Challenges and Prospects of Electoral Campaigns through Social Media in Ethiopia:

Lessons from the 2015 General Election.

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Abstract

Despite electoral campaigns are essential elements of election, 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 explore the challenges and prospect of using social media. The research utilized a qualitative approach. Blue Party, Ethiopian Democratic Party, Ethiopian Federal Democratic Unity Forum, and Ethiopian People Revolutionary Democratic Front were selected as cases by using intensity case selection method since they were active in using social media. In-depth interview, focus group discussions, and documents were used to collect data. The study used thematic analysis. The study found that the low number of followers at the social media bases of parties, suppressive tendency of the régime, high internet cost and poor internet connectivity, political apathy of users, unwanted interactions of some of the users as well as awareness predicaments as factors that challenge parties' use of social media as alternative channel of electoral campaign. However, emerging fertile conditions such as optimistic perception of users towards the role of social media, increasing political involvements of youths, and attempts of price revisions on the other hand were found to be impetus to promote parties' use of these media. Generally, despite there are such challenges, the prospects show that social media are becoming as alternative channels of electoral campaigns in Ethiopia.
Key Words: Challenges; Electoral campaign; Ethiopia; Prospects; Social media, Political Parties

1. Introduction

1.1. Background of the Study

Following the triumph of representative democracy over the direct one, election and electoral

politics have become the central themes in the domain of political science. Election is a

process through which people can vote a candidate among the given alternatives (Ashenafi,

2013; Teshome, 2009). Before the electorates decide their choices, they should have clear and

enlightened understandings about the programs proposed by the candidates; and electoral campaigns are playing significant roles for this end (Sides et al., 2010).

Electoral campaigns are a serious of communicative advertisements undertaken by political parties and individual candidates. The main aim of every campaign is to attracts the attention of the targeted audiences and gets the support of the electorate so that, candidates will win election (Trent et al., 2011). In line with the attainment of the central goal–persuading and mobilizing voters to win election–electoral campaigns play a role for enhancing the political consciousness of citizens. They enable electorate to have access for information about the candidates. Moreover, campaigns provide areas and issues of political participation; and enable candidates to learn about their strength and weakness (Trent et al., 2011).

If electoral campaigns are this much important, the critical question is how campaigners have access to the people. There are three main channels of electoral campaigns: a) the people-intensive channels, which include activities such as demonstrations, public assemblies, party meetings, and doorstep canvassing; b) the mainstream media which encompasses the print and broadcast media; and c) the new media, mainly the social media (Archuvalen, 2014; Norris, 2005). The existence of an alternative media through which candidates can reach their voter is an essential precondition to have free, fair, competitive, and inclusive elections as well as successful electoral campaigns (Teshome, 2009).

In this third stage of electoral campaigns, political parties and individual candidates have been using the new media particularly social media extensively (Norris, 2005; Baringhorst, 2009). Empirical studies conducted by researchers in different countries show that political parties have been extensively using social media to conduct their campaigns and the channel is found to have a great potential (Archuvalen, 2014; Davies, 2014; Small, 2007). Particularly in countries where the mainstream media are under the control of the incumbent regime and the alternative to run people-intensive channels is blocked, the role of social media in serving as channel of electoral campaign is reverenced (Gong, 2011)

> 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)

In Ethiopia, a study conducted on the status of social media as a media alternative demonstrates that different social networking sites such as Facebook are recognized as one of the media alternatives (Sileshie, 2014) The study 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%)" (Sileshie, 2014). Such leveling of the social media along with the increasing internet penetration rate is assumed to be great opportunity. As of 2016, the internet penetration rate of Ethiopia was 3.7% and the Facebook penetration rate is also growing with almost parallel level (IWS, 2016).

The existence of such literatures about promising potential of social media and the researcher's observation of some political parties using these media as channel of electoral campaigns in the 2015 election were the motivating factors to conduct this study. Accordingly, the study intended to explore the challenges and prospects in using social media as channel of electoral campaigns with a focus to the 2015 general election.

1.2. Statement of the Problem

In the past four round general elections, the people-intensive channels and the mainstream media were the only channels of electoral campaigns for both the incumbent and opposition parties in Ethiopia. However, these two channels have been an agony for opposition parties to conduct campaigns. Opposition political parties are always claiming that they lack enabling political space to conduct campaigns through people-intensive channels (Alemayehu, 2010). People involved in these political activities have been exposed to frequent threats and political measures, which lead them to abstain from such activities (Alemayehu, 2010; EAJDN, 2015).

The mainstream media were also in a critical problem in spite of the fact that media is important for the building of democracy in general and fair electoral campaigns in particular. 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 by the National Electoral Board of Ethiopia (Alemayehu, 2010; EAJDN, 2015). Making the situation worse, private media have been becoming 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 sever which leads journalists to self-censor their reports (Teshome, 2009). These all situations make Ethiopia's opposition political parties vulnerable in conducting their electoral campaigns effectively.

Within such situation, some political parties started to use social media to conduct their campaigns in the 2015 general election. Given the aforementioned problems that opposition parties have faced in using the other channels, conducting a research on their practice of using the third option is essential, which is at the heart of this study. As the issue is recent, there are not studies that explore the experiences of Ethiopia's political parties in using social media as a channel of electoral campaigns. Hence, this study will have a significance to fill the gap in this regard.

1.3. Objectives of the Study

The general objective of this study was to explore the challenges and prospects of electoral campaigning through social media in Ethiopia with a focus on the fifth general election of Ethiopia. With this general objective, the study specifically aimed to:
  - ✓ Discern the problems that challenged the electoral campaigns conducted through social media; and
  - ✓ Imply the prospects of electoral campaigning through social media in Ethiopia.

1.4.   Research Questions

Given the above objectives, the study intended to answer the following central questions.
  - ✓ What were the challenges that political parties faced while conducting their electoral campaigns through social media?
  - ✓ What looks like the prospect of electoral campaigning through social media in Ethiopia?

1.5. Scope of the Study

This paper aimed to explore the practice of political parties in using social media as channel of electoral campaigns in Ethiopia by taking the experiences of selected political parties during the 2015 general election. 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 (Simegnish M, 2015) has motivated the researcher to focus on these types of social media.

In terms of the targeted group of the study, selected political parties contesting in the 2015 general election (Blue Party, EDP, EFDUF, 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 was also included in this study. 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 reason for its inclusion.

2. Research Methods

The study used a qualitative research method. Since the research aimed to explore the social media campaigns by considering the experiences and perceptions of various units, it applied a qualitative research approach. Under this qualitative method the study employed a case study research design. A case study research design was preferred because it is important to give in-depth description by using multiple sources of data, collected through different ways (Ketemaw, 2017). Accordingly, four political parties (Blue Party, EDP, EFDUF, and EPRDF) were selected as cases of the study. These political parties were selected for the following reasons. First, they were the leading political parties in many of their movements including in candidates they field and finance they received (NEBE, 2015). In the second place, they were found to be the leading in terms of social media followers and their political involvement at these media (Sinetsehay, 2015). Hence, it is believed that a lot can be learned from such influential cases regarding the issue to be studied.

In terms of participants, the paper considered sources from both the demand and supply sides. Considering both the demand and supply side is essential   to have a holistic understanding about the issue (Small, 2007). In view of that, officials of the each party (supply side) as well as their activists (demand side) were the participant of the study. By using intensity purposive sampling, two individuals from each party 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 respective parties were chosen and interviews were undertaken with them. The interviews were undertaken on different days from January 18, 2016 to February 17, 2016. Each interview session consumed for 45 to 55 minutes.

On the other hand, the activists were chosen through snowball sampling design from activists in Addis Ababa given the largest social media users are based in Addis Ababa Freedom House, 2015a). Moreover, many of political parties and their political activities which bring exposures to activists are based at Addis Ababa (Smith, 2007). Members of political parties who were relatively in better position in different activities of the party and social media

involvement were selected and focus group discussions were carried out. Given the similarity of information collected from the participants, four focus group discussions (one in each party) were found to be sufficient. The focus group discussions were undertaken in the office of each respective political party. Each focus group discussion consumed from one and half to two hours.

In addition to interviews and focus group discussions the research consulted different governmental reports; statistical data published by different international institutions, media information, and social media contents of the party to collect the necessary data. In terms of the social media contents at the parties' social media bases, the research consulted the contents posted from February 22, 2015 to May 22, 2015 since this period was the official campaign period (Neamin, 2015). Then, the data were analyzed thematically.

3. Result and Discussion

3.1. Briefing the Parties' Involvement at the Social Media

In terms of the channels of electoral campaign used by the parties, the 2015 general election was different from the previous general elections. It was in the fifth general election that some parties were officially commencing to use the social media to channel their electoral campaigns. Blue Party, though recently established, was the first to begin using social media involvement (Sinetsehay, 2015) through its Facebook page named as *Semayawi Party-Ethiopia* followed by around 70,500 users and Twitter page named as *Semayawi Party* followed by more than 800 users. With such presence on the social media, the party was informing its followers about the profiles of the candidates, the alternative policies it has, the electoral symbol, online campaign activities, invitation to party meetings and notification about the offline campaigns (Ketemaw, 2017).

Despite it is claimed to have unlimited presence via the mainstream media and people-intensive channels (Alemayehu, 2010; Teshome, 2009), the incumbent, EPRDF also avail itself at the different 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 as *EPRDF-official* and 6,000 at its Twitter account named as *EPRDF-Ethiopia*. EPRDF was also releasing messages that aimed to introduces its electoral symbol, policies that the regime pronounces, the offline campaign activities and invitation to follow the offline campaign activities of the party (Ketemaw, 2017).

EDP has relatively long history of involvement in Ethiopian politics. However, its presence at the social media is a recent phenomenon. It was in 2014 that its Facebook page Ethiopian Democratic Party was created (Sinetsehay, 2015). Currently, the page has about 13,600 followers, which is the third largest next to Blue Party and EPRDF in terms of followers. It was introducing its policies and electoral symbols in the 2015 general election of Ethiopia by using the social media (Ketemaw, 2017).

EFDUF also known as *Medrek* is a forum of four political parties: The Oromo Federalist Congress (OFC), Union of Tigrayans for Democracy and Sovereignty (UTDS) a.k.a. Arena, Sidama Liberation Movement (SLM) and Ethiopian Social Democracy – Southern Unity Party (Neamin, February 28, 2015). The party has a Facebook account with a name *Medrek Ethiopia* followed by more than 600 users. The public relation head of the party has been administering this Facebook account of the party as informed by Interviewee 08. Like EDP, it was also posting messages that focus on advertising their alternative policies in various sectors as well as their electoral symbols (Ketemaw, 2017).

3.2. Challenges of Social Media Campaigns

Though, political parties commenced to use social media as alternative channel of electoral campaigns, there are different factors that challenged the parties' use of the media in effective manner. In the following subsection, the paper presented these challenges and discussed them in relation to other studies.

3.2.1. Low Number of Followers at the Social Media Bases of Political Parties

It is obvious that electoral campaigns are successful when political parties have extended outreach to the electorates whom they need to get their vote (Kriesi et al., 2009). However, the performances of Ethiopia's political parties on the social media were found to be challenged for accessing majority of the electorates as pointed by the participants. As this paper has shown the details here below, this challenge has mainly two dimensions.

I. Low internet penetration rate: According to the participants from the different interview sessions and focus group discussions, the lower internet penetration was one of the challenges that affect political parties while using social media.

> The first challenge that I can cite you is the lower numbers of population who have internet access. From the total population of Ethiopia, only few urban residents do have access to internet. Different reasons have contributed for this end. The first and

the main one is the failure of the regime to expand the various networks that provide internet service access. The second reason is the economic shortcomings of the people to own the physical equipment needed to use the technology. (Interviewee 01 from EDP)

Participant 01 from EPRDF focus group discussants has also stated her view as:

In Ethiopia, the numbers of population who have internet access are minimal when compared to the numbers of people that have access to radio and television. That means, the numbers of people that can be reached via social media campaigns are few. The main reason behind is the difficulty to get internet connection routes.

As it is possible to understand from the cited interviewee and focus group participant, the low numbers of people that have access to internet in Ethiopia has challenged political parties to reach many people. This claim of participants is also supported by the various statistics. The internet penetration rate which is 3.7% is one of the lowest in Africa (IWS, 2016).

The existence of such low internet penetration rate is attributed to different reasons. The first reason is associated with the problem of accessing networks such as broadband, narrowband, Wi-Fi connections or mobile internet services that enable internet connections. In this regard, Interviewee 08 from EFDUF has stated his idea as, "since the sole internet service provider is the Ethio-telecom, there is not market competition which in turn affects the expansion, quality and price of the internet service". Similarly, participant 06 from Blue Party has said that, "the outreach of the internet service is limited in Ethiopia". From these data, it is understandable that one of the reasons for the lower internet penetration is the difficulty to access internet routes.

These limited internet connections are existed mainly due to the absence of competition on the market given that Ethio-telecom is the sole provider of the service as the informants has cited. In this regard, another research conducted in the country shows how the monopoly of the telecom service by the state has badly affects the telecom services in Ethiopia. Moreover, a report by Human Rights Watch (2014) reveals that Wi-Fi connections are available only in some of the expensive hotels and institutions and are inaccessible for the large population. Although the mobile internet connection is being expanded (Ethio-Telecom, 2016a), it is low number of population that has access to the mobile internet connection when compared to the

largest population of Ethiopia (Freedom House, 2015a). Thus, the difficulty of accessing internet connection routes is one of the reasons that lower internet penetration.

The second reason is associated with the economic power of the people. In this regard, Interviewee 05 from EPRDF has explained her idea as; "Even those who may have access to the internet cannot use internet due to lack of the physical equipment". Ethiopia is one of the poorest countries in the world where an average of 30% of the population are living in extreme poverty (UNDP, 2015). Due to such low economic status of the people as cited by the informant and substantiated by the above documents, the access to the physical equipment is a challenging phenomenon which in turn affects the number of people surfing on the internet. The existence of such difficulties in accessing physical equipment along with the high internet price contributes in lowering the number of people surfing on the internet. A study that explored the information communication technology and democratization in Africa with a focus to Ghana has also outlined how the difficulty to access physical equipment is affecting the role of information communication technologies in the democratization (Tettey, 2001).

II. Difficulty to access the people surfing on the internet: The second reason for the low number of people following the social media bases of the parties is associated with the difficulty to have a direct access for the users surfing on the internet. Despite the lower internet penetration of the country as compared to other African countries, Ethiopia is scoring one of the fastest growths in its penetration rate (Internet Live Stat, 2016). For example, the one-year change of internet penetration from 2015 to 2016 was 13.4%, which is greater than the 7.5% one year average change of the world countries (Internet Live Stat, 2016). However, the numbers of people that have a direct access to the social media bases of the political parties is low as compared to the internet and Facebook penetration rate of the country.

> A recent statistics shows that about two million Ethiopians are surfing on Facebook. The portion of this online society that follows our social media bases is low. For example, our Facebook page, which has the largest followers than other political parties, has followers of around 70,000. But more than three million are surfing on Facebook. (Interviewee 04 from Blue Party)

This means, in addition to the lower internet penetration, political parties were unable to have a direct access for the people who are browsing the internet and surfing on the Facebook and Twitter. For example, Blue Party and EPRDF, which have the largest followers, are directly

accessing only 1.97 % and 1.67% of the total population surfing on the dominant social media, Facebook respectively.

The question here is why it is low. According to the interviewees and focus group discussants, the creation of synonymous pages and the focus of users on entertainment and social interaction issues than political oriented issues are the major reasons behind the low number of people following the social media bases of political parties. Moreover, the lack of awareness about the fact that political parties have a social media bases and the attitude of the people that social media are not this much important has contributed to the low number of followers at the social media bases of political parties.

The *creation of synonymous pages* confuse the people to identify which one is the genuine page of the party and divides the followers to the different synonymous pages. Particularly, at Facebook, there are various pages created in the name of political parties that do not belong to the party as pointed by the informants.

> The major options that users can follow our page are by following the shared pages, accepting an invitation made by the followers and searching by themselves. However, following our page by searching is being challenged due to the availability of various synonymous pages, which are not belonged to us. (Interviewee 06 from EPRDF)

The focus group discussants of the various groups have raised these challenges as creating confusions particularly at the first time when users search to follow the page. Participant 04 from EDP focus group discussants has indicated his experience as "the lack of means that differentiate the official page from other pages is the other challenge that users are facing when attempts to follow the page of political parties".

Thus, the existence of synonymous pages is one challenge as it poses confusion on those users who attempt to follow the official page of a given political party. Based on the researchers observation on May 1, 2016 (though changes may exist), there were synonymous pages that are difficult to differentiate which one is the party's page and which one is not[1].

The other reason for the low number of people who follows the social media bases of the political parties is the fact that *many users do not know that political parties have a presence on the social medi*a. In this regard, participant 02 from EPRDF focus group discussants has

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[1] As per the review of the Facebook pages of the selected political parties via search, the researcher found four pages created in the name of Blue Party, three pages in the name of EDP, three pages in the name of EFDUF, and two pages in the name of EPRDF with a great resemblance with the official pages.

expressed his view as "…in addition to the cited problems by participants, many of the users do not have awareness whether political parties have presence on the social media given the limited way of introducing the social media bases of the political parties". Similarly, Interviewee 03 from Blue Party explained the situation as "the means that we attempted to introduce our social media bases is mainly by inviting friends in our individual accounts. Hence, many of the users may not have the information that the party has an official presence on the social media."

Thus, due to the limited attempts of political parties to introduce their social media bases, many of the social media users are unaware about the political parties' social media presence, which in turn contribute for the low number of followers at the social media bases of the political parties. However, the problem is not unique to the Ethiopian online society. The study conducted in India has also found that "almost 54% of the samples taken are not aware of websites of political parties" during the 2009 parliamentary election (Arulchelvan, 2014).

The other reason is the political apathy of the users. Many of the users are focusing on social interaction and social entertainment than involving in politics (detailed accounts are given under section 3.2.2). Finally, the pejorative attitudes of people towards social media have also contributed to the low number of population. In this regard, participant 03 from EDP discussants has stated his experience as:

> There are yet people who can access internet connections and have economic capacity to buy physical equipment. However, due to the feeling of these people that social media are not this much important, they are not login to Facebook and other social media bases.

Similarly, participant 05 from EFDUF focus group discussants has stated his view as "although their number is not that much big, there are people who do not view social media as important and even some who consider social media involvements mainly on Facebook as something that lower their status". Interviewee 08 from Blue Party also has said, "due to some of the bad behaviors exhibited at the social media, some people prefer not to have presence on it". Hence, the attitude of people towards social media as they are not important and sometimes as pejorative has contributed for the low presence of people at the social media in general and at political parties' social media bases in particular.

3.2.2. The Political Culture of the Online Society

The other problem that affected political parties in using social media to conduct electoral campaigns is the political culture of the people. As highlighted earlier, political apathy of the people surfing on the social media one of the problems. With this regard, Interviewee 07 from EFDUF has stated his idea as "not all the social media users are politically active. There are social media users who are spending their time by chatting and viewing entertainment oriented posts rather than following, sharing, and commenting political oriented contents."

Similarly, participant 02 from EPRDF has portrayed his experience as:

> One of the challenges in using social media as channel of electoral campaigns is the political indifference of many of the users. Given the low number of population surfing on these media, the political apathy of the users has challenged the online political activism of the political parties.

The interviewee and focus group discussant cited here above are indicating that the user's lack of interest on political issues is the other challenge. Although, people's involvement is also dwindling in the offline activities (Alemayehu, 2010; Tronvoll, 2001) the issue has become sever when one pointed to the social media given the low number of people surfing on this media. A study conducted by another researcher (Sileshie, 2014) has also indicated that the largest majority of the Ethiopian Facebook users were not updating themselves on the various political issues.

Apart from the low political involvement, some users have *exhibited unnecessary behavior at the time of their interaction.* Rather than undertaking a meaningful discussion on the social media, there are people who are insulting certain groups or party leaders, misleading and diverting the line of discussion as highlighted by the informants. "Things like distortion of the debate, waving unfounded claims, and verbal attacks against the leaders and the party rather than discussing on the issues that we post were the other challenges" (Interviewee 01 from EDP).

> Since there are social media users who have created their accounts with pseudo name and profile pictures, they released false information as well as gave a reaction with full of insults that targeted the party or the officials of the party. While the first case affects the trustworthiness of the social media, the second scenario also affects the discussion and /the debate. (Participant 02 from EPRDF discussants)

3.2.3. Internet Cost and Connectivity

The other challenge that the interviewees and focus group discussants have outlined is the high internet cost as well as the poor quality of the internet service. Although, social media are cost-effective when compared to the mainstream media including newspapers [9], the internet cost is still found to be a challenge for using social media in an effective manner. These price and quality of the internet have influenced involvement in general and medium choice of the users in particular.

> The higher internet cost and poor quality of connection affecting us to upload and download videos. We were conveying our messages via text, images and a combination of the two. Although we tried to release video messages, their likelihood to be viewed by our audiences was low. (Interviewee 03 from Blue Party)

Participant 05 from EDP focus group discussants has explained his experience as:

> The other main challenge that affects the social media is the cost and quality of the internet. The internet price is unaffordable for the majority of Ethiopian population. The saddest thing is the slow and fragmented connection that terrifies many of us while using the social media. Given these two conditions, the likelihood to access video messages is too difficult.

According to a recent statistics, the internet cost of Ethiopia is one of the highest in the world (Small, 2007). Particularly, when it is viewed in light of the lowest GDP per capita income of the people (UNDP, 2015) the internet cost is a great challenge to have regular and continuous presence at the social media mainly on the side of the individual users. In addition to the higher cost of the internet, the weak quality of connection has challenged the utilization of social media as channel of electoral campaign. A recent report shows that the speed of internet in Ethiopia is one of the lowest with fragmented services (*Freedom House*, 2015a). The average speed of Ethiopia's internet connection was 1.8 Mbps, which is lower than the world's average, 3.5 Mbps until March 2015 (*Freedom House*, 2015a). Let me have some illustrative comparisons by taking the 2016 Ethiopia's internet price in relation to other selected countries in the Horn of Africa.

In Kenya an internet service provider named Airtel provides a 30 gigabyte internet service with an average of 2 Mbps speed monthly package with 30 USD (*Naimbuzzi, 2015).* In Ethiopia, 30 gigabytes monthly internet service package with an average of 1.8 Mbps speed is provided

for 3000 ETB or 143 USD (Ethio-telecom, 2016 b). Hence, internet price of Ethiopia is almost triple times greater than Kenya. When one considers this difference in light of the difference in GDP per capita income, the difference becomes more visible. While Ethiopians are expected to incur about 26.1% of their GDP per capita income, Kenyans are expected to incur only 2% of their GDP per capita income to have access of 30 gigabytes monthly package internet service with relatively similar speed[2].

One may thought that Kenyan's internet price is low since it has route to the sea and the comparison is not suitable with the landlocked Ethiopia. However, still Ethiopia's internet price is higher than Uganda, which is another landlocked country in the region. For example, in Uganda 10 gigabytes monthly package internet service with an average speed of 1.8 Mbps is provided with 43 USD (Freedom House, 2015b) while it consumes 60 USD in Ethiopia based on the new package service (Ethio-telecom, 2016b). Again, if it is calculated in terms of GDP per capita income, 6% of GDP per capita is required to buy 10 gigabytes monthly package in Uganda while it requires about 11% of the GDP per capita of individuals in Ethiopia, which is almost double of Uganda.

Generally, based on the aforementioned data, it is possible to conclude that the high price in combination with the slow and fragmented connection offered by the sole internet service provider–Ethio telecom–have been affecting political parties' use of social media. Particularly, sending and accessing video messages were problematic given these challenges as cited by the informants. In this regard, a study conducted on the language and medium preferences of political parties on the social media usage shows that the majority of the messages (77%) were released through texts and a combination of texts and images while video messages covered only 19.7% (Ketemaw, 2017).

3.2.4. The Suppressive Tendency of the Regime

Though the research didn't found a threat against parties for the information they released via their official social media bases, measures taken against individual users have created a fear on the active social media users. In this regard, Interviewee 04 from Blue Party has said:

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[2] These figures are calculated by taking the World Bank's (2015) report on the GDP per capita income of Ethiopia, Uganda, and Kenya as 573 USD, 714 USD, and 1358 USD respectively which is Retrieved from http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.PCAP.CD/countries?display=default

Our party has not faced anything from the government for the electoral campaigns we released via our social media base till now. However, our party member, who was the former head of the party's public relation, has been arrested for the idea that he has posted at his personal Facebook account. The action is indeed suppressive.

Interviewee 08 from EFDUF has also expressed his view as:

The suppressive measures against the social media activists such as the *zone nine bloggers an*d Yonatan Tesfaye (the former public relation head of Blue Party) have found to create fear on our followers at the social media, which hence affects their interaction (like, comment, share, and even to follow) for the information we post. In fact, these are an indicative that these media like the people-intensive channel are being targets of this dictatorial regime in suppressing dissent voices.

Similarly, participant 05 from EDP focus group discussants has expressed his view as:

Although the social media is relatively free when compared to the people-intensive channels, many users fear to involve in political activities available at the social media and many are creating pseudo accounts due to fear of political measures. Such fears have emerged due to the various actions that the government takes against some politically active social media users.

As indicated by the interviewees and focus group discussant cited above, the actions against individual bloggers and Facebook users by the regime have challenged the relative freedom enjoyed via these channels particularly on the side of the followers. The government has been taking different measures such as arresting and intimidating active users as well as blocking internet services (Ashenafi, 2013; Megenta, 2009). In most cases, the arrest and detentions are however without finding these activists being guilty. The cases in point are the zone nine bloggers who were released being innocent while they were badly treated for around two years in prison without sentence (Freedom House, 2015a).

Despite these measures were not made against the political messages conveyed via the parties' official social media bases, the existence of such challenges against the active social media users were directly affecting political parties by creating fear on the side of the social media users as indicated by the informants. Such measures have also contributed for the proliferation of Facebook accounts and pages with pseudo names which in turn leads to the release of unfounded claims at the social media by being hidden in pseudo names as indicated

by the informants. However, this challenge is not raised from informants on the side of the incumbent.

3.2.5. Awareness predicaments

The problem of technical knowledge to run the application at the social media is also found to affect the users. There are people who face difficulties to establish presence on the social media and maintain interactivity in the meantime. Regarding this problem, Interviewee 06 from EPRDF has expressed his idea as:

> Although surfing on the social media is an easy task, reading and writing skills and a bit know how about the applications are needed. Mainly, this is essential to establish presence for the first time and to express ones feeling. However, there are people who face difficulties to write reactions as well as to establish a presence at the social media bases.

Similarly, participant 06 from EDP's focus group discussants has stated:

> It is only who can read write and understand English language that can establish presence on the social media. Hence, people who do not have such knowledge are challenged from establishing presence. Not only for establishing presence, it is also vital to continue political interaction after once you establish your base.

Thus, the problem of awareness to use the social media applications in particular and the illiteracy in general have contribution in affecting the political parties' performance on the social media by lowering the number of people involving at the social media.

Generally, the low number of followers at the social media bases of parties, suppressive tendency of the régime, high internet cost and poor internet connectivity, political apathy and unwanted interactions of some of the users as well as awareness predicaments were found to be the major challenges that political parties have faced while using social media as channel of electoral campaigns in particular and political communication in general.

3.3. The Prospects of Online Campaigning in Ethiopia

Though the political parties have exhibited some weaknesses and also faced considerable challenges, is visible that social media are becoming an alternative channel of electoral campaign in the country. This prospect is, indeed, predictable when one consider various emerging improvements in this regard. The essential emerging fertile conditions that entail the

prospect of social media to become the alternative channel of electoral campaign are discussed here below.

The first phenomenon that implies the prospect of social media to become the essential channel of electoral campaign is the ***perception towards the potential of these media***. The primary event that determine' the behavior of an individual or institution is perception. Hence, the perception of the personnel in each respective party about the role of social media was explored in this study. Based on their experiences, views of interviewees reveal that social media are becoming an alternative and potential channel of communications. In this regard, the former Blue Party's public relation head, Yonatan Tesfaye has stated as, 'we have been utilizing social media starting from our establishment for their unique advantages….social media provide unlimited and free access to the information provision and expression' (Sinetsehay, 2015).

> Now there are at around four million people at Facebook, and reaching this population is not an easy thing. Moreover, now you cannot find politically active and conscious person who does not have presence on the social media. Hence, you have a potential of accessing these politically conscious people at these media. As such, the potential of social media in serving as alternative channel of electoral campaign is commendable. (Interviewee 05 from EPRDF)

Similarly, Interviewee 02 from EDP has expressed his view as:

> In our evaluation of the overall progress in the fifth general election, our use of social media was one of the issues being evaluated. Though we were not using the social media to the extent that we have to use, as it was our first attempt to use, we found that the social media have a potential that cannot be discredited. We also took a lesson how we can use it in an effective way for the future.

The focus group discussants have also pronounced the potential of the social media. Participant 04 from EFDUF focus group discussants has stated her view as:

> The potential of social media is not questionable. Mainly, as electoral campaigns are tending to inform the electorates about the policies and programs, the social media campaigns allow political parties to reach the audience available at these media without being constrained by limited time.

All the aforementioned data are showing that both the political parties and their activists have an optimistic view towards the potential of social media and are pointing its important

contribution in electoral campaigns. Regarding this, a study that investigated the internet's democratization effect in authoritarians by taking the Ethiopian experience shows how the participatory media are opening up alternative spaces of participation in authoritarian states (Megenta, 20100. Similarly, *another study that assessed the online debate in Ethiopia indicates that the social media are providing a broad spectrum of debates given the limited media alternatives in the country Gagliardone, 2015).*

*The second emerging condition is **the increasing involvement of users at the online political activism.** In line with the above optimistic perceptions towards the role of social media, the people's involvement at the online political participation is slightly improved. Particularly,* during important themes that characterize the Ethiopian political domain such as election, *users' engagement is increasing. "*There were increased involvements during the electoral campaign phases than other days: Many users have shifted from their usual use of social media for social interaction and entertainment to political involvement" (Interviewee 05).

This idea reflects how the political involvement of the audiences at the online media is augmented when there are certain issues. For example, the involvements and participations of the social media users in the different phases of the Oromo Protest (conducted in the 2016) were creditable in this regard (Jawar Mohammed's interview with VOA, March 14, 2016). This is a good example that also shows the shift of the social media users from using social media for social interaction and entertainment to political involvement. Moreover, the training given by the Addis Ababa Youth League of EPRDF for its selected members on use of social media as pointed by focus group discussants of the party is another impetus to improve political activism through the social media.

Thirdly, ***efforts of awareness creation about the role of social media*** and how to use these media in a productive manner is another force to predict the prospect of social media campaigning. In this regard, the case in point is the discussion organized by the Amhara Mass Media Agency on how to use social media in a proper manner[3]. The discussions were transmitted through the three FMs (FM Bahirdar 96.9, Dessie FM 87.9, and Debrebirhan FM 91.4) in Amhara region. It was attended by listeners who were also participating in the discussions which finally concluded by explanations of an expert from Bahirdar University. It was undertaken for two consecutive Mondays on February 28, 2016 and March 05, 2016 from

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[3] Amhara Mass Media Agency, Bahr Dar FM 96.9, February 28 and March 05, 2016.

2:00 -4:00 o'clock local time in the evening. This can be taken as an effort to improve the practices of users' social media utilization which help political parties to use the media in their future endeavors.

In the fourth place, attempts by Ethio-telecom to **reduce internet services and expand internet penetration can be cited**. According to the press release issued by Ethio-telecom on February 2016b, the mobile internet price discounted from 0.46 ETB/megabyte for 2G and 3G mobile internets and from 0.55 ETB /megabyte for 4G mobile internets to 0.35 ETB/megabyte [30]. Moreover, the institution has provided new internet package services through which one can buy packages from 25 megabytes daily package to 30 gigabytes monthly package with 5 to 3000 ETB respectively (Ethio-Telecom, 2016b). Though the price is yet high and unaffordable given the economic status of the people, the attempt of the price revision is important in increasing the involvement at the social media both on the side of the parties and the activists.

Generally, the perception of users towards the role of social media, increasing political involvements, attempts of price revisions, efforts of awareness creation activities along with the benefits that the media offers, are assertive for the prospect of social media to be become as alternative channels of electoral campaign. Moreover, the potential to access the educated and young population as well as the limitedness of other channels of communication implies that these media will be the future alternatives of political communication, mainly for the opposition political parties.

4. Conclusions

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 showed that political parties started to use social media in the 2015 general election of Ethiopia. The parties were found to convey their electoral symbols, alternative policies and offline campaigns activities via these channels to expand their outreach. Blue party went further. It was posting profiles of candidates.

However, the research found that political parties have faced considerable challenges in their use. In this regard, the low number of followers at their social media bases which is attributed to different reasons such as low internet penetration rate and difficulty to access the people

surfing on the social media was found to be one of the challenges. Moreover, the political apathy and unwanted reaction of some of the users, the high internet cost and poor connectivity as well as the suppressive tendency of the regime against individual social media activists were found to be the other challenges.

In spite of the challenges discussed so far, there are emerging fertile conditions. These emerging conditions are on the other hand opportunistic forces that enhance the utilization of social media as alternative channel of electoral campaign in Ethiopia. The emerging fertile conditions such as youths increasing political involvements at the social media, awareness creation activities, and optimistic perception of users about the potential of these media are an indicative for the potential of social media in serving as instrument of campaigning. Moreover, price revision attempts tend to have a significant contribution to attract people to use these media. It also promotes users to stay for "long" time by surfing on the social media. Hence, it is possible to conclude that the prospect of social media to be alternative channels of electoral campaign is visible given the cited fertile conditions. This shows how the social media are becoming to be good reliefs for opposition political parties which are seriously curtailed from using either the people-intensive channels or the mainstream media.

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are suggested for the effective utilization of social media as channel of electoral campaigns. The paper found the existence of synonymous pages and user's lack of awareness about political parties' social media presence as challenges that influence the users that could follow the social media bases of parties. Hence, political parties can undertake *page authentications*. Moreover, they can introduce their pages by other pages, which have relatively higher followers. They can also use Facebook ad creator and power editor to advert their pages.

Since the unwanted interactions have found to influence political parties in using these media, awareness creation efforts on how to use social media and about their benefits have to be strengthened. It is important to strengthen awareness creation on issues such as the importance of these media, technicalities to use them as well as ethics or responsibility in using them. These can be undertaken by inculcating such issues with courses such as information communication technologies.

The poor quality of connection along with its limited outreach is also the other challenge. Hence, meaningful efforts have to be made both to expand the connection as well as to

improve the quality and speed of connection by the concerned organ. The government may allow private enterprises to involve in the service provision for fostering competitiveness and render quality services with affordable prices.

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 enable the impressive presentations that the social media supports. The measures undertaken against innocent active social media users have to be stopped and the relative online freedom of the users should not be jeopardized.

In terms of future researches, this research has explored the various reasons that contribute for the low number of followers at the political parties' social media bases. To know which factor has more influence, it is important to undertake a research by using a method that shows the strength of relationship between dependent and independent variables quantitatively.

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