Governing by Checkpoints: Everyday Mobility and Control in Wartime Amhara

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Abstract

This article examines the everyday governance of mobility in the conflict-affected Amhara region of northern Ethiopia, which has experienced escalating violence and fragmentation since 2020. In a fragmented and militarised landscape, checkpoints—erected by state forces, paramilitary groups such as Fano, and informal actors—have emerged as the dominant infrastructure of rule. Drawing on original fieldwork conducted in March 2025, the article explores how individuals navigate a fluid terrain of ad hoc control, where power is enacted not through institutions but through glances, silences, and bodily performances. Through the lens of "vernacular governance by passage," the study reveals how movement becomes both a site of vulnerability and a modality of political negotiation. Theoretically, the article contributes to debates on fragmented sovereignty, affective governance, and the embodied dimensions of state power. It argues that governance in Amhara has not collapsed, but has migrated into movement itself—where checkpoints are not merely barriers but stages upon which authority is improvised, contested, and endured.

Keywords
Amhara, Ethiopia, mobility, checkpoints, sovereignty, vernacular governance, affective control, everyday state, conflict, anthropology of power

Introduction

> *"I never know who will stop me today. Sometimes it's the army, sometimes it's Fano, and sometimes it's someone I've never seen before. I walk with my head down, I say nothing, I just try to pass."*
> *(Interview with T., 26-year-old woman, Lalibela, March 2025)*

Movement—once a banal and unreflective part of daily life—has become a deeply political act in northern Ethiopia. In the Amhara region, escalating armed conflict since 2020 has produced

a fragmented system of control in which multiple actors—state military, paramilitary groups such as Fano[1], and informal militias—establish checkpoints, patrol urban peripheries, and monitor rural roads. For ordinary citizens, negotiating these overlapping regimes of scrutiny is not merely a question of navigation, but of survival.

This article explores how everyday mobility is governed in wartime Amhara, not through formal institutions or codified laws, but through a mosaic of ad hoc checkpoint regimes. Far from uniform or stable, these regimes are marked by shifting rules, rotating enforcers, and opaque logics. Yet for residents of towns like Lalibela and the surrounding countryside, checkpoints have become the dominant mode through which power is encountered, interpreted, and endured.

Drawing on original interviews conducted in March 2025, we examine how individuals adapt to this unpredictable terrain.

We ask: How is movement both regulated and moralised in a landscape where the state is simultaneously present and absent, and where the line between protection and threat is persistently blurred? By analysing the micro-practices of avoidance, compliance, and embodied fear, we offer a grounded account of how governance materialises in the everyday.

Our theoretical approach draws on scholarship on fragmented sovereignties[2], state performativity[3], and the affective dimensions of control.[4] While recent research has emphasised the role of state fragility in shaping African political orders, we shift attention to how individuals themselves perceive, interpret, and tactically engage with the diffuse apparatuses of wartime power.

Ultimately, we argue that governance in Amhara has not disappeared—it has migrated into movement. Power circulates not through formal institutions, but through the intimate choreography of checkpoints, where gazes, silences, and bodies become instruments of rule.

[1] FISEHA, Assefa. Federalism, Devolution and Cleavages in Africa: Do Institutions Matter? In: *Federalism, Devolution and Cleavages in Africa*. Cham: Springer Nature Switzerland, 2024, pp. 185–289. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-50426-6

[2] HANSEN, Thomas Blom and STEPPUTAT, Finn. Sovereignty revisited. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 2006, **35**(1), pp. 295–315. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.anthro.35.081705.123317

[3] MITCHELL, Timothy. The limits of the state: Beyond statist approaches and their critics. *American Political Science Review*, 1991, **85**(1), pp. 77–96. https://doi.org/10.2307/1962879

[4] FASSIN, Didier. The embodied past. From paranoid style to politics of memory in South Africa. *Social Anthropology/Anthropologie Sociale*, 2008, **16**(3), pp. 312–328. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1469-8676.2008.00045.x

Theoretical framing: Governing in the Absence of Governance

In much of the political science literature, governance is often equated with the presence or absence of functioning state institutions. A fragile or failed state, by this logic, represents a void—a collapse of order, security, and legitimate authority. In such contexts, especially during armed conflict, governance is assumed to retreat while violence takes its place.

Yet from an anthropological and spatial perspective, governance rarely vanishes; it reconfigures. This reconfiguration does not necessarily involve new institutions or ideologies, but new terrains and techniques of control—often embedded in the everyday. As Das et al.[5] argue, the state is not simply what is written in law, but what is performed, perceived, and contested in the intimate spaces of daily life. It is precisely in these marginal and crisis-afflicted zones that the state may be most acutely felt.

One of the most visible sites where such governance crystallises is the checkpoint. In places like Myanmar, South Sudan, and Afghanistan, checkpoints have become improvisational infrastructures of control, shifting with militia movements and localised power dynamics.[6] In Palestine, by contrast, checkpoints form part of a more formalised and bureaucratised system of surveillance and territorial separation.

Yet across these contexts, checkpoints are not simply tools of military control; they are arenas of sovereign performance[7],[8].

They dramatise the presence of power, even in its fragmentation, and create affective atmospheres—of fear, submission, hope, or defiance. Checkpoints thus not only regulate space, but also shape subjectivities, requiring individuals to embody particular roles: the obedient civilian, the silent woman, the trustworthy local.

In the Ethiopian region of Amhara, this dynamic is particularly stark. The state's capacity to deliver services or security has been severely weakened by ongoing conflict. Yet its authority is not absent. Rather, it has been outsourced, fragmented, and reterritorialised into the bodies and behaviours of those who operate and confront checkpoints—be they national soldiers, Fano fighters, or ununiformed local men with guns.

[5] DAS, Veena, et al. Anthropology in the Margins of the State. *PoLAR: Political and Legal Anthropology Review*, 2004, **30**(1), pp. 140–144.
[6] NEIL, Tony; CHIT, Saw Day**.** *Beyond the 'rebel' territorial trap: governing logics and armed group sovereignty*. Copenhagen: Danish Institute for International Studies, 2024.
[7] PARIZOT, Cédric. Temporalities and perceptions of the separation between Israelis and Palestinians. *Bulletin du Centre de recherche français à Jérusalem*, 2009, **20**.
[8] ZUREIK, Elia. Strategies of Surveillance: The Israeli Gaze. *Jerusalem Quarterly*, 2016, **66**.

Building on these insights, we propose to understand movement itself as a site of governance. The act of walking down a road, choosing a route, or deciding when and whether to speak at a checkpoint becomes a moral and political negotiation. In doing so, we move beyond static notions of state sovereignty to what Hansen and Stepputat[9] call "sovereignty as a practice"—a shifting and situated process, enacted through social relations and spatial performances.

But we go further. We argue that in Amhara, governance has migrated into the very fabric of mobility. Movement is not simply something the state restricts—it is where the state is enacted. Through the regulation of movement, power no longer needs a centre; it flows through checkpoints, through glances, silences, and the calibrated performances of bodies attempting to pass.

In this way, governing by checkpoints is not a sign of failed authority but the birth of a new, intimate mode of rule—one that is both precarious and penetrating, improvised yet systematic. It is a form of spatialised governmentality that turns every road into a potential theatre of power, and every traveller into a political subject.

The checkpoint thus becomes a threshold—not only spatial, but ethical and existential. Passing through it requires more than compliance; it demands a performance of self, calibrated to ambiguous expectations. Averted eyes may signal deference or suspicion. A calm tone may reassure or provoke. Bodily comportment becomes political currency, and fear itself becomes part of the choreography of survival.

Such encounters are not only shaped by authority, but by what James C. Scott[10] called the *moral economy*: the deeply felt ideas of fairness, dignity, and legitimacy that ordinary people bring to their interaction with power. In Amhara, our interlocutors rarely spoke of the law. Instead, they spoke of what is "right," what is "expected," and what is "humiliating." These moral evaluations shape their routes, their silences, and their strategies. Governance, in this sense, is not only external—it is negotiated internally, through emotion, memory, and improvisation.

This points to a crucial theoretical shift: governance as affective navigation. Here, statehood is not measured by the presence of ministries or mayors, but by the palpable need to

[9] HANSEN, Thomas Blom and STEPPUTAT, Finn. Sovereignty revisited. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 2006, **35**(1), pp. 295–315. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.anthro.35.081705.123317

[10] SCOTT, James C. *The Moral Economy of the Peasant: Rebellion and Subsistence in Southeast Asia*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976.

anticipate, sense, and tactically respond to unstable forms of control. Ademe[11] has shown how control regimes work not only through force, but through the management of emotion[12]. In Amhara, fear is not just a consequence of violence; it is a modality of rule.

Crucially, this affective mode of governance is not totalising—it is porous, inconsistent, and often resisted. People learn, adapt, mistrust, and even manipulate checkpoint actors. This improvisational dynamic, what we call "vernacular governance by passage," is central to understanding the political geography of Amhara today. It redefines statehood as a distributed process, enacted through contingent relations in space rather than static institutions in capital cities.

These dynamics are not unique to Ethiopia. In many conflict-affected or postcolonial contexts, we find that governance increasingly emerges not through durable state institutions but through the unstable regulation of movement. What Amhara offers, then, is not an exception—but a sharp lens through which to rethink the spatial and affective infrastructures of power.

Setting the Scene: The Amhara Region in Wartime

The northern Ethiopian region of Amhara has long occupied a central place in the country's political and cultural imagination. Home to iconic churches, imperial legacies, and a dominant strand of national identity, Amhara has often been framed as the "heartland" of the Ethiopian state[13],[14]. But in recent years, it has become a fractured and fracturing landscape, where allegiances shift, armed groups proliferate, and everyday life is haunted by uncertainty.

Since 2020, Ethiopia has been engulfed in a complex, multi-sited war that began as a confrontation between federal forces and the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), but quickly metastasised into overlapping conflicts across multiple regions[15],[16]. While international attention focused on the Tigray war, the Amhara region—directly affected by the TPLF's

[11] ADEME, Solomon Molla. Demystifying the causes of the Amhara people's protest in Ethiopia. *Third World Quarterly*, 2022, **43**(4), pp. 916–935. https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2022.2030701
[12] PRITZKER, Sonya E., Janina FENIGSEN and James MacLynn WILCE, eds. *The Routledge handbook of language and emotion*. London/New York: Routledge, 2020. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780367855093
[13] ABBINK, Jon. Ethnic-based federalism and ethnicity in Ethiopia: reassessing the experiment after 20 years. *Journal of Eastern African Studies*, 2011, **5**(4), pp. 596–618. https://doi.org/10.1080/17531055.2011.642516
[14] TRONVOLL, Kjetil. *War and the Politics of Identity in Ethiopia: Making Enemies of the State*. Suffolk: James Currey, 2009. https://doi.org/10.1515/9781846157769
[15] TRONVOLL, Kjetil. The anatomy of Ethiopia's civil war. *Current history*, 2022, 121.835: 163-169.
[16] NYADERA, Israel Nyaburi; OSEDO, Census. Civil war between the Ethiopian Government and the Tigray people's Liberation Front: a challenge to implement the responsibility to protect Doctrine. *African Journal on Conflict Resolution*, 2023, 23.1: 35-59.

offensive in November 2020—was undergoing its own transformation: from a relatively stable administrative region to a contested and militarised frontier of the Ethiopian state[17].

One of the most consequential developments has been the rise of Fano—a loosely organised, largely Amhara-identified armed movement that presents itself as both a protector of the people and a challenger to federal authority[18],[19]. In some areas, they fight alongside government forces; in others, they clash with them. This fluid alignment has left civilians navigating a maze of shifting loyalties, murky hierarchies, and unpredictable rules.

A local message we received from Lalibela in March 2025 illustrates the affective and spatial uncertainty that now defines everyday life:

> *"Here we are fine surviving under his protection God. The ongoing conflict last Tuesday the war here in Lalibela around the north location. The situation has worsened more people are dead. The war has been for seven hours."*
> *(G. & G., WhatsApp message, March 2025)*

It is in this context that the checkpoint becomes not merely a security device, but a node of power, ambiguity, and risk. In towns like Lalibela and throughout the rural highlands, checkpoints proliferate—not only those set up by federal forces, but by Fano fighters and, increasingly, by informal local actors[20], [21]. These are not permanent installations with clear chains of command; they are mobile, improvisational, and often personally negotiated.

For example, one respondent told us about a local driver—recognised by foreign researchers and visitors—who was killed in recent fighting:

> *"He also brought you to the hotel the last day you left. I'm pretty shocked. I think he was killed because he was a member of Fano."*
> *(R., WhatsApp message, March 2025)*

The consequences are immediate and intimate. Women fear harassment. Young men fear conscription or arbitrary arrest. Farmers delay travelling to markets. Teachers have been abducted and executed. According to residents interviewed by *Addis Standard*, "many civilians

[17] ACLED 2023
[18] SIGATU, Kaleab Tadesse. From Security Provider to a Security Risk? The Abrupt Withdrawal of Ethiopia's Decade-Long Peacekeeping Mission in UNISFA. *Hadtudományi Szemle*, 2022, **15**(4), pp. 69–91. https://doi.org/10.32563/hsz.2022.4.5
[19] CRISIS GROUP. *CrisisWatch Ethiopia* [online]. International Crisis Group Report, 2023 [cit. 10-4-2025]. Available from: https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/horn-africa/ethiopia
[20] ACLED. Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project [online]. 2023, 2024 [cit. 10-4-2025]. Available from: https://acleddata.com/
[21] interviews, March 2025

have been killed in crossfire," with some reports describing stray bullets, burnt fuel trucks, and entire kebeles falling under militant control[22].

> *"The militants abducted teachers, accusing them of teaching. They took them from their homes and executed them. The first teacher was killed while entering the school gate."*
> *(Merawi resident, Addis Standard, 2025)*

Meanwhile, the state's official narrative paints a conflicting picture: the Ethiopian army claims to have "destroyed" more than 300 Fano fighters in two days of fighting, while Fano representatives claim to have killed over 600 federal soldiers[23]. These competing figures reflect not only the intensity of the violence, but also the degree to which truth itself has become a contested battleground.

As state infrastructure withers and military engagements displace administrative order, the capacity to control movement has become one of the few remaining indicators of authority[24]. But unlike traditional state border posts, these checkpoints do not delineate inside from outside. They divide neighbourhoods, villages, even market roads—turning familiar routes into political frontlines. Many residents described facing different checkpoint rules within the span of a single kilometre, depending on who was present that day.

In this fragmented landscape, power is not exerted from the centre outward, but diffused through a thousand micro-territories of control, most of them unmarked, unauthorised, and unaccountable. The checkpoint, in Amhara today, is less a line than a performance—a moment in which authority is enacted, negotiated, and, for a fleeting second, stabilised.

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> *"Honestly, what's happening now is very sad, but we're used to it all now. So it's nothing new. All we can do is see the dead and only pray."*
> *(R., WhatsApp message, March 2025)*

This sentence—spoken with quiet resignation rather than drama—captures the emotional texture of life under wartime mobility control. Death is not shocking, only

[22] Addis Standard, 25–27 March 2025
[23] AFP 2025; Reuters 2025
[24] SCOTT, James C. *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2020. https://doi.org/10.12987/9780300252989

continuous. In a region where governance migrates through bodies and checkpoints, mourning becomes a form of endurance, and prayer a gesture of sovereignty that remains untouched.

Methodology: Listening to the Checkpoints

This article is grounded in qualitative fieldwork conducted in Lalibela and surrounding areas of the Amhara region in March 2025. In total, we conducted 15 semi-structured interviews with local residents, including women and men of varying ages, occupations, and social positions. The selection of respondents was shaped by availability, safety, and the willingness to speak about movement and control—topics often laden with risk, memory, and fear.

Our aim was not to produce a representative sample in a statistical sense, but rather to gather rich, situated accounts of lived experience. We sought to understand not only what people do in the face of checkpoints and violence, but how they feel, interpret, and narrate these encounters—in other words, how power is made meaningful through mobility.

Interviews were conducted in Amharic, with the assistance of a local interpreter and fixer deeply familiar with the region and its sociopolitical tensions. In many cases, conversations emerged informally—from walks through the town, visits to homes, or time spent sitting quietly during power cuts. In other instances, respondents reached out via WhatsApp, sending spontaneous voice messages or typed reflections in their own English—messages that, though grammatically imperfect, carried profound emotional clarity. For example, one resident wrote:

> *"Today no power, no bread, people fighting again. We are tired, but what can we do? Only wait and see what next."*
> *(WhatsApp message, March 2025)*

All respondents were anonymised for safety, and all identifying details—names, specific locations, professions—have been altered where necessary. Conversations involving trauma, loss, or sensitive political affiliation were handled with particular care, and no audio recordings were made unless explicitly requested and approved.

Given the dangerous and highly changeable nature of the conflict, fieldwork conditions were fluid, requiring flexibility, caution, and constant recalibration of movement and intent. As researchers, we were not exempt from the very dynamics we set out to study. We too negotiated checkpoints, adjusted routes, and relied on rumours to assess safety. This reflexivity forms part of our analytical lens: to study the politics of movement while moving through a politicised landscape.

Finally, this research recognises the role of faith, fatigue, and fatalism as analytical categories. When a respondent writes, *"All we can do is see the dead and only pray,"* we do not interpret this merely as resignation, but as an ethical framework of survival—a moral map for navigating a terrain where maps have lost their bearings.

This research was shaped not only by proximity, but by positionality. The author of this article is a young Amhara woman, raised in an urban setting and educated within the Ethiopian system, yet with close personal and academic ties to European colleagues. This dual orientation brought both access and ambivalence: access to voices and silences that are rarely shared with outsiders, and ambivalence toward the expectations of "objectivity" often demanded by foreign academia.

In the field, I was both an insider and an interpellated observer. My respondents shared with me not only what had happened, but how it felt—how they breathed under tension, how they measured each day not by the hour, but by the sound of gunfire, or the absence of it. And yet, through frequent exchanges with European researchers—many of whom were visibly shaken by the sudden collapse of order they witnessed—I became more attuned to what had become normal for us, but shocking for others.

> *"It's extremely stupid," M. told us—referring not to one event, but to everything: the checkpoints, the killings, the fear, the boredom.*
> *(Interview, Lalibela, March 2025)*

His words were not emotional, nor even angry. Just tired. And that fatigue—shared across many of our respondents—became a form of knowledge. Through European eyes, this fatigue often appeared as apathy; through ours, it was the clearest sign of survival.

Rather than attempt to neutralise this tension, I bring it into the analysis. This article is not written from a place of detachment, but from a place of partial immersion—a space between shared grief and structural critique. My aim is not to speak *for* Amhara, nor to explain it to the world, but rather to trace how power moves through roads, gestures, rumours, and unspoken calculations, in a land that is at once deeply familiar and increasingly unknowable.

Scenes of Passage: Checkpoints, Bodies, and the Politics of Movement

This section examines how governance in wartime Amhara is experienced through fragmented infrastructures, embodied encounters, and moral economies of movement. It begins by mapping the proliferation and variability of checkpoints, which function less as fixed barriers and more

as unpredictable arenas of discretionary and sometimes violent power. Respondents described being arbitrarily detained, humiliated, or physically assaulted, often without any explanation. Power here is not only performed—it is wielded abruptly and without accountability.

The analysis then turns to the embodied nature of passage—how gendered and affective performances shape interactions at these sites of control. From posture to voice modulation, individuals calibrate their behaviour in an attempt to read and pre-empt the intentions of the armed men they face.

Finally, attention is given to the stratification of mobility itself: while some individuals pass with ease, others face interrogation or threats depending not on law, but on appearance, accent, or access to informal networks. Taken together, these observations reveal a system in which authority circulates not through institutions, but through improvisation, domination, perception, and the daily choreography of survival.

Checkpoint Landscapes: Fragmented Infrastructures of Power

On maps, the Amhara region appears as a continuous territory—outlined in administrative borders, crossed by roads, and dotted with settlements. But for those who live there, space is experienced less as geography and more as a fluid patchwork of control, uncertainty, and shifting threat. One respondent summarised it bluntly: *"There is no safe road anymore. It depends on the hour, the rumour, and who is holding the gun that day."*

In Lalibela and its surrounding highlands, the number and nature of checkpoints have multiplied dramatically since mid-2023. No longer confined to federal army outposts, checkpoints are now established by various Fano factions, localised militias, and even loosely organised village groups. Their appearance varies—from sandbags and concrete blocks to nothing but a man with a rifle standing at a crossroads.

> *"Sometimes they ask for ID. Sometimes they don't. Sometimes they ask you to speak. Sometimes they just look at you and decide."*
> *(Interview with H., farmer, outskirts of Lalibela)*

This variability is not random; it reflects the absence of a unified logic of control. One day, a checkpoint enforces a curfew. The next, it is gone. Some are extortionary—used to collect informal fees. Others are symbolic, used to perform presence or mark territory. For residents, these shifting configurations mean that no route is ever neutral.

The topography of movement becomes layered with moral geographies: routes are remembered not by distance, but by risk. One woman described how a simple walk to the market became a negotiation of identity:

> *"They ask: are you Amhara? Do you speak Amharic? Do you support Fano? It is not a checkpoint; it's a question point."*

In such spaces, there are no clear rules, but strong expectations. People learn to anticipate what the person with the gun might want to see or hear—not because it has been declared, but because survival depends on playing the role of the "harmless citizen." These are what we call tacit scripts of compliance—socially learned behaviours that are rehearsed, repeated, and adjusted, not to express truth, but to reduce danger.

In this sense, the checkpoint is not just a site of physical filtering; it is a theatre of conditional belonging. One must signal trustworthiness, neutrality, or alignment, but in the absence of clear indicators, even silence becomes a political performance.

The spatial logic of these checkpoints reflects a new infrastructure of power—improvised, volatile, and deeply performative. Unlike state-built checkpoints, which signal bureaucracy, these checkpoints signal discretion. Decisions are made on the spot. Authority is not codified but embodied—by the posture of the guard, the tone of his voice, the look in his eyes.

In this landscape, maps are no longer reliable instruments of navigation. Instead, people rely on whispers, on mobile phone updates, on collective memory. As one interviewee put it:

> *"We don't follow roads. We follow information."*

These checkpoint regimes do not replace the state, but become the state as it is lived—diffuse, unstable, and carried in the bodies of those who enforce and endure them. While performance and affective navigation shape many encounters, several respondents stressed the sheer unpredictability and raw violence embedded in these moments. One man described being forced to kneel for half an hour without explanation; another witnessed a fellow villager beaten after failing to answer quickly. These were not ambiguous forms of control, but explicit demonstrations of domination. As one interviewee said bluntly:

> *"It's not a play. Sometimes it's just fear."*

In these situations, power is not negotiated—it is imposed.

The Body at the Border: Gendered and Embodied Control

At a checkpoint, a person is not simply a traveller. They are a body to be read—for signs of danger, suspicion, or subordination. In Amhara, where uniforms are inconsistent and rules opaque, the politics of passage is deeply embodied. Who you are—or rather, how you appear—is often more consequential than what you say.

One young woman from Lalibela explained:

> *"I walk with my head down. I say nothing. If they think you're strong, they stop you. If you look afraid, they stop you. If you speak too loudly, they stop you."*

This illustrates a central paradox: any gesture can be misread, and any non-gesture can be interpreted as concealment. The checkpoint thus becomes a place where individuals must perform an identity that is neither too visible nor too invisible—a narrow corridor of acceptability, navigated not through legal documents, but through posture, tone, and silence.

Gender plays a critical role in shaping how people experience these encounters. Women tend to emphasise fear of harassment and bodily vulnerability. Several described adopting strategies of self-effacement—avoiding eye contact, walking slowly, hiding their hair. As one respondent put it:

> *"I dress like an old woman now. It's better if they don't look at you."*

Another woman described how she deliberately travelled with her younger brother, not for protection, but because "having a man next to you makes them look at him, not you." Some mentioned changing their gait, flattening their voice, or using local dialects to appear less urban, less outspoken, less noticeable. These are not just performances of gender, but of calculated vulnerability.

Men, in contrast, spoke more often about fear of detention, interrogation, or forced recruitment. Young men, especially those with a certain build or speech pattern, were often pre-emptively treated as suspects—potential fighters or dissidents. One man told us:

> *"They said I was Fano because I didn't smile. What kind of reason is that?"*

These experiences show that the checkpoint does not merely screen for weapons or documents—it screens for bodies that fit or deviate from implicit expectations. The result is a form of affective profiling: fear, fatigue, or defiance are read as indicators of guilt.

Over time, these interactions shape how people inhabit their own bodies. Women shrink themselves. Men become performatively passive. Children are taught to walk without looking around. As one mother said:

> *"I told my son: never answer first. Wait. And keep your voice low."*

In such a regime, the body is not only vulnerable—it becomes a strategic instrument, trained to comply, to defer, to survive. This is governance not through laws, but through the disciplining of movement, emotion, and flesh.

And yet, not all bodies are read the same way. While locals must carefully calibrate their appearance and tone to avoid suspicion, foreigners—especially visibly white visitors—often interrupt the script entirely. Their presence can shift the tone of the interaction, soften aggression, or even produce surprising forms of hospitality.

One of us recalls a moment on a rural road near Lalibela, when a minibus was stopped by armed Fano fighters. As silence gripped the vehicle and passengers lowered their gaze, one of the men noticed the foreigner:

> *"Tourist?" he asked in English. When the reply came—'Yes, just travelling'—his tone shifted. He smiled faintly, asked where the visitor was from, then, after a short exchange, pulled out a scrap of paper: 'Here's my number. If you have any trouble, call me. I can help.'"*

The irony was stark. While locals concealed phones under floorboards and braced for interrogation, the outsider was offered protection by the very forces others feared. This was not an isolated episode. Throughout our fieldwork, we encountered multiple instances where foreigners were either waved through without question or addressed with exaggerated politeness—sometimes even reluctance, as if their presence complicated the usual choreography of power.

> *"They never asked for your passport," one local recalled. "But they asked me where I was going, who I knew, and why I was travelling alone."*

These moments do not negate the violence of the checkpoint regime. But they reveal that power, in Amhara, is relational, not absolute. The checkpoint is not a fixed space of authority, but a stage where identity is interpreted in the moment—contingent on how one is seen, heard, and placed within the conflict. The foreign body, especially when white and male, defies easy categorisation. It can be feared, resented, or used—but it is rarely ignored.

In this way, governance becomes conditional and comparative. The same checkpoint that strips one person of dignity may grant another a smile and a phone number. This asymmetry

reflects not only visible hierarchies of race and foreignness, but the deeper truth that sovereignty here is not just fragmented—it is negotiated, person by person. These fleeting privileges of the foreigner, however, are not without cost. Elsewhere, the same visibility attracts suspicion, opportunism, or overcharging. Mobility here is never free—it is always negotiated, in different currencies.

Mobility as Privilege: Knowing the System, Surviving the System

In Amhara, movement is not only restricted—it is unevenly distributed. While some people shrink their presence to avoid attention, others move through the same landscapes with a measure of ease. The difference lies not in legality, but in knowledge, language, connections—and above all, perception.

> *"My brother is in the army. They never stop me,"* one young man told us with quiet confidence.
> *"If they ask me questions, I just call someone. I have the numbers. They let me go."*

Others described how they avoided checkpoints altogether—not through force, but through routes known only to locals, or by paying drivers who knew when and where to pass.

> *"There are back roads. They cost more. But they are worth it if you don't want problems."*

Mobility, in this sense, is not just a physical act—it is a form of capital. Knowing who to call, what to say, which accent to use, or even how to frame your family background can mean the difference between arrest and safe passage.

In several interviews, people spoke of learning how to talk like someone from "nowhere"—to erase clues that might suggest loyalty to one side or another.

> *"I never say where I'm from. I say: I'm just going to the market. That's it. I speak soft Amharic, no village accent. I wear plain clothes. It helps."*

Others relied on social currency—a cousin who worked at a nearby base, a friend who knew a local commander. One man even showed us a voice message he played at checkpoints, recorded by a relative in the security forces, saying he was "cleared".

Meanwhile, those without such networks or skills were far more vulnerable—especially rural women, displaced persons, or ethnic minorities whose speech or dress marked them immediately. One woman who had fled from Kobo told us:

> *"I didn't know the roads. I didn't know anyone. I just followed others. When they stopped us, I froze. I couldn't speak. I just cried."*

These testimonies illustrate a central point: governance by checkpoint creates a hierarchy not only of ethnicity, class, or gender—but of mobility itself. The right to move is not universal. It is earned, bought, or borrowed. Those who master the informal codes of movement transform themselves from subjects into navigators. This produces not just inequality, but moral tension. Several respondents acknowledged feeling guilt or discomfort about their relative freedom:

> *"Others are stopped and searched. Me—they just wave me through. I feel lucky. But also ashamed. Why me?"*

In such a system, mobility is not just survival—it is privilege. And privilege, in the Amhara conflict, is not fixed or inherited. It is performed, negotiated, and sometimes simply guessed.

Discussion: Controlled Mobility as a Political Tool

Throughout this article, we have argued that mobility in wartime Amhara is not simply constrained—it is governed. But this governance does not take the form of clear laws, visible administrations, or predictable sanctions. Instead, it operates through a dispersed, relational infrastructure of checkpoints, bodies, rumours, and performances. In this system, movement is neither free nor entirely blocked—it is conditional, negotiated, and precarious.

This aligns with and extends the idea of "sovereignty as a practice"[25], where state-like power emerges not from institutions but from everyday performances of control. Checkpoints in Amhara are not only tools of territorial enforcement. They are technologies of power that produce moral hierarchies, spatial boundaries, and emotional atmospheres. They transform roads into theatres, and travellers into actors.

Yet unlike conventional state sovereignty, this system is characterised not by stability, but by volatility. There are no fixed rules—only expectations. And those expectations shift depending on time, place, and identity. As we have shown, people must read the situation and adjust accordingly. They draw on tacit knowledge, embodied scripts, and networks of informal protection.

This improvisational character does not mean that governance is weak. On the contrary, it makes it more intimate, more affective, and more difficult to resist. You cannot appeal to the law if there is no law. You cannot plan a route if maps have lost their meaning. This leads to a

[25] HANSEN, Thomas Blom and STEPPUTAT, Finn. Sovereignty revisited. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 2006, **35**(1), pp. 295–315. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.anthro.35.081705.123317

fundamental paradox: a government that cannot guarantee safety governs instead through uncertainty.

In such a context, fear is not a byproduct of violence—it is a modality of rule[26]. It penetrates the body, shapes behaviour, and disciplines movement. Women walk with their eyes lowered. Men erase their smiles. Children learn to wait before speaking. As one respondent told us: *"We don't move with our legs. We move with our judgment."*

At the same time, the checkpoint is not only a site of subjugation—it is also a space of negotiation, of micro-resistance, of improvisation. People leverage contacts, disguise their origins, feign neutrality, or play roles. Even the presence of foreigners can disrupt or soften the power play, as we saw in cases where armed actors performed hospitality in the presence of an international guest.

What emerges is a form of vernacular governmentality—not imposed from above, but enacted through daily encounters, shared rumours, and collective intuition. In Amhara, mobility is not just something to be regulated. It is where governance happens.

Conclusion: The Intimacy of Rule

This article began with a simple act: a person walking down a road. In ordinary times, such an act would be forgettable. But in wartime Amhara, movement has become a diagnostic of power. It reveals who is trusted, who is feared, who must speak, and who must keep silent. It transforms a footpath into a filter, a glance into a command, and a checkpoint into a stage.

We have argued that governance in Amhara has not collapsed—it has migrated. It now lives in the interstices of movement: in the way a woman lowers her eyes, in the way a man rehearses neutrality, in the way a boy learns to walk without curiosity. Checkpoints are not simply obstacles on a road. They are intimate infrastructures of rule, governing not by decree but by discretion, not through bureaucracy but through bodies.

What is perhaps most striking is not the presence of violence, but the absence of clarity. Rules shift. Logic dissolves. Maps mislead. In this environment, people learn to govern themselves—through anticipation, through affect, through fear. This is not a passive condition. It is a form of political learning, of survival choreography, of what we have called *vernacular governance by passage*.

[26] FASSIN, Didier. The embodied past. From paranoid style to politics of memory in South Africa. *Social Anthropology/Anthropologie Sociale*, 2008, **16**(3), pp. 312–328. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1469-8676.2008.00045.x

And yet, this is not merely a story of subjugation. Amid the fragmentation, people manoeuvre. They disguise, negotiate, leverage networks, and sometimes even laugh in the face of fear. Foreigners, too, find themselves woven into this mosaic—sometimes as spectators, sometimes as shields, occasionally as welcome disruptions. A smile, a joke, a gesture of politeness offered by a fighter may not signify peace—but it reveals that power is never pure performance. It is also relational.

One of our interlocutors described the situation with quiet fatalism: *"We are used to it now. All we can do is see the dead and only pray."* But in that statement lies not resignation—it is a moral grammar. To pray is not to accept. It is to endure, to wait, to preserve the sense that the current order is temporary, unjust, incomplete.

Because what checkpoints do not check is the memory of how things once were—and the hope for how they might be again. Movement is not only a site of control. It is also a trace of life, of persistence, of the refusal to disappear. Even the smallest act—crossing a road, keeping silent, whispering directions—becomes a form of survival.

What Amhara teaches us is that governance does not require a capital city or a constitution. It can be enacted one checkpoint at a time, through whispers, hesitations, and the trembling calculus of whether to speak or stay silent. It shows that sovereignty, in its most granular form, may not always—or not only—reside in the state, but in the quiet, invisible techniques by which people adjust their steps to survive.

To understand political control in conflict zones, we must therefore look not only at wars and ceasefires, but at how people walk, wait, and pass. Not at what the state declares, but at what it demands without speaking. Not at what power looks like, but at how it feels.

Because in Amhara today, power is not only visible at the checkpoint. It *is* the checkpoint.

And the body is not only controlled—it becomes the map.

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