

Grassroots Feminist Organizing in the Shadow of State Feminism in Ethiopia

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Abstract : In this paper examines the state of grassroots feminist activism in the backdrop of state feminism in Ethiopia. Specifically, I examine the impact of the Charities and Societies Proclamation (aka CSO law), a 2009 law that banned so-called foreign NGOs—i.e., those receiving more than 10% of its operating budget from non-local sources— from working in the areas of human rights, democracy, governance, and gender equality. Viewed as government retribution for the NGO opposition to the government in the 2005 elections, the law aimed to halt the work groups such as the Ethiopian Women Lawyers Association (EWLA), who were defined as a “foreign” NGO. Based on interviews with prominent Ethiopian women’s rights leaders in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, I assess how grassroots feminist organizing adapts to state suppression on the one hand, and the aggressive entry of the state into women’s rights work on the other hand. While the 2009 law has slowed down the work of women’s rights activism, displaced feminists view feminist advocacy as cyclical and the state as neither fully adversarial nor an ally but rather as an instable entity that at times provides political openings to push ambitious feminist agendas. Grassroots activists are regrouping and developing new political responses strategies such as coding rights issues to fit state mandate; dissembling rights work in permissible social provision language; rechanneling political work into informal spaces and unregistered social clubs; innovating new funding partnerships, and reassembling as privately held research and advocacy companies. my study reveals how grassroots feminist politics operates in the shadow of a hostile state and within the confines of local politics.

Keywords : grassroots feminism, ethiopian feminism, civil society and gender, state feminism

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