

Ethiopia

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Press freedom in Ethiopia declined in 2014 as the government launched a crackdown on journalists and bloggers ahead of the May 2015 elections. Among those arrested were six members of the Zone 9 blogging collective who regularly wrote on issues of human rights and governance. The government of Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn continued to use the draconian antiterrorism law to stifle dissent, targeting both print and online journalists, with some prosecuted in absentia. Others faced charges such as defamation. With 17 journalists behind bars as of December 1, according to the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), Ethiopia was the second-worst jailer of journalists in Africa, after Eritrea.

Legal Environment

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. In April 2014, the state-owned broadcaster—the Ethiopian Radio and Television Agency (ERTA)—was found guilty of defaming the opposition Unity for Democracy and Justice party in a multipart documentary. The court ordered ERTA to air a correction, though an ERTA journalist who served as a presenter for the film was acquitted. In October, Temesghen Desalegn, the former editor and owner of the now-defunct independent weekly *Feteh*, was sentenced to three years in prison for incitement, criminal defamation, and false publication related to 2012 articles that criticized the government’s repression of student activists and ethnic minorities.

The 2009 antiterrorism law, ostensibly designed to address crimes related to armed insurgencies, has been used extensively against journalists. Most journalists 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. In February 2014, Somali journalist Mohamed Aweys Mudey was sentenced to 27 years in prison on terrorism charges. He had been arrested in November 2013 and detained for four months for allegedly possessing information about the operations of Somali extremist group the Shabaab in Ethiopia. In April 2014, six bloggers associated with the Zone 9 collective were arrested along with three independent journalists. The nine detainees were charged in July with receiving aid and instructions from terrorist groups with the intention to destabilize the country. In August, the government also brought criminal charges against five magazines—*Lomi*, *Enqu*, *Fact*, *Jano*, and *Addis Guday*—and the weekly newspaper *Afro-Times*. They were accused of “encouraging terrorism, endangering national security, repeated incitement of ethnic and religious hate, and smears against officials and public institutions.” The publishers of three of the magazines fled the country, but they were convicted in absentia and sentenced to over three years in prison. At least five other journalists were already serving sentences or in pretrial detention for alleged terrorism offenses, while two Eritrean journalists have been imprisoned without charge since 2006, also for suspected terrorist activities. Several additional journalists have been convicted in absentia.

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 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 part by restricting foreign funding and imposing rigid and intrusive spending rules.

In April 2014, a staff member of the international advocacy group Article 19 was detained upon arrival in Ethiopia from Kenya, held without access to a lawyer for more than a day, and deported with a warning not to return. He had been scheduled to provide journalists with security training. International organizations and activists have mounted public campaigns on behalf of jailed Ethiopian journalists, but they have had little concrete effect. Eskinder Nega, a journalist and blogger who was sentenced to 18 years in prison in 2012 for his critical reporting, was named as the recipient of the 2014 World Association of Newspapers and News Publishers (WAN-IFRA) Golden Pen of Freedom Award. The Zone 9 bloggers received significant international support after their arrest, particularly on social media. Nigerian and Tanzanian bloggers organized the first Africa-wide “tweetathon” to call for their release, and legal petitions were submitted to the African Union and the United Nations.

Political Environment

Censorship and self-censorship are routinely practiced. 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. In June 2014, 20 journalists from the state-owned Oromia Radio and Television Organization were fired with no formal explanation. The journalists said the mass dismissal could be linked to their views on a student protest movement that challenged a government plan to cede parts of Oromia State to the federal capital region of Addis Ababa.

The government obstructs access to numerous websites, including independent and international news sites, opposition websites, and the sites of groups designated as terrorist organizations. Controversial political blogs, many of which are based abroad, are blocked, preventing important voices from contributing to the local political debate. 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. 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.

Media outlets face significant restrictions on coverage of mass protests, particularly those by the Muslim community against policies that threaten their religious freedoms, which began in 2012. Journalists who cover the demonstrations have faced arrests and harassment. In July 2014, photojournalist Aziza Mohamed of *Addis Guday* was arrested and held without charge for supposedly inciting protesters to violence. The editor and the managing director of the defunct Muslim weekly *Ye Muslimoch Guday* were similarly arrested for coverage of the protests in 2012 and 2013, respectively, and their trials on terrorism charges were ongoing in late 2014.

Harassment and intimidation of critical journalists in Ethiopia remains a common practice among law enforcement officials. A 2013 Human Rights Watch report 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. Growing concerns about politically motivated charges and possible imprisonment have led a record number of Ethiopian journalists to flee abroad. According to CPJ, more than 30 journalists left the country during 2014, twice as many as in the previous two years combined.

Economic Environment

The number of print outlets covering politics decreased significantly after 2005, while weekly papers and magazines on business and lifestyle topics—catering to the growing urban middle class—are proliferating. 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, though the owners of the few private radio stations are generally seen as friendly to the authorities. 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.

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. The printer voided agreements with *Feteh* and the opposition daily *Finote Netsanet* that year, effectively putting the former out of business. 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.

Ethiopia and neighboring Djibouti, which has a population of less than a million, are the only 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 nearly 29 percent of the population in 2013, though internet connectivity remained at a meagre 2 percent. 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.