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Freedom Of The Press - Ethiopia (2011)

Status: Not Free
Legal Environment: 27
Political Environment: 33
Economic Environment: 18
Total Score: 78

The political climate in Ethiopia in 2010 was heavily influenced by national elections that took place in May, which saw the ruling party, the Ethiopian People Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), and its affiliates, win all but two seats in the parliament. The government took a variety of measures to secure greater control over the country, avoid the unrest that accompanied parliamentary elections in 2005, and ensure an electoral outcome favorable to itself. To this end, journalists and opposition figures were intimidated and harassed, but, most importantly, the EPRDF used state resources to support its political platform, creating an uneven playing field for other parties to compete.

The constitution guarantees freedom of the press, but this right is often restricted in practice. The Freedom of the Mass Media and Access to Information Proclamation became law in December 2008 after years of consultation and debate. The legislation has been criticized by the private media and press freedom groups for imposing constraints on journalists and harsh sanctions for violations. The most controversial provisions from the original draft law had already been included in the penal code that took effect in May 2005. Of greater concern is the selective approach the government takes in implementing laws, as well as the lack of an independent judiciary. Journalists have few guarantees that they will receive a fair trial, and charges are often issued in response to personal disputes. Court cases can continue for years, and many journalists have multiple charges pending against them. Following an arrest in 2009 on criminal defamation charges, in January 2010, *Al-Quds* editor in chief Ezedin Mohamed was sentenced to one year in prison for another article, which criticized statements made by Prime Minister Meles Zenawi. Mohamed was released on September 11. However, on the same day, Akram Ezedin, Mohamed's son and interim editor in chief for *Al-Quds* during Mohamed's imprisonment, was arrested without charge for the publication of articles criticizing the local Islamic Council in Ethiopia's Afar region. In another case in March 2010, the Ethiopian Supreme Court overruled a 2007 presidential pardon given to four publishing companies, Serkalem, Sisay, Zekarias, and Fasil. The publishing houses had been shut down as part of the 2005 postelection crackdowns on independent press and political opposition, and the publishers and editors were imprisoned. The Supreme Court's decision required the publishing companies to pay a record fine. According to the Committee to Protect Journalists, four journalists are in jail as of December 2010, including two Eritrean journalists from Eri-TV who were reportedly arrested by Ethiopian forces in the Somali capital of Mogadishu in 2006, and continue to be held at an undisclosed location in Ethiopia.

Ethiopia has one of Africa's most progressive freedom of

information laws, although access to public information is largely restricted in practice, and the government has traditionally limited coverage of official events to state-owned media outlets. According to the media monitoring undertaken by the European Union in the run up to the 2010 elections, coverage tended to favor the ruling party, but its tone was largely neutral, and other parties were allowed access to the state television and radio broadcasters to present their platforms and participate in debates. However, the curtailing of the space for civil society to operate was influenced by less visible measures already adopted by the government in 2009, when legislative measures were taken to restrict the ability of actors other than the state to operate in areas such as human rights. The Proclamation for the Registration and Regulation of Charities and Societies was passed by the parliament in January 2009, curtailing the ability of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) to operate in sectors other than education, health, and food security. The repercussions of this law became increasingly evident around election time, reducing the ability of international NGOs to implement projects in the areas of governance and human rights, including freedom of expression. Another law that constrains public debate is the Anti-Terrorist Proclamation, which took effect in July 2009. It was theoretically designed to combat groups accused by the Ethiopian government of carrying out terrorist activities, such as the Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF) and the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF). However, its broad definition of who can be considered a terrorist caused concern among international free-expression groups, as did language imposing prison terms of up to 20 years on those who "write, edit, print, publish, publicize, or disseminate" statements deemed to "encourage, support, or advance" terrorist acts. This provision had an almost immediate effect on the media. The exiled editors of a political newsletter, Dereje Habtewold and Fasil Yenealem, were convicted in absentia in August 2010 of involvement in a terrorist plot. The concern that the law was being used to prepare charges against the newspaper *Addis Neger* caused three of its editors—Mesfin Negash, Abiy Tekle Mariam, and Tamirat Negera—to flee the country. The same provision was employed by the Ethiopian government to pressure Kenya's Nation Media Group to stop broadcasting an investigative documentary on the OLF.

Criminal prosecutions, harsh sentencing, official pressure, and the threat of exile have encouraged self-censorship among journalists. Foreign journalists and those working for international news organizations have generally operated with fewer restrictions than their local counterparts; however, they too regularly practice self-censorship and face harassment and threats from authorities. In June, Ethiopian authorities expelled Heather Murdock, a reporter for Voice of America (VOA) covering the rebel area in the eastern region of Harar. Physical attacks on members of the press are rare.

The state controls all broadcast media and operates the only television station. In 2007, a new broadcasting authority was created, and the first licenses were awarded to two private FM stations in the capital; they are owned by individuals seen as friendly to the EPRDF. Dozens of print outlets publish regularly and offer diverse views, although following the 2005 crackdown only a limited number of newspapers were allowed to continue publishing without interruption. There are currently 20 private Amharic and English-language newspapers, which generally focus on politics and business.

The government controls the only newspaper printing press, and its abuse of this monopolization affects private newspapers' circulations based on how much the companies can afford to print. The signals of international broadcasters Deutsche Welle and VOA have occasionally been jammed. This trend continued in 2010, but in contrast to previous years, when the government denied its involvement in blocking the signals, Zenawi claimed the right of its government to block broadcasting he said was fomenting ethnic violence. Zenawi has often mentioned the use of radios during the Rwandan genocide to justify his government's repressive measures against national and international broadcasters.

Owing to an extremely poor telecommunications infrastructure, only 0.75 percent of Ethiopians accessed the internet. In 2010, the country was still relying mostly on slow and unreliable dial-up connections. The government has resisted liberalizing telecommunications, maintaining a near monopoly and keeping prices artificially high. According to the International Telecommunication Union, in 2010 Ethiopia was the second most expensive country for broadband internet; the price of a connection was 2,085 percent of average monthly income. Most of the political blogs, many of which are based abroad, have been blocked, hindering important voices from contributing to the local political debate. At the same time, the government has invested massive resources to use new communication technologies that allow it to communicate with the periphery of the state. It has set up a satellite-based videoconferencing system known as WoredaNet to allow the prime minister, other ministers, high level civil servants to regularly communicate with local officials, although its efficacy remains limited.