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Freedom in the World 2010 - Ethiopia

Capital: Addis Ababa
Population: 82,825,000

Political Rights Score: 5 *
Civil Liberties Score: 5 *
Status: Partly Free

Trend Arrow ↓

Ethiopia received a downward trend arrow due to the narrowing of political space in advance of the 2010 elections, the government's crackdown on the operations of nongovernmental organizations, and its passing of a draconian antiterrorism law.

Overview

Prime Minister Meles Zenawi's government bolstered restrictions on political activity in 2009 as it prepared for federal and regional elections scheduled for 2010. Opposition party activists were arrested, and a new antiterrorism law gave the government broad authority to crack down on perceived opponents. Other legislation enacted during the year imposed strict controls on civil society organizations.

One of the few African countries to avoid decades of European colonization, Ethiopia 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 a coalition of guerrilla groups led by forces from the northern Tigray region overthrew his brutal dictatorship in 1991. The main rebel group, the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), formed a new regime, and its leader Meles Zenawi became interim president.

Under the EPRDF, democratic institutions and a new constitution were introduced. Most of the opposition boycotted elections held in 1995, claiming harassment of its supporters precluded a fair vote, and Meles became prime minister. He began a second five-year term after the 2000 elections, which the EPRDF also won easily. 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 war that lasted from 1998 to 2000. The Eritrea-Ethiopia Boundary Commission was then established to draw a new border, but Ethiopia rejected its 2002 decision to assign the town of Badme to Eritrea.

In the 2005 elections for the powerful lower house of Parliament, the EPRDF and its allies won 327 seats, while the two main opposition parties took 161 seats, up from 12 in the previous Parliament. Notwithstanding their gains, opposition parties argued that fraud and interference in the electoral process had deprived them of outright victory. Street demonstrations led to violence and a harsh reaction by the authorities. At least 193 people were killed and more than 4,000 were arrested, including leading opposition figures, who were finally pardoned and released in 2007.

The opposition boycotted local elections in 2008, accusing the EPRDF of harassment. Opposition activities were further restricted in 2009, as the EPRDF prepared for the 2010 federal and regional elections. In June, 45 members of an unregistered political party were charged with trying to topple the government.

Ethiopia's relations with neighboring countries were tense but stable in 2009. The border dispute with Eritrea remained unresolved, but Ethiopian forces completed their withdrawal from Somalia, ending a disastrous three-year campaign aimed at destroying Islamist rebel groups and propping up the war-torn country's Transitional Federal Government.

Meanwhile, Ethiopia continued to face separatist movements in Oromiya and the Ogaden. Sporadic fighting persisted between government forces and Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF) guerrillas. The authorities have banned journalists from the region, preventing the outside world from accurately assessing the situation there.

Ongoing drought in parts of the country in 2009 led to a warning that five million people would be in need of food aid, in addition to the eight million who already received it. The drought also reduced Ethiopia's hydroelectric power output, causing frequent outages in Addis Ababa and contributing to a growth rate of less than 2 percent according to the United Nations, which was far less than the 10 percent claimed by the government.

Political Rights and Civil Liberties

Ethiopia is not an electoral democracy. However, the presence of a significant elected opposition at the federal level since 2005 does mark a possible step forward in the development of the country's democratic political culture.

The bicameral Parliament consists 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 House of People's Representatives selects the prime minister, who holds most executive power, and the president, who serves in a largely ceremonial capacity for six-year terms. The 1995 constitution has a number of unique features, including a federal structure that grants certain powers and the right of secession to ethnically based states. However, in 2003 the central government acquired additional powers to intervene in states' affairs when public security is deemed to be at risk.

More than 60 legally recognized political parties are active in Ethiopia, but the EPRDF dominates political life. Government harassment has seriously impeded the ability of opposition parties to function, although some have used rhetoric that could be interpreted as advocating violence, or have failed to conduct themselves in a manner consistent with a democratic political culture.

A recent series of arrests of opposition figures appeared to signal a crackdown on political freedoms in advance of the 2010 elections. Unity for Democracy and Justice party leader Birtukan Mideksa, who had received a sentence of life in prison after the 2005 postelection violence and was pardoned in 2007, was rearrested in December 2008 after her pardon was revoked. In June 2009, 46 people were charged with plotting to overthrow the government on behalf of Ginbot 7, an unregistered party. In November, a court convicted 26 of the defendants after a trial that legal rights groups criticized as

unfair. However, a high-profile opponent of the government, the singer Tewodros Kassahun, known as Teddy Afro, was released early from a two-year prison sentence in August 2009; he had been convicted for a hit-and-run automobile accident, but his supporters claimed that the case was politically motivated.

The government has taken a number of steps to limit corruption, including the imposition of asset-disclosure rules for state officials. However, graft remains a significant problem. Former prime minister Tamrat Layne and former defense minister Seye Abreha were convicted of corruption in 2007, but both had been released by the end of 2008, having already served several years in prison on other corruption charges. Ethiopia was ranked 120 out of 180 countries surveyed in Transparency International's 2009 Corruption Perceptions Index.

The news media are dominated by state-owned broadcasters and government-oriented newspapers. There are a number of independent newspapers, but they struggle financially and face intermittent government harassment. The only independent newspaper in the capital, *Addis Neger*, suspended operations in November, as staff said they feared prosecution by the authorities. A 2008 media law has had a chilling effect on freedom of speech. Although it barred government censorship of private media, the measure allowed prosecutors to seize material before publication in the name of national security and gave the government broader powers to pursue defamation cases. Journalists who fall foul of the government risk exile or imprisonment. In two separate cases in August 2009, journalists were given one-year prison sentences for spreading false information. Internet usage is confined mainly to major urban areas, and the government has blocked opposition-run websites.

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

Academic freedom is restricted. Prime Minister Meles Zenawi has accused universities of being friendly to the opposition, and their activities are closely monitored. In recent years, student protests against government policies have led to scores of deaths and injuries and hundreds of arrests. The government has tried to establish a more orderly and loyal academic community by creating 13 new state universities. Growing intolerance of dissent has dampened private discussion in the country, as even ordinary citizens face harassment or arrest for speaking out against the government.

Freedoms of assembly and association are limited. In January 2009, the House of People's Representatives passed the Charities and Societies Proclamation, which is designed to restrict the ability of foreign nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) to bypass government channels when they disburse funds. Foreign NGOs are defined as groups that receive more than 10 percent of their funding from abroad. The measure also gives the government broad authority to restrict NGO activities it deems unhelpful, such as campaigning for human and political rights. All civil society organizations are required to reregister with the government under the new rules.

Trade union rights are tightly restricted. Government workers in "essential industries," a term that is broadly defined, are not allowed to strike, and the Confederation of Ethiopian Unions is under government control. Some union leaders suspected of engaging in political activity have been removed from their elected offices or forced to leave the country. All unions must be registered, and the government retains the authority to cancel union registration.

The judiciary is officially independent, although there have been few significant examples of decisions at variance with government policy. Suspects are routinely held without warrants, and cases can take a long time to reach court. A draconian new counterterrorism law, passed by the government in July 2009, defines terrorist activity very broadly and gives great discretion to the security forces. According to Human Rights Watch, the law could be used to prosecute peaceful political protesters and impose the

death penalty for offenses as minor as damaging public property. Conditions in Ethiopia's prisons are harsh, and the International Committee of the Red Cross is not permitted to inspect federal facilities and police stations. Detainees frequently report being abused or tortured.

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. Discrimination against other groups, especially the Oromo, has been widespread. According to the International Crisis Group, Ethiopia's federal system of government, which grants autonomy to the dominant ethnic group in each region, has increased tensions between communities. Repression of the Oromo and ethnic Somalis, and government attempts to co-opt their parties into subsidiaries of the EPRDF, have helped to fuel nationalism in both Oromiya and the Ogaden.

The government has established a Women's Affairs Ministry, and Parliament has passed legislation designed to protect women's rights. In practice, however, women's rights are routinely violated. Women have traditionally had few land or property rights, especially in rural areas, where there is little opportunity for female employment beyond agricultural labor. General deficiencies in education exacerbate the problems of rural poverty and gender inequality. According to the NGO Save the Children, Ethiopia has one of the lowest rates of school enrollment in sub-Saharan Africa.

**Countries are ranked on a scale of 1-7, with 1 representing the highest level of freedom and 7 representing the lowest level of freedom.*

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