future	Text and image	Amharic	28/02/2017
135	Campaign: EPRDF's effort in dealing with diversity: Reposted	Text	Amharic	27/02/2017
136	Campaign: showing major developments (a documentary type)	Video	Amharic	27/02/2017

**Appendix 1. Contd.**

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137	Campaign: EPRDF and the building of democracy	Text	Amharic	26/02/2017
138	News: TPLF's anniversary of its foundation	Text and image	Amharic	26/02/2017
139	Campaign: EPRDF's effort in dealing with diversity: Reposted	Text	Amharic	26/02/2017
140	The road construction phenomenon in Ethiopia	Text and image	Amharic	25/02/2017
141	Illustrating the qualities of Bee	Text and image	Amharic	25/02/2017
142	Posting the image of bee	Image	Amharic	24/02/2017
143	Vote for EPRDF	Text and image	Amharic	23/02/2017
144	<u>News:</u> "Some parties' commitment to respect the electoral law"	Text	Amharic	22/02/2017
145	The celebration of TPLF'S foundation day	Text and image	Amharic	22/02/2017

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