

Flygtningenævnets baggrundsmateriale

Bilagsnr.:	657
Land:	Etiopien
Kilde:	Rift Valley Institute
Titel:	Urban contestation in Dire Dawa City
Udgivet:	31. oktober 2024
Optaget på baggrundsmaterialet:	4. november 2025

URBAN CONTESTATION IN DIRE DAWA CITY

Bereket Diriba

January 2025



Rift Valley Institute
MAKING LOCAL KNOWLEDGE WORK



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THE ETHIOPIA PEACE RESEARCH FACILITY

This report was written for the Ethiopia Peace Research Facility (PRF) and is part of its Knowledge for Peace (K4P) series on contested urban spaces. The PRF is an independent facility combining timely analysis on peace and conflict from Ethiopian experts with support for conflict-sensitive programming in the country. It is managed by the Rift Valley Institute (RVI) and funded by the UK government.

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DESIGN/LAYOUT

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SUMMARY

- Dire Dawa, the second-most populous city in Ethiopia, is known as a melting pot of ethnic, language and religious groups in the east of the country. In the aftermath of the 2018 national political transition, however, the city, which is popular with visitors, experienced ethnic and religious conflicts in the following two years. This revealed underlying tensions among the city's multiple ethnic and religious groups.
- From 2020 to 2023, various developments have contributed to the restoration of relative peace in Dire Dawa compared to other parts of Ethiopia, two of which are especially significant. First, a government crackdown on opposition political forces, including dismantling the informal youth group structures that were at the forefront of the conflicts. Second, the change in political leadership of the city administration, which now largely consists of actors born and raised in Dire Dawa.
- Still, this is a fragile peace. Competing group interests in Dire Dawa remain unaddressed, with the potential to burst into conflict in response to changes in the political and security arrangements in the city, surrounding regions and even neighbouring countries.
- Contestation in Dire Dawa involves a diverse range of political, economic and social actors. The main ones are the Dire Dawa administration, the federal government, Oromia region, Somali region, the Shinile zone (in Somali region), traditional institutions of *ugaz* (king) and *Abbaa gada* (lit. father of the *gada*; the most senior elected Oromo leadership position), and the Dire Dawa city inter-religious council and its member institutions.
- Also heavily involved are social institutions, especially those that offer community support such as *eder* (ፎደራ; አድራ) and *afosha* (the equivalent of *eder* in Afaan Oromo), as well as traditional financial unions like *equb* (ጃብ; አቋብ) and city residents.
- Economic actors playing a critical include those operating in the Dire Dawa Industrial Park and Dire Dawa Free Trade Zone, cement factories, land and investment bureaus, *Bajaj* (motor trike) drivers, labour associations (ጸላጸና አውራጃ; ጸላጸና አውራጃ), small businesses, informal traders and contraband dealers.
- There are five main layers of contestation. First, the leading cause of disputes remains the decades-old ownership claims and counterclaims between the Oromo and Somali groups and their political forces. Despite adopting the Dire Dawa City

Charter, which aimed to resolve the dispute between Oromia and Somali regions over the city, contestation between members of these two groups continues to shape and affect intergroup relations and the distribution of political power and resources in the city. This is mainly reflected in disputes over administrative boundaries, land use and settlements.

- Second, contestation between the main religious groups in the city is impacting both intergroup relations and settlement patterns. The religious composition of officials at the city administration and *kebele* (lowest administrative division) levels is considered to be disproportionate given the religious makeup of the population.
- Partly due to the absence of inclusive conflict resolution and reconciliation processes in the wake of the 2019 and 2020 violence, new settlement patterns are leading to increasingly homogeneous neighbourhoods. Hindering intergroup interactions and exacerbating differences, this trend makes existing fault lines more combustible. Disputes among and between members of different ethnic or religious groups can quickly deteriorate into identity-based conflicts involving larger numbers of people.
- Third, language, culture and public spaces have emerged as a focus of contestation in Dire Dawa. The exclusion of Afaan Oromo as an official language of the city administration affects Oromo participation in economic and political life, as well as limits cultural development and educational opportunities. Hence, Oromo residents continue to demand formal recognition for their language alongside Amharic. The symbolic representation of Oromo figures in public spaces around the city has also sparked debate and suspicion among other ethnic groups.
- A notable example of contestation over public spaces is the recent renaming of Millennium Park to Ali Birra Park, after a prominent Oromo musician. This city administration decision sparked fear among non-Oromo residents, who saw the move as potentially instrumental in consolidating Oromo political forces in support of their ownership claim over Dire Dawa.
- The fourth aspect of urban contestation in Dire Dawa involves disputes between urban residents and the city administration. The residents resent that the Dire Dawa City Charter and the informal 40:40:20 power-sharing agreement deprive them of their right to proportional representation. Specifically, as indicators of their marginalization they point to the disproportionate distribution of council seats between urban and rural kebeles, and the unequal representation of religious groups and residents in the city administration.
- Fifth, Dire Dawa is facing a growing challenge with the influx of migrants from nearby rural areas in the Hararghe zones in Oromia and from other parts of Ethiopia. Economic migrants compete with local youths for limited job opportunities. Drug abuse and increased criminal activity are seen as linked to the influx. In some parts



of the city, informal settlements pose security challenges. They have also become politically sensitive for the city administration as attempts at forceful eviction could spark conflict.

- Probing these five layers of contestation is crucial for better understanding the nature of the key actors involved and the shifting relations between them. In turn, this knowledge can serve to inform policymakers as they address existing fault lines and potential conflict flashpoints in the city, and work to contain the impact of regional tensions on the fragile situation in Dire Dawa.
- Ethiopia is suffering from serious conflicts in Oromia and Amhara regions, and tensions in the Horn of Africa are on the rise following the January 2024 Ethiopia–Somaliland memorandum of understanding. These wider problems shape intergroup relations in the city, just as conflicts and tensions in Dire Dawa risk spilling out into neighbouring regions and countries.
- Understanding these mutually reinforcing dynamics is of paramount importance for maintaining peace and mitigating violence in Dire Dawa, across eastern Ethiopia and in the Horn of Africa.



INTRODUCTION

Located a little more than 500 km to the east of Addis Ababa, Dire Dawa is one of only two chartered cities in Ethiopia.¹ It is also the second-most populous city in the country. According to the 2007 census (the most recent), the population was 341,834 people.² Estimates indicate that it is now nearly half a million people.³ Since its establishment in the late nineteenth century, the city has had a reputation for being a cultural melting pot, bringing together diverse Ethiopian ethnic, religious and linguistic groups, along with foreigners.⁴ Bordering Oromia Regional State and Somali Regional State, Dire Dawa comprises nine kebeles (the lowest administrative division) in the main urban area and 38 kebeles in the adjacent rural areas. Residents in the rural kebeles (roughly a third of the population) that are located outside of the city's built-up core are almost exclusively ethnic Oromos and Somalis, accounting for 73.5 per cent and 26 per cent of the total rural population, respectively. According to the 2007 census, 99.5 per cent of these rural residents are Muslims. The smaller urban area of Dire Dawa is much more diverse, including: Oromos (33 per cent); Amharas (29.5 per cent); Somalis (23.5 per cent); Gurages (6.7 per cent); Tigrayans (1.8 per cent); Hararis (1.6 per cent) and others. In terms of religious composition, urban Dire Dawa comprises mainly Muslims (57.4 per cent), Orthodox Christians (25.6 per cent), Protestants (2.8 per cent) and Catholics (0.4 per cent).

The Ethiopia–Djibouti railway line played a central role in the establishment of Dire Dawa in 1902 and its subsequent expansion.⁵ After a slowdown in the 1990s, Dire Dawa once again rose as the central economic hub in eastern Ethiopia. The opening of the Dire Dawa Free Trade Zone and the flow of foreign investment into the textile and cement sectors have contributed to this revival. Seven manufacturing companies have invested in the Dire Dawa Industrial Park,

1 Addis Ababa is the other chartered city.

2 'Ethiopia - Population and Housing Census 2007 - IPUMS Subset', Microdata, World Bank. Accessed 1 November 2023, <https://microdata.worldbank.org/index.php/catalog/2747/related-materials>. Unless otherwise specified, the data in the remainder of this paragraph is derived from this source.

3 'Ethiopia: Dire Dawa Urban Profile', UN-Habitat. Accessed 1 November 2023, <https://unhabitat.org/ethiopia-dire-dawa-urban-profile>.

4 In addition to the employees of the railway company, who were mostly French, small numbers of Greeks, Armenians, other Europeans and Arabs, opened shops and hotels and founded some industry in Dire Dawa.

5 Samuel Zelelew and Zegeye Mamo, 'Urban Transformation and Associated Emerging Urban Forms: An Examination of Physical Density from Planning Interventions Perspective', *Journal of Regional and City Planning* 34/1 (2023): 35–54, <https://doi.org/10.5614/jpwk.2023.34.1.3>. Unlike many other urban areas in Ethiopia, Dire Dawa did not grow out of a garrison town.

employing more than 2,500 workers.⁶ The domestic and foreign companies produce packaging, along with shoes, textiles and electrical and auto engineering products for export. In addition, there are local investments in the mineral water packaging industry. According to the Dire Dawa investment office, capital flows to the city have progressively improved. Over the last four years, the office has issued 1,526 investment licences for projects with a registered capital of more than USD 1.8 billion.⁷ Many urban residents are also engaged in small informal businesses, as well as contraband trade. In rural parts of Dire Dawa, there is also the production and trade of *khat* as a cash crop.⁸

Socially, Dire Dawa has long been popular, known for its conviviality and multiculturalism. Its residents are often described as progressive, sociable and open-minded.⁹ Recently, however, the city has faced multiple identity-based conflicts. These challenge the tropes used to describe Dire Dawa. The roots of this violence can be traced to political, social and economic contestations among the city's groups.

DIRE DAWA: THE EVOLUTION OF CONTESTATION

Urban centres in Ethiopia are vital for socio-economic, political and cultural change. Although most significant political and economic decisions are made in Addis Ababa, major cities and towns outside the capital also play an important role in shaping socio-economic and political dynamics at the local, regional and national levels. Dire Dawa is no exception, with multiple political and administrative actors playing various roles. As a chartered city, Dire Dawa has a special relationship with the federal government in terms of political representation in the federation, revenue collection and access to the federal budget. In addition, Dire Dawa is contested by the two surrounding regional states, Oromia and Somali. Political, economic and cultural elites from both regions compete for dominance via claims, political tricks and sometimes violent agitation. Adding another layer of complexity, the rural and urban residents of the city have diverse economic and political interests, and belong to multiple cultural and linguistic communities, as either longstanding inhabitants or migrants from other parts of the country. All these features are essential for understanding political contestations in Dire Dawa, with its chartered city status creating unique dynamics.

In particular, this status hampers development in Dire Dawa, partly by limiting its tax base. Despite the presence of profitable industries and businesses, the city administration only has a mandate to collect taxes from small businesses, whereas the federal government collects taxes from the large privately owned limited companies located there. As a chartered city,

6 Phone interview with Dire Dawa industrial zone public relations officer, female, age 33, Dire Dawa, 12 December 2023.

7 Dire Dawa investment office data, Investment flows from 2018/19 – 2022/23 fiscal year.

8 *Khat* (*Catha edulis*) is a mildly narcotic plant native to the Horn of Africa.

9 Dereje Feyissa, 'Expectations and Belonging in Dire Dawa: Drivers, Dynamics and Challenges of Rural to Urban Mobility', Nairobi: Rift Valley Institute, 2018.

Dire Dawa does not benefit from the federal government tax revenue allocation scheme for regional states.¹⁰ While the city administration does receive budget subsidies from the federal government and from Oromia and Somali, it also has to rely on a narrow tax base.¹¹

As a result of the limited resources, combined with the pressures of an expanding population, Dire Dawa administration has been struggling to address growing public demands for infrastructure and services. This discontent has recently been voiced by Dire Dawa's delegates in the House of Peoples' Representatives, the lower house of the Ethiopian Federal Parliamentary Assembly. They have called for Dire Dawa to become a region or a city in either Oromia or Somali regions.¹² Although the city administration has said it intends to amend the Dire Dawa City Charter to improve revenue generation, it has rejected calls for a referendum.¹³

AIMS OF THE STUDY

This case study on urban conflict in Dire Dawa is part of a larger research project on contested spaces in Ethiopia, with a specific focus on processes of urbanization and how they link to conflict. Contextualized in relation to the post-2018 political transition, the objective of the Dire Dawa case study is to identify and analyse the terms of urban contestation, where it occurs and who the key actors are. By identifying these dynamics, the study aims to provide a nuanced and in-depth understanding of socio-economic and political contestations in Dire Dawa. In particular, it examines how the city administration shapes these trajectories and how tensions and violence can be reduced.

More broadly, the study aims to show that intergroup relations in the city have implications for interethnic and inter-religious interactions across Ethiopia, especially for the two surrounding regions and at the federal level. As such, this study may provide lessons on how to ensure good governance and build consensus in other diverse urban areas of Ethiopia. Due to the geographic proximity of Dire Dawa to Ethiopia's eastern neighbours in the Horn of Africa, as well as its socio-cultural and religious composition, intergroup relations among city residents also have wider significance.

10 Feyissa, 'Expectations and Belonging'.

11 Ashenafi Endale, 'Cash-strapped Dire Dawa Admin Demands Regional Status', *The Reporter*, 14 January 2023. Accessed 30 July 2024, <https://www.thereporterethiopia.com/29780/>.

12 Endale, 'Cash-strapped'.

13 'News: Dire Dawa City Admin Refutes Reports of Referendum to Decide on City's Future', *Addis Standard*, 20 January 2023. Accessed 30 July 2024, <https://addisstandard.com/news-dire-dawa-city-admin-refutes-reports-of-referendum-to-decide-on-citys-future/>.

METHODOLOGY

Qualitative methods of data collection and analysis are central to the study. Both primary and secondary data sources informed the research. The study began with a literature review of relevant and reliable secondary data sources, including official reports and policy analyses, academic material and studies on Dire Dawa. Primary data was collected from key informant interviews, three focus group discussions (FGDs) and observations from the field. In total, 26 interviews were conducted with members of the Oromo and Somali communities, along with members of other ethnic groups. This included youths, elders, religious leaders, government officials, opposition political leaders, journalists and representatives from the business community and organized youth groups; for example, day labourers, Bajaj (motor trike) drivers, etc.



THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF CONTESTATION

Disputes over the ownership of Dire Dawa became more salient following the national political transition in the 1990s and the subsequent establishment of ethno-linguistic federal arrangements in Ethiopia.¹⁴ Until 2008, this political contestation led to instability and frequent change in the city administration. Between 1990 and 2008, for example, Dire Dawa had four different types of administration. Post-1990, the city was placed under the Oromia regional administration led by the Oromo Peoples Democratic Organization (OPDO).¹⁵ This decision was fiercely contested by the Somali political forces running the city. During this period, Dire Dawa served as a political and cultural centre for the Issa–Gurgura Somali clans.¹⁶ The traditional head of the Issa clan, known as the *ugaz* (king), serves members of Issa clans in Somali region, Somalia (mainly in the breakaway region of Somaliland) and Djibouti. Given that Dire Dawa is the seat of the *ugaz*, this makes the city significant for Somalis in Ethiopia and neighbouring countries.

In 1993, tensions escalated further when the newly formed Somali region claimed Dire Dawa as its capital, unleashing a battle for the control of the city between the two Ethiopian regional states that cover the largest areas.¹⁷ In response, the Ethiopian federal government took charge of the city and its administration. Up until 2008, the city was governed by the Dire Dawa Transitional Administration (1993–1995), the Dire Dawa Administration Council (1996–2006) and the Dire Dawa Provisional Administration (2006–2008).¹⁸

CONTESTATION OVER POWER-SHARING

In 2006, the ruling parties of Oromia (the OPDO) and Somali (the Ethiopian Somali People's Democratic Party, ESPDP) adopted the Dire Dawa City Charter, which includes a power-sharing

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- 14 Asnake Kefale, 'Ethnic Decentralization and the Challenges of Inclusive Governance in Multi-ethnic Cities: The Case of Dire Dawa', *Ethiopia, Regional & Federal Studies* 24/5 (2014): 589–605, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13597566.2014.971772>.
 - 15 Milkessa Midega, 'Ethiopian Federalism and the Ethnic Politics of Divided Cities: Consociationalism without Competitive Multiparty Politics in Dire Dawa', *Ethnopolitics* 16/3 (2017): 279–294, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17449057.2016.1254412>.
 - 16 Midega, 'Ethiopian Federalism'.
 - 17 Midega, 'Ethiopian Federalism'.
 - 18 Midega, 'Ethiopian Federalism'.

deal commonly known as the 40:40:20 arrangement.¹⁹ This arrangement gives the political parties representing Oromia and Somali 40 per cent each of the 185 city council seats. The position of the city mayor is also informally given to these two ruling political parties on a rotating basis, initially based on a two-and-a-half-year term and on a five-year one since 2021. The remaining 20 per cent of city council seats were reserved for other parties from the former ruling Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) coalition.

This arrangement did not, however, satisfy the political forces of the two groups, with both continuing to claim they were due a larger share of seats.²⁰ Moreover, non-Oromo and Somali city residents felt marginalized by the deal, rejecting the 40:40:20 arrangement altogether. The three major communities in the city—Oromo, Somali and Amhara—have differing stands on the arrangement. Members of the Oromo, for example, argue the need for more representation of their group, proportional to their population size, both in the city council and in leadership positions in the city administration.²¹ Some argue that the administration is reluctant to address Oromo political and cultural demands due to the influence of Somali members; specifically, the Somali-Issa, who are seen as having more leverage over the city administration due to the support of Djibouti's government.²² The Oromo thus have a sense of injustice about having an equal share of power with Somalis despite their larger population. In contrast, and perhaps to be expected given their smaller population, many Somalis see the 40:40:20 arrangement as an acceptable means of addressing the competing ownership claims.²³

Alongside these differing opinions, a significant number of Dire Dawa urban residents have always vigorously opposed the 40:40:20 arrangement on the grounds that it excludes them from decision-making regarding political, economic and socio-cultural matters. Opposition to it was visible in the wake of the 2018 political transition in Ethiopia. For example, an informal youth group in Dire Dawa, Satānawu (ሳተኖጂ), demonstrated the displeasure of Amharic-speaking residents about 40:40:20 through civil disobedience and violent protests in 2019.²⁴

Contestation around the 40:40:20 arrangement is made more complex because it gives disproportionately more power and seats in the city council to representatives from the rural kebeles surrounding Dire Dawa, even though roughly two-thirds of the Dire Dawa population resides in urban areas. As an opposition political party leader explains:

The Dire Dawa city council has 185 seats. Of these seats, the rural kebeles of Dire Dawa

19 Midega, 'Ethiopian Federalism'.

20 Kefale, 'Ethnic Decentralization'.

21 Interview with journalist, male, age 35, Dire Dawa, 8 December 2023.

22 Interview with elder, male, age 76, Dire Dawa, 5 December 2023.

23 Interviews with members of the Somali community in Dire Dawa, 30 November 2023 and 2 December 2023.

24 'Dire Dawa Police Arrested 308 Suspects in Connection with Violence', *Borkena*, 29 January 2019. Accessed 23 July 2024, <https://borkena.com/2019/01/29/dire-dawa-police-arrested-308-suspects/>.

are represented by 114 seats, while the urban kebeles have only 75 seats. This is the case even though the population living in urban kebeles of the city is larger than in the rural kebeles. The arrangement was made to favour the then ruling party, the EPRDF, during election times as it was defeated in the city in the 2005 national election, which took place a year before the agreement was adopted.²⁵

In addition to the distribution of city council seats, the method of appointing the city mayor and cabinet members (also divided between the Oromia and Somali ruling parties) is also considered exclusionary by many Dire Dawa residents. The arrangement limits the economic opportunities and political participation of those who do not belong to the two dominant groups. A civil society leader elaborates:

The 40:40:20 ethnic-based quota system in the city has created grievances among city residents, limiting their employment opportunities in the city administration offices. The administration has been undertaking ethnic quotas in its recruitment process as well. The quota is more like 50–50 as political party groups representing the Oromo and Somali share the cabinet seats. Positions in certain sectoral bureaus in the administration are even counted as rightfully belonging to one of the two ethnic group members. For instance, the agriculture bureau has traditionally been controlled by representatives of the Somalis, while the revenue bureau seems to have been reserved for the Oromo representatives.²⁶

The structural exclusion of urban residents from political decision-making and participation has led to the rise of tensions among and within ethnic groups. This has also spilled over into religious identity, with urban residents often scrutinizing the decisions made by the city administration for possible religious and ethnic motives. One study participant notes:

The exclusion of urban residents from decision-making processes, despite their population size, means that the city cabinet lacks fair representation and the inclusion of the different religious groups that make up the city. The cabinet has only 3 Christians out of the 21 cabinet seats. This can contribute to distorted decision-making in matters concerning religious issues. Services and benefits are easily given to people who have a common religious background with city officials. For instance, the recent decision to provide a plot of land that belongs to the Mekane Yesus church²⁷ of Dire Dawa to a hotel investor indicates that the city cabinet decision-making process

25 Interview with opposition political party leader, male, age 50, Dire Dawa, 2 December 2023.

26 Interview with CSO leader, male, age 36, Dire Dawa, 28 November 2023.

27 G Tilahun, letter to Dire Dawa Mekane Yesus Church, 6 October 2023. For church response, see: 'A message conveyed from the Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus regarding Dire Dawa Congregation', Facebook post, 26 October 2023. Accessed 3 December 2024, https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=353842693709532&id=100072514116480.

lacks sensitivity toward certain religious institutions and followers.²⁸

The appointment of officials from Oromia and Somali to administer the city is further perceived as a significant obstacle to development and good governance. Study participants argue that problems related to service delivery and good governance in Dire Dawa emanate from the absence of effective leadership with the capacity and commitment to serve city residents. Given that many officials in the city administration are recruited from Oromia and Somali regions, they lack adequate knowledge of the city and do not have sufficient passion for serving the needs of its residents.²⁹

Despite urban residents' continued grievances over the composition of the city administration and their limited representation, the new city leadership, which came to power in 2021, has gained more acceptance than its predecessors. The appointment of Mayor Kedir Juhar and his 21 cabinet members, most of whom were born and raised in Dire Dawa, has been welcomed by city residents, especially those who have been marginalized from the administration decision-making processes in the past.

The current leadership enjoys acceptance among the public, including those who do not support Prosperity Party, due to their appeal to the values of urban residents and the psychology of the city. The civil society leader explains:

Even though they represent the Prosperity Party, the residents see the new leadership team differently. Their mostly city born-and-raised upbringing enables them to better understand the challenges urban residents face than previous administrations could. ... Mayor Kedir Juhar is multilingual and all ethnic group members, including the Amharic-speaking ones, accept him. He has undertaken commendable action in including former youth leaders who were previously engaged in conflict in the different structures of the city administration.³⁰

In addition to engaging previously marginalized urban residents and members of the informal youth structures, the new administration has focused on creating job opportunities for youths in transportation, manual labour, parking services and other areas. This has also helped foster better relations between the youth and the administration.

More generally, improved relations between the administration and residents have helped the new leadership more actively engage citizens in governance. This is evident in their work with members of the Dire Dawa Bajaj drivers' association, who provide evening transport services. These drivers, primarily city youths, now work closely with the administration to ensure peace and combat criminal activities during their night shift. A local community policing system has

28 Interview with university lecturer, Dire Dawa University, male, age 34, Dire Dawa, 27 November 2023.

29 FGD with residents, 03 kebele (Kezira area), Dire Dawa, 2 December 2023.

30 Interview with CSO leader, male, age 36, Dire Dawa, 28 November 2023.

also been put in place by the city administration, with residents participating in it. Growing public commitment to collaborate with the administration indicates increased receptivity to and trust in the leadership.

The actions of the leadership in defending the interests of urban Dire Dawa residents have also earned them the support of Orthodox Christian residents. A significant example is the decision of the administration to support the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church during the 2023 crisis, when the church faced the possibility of a split with some of its clergy in Oromia:

The mayor's decision during the Orthodox church dispute to stand with the Ethiopian Orthodox Church-appointed patriarch and to reject calls to back the splinter Oromo Orthodox church members indicates leadership allegiance to Dire Dawa residents even when such decisions conflict with the Oromia Regional State government.³¹

Although the policy of empowering Dire Dawa-born and raised individuals in the administration has offered hope for marginalized groups—mainly Amharic-speaking residents in the central urban areas, especially youths—these actions also threaten other groups. An Afaan Oromo-speaking resident of the city argues that the tendency to prioritize individuals born in the city potentially antagonizes residents who have migrated to Dire Dawa from adjacent *woredas* (districts) in Oromia, mainly from the two Hararghe zones and rural kebele residents who have strong cultural, economic and political links to Dire Dawa. He explains:

Recent developments under Mayor Kedir's leadership favour those who are born in Dire Dawa—[yädärē ləğə; የዳራ ልጅ; children of Dire Dawa]. I believe this creates resentment among the Hararghe Oromos who live in the city. Dire Dawa is part of Hararghe. It is an important economic and cultural hub for the Hararghe Oromos. Many residents in rural kebeles are barely getting access to infrastructure and they are not well integrated into the city. I fear the recent trend could also exacerbate the exclusion of these rural residents.³²

Oromos, both urban and rural, consider Dire Dawa its ancestral land. A journalist and city resident offers more detail:

Dire Dawa is the land of Oromos from the start. If you take the Dire Dawa–Harar road, it is called by the locals as 'Kara Alaa', referring to the owner of the area. Alaa is one of the sons of Afran Qallo. The six mountains surrounding Dire Dawa and the five rivers in the city are all named after an Oromo name. These are the Dole, Dachatu, Butiji, Goro and Melka rivers. Dima, Kote Farda and other mountains are all named after an Oromo name. The neighbourhoods also have Oromo names. You can mention Laga Hare, Ganda Garaa, Ganda Gamechu, Ganda Qore, Kefira, Kebrl Ijole, Magalaa, etc.

31 Interview with CSO leader, male, age 36, Dire Dawa, 28 November 2023.

32 Interview with CSO employee, male, age 30, Dire Dawa, 27 November 2023.

Neighbourhoods such as Addis Ketema used to be the residence of individuals such as Ibrahim Haji Ali Boru's ancestors until it was taken from him by Haile Selassie and given to the soldiers and their families. The problem was created with the urban reform introduced in 2006, which made the city a chartered and independent city, denying the Oromos ownership rights over the city.³³

Other ethnic groups, notably Somalis, raise similar historical claims of affiliation to the city, further complicating the ethnic contestation in Dire Dawa.³⁴

An intra-ethnic power-sharing dispute is also part of the picture. A case in point is the dispute over kebele positions between Somali-Issa clan members and the Gurguras³⁵ in parts of the city where most of these group members reside. A local official in 01 kebele, also called Melka, states that Somali Issa and Gurgura community leaders have been arguing about group representation at the kebele level:

The narrative of claims of ownership and the subsequent demand for more sharing of power due to these claims are not limited to interethnic relations but are also reflected in intra-ethnic relations as certain clans refer to their respective group's population number and demand power distribution as such. In the past, Somali Issa and Gurgura clans have had disputes about sharing political office positions in Melka kebele. Later, the two groups reached an equal power-sharing arrangement to settle the dispute.³⁶

ADMINISTRATIVE BORDER DISPUTES, INFORMAL SETTLEMENTS AND HOUSING

The absence of a clear distinction between the Dire Dawa administration and its two neighbouring regions is another significant factor in intergroup contestations. Construction of informal settlements has intensified in suburban areas as the administration struggles to enforce its jurisdiction without clear boundary demarcation. These informal settlements are exacerbating intergroup suspicions related to alleged attempts by specific individuals and ethnic groups to effect demographic change in Dire Dawa as a way to advance the interests of their group. As a study participant explains, 'Competition between the Somali and Oromo political groups is changing the demography of the city. The settlements are also intensified with the possibility of a referendum in the future as the city status is not yet entirely decided.'³⁷ Intergroup mistrust, especially between Oromos and Somalis, threatens stability in areas where new informal settlements are expanding. Both sides accuse one another of encouraging the

33 Interview with journalist, male, age 35, Dire Dawa, 8 December 2023.

34 Interview with Somali language service journalist, male, age 38, Dire Dawa, 1 December 2023.

35 The Gurguras are a community of people sharing both Somali and Oromo identities. Recently, they have been undergoing a process of re-affiliating from Oromo to Somali ethnicity.

36 Interview with official, 01 kebele (Melka area), male, age 40, Dire Dawa, 30 November 2023.

37 The suggestion is that Oromo-owned banks facilitate Oromo residents owning houses by favouring them with loans. Interview with CSO leader, male, age 36, Dire Dawa, 28 November 2023.

settlement of their group's members in and around Dire Dawa to increase the size of their populations. A resident of the Shinile zone in Somali region confirms this:

Residents consider the recent increase in new settlements in 02 kebele of Dire Dawa city, also known as Sabian, and a specific area of Boran, an intentional attempt to increase the presence of Oromo group members. Locals think these new settlements are even encouraged with the support of the Oromia regional government and banks.³⁸

Others point to examples of politically backed settlements, as this study participant explains:

The previous administrations of Dire Dawa worked to shift the demography of the city to the advantage of their own ethnic groups. For instance, during the period when there was an OPDO mayor, people from eastern Hararghe [Oromo] were encouraged to settle in the part of the city now known as the Awaday neighbourhood.³⁹

Another participant makes a similar claim about Somali political elites being involved in encouraging new settlements:

Under the TPLF [Tigray People's Liberation Front; meaning the EPRDF] rule, Somalis were encouraged to settle in Dire Dawa and its surroundings to counter Oromo influence over the city. The Somalis increased their number by buying houses, making the city the seat of their cultural leaders and through their political appointees. Mayors assigned by the ESPDP were engaged in re-engineering the city demography and also evicting Oromos from places such as Erer and Magalaa Adi, especially in the lead up to the 2006 [power-sharing] referendum. These areas are now placed under the administration of the Shinile zone in the Somali region, with the help and conspiracy of the TPLF.⁴⁰

In addition to subtle support for informal settlements, competing political forces also attempt to secure demographic dominance through the settlement of internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Dire Dawa. One participant claims that, 'In 2017, in response to the Oromia region's decision to settle IDPs evicted from different parts of the Somali region in Dire Dawa, the Somali region in turn responded by resettling individuals who were not necessarily IDPs.'⁴¹

Contests over informal settlements in Dire Dawa are linked to geographic factors. The more favourable settlement area is found along the Dire Dawa–Shinile zone administrative border areas. This has pitted Somali Dire Dawa residents against recent settlers. A Somali journalist

38 Interview with Somali language service journalist, male, age 38, Dire Dawa, 1 December 2023.

39 Interview with resident of 03 kebele (Kezira area) and university lecturer, Orthodox, male, age 50, Dire Dawa, 5 December 2023.

40 Interview with journalist, male, age 35, Dire Dawa, 8 December 2023.

41 Interview with CSO leader, male, age 36, Dire Dawa, 28 November 2023.

elaborates:

Settlement patterns in parts of Dire Dawa bordering the Shinile zone of the Somali region are equated with the expansion of Addis Ababa into the adjacent rural areas of Oromia. The area is preferred for new settlements because that is only where the city can expand, given that the land on the side of the Oromia region is hilly and not favoured for urban settlements and expansion.⁴²

In turn, this settlement pattern reinforces existing tensions between Oromos and Somalis. Although residents with different ethnic backgrounds engage in the process, settlements by Oromos are viewed with suspicion. This is because of the previous history of conflict between the Oromo and Somali communities, on top of existing tensions over the ownership of Dire Dawa. As the Somali journalist notes, ‘The Amharas are welcome to settle in these places as they are peaceful, and the Somalis have no problem with them. But with Oromo settlement, there are reservations for fear that they might demand and claim the land later on.’⁴³

Housing issues are also a source of tension between Somali and Oromo residents of the city. Residents of Lega Hare areas of Dire Dawa in 08 kebele indicate that public residential buildings in the vicinity have recently become a source of dispute between the local administration and Somali region:

In our kebele, there are tensions over the use of residential houses in a place known as ‘Wuhaləmatə’ (ዉሃለማተ). Somali family members of regional state officials still live in these houses even though the 08 kebele provides services to these residents [mainly Somalis]. The kebele provides infrastructures but cannot decide on these public resources and their allocations. There are over 40 houses in these compounds. The rental cost is paid to Somali Regional State. The kebele is asking for the administration of these houses to be transferred from the Somali region to the city administration so that these houses can be used to benefit the residents and people who are in dire need of houses.⁴⁴

TENSIONS OVER INVESTMENT AND JOB OPPORTUNITIES

In recent years, economic activity in Dire Dawa has started to revive, with investment increasing. Three factors have contributed to this: the resumption of the Ethio–Djibouti railway service; the establishment of the Dire Dawa Industrial Park; and the formation of the Dire Dawa Free Trade Zone. Located in the east of the city, these developments have attracted new residences, the construction of new government buildings and hospitals and investment in Dire Dawa

42 Interview with Somali language service journalist, male, age 38, Dire Dawa, 1 December 2023.

43 Interview with Somali language service journalist, male, age 38, Dire Dawa, 1 December 2023.

44 FGD in 08 kebele (Lega Hare area), Dire Dawa, 3 December 2023.

University.⁴⁵

According to residents, compared to the previous Ethio–Djibouti railway service, the new railway line is not resulting in substantial economic benefit to either residents or businesses. While the new line has helped attract investment into the industrial zones, small businesses in the city are not benefitting because, unlike with the previous service, the train station is too far from the urban centre.⁴⁶ The industrial park has attracted 9 companies working in 12 manufacturing sectors, employing a total of 2,500 employees. The job opportunities created, however, fall short of the demand given the high unemployment rate in the city, especially among the youth.⁴⁷

Other cultural, logistical and geographical factors create further impediments to city residents benefitting from these opportunities. One focus group participant in the Melka area of the city points out that:

The newly established industry and free economic zones are only providing some labour and work opportunities to local youths, while professional job positions are mostly assigned at the federal level. This limits the chances of the local youth to work in white collar job positions.⁴⁸

Another participant adds that the work culture among youth in Dire Dawa, especially the reluctance to work for small salaries, deters them from working in these new industries, which allows migrants to dominate employment there.⁴⁹ The location of the new industrial park, railway station and free trade zone has also created an uneven distribution of jobs. A resident explains that because the new industries are primarily found in the east, which is mainly inhabited by Somalis, this makes transportation costly for youths from Oromo-dominated neighbourhoods in the west.⁵⁰

Some respondents note that industrial pollution has also become a problem in Dire Dawa. According to one, ‘The air pollution and release of factory residue has been creating health problems among the local communities. Previously unknown types of disease are now becoming common in the area. The agricultural produce of the surrounding farmers has also been severely affected.’⁵¹

45 Contestation also involves a claim by the Shinile zone over parts of the Dire Dawa University compound. Interview with Dire Dawa University lecturer, male, age 34, Dire Dawa, 27 November 2023.

46 Interview with khat trader and juice shop owner, female, age 45, Dire Dawa, 9 December 2023.

47 Phone interview with Dire Dawa industry zone public relations officer, female, age 33, Dire Dawa, 12 December 2023.

48 FGD in 01 kebele (Melka area), Dire Dawa, 30 November 2023.

49 Interview with civil society organization leader, male, age 36, Dire Dawa, 28 November 2023.

50 Interview with khat trader and juice shop owner, female, age 45, Dire Dawa, 9 December 2023.

51 FGD in 01 kebele (Melka area), Dire Dawa, 30 November 2023.

Another elaborates:

Regarding the cement factories, local residents complain they are not benefitting from the resources. Only others, especially those connected with the higher government officials, benefit. Local youths are finding it hard to work as day labourers due to the low wages, let alone distributing the products and benefits. The city and neighbouring regional business people and government officials [organized cadres] are getting specific cement distribution quotas. In the meantime, the residents around the cement factory are being affected by the chemicals and clouds of dust released from the factories and the detonations conducted for new explorations.⁵²

Economic problems related to unemployment and inflation seriously challenge the stability of Dire Dawa. In the last few years, for example, interest groups have reportedly recruited disadvantaged youths to engage in ethnic and religious conflicts.⁵³ Study participants fear that the growing rates of unemployment and inflation, particularly of food, could lead youths to engage in crime and violence.⁵⁴



52 Interview with teacher and author, 02 kebele resident, male, age 50, Dire Dawa, 8 December 2023.

53 Interview with justice and security administration bureau expert of Dire Dawa, male, age 43, Dire Dawa, 29 November 2023.

54 Interview with civil servant, 07 kebele resident, male, age 55, Dire Dawa, 4 December 2023.

SOCIO-CULTURAL ASPECTS OF CONTESTATION

Dire Dawa is considered one of the most multicultural urban centres in Ethiopia and has long attracted people from various parts of the country and from abroad.⁵⁵ It remains a preferred destination for people looking for jobs or who want to engage in commerce. This is mainly due to its strategic location along the main trade corridor from Addis Ababa to Djibouti and its port. Dire Dawa also appeals to many because of its unique culture and the hospitality of its residents. The location of the city—surrounded by Oromia and Somali regions—makes it a cultural hub and point of interaction for those two groups, along with the other ethnicities that have resided in Dire Dawa for decades. Relations between the various faith groups in the city remain cordial due to strong and enduring values of religious tolerance among residents, who point to peaceful celebrations by Christians and Muslims in recent years.

Intergroup relations in Dire Dawa have been relatively peaceful for a long time. Recently, however, broader political and security changes, and unrest in other parts of the country, have challenged both the stability of the city and relations among its inhabitants. The ethnic and religious-based conflicts that occurred in 2019 and 2020 in Dire Dawa have also significantly threatened the peaceful coexistence of resident groups. A notable example is the violence that was sparked by the killing of the popular Oromo singer Hachalu Hundesa on 29 June 2020.⁵⁶ These tensions have calmed due to numerous factors, ranging from a government crackdown on political factions and informal youth structures to efforts made by the city's traditional and religious leaders. In particular, they have played a pivotal role in restoring bonds in the wake of identity-based violence in the city.⁵⁷

TRADITIONAL LEADERS AND INSTITUTIONS: ABBAA GADA, UGAZ AND EDER

Dire Dawa hosts two influential traditional leaders: the Somali ugaz (king) and the Oromo

55 Dire Dawa has historically hosted a range of non-Ethiopian settlers, including small communities of French (mostly working on the railway), Greeks, Armenians, other Europeans, and Arabs, who opened shops, hotels and founded some industry.

56 Laetitia Bader, 'Ethiopia cracks down following popular singer's killing', Human Rights Watch, 1 July 2020. Accessed 25 July 2024, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/07/01/ethiopia-cracks-down-following-popular-singers-killing>.

57 Interview with opposition political party leader, male, age 50, Dire Dawa, 2 December 2023.



Abbaa gada (lit. father of the gada; top elected Oromo leadership position).⁵⁸ These leadership institutions play both practical and symbolic roles. The role as a conduit between the public and the ruling elites has grown over the last few years, especially in the case of the Abbaa gada. Following the crackdown by federal security forces in response to the violence in 2019 and 2020, which resulted in the weakening of opposition parties and the Qeerroo, the informal Oromo youth group, traditional institutions increased in significance in the social and political lives of Oromo residents.

After the 2018 national political transition, power relations among traditional institutions in Dire Dawa changed with the rise in the influence of previously marginal institutions. According to study participants, this followed the shift in power relations among the city's groups.⁵⁹ Under its current leader, Abdurazaq Ahmed, for example, the Abbaa gada has recently become far more important than it was in the past. This institution is now on par with the influence and role of the ugaz in the Somali community. During this period, the Abbaa gada has emerged both as a force for representing Oromo community interests and as a strong symbol of Oromo culture. Beyond the traditional functions of mediating inter-community and inter-personal matters, Oromo residents now seek out the Abbaa gada to address issues stemming from poor governance and maladministration—such as the distribution of infrastructure—on the part of Dire Dawa administration.⁶⁰

As with the Abbaa gada, the ugaz is vital for representing the interests of the Somali community in Dire Dawa and in neighbouring Somali region. This institution also strongly influences Somali people elsewhere across the Horn of Africa; notably, in Somalia—mainly in the breakaway region of Somaliland—and Djibouti.⁶¹

In addition to these two leadership institutions, two other traditional institutions play crucial roles among urban residents. The first is *eder* (‘ədərə; insurance group) and the second is *equb* (‘əqubə; credit union).⁶² Eders are associations that primarily financially assist people, for example with funeral expenses, and help with security issues. Eders exert strong influence on Dire Dawa residents, with leaders seen as independent representatives of resident interests. FGD participants attest to the value of this traditional institution in the lives of residents:

Eder leaders are influential in the local community. They and religious leaders have previously contributed to resolving the city's problems. These institutions are

58 The Abbaa gada is an institution of the Afraan Qallo, an Oromo sub-group.

59 Interview with opposition political party leader, male, age 50, Dire Dawa, 2 December 2023.

60 Interview with teacher and author, 02 kebele resident, male, age 50, Dire Dawa, 8 December 2023.

61 Interview with communication office head, 01 kebele (Melka area), male, age 40, Dire Dawa, 30 November 2023.

62 Equb is a traditional savings method widely practiced across Ethiopia. It provides interest-free savings and rotating access to funds for members drawn from a small community.

considered neutral. Unlike other political leaders in the city, the leaders are freely elected by the residents.⁶³

TRAUMA, MIGRATION AND HATE SPEECH

Interethnic and religion-based relations among residents are often described as cooperative and respectful of each other's values. Although the current situation is stable, relations among the various cultural, religious and ethnic groups in Dire Dawa are fragile. This is mainly due to the unmet demands of multiple groups and the absence of an inclusive reconciliation process to address the trauma caused violence in the city over the past few years, starting in 2019.

Ongoing intergroup tensions are eroding the values of multiculturalism and tolerance in Dire Dawa. As a result of the entrenchment of ethnocentric versions of identity and the continued weakening of intergroup relations, there are persistent fears that incidents of conflict between individuals or group members could escalate into violent larger scale intergroup disputes. This civil society leader elaborates:

Due to the dire situation of unemployment and limited job opportunities, conflict among youths on the extraction of mineral resources like stone or even day labour activities in marketplaces tends to quickly evolve into a conflict between groups along ethnic and religious lines. Sometimes, these conflicts can also be caused by conflicts in neighbouring regions and countries. For instance, recently, following the alleged killing of a Somali by an Oromo individual in Djibouti, Somali ethnic members in Dire Dawa's 09 kebele got into conflict with Oromo ethnic members living in the area.⁶⁴

Because Dire Dawa is home to groups from across Ethiopia, developments outside the city also continue to affect and shape relations in it. In 2019 and 2020, this was witnessed in the religious-based conflicts that occurred during Epiphany and Orthodox Christian processions.⁶⁵ Research indicates that these incidents were partly triggered by the religious-based violence that occurred in Amhara region; in particular, attacks on mosques in Gondar and Mota towns.⁶⁶ Similarly, conflicts in Amhara could potentially affect intergroup relations, especially between the Oromo and Amhara, in the city. As the civil society leader explains:

The ongoing conflict in the Amhara region has increased the tension between residents. This is partly related to previous youth leaders in the city joining the Fano [militia] forces in the Amhara region. One of the prominent leaders of the informal Satānawu

63 FGD with residents, 03 kebele (Kezira area), Dire Dawa, 2 December 2023.

64 Interview with CSO leader, male, age 36, Dire Dawa, 28 November 2023.

65 Interview with justice and security administration bureau expert of Dire Dawa, male, age 43, Dire Dawa, 29 November 2023.

66 Kedir Jemal, 'Religion and Conflict in Dire Dawa: Intercommunal Tensions and Opportunities for Peace', Nairobi: Rift Valley Institute, 2023.

[ሳተናዉ] youth group in Dire Dawa city, Sisay Ayele, was recently seen giving press releases alongside the Amhara Gojjam Fano leader, Zemene Kase. This intensified suspicions between the communities here in the city among residents.⁶⁷

The unaddressed tensions among groups in Dire Dawa continue to shape settlement patterns. The identity-based violence that occurred in 2019 and 2020 forced people to relocate their homes and businesses to parts of the city dominated by their own group. The trauma of these attacks continues to influence decisions about where to live, as this study participant indicates:

In the 02 and 08 kebeles of the city, Amharic-speaking residents were previously forced to relocate to other areas for fear of attacks from members of the Oromo ethnic group. At the same time, Oromos living in the 09 kebele faced similar attacks from youths of the Somali ethnic group, who are dominant in number in this area. This has affected the nature of the settlement patterns of city residents. Minorities in parts of the city feel threatened due to the deterioration of intergroup relations.⁶⁸

In turn, settlement patterns reinforce intergroup tensions and strengthen boundaries between religious and ethnic groups. This poses a challenge to the future stability of Dire Dawa. The consequences of increased homogeneity in residential areas and continued intergroup tensions have even turned once peaceful and friendly activities into a combustible source of conflict. This young man offers an example:

In our area, the challenge is related to divisions along neighbourhoods. These sentiments are problematic, as we recently witnessed at a football match among Dire Dawa's various neighbourhoods. During these tournaments, emotionally driven young individuals get into fights, which at times leads to inter-neighbourhood conflict.⁶⁹

An opposition political party leader offers more detail:

Recently, football matches held in Kongo Meda between teams from the Enga and Genda Tesfa neighbourhoods turned into ethnic conflicts. This is because settlements in parts of the city are getting more homogenized, mainly along ethnic and religious lines. This limits the interaction and understanding between groups about each other's culture and values.⁷⁰

67 Interview with CSO leader, male, age 36, Dire Dawa, 28 November 2023.

68 Interview with justice and security administration bureau expert of Dire Dawa, male, age 43, Dire Dawa, 29 November 2023.

69 Interview with representative of the labour association (ፎላክላንዳዊ ልማት ማህበረሰብ) in 07 kebele, male, age 25, Dire Dawa, 3 December 2023. This study participant also notes that there have been disagreements between different associations of manual labourers in marketplaces over jobs, which sometimes evolve into intergroup disputes.

70 Interview with opposition political party leader, male, age 50, Dire Dawa, 8 December 2023.

The migration patterns and informal settlements also shape group interactions in the city. According to study participants, the increasing number of illicit settlements by individuals from the rural kebeles of Dire Dawa and adjacent Oromia woredas is creating tensions between the newcomers and residents. Residents consider the settlers a source of the conflict and blame them for the increasing crime. A resident of 03 kebele states that the new settlements in her vicinity have caused tensions between locals and the new arrivals:

The new settlements in parts of our kebele, such as šāmānətäriya (ሸመንተሪያ), along the old railway line, are mainly inhabited by youths from the neighbouring Oromia region. These settlements started during the political transition in 2018 and 2019. Now, criminal activities in these areas threaten the residents.⁷¹

Another resident from the same kebele reinforces this: 'It has become difficult to pass by these areas after 9.30 p.m. due to fear of robbery. People from outside the city cause the problem in Dire Dawa.'⁷²

In addition to the security problems caused by migration, the number of migrants, including children and women, especially from the neighbouring East Hararghe zones and Harar city, is considered by some to be a social problem that needs to be addressed. One city resident explains:

Many migrants come to Dire Dawa, leaving the surrounding zones of Oromia due to economic hardship and other problems. Despite their expectations, lots of them fall into despair and drown their sorrows in drug abuse. Many girls also engage in prostitution. Some of them are exposed to disease. The city administration has tried to relocate these migrants to their hometowns but most of them return to the city shortly afterward. Because of the different abuses these migrants are exposed to, even when the city administration relocates these children, they get rejected by their families as they are exposed to drugs and other socially unacceptable behaviours.⁷³

An official from 07 kebele official elaborates and links this trend to violence:

07 kebele is a centre for several businesses. It is a destination for imports from Djibouti and khat from Hararghe. As a result, many migrants come to the neighbourhood to make their living. With the influx of these migrants, there is an increasing problem related to drug use. Youths between the age of 16–28 are those who are involved in drug abuse like hashish. Younger children between 12–20 are involved in the use of sniffing glue and benzene (masatəšə; ማስተሽ). These youths mostly stay around the bus station (mänäharyä; መሃረርያ) area and under the Alfred Shafi bridge. Sometimes, these youths engage in violence. They can also be easily exploited by political actors who

71 FGD with residents, 03 kebele (Kezira area), Dire Dawa, 2 December 2023.

72 FGD with residents, 03 kebele (Kezira area), Dire Dawa, 2 December 2023.

73 Interview with teacher and author, 02 kebele resident, male, age 50, Dire Dawa, 8 December 2023.

want to cause instability using these children.⁷⁴

According to FGD participants in 03 kebele, Ethiopia's ethno-linguistic federation also shapes intergroup relations among inhabitants.⁷⁵ Residents feel that the system contributes to the growing self-awareness of ethnic and religious identity, while simultaneously eroding the culture of tolerance and multiculturalism that has long been a feature of Dire Dawa. One FGD participant summarizes the issue by saying that the 'ethnic and religious differences promoted in the past years have created tensions between groups as they focus on their differences rather than their commonly shared interests.'⁷⁶

Study respondents emphasize the influential role the media plays in shaping identity-based tensions. They identify outlets such as Mereje TV, OMN, Waaruf TV, Wargeska City, Midnimo TV and Dire Tube as the most watched in Dire Dawa.⁷⁷ One-sided narratives often dominate these platforms. People in the city tend to follow the social and mainstream media run by those from their own ethnic or religious group. This creates a bubble and the segmentation of information, which reinforces intergroup suspicions. The spread of hate speech and inflammatory social media posts also risk worsening intergroup tensions in Dire Dawa, especially in the continued absence of reconciliation processes for past violence and unresolved demands related to political representation.⁷⁸ Participants mainly point to the consequences of unverified reports about identity-based killings in exacerbating interethnic suspicions.⁷⁹

LANGUAGE, EDUCATION POLICY AND USE OF PUBLIC SPACE

Three areas of contention are of particular concern to residents. These include the choice of the official working language, the exclusion of specific subjects from the city education curriculum and the use of public space. The language barrier, coupled with the absence of official use of Afaan Oromo, impedes some residents' access to city administration services. This is especially the case for those from rural kebeles. An Afaan Oromo-speaking participant explains the consequences:

The working language in Dire Dawa is Amharic. Although many of the city's population is mainly Afaan Oromo speakers, Afaan Oromo is not yet used in official government business. We are forced to use a translator to access services or submit documents at government offices. Posts in government offices, including kebeles, are also announced in Amharic, which limits Oromo residents' access to information.⁸⁰

74 Interview with 07 kebele official, male, age 38, Dire Dawa, 6 December 2023.

75 FGD with residents, 03 kebele (Kezira area), Dire Dawa, 2 December 2023.

76 FGD with residents, 03 kebele (Kezira area), Dire Dawa, 2 December 2023.

77 Interview with Somali language service journalist, male, age 38, Dire Dawa, 1 December 2023.

78 FGD with residents, 03 kebele (Kezira area), Dire Dawa, 2 December 2023.

79 FGD with residents, 03 kebele (Kezira area), Dire Dawa, 2 December 2023.

80 Interview with khat trader and juice shop owner, female, age 45, Dire Dawa, 9 December 2023.

Grievances related to the education curriculum reveal intergroup sensitivities. One study participant, a journalist, indicates that schools in the city have not yet started providing instruction about *Sirna gada* (the Oromo socio-economic and cultural system) which has already begun in other parts of the country.⁸¹ The delay is considered to be because of political sensitivities. The journalist explains:

Even at the time when the Afaan Oromo language is being given as a subject in *Finfinnee* [Afaan Oromo name for Addis Ababa] and schools in all other cities of Oromia are providing education about Sirna gada, Dire Dawa city administration has not yet started this despite having a large number of Oromo residents. This is because the mayor of Dire Dawa has not yet passed a decision on this matter. I am unsure whether he feared or could not convince his cabinet about starting the education. However, it has not started here because the Somalis oppose the idea. The administration doesn't want to offend the Somalis and get involved in any controversy. The new administrators want to be celebrated during their term and are hesitant to get involved in matters that help ensure the Oromo people's interests.⁸²

Afaan Oromo-speaking participants also share feelings of marginalization from the neglect by the city administration in relation to the development of their culture and its place in the city. As an Oromo businesswoman observes:

Culturally, Oromos are not well represented in Dire Dawa. The current administrators also seem to lack confidence in pushing for reforms to include Oromo culture, language and history in the official space. They [the city administration] think it is a crime to speak about the Oromo. They fear that non-Oromos will label them as narrow-minded and ethnocentric.⁸³

Despite expressions of marginalization, study participants voice appreciation for recent developments in the city in terms of honouring and commemorating the prominent Oromo musician Ali Birra, who was born in Dire Dawa. At the same time, however, they argue that this type of one-off action should not create an impression that the city administration is committed to the development of Oromo culture, language and history. A Dire Dawa resident clarifies that the action taken—renaming a city park—was actually a result of pressure: ‘The Ali Birra Park was even named after him following the pressures created on the administration from different sides. Had it not been for these pressures, they hesitated to risk their popularity by dedicating the park to the artist.’⁸⁴ An Oromo businesswoman comments:

The renaming of Millennium Park to Ali Birra Park is not that significant. He was born

81 Interview with journalist, male, age 35, Dire Dawa, 08 December 2023.

82 Interview with journalist, male, age 35, Dire Dawa, 08 December 2023.

83 Interview with khat trader and juice shop owner, female, age 45, Dire Dawa, 9 December 2023.

84 Interview with journalist, male, age 35, Dire Dawa, 8 December 2023.

in Dire Dawa. He deserves more. This cannot be seen as a favour to the Oromo people. Even when inaugurated as that park [Ali Birra Park], they [the city administration] used the Amharic language and only recently added Afaan Oromo writing.⁸⁵

Perceptions differ among other groups, who tend to see such actions as attempts to deepen Oromo claims over the city. An Af-Somali speaker who participated in the study argues that the recent memorialization of Ali Birra and the renaming of Millennium Park attest to this:

Post-2018, Oromo claims over Dire Dawa and its land have grown. The relationship between the Oromos and the Somalis deteriorated after the Somali–Oromo conflict [2016–2018]. The social bond and relations between the two ethnic groups have deteriorated. The renaming of Millennium Park as Ali Birra Park indicates the growing Oromo influence and assertion over the city.⁸⁶

The lack of public consultation on the renaming of the park exacerbates the situation as it gives rise to yet more suspicion and complaints. It also contributes to rising levels of fear about Oromo dominance over the city, according to some local Somalis.⁸⁷

According to an academic based at Dire Dawa University, the memorialization of Ali Birra and the introduction of new celebrations such as an annual diaspora festival (Nafəqot Dəre; ናፋቆት ደሬ) are attempts by the city administration to revive the previously stronger identity of Dire Dawa and forge closer relations between groups around this unique multicultural identity.⁸⁸ Another cultural aspect of contestation in Dire Dawa is related to the very name of the city, along with the naming of its neighbourhoods, especially since the post-2006 period. This is when the local names for local administrations and institutions were changed to numbers. This resident explains the process:

Even the names of the local administrations were changed to numbers, rather than using their previous names. Melka Jebdu is called 01 kebele, Ganda Qore is 04, Laga Hare is changed to 08, Goro is changed to 02 and Ganda Gerada is 09 kebele. Health stations previously used to be called by local names but there were also attempts to rename these places with new numeric-based names. The new naming system started with the introduction of the [Dire Dawa City] charter. This is mainly done to hide the Oromo connection with this place and weaken its rightful claim over the city.⁸⁹

85 Interview with khat trader and juice shop owner, female, age 45, Dire Dawa, 9 December 2023.

86 Interview with 01 kebele (Melka area) resident, female, age 32, 1 December 2023.

87 Interview with Somali language service journalist, male, age 38, Dire Dawa, 1 December 2023.

88 Interview with Dire Dawa University lecturer and researcher, male, age 42, Dire Dawa, 7 December 2023.

89 Interview with journalist, male, age 35, Dire Dawa, 8 December 2023.

CONCLUSION

Contestation in Dire Dawa among ethnic, economic and social groups resident in both the urban and rural parts of the administration is ongoing. These occur within the structures of local and city administration bureaus and offices. The ethnic and religious composition of officials assigned to posts in the city remains a point of contention and the focus of scrutiny by competing political actors, giving rise to demands for better representation that reflects the demographic realities of Dire Dawa.

The role of informal and opposition political actors, who significantly influenced urban contestations during the 2018 political transition, is now replaced by actors from the Prosperity Party. Alongside this change, religious and traditional institution leaders have emerged as key actors and leaders, replacing the once influential youth structures that were at the forefront of past conflicts.

The geographic setting of Dire Dawa also plays a critical role in ongoing contestation. In particular, new investments are being made in the east of the city along the disputed administrative border between Dire Dawa and Shinile zone of Somali region. New informal settlements are being established in these areas, which belong to Somali region. Given the absence of official boundary demarcation between these two administrations and the history of conflict between Somalis and Oromos, the new settlements could lead to disputes and violence. While the sense of belonging to a local neighbourhood is strong in Dire Dawa, the growing trend for ethnically homogenized settlement patterns poses a significant challenge to future stability. This trend limits intergroup interactions, which risking further deterioration of relations and higher levels of intergroup suspicion and antagonism.

The new city administration and the composition of its rank and file, consisting mainly of individuals born and raised in Dire Dawa, have gained public support, especially among previously marginalized urban residents. While welcome in urban parts of the city, this new development can also be seen in terms of marginalizing rural residents, who already feel deprived in terms of the official recognition of Afaan Oromo, their historical affiliation to the city, development of their culture and equitable provision of public services and infrastructure. The relationship between newly arrived migrants and longer term residents complicates these dynamics. Specifically, drug and crime problems related to youth and child migrants from surrounding towns and rural villages in the Hararghe zones in Oromia are becoming a social and security challenge for the city administration and residents alike.

While historically seen as a strength, Dire Dawa's diversity also poses challenges to its stability, especially as the political and security problems at the national level continue. Due to growing

awareness of their ethnic and religious identities among residents, developments in surrounding regions and other parts of Ethiopia, even in neighbouring countries, could affect intergroup relations in Dire Dawa. For instance, developments such as the recent tensions between the Ethiopian and Somali national governments over the Ethiopia–Somaliland memorandum of understanding have the potential to increase tensions between Oromo and Somali residents in Dire Dawa. Escalating disputes and identity-based attacks against Oromos in parts of Somalia, Djibouti or Somaliland would also risk worsening relations or even trigger violent conflict between these two groups.⁹⁰

Cross-border disputes between Oromia and Somali regions in places such as Babile likewise impact intergroup relations in the city. Similarly, growing instability in Amhara and cross-border armed conflict with Oromia could affect relations between the Oromo and Amhara communities in Dire Dawa. This is partly because divisive media reports, one-sided narratives and incendiary social media posts have been contributing to the deterioration of intergroup relations.

Despite the range of contestations and the genuine risk of escalation, Dire Dawa is experiencing a period of relative peace and stability, along with economic improvement. Past incidents of religious and ethnic-based conflict that destabilized the city in 2019 and 2020 have now subsided. It is, however, a fragile situation. To ensure that peace and stability take stronger hold, the contestations in Dire Dawa require thorough structural and legal responses. Issues related to the demarcation of the city boundaries need speedy action on the part of the city administration and Oromo and Somali regions. Otherwise, tensions could become more complex and more challenging to resolve. Addressing the issue of informal settlements through public participation, and effective and timely administrative responses, is important to avoid competing land grabs.

Fostering greater trust and improving relations among ethnic, religious, cultural, social and economic groups in the city is critical to avert the recurrence of the violence that broke out in 2019 and 2020. Given limited efforts to date, however, more needs to be done to heal the wounds. In this, the leadership of the traditional and cultural institutions in the city, which Dire Dawa residents mostly accept and respect, can play a crucial role. Decisions about cultural events and the use of public spaces should be made after inclusive public deliberation.

Finally, sustaining the current peace and stability requires improvement in the transparency of resource distribution, mainly in terms of land and housing. City administration policies should also focus on improving access to new employment opportunities for all residents, with specific attention to rural dwellers.

90 ‘Suspected Al-Shabaab attack in Somalia leaves 7 Ethnic Oromos dead’, *Shabelle Media Network*, 5 February 2024. Accessed 25 July 2024, <https://shabellemedia.com/suspected-al-shabaab-attack-in-somalia-leaves-7-ethnic-oromos-dead/>.

GLOSSARY OF ACRONYMS, WORDS AND PHRASES

<i>Abbaa gada</i>	(Afaan Oromo) lit. father of the <i>gada</i> ; top elected Oromo leadership position
<i>Bajaj</i>	motor trike
<i>ṣañña'awəra</i>	(Amharic) labour association
EPPDF	Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front
ESPP	Ethiopian Somali People's Democratic Party
FGD	focus group discussion
<i>eder</i>	(Amharic) insurance group
IDP	internally displaced person
<i>equb</i>	(Amharic) credit union
<i>kebele</i>	(Amharic) lowest administrative division
<i>khat</i>	(Amharic) mildly narcotic plant (<i>Catha edulis</i>) native to the Horn of Africa
OPDO	Oromo Peoples Democratic Organization
satānava	(Amharic) informal youth group (Dire Dawa)
<i>Sirna gada</i>	(Afaan Oromo) The Oromo socio-economic and cultural system
TPLF	Tigray People's Liberation Front
<i>woreda</i>	(Amharic) third-level administrative division



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