

## FREEDOM IN THE WORLD

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## Ethiopia

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## OVERVIEW:

**Ethiopia's authoritarian government showed no sign of loosening its grip on power in 2011, using an antiterrorism law to target opponents of the ruling party. More than 100 political activists and journalists were detained, often for several months, before being charged with vaguely defined terrorism offenses. Also during the year, tensions with neighboring Eritrea increased after it was accused by a UN panel of plotting a terrorist attack in Ethiopia.**

Ethiopia, one of the few African countries to avoid decades of European colonization, ended a long tradition of monarchy in 1974, when Emperor Haile Selassie was overthrown in a Marxist military coup. Colonel Mengistu Haile Mariam ruled the country until he was toppled by guerrilla groups led by forces from the northern Tigray region in 1991. The main rebel group, the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), formed a provisional government with Meles Zenawi as head of state.

The EPRDF introduced democratic institutions and a new constitution, and Meles became prime minister after elections in 1995. However, most of the opposition boycotted the polls, claiming harassment of its supporters. The EPRDF easily won the 2000 elections, and Meles began his second five-year term. Opposition parties and some observers criticized the government's conduct of the vote.

A border dispute with Eritrea, which had gained formal independence from Ethiopia in 1993 after a long guerrilla conflict, triggered a 1998–2000 war between the countries. Ethiopia later rejected the findings of an international commission that awarded the contested area to Eritrea, and the two neighbors have remained at odds ever since.

The EPRDF and its allies led the 2005 parliamentary elections, though the main opposition parties performed well, winning a third of the seats. Claiming that voter fraud had deprived them of outright victory, opposition supporters took to the streets. The authorities responded harshly, killing at least 193 people and arresting more than 4,000, including leading opposition figures. Several prominent detainees received harsh sentences, and though all were pardoned and released in 2007, some were later rearrested.

The opposition boycotted local elections in 2008, accusing the EPRDF of harassment. Opposition activities were further restricted in 2009, when 40 members of an unregistered political party were convicted of trying to topple the government.

In contrast to the 2005 elections, the May 2010 federal and regional elections were tightly controlled by the EPRDF. Voters were threatened with losing their jobs, homes, or government services if they did not turn out for the ruling party. Opposition meetings were broken up, and candidates were threatened and detained. Opposition-aligned parties saw their 160-seat presence in Parliament virtually disappear, with the EPRDF and its allies taking all but two of the 547 seats in the lower house. The European Union and the United States expressed serious reservations about the outcome, but opposition demands for a rerun were dismissed by the Supreme Court. Meles was sworn in for a third term as prime minister in September 2010.

Shorn of its representation in Parliament and placed under relentless pressure by the authorities, opponents of the EPRDF found it increasingly difficult to operate. A planned antigovernment protest inspired by the uprisings in North Africa fizzled out in May 2011. In June, Parliament's lower house declared five groups to be terrorist entities, including the U.S.-based opposition movement Ginbot 7. The designation meant that any journalist who interviewed party members faced possible arrest on terrorism charges. Scores of activists and journalists were arrested in the following months, including well-known actor Debebe Eshetu, who was charged with planning attacks on behalf of Ginbot 7. Two political leaders from the Oromia region were arrested in August and charged under the same antiterrorism legislation; another four politicians were detained the following month.

Tensions between Ethiopia and Eritrea ratcheted up once more after evidence emerged that Eritrean officials were behind a failed plot to bomb an African Union summit and other high-profile targets in Addis Ababa in January. Eritrea denied involvement, but a panel of UN experts endorsed the allegations in a July report. Meles called for regime change in Eritrea and accused his domestic opponents of acting as agents for Asmara. More than 120 suspected members of a leading rebel movement, the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF), were rounded up. In July, 14 were found guilty of involvement in the bomb plot and received lengthy prison terms.

Also during the year, the government claimed successes against the main rebel movement in the Ogaden region. The Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF) had split in two, with one faction signing a peace deal in 2010 and

## 2012 SCORES

STATUS

**Not Free**

FREEDOM RATING

**6.0**

CIVIL LIBERTIES

**6**

POLITICAL RIGHTS

**6**

winning the release of 400 members from prison in January 2011. Military operations continued against the other faction, which alleged that 100 civilians were killed during a government offensive in May.

A prolonged drought, the worst to hit the Horn of Africa in 60 years, left nearly 5 million Ethiopians in need of assistance at the end of 2011. Over 270,000 refugees fleeing famine in Somalia had crossed into Ethiopia, adding to the crisis. Ethiopians' difficulties were compounded by large rises in the price of food; the annual rate of inflation reached 41 percent in August.

## POLITICAL RIGHTS AND CIVIL LIBERTIES:

Ethiopia is not an electoral democracy. Parliament is made up of a 108-seat upper house, the House of Federation, and a 547-seat lower house, the House of People's Representatives. The lower house is filled through popular elections, while the upper chamber is selected by the state legislatures, with both serving five-year terms. The lower house selects the prime minister, who holds most executive power, and the president, a largely ceremonial figure who serves up to two six-year terms. However, all of these institutions are dominated by the EPRDF, which tightly controlled the 2010 elections. The leader of the EPRDF, Meles Zenawi, has ruled continuously since 1991, first as transitional head of state and then as prime minister. While the 1995 constitution in theory grants the right of secession to ethnically based states, the government acquired powers in 2003 to intervene in states' affairs on issues of public security.

Corruption is a significant problem in Ethiopia. According to the Heritage Foundation's Index of Economic Freedom, EPRDF officials receive preferential access to credit, land leases, and jobs.

The news media are dominated by state-owned broadcasters and government-oriented newspapers. One of the few independent papers in the capital, *Addis Neger*, closed in 2009, claiming harassment by the authorities. Privately owned papers are small in number, tend to steer clear of political issues, and have low circulations. A 2008 media law allows prosecutors to seize material before publication in the name of national security, and makes defamation a criminal offense.

Journalists who reported on opposition activities faced serious harassment in 2011. Two newspaper reporters were detained under the country's antiterrorism law in June. They were formally charged with terrorism offenses during a court hearing in September, at which one of them claimed to have been tortured. A third journalist was charged in absentia. In a separate case, two Swedish journalists were charged on the same day with terrorism offenses for reporting on the activities of the ONLF. In December, they were found guilty of supporting terrorism and were each sentenced to 11 years in prison. Another well-known journalist, Eskinder Nega, who had previously been pardoned for treason relating to the postelection protests in 2005, was detained again in September and accused of terrorism. Because of these risks, many of Ethiopia's journalists work in exile. In September, a reporter fled the country after being asked to reveal the source of a story he wrote that was cited in a U.S. diplomatic cable published by the antisecrecy group WikiLeaks. The authorities routinely block opposition websites, and in 2010, they jammed the Amharic-language broadcasts of Voice of America for eight months.

Constitutionally mandated religious freedom is generally respected, though religious tensions have risen in recent years. The Ethiopian Orthodox Church is influential, particularly in the north. In the east there is a large Muslim community, made up mainly of the Somali, Oromo, and Afar ethnic groups.

Academic freedom is restricted. The government has accused universities of being friendly to the opposition, and prohibits political activities on campuses. There have been reports of students being pressured into joining the EPRDF in order to secure places at universities.

The presence of the EPRDF at all levels of society inhibits free private discussion. Many people are wary of speaking against the government for fear of being overheard by party officials. The EPRDF maintains a network of paid informants, and opposition politicians have accused the government of tapping their telephones.

Freedoms of assembly and association are guaranteed by the constitution but limited in practice. Organizers of large public meetings must request permission from the authorities 48 hours in advance. Applications by opposition groups are routinely denied. During the 2010 election campaign, police routinely broke up political rallies and meetings organized by the opposition.

The 2009 Charities and Societies Proclamation restricts the activities of foreign nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) by prohibiting work on human and political rights. Foreign NGOs are defined as groups receiving more than 10 percent of their funding from abroad, a classification that captures most domestic organizations as well. NGOs have struggled to maintain operations as a result of the law, which also obliged them to reregister with the authorities. According to Justice Ministry figures, there were 3,522 registered NGOs before the law was passed and 1,655 afterward. In 2010, the Ethiopian Human Rights Council and the Ethiopian Women Lawyers' Association had their bank accounts frozen for violating the rules on receiving foreign funds, and the Ethiopian Bar Association had its license suspended for alleged irregularities. It was forced to register under a new name after its identity was assumed by a new organization affiliated with the EPRDF. In August 2011, a visiting delegation from Amnesty International was expelled following a meeting with opposition leaders, who were subsequently arrested.

Trade union rights are tightly restricted. 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 (CETU), which is under government influence. Independent unions face harassment. There has not been a legal strike since 1993.

The judiciary is officially independent, but its judgments rarely deviate from government policy. The 2009 Antiterrorism Proclamation defines terrorist activity very broadly and gives great discretion to the security forces, allowing the detention of suspects for up to four months without charge. It was used in 2011 to detain more than 100 members of opposition parties; terrorist suspects were denied legal assistance while they awaited trial. Conditions in Ethiopia's prisons are harsh, and detainees frequently report abuse.

The government has tended to favor Tigrayan ethnic interests in economic and political matters. Politics within the EPRDF have been dominated by the Tigrayan People's Liberation Front, one of its constituent groups. Repression of the Oromo and ethnic Somalis, and government attempts to co-opt their parties into subsidiaries of the EPRDF, have fueled nationalism in both Oromia and the Ogaden. Persistent claims that war crimes have been committed by government troops in the Ogaden are difficult to verify, as independent media are barred from the region.

Private business opportunities are limited by rigid state control of economic life and the prevalence of state-owned enterprises. All land must be leased from the state. The government has evicted indigenous groups from areas like the Lower Omo Valley to make way for projects such as hydroelectric dams. It has also leased large tracts of land to foreign governments and investors for agricultural development in opaque deals. Persistent allegations have been made by journalists and groups such as Human Rights Watch that the government has withheld development assistance from villages perceived as being unfriendly to the ruling party.

Women are relatively well represented in Parliament, winning 152 seats in the lower house in the 2010 elections. Legislation protects women's rights, but they are routinely violated in practice. Forced child labor is a significant problem, particularly in the agricultural sector.

#### **TREND ARROW:**

Ethiopia received a downward trend arrow due to the government's increased use of antiterrorism legislation to target political opponents and a decision by the parliament's lower house to include a leading opposition movement in its list of terrorist organizations.

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