

# Ethiopia | Freedom House

## POLITICAL RIGHTS: 7 / 40 (+3)

### A. ELECTORAL PROCESS: 1 / 12

#### **A1. Was the current head of government or other chief national authority elected through free and fair elections? 0 / 4**

The president is the head of state and is indirectly elected to a six-year term by both chambers of Parliament. The prime minister is head of government, and is selected by the largest party in Parliament after elections, or in the case of a resignation. Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed—a 42-year-old former military officer from Ethiopia's largest ethnic group, the Oromo, and a member of the ruling EPRDF—was sworn in as prime minister in April 2018, succeeding Hailemariam Desalegn, who resigned in February amid growing protests at which demonstrators demanded greater political rights. Abiy was reconfirmed at the EPRDF party congress in October. The last parliamentary elections, which led to the selection of Desalegn as prime minister in 2015, were not held in accordance with democratic standards.

#### **A2. Were the current national legislative representatives elected through free and fair elections? 0 / 4**

The bicameral Parliament includes the 153-seat House of Federation, whose members are elected by state assemblies to five-year terms, and the House of People's Representatives, with 547 members directly elected to five-year terms.

The 2015 parliamentary and regional elections were tightly controlled by the EPRDF, with reports of voter coercion, intimidation, and registration barriers. The opposition lost its sole parliamentary seat, as the EPRDF and its allies took all 547 seats in the House of People's Representatives.

#### **A3. Are the electoral laws and framework fair, and are they implemented impartially by the relevant election management bodies? 1 / 4**

The 2015 elections were held on time and official results were released within a month. However, opposition parties repeatedly questioned the independence of the National Electoral Board of Ethiopia (NEBE), and the Unity for Democracy and Justice (UDJ) party alleged that it blocked its leaders from registering as candidates.

Prime Minister Abiy has promised electoral reforms, and in November 2018, he met with opposition leaders to discuss how to make the electoral framework fairer. Also in November, Parliament confirmed Birtukan Mideksa, a prominent, previously exiled former opposition leader, to serve as head of the NEBE. At year's end, Parliament was considering a draft bill designed to increase the independence of the NEBE.

## **B. POLITICAL PLURALISM AND PARTICIPATION: 3 / 16 (+3)**

### **B1. Do the people have the right to organize in different political parties or other competitive political groupings of their choice, and is the system free of undue obstacles to the rise and fall of these competing parties or groupings? 1 / 4 (+1)**

Opponents of the EPRDF have found it nearly impossible to operate inside Ethiopia and were subject to prosecution under restrictive antiterrorism and other legislation. However, in 2018, authorities took a number of actions that gave political groupings more freedom to operate.

In January 2018, the government released hundreds of political prisoners, including Merera Gudina, leader of the OFC. Bekele Gerba, another prominent OFC figure, was freed in February. Both Merera and Bekele had been jailed on trumped-up charges of terrorism. In May, Andargachew Tsigie, who had been sentenced to death for his membership in the banned opposition group Ginbot 7, was pardoned. In June, Parliament removed Ginbot 7 and two other groups—the OLF, and the ONLF—from its list of terrorist organizations as a first step toward fostering peaceful and constructive political dialogue. And in July, Parliament approved a widespread amnesty for thousands of individuals charged with treason and other crimes against the state, most of whom had been released earlier in the year. These changes have paved the way for many high-profile opposition figures to return from exile, including Birhanu Nega of Ginbot 7, who returned in September after 11 years in exile.

Abiy's administration has pledged reforms that will ease the legal and practical requirements for opposition parties to operate, though substantial changes are necessary before political parties can carry out activities freely.

*Score Change: The score improved from 0 to 1 because the government took a number of steps that allowed political groupings greater freedom to operate, including releasing political prisoners, pardoning opposition leaders, and enacting an amnesty for thousands of people charged with crimes against the state.*

### **B2. Is there a realistic opportunity for the opposition to increase its support or gain power through elections? 1 / 4 (+1)**

The EPRDF still maintains numerous formal and informal advantages over opposition parties, and there are no opposition parties represented in Parliament. However, the changes Prime Minister Abiy's government began to implement in 2018 improved conditions for opposition groupings, which may now prepare more openly for the 2020 parliamentary elections. Abiy in August 2018 expressed a commitment to democratic polls, and pledged that he would not allow his reforms to delay the vote.

*Score Change: The score improved from 0 to 1 because Prime Minister Abiy's reforms allow opposition groupings to operate more openly in advance of 2020 elections.*

**B3. Are the people's political choices free from domination by the military, foreign powers, religious hierarchies, economic oligarchies, or any other powerful group that is not democratically accountable? 0 / 4**

Ethiopia's powerful military has been influential in the country's politics, and patronage networks, often based on ethnicity, often drive political decision-making. The authoritarian one-party system in Ethiopia largely excludes the public from genuine political participation, though nascent attempts by Abiy to include more diverse voices in the political system could yield positive results.

**B4. Do various segments of the population (including ethnic, religious, gender, LGBT, and other relevant groups) have full political rights and electoral opportunities? 1 / 4 (+1)**

Women hold nearly 39 percent of seats in the lower house and 32 percent in the upper house, but in practice, the interests of women are not well represented in politics. Prime Minister Abiy has made some effort, however, to include women in high-level decision-making processes. In 2018, women were appointed to a number of prominent positions including the presidency, head of the NEBE, head of the Supreme Court, and to half of all cabinet posts.

Political parties in Ethiopia are often based on ethnicity. The country's major ethnic parties are allied with the EPRDF, but have historically had little room to effectively advocate for their constituents. Ongoing friction inside the ruling coalition between the Tigrayan People's Liberation Front (TPLF), which previously dominated decision-making as well as resource allocation, and the other ethnically based parties, including Prime Minister Abiy's Oromo People's Democratic Organization (OPDO), continues.

*Score Change: The score improved from 0 to 1 due to the appointments of women to a number of senior government posts.*

**C. FUNCTIONING OF GOVERNMENT: 3 / 12**

**C1. Do the freely elected head of government and national legislative representatives determine the policies of the government? 0 / 4**

None of Ethiopia's nominally elected officials were chosen through credible elections, and the country's governance institutions remain dominated by the EPRDF.

**C2. Are safeguards against official corruption strong and effective? 2 / 4**

Corruption and unequal resource distribution are significant problems that have contributed to the unrest that has plagued Ethiopia in recent years. The government has taken some steps to address the issue, which remains a priority for Prime Minister Abiy's administration.

In November and December 2018, a number of high-profile military and government officials were arrested and charged with corruption. Notably, 26 high-level employees of the military-run Metals and Engineering Corporation (MeTEC),

including its chief executive, were arrested on corruption charges, and were awaiting trial at the end of the year. Some critics have accused the government of selectively prosecuting officials from the Tigray ethnic group, which has dominated the military for decades. However, a number of non-Tigray officials were also arrested in the sweep.

### **C3. Does the government operate with openness and transparency? 1 / 4**

Although EPRDF operations and decision-making processes have generally been opaque, the government has attempted to increase transparency in recent years, and in 2018 consulted with community organizations and journalists to advance reform efforts. The Legal and Justice Affairs Advisory Council was established in June 2018, and has a three-year term to study the country's restrictive terrorism, media, and nongovernmental organization (NGO) laws and recommend reforms to them. The council includes a number of legal professionals with various areas of expertise.

However, government procurement processes remain largely opaque, and some companies are still awarded government contracts without a tender. Due to widespread insecurity, in April the government postponed the census, which was originally scheduled for November 2017, by one year. (Carrying out the census is essential for planning the budget.)

## **CIVIL LIBERTIES: 12 / 60 (+4)**

### **D. FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION AND BELIEF: 4 / 16 (+2)**

#### **D1. Are there free and independent media? 1 / 4 (+1)**

After years of severe restrictions on press freedom, the government took initial steps to increase freedoms for independent media in 2018. A number of prominent journalists were released from prison during the year, including Eskinder Nega and Woubshet Taye, who were both freed in February after they each had served almost seven years in prison for criticizing the restrictive 2009 terrorism laws. As of December, no journalists were imprisoned in Ethiopia for the first time since 2004, according to CPJ. However, this progress was tempered somewhat by the arrests and detentions of five journalists and bloggers along with several politicians in March; they had been attending a party, which violated a state of emergency imposed the previous month that required permission for gatherings. After being detained for 12 days, the journalists were released with the others.

Ethiopia's media landscape is dominated by state-owned broadcasters and government-oriented newspapers. However, since Prime Minister Abiy took office in April, the government has eased restrictions on independent media, permitting both greater freedom for journalists and a more diverse range of news for consumers. In June, the government lifted bans on 264 websites (including news sites and blogs) and television networks. Among the outlets allowed to reopen were the US-based diaspora satellite television stations, Ethiopian Satellite Television (ESAT), and the Oromo Media Network (OMN), which had been charged with inciting terrorism and

banned in 2017. They each opened offices in Ethiopia after the bans were lifted; earlier, in May, the charges against both networks were dropped.

The government has promised to revise its controversial 2008 mass media law, which gives broad powers to the government to prosecute defamation, but at the end of 2018 legislation had not yet been drafted.

*Score Change: The score improved from 0 to 1 because the government eased restrictions on media, including by lifting bans on news outlets and releasing imprisoned journalists.*

## **D2. Are individuals free to practice and express their religious faith or nonbelief in public and private? 2 / 4**

The constitution guarantees religious freedom, but the government has historically discriminated against Muslims, who comprise about 34 percent of the population. In 2018, however, the relationship between the government and the Muslim community began to improve. Between February and May, more than a dozen prominent Muslim activists who had been convicted under the country's antiterrorism law in 2015 for protesting against the government's treatment of Muslims were released from prison. Additionally, Prime Minister Abiy facilitated dialogues during the year to heal schisms in both the Ethiopian Orthodox Church and among the country's Islamic leaders.

## **D3. Is there academic freedom, and is the educational system free from extensive political indoctrination? 0 / 4**

Academic freedom is restricted in Ethiopia. The government has accused universities of being pro-opposition and prohibits political activities on campuses. There are reports of students being pressured into joining the EPRDF in order to secure employment or admission to universities; professors are similarly pressured in order to ensure favorable positions or promotions. The Ministry of Education closely monitors and regulates official curricula, and the research, speech, and assembly rights of both professors and students are frequently restricted.

## **D4. Are individuals free to express their personal views on political or other sensitive topics without fear of surveillance or retribution? 1 / 4 (+1)**

Wide-reaching surveillance programs and the presence of the EPRDF at all levels of society have inhibited private discussion. However, broad political changes in 2018, including the release of political prisoners and lifting of bans against prominent government critics in the media and other sectors has fostered a more open atmosphere for private discussion. And unlike in some previous years, in 2018 there were no reported arrests of private citizens in connection with antigovernment remarks.

Some international organizations have expressed concerns about a proposed hate speech law that the Office of the Attorney General began drafting in November, arguing that it could curtail free speech. The draft legislation could place restrictions on social media posts, which some government officials have partially blamed for

ethnic violence that wracked the country in 2018. The law had not yet been enacted as of December.

In response to violence or unrest, the government is known to shut down internet access, curtailing people's ability to communicate. In August, in response to ethnic clashes, the government shut down mobile and broadband internet access in the Somali Region for several days.

*Score Change: The score improved from 0 to 1 because broad political reforms have resulted in individuals' increased willingness to express political views in private discussions.*

## **E. ASSOCIATIONAL AND ORGANIZATIONAL RIGHTS: 2 / 12 (+2)**

### **E1. Is there freedom of assembly? 1 / 4 (+1)**

Severe restrictions on freedom of assembly imposed by the EPRDF government in the past eased somewhat in 2018, as demonstrations were more frequently allowed to occur without interference. However, protests were still sometimes violently dispersed by security forces. In August, for example, police opened fire on a group of demonstrators protesting the looting of property owned by ethnic minorities in the Somali Region, killing four people.

A government-imposed state of emergency, which was announced in February in response to the escalating ethnic violence and the resignation of former prime minister Hailemariam Desalegn, effectively banned public protests until it was lifted in June, two months earlier than planned. The internet was blocked several times in 2018 in response to mass demonstrations, hampering their organization. In September, mobile internet was blocked for three days in Addis Ababa in the wake of protests.

*Score Change: The score improved from 0 to 1 because demonstrations were more frequently allowed to occur without interference.*

### **E2. Is there freedom for nongovernmental organizations, particularly those that are engaged in human rights– and governance-related work? 1 / 4 (+1)**

In 2018, the space for NGOs to operate opened significantly. NGOs can now more freely organize public events, renew registration, and make public statements that are critical of the government without facing harassment or intimidation by authorities.

The 2009 Charities and Societies Proclamation restricts the activities of foreign NGOs by prohibiting work on political and human rights issues, though Prime Minister Abiy has promised to revise the legislation, and the Legal and Justice Affairs Advisory Council sought input from an array of NGOs during its review of the law. A draft of the new proclamation, which would ease funding restrictions for human rights groups and politically oriented NGOs and limit the ability of the Charities and Societies Agency to interfere with their operations, was under consideration by the Council of Ministers at the end of 2018.

*Score Change: The score improved from 0 to 1 because government interference with the work of NGOs decreased.*

### **E3. Is there freedom for trade unions and similar professional or labor organizations? 0 / 4**

Trade union rights are tightly restricted. Neither civil servants nor teachers have collective bargaining rights. All unions must be registered, and the government retains the authority to cancel registration. Two-thirds of union members belong to organizations affiliated with the Confederation of Ethiopian Trade Unions, which is under government influence. Independent unions face harassment, and trade union leaders are regularly imprisoned. There has not been a legal strike since 1993, though unsanctioned ones sometimes take place.

## **F. RULE OF LAW: 2 / 16**

### **F1. Is there an independent judiciary? 1 / 4**

The judiciary is officially independent, but in practice it is subject to political interference, and judgments rarely deviate from government policy. The November 2018 appointment of lawyer and civil society leader Meaza Ashenafi as chief justice of the Supreme Court has raised hopes for judicial reform. Ashenafi has promised to build judicial independence and reduce corruption in the courts, and she claims to have the support of Prime Minister Abiy in this endeavor.

### **F2. Does due process prevail in civil and criminal matters? 0 / 4**

Due process rights are generally not respected. However, in 2018, the Legal and Justice Affairs Advisory Council began a review of the 2009 Anti-Terrorism Proclamation, which has been used to arbitrarily arrest opposition figures, NGO leaders, journalists, and other critics of the government. In February 2018, 10,000 people who had been arbitrarily detained under a state of emergency imposed in October 2017 were released, though the government also said it intended to bring charges against thousands of others detained in the sweep.

Despite some positive developments in 2018, arbitrary arrest and detention remains common. During one weekend in September, nearly 3,000 people were arrested in a sweep purportedly meant to address rising crime in Addis Ababa, with many detained for activities that are not criminal offenses in Ethiopia, such as smoking shisha. Although many of those arrested were promptly released, some 1,200 youths detained for their alleged participation in September protests against ethnic violence were sent to a military facility for a month, for “rehabilitation.” The right to a fair trial is often not respected, particularly for opponents of the government charged under the antiterrorism law.

### **F3. Is there protection from the illegitimate use of physical force and freedom from war and insurgencies? 0 / 4**

Ethnic violence and unrest continued in numerous regions of Ethiopia in 2018, mainly between members of the Oromo community and other groups, and the

violence escalated after Abiy, an ethnic Oromo, took office. In response to the crisis, in which numerous people were killed and at least a million people were displaced in 2018 alone, Parliament approved a new reconciliation commission in December to promote dialogue and encourage a peaceful resolution to the conflicts.

Earlier, in August, Prime Minister Abiy deployed the army to the eastern Somali Region amid an apparent dispute between regional and federal authorities and an outbreak of violence against ethnic minorities; federal forces subsequently arrested and imprisoned the region's president, Abdi Illey, on charges of orchestrating widespread rights abuses and stoking ethnic violence.

Security forces frequently commit human rights violations including torture and extrajudicial killings, and often act with impunity. However, the new government has shown some willingness to hold police and military personnel accountable. In November, 36 senior intelligence officials were arrested for human rights abuses including torture, and awaited trial at year's end.

#### **F4. Do laws, policies, and practices guarantee equal treatment of various segments of the population? 1 / 4**

Repression of the Oromo and ethnic Somalis, and government attempts to coopt their political parties into EPRDF allies, has fueled nationalism in the Oromia and Somali regions. The property of ethnic minorities, and of people living in areas where they are not members of the majority group, are frequently targeted in the unrest that has wracked Ethiopia.

Same-sex sexual activity is prohibited by law and punishable by up to 15 years' imprisonment. Women face discrimination in education, access to credit, and employment.

### **G. PERSONAL AUTONOMY AND INDIVIDUAL RIGHTS: 4 / 16**

#### **G1. Do individuals enjoy freedom of movement, including the ability to change their place of residence, employment, or education? 1 / 4**

While the constitution establishes freedom of movement, violence, particularly in the Oromia and Somali regions, impedes people's ability to travel freely.

In September 2018, following a declaration of peace between Ethiopia and Eritrea in July, key border crossings between the two countries opened for the first time in 20 years.

#### **G2. Are individuals able to exercise the right to own property and establish private businesses without undue interference from state or nonstate actors? 1 / 4**

Private business opportunities are limited by rigid state control of economic life and the prevalence of state-owned enterprises. Prime Minister Abiy has promised to implement significant economic reforms, and in June 2018, the government announced that it would open state monopolies in aviation and telecommunications to private investment.

All land must be leased from the state. The government has evicted indigenous groups from various areas to make way for infrastructure projects. It has also leased large tracts of land to foreign governments and investors for agricultural development in opaque deals that have resulted in the displacement of thousands of people.

Evictions have taken place in the Lower Omo Valley, where government-run sugar plantations and hydroelectric dams have put thousands of pastoralists at risk by diverting their water supplies.

### **G3. Do individuals enjoy personal social freedoms, including choice of marriage partner and size of family, protection from domestic violence, and control over appearance? 1 / 4**

Legislation protects women's rights, but these rights are routinely violated in practice. Enforcement of laws against rape and domestic abuse is inconsistent, and cases routinely stall in the courts. In 2018, a joint research project conducted by academics at Debre Markos University in Ethiopia and the University of Queensland in Australia concluded that almost half of Ethiopian women become victims of gender-based violence in their lifetimes.

Forced child marriage is illegal but common in Ethiopia, and prosecutions for the crime are rare. According to UN International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) statistics for 2017, 40 percent of women are married before the age of 18. Female genital mutilation (FGM) is also illegal, but the law is inconsistently enforced, and the 2016 Ethiopian Demographic Health Survey found that 65 percent of women between the ages of 15 and 49 had undergone the practice. However, reports suggest that FGM rates have reduced in recent years due to efforts by both NGOs and the government to combat the practice.

### **G4. Do individuals enjoy equality of opportunity and freedom from economic exploitation? 1 / 4**

Trafficking convictions have increased in recent years, though the US government continues to urge its Ethiopian counterparts to more aggressively pursue trafficking cases. Many children continue to work in dangerous sectors and lack access to basic education and services. Most agricultural labor in rural areas is performed by women, but these women are generally excluded from decision-making processes regarding their work.