

Flygtningenævnets baggrundsmateriale

Bilagsnr.:	218
Land:	Etiopien
Kilde:	Freedom House
Titel:	Freedom of the press 2013 - Ethiopia
Udgivet:	5. september 2013
Optaget på baggrundsmaterialet:	2. januar 2014



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Publisher [Freedom House](#)

Publication Date 5 September 2013

Cite as Freedom House, *Freedom of the Press 2013 - Ethiopia*, 5 September 2013, available at: <http://www.refworld.org/docid/522998872d.html> [accessed 9 December 2013]

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2013 Scores

Press Status: Not Free

Press Freedom Score: 82

Legal Environment: 28

Political Environment: 35

Economic Environment: 19

Despite the death in August of longtime prime minister Meles Zenawi, the political and media environment in Ethiopia remained highly repressive in 2012. The new prime minister, Hailemariam Desalegn, appeared set to continue many of his predecessor's policies. The government continued making extensive use of a 2009 antiterrorism law to stifle dissent during the year. It also stepped up control of the internet, passing a new telecommunications law, launching initiatives to hamper online debate, and blocking access to critical websites. According to the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), Ethiopia was the second-leading jailer of journalists in Africa in 2012, 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 August 2012, the government filed criminal charges of defamation and "inciting the public through false rumors" against Temesgen Desalegn, editor in chief of the independent weekly *Feteh*, who had written articles that criticized Meles's rule. Although the charges were later dropped, *Feteh* was unable to continue publishing due to government pressure.

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 appears to criminalize the use of popular voice-over-IP (VoIP) communications software such as Skype, among other provisions.

The 2009 antiterrorism law, supposedly designed to confront the challenges posed by armed insurgencies, has been used extensively against politicians and journalists. They have been

accused of varied collaborations with groups labeled as terrorist organizations by the parliament. Most journalists affected by the law were arrested simply for publishing information about these groups or for conducting interviews with their leaders. In January 2012, a court sentenced two journalists – editor Woubshet Taye of the now-defunct weekly *Awramba Times* and columnist Reeyot Alemu of *Feteh* – to 14 years in prison, ostensibly for plotting terrorist attacks. The charges were widely regarded as a response to their critical coverage of the government. Reeyot's sentence was reduced to five years on appeal in August. Both had been in detention since June 2011. In July 2012, independent journalist and blogger Eskinder Nega was sentenced to 18 years in prison on terrorism charges, having been arrested in September 2011 for criticizing the similar arrests of other journalists. Five journalists living in exile received harsh prison sentences in absentia in the same court ruling. In September, the government pardoned two Swedish journalists, Johan Persson and Martin Schibbye, who had been arrested by Ethiopian forces after entering the restive Ogaden region in 2011 and charged under the antiterrorism law.

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 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. In April 2012, the state-run Berhanena Selam Printing Press, 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*, 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.

The government restricts 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, are blocked, preventing important voices from contributing to the local political debate. In 2012, Tor, a software package that allows users to circumvent internet filtering and browse the web anonymously, was blocked when the Ethiopian Telecommunications Corporation started to use deep packet inspection (DPI). According to tests carried out by the OpenNet Initiative in 2012, dozens of web addresses were reportedly blocked, including online news portals such as Nazret.com and groups such as the Oromo Liberation Front, which has been designated a terrorist organization by the government. Two international news sites, Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiya, were also reported to be inaccessible.

There were no reports of physical attacks on journalists during the year, though harassment, intimidation, and arbitrary arrest were common. Ethiopian authorities detained two Voice of America (VOA) journalists, Peter Heinlein and Marthe Van Der Wolf, in May and October, respectively, for their coverage of protests by members of the Muslim community. Such protests were common in 2012, and the government acted to restrict coverage of them, orchestrating raids on media outlets and the homes of journalists. The editor of the Muslim-oriented paper *Ye Muslimoch Guday*, Yusuf Getachew, was arrested in July and charged with terrorism in October,

while at least two of his colleagues went into hiding and the paper was forced to stop publishing. Such crackdowns have contributed to a trend of journalists fleeing into exile for fear of arrest in recent years. The increasing number of departures has significantly weakened the media sector and hampered its ability to challenge government restrictions.

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 VOA have occasionally been jammed, reportedly with technical support from the Chinese government. The authorities continued this practice in 2012, claiming that the jammed broadcasts were destabilizing the country. Fear of prosecution and heavy taxes on the publishing process have effectively concentrated the printing industry in the hands of the largest state printer, Berhanena Selam.

Due to an extremely poor telecommunications infrastructure, only about 1.5 percent of Ethiopians had access to the internet in 2012. The government has resisted liberalizing telecommunications, maintaining a monopoly and keeping prices artificially high. In recent years, important changes were introduced regarding 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. The government has invested massive resources in new communication technologies that permit it to maintain close contact with the periphery of the country. It has set up a satellite-based videoconferencing system known as WoredaNet to allow the prime minister, cabinet members, and high-level civil servants to regularly communicate with local officials.

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