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Freedom of the Press 2010 - Ethiopia

Status: Not Free

Legal Environment: 27

Political Environment: 33

Economic Environment: 18

Total Score: 78

The political climate in Ethiopia in 2009 was heavily influenced by the upcoming 2010 elections. The government took a variety of measures to secure greater control over the country and avoid the unrest that had accompanied the previous elections in 2005. Allegations of irregularities in counting the ballots that year had caused widespread protests, prompting authorities to kill numerous protesters, shut down newspapers, and imprison journalists and members of opposition parties.

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 was passed into law in December 2008 after years of consultation and debate. The legislation is not exceptionally restrictive, but it 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 were 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 issued arbitrarily in response to personal disputes. Court cases can continue for years, and many journalists have multiple charges pending against them. The latest example was the conviction of two journalists in August 2009 in connection with coverage of sensitive topics dating back several years. Ibrahim Mohamed Ali, editor of the weekly, Muslim-oriented newspaper *Salafiya*, *Al-Quds* publisher Maria Kadi Abafita, and *Al-Quds* editor in chief Ezeddin Mohammad were arrested for publishing articles that criticized the Ministry of Education's proposal to prohibit headscarves for female Muslim students in public schools. While Abafita was acquitted, Mohammad was fined 10,000 birr (US\$800), and Ali was sentenced to one year in jail. Separately, Asrat Wedajo, former editor of *Seife Nebelbal*, a newspaper that was shut down by the government in 2005, was also sentenced to a one-year prison term in connection with a story published in 2004 that lamented human rights violations against the Oromo ethnic group. The imprisonment of Ali and Wedajo brought the total number of journalists in jail to four as of December 1, 2009, according to the Committee to Protect Journalists. The other two are 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.

Laws provide for freedom of information, 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, albeit with slight openings that began in 2006. In a negative trend, several legislative measures taken in 2009 explicitly targeted the media, while others had repercussions for the overall media environment. In January, the Proclamation for the Registration and Regulation of Charities and Societies was passed by the parliament, curtailing the ability of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) to operate in sectors other than education, health, and food security. As a result, international NGOs faced significant restrictions on implementing projects in the areas of governance and human rights, including freedom of expression, as did local NGOs that received more than 10 percent of their budgets from foreign sources. In July, the Anti-Terrorist Proclamation took effect. 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 of involvement in a terrorist plot. In December, three staff members of leading independent newspaper *Addis Neger* - Abiy Tekle Mariam, Mesfin Negash, and Tamirat Negera - fled the country, claiming that charges were being prepared against them under the new law. 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. *Addis Neger* suspended operations in November, as staff said they feared prosecution by the authorities. Foreign journalists and those working for international news organizations have generally operated with fewer restrictions than their local counterparts; however, they regularly practice self-censorship and face harassment and threats from authorities. 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 finally awarded to two private FM stations in the capital. In June 2008, the first private, foreign-language FM station, Afro FM, was granted a license; it broadcasts in English, French, and Arabic. 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 are generally focused on politics and business. In past years, access to foreign broadcasts has occasionally been restricted. This pattern continued in 2009 with the jamming of Deutsche Welle and Voice of America (VOA) signals, though the government denies blocking the stations. Diplomatic ties with Qatar were broken in the past over the Qatar-based satellite station Al-Jazeera's coverage of the ONLF insurgency.

Owing to an extremely poor telecommunications infrastructure, internet access is very limited. In 2009 the country was still relying mostly on slow and unreliable dial-up connections, and there were few broadband subscribers. Less than 1 percent of the population had internet access during the year. The government has resisted liberalizing telecommunications, maintaining a near monopoly and keeping prices artificially high. The monthly fees charged by the Ethiopian Telecommunication Corporation for a broadband connection ranged from US\$200 for 64 Kbps, only slightly faster than dial-up, to more than US\$5,000 for 2 Mbps. Meanwhile, most of the political blogs, many of which are based abroad, have been blocked, hindering important voices from contributing to the local political debate.