Key Developments in 2016:

- In October, in response to ongoing antigovernment protests, the authorities enacted a state of emergency that allowed them to restrict internet access and social media use.
- The Addis Standard magazine halted publication of its print edition, citing restrictions linked to the state of emergency.
- Ethiopia was the second-worst jailer of journalists in sub-Saharan Africa, according to the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), which counted 16 journalists behind bars as of December.
- Authorities continued to restrict free movement and reporting outside Addis Ababa. In August, three journalists, including two from the U.S. Public Broadcasting Service (PBS), were detained while reporting on a severe drought from the town of Shashamene and escorted back to the capital, where they were ordered to remain.

Executive Summary

Ethiopia’s media environment is one of the most restrictive in sub-Saharan Africa. The government of Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn continues to use the country’s harsh antiterrorism law and other legal measures to silence critical journalists and bloggers. As
of December 2016, Ethiopia was detaining 16 journalists, making it the fifth-worst jailer of journalists in the world and the second-worst in sub-Saharan Africa, after Eritrea. In addition to the use of harsh laws, the government employs a variety of other strategies to maintain a stranglehold on the flow of information, including outright censorship of newspapers and the internet, arbitrary detention and intimidation of journalists and online writers, and heavy taxation on the publishing process.

In 2016, Ethiopia was racked by antigovernment protests, which primarily took place in the Oromia and Amhara regions; more than 800 people were killed in the government’s disproportionate response, according to some estimates, and thousands more were detained. As protests continued, authorities in October imposed a severely restrictive state of emergency that banned many forms of speech. Among other actions taken under the state of emergency, the government prohibited the use of social media to share information about the situation, blocked access to two important diaspora television channels that were deemed terrorist organizations, and banned political parties from issuing any press statements that authorities deemed incendiary. A number of reporters were swept up in the mass detentions that followed the emergency declaration. The state of emergency significantly limited independent journalists’ activities and contributed to a pervasive atmosphere of self-censorship, allowing state-run and government-friendly private outlets to fill the resulting information vacuum.

Journalists also continued to face repercussions for reporting on previous years’ protests. In March, Solomon Kebede, managing editor of the now-defunct publication Ye Muslimoch Guday, finally received a prison sentence after being detained since January 2013 on terrorism charges linked to coverage of 2012 protests by the Muslim community. He was reportedly released in April 2016. Two journalists with Radio Bilal who had also reported on the Muslim protests were convicted on terrorism charges in December 2016, but had not been sentenced by year’s end. They had been in detention since early 2015.

**Legal Environment: 29 / 30 (↓1)**

While the constitution guarantees freedom of the press, the 2005 criminal code contains many provisions that limit this right, including restrictions on “obscene” communication, defamation, and criticism of public officials. The 2009 antiterrorism law, ostensibly designed to address crimes related to armed insurgencies, has been used extensively against journalists. Among them are Darsema Sori and Khalid Mohammed of the faith-based Radio Bilal, who had been arrested in 2015 in connection with coverage of demonstrations by members of Ethiopia’s Muslim community. In December 2016, they were convicted of inciting terrorism and attempting to overthrow the government, but had not been sentenced at year’s end. In March, Kebede, the managing editor of the now-defunct publication Ye Muslimoch Guday, finally received a prison sentence after being detained since 2013 on terrorism charges linked to coverage of the same protest movement; he was freed the following month. Yusuf Getachew, also of Ye Muslimoch Guday, was released from prison in September 2016 after receiving a presidential pardon; he had been imprisoned since 2012 and convicted under the terrorism law in 2015, also for covering the Muslim protests.
Other laws that can be used to restrict journalists’ activities include the Computer Crime Proclamation, which was adopted by the House of People’s Representatives in June 2016, and enables surveillance by security forces and broadens the definition of criminal defamation. The 2012 Telecom Fraud Offences Proclamation prescribes significant fines and up to eight years in prison for those convicted of using the telecommunications network to disseminate a “terrorizing message.” The law also criminalizes the use of popular voice over internet protocol (VoIP) communications software such as Skype for commercial purposes, or to bypass the telecommunications monopoly of state-owned Ethio Telecom. The 2009 Proclamation for the Registration and Regulation of Charities and Societies introduced onerous administrative requirements for nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and has crippled their ability to monitor and advocate for media freedom and other rights issues.

In 2016, Ethiopia was racked by antigovernment protests, which primarily took place in the Oromia and Amhara regions; more than 800 people were killed in the government’s disproportionate response, according to some estimates, and thousands more were detained. In October, a state of emergency was imposed in response to the protests. This six-month law restricts the use of social media to share information about the situation and prohibited people from viewing or disseminating material from two television channels run by Ethiopians abroad—Ethiopian Satellite Television and Radio (ESAT), and Oromo Media Network (OMN)—which were characterized as terrorist organizations. It also banned political parties from issuing any press statements that authorities deemed incendiary, and prohibited the dissemination of material that “could create misunderstanding between people or unrest.” A number of reporters were swept up in the mass detentions that followed the emergency declaration.

The government’s selective enforcement of the laws and the lack of an independent judiciary mean that journalists have few guarantees of due process or a fair trial. Court cases can continue for years, and many journalists have multiple charges pending against them.

The 2008 Freedom of the Mass Media and Access to Information Proclamation allows for freedom of information, but imposes onerous licensing and registration requirements and harsh sanctions for violations. The media regulatory system remains under the control of the ruling party, and most professional media associations are closely aligned with the government.

Authorities are known to monitor private telephone calls, online communications, and web browsing habits, and have taken steps to prevent the use of tools that can be used to circumvent such monitoring, including Tor and virtual private network (VPN) software. The threat of surveillance, as well as the restrictive provisions of the 2016 state of emergency, made it extremely difficult for journalists to organize to defend their interests in 2016. Harsh press laws and the ongoing repression of media workers discourage people from entering the profession of journalism.

**Political Environment: 38 / 40 (↓2)**

Ethiopia’s media are dominated by state-owned broadcasters and government-oriented newspapers. Many private newspapers, which generally have low circulation, report that
officials attempt to control content through article placement requests and telephone calls to editors about stories that are critical of the government. Reporters who cover controversial topics risk being arrested or dismissed from their jobs.

Private media outlets have difficulty accessing government information and press briefings, and gaining access to official events. Many bloggers and journalists at private outlets are wary of even attempting to interact with government officials, with mistrust deepening in the wake of the 2016 state of emergency. Officials, for their part, seldom provide unscripted information even to friendly media, out of concern for their careers.

Authorities continued to restrict free movement and reporting outside Addis Ababa. In August, three journalists, including two from the U.S. public broadcaster, were detained while reporting on a severe drought from the town of Shashamene and escortied back to the capital, where they were ordered to remain.

Censorship and self-censorship are routinely practiced. Government control of the country’s primary printing press allows for prepublication censorship of newspapers. The risk of job loss, harassment, prosecution, and arbitrary arrest encourage journalists to self-censor.

Provisions of the state of emergency severely restricted the range of news sources available in Ethiopia. Access to websites including Facebook, Twitter, the Washington Post, the New York Times and numerous local websites was blocked. In October, the Addis Standard magazine halted publication of its print edition, citing restrictions linked to the state of emergency.

Harassment and intimidation of critical journalists in Ethiopia remains a common practice among law enforcement officials. The mass arrests that accompanied the 2016 state of emergency further served to intimidate Ethiopian journalists. Several of the journalists who were swept up in the detentions remained in custody without charge at year’s end.

**Economic Environment: 19 / 30**

The number of print outlets covering politics has decreased significantly over the last decade, while weekly papers and magazines on business and lifestyle topics have proliferated. The state operates the only national television station and owns almost all radio outlets, the primary sources of information for Ethiopians. State-controlled media are biased in favor of the government and the ruling party. Broadcasting law prohibits any political, religious, or foreign entities from owning stations, and the owners of the few private radio stations that operate are generally seen as friendly to the authorities. In October 2016, the Broadcasting Authority granted digital television licenses to private companies for the first time. However, the three new licenses went to broadcasters affiliated with ruling party.

Ethiopia is one of the few remaining countries in Africa to maintain a complete monopoly on telecommunications, including provision of internet service. The government’s control of the telecommunications sector has allowed it to contain the potential of new communication technologies that might enable greater civic and political mobilization. At
the same time, it has invested massive resources into technologies that support its own state surveillance apparatus and development agenda.

The state telecommunications company continued to disrupt the signals of international broadcasters including Voice of America and Deutsche Welle in 2016, and blocked internet access on numerous occasions throughout the year. A nationwide internet blackout in August lasted two days. Internet access in Oromia and Amhara was frequently blocked as mass protests took place. Mobile access to the internet was blocked in number of places following the declaration of the state of emergency. Just over 15 percent of people in Ethiopia accessed the internet in 2016.

Fear of prosecution and heavy taxes on the publishing process have effectively concentrated the printing industry in the hands of the largest state-run printer, Berhanena Selam Printing Press. In 2012, Berhanena Selam introduced a revised "standard contract" that allows it to refuse distribution of content deemed to be contrary to state interests. Publishers must submit to the contract or risk losing their printing privileges. By giving the state enterprise the power to vet and review articles before printing them, the new contract essentially reestablished official prepublication censorship in Ethiopia.

Most advertising contracts originate with the government or companies associated with the state, and go to state-affiliated outlets rather than independent ones. Advertising from private companies can also be challenging to obtain, as these organizations could face retaliation from the government for advertising in critical publications.

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