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Freedom of the Press 2012 - Ethiopia

2012 Scores

Press Status: Not Free

Press Freedom Score: 81

Legal Environment: 28

Political Environment: 35

Economic Environment: 18

The political and media freedom climate in 2011 dramatically deteriorated as the government started making extensive use of the antiterrorism law, which entered into force in 2009, as an instrument to stifle dissent. Ethiopia is currently the second-leading jailer of journalists in Africa, after Eritrea.

While the constitution guarantees freedom of the press, this right is often restricted in practice. The Freedom of the Mass Media and Access to Information Proclamation was passed into law in December 2008, and has been criticized by the private media and press freedom groups for imposing constraints on the practice of journalism and harsh sanctions for violations. The most controversial provisions are included in the penal code that took effect in May 2005. Of greater concern is the selective approach the government takes in implementing laws and the lack of an independent judiciary. 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.

The antiterrorism law, supposedly designed to face the challenges posed to the government by armed insurgencies, was used to charge 24 politicians and journalists with terrorist offences. The accused were allegedly involved in varied collaborations with groups labeled terrorist organizations by parliament. Most journalists were arrested simply for having published information about these groups or for having interviewed some of their leaders. Among the journalists arrested were independent journalist and blogger Eskinder Nega; Woubshet Taye, deputy editor of the weekly *Awramba Times*; and Reeyot Alemu, a columnist with the independent weekly *Feteh*. Prime Minister Meles Zenawi's government also targeted foreign journalists under the antiterrorism law in 2011. In June, two Swedish journalists, Johan Persson and Martin Schibbye, were arrested by Ethiopian forces after having entered the Ogaden region in Ethiopia from Somalia to report on guerrilla activities and human rights conditions in the area, and on the activities of a Swedish organization searching for mineral resources. The two were sentenced to 11 years in prison in December.

Media practitioners were also targeted throughout the year for reasons unrelated to allegations of terrorism. In February 2011, roughly 130 charges were filed against *Feteh* editor in chief Temesgan Dessalegn, 35 of which were criminal charges that included defaming the government and inciting public violence and protests to boost newspaper sales. A number of journalists fled into exile for fear of arrest. As a result, popular newspapers had to close and resort to online versions managed by editors in exile. Journalist Argaw Ashine fled the country in September because of fears of impending imprisonment after being questioned by the police about the identity of a government source mentioned in WikiLeaks cables. In November, the editor in chief of the *Awramba Times*, Dawit Kebede, left the country because of continued harassment and intimidation by officials, which effectively closed the newspaper. In the same month, satirist Abebe Tolla of *Feteh* and *Awramba Times* also fled due to fear of retaliation for his critical commentary.

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 limited coverage of official events to state-owned media outlets. Since 2009, with the passage of the Proclamation for the Registration and Regulation of Charities and Societies, the ability of local and international nongovernmental organizations to monitor and advocate on issues of human rights, including media freedom, has become considerably more restricted.

Self-censorship is routinely practiced. Many private newspapers also report that the government attempts to control content through article placement requests and phone calls to editors from officials about articles that are critical of the government. The

government's fear of dissenting voices was further fuelled by the popular uprisings that transformed the political landscape of North Africa and the Middle East in 2011. There were no reports of physical attacks on journalists during the year, though harassment, intimidation, and arrest were common.

The number of print outlets covering politics decreased significantly after 2005, while weekly papers and magazines on business and lifestyle catering to the growing urban middle class are proliferating. Approximately 20 private newspapers were published in 2011, with a combined circulation of 150,000 in Addis Ababa, the capital. The state operates the only national television station and owns almost all radio broadcasting in the country, both of which constitute the primary source of information for Ethiopians. Government-controlled media is biased toward the government and the ruling party. Broadcasting law prohibits any political, religious, or foreign entities from owning broadcast stations. 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 ruling party. The signals of international broadcasters Deutsche Welle and Voice of America have occasionally been jammed, reportedly with the technical support of the Chinese government. This trend continued in 2011, but in contrast to previous years, when the government denied its involvement in blocking the signals, Meles claimed the right of his government to block broadcasting he said was fomenting ethnic violence. Meles has often mentioned the use of radios during the Rwandan genocide to justify his government's repressive measures against national and international broadcasters. The government controls the only newspaper printing press and often raises the cost of printing, the result of which is interrupted or altered publication cycles for newspapers based on how many copies the companies can afford to print.

Owing to an extremely poor telecommunications infrastructure, only 1 percent of Ethiopians had access to the internet in 2011. The government has resisted liberalizing telecommunications, maintaining a monopoly and keeping prices artificially high. In 2011, however, some important changes were introduced for mobile and internet services, including an increase in capacity for mobile services and the introduction of mobile internet – albeit at expensive rates – in major cities. These changes are largely due to a \$1.5 billion project financed by the Chinese government and implemented by Chinese company ZTE to overhaul the telecommunications infrastructure in Ethiopia. The government restricted access to numerous websites, including news sites, opposition websites, and the sites of groups designated as terrorist organizations. Controversial political blogs, many of which are based abroad, were 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, and high-level civil servants to regularly communicate with local officials.

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