ETHNIC PARTY POLITICS, INSTITUTIONAL EROSION, PARTY FORMATION AND NATIONAL COHESION IN POST-1991 ETHIOPIA: EVIDENCE FROM GAMBELLA REGIONAL STATE

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Abstract

This interpretivist, qualitative single case study explores how ethnic political parties have developed in Gambella Regional State, Ethiopia between 1991. It also examines how they have impacted political representation, inter-ethnic relations and national integration. Data was collected through 20 semi-structured interviews with key informants, 6 focus groups with 36 participants in total from Anywaa, Nuer and Opo communities. Non-participatory observation was carried out for 7 days at 3 sites. The analysis used a triangulated approach using data from multiple social science sources. A mixed method thematic analysis was completed to determine the strength of the empirical claims. Findings suggest that ethnic political parties develop through a gradual process. There has been a long history of inclusion in state structures, a significant transformation of traditional structures and the 1991 political transition. While there was some competition between ethnic parties and traditional structures, there was a layering effect. Certain political and administrative actors have become involved in certain mediation roles; however traditional elders still have a monopoly in culturally sensitive issues. The creation of a new political arena has provided more political recognition for the Anywaa and Nuer people. However, the smaller indigenous groups (Majang, Komo and Opo) still claim that they do not have any influence over regional politics. Although ethnically organized political competition has generated inter-group tension, cross-ethnic social interactions such as intermarriage, market trade, shared education, and everyday collaboration continue to provide a baseline for social cooperation. The study concludes that strengthening national cohesion requires equitable power-sharing, enforceable minority protections, formal recognition of customary dispute mediation, and issue-based political engagement.

Keywords: Ethnic Federalism; Ethnic Political Parties; Indigenous Institutions; Gambella; Anywaa; Nuer

1 Introduction

1.1 Background of the study

Multi-ethnic countries have employed ethno-federalism as a tool to manage diversity by granting self-rule and political power to ethnic communities. But evidence from previous cases suggests that ethno-federalism can also foster intra-ethnic conflicts over political dominance and resources where regions vary in power and wealth (Hale, 2004; Erk & Anderson, 2009; Juon & Rohrbach, 2023). One's experience of past governance systems also influences the structure of current political competition and organisation of parties (Amodio et al., 2022).

In Ethiopia, following the 1991 political transition, the unitary single state was replaced with an ethnic-based federal system enshrined in the constitution in 1995. While the constitution recognised rights to self-rule for ethnic groups and cultural autonomy of different peoples, political power was (is) primarily

held by the now defunct dominant EPRDF (or its regional partner parties) (Aalen, 2011; Abbink, 2011; Yimenu, 2022). In the 2018 reforms, the majority of regional EPRDF parties merged into the Prosperity Party in 2019 and the federal system based on ethnicity persisted (Yimenu, 2024).

Gambella Regional State provides a significant case to explore this dynamic. The region has five constitutionally recognised indigenous groups (Anywaa, Nuer, Majang, Komo and Opo), as well as refugee and highland communities. In the past, Nuer traditional governance was based on segmentary and consensus principles, while traditional Anywaa kingship was more centralised (Evans-Pritchard, 1940; Feyissa, 2011). This status was altered by successive Imperial and Derg regimes through state integration and political domination of their customary institutions (Feyissa, 2006; Tronvoll & Hagmann, 2012).

Since 1991, ethnic party organisations have become further sources of regional political agency. The Derg period witnessed the formation of the Anywaa led Gambella People's Liberation Movement (GPLM), while the Nuer were responsible for the formation of the Gambella People's Democratic Unity Party (GPUDP) in 1992. These groups then integrated into a regional political structure in 1998, and then the formalization of the Gambella Peoples' Democratic Movement (GPDM) in 2003. The GPDM was absorbed into the Prosperity Party in 2019, but ethnically based political mobilisation persisted. Ethnic competition has proved all too often to be about questions of representation, territory, refugee integration and land entitlements.

While there has been some work on Ethiopian federalism and conflict in Gambella, previous research has paid little attention to the evolution of customary institutions and the formation of ethnic parties in historical perspective in relation to contemporary political dynamics. This study investigates the impact of state incorporation and the advent of ethnic federalism on the evolution of ethnic parties in Gambella and their consequences for political representation, inter-ethnic and inter-regional relations and national unity.

1.2 Statement of the problem

Ethiopia’s ethnic federalism made ethnicity the organising principle of regional politics, and ethnic parties became the main link between citizens and the state. A growing literature connects this arrangement to ethnic politicisation and conflict (Gelaneh, 2020; Aragaw, 2024; Jibat et al., 2025). The debate between those who credit ethnic parties with delivering self-determination and representation, and those who blame them for deepening cleavages, remains unresolved. The evidence needed to settle it is thin at the level where parties actually operate. Four gaps in the literature explain why.

First, most studies work at the national level. They show that ethnic federalism is associated with politicisation, but they say little about how party politics works in peripheral, multi-ethnic regions such as Gambella. Second, attention has gone mainly to the larger ethno-nationalist projects (Oromo, Amhara and Tigrayan), with less on frontier groups and their political strategies (Melaku, 2024). Third, studies of Gambella explain ethnic politicisation through borderland dynamics, refugee flows and Anywaa-Nuer competition (Kurimoto, 1997; Feyissa, 2011; Ojulu, 2025). They rarely connect the long erosion of customary institutions to the formation of parties, and then to cohesion outcomes, in one analytic chain. As a result, party formation is treated either as a consequence of the 1991 constitutional choice or as a by-product of group rivalry, and the intervening institutional process goes unexamined. Fourth, claims about the effects of ethnic parties are often asserted rather than shown. Few studies document, with evidence

from the people involved, how parties affect representation, inter-ethnic trust and rivalry, the position of smaller groups, and a shared civic identity.

This has significant implications for Gambella. Despite the party system developing through continuous merging, replacement and restructuring of ethnic parties by the federal centre there have been continual tensions between ethnic groups. The formation of ethnic parties in 2019 did not prevent ethnic mobilisation. Therefore without understanding how this has developed it is unclear whether ethnic parties cause ethnic division, is a response to ethnic division or has emerged from a long term institutional development. If they have emerged from institutional developments then there will be no change in the incentive structures that exist in the electoral arena. National unity will therefore be at risk. The study overcomes this challenge by considering a long institutional development. Using qualitative data from Gambella this shows that the breakdown of customary institutions, ethnic party formation and national unity are connected in one logical sequence.

1.3 Objectives

The general objective is to explain how ethnic political parties emerged and operated in Gambella Regional State after 1991, and to assess their effects on political representation, inter-ethnic relations and national cohesion.

The specific objectives are to:

1. Describe pre-1991 indigenous governance among the Nuer and Anywaa and how successive states incorporated and weakened it;
2. Trace how the 1991 transition and ethnic federalism enabled the formation of ethnic parties (GPLM, GPUDP and EPRDF-aligned parties);
3. Examine which functions of customary authority parties took over (dispute settlement, resource access, legitimacy);
4. Assess the effects of party politics on representation, inter-ethnic trust and rivalry, the position of small groups, and a shared national identity; and

1.4 Research questions

1. How were indigenous governance systems organised before ethnic party politics, and how did Imperial, Derg and EPRDF-era state practices affect them?
2. How did the 1991 transition and ethnic federalism shape the formation of ethnic parties?
3. Which functions of customary authority did parties take over, and with what consequences for access to resources and legitimacy?
4. How have ethnic parties affected representation, inter-ethnic cooperation and conflict, the position of small groups, and a shared civic identity?

1.5 Significance

The study offers sub-national, locally grounded evidence on a debate that is mostly conducted at the national scale. It links two bodies of work that are usually kept apart (customary institutions and party politics). It gives smaller groups a voice alongside the Anywaa and Nuer. And it shows how each claim is supported, so that policy recommendations rest on evidence that can be inspected.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Conceptual Review

Ethnic federalism refers to a formal form of federalism and territorial governance where political representation becomes segmented across various ethnic/ linguistic communities (Aalen, 2011; Abbink, 2011). This concept focuses on the institutional framework in which ethnic identity became important in Gambella. It takes into consideration the impact of ethnic federalism but does not assume its divisive or integrative nature. Instead it focuses on the experiences of each different ethnic community.

Ethnic political parties are political parties organised around party leadership, party members and political arguments. They represent clear ethnic groupings (Horowitz, 1985; Chandra, 2004; Ishiyama, 2009). This paper focuses on the (unsuccessful) attempts of organisations such as the Gambella People's Liberation Movement (GPLM) and Gambella People's United Democratic Party (GPUDP) to gain political recognition through these parties. The impacts of party competition will also be discussed.

Customary institutions refer to an institution of local recognised authority for managing social relations and justice within a community. In the region of Gambella these institutions include Nuer and Anywaa traditional leaders and allied leadership. This research discusses how there was variation in the authority of these institutions. Furthermore, there will be discussion of the overlap between this institution and the political party.

Group representation refers to the ability of groups to have their voices heard, be involved in decision making processes and cause change to political priorities. Group representation can therefore be understood as the ability to influence public decisions and institutions (Lijphart 1977; Chandra 2004).

Interethnic relations and national unity refer to the interaction of different ethnicities and how individuals feel they are part of a wider political landscape. National unity is a multi-dimensional term referring to common civic identity, horizontal trust, involvement in institutions and public trust (Aragaw, 2024). This study does not assume ethnicity to be an either-or relationship with national identity. Instead it analyses the balance of political competition with collaboration in everyday life.

2.2. Theoretical Framework

This paper uses four theories to gain an understanding of the historical, institutional and political processes that resulted in Ethnic parties and how they have affected unity within Gambella.

Mamdani's Double Hypothesis

Mamdani (1996) describes the dual class structure of Indirect Rule, as being implemented across African states. This provides an understanding of how relationships between state and indigenous authorities have developed throughout different regimes and Objective 1.

State-in-society perspective (Migdal)

Governance is formed as a result of interactions between state and social institutions (Migdal, 1988: 58). This is important to Gambella as there are still negotiations between indigenous authorities, government positions, political parties and the community about who performs what function within governance. This provides an understanding of why we often see officials from political parties acting as intermediaries and indigenous authorities maintaining their powers in sensitive cultural issues.

Historical Institutionalism

Historical Institutionalism can be used to understand how political events are determined by prior organisation, pivotal points and subsequent changes (Pierson, 2004; Capoccia & Kelemen, 2007). Using a typology provided by Mahoney & Thelen (2010) to understand the process, we can see how institutions have changed. This research looks at layering – where formal institutions have developed separately to informal indigenous institutions. This connects Objectives 1-3 as the formal institutions can be traced.

Ethnic party competition & power sharing

Political institutions can create ethnic identity as a key aspect of political competition (Horowitz, 1985; Chandra, 2004; Posner, 2005). Power sharing, minority rights and group independence are stressed as ways to manage the divisions of plural societies (Lijphart, 1977). These three ideas help to provide analysis for Objective 4 looking at political representation, minority groups and ethnic relations and national unity.

The theories provide us with a connected analytical approach. Mamdani provides an understanding of incorporation of the state. Migdal provides an understanding of how state and society institutions interact. Historical Institutionalism helps us to understand changes and continuities in institutions. Ethnic party competition & power sharing provides an understanding of the scope of representation. Whilst the theories don't provide us with any prior causality, they help us to understand the causality.

2.3. Empirical Literature

Evidence shows that there can be varying outcomes to ethnic federalism and ethnic parties. While many scholars have highlighted the benefits of ethnic federalism including increased political inclusion and recognition, others have argued that this can cause exclusion, local conflict and competition (Hale, 2004; Erk & Anderson, 2009; Roeder, 2009; Alber & Breen, 2022). Ishiyama (2009) concludes that similar outcomes can result from ethnic parties. While they can increase political inclusion for minority groups, they do not necessarily create instability and conflict. Juon & Rohrbach (2023) demonstrate that tension within the government and local population will affect the impact of ethnic parties.

Many papers have been written regarding Ethiopia. Aalen (2011) analyses the effects of ethnic identity and political actors when operating under ethnic federalism. Abbink (2011) explores the political and institutional issues raised by Ethiopia's federal experiment. Vaughan and Tronvoll (2003) detail the political and institutional background to the federal system. While these provide some valuable insight into the issues facing Ethiopia at a national level, there is no detailed case study on how ethnic parties and customary authorities interact in the periphery.

There has been much research conducted on Gambella. Kurimoto (1997), Feyissa (2011), Human Rights Watch (2005) and Ojulu (2025) provide valuable background to the political tensions within the region. However, the discussions do not combine the traditional institutions changing over time, the emergence of ethnic parties and how this affects political representation and unity.

This study is addressing this issue through qualitative data. It finds that while they did not break down or disappear completely they have instead adapted to the new political and administrative actors taking over some of their roles. Elders still have power within the community. The findings demonstrate that some communities have developed political avenues through ethnic parties, but concerns were raised by Komo and Opo and Majang participants that they lacked influence. The data indicates there was some political

competition and territorial issues but there was an also inter-ethnic relationship such as marriage, business, education and cooperation. This provides a more detailed insight into how ethnic parties effect cohesion.

2.4. Research Gap

This paper aims to address three shortcomings regarding the understanding of the ethnic federal system in Ethiopia. Firstly, the literature focuses on the national scales, and little systematic attention is given to the state level, and specifically to the peripheral multiethnic regions. Secondly, research on the Gambella region has been limited. Most of it concentrates on issues around ethnic conflict, land and refugees and lacks discussion about the transformative impact of changes to the customary power structures. Lastly, there needs to be more empirical evidence regarding how party politics affect small ethnic group inclusion, interethnic collaboration and common notions of civic identity from local actors.

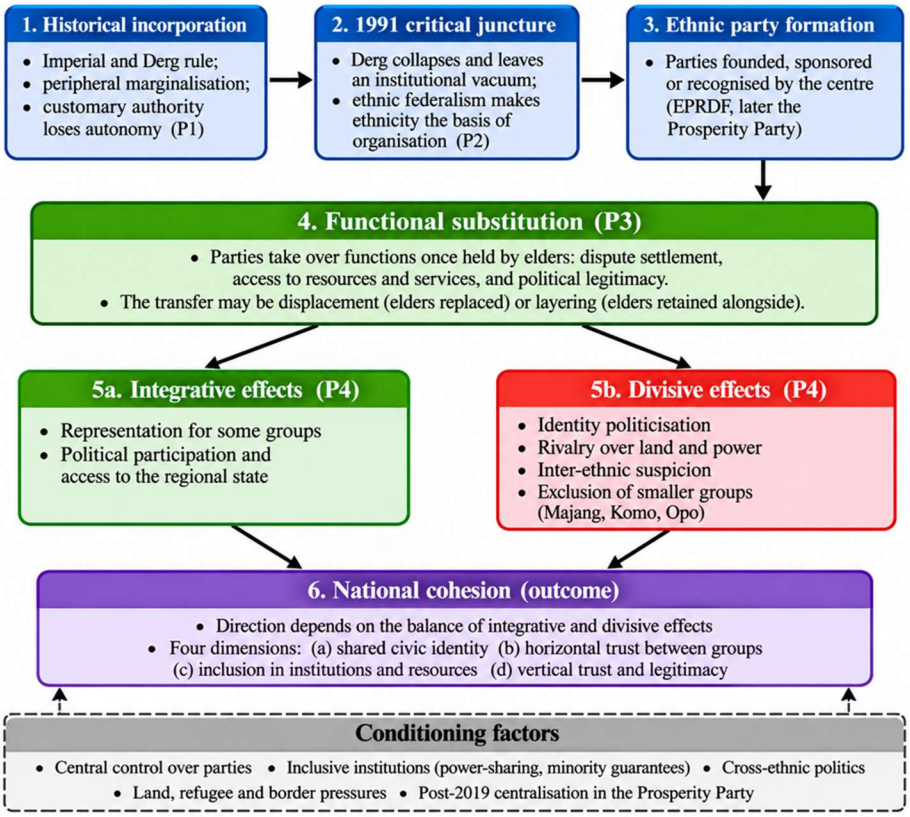
This paper seeks to address these shortcomings by connecting historical institutional changes, ethno-party formation, the interactions between formal and customary power structures and current political representation and interethnic relations. While this paper does not aim to show that the Gambella region is representative of all regions in Ethiopia, it provides a qualitative explanation specific to the region.

2.5. Conceptual Framework

These questions are connected through a political process within the institutional framework. They highlight how indigenous forms of government have become integrated into different governmental systems that during the political transition and implementation of an ethnic federal system in 1991 there was an institutional setting which gave rise to various ethnic parties. These parties interacted with traditional institutions whereby elders continued to hold power.

This will look at the political outcomes of these situations. Political representation, relationships between different ethnicities and national unity will be dependent upon the relation between the centre and regions, the inclusiveness of the political institutions, protection of minorities, land and resources conflicts, and interactions between different ethnicities (figure 1).

Figure 1. Conceptual framework.



Source: Authors' construction.

Four propositions guide the analysis and are revisited in the discussion:

1. **P1: (Erosion)** state incorporation transformed the autonomy, legitimacy and functions of customary institutions.
2. P2: **(Institutional vacuum)** the 1991 change provided new political opening that interacted with the historical group/individual grievance and institutional legacy.
3. **P3: (Substitution)** party-based and formal state institutions performed certain intermediary roles alongside the traditional institutions.
4. **P4: (Duality)** ethnic parties brought some communities greater political acknowledgement, yet they sustain unequal distributions of political power and inter-ethnic hostilities.

Each proposition is stated so that it could fail. (Table 1) sets out what evidence would support it and what would count against it.

Table 1: From propositions to evidence

Proposition	*Source theory*	*Evidence that would support it*	*Evidence that would count against it*
P1 erosion (RQ1; sections 4.2–4.3)	Mamdani; Migdal	Informants and documents report appointed intermediaries, co-option and loss of dispute-settling authority before 1991	Reports that customary authorities kept independent legitimacy and functions under imperial and Derg rule
P2 vacuum and juncture (RQ2; section 4.4)	Migdal; historical institutionalism	Evidence of institutional restructuring, political exclusion, and changes in customary authority after 1991, alongside continued customary institutional activity.	Revival of customary authority after 1991, or party formation explained by the 1991 design alone
P3 substitution (RQ3; section 4.7)	Migdal; Mahoney & Thelen	Disputes, jobs, services and legitimacy sought from party officials instead of elders	Elders keep all these functions; shared roles would indicate layering and not displacement
P4 duality (RQ4; sections 4.8–4.9)	Ethnic party theory; Lijphart; Posner	Reports of both wider representation and greater suspicion, rivalry or exclusion of smaller groups	Reports of only one effect, or of no difference for smaller groups

Source: Empirical data, 2025

3 Research Methodology

3.1 Research Design

Research Design As this study aims to investigate a current event in situ in detail, a qualitative case study was used (Stake, 1993 & 1995), (Yin, 2018). Case Selection the reason that the region of Gambella was selected as a critical, rich case was due to: 1) Differing customary systems experiencing the same state sequence. This provided opportunity for comparison. 2) Multiple competing ethno-political groups located within a small part of the regional polity. 3) It is a borderland periphery meaning it does not often have active engagement with national conversations regarding federalism and cohesion. This will provide analytical generalization. However there will not be statistical generalizability.

3.2 Philosophical stance

This study employs an interpretivist approach. It relies on social constructs of political realities and participants' accounts of their relationship with institutions, parties and belonging (Creswell & Poth, 2018). It is a qualitative single case study design. This study will focus on the Gambella Regional State of Ethiopia. The region was purposefully selected as a 'critical case', as there is much information available (Yin, 2018). Interpretation will be conducted using abductive logic, meaning the participant accounts are

constantly being compared to theoretical standpoints. As a result this article can only make reference to a 'pathway' or 'mechanism' within the data, supported by documents. There cannot be any statistical inferences made (Flyvbjerg, 2006; Yin, 2018).

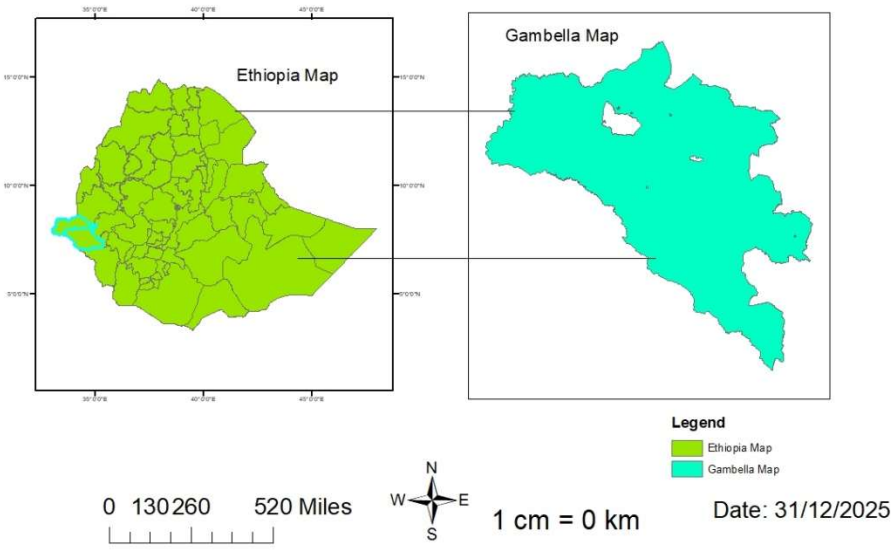
3.3 Study area

This study was conducted in the Gambella Peoples' National Regional State (Fig.2), in south western Ethiopia bordering the Republic of South Sudan. This area covers around 29782sq km, is a lowland area with numerous wetlands, savannah and large river systems including Baro, Gilo, Akobo and Alwero. This area has conventional use value as it is the main source of riverine farming, fishing, grazing, and transport and trans-boundary movement with these rivers being the main ecological and economical connection to South Sudan (Fig.2). This area is very diverse with numerous nations, nationalities and peoples living here. The Nuer, Anywaa, Majang, Komo and Opo peoples live within this area (Fig.2). According to the 2007 Population and Housing Census a total estimate of 307,096 people live within this area. Of this population 143,286 people (46.66 %) are Nuer, 64,986 people (21.16 %) are Anywaa, 12,280 people (4.00%) are Majang, 990 people (0.32%) are Opo and lastly 224 people (0.07%) are Komo (CSA, 2007). 85,330 people (27.79%) are highlanders.

There is also a refugee population living in Gambella from South Sudan due to conflict. These asylum seekers influence the make-up of the population as well as the services provided, relationships between different groups and the overall frontier aspect of Gambella. Most of the population follows Protestantism but there are many traditional aspects. Some follow Orthodox Christianity and Islam; these are mainly followed by settlers and non-ethnically local people. This shows how diverse this area is.

Gambella has always had a marginal position within the Ethiopian state. This area was once part of the Ethiopian empire and since then has remained under the dominance of the various regimes that have been in power such as the derg and EPRDF. This domination is shown through a lack of infrastructure, uneven distribution of infrastructure and dependency on central state structures.

Figure 2. Map of Study Areas



Source: researcher, own constructed, 2025

3.4 Data sources and collection

Four sources were used so that claims could be triangulated (Carter et al., 2014; Denzin, 2009). Data were collected across four distinct source streams to facilitate triangulation: 20 semi-structured key informant interviews (KIIs), six focus group discussions (FGDs) with 36 total participants, seven days of non-participant observation across three sites, and documentary analysis.

Table 2: Data sources

Source	***Scale***	***Purpose***
Key informant interviews (KIIs)	20 interviews, 30–60 minutes each	Expert and insider accounts of governance change and party formation
Focus group discussions (FGDs)	6 groups * 6 participants = 36	Community perspectives and shared narratives
Non-participant observation	Three sites Gambella town, Itang and Nuer Zone, 7 days field	Context; how disputes and services are actually handled; check on what is said
Documents and archives	Policy papers, proclamations, reports, scholarly studies	Historical record; corroboration

Source: Fieldwork Empirical Data, 2025-2026

3.4.1 Key informant interviews

Semi-structured interviews followed a guide based on the objectives and the literature and pilot-tested for clarity and order (Table 2). Interviews were conducted in English, Nuer, Anywaa, Majang, and Amharic, depending on participants' language preferences and the researcher's communication arrangements.

Interview materials were transcribed and translated into English by three researchers with relevant language proficiency. The English transcripts were used for thematic analysis. Because translation may affect the interpretation of culturally specific expressions, the research team reviewed translated materials for clarity and consistency. Nevertheless, some meanings, idiomatic expressions, and culturally embedded concepts may not have been fully captured in English. This limitation was considered during interpretation, particularly when analyzing accounts of customary institutions, ethnic identity, and political belonging (Table 3).

Table 3: Key informant composition

Category	***Selection criterion***	*No*
Elders and customary chiefs	Knowledge of indigenous governance	4
Regional government administrators	Experience in regional governance and policy	3
Federal and regional policymakers	Involvement in Gambella and federalism policy	2
Member of ethnic political parties	Direct involvement in party politics	4
Former regional officials	Historical knowledge of political and administrative change	3
Civil society and NGO representatives	Peacebuilding, governance, community development	2
Community leaders and activists	Local political dynamics and inter-ethnic relations	2
Total		**20**

Sources: empirical field work data, 2025-2026

Table 4. Ethnic composition of key informants

Ethnic group	***Number***	***Percentage***
Anywaa	*6*	*30%*
Nuer	*8*	*40%*
Majang	*2*	*10%*
Komo	*1*	*5%*
Opo	*1*	*5%*
Highlanders	*2*	*10%*
Total	*20*	*100%*

Source: Fieldwork empirical Data, 2025-2026

The 20 key informants represented six ethnic groups. Nuer participants constituted the largest proportion (40%), followed by Anywaa participants (30%). Highlanders accounted for 10%, as did the Majang, while Komo and Opo each represented 5% of the interview participants (Table 4).

Table 5. **Gender composition of key informants**

Gender	***Number***	***Percentage***
Women	*4*	*20%*
Men	*16*	*80%*
Total	*20*	*100%*

Source: *Fieldwork empirical Data, 2025-2026*

The informant group comprised four women and sixteen men. This diversity enabled the study to incorporate perspectives from multiple ethnic communities and gender groups (Table 5).

3.4.2 Focus group discussions

Six FGDs were held, one group with Opo, two groups with Anywaa and three groups with Nuer participants. Groups were ethnically homogeneous so that participants could speak openly on sensitive questions, a standard approach where inter-group tension exists (Krueger & Casey, 2015; Morgan, 1997). A semi-structured guide was used. The design has a cost: it gives no direct inter-group exchange. The six focus group discussions (FGDs) were organized according to ethnic affiliation, comprising three Nuer groups, two Anywaa groups, and one Opo group. Each of these six groups consisted of an equal distribution of six participants. To ensure data independence, there was no overlap between the participants involved in the FGDs and those selected for the key informant interviews (KIIs). Meanwhile, due to their willingness and availability, members of the highlander, Majang, and Komo communities participated exclusively in the KIIs.

3.4.3 Non-participant observation

Non-participant observation was conducted at communities and government offices, sites and historic places to enhance the information obtained from key informant interview, focus group discussion and document analysis. The observation in these sites targeted three areas that is (a) the setting of the institutional of community members for settling disputes or making request to customary elders, offices of political parties and government offices; (b) social interaction and practices in relation to leadership and decision making; and (c) physical setting and administrative environment of those activities. Field notes used: (a) attributed descriptive notes, and (b) reflexive notes as discussed by Emerson et al. (2011) and Kawulich (2005).

These were carried out across three field visits; in Gambella town (May 2025) for two days where the researcher attends a peace conference; in Itang town (June 2025) for two days where the researcher observes the market centre in Tharpam in which the community members from the host as well as the refugee community gather; and in Nuer Zone (September 2026) for three days where the researcher observes elders and the customary dispute-settlement practices taking place in the Zone. Accordingly, the researchers conduct non-participant observation for a total of seven days on three sites.

The visits were undertaken at separate times due to security concerns regarding access and travelling between the sites. It was not possible to undertake all the fieldwork in one uninterrupted period. The visits allowed the researcher to see the settings and institutions under observation under the situational circumstances at each site.

3.4.4 Documents and archives

Primary documents include government records, policy documents, proclamations and official reports on leadership structures and party development. Secondary documents include scholarly books, articles and reports on Gambella and Ethiopian politics (Bowen, 2009).

3.5 Sampling Techniques

Purposive sampling was used to select information-rich participants with direct knowledge of the study topic. Elders were included for their knowledge of customary institutions and historical changes; CSO representatives for their experience in peacebuilding and community relations; political party members for their involvement in party formation and political representation; and members of major and minority ethnic groups to capture diverse perspectives on political participation, inclusion, and interethnic relations.

Snowball sampling complemented purposive sampling because knowledgeable individuals, particularly those involved in politically sensitive issues, were not always easily identifiable or accessible. Initial participants referred the researcher to other relevant informants, helping reach individuals beyond the researcher's initial contacts (Patton, 2015; Noy, 2008). However, referrals were assessed carefully to reduce reliance on a single social or political network.

3.6 Data analysis and evidence grading

Thematic analysis: Data were analyzed using hybrid thematic analysis combining deductive and inductive coding based on Braun and Clarke (2006). The authors established an explicit three-tier evidence-grading system **(**Strong**,** Moderate**,** Limited**)** in Table 6 to evaluate the reliability of empirical claims. The analysis followed an abductive logic, combining deductive and inductive coding within a hybrid thematic analysis. Initial codes were informed by the research questions, theoretical perspectives and propositions, while additional codes emerged from participants' accounts and documentary evidence. The researchers moved iteratively between empirical findings and theoretical explanations to refine the themes and develop plausible interpretations of institutional change, party formation and national cohesion.

Table 6: Evidence-assessment rule

Assessment	*Criterion*
Strong	*Corroborated by at least three independent empirical data sources, with evidence from more than one participant group*
Moderate	*Supported by two empirical data sources or multiple participants within one group*
Limited	*Based on one empirical source or an uncorroborated participant perception*

Source: Empirical Fieldwork Data, 2025-2026

Direct quotations are used as *illustrations*. Each is labelled by source type and informant category (Table 6), and perceptions held by one group (for example, claims about Nuer or Anywaa dominance) are reported as perceptions and not as established facts.

3.7 Trustworthiness and reflexivity

Confidence was established using the standards of Lincoln and Guba (1985) and Tracy (2010). Credibility was supported using four sources of data, member checking, and peer debriefing with research-team members. Summaries of the data were provided to three participants to determine whether they recognized the themes as my interpretation of their words. Transferability was established using descriptions of the research context, participants' demographics, sampling, and situational factors. Dependability was supported by an audit trail which included the codebook, definition of the themes, and memoing of decisions made during the analysis process. Confirmability was achieved through the documentation of decision making, the use of participant reports as evidence for the themes, and reflexive memoing of assumptions brought to the research.

The research process was examined to reflect on the positionality of the researcher in order to address any impact on the recruitment of the participants, collection of data, and analysis. The researcher made a clear separation between the participants' accounts, evidence from observation and analysis to guard against any personal assumptions from infiltrating the researcher‟s findings. These procedures aimed to provide transparency in how the analysis has derived from the qualitative data.

3.8 Ethical considerations

All participants received information on the purpose, risks and their right to withdraw, and gave written or verbal consent. Names and identifying details were withheld, and informants are cited by category, place and month. Data are stored securely and shared only on reasonable request. Because the topic is ethnically sensitive, the study sought to avoid putting participants at risk, for instance by holding interviews in places of their choosing and by not reporting identifying combinations of role and location.

3.9 Limitations

The study is a single region (Gambella) and therefore not statistically generalizable; focus groups were ethnically homogeneous and used snowball sampling, limiting cross-ethnic perspectives (Majang, Komo and Highlander views were captured only via key informants/documents); accounts of past events rely on memory and are reported as perceptions, cross-checked with documents where possible; multi-language interviews were translated into English, which may lose culturally specific meanings; fieldwork occurred in separate periods (May–June 2025 and Sept 2026) and observations were limited to seven days across three sites, so findings may not reflect later changes; no survey measures of trust or identity were collected, so cohesion is based on participants’ perceptions. Future work should combine qualitative and survey methods, use mixed-ethnic groups, and track politics and cohesion over a longer period.

4 Findings

Profile of participants

The study drew on 20 key informant interviews (KIIs), six focus group discussions (FGDs) with 36 participants, and seven days of non-participant observation across three sites. Of the 20 key informants, eight were Nuer, six Anywaa, two Majang, two Highlanders, and one each Komo and Opo (Table 4). Sixteen were men and four were women (Table 5). The six FGDs were held with one Opo group, two Anywaa groups and three Nuer groups. Table 7 lists every quotation used below by code, source type, informant category, place and month.

Indigenous governance before ethnic party politics

The findings indicated that Nuer and Anywaa communities had their own systems of authority, social relations and conflict resolution before modern state administration reached the region. Nuer governance was decentralised and segmentary, with authority resting on leopard-skin chiefs, clans and elders recognised by the community (Evans-Pritchard, 1940; Tronvoll & Hagmann, 2012). Anywaa governance was more centralised, with authority centred on the Nyieya and supported by local chiefs and elders (Feyissa, 2011). Both systems maintained social order and resolved community conflicts. One FGD participant described how the link between politics and ethnicity differed before 1991:

> *"The kind of identification we find between politics and ethnicity in this Gambella region now was not so before 1991" (Q1, FGD, Gambella Town, May 2025).*

Participants described political organisation as becoming concentrated around the larger ethnic groups after 1991.

Changing authority of customary institutions

Historical and documentary sources indicated that customary institutions were weakened and restructured under successive regimes. Interview accounts referred mainly to the period after 1991 and did not separately show what each earlier regime contributed. A senior government official described the change in the role of traditional authorities as follows:

> *"I feel that the role of traditional authorities has changed. We, the local people, have no influence now. Whenever something happens, the local political bureau should be involved so that decisions are made according to the ethnic proportions. Otherwise, our voices are not adequately considered in the decision-making process" (Q4, KII, May 2025).*

The 1991 transition and ethnic party formation

Participants saw the 1991 transition and the introduction of ethnonational federalism as important for the emergence of ethnicity-based political organisations in Gambella. The new system gave ethnic communities space to demand recognition of identity, representation, language protection and access to regional institutions. Participants also pointed to territorial conflicts, refugee settlement, earlier inter-ethnic conflict and the Sudanese civil war as shaping party formation (Kurimoto, 1997; Feyissa, 2011; Ojulu, 2025). Customary institutions continued to operate in dispute resolution and community affairs after 1991, and participants did not describe them as having disappeared.

The post-1991 party landscape and political control

Participants identified the main post-1991 parties as the GPDM, GPLM and GPUDP. They commented on the role of the EPRDF in recognising, organising and directing these parties. A senior regional official said:

> *"The EPRDF institutionally created, legitimised and controlled the local parties, largely to ensure that they were beholden to the centre." (Q5, KII, May 2025).*

A KII elder added:

> *"The parties are identified on ethnic grounds in name only as they are centralized in fact" (Q6, KII, September 2026).*

Political objectives of the GPLM and GPUDP

The GPLM and Anywaa territorial concerns

Anywaa informants linked the GPLM to the defence of territory, political representation and refugee settlement. An Anywaa elder from Itang said:

> *"... We identified these three areas, Lare, Itang and Akobo, as a problem that we would have to resolve early because the land beneath us. If you look at it, the Nuer invasion will deprive us of our rights to the land..." (Q7, KII, Itang, May 2025).*

An Anywaa woman from Itang also spoke about refugee resettlement:

> *"... We had a strong will to re-organize the refugee camp and should demand the structural change because we thought that they have an impact on our demographics of our lands and political interests, geographical space interests..." (Q8, KII, Itang, May 2025).*

These accounts reflect how participants perceived territorial demarcation and refugee settlement, and they are reported here as perceptions, not as verified territorial claims.

A Nuer key informant offered a different explanation. He said that politicians had created division between the Nuer and the Anywaa, who had once lived together through intermarriage and food sharing. An FGD participant who was a Nuer refugee from Kule Camp described how Nuer refugees and host communities in Kule Camp and Pulkode Kebele, Itang, used the same markets. He said refugees bartered humanitarian food assistance for local products such as milk, fish and mangoes. He added that during conflict between the Nuer and Anywaa, Nuer refugees were seen as more vulnerable because of their ethnic identity. Anywaa accounts therefore centred on territorial security and representation, while Nuer accounts stressed the political nature of the disputes and the continuity of everyday relations.

The GPUDP and Nuer political recognition

Nuer informants associated the formation of the GPUDP with demands for political recognition, Nuer-language education, representation and fair access to regional resources. They described the party as a channel through which Nuer leaders sought a place in the new political order after 1991. Some also reported resistance from competing political actors and limited recognition in regional and federal institutions. One KII elder said:

> *"We, the Nuer were not given the chance to run for leadership in the regional level by the central government. We then formed a political party to have our leaders voice us in parliament and lead us. But we did not get the full acceptance of leading the Gambella Region until 2014 when Gatluak Tut was the first Nuer regional president. We were admitted only during the EPRDF era because it was a political party that would give us voice" (Q13, KII, Gambella Town, May 2025).*

Historical grievances and perceptions of political domination

Accounts of political dominance referred to different periods. The Derg-era arrangement, including the Workers' Party of Ethiopia, was distinct from the post-1991 order in which the GPLM emerged as a political actor alongside the EPRDF.

Changes in customary governance functions

Participants described how communities sought help with disputes, jobs and public services. A young key informant said:

> *"We used to have our own fights but we used to rely on elders in the past and they would help us to sort out the matter and these days they go to the party officials" (Q2, KII, Gambella Town, June 2025).*

A community member added:

> *"Formerly, we went to elders or traditional chiefs for assistance with work related or social matters but now, the majority of communities are more comfortable seeking help from a government representative who is connected to one of the major political parties." (Q9, KII, Gambella Town, September 2026).*

Field observation showed that elders remained active. On 20 June 2025 in Itang Town, woreda administrators reported that local elders (*Guanditni*) still mediated customary conflicts, working with the woreda and the peace and security offices. These included marriage disputes, fights and violent conflicts. Elders applied customary rules, codes of conduct, sanctions and compensation. When formal administrative and legal structures were seen as inadequate, elders were asked to mediate culturally sensitive conflicts. Customary authority therefore continued alongside formal institutions, and its work increasingly involved coordination with woreda administrations and security offices.

Political inclusion of smaller groups

Participants from the Majang, Komo and Opo communities said they had little influence over regional political and development priorities. A Majang informant said:

> *"Our people have a lot of problems, but the issues of our community are not taken to the region. The decisions are left to the Nuer and Anywaa community; the voice of our community and our communities' interest and needs are not heard in the region" (Q10, KII, Gambella Town, May 2025).*

A Komo elder said:

> *"Previously, the Komo have been neighbours of the Anywaa community, enjoying intermarriage and cultural exchanges. Yet this contact and integration have gradually diluted our culture, and our language is slowly dying out. The occurrence of intermarriage between the Komo and Anywaa communities in Gambella has led to challenges in identity and representation. This is because at times members of the Anywaa–Komo heritage have stood and been elected for the Komo parliamentary seats, even though they were not pure Komo. This has been a source of confusion for the other ethnic groups in identifying who the Komo are. We thus feel under-represented in the regional government though we have of late achieved some recognition and limited representation through the Gambella woreda" (Q11, KII, Gambella Woreda, May 2025).*

An Opo FGD participant similarly reported:

> *"As we are a small ethnic community, in terms of political representation, participation and social services, we did not have sufficient access. We used to feel neglected and marginalized in view of the larger majority ethnic communities. For instance, we only had three seats at the Itang*

level and two at the Gambella Regional Parliament during 1991-2014 periods. Komo and Majang communities faced a similar situation. Although a few strides have been made in recent years, still there are major gaps. Our community has not yet established an independently administered woreda; rather our communities are organized only into kebeles under Itang" (Q12, FGD, Itang, June 2025).

Political representation was uneven across groups. The Anywaa and Nuer held more prominent positions in regional political competition, while the Majang, Komo and Opo continued to express concern about their representation and influence.

Ethnic parties and social cohesion

The findings indicated that ethnic-party politics had mixed implications for inter-ethnic relations in Gambella. Political competition and perceptions of unequal representation contributed to tension between some groups. At the same time, intermarriage, trade, education and community-level interaction continued across ethnic lines. A Majang participant raised both the unresolved border issue and the sense of exclusion from regional decision-making:

"Our community has had to contend with longstanding border challenges in and around the Majang Zone, mostly bordering the South West Ethiopia Region. Unfortunately the Gambella Regional Government does not take responsibility for this issue and our community continues to fight to maintain control over its territories. This is an issue of great concern for our community and we believe our voice has been ignored in regional politics and decision making, which we link to the fact that the two large ethnic groups dominate regional politics and communities such as ours do not have a say over political affairs" (Q14, KII, Gambella Town, May 2025).

Participants also described cooperation. One FGD Q3, participant called Gambella "a small Ethiopia", pointing to the mix of people from different regions, business and job opportunities, NGO activity, intermarriage and the role of Gambella University in bringing people together. A key informant described interaction between the indigenous community of the Nuer Zone and Highlanders and said their quarrels were like fights between "two brothers" and not ethnic conflicts. Education, marriage, employment, markets, language learning and cultural exchange were all described as sources of daily contact across ethnic lines.

Overall, participants reported that ethnic parties widened political representation for some groups while leaving others with less influence and access. Political competition produced mistrust, yet shared social experiences continued to provide a basis for cooperation.

5 Discussion

5.1 Historical Institutional Transformation and Customary Authority

This suggests that customary institutions within Gambella were modified. It has been discussed in literature that both the Imperial and Derg administrations included or restricted customary institutions. (Feyissa, 2015; Tronvoll & Hagmann, 2012). However, little primary data was found on the situation prior to 1991. Control over political decision making is being concentrated in the government and politically bureaucratic tiers of government (Q4 KII 25 th May 15). This suggests that the formal institutions of government are becoming important tools for political power. Whilst this gives an

indication that there has been a change in the decision making authority, it does not provide substantial indication as to the nature of the institutional erosion during the pre-1991 regimes.

This supports the dual state argument (Mamdani, 1996), where customary institutions have been enclosed within state structures due to developments such as this. It also provides support for Migdal's (1988) state-in-society theory whereby authority is seen as a result of both formal organisations and social actors. However, it only provides partial evidence for these theories. Evidence suggests that the state had benefits by having some previous engagement with customary institutions, as they could control them without losing legitimacy with the local populace. Institutional modification within Gambella should therefore be seen as partial.

5.2 The 1991 Transition and Ethnic Party Formation

Although the 1991 transition created new possibilities for ethnic political mobilization, the establishment of ethnic parties cannot be explained by the constitutional introduction of ethnic federalism. The GPLM's long establishment, the emergence of the GPUDP, and the reconfiguration of regional parties all show that new parties emerged within a dynamic political environment. Furthermore, political inclusion, political representation and decisions based on ethnicity all implied that ethnicity was a channel communities could use to raise political issues.

This also fits within the theory of historical institutionalism where it is stressed that critical junctures are closely related to historic legacies (Pierson, 2004; Capoccia & Kelemen, 2007). The data shows that the transition in 1991 did not create an institutional vacuum, but altered the political opportunities for current communities and institutions. Therefore, the emergence of ethnic parties can be seen as a result of historic institutional change, political reforms and competition over political positions instead of being an inevitable result of the introduction of ethnic federalism.

5.3 Party Control and Regional Political Autonomy

The findings demonstrate that the regional political parties are not politically independent. The EPRDF were responsible for creating and controlling regional political parties (Q5, KII, and May 2025). Furthermore, regional political parties are ethnically dominated and highly influenced by the centre (Q6, KII, and September 2026). This implies that political parties weren't politically independent based on their ethnicity.

This is supported by the current literature on Ethiopia's dominant party regime demonstrating tensions around the centralisation of power and lack of true political independence within the federal system (Aalen, 2011; Abbink, 2011; Vaughan & Tronvoll, 2003). The concept of the state in society (Migdal, 1988) provides more insight into the relationship between the centre, regional political parties and local institutions. It must be noted that the interview data does not provide concrete evidence that every regional political party was directly controlled by the centre. Rather it provides an insight into how people view political control. Overall, the findings demonstrate that political parties were involved in political representation based on their ethnicity but were not politically independent.

5.4 Institutional Layering and the Persistence of Customary Authority

Findings indicated that formal institutions created new intermediary functions for accessing government services, mediating social problems and articulating political concerns (Q2, KII, June 2025; Q9, KII,

September 2026). However, elders still carried out culturally sensitive matters and worked together with woreda administration and peace and security office.

This demonstrates the concept of multiple institutions replacing one another (Mahoney & Thelen, 2010). The new formal institution had new functions that were also carried out by traditional institutions that still had power at a community level in relation to particular issues. The state in society approach (Migdal, 1988) can be applied to understand how power still existed within government employees, party organs and traditional leaders. Findings also provide a nuanced understanding of Mamdani's (1996) approach. Although incorporating the state may impact individuals' recognition of traditional leaders, it does not completely replace traditional institutions. This therefore implies that institutional change occurred based on the principles of multiple institutions, flexibilities and adaptability.

5.5 Political Representation and Minority Inclusion

This suggests that while ethnic party politics gave some groups a voice in politics, it did leave other groups feeling that they did not have enough influence within their region. Participants from the Majang, Komo and Opo communities spoke of feeling excluded and not having much impact within the political processes of their region (Q10, Q11 and Q12, KII, 2025). They also understood that the bigger ethnic groups will often dominate politically in the region (Q14, KII, and May 2025).

This tells us that even though some groups are acknowledged formally this does not necessarily mean they are politically represented. This fits with Lijphart (1977) who advocated for power sharing. It also fits with the literature which has looked at ethnic mobilisation in politics (Chandra, 2004; Posner, 2005). However, this is only relating to how the participants felt about the distribution of political power and does not necessarily mean that the smaller groups have been excluded completely from the political processes in the region. All it shows is there is a difference between being recognised and feeling like you are involved.

5.6 Interethnic Relations, Competition, and Cooperation

However, there was an indication that ethnic party politics interacted with existing geographical, demographic and political concerns within the community. Ethnic group members other than Anywaa indicated that political mobilisation was related to concerns over land security and refugee settlement (Q7 & Q8 KII, Itang, and May 2025). In contrast, some spoke about political rivalry and ethnic representation. These forms of political mobilisation appeared to have been motivated by individuals feeling their land, representation and regional influence was at risk.

The findings show that there was some political rivalry but everyday collaboration occurred. Individuals spoke about collaborating on issues such as trading, the relationship between refugees and the local community, intermarriage, education and shared employment in FGDs. This indicates that whilst there was some rivalry between ethnic groups (as described by Horowitz, 1985), it has also provided a context to support Migdal's (1988) analysis of the symbiotic relationship between political institutions and social relations. This suggests that whilst ethnic divisions became prominent in some cases, they did not affect all interactions between the two groups. Interethnic relationships should therefore be seen as diverse.

5.7 Social Cohesion and Shared Civic Identity

Overall, the findings reveal a complex picture. Whilst competition within politics and perceived inequities based on ethnic group membership were associated with concerns about exclusion and between ethnic

distrust, individuals described a long history of social integration between different ethnic groups. A comment made by one of the Q3 FGD participants highlighted this when they stated that "Gambella is a small Ethiopia in terms of ethnicity, opportunities for jobs and education and trading". This suggests that an element of social integration may be evident alongside political identification with ethnicity. These findings align with the idea that social integration can be a multi-dimensional concept, whereby social identification, trust and institutional access are viewed as separate concepts (Chan et al. 2006). Overall, the findings also reflect those in the literature on political ethnic mobilisation, which argue that political institutions are a key determinant of whether ethnicity becomes an important source of competition (Chandra 2004; Posner 2005).

However, it should be noted that the findings do not show that political parties based on ethnicity have resulted in less national identification or trust in the institutions. As the survey data was not used to examine social integration or institutional trust, I would describe these findings as a qualitative description of people's lives. Overall, the findings indicate that social integration was a broad and diverse concept within Gambella, whilst political competition between ethnic groups varied depending on the alliances and networks between the different ethnic groups.

5.8 Theoretical and Empirical Contribution

Overall the findings show that it cannot be solely argued that the 1991 transition, loss of traditional authority and high ethnic competition is what caused the creation of ethnic parties in Gambella. This case study has shown the complex ways in which history, political restructuring, party dominance, traditional authority and uneven political inclusion interacted. It adds to the literature by showing how multiple political institutions and uneven political inclusion can co-exist alongside traditional institutions on a local scale.

This shows how Mamdani’s two worlds of state theory, Migdal’s state-in-society approach, ethnicity-party competition theory and historical institutionalism can be applied to a local example. It does not offer an explanation for causality but shows how different theoretical approaches can help analyse the institutions and politics within the country.

6. Conclusions

The conclusion highlights that ethnic party formation in Gambella was not driven solely by the 1991 constitutional framework, but was the culmination of historical weakening and reorganization of customary leadership under successive regimes, combined with ethnicity becoming the principal mechanism for representation and state resource access in 1991. Major regional parties (GPLM, GPUDP, and EPRDF-aligned parties) remained tightly linked to central authorities, restricting their regional decision-making autonomy.

Post-1991 party politics created selective political recognition enabling the Anywaa and Nuer to articulate claims regarding land, language, and institutional access, while smaller indigenous communities (Majang, Komo, and Opo) retained very little influence over regional decision-making despite official recognition. Formal state and party actors assumed administrative and service-related intermediary functions, while customary elders continued to mediate culturally sensitive disputes in coordination with woreda and security offices. National unity will only occur if there is an equitable sharing of power, tangible protections for minority groups, recognition of customary mediation and political engagement based on issues for all ethnicities. Further research should be undertaken comparing other regional states, using

survey data to understand trust and identity and tracking changes in national unity since the 2018 party restructuring.

Policy Recommendations

Sustainable national cohesion requires four key interventions:

1. Equitable regional power-sharing.
2. Enforceable and tangible minority group protections.
3. Formal institutional recognition of customary dispute mediation.
4. Issue-based political engagement across ethnic lines.

Future Research Agenda:

The study outlines three directions for future study:

1. Comparative analysis across other Ethiopian regional states.
2. Quantitative survey-based research measuring civic trust and identity.
3. Longitudinal tracking of national unity outcomes following the post-2018 party restructuring.

Declarations

Ethical approval

Ethical review was waived by the Institutional Research Ethics Review Committee of Gambella University because the study used non-invasive data collection (FGDs and interviews) and posed minimal risk. The study followed the ethical guidelines of Gambella University.

Consent to participate

All participants gave informed consent. Participation was voluntary and participants could withdraw at any time without penalty. Written consent was obtained where possible and verbal consent otherwise. Participants were told that their answers would be confidential and that no individual would be identifiable in the report.

Consent to publish

Not applicable.

Availability of data and materials

Data are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request, subject to protection of participants' identities.

Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

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Table 7: Register of testimony used in the findings

Code	Source type	Informant category and place (Description)	Month
Q1	FGD	Participant, Gambella town	May 2025
Q2	KII	Youth, Gambella town	Jun 2025
Q3	FGD	Participant, Gambella town	Jun 2025
Q4	KII	Senior government official	May 2025
Q5	KII	Senior regional official	May 2025
Q6	KII	Elder from Gambella town	September 2026
Q7	KII	Anywaa elder, Itang	May 2025
Q8	KII	Anywaa woman, Itang	May 2025
Q9	KII	Community member, Gambella town	September 2026
Q10	KII	Majang, Gambella town	May 2025
Q11	KII	Komo elder, Gambella Woreda	May 2025
Q12	FGD	Opo participant, Itang	Jun 2025
Q13	KII	Elder, Gambella, town	May, 2025
Q14	KII	Majang, participant, Gambella town	May, 2025

Source: Fieldwork data, 2025-2026



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