Ethiopia

Country:
Ethiopia

Year:
2016

Press Freedom Status:
Not Free

PFS Score:
83

Legal Environment:
28

Political Environment:
36

Economic Environment:
19

Overview

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 draconian antiterrorism law and other legal measures to silence critical journalists and bloggers, though pressure abated slightly following the landslide victory by the ruling Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) in May 2015 general elections. In addition to legal pressure, the government employs a variety of strategies to maintain a stranglehold on the flow of information; these include outright censorship of newspapers and the internet; arbitrary detention and intimidation of journalists and bloggers; and heavy taxation on the publishing process.

Key Developments

• Ethiopia was the second-worst jailer of journalists in sub-Saharan Africa, after Eritrea, with 10 journalists in jail at the end of 2015.
• Following the May 2015 elections, a number of journalists with the Zone 9 blogging collective who faced terrorism charges saw their cases dropped, or were acquitted. In December, authorities initiated proceedings aimed at overturning the acquittals.
• An Italian cybersecurity company cut ties with the Ethiopian government after documents leaked in July indicated that the firm had ignored signs that its technology was facilitating abusive surveillance of journalists by Ethiopian officials.
• In November, Gizaw Taye, the publisher of the discontinued magazine *Lomi* who fled the country in 2014 amid a pre-election crackdown, was convicted in absentia of dubious tax evasion charges and sentenced to 18 years in prison.
• Two journalists—one with an opposition newspaper and another with a state-owned newspaper that had covered mass protests—were arrested in December, and were being held without charge at year’s end.

**Legal Environment: 28 / 30**

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. A number of media workers prosecuted under the law have been accused of collaboration with government-designated terrorist organizations simply for publishing information about such groups or conducting interviews with their leaders; the law has also been invoked against journalists who cover mass demonstrations. In August 2015, Yusuf Getachew of the defunct Muslim weekly *Ye Muslimoch Guday* was sentenced to seven years in prison for plotting acts of terrorism and inciting violence. He had been detained since 2012, when he was charged under the law’s provisions in connection with coverage of an ongoing protest movement by members of Ethiopia’s Muslim community against alleged state interference in their affairs. Yusuf’s colleague Solomon Kebede, who was arrested in 2013 in connection with his coverage of the same movement, also remains in prison; his trial on terrorism charges was ongoing in December 2015. Separately, two journalists from the faith-based Radio Bilal who had been covering the Muslim demonstrations—Darsema Sori and Khalid Mohammed—were arrested in February 2015. After being held for months without charge, in August they were finally accused under the antiterrorism law of seeking to overthrow Desalegn’s administration in order to replace it with an Islamic government. The case was ongoing at the year’s end.

Legal pressure against critical journalists appeared to abate somewhat following general elections in May, which saw a landslide victory for Desalegn’s EPRDF. In April 2014, five bloggers with the Zone 9 collective, which is known for its advocacy for free expression, were charged with receiving aid and instructions from terrorist groups with the intention to destabilize the country, and taken into custody. Two were released in July, some weeks after the polls, when charges against them were dropped. In October, a court acquitted four other Zone 9 bloggers of terrorism charges, and released them. A fifth blogger, Befekadu Hailu, was acquitted as well, but remained in custody for a few days longer on a separate charge of inciting violence. He was released on bail later in October, but that charge remained pending at year’s end. However, in December the five bloggers acquitted of terrorism charges were summoned back to court after the prosecutor’s office initiated an appeal of their acquittals.

Separately, in July three freelance journalists who were arrested along with the Zone 9 bloggers in 2014 were freed after authorities dropped the charges against them. Also in
July, columnist Reeyot Alemu, in custody since 2011 and serving a five-year sentence for ostensibly plotting terrorist attacks, was released a year early, likely in connection with an impending visit to Ethiopia by U.S. President Barack Obama.

Other restrictive laws that impede the practice of journalism include the 2008 Freedom of the Mass Media and Access to Information Proclamation, which imposes onerous licensing and registration requirements and harsh sanctions for violations, and the 2012 Telecom Fraud Offences Proclamation, which prescribes significant fines and up to eight years in prison for those convicted of using the telecommunications network to disseminate a “terrorizing message.” The latter 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 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. Charges are often filed arbitrarily in response to personal disputes. Court cases can continue for years, and many journalists have multiple charges pending against them.

Ethiopia has one of the continent’s most progressive freedom of information laws, but access to public information is largely restricted in practice, and the government has traditionally allowed only state-owned media outlets to cover official events.

The Ethiopian Broadcasting Authority, which reports to the Government Communications Affairs Office, regulates broadcast and print media. In June 2015, the body ordered Zami Public Connections, a radio station owned by a prominent local journalist, to shut down after it refused to cancel a program known for airing politically sensitive information, though it was unclear if the government would enforce the order.

The 2009 Proclamation for the Registration and Regulation of Charities and Societies has crippled the ability of nongovernmental organizations to monitor and advocate for media freedom and other human rights issues.

In 2013, employees of the independent Ethiopian Satellite Television Service (ESAT), a satellite broadcaster run by diaspora journalists operating abroad, were targeted with sophisticated spyware that can be used to copy files, obtain passwords, and intercept Skype calls and instant messages. Documents leaked in July 2015 revealed that the Ethiopian government purchased this software from the Italian cybersecurity firm Hacking Team, whose staff had continued to assist Ethiopian intelligence agents despite indications that they were conducting surveillance on ESAT journalists. Hacking Team discontinued its relationship with Ethiopia later in the year.

**Political Environment: 36 / 40**

Many private newspapers 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; such topics include a controversial government plan to cede parts of
Oromia State to the federal capital region of Addis Ababa, as well as the ongoing protest movement by members of Ethiopia’s Muslim community.

Censorship and self-censorship are routinely practiced. The government obstructs access to numerous websites, including independent and international news sites, opposition websites, and the sites of groups designated as terrorist organizations. Tor, a software package that allows users to circumvent internet filtering and browse the web anonymously, has been blocked since Ethio Telecom adopted deep packet inspection (DPI) to control internet traffic in 2012. Government control of the country’s primary printing press allows for prepublication censorship of newspapers.

Journalists are frequently detained without charge. In December 2015, police arrested Getachew Shiferaw, editor of the online newspaper Negere Ethiopia, which is known for its coverage of legal proceedings against journalists and which was forced to stop circulating print editions in 2014. Days later, a court granted authorities permission to detain him without charge for 28 days; press freedom advocates have expressed concern that he will face charges under the antiterrorism law. The same month, police arrested Fikadu Mirkana, an anchor with the state-owned Oromia Radio and TV; authorities did not disclose the reason for his arrest, but it followed the station’s coverage of protests against the capital expansion plan. Journalists who fail to toe the government line risk prosecution on trumped-up charges unrelated to their work. In November, Gizaw Taye, the publisher of the discontinued magazine Lomi who fled the country in 2014 amid a government crackdown, was convicted in absentia of dubious tax evasion charges; he was sentenced to 18 years in prison.

Harassment and intimidation of critical journalists in Ethiopia remains a common practice among law enforcement officials. Human Rights Watch has extensively documented dozens of cases of abuse and mistreatment of inmates at the Maekelawi detention center—a key federal facility for journalists and other political prisoners in Addis Ababa—including unlawful interrogation tactics and denial of access to basic needs, as well as to family members and lawyers, in order to obtain coerced confessions. In October 2015, reports emerged that authorities were denying medical treatment and family visits to Temesgen Desalegn, the former editor and owner of the now-defunct independent weekly Feteh. He is currently serving a three-year sentence for incitement, criminal defamation, and false publication related to a series of 2012 articles that criticized the government’s repression of student activists and ethnic minorities.

Growing concerns about politically motivated charges and possible imprisonment prior to the May 2015 elections prompted at least 34 journalists to flee into exile between June 2014 and May 2015.

Economic Environment: 19 / 30

The number of print outlets covering politics have decreased significantly over the last decade, while weekly papers and magazines on business and lifestyle topics—catering to the growing urban middle class—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
Broadcasting law prohibits any political, religious, or foreign entities from owning stations, though the owners of the few private radio stations are generally seen as friendly to the authorities. More than a dozen community radio stations are in operation, and serve as critical nodes in promoting topics related to development among the country’s rural population. The signals of international broadcasters such as Deutsche Welle and Voice of America (VOA) have occasionally been jammed, reportedly with technical support from the Chinese government. In October 2015, the Ethiopian Broadcasting Authority announced it would issue dozens of new public and private broadcast licenses over the next several years. No concrete steps were taken toward that goal by year’s end.

Ethiopia is one of the few remaining countries in Africa to maintain a complete monopoly on telecommunications, including provision of internet service. With the support of the Chinese government, Ethio Telecom managed to raise mobile connectivity to approximately 50 million subscribers, out of a population of nearly 100 million, in 2015. However, only about 11.6 percent of the population had access to the internet in 2015. The government’s control of the telecommunications sector has allowed it to contain the potential of new communication technologies to enable civic and political mobilization, but it continues to invest massive resources in these technologies to support its own state surveillance apparatus and development agenda.

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.

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