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Freedom of the Press 2014 - Ethiopia

Any hopes for improvements in press freedom following the August 2012 death of Ethiopian prime minister Meles Zenawi were dashed in 2013 as new prime minister Hailemariam Desalegn remained firmly on the course of his predecessor, resisting calls for a more open media environment. The government continued to wield the draconian antiterrorism law to stifle dissent, targeting both print and online journalists—even in absentia—while charges such as “outrages against the constitution” or “defaming the government” were levied against other critical voices. Ethiopia remained the second-worst jailer of journalists in Africa in 2013, after Eritrea.

While the constitution guarantees freedom of the press, the 2005 criminal code contains many provisions that limit this right, including restrictions on “obscene” communication, criminal defamation, and criticism of public officials. In February 2013, a Federal High Court judge revived criminal defamation and false publication charges against *Feteh* editor Temesgen Desalegn. The charges—previously dropped in August 2012—stem from articles published in the now-defunct independent weekly prior to Meles’s death in August 2012, criticizing the government’s policies against the country’s Muslim minority. In December, Asfaw Berhanu, a journalist with the *Reporter* newspaper, was convicted of “spreading false rumors” and sentenced to two years and nine months in prison for a story he wrote about the dismissal of three state government officials that later proved to be untrue. The court verdict was handed down even though the *Reporter* published of a front-page retraction and dismissed Asfaw over the story.

The 2009 antiterrorism law, ostensibly designed to confront the challenges posed by armed insurgencies, has been used extensively against journalists. Most journalists prosecuted under the law were accused of collaboration with groups labeled as terrorist organizations simply for publishing information about those groups or for conducting interviews with their leaders. Ethiopia was the target of numerous international campaigns supporting journalists convicted under the antiterrorism law in 2013, but to little effect. In particular, Eskinder Nega, a journalist and blogger who has been jailed multiple times for his critical reporting, has inspired a global campaign for his release and become an international face of the press freedom movement. Despite the support of press freedom and human rights organizations such as Amnesty International, PEN America, and the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), the Supreme Court on May 2 confirmed Nega’s sentence of 18 years in prison, accusing him of supporting terrorist activities. Reeyot Alemu Gobebo, a journalist with *Feteh*, was awarded the UNESCO/Guillermo Cano World Press Freedom Prize on May 3 but continues to serve out her five-year jail term—reduced on appeal from the previous 14—also on charges of terrorism. Three other journalists are currently serving sentences under the antiterrorism law, while two Eritrean journalists have been imprisoned without charge since 2006, also for suspected terrorist activities.

Private media and press freedom groups criticized the 2008 Freedom of the Mass Media and Access to Information Proclamation for imposing restrictions on the practice of journalism and harsh sanctions for violations. In 2012, the Parliament expanded on the theme of the 2009 antiterrorism law by passing the 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 law also criminalizes the use of popular voice over IP (VoIP) communications software such as Skype for commercial purposes or to bypass the monopoly of state-owned Ethio-Telecom.

The selective approach taken by the government in implementing laws and the lack of an independent judiciary continues to be of grave concern. Journalists have few guarantees that they will receive a fair trial, and 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, although 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.

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. The government also revoked the publication licenses of two newspapers in 2013—the *Addis Times* and *Le’ilela*—over minor regulatory infractions, including failure to notify the media regulator of a change of address. Meanwhile, a third outlet, Radio Bilal, was forced to close after two of its journalists were arrested in connection with their coverage of mass protests by the Muslim community against government policies threatening their religious freedoms. Coverage of the peaceful demonstrations, which began in 2012, has been met with severe reprisals by Ethiopian authorities: the editor and managing director of the Muslim weekly *Ye Muslimoch Guday* are currently serving jail time on terrorist-related charges and their paper has been shuttered.

The government restricts access to numerous websites, including independent and international news sites, opposition websites, and the sites of groups designated as terrorist organizations. Social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter were also reported to be inaccessible during the year. 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, the targeting of opposing voices took a new turn, as employees of the independent Ethiopian Satellite Television Service (ESAT), a satellite broadcaster run by diaspora journalists operating abroad, were targeted with sophisticated spyware used to copy files, obtain passwords, and intercept Skype calls and instant messages.

Harassment and intimidation of critical journalists in Ethiopia remains a common practice among law enforcement officials, extending even into the prison system, according to a report released in October 2013 by Human Rights Watch. The report documents dozens of cases of abuse and mistreatment of inmates at the Maekelawi detention center—the main federal facility for 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 coerce inmates into confessions.

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 toward the government and the ruling party. Broadcasting law prohibits any political, religious, or foreign entities from owning stations. In 2007, a new broadcasting authority was created, and the first licenses were awarded to private FM stations in the capital owned by individuals seen as friendly to the ruling party. The signals of international broadcasters 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, which has a near monopoly, 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* in 2012, effectively putting them 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, which has provided loans exceeding \$3 billion to the Ethiopian government to expand telecommunication access, state controlled 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. This progress, however, still leaves Ethiopia near the bottom of the rankings for Africa. The government’s monopoly on the telecommunication sector has allowed it to contain the destabilizing potential of new communication

technologies, while it continues to invest massive resources in these technologies to support its own ambitious state surveillance apparatus.

2014 Scores

Press Status

Not Free

Press Freedom Score

(0 = best, 100 = worst)
81

(0 = best, 30 = worst)
27

(0 = best, 40 = worst)
35

(0 = best, 30 = worst)
19

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