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Society and demography in the Horn of Africa

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The Horn of Africa: The New Center of the African World

This chapter focuses on society and demography in the Horn of Africa region in terms of placing youth, digital activism, migration, gender dynamics, political mobilization, ethnicity, and social structures in a wider context of analysing state-society relations. It conceptualizes the complex demographic tendency through population growth and age structures. It analyses the new forms of social mobilization and digital activism. It also examines migration, mobility, and social reconfiguration. The chapter discusses the gendered aspects of society and demography in the Horn of Africa. It also explains the link between political mobilization, ethnicity, and social organization in the Horn. Finally, it discusses the relations between the state and society and their implications on governance, legitimacy, and stability in the Horn of Africa region.

Society and demography, Youth bulge, Digital activism, Migration, Gender, Horn of Africa.

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Introduction

The Horn of Africa (HoA) region stands as a long-term strategic priority with its geographical closeness to the Red Sea, the Gulf of Aden and Indian Ocean, as well as significant trade routes of the world, which have facilitated communication, the exchange of ideas, cultural influences, and migration for thousands of years between Africa, the Middle East, and Asia. The Horn region, also known as the Somali Peninsula, refers to the easternmost extension of the African continental landmass. The core states of the Horn include contemporary Ethiopia, Eritrea, Djibouti, Somalia, and Somaliland (a *de facto* independent state not recognized internationally), as well as, in some accounts, Sudan, South Sudan, Kenya, and Uganda.

Not only is much of the natural environment of the Horn extremely forbidding, but vast differences in its environmental endowment, ranging from the plateau lands of northern Ethiopia through to the Somali scrub, create very different kinds of society, with dramatically contrasting values and ways of life (Clapham, 2018). The region falls on the frontier between two of the world's major religions, Islam and Christianity, and encompasses a huge range of ethnic groups, languages, and cultures (Clapham, 2018). These differences have, in turn, been intensified by patterns of colonial conquest (internal as well as external), the creation of highly artificial states, and the uneven incorporation of the region into the global economy and into global conflicts (Clapham, 2018). The Cold War affected the Horn far more directly and intensively than it did other parts of sub-Saharan Africa, and the region is now again on a global frontline in the so-called 'Great and Middle Power competition'. Moreover, within the last few decades, the region has been linked to a regular conflict, political instability, humanitarian disasters, and a weak state apparatus (Getahun Ashine, 2024).

Consequently, there has been significant literature on the Horn, focusing on elite politics, armed conflicts, violent extremist groups, migration, and foreign security interventions. Although these views are critical, they tend to underreport the social and demographic underlying factors that precondition the political actions, state potential, and stability over time. To comprehend the Horn of Africa, more specifically, it is necessary to pay more attention to the ways in which societies are organized, populations evolve, and relations between states and citizens are determined.

One of the most important structural forces that affects the region is demographic change. The population growth rate of most states in the Horn of Africa is among the highest worldwide, resulting in rapid population expansion and a large proportion of young people. These demographic processes operate on long time scales and influence labour markets, education systems, urban infrastructure, and political institutions. Demographic changes are irreversible and cumulative over time, unlike short-term political events. The issue of demography in this chapter is not considered as a background context, and it is rather one of the main forces that determine social relations and political consequences in the region.

Moreover, a characteristic of this demographic scenario is the youth bulge: the disproportionate number of younger generations relative to older generations. The potential size of the youth population can be a great social and economic asset, especially when education, employment, and participation in political affairs are offered. In situations where economic opportunities are scarce and the political systems are still oriented toward exclusiveness, demographic pressure may enhance frustrations, rivalry, and change demands. Youth experiences in the Horn of Africa are characterized by unequal education, elevated unemployment or underemployment, and limited opportunities to be involved in political activities. It is not youthfulness, but the relationship between demographic realities and institutional capacity that gives the youth bulge its political significance. The results vary, beginning with civic, innovative activity to protest, migration, mobilization, and recruitment to violent extremists or criminal networks.

Digital transformation is further influencing these dynamics. The increased availability of mobile phones, social media platforms, and online communication has changed how social grievances are expressed and how collective action is organized. Furthermore, digital spaces have emerged as significant arenas of political discussion, identity construction, and mobilization, especially among the younger generations. Hence, digital activism in the Horn of Africa does not establish social and political pressures alone; it makes the already existing demographic and social tensions more prominent and confronts the governmental control over information and political discourses. Meanwhile, governments have reacted by implementing novel digital surveillance, censorship, and repression, indicating the disputed digital space.

The social environment of the Horn is also challenged by mobility and migration. Conflict, climate stress, and economic hardship have caused internal displacement that has redefined the urban centres and changed social organization patterns. The regional and international implications of cross-border migration and refugee flows are widespread, and the role of diaspora in domestic politics becomes more and more visible in terms of remittances, advocacy, and transnational activism. Migration is not merely a humanitarian or economic problem, but it is a deep social phenomenon that influences the family structures, gender roles, and political identities. To some young people, mobility is a coping mechanism and also a political message to a world at home that seems to have limited opportunity.

Furthermore, social identities and structures, especially those of ethnicity, gender, and informal institutions, continue to be at the heart of the explanation of how the Horn societies are responding to the demographic and political pressures. Ethnic identities are commonly described as inflexible or primordial, but in reality, they are dynamic and, in most cases, they are often reinvented through political contests, migration, and even state policies. On the same note, gender relations are experiencing a slow evolution with women finding their way through reforming economic roles, displacement, and political participation of various kinds. These social arrangements mediate access to resources, power, and security, shaping the relationships between individuals, groups, and the state.

Most evidently, combined, these dynamics merge in the realm of relations between the state and society. The high rate of demographic increase, young population ambitions, digital connectivity, migration, and even changing social identities exert a lot of pressure on the states that have little capacity to provide services, inclusion, and even legitimacy. Governments have, in most instances, used coercive techniques to deal with dissent, further undermining trust between state institutions and the citizens. The state-society relations in the Horn of Africa region would therefore need one to understand the influence of the social and demographic forces on governance issues, as well as the political behaviour.

This chapter explores the society and demography in the Horn of Africa region in terms of placing youth, digital activism, migration, gender dynamics, political mobilization, ethnicity, and social structures in a wider context of analysing state-society relations. It is organized into five sections with an introduction and a conclusion that discusses the

relations between the state and society and their implications on governance, legitimacy, and stability in the Horn of Africa region. The first section conceptualizes the demographic tendencies and the political importance of the youth bulge by explaining factors such as population growth, age structures, urbanization, and education. Here, the youth bulge is discussed not as a statistic, but as a disruptive political actor. The second section examines the new forms of social mobilization and digital activism by diving into social media, youth, activism, narrative formation, protest, repression, and their implications on authority and control in the region. The third section focuses on migration, mobility, and social reconfiguration. It examines the urban stress, internal displacement, cross-border migration, refugees, and the diaspora's effect on politics and identity. The fourth section analyses the gendered aspects of society and demography in the Horn of Africa region. The fifth section describes the connection between political mobilization, ethnicity, and social organization in the Horn region.

Understanding demography in the Horn of Africa: population growth and age structures

Worldometer (2026) predicted that in 2026, Djibouti, Somalia, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Sudan, and South Sudan will have estimated populations of approximately 230 million. Of the reported population, almost two-thirds are from Ethiopia alone, with an estimated 140 million people (Yeboua and Cilliers, 2023). It is followed by Sudan, with approximately 53.2 million people; Somalia, with 20.3 million, and South Sudan, with 12.4 million. Lastly, there are Eritrea and Djibouti, with estimated populations of 3.6 million and 1.1 million, respectively (Worldometer, 2026). The region's population is expected to reach 241 million by 2030, with an estimated growth rate of about 2.6% annually (Worldometer, 2026). It is important to note that this region has a very young population, reportedly accounting for over 70% of the population being below the age of thirty (Worldometer, 2026). The region possesses 12% of the world's youth population (Walhad, 2024). For example, half of Djibouti's population is no older than twenty five.

Ethiopia is the most populous nation in the region, with an expected population of over 152 million people by the year 2030, with almost half of the population being between the ages of fifteen and twenty nine. Eritrea, Ethiopia, Somalia, Sudan, and South

Sudan's median population ages range from nineteen to sixteen. There is a very high fertility rate in the whole region that keeps supplying the population with a regular injection of young generations. Indicatively, in 2023, Somalia had one of the highest rates of total fertility at 6.1 children per woman, compared to 3.7 and 3.9, respectively, on average in Eritrea and Ethiopia, and almost 4.8 in South Sudan (Statista, 2026). By contrast, Djibouti was at a less developed level of demographic transition, with a rate of about 2.6 children per woman (Statista, 2026). These patterns depict not only the magnitude of youth cohorts, but also their accumulation at ages at which people enter the labour market, begin higher education shifts, and experience political socialization.

This fertility, plus a falling child mortality rate, has resulted in age structures where a good percentage of the population is young. In the majority of the Horn countries, the median ages are very low, as low as sixteen years in Somalia, about nineteen years in Ethiopia, Sudan, Eritrea, and many other neighbouring states, much lower than those of the world as a whole, and indicating a strongly child-young population (Yeboua and Cilliers, 2023). However, differently, Djibouti's median age is approximately 25.7 years as of 2026. Such age distributions are reflected in high dependency ratios, implying that the number of working-age adults is comparatively low relative to the number of young dependents. Sub-Saharan Africa generalized data indicates that child dependency ratios can reach up to 69%, which is both socially and economically crippling to both households and the state (Tabutin and Schoumaker, 2020).

Youth bulge refers to the portion of the total adult population aged fifteen to twenty nine years old. It is generalized that countries tend to have political instability when adult's 40% population is comprised of ages between fifteen to twenty nine years, especially when coupled with failing economic development, the youth's limited participation in governance and education (Weber, 2019). With the exception of Djibouti, the Horn's youthful populace constrains the growth of the economy.

In relation to dependents, fewer people between the ages of fifteen and sixty five are working. This evidently disrupts economic stability in the Horn of Africa countries. Although historically, nations like South Korea and Taiwan achieved economic growth because of their young populations, it may not be the same case with the region under discussion. For a nation to experience a demographic dividend, it must have at least 1.7 working-aged people for each dependent, yet except Djibouti with an estimate of 1.9,

other states have not yet reached that and the projections of countries like Ethiopia and Eritrea to reach 1.7 are after 2040, while Somalia is projected to get there by 2070 with the remaining anticipated to reach 1.7:1 around the 2050s (Yeboua and Cilliers, 2023).

Urban areas have been identified as the most visible locations in the demographic pressures of the Horn of Africa because of the rapid rural-to-urban migration and population increase that have turned cities into the centres of youth economic and political challenges (Hammond *et al.*, 2025). Even though the Horn is still primarily rural, with average urbanization rates that are below the continental average, urban centres grow rapidly. In sub-Saharan Africa, almost half of the population is today urbanized, and the numbers are likely to keep on soaring as urbanization is not only a natural phenomenon, but it is also a form of migration (Cham, 2025). Although some countries like Djibouti have urban centres with concentrations of approximately four out of five inhabitants, other countries like Ethiopia are agriculturally based, yet with a fast-growing urban cover. Ethiopia has an even greater case of urban population increase of about 10.8 million in 2002 to a population of 28 million in 2022, with Addis Ababa, Bahir Dar, and other second-tier cities rising exponentially in the last twenty years (Macrotrends, s. f.).

It is vital to note that urbanization in the Horn of Africa is uneven across countries. This city boom puts a strident strain on housing, infrastructure, services, and employment. A good number of urban migrants, particularly the youth, end up in growing informal settlements where they experience precarious employment, lack access to services, and have diverse opportunities to access stable livelihoods.

The education systems of the region have grown over the last ten years, in terms of population increase, as well as political investment in increased access to education. More enrolment at the primary and secondary levels has expanded literacy and low-level skills among the youth, and the result is a generation that is more conscious of regional and international problems. However, there has not been equal growth in formal employment opportunities in keeping pace with the growth of education. In most of the Horn states, young generations of educated people join the labour markets in their numbers and cannot find employment opportunities, which causes underemployment, work in the informal sector, and growth of demands that cannot be met with state efforts (International Organization for Migration, 2022a). Such a discrepancy between increased

education and low economic absorption defines the political consciousness and desires more than it grounds stable economic integration.

The political consequences are many-sided. Education does not merely impart skills to the youth; it also brings consciousness to social, economic, and political options, especially in situations where the formal labour markets are not strong. With increased educational levels and still no corresponding rise in employment and wage earners, young people in the cities will be more prone to voice displeasure with the governance, confront the state institutions, and organize themselves around issues of inclusion and equity. Education, in this regard, heightens expectations more quickly than states in the region have been capable of meeting them, and this process is played out in protests, community organization, and new manifestations of political participation, which cannot be explained outside of the larger demographic change of the society.

New forms of social mobilisation and digital activism

In the 21st century, the world has turned into a global village in terms of civic participation and political representation through the use of digital technologies. Young people in the Horn of Africa have found digital platforms to be valuable for voicing complaints, constructing networks, and disrupting the status quo in governance because the formal avenues of participation in politics have been insufficient and state-society relationships strained due to population pressures and unequal governance.

Digital activism has become a tool whereby young people have converted social pressures into direct and organized social and political action, bypassing normal media and institutional intermediaries, compared to being a mere supplement to offline action. Internet access and mobile connectivity in the Horn of Africa are still relatively low compared to most of the world; however, they have grown significantly both in urban and peri-urban regions in the last decade. With one of the lowest Internet penetration rates on the continent, social media users reached almost 6.35 million in Ethiopia in 2022, although the government still attempted to block access (while the situation significantly improved, almost doubling the number of users in the country in nearly three years) (Kemp, 2022). Internet penetration rate in Djibouti is 65%, and comparatively low in Eritrea, which is 20% (Kemp, 2025). Kenya, considered the leading country in digital

adoption, reached roughly 40-56% Internet access between 2024 and 2025 (Association for Progressive Communications and Kenya ICT Action Network, 2025). Other African-wide trends are the accelerating growth in digital access, whereby by 2024 approximately 40% of Africans report having frequent Internet access, with over 600 million people using the Internet (Diagana and Wadagni, 2025).

Mobile phones and social applications have become important points of communication even in areas that have minimal infrastructure. Information sharing and coordination through messaging apps (WhatsApp, Telegram, etc.) are commonly utilized in situations where the traditional media are either state-owned or threatened. Actors of civil society and the networks of diaspora have also been involved in the introduction of digital spaces to communities that are less formal in their connectivity, which is added to hybrid systems of information circulation that incorporate both local and online media in unique ways.

This digital penetration that is uneven yet on an increasing trend has altered the landscape of political participation. In what used to be limited to geography and the state monopolization of the TV and newspaper, social platforms have offered comparatively easy areas of articulation and organizing. This has been further expanded by the emergence of cheap smartphones and prepaid data services even during economic crunch, especially among the urban youth.

To a lot of young Africans and especially youth in the Horn, digital platforms no longer remain peripheral to political life; they are central to the conceptualization and actualization of activism. In the continent, the youth have been using social media to coordinate protests, spread information quickly, and voice complaints on a scale that was not feasible ten years ago. Although data on the Horn specifically might be patchy, the cases on a region-wide level demonstrate the more general tendencies: in Kenya in 2024, young activists mobilized opposition to a controversial Finance Bill, organized protests on a national scale with the help of X (then Twitter), TikTok, and Facebook, and framed the discussion about government and responsibility (Collaboration on International ICT Policy for East and Southern Africa, 2025).

Online activism among young people is not only limited to physical demonstrations. The virtual spaces have been transformed into social spaces where they can discuss and coordinate action and articulate the story of dissatisfaction and communal identity. On the

other hand, digital activism can help bridge the civic and formal political realms; recently, young people have gathered on social media in Uganda to interact with political leadership and organize around political practices.

Unlike the inadequate infrastructures and frequent government incursions, youth in Ethiopia have used the Internet to disseminate news on protests, human rights violations, and political arrests despite the situations where governments are blocking or closing down online communications to hush up mobilization efforts. Similarly, anti-government protests were sparked in 2020 by a viral video of a detained air force pilot who claimed to have been tortured (Reuters, 2020). These trends represent a wider transnational turn: African young people are becoming more visible, more vocal in digital space, and are becoming the scene of socialization in politics and networked activism.

The influence of digital activism on the formation of narratives—that is, which stories gain the attention of the public, the manner in which grievances are packaged, and who has a voice—is one of the most important effects of digital activism. Digital platforms offer memes, hashtags, livestreams, and peer-to-peer storytelling tools capable of quickly changing the state of the debate and finding support across and outside national boundaries.

For instance, the protests in Kenya in 2024 led by Gen Z are a bright illustration: hashtags and viral posts served to define the identities of protestors, organize actions, and keep the momentum, as well as to attract the attention of the global community to the local demands in order to get accountability and change the existing order (Reuters, 2020). Although not a native of the Horn itself, the patterns in the regions are educative in the process of perceiving similarities in how young people use digital technology to create a story, which forms the basis of mobilization.

Nevertheless, cyberspaces are debatable, as well. Governments and security agencies have increasingly been attempting to dislocate or subjugate online mobilization, setting up Internet blackouts, obstructing individual applications, and implementing spying technologies in eras of turmoil. For example, the increased penetration of social media into Ethiopia coincided with the early part of Prime Minister Abiy's tenure, when there appeared to be a greater openness to freedom of political expression via digital platforms, which resulted in hate speech, misinformation, or disinformation, resulting in the

government restricting Internet access to some extent (Chonka, 2025). In 2024, Internet shutdowns were at record high levels across the continent of Africa, and the authorities frequently used national security, political instability, or protests as the reasons. Not only are such measures useful in hindering coordination, but activists have to become innovative with other tools, including encrypted messaging applications, VPNs, and peer-to-peer networks.

The battle of narration does not only lie between activists and states, but also within communities. Social media platforms have been filled with disinformation, hate speech, and messages with ethnic undertones, such as in the case of Ethiopia, where the social divide is already established, and the digital movements sometimes intensify the situation, making it hard to create common civic ground. This twofold truth, empowerment and danger, highlights how difficult digital mobilization in transitional societies is.

In the Horn of Africa, it has been noted that digital activism has the possibility of changing the balance of power. The social platforms erode the power of the states to monopolize information flows by facilitating decentralized networks of communication. This does not give the youth uniform power; it benefits other actors, such as political elites, foreign interests, and non-state armed groups, who can use digital spaces to propagate and recruit new members. However, the emergence of digital mobilization under the leadership of young people is one of the indications of the change, like the creation of political pressure and the necessity to negotiate authority in the digital world. A combination of repression, co-optation, and digital policy changes is the response of states. Blackouts on the Internet, banning of platforms, cybercrime legislation, and surveillance equipment are in place to limit mobilization as well as to enforce the conditions of online interaction. International advocacy groups and civil societies have countered these steps, highlighting the importance of digital rights in the wider governance discussion.

Meanwhile, the grassroots activists demonstrate how digital activism might be used in a positive direction. Digital storytelling and youth-focused projects in Somalia, Djibouti, and Ethiopia are used to counter extremist messages and communications, and support peacebuilding by focusing on ethics in digital activities and building community resilience. These campaigns prove that digital advocacy is not only resistance, but redefines civic engagement and national histories.

Migration, mobility, and social reconfiguration

Over thousands of years, the movement of people has been an important feature in the demographic trends in the region. People have migrated and intermixed for centuries, resulting in the spread of cultural influences and affinity transcending modern borders. Furthermore, mobility in the Horn of Africa is characterized by mixed migration, wherein different categories of migrants move within and out of the region. This region has three main interregional routes: the Eastern Route towards the Arabian Peninsula and in particular Saudi Arabia, the Southern Route towards the southern part of the continent, in particular South Africa, and the Northern Route towards North Africa and Europe. Important flows also take place within the region, which are classified as the Horn of Africa Route (International Organization for Migration, 2022b).

Consequently, demographic changes and social strains that have been in existence in the Horn of Africa have not only influenced domestic politics and the hopes of the youth, but have also facilitated differentiating trends in human mobility. The phenomenon of migration within the region is a complex social process, which includes internal displacement, flight across the border, gendered movement, and diaspora activities. These mobility practices cannot be considered independently of the larger demographic and governance processes, but instead they are themselves shaped by, as well as remakers of, social structures, identity processes, and the politics of the Horn.

In the Horn of Africa, internal displacement is at a high level, like it has never been before, and this has been caused by a combination of conflict, environmental shocks, and food insecurity. By the end of 2024, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR, 2025a) reported that the East and Horn of Africa and the Great Lakes Region have been home to about 5.6 million refugees and asylum-seekers and 20.7 million internally displaced persons (IDPs), summing up to 26.3 million people, which increased compared to previous figures, due to the conflict in Sudan and climatic shocks. A large proportion of these movements was due to Sudan alone accounting for 11.6 million IDPs; followed by Somalia, 3.9 million; Ethiopia, 3.3 million, and South Sudan, 1.8 million, resulting in significant displacement (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2025a). Additionally, during the same period, 18% of the Eritrean population, thus 655,000 people, were reportedly forcibly displaced (Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 2024). Among such displaced groups, millions of people are trapped in secondary

displacement cycles because of insecurity and climatic stress. On the contrary, Djibouti acts as a transit hub and one of the major hosts to its neighbouring states' refugees and asylum seekers; for example, in 2021 the country hosted an approximate of 34,005 refugees from Somalia, Ethiopia, Yemen, Eritrea, and other countries (Migrants-Refugees, 2022).

The displacement internally tends to cause acute urban pressure when individuals take refuge in towns and cities that lack adequate infrastructure or social amenities (Mombelloni, 2024). To explore this point, the cities in Africa like Khartoum, Mogadishu, and Juba have experienced high rates of IDPs that have overloaded already stressed housing, health, and education systems. The limited access to livelihood opportunities and weak social networks of informal settlements at the periphery of urban centres increase the vulnerability of many IDPs. Additionally, a secondary movement of IDPs, who must resettle because of new acts of violence or weather disasters, also intensifies the level of social fragmentation and weakens the survival of the community.

The pressure of displacement has been increased in Ethiopia, Kenya, and Somalia by environmental changes like long-term droughts and floods caused by climate change. The displacement caused by drought is disproportionately visible in rural areas, but the effect is felt in the cities too, as pastoralism and small-scale agricultural livelihoods are destroyed, and the rural people seek employment and services in the city. Such movements redefine the urban society, establishing new patterns of settlement, work, and participation in politics, which in turn change social structures and demands on the policy (Amir, 2024). For example, the World Bank had projected the Ethiopian population to reach 42 million in 2034, tripling from 15 million in 2012 (Diagana and Wadagni, 2025).

The other significant aspect of movement within the Horn of Africa is cross-border movements. The wars and insecurity have forced millions of people to flee across national borders. For example, over 242,000 migratory movements were recorded during the first half of 2025. Additionally, 98% of the movements were recorded along the Eastern Route, with most migrants being from Ethiopia's regions: Amhara, Oromia, and Tigray (Humanitarian Action, 2025). Moreover, Sudanese migration, being the world's largest, reaching over 11.7 million people, has strained neighbours like South Sudan, Chad, Uganda, and Egypt, which have large populations of refugees, as well as other displaced people (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2025b). Combined with the

large numbers of displaced people in the area, this caused millions of refugees and asylum seekers to be hosted in the Horn by the end of 2025.

There are important social implications of these cross-border movements. To begin with, they change demographic patterns in host regions, affecting the labour markets, service delivery, and ethnic relations (Desiderio, 2016). Second, refugees create diasporic communities that are connected to their countries of origin, and these communities influence the cross-border communications and remittances (Adugna, 2018). In times of acute displacement, border towns and camps develop at a very fast pace and result in complex configurations of social interaction between refugees and host peoples, which sometimes lead to rivalry in accessing scarce resources, and at other times to cultural exchange and social hybridization.

The diaspora from the Horn of Africa is involved in complicated processes to influence the political discourse and social identities within and outside the region. Migrant communities settled in Europe, North America, and the Middle East have a tendency to have close emotional and material ties with their families back home. These relations encompass remittances, a major source of income to households in nations such as Ethiopia, Djibouti, and Somalia, and information flows, which affect the expectations, political awareness, and transnational identity formation (Cuko and Traoré, 2008).

Political mobilization is another area of engagement of the diasporic community. Expatriates tend to form communities in terms of the problems of governance, human rights, and conflict management, which creates pressure on home- and host-country policies. The diaspora networks have at times been involved in peacebuilding, opposition movements, or assisted in opposition movements and used their relative safety and resources in their host countries to alter the debate in their home countries. The impact of the diasporic political activity transforms how citizens in the Horn perceive state legitimacy, accountability, and belonging; as such, transnational identities collide with the local social structures.

Gendered aspects of society and demography in the Horn of Africa region

Enhanced urbanization and government-initiated reforms in Djibouti have led to higher female representation in politics, though participation in labour is poor (Republic of

Djibouti). A different example is that of Eritrea, where women have traditionally engaged in national service and liberation discourses, which in turn have converted to public life roles, without generating structural changes in economic empowerment (Amahazion, 2025). On the contrary, in Ethiopia and Somalia, the role of women is more deeply entrenched within informal economies as well as community resilience frameworks, especially when there is displacement and conflict (United Nations Development Programme, 2021). Such differences indicate that gender in the Horn of Africa cannot be perceived as a unified experience, but as being conditioned by specific political economies and historical developments.

In the Horn of Africa, the gendered aspects are more rooted in the demographic framework and social changes. The high rate of population growth, unequal urbanization, economic insecurity, and protracted conflict have transformed the household structure, the division of labour, and patterns of authority in a distinctively gendered manner. Instead of viewing gender as a secondary issue, it should be perceived as a major structuring principle of social and demographic shifts in the region. In the Horn, the women are in a structurally important role, but an unequally empowered role in the society demographically (Abdi, 2011).

The demographics in the Horn of Africa show that almost 50% of the population comprises women, yet their empowerment against men is uneven. For instance, women and girls in Djibouti account for 50.4% of the country's population. Women head 19% of the households, yet their labour participation is 18.2% against men, which is 45%. Additionally, women hold about 26% of parliamentary seats. In Eritrea, the population has 50.7% women, with a notable 47.5% female headed households, whilst in Ethiopia, women account for 49.8% of the country's population, having them heading 22.1% of the households. Their labour participation is around 75%, yet they are overrepresented when it comes to unpaid labour and informal work. Likewise, in Somalia, 49.9% of the population is women, with between 47-66% of the households being headed by women due to prevalent conflict and subsequent displacements. Nevertheless, their labour participation is significantly low at about 29.4%. Meanwhile, women in Sudan before the recent conflict represented a 50% portion of the population, with labour force participation accounting to 29.4% and with 31% parliamentary seats (World Bank Group, 2025).

Demographic trends in several countries in the Horn are also a manifestation of gender stereotypes and norms regarding marriage, reproductive expectations, and the social importance of women. Women in most rural and peri-urban areas still have their social identity largely attached to motherhood and home care, which restricts access to education, political processes, and formal jobs (Strategic Initiative for Women in the Horn of Africa Network, 2011).

However, these patterns have been starting to change with urbanization and economic restructuring. With the fall of the rural livelihood and the rise of the informal economic activities, women are now more engaged in cross-border trade, the care economy, and the service industry. This economic involvement does not always mean structural empowerment, but it does change household bargaining power and intra-family authority. In other settings, women have turned into key income earners, particularly where the traditional male breadwinner's role has been disrupted by male unemployment, migration, and conflict-related absence. These changes bring about subtle but profound changes in gender hierarchies, despite the formal legal and political institutions falling behind.

Gender relations are also reconstructed by conflict and insecurity. The sustained instability in the Horn has affected the social protection measures by creating an increased vulnerability to violence among women and also forcing them to take on a greater economic and social burden (Birch *et al.*, 2023). Gender-based violence is a widespread phenomenon, especially in weak and war-torn settings, which promotes structural imbalances. But conflict also provides paradoxical spaces of renegotiation of social roles: women organize within their communities, engage in informal governance arrangements, and provide resilience networks in their locality (Odary, Komba and Nyamato, 2020).

Another important demographic aspect is in education. Increased access to primary and secondary education among the girls in the region has started working to change the expectations of marriage age, fertility, and labour participation (Strategic Initiative for Women in the Horn of Africa Network, 2011). Nevertheless, such gains are still uneven because of rural-urban and socio-economic differences.

With education levels rising, fertility tends to fall, and the participation in the labour force by women becomes diverse, slowly altering demographic trends. Hence, in the Horn of

Africa, there is a growing impact of women not only as social actors but as policy influencers, as they are transforming the nature of governance internally. Women in countries like Ethiopia, Somalia, Djibouti, Eritrea, and others (Strategic Initiative for Women in the Horn of Africa Network, 2026) have been at the forefront of the constitutional consultations, community reconciliation, and national dialogue processes, where they have regularly argued in favour of inclusive governance, a social protection framework, and gender-responsive reforms (Rubio-Marín and Irving, 2019).

Grassroots women's networks have worked through the local conflicts, negotiated across clans, and played a role in the transitional justice discourse, and it has been observed that peace-building is not localized in the political settlements of the elites but rather embedded within the societal structure (Strategic Initiative for Women in the Horn of Africa Network, 2011). Female parliamentarians, civil society leaders, and policy advisors have also influenced laws on gender-based violence, education access, and inclusion, and related security to social welfare and demographic stability. When peace initiatives are based on experienced social realities, especially on family welfare, displacement, and youth vulnerability, women leaders tend to broaden the concept of security past militarized reactions. The increasing involvement in policy making and the framing of the process of reconciliation is an indication of gradual yet significant change to more inclusive forms of governance, where representation and social accountability roles in policy making have become elements of legitimacy as opposed to coercion alone.

In a nutshell, the demographic change in the Horn of Africa is impossible to comprehend without gender forecasting. The functions of reproduction, work, care, and organization of the community of women ensure the social fabric even in the face of rapid change. As societies confront the growth of youth populations, economic and political instability, and gendered relations, said relations are the primary focus of domestic adjustment, the formation of authority, and the establishment of legitimacy. Thus, gender is not a sub-thematic issue within youth or migration, but a foundational area of social demography and state-society relations in the region.

Political mobilisation, ethnicity and social organization

Ethnicity has remained a highly relevant principle of organization in the Horn of Africa that defines political mobilization, resource access, and authority claims. Ethnic identity in most states that make up the region overlaps with the past structures of marginalization, ownership of land, and the history of state formation, and as such, it is a potent source of political statements (Hassan, 2025). Ethnic attachment tends to offer a model within which groups express grievances on governance, representation, and economic exclusion.

In Ethiopia, as an example, ethnic federalism established identity as the foundation of state administration, entrenching ethnicity into the state institutions and political life (Fiseha, 2019). Although this framework was meant to control diversity and decentralize power, it has also increased ethnic mobilization, especially when there is a transition of power. In some other cases, such as Somalia and Djibouti (Leta, Zeray and Haile, 2015), political involvement, conflict management, and access to state resources remain organized by clan identities, which both provide a stabilizing social network and a source of fragmentation.

Notably, ethnicity in the Horn cannot be interpreted as something unchangeable and primordial. Ethnic identities are also activated in a strategic manner following demographic pressures, land and job competitions, as well as feelings of unequal state treatment. Young people, especially teenagers, can be recruited around ethnicised stories where they cannot see opportunities in their economic activities, and the formal political systems seem like a closed door (African Union, 2020). Ethnic identity provides a feeling of belonging and political leverage in this kind of scenario, although it may contribute to the increase of social polarization.

Social life in the Horn of Africa is also dominated by an implication of informal institutions alongside formal state institutions that govern behaviour, adjudicate disputes, and distribute power. These are clan systems, customary law, religious institutions, and councils of the elders in the community (Mengisteab, 2019). These systems frequently occupy governance spaces that are underrepresented by the state, such as rural and peri-urban regions.

The informal institutions have a significant role in controlling the demographic pressure. With increased population and strained resources, households and communities have to

find refuge in kinship and mutual commitments to welcome social shocks. These networks are crucial to sustaining networks in situations of displacement or migration, which make available housing, jobs, and social protection. Concurrently, informal structures may strengthen the hierarchies based on age, sex, and kinship and restrict the freedom of choice and movement.

These traditional arrangements are under growing pressure from urbanization and social change that is being driven by young people. Based on the exposure to new ideas through education and other digital media, younger generations tend to challenge the authority of the elders and traditional leaders. This conflict of generations corresponds to the general changes in social organization, since informal institutions respond to emerging changes in demographic and economic conditions in an uneven way. Whereas there are structures that are transformed to suit new functions and demands, there are those that develop as arenas of contention, especially when they are seen to limit an opportunity or support marginalization.

With the social change and rapid population growth, the continuity of many of the fundamental aspects of social organization in the Horn of Africa is quite striking. Ethnic identities and kinship relations, as well as informal institutions, have remained the way of organizing everyday life and intermediating access to resources and power. These long-lasting structures give certainty in situations where political and economic instability prevail.

Meanwhile, change is unquestionable. Social youth movements, digital communication, urbanization, and migration are transforming the way identities are manifested and the way authority is challenged. The old hierarchies founded on age, gender, and lineage are being confronted by new types of social structures of individual aspiration, transnational belonging, and political action outside formal institutions.

This continuity and change co-exist to create a dynamic social landscape. The social structures are not collapsing or stagnating, but they are being renegotiated under the pressure of demographic factors. What emerges is a complicated interplay between inherited types of order and evolving social reality, which carries with it some serious consequences in the way in which governance, cohesion, and political stability should be maintained.

Conclusion. The relations between the state and the society and its implications on governance, legitimacy, and stability in the Horn of Africa

Intertwining demographic, technological, and mobility-based changes are redefining both state-society relationships in the Horn of Africa. Populations dominated by the youth, increased digital connectivity, and enduring migration trends have also changed the relationship to political authority among societies due to ethnic and gendered inequalities. Such changes do not merely create momentary disturbances; they redefine anticipations of leadership, involvement, and authority. This has led to the strained relationship that exists between states and their societies, and one that is marked by weak legitimacy, an increased dependence on coercion, and an uneven future regarding stability.

The social foundation of political legitimacy has shifted radically, due to the social power of the youth. In most of the Horn, the governments remain functioning under institutional arrangements and elite bargains that were made in former periods in history and are usually focused on controlling the rural areas, the way of giving out patronage, or security systems. But the younger generations as a whole, especially the ones that have been influenced by a broader education and a more urbanized lifestyle, judge authority by other means. Employment, being included in the decision-making process, providing services, and responding to social grievances are increasingly becoming the standards by which states are evaluated.

This creates an increasing gap of legitimacy. States are supposed to do things that are beyond their financial, administrative, and institutional capabilities, whereas young citizens are more opposed to deferential or clientelist political relations. Notably, this point does not just represent an ideological breach; it is structural. Age structure constrains the rate at which governments can absorb the entrants in the labour market, expand services, or redistribute resources. When the expectations grow faster than the delivery happens, it is not incidental but endemic, and it erodes the trust in the institutions of the state as well as the political leadership.

These legitimacy challenges have been worsened by the digital technologies that have transformed the ways of political engagement. The social media sites enable the youth and the urban population to voice their grievances, spread other stories, and organize mass movements faster and on a larger scale than ever before. These are not tools that

substitute authority; however, they mediate the existing relationship between society and authority, decreasing the price of coordination and increasing the voices that were initially marginalized.

To those states, which were used to dealing with dissent by using controlled media spaces or localized forms of repression, digital activism is a deep challenge. The flows of information become more difficult to contain, the stories become elusive to the official frames, and even repression itself can be seen and challenged. Consequently, the governments are starting to think less of these as a place to participate and more of these as a place of threat to their security. Internet blackouts, spying, and online intimidation have emerged as standard reactions, part of a more general shift to think of social mobilization not as a deliberative act but as something destabilizing.

It is a mistrust that is strengthened. In the case of criminalization or securitization of digital expression, young people make repression the message that establishing a formal political institution is futile. The consequence is that this leads to a vicious circle: once legitimacy is diminished, people are more likely to protest, and this means that more coercion will lead to a decrease in legitimacy.

Migration also makes the relation between the state and the society in the Horn complex by dividing the social contract both spatially and socially. Internal displacement and urbanization also place a strain on the local authorities, with the result being unequal access to services and inequalities as well. Populations that are displaced may not be governed by formal apparatus, but through humanitarian aid organisations, informal networks, or communal agreements. This undermines the state's presence and powers, particularly in the urban periphery as well as in conflict-prone areas.

The political power is also transformed by the cross-border movement and the diasporic interaction. Diaspora people affect the politics of the home country via remittance, advocacy, and the flow of information, which tend to create new political norms and expectations. Although such transnational connections can help thrive and survive economically, they might also isolate legitimacy from the territorial governance. The state can no longer play the central mediator in distributing social welfare and representation, as economic security and political voice are becoming increasingly located outside of the institutions of the nation.

Furthermore, in the Horn of Africa, ethnicity is still a focal point around which relations between the state and society are organized. The politics of ethnic inclusion, exclusion, or balance is a common way of negotiating political power, especially in a federal or post-conflict environment. The mobilization of the youth and digital activism often overlaps with ethnic identities, enhancing grievances that are related to marginalization or unequal access to resources in the past. Although these dynamics have the capacity of strengthening collective claims, they also tend to enhance polarization in situations where states are selective or securitize ethnic mobilization.

In terms of gender, there is another dimension where women perceive the power of the state differently, as they were deprived of equality in accessing economic opportunities, lawful safeguards, and representation in politics. Additionally, migration and displacement tend to burden women with responsibilities but a lesser ability to obtain institutional aid, hence gaps in state responsiveness. Meanwhile, the informal economies, community networks, and online spheres of female involvement illustrate the application of some forms of agency that are outside of formal governance frameworks. The inability to introduce gendered experiences into policy systems makes state legitimacy among critical segments of society even weaker.

The combination of the pressure of the youth, the digital mobilization, the fragmentation caused by migration, and the grievances based on identity assists in understanding why coercion has taken centre stage in governance in much of the Horn. Having a weak ability to provide both economically and politically, states find it more and more necessary to control dissent with the help of security apparatuses. Coercion provides short-term dominance at long-term prices: it lies in the constriction of political space, decimation of institutional trust, and strengthening of exclusion sensations.

Importantly, coercion is not merely a policy option; it is an option that is limited. In situations that have little fiscal space, slow institutional reform, and weak elite coalitions, repression will be a default mechanism of sustaining power. Nevertheless, in societies where young people are predominant, and the digital connectivity is on the rise, coercion cannot control the legitimacy restoration as much as it is likely to generate resistance cycles and repressions.

The changing relationship between the state and society in the Horn of Africa has far-reaching consequences for governance and stability in the region. Hence, stability can never be defined in terms of lack of conflict, and it is hinged on the ability of states to adjust themselves to the evolving social realities. Inclusion of the youth, meaningful political participation, and reality in service delivery is no longer a choice but a precondition for sustainable authority.

Meanwhile, digital governance, migration management, and gender-responsive policies are the key to restoring confidence between states and societies. The lack of consideration of these interlinked pressures threatens to consolidate the coercive form of government and instability.

In conclusion, the digitalization of the Horn of Africa, demographic pressures, and migration occur within deep-rooted identity and social organization systems. It is still centred on ethnicity, gender relations, and informal institutions of how individuals perceive state authority, political mobilization, and social change. These social structures are not stagnant or purely traditional, but they are dynamic in a constant state of reorganization and restructuring due to economic stress, war, urbanization, and youth bulge. The mediation of continuity as well as change in state-society relationship through identity and social organization thus demands close attention to the meaning of understanding the society and demography in the Horn of Africa region.

*Fatuma Ahmed Ali**

Associate Professor of International Relations
United States International University-Africa