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Freedom in the World 2011 - Ethiopia

Capital: Addis Ababa

Population: 82,825,000

Political Rights Score: 6 *

Civil Liberties Score: 6 *

Status: Not Free

Status Change Explanation

Ethiopia's political rights rating declined from 5 to 6, its civil liberties rating from 5 to 6, and its status from Partly Free to Not Free due to national elections that were thoroughly tainted by intimidation of opposition supporters and candidates as well as a clampdown on independent media and nongovernmental organizations.

Overview

Prime Minister Meles Zenawi and his Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) party sealed their complete dominance of political life with a crushing victory in the May 2010 general elections. The EPRDF and its allies took all but two seats in the 547-seat Parliament. The government stepped up its repression of independent media through interference with foreign broadcasts, including the jamming of Voice of America's radio signal. Opposition political rallies were suppressed, while nongovernmental organizations struggled to sustain themselves under restrictive legislation enacted in 2009.

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 he was toppled by guerrilla groups led by forces from the northern Tigray region in 1991. The main rebel group, the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), formed a new regime under the leadership of Meles Zenawi.

The EPRDF introduced democratic institutions and a new constitution. Most of the opposition boycotted elections in 1995, claiming harassment of its supporters, and Meles became prime minister. The EPRDF easily won the 2000 elections, and Meles began his second five-year term. 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 1998-2000 war between the countries. The border dispute has yet to be resolved.

The EPRDF and its allies led the 2005 parliamentary elections, though the main opposition parties performed well, winning a third of the seats. Claiming that voter fraud had deprived them of outright victory, opposition supporters took to the streets. The authorities responded harshly, killing at least 193 people and arresting more than 4,000, including leading opposition figures. All 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 when 40 members of an unregistered political party were convicted of trying to topple the government.

In contrast to the 2005 elections, the federal and regional elections held in May 2010 were tightly controlled by the EPRDF, halting Ethiopia's faltering process of democratization. The campaign was heavily weighted in favor of the ruling party, with European Union (EU) observers noting the use of state resources for EPRDF campaign activities. The gradual usurpation of the state by the EPRDF enabled the party to influence voter behavior down to the village level. According to Human Rights Watch, local officials or neighborhood militia reportedly went door to door, verifying that residents had registered as members of the EPRDF. Voters were threatened with losing their jobs, homes, or government services if they did not turn out for the party.

An electoral code of conduct was agreed between the EPRDF and several leading opposition parties, but others, including the Forum for Democratic Dialogue in Ethiopia (Medrek) coalition, refused to sign it, arguing that it failed to incorporate much-needed

reforms of the electoral board and did not enable the media to freely report on the election campaign. The code was enacted as law despite such objections. Of the 79 registered parties, 63 decided to participate in the elections. The opposition failed to mount more than a token challenge to the EPRDF. Part of this failure can be blamed on a poorly run campaign, though official harassment and intimidation were also major factors. Opposition meetings were broken up, and candidates were threatened and detained. Ethiopia's most charismatic opposition figure, the leader of the Unity and Justice Party, Birtukan Mideksa, remained in prison during the election. She had been convicted of trying to overthrow the constitutional order following the election-related disturbances of 2005. After seeking an official pardon, she was released in October 2010.

Several opposition candidates were also reportedly attacked during the 2010 election. In March, Aregawi Gebre-Yohannes, a member of a Medrek-aligned party, was stabbed to death in what colleagues considered a political killing. However, the government claimed Gebre-Yohannes had died in a bar fight and the man responsible had been arrested and imprisoned. Other incidents of violence were similarly difficult to substantiate amid the claims and counterclaims of opposition activists and government officials.

Polling day was peaceful and orderly, though monitoring assessments conducted by teams from the EU and the African Union (AU) differed sharply. The EU contingent said the election had not been conducted on a level playing field, while the AU delegation – which was not present in the weeks preceding the election – described the vote as free and fair. The United States declined to send observers because of restrictions placed on its mission, but said the election fell short of international standards and criticized the limitations placed on independent observers and the media in the run-up to the vote.

Opposition-aligned parties ultimately saw their 160-seat presence in Parliament virtually disappear. The EPRDF and its allies won all but two of the 547 seats in the lower house, while Medrek and an independent candidate each captured one seat. Of the nearly 30 million voters who took part in the election, 99.6 percent chose the EPRDF or one of its allied parties, according to official results. The EU and the United States expressed serious reservations about the outcome, but opposition demands for a rerun were dismissed by the Supreme Court.

Meles was sworn in for a third term as prime minister at the EPRDF conference in September. Several long-serving cabinet members were subsequently replaced by younger party loyalists, strengthening Meles's personal control over the government.

Ethiopia's relations with its neighbors were tense in 2010, as diplomatic contact with Eritrea remained frozen. In August, the Ethiopian military reportedly mounted incursions

into areas of Somalia controlled by the Shabaab, an Islamist militia group. Internally, government forces appeared to gain the upper hand against separatist movements in Oromiya and the Ogaden. In September, Ethiopian forces claimed to have killed or captured 200 fighters from the Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF) following a tip-off from the Somaliland authorities. A month later, an ONLF faction signed a peace deal with the government. The main Oromo rebel movement, the Oromo Liberation Front, was weakened by factionalism, defections, and arrests.

Ethiopia struggled with a prolonged drought in 2010. The UN World Food Programme estimated that 10 million people were in need of support, but the government played down the crisis and pledged to end Ethiopia's dependence on food aid within five years.

Political Rights and Civil Liberties

Ethiopia is not an electoral democracy. The Parliament is made up 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 lower house selects the prime minister, who holds most executive power, and the president, a largely ceremonial figure. The EPRDF remains the most important political institution in Ethiopia, and Parliament rarely asserts its independence. While the 1995 constitution in theory grants the right of secession to ethnically based states, the government acquired powers in 2003 to intervene in states' affairs on issues of public security. More than 79 political parties are legally recognized, though the EPRDF dominates political life.

Corruption is a significant problem in Ethiopia. According to the Heritage Foundation's Index of Economic Freedom, EPRDF officials receive preferential access to credit, land leases, and jobs.

The news media are dominated by state-owned broadcasters and government-oriented newspapers. One of the few independent papers in the capital, *Addis Neger*, closed in 2009, as staff said they feared prosecution by the authorities. Several new, privately owned papers were published in 2010, but most shied away from political issues and had low circulations. A 2008 media law allows prosecutors to seize material before publication in the name of national security and gives the government broader powers to pursue defamation cases. The election code of conduct adopted in March 2010 prohibited journalists from interviewing voters, candidates, or observers on election day or reporting anything that might incite rebellion or terrorism. The government jammed the Amharic-language services of Voice of America (VOA) from late February until October. Prime Minister Meles Zenawi equated VOA's coverage to the hate speech aired

by a notorious Rwandan station during that country's 1994 genocide. In June, a VOA reporter was expelled from Ethiopia for broadcasting claims that government forces had killed more than 70 civilians in the Ogaden region.

Constitutionally mandated religious freedom is generally respected, though 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 Afar ethnic groups.

Academic freedom is restricted. The prime minister has accused universities of being friendly to the opposition, and their activities are closely monitored. There have been reports of students being pressured into joining the EPRDF in order to secure places at universities. The presence of the EPRDF at all levels of society inhibits free speech. Many people are wary of speaking out against the government for fear of being overheard by party officials.

Freedoms of assembly and association are guaranteed by the constitution but limited in practice, as street demonstrations have been banned since 2005. During the 2010 election campaign, police routinely broke up political rallies and meetings organized by the opposition. The 2009 Charities and Societies Proclamation restricts the activities of foreign nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) by prohibiting work on human and political rights. Foreign NGOs are defined as groups receiving more than 10 percent of their funding from abroad, a classification which affects most domestic organizations as well. NGOs have struggled to maintain operations as a result of the law, which also obliged them to reregister with the authorities. The Ethiopian Human Rights Council and the Ethiopian Women Lawyers' Association had their bank accounts frozen in August 2010 for violating the rules on receiving foreign funds. Another prominent group, the Ethiopian Bar Association, had its license suspended for alleged irregularities in April.

Trade union rights are tightly restricted. All unions must be registered, and the government retains the authority to cancel union registration. Two-thirds of union members belong to organizations affiliated with the Confederation of Ethiopian Trade Unions (CETU), which is under government influence. Unions that are independent of the CETU face harassment. There has not been a legal strike since 1993.

The judiciary is officially independent, but its judgments rarely deviate from government policy. Suspects are routinely held without warrants, and cases can face lengthy delays before reaching court. A 2009 counterterrorism law defines terrorist activity very broadly and gives great discretion to the security forces. Conditions in Ethiopia's prisons are harsh, and detainees frequently report abuse.

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. Repression of the Oromo and ethnic Somalis, and government attempts to co-opt their parties into subsidiaries of the EPRDF, have fueled nationalism in both Oromiya and the Ogaden. Persistent claims that war crimes have been committed by government troops in the Ogaden are difficult to verify because independent media are barred from the region.

Women are relatively well represented in Parliament, winning 152 seats in the lower house in the 2010 election. Legislation protects women's rights, but they are routinely violated in practice. Forced child labor is a significant problem, particularly in the agricultural sector.

Private business opportunities are limited by rigid state control of economic life and the prevalence of state-owned enterprises. All land must be leased from the state.

** 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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