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Freedom in the World 2009 - Ethiopia

Capital: Addis Ababa
Population: 79,100,000

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

Overview

Citing harassment by the ruling party, the opposition decided to boycott local elections in 2008. Also during the year, revised draft and actual laws regulating the press and civil society provided a reinforced legal basis for government oversight and control. The political climate was further polarized by ongoing tension in several restive provinces, relations with Eritrea, and Ethiopia's military engagement in Somalia. A drought and rising food prices proved to be complicating factors.

One of the few African countries to avoid European colonization during the 19th and early 20th centuries, Ethiopia ended a long tradition of monarchy in 1974, when Emperor Haile Selassie was overthrown in a Marxist military coup. Colonel Mengistu Haile Mariam subsequently established a brutal dictatorship that lasted more than 15 years. He was overthrown in 1991 by a coalition of guerrilla groups led by forces from the northern Tigray region. The main rebel group, the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), formed a new regime, and EPRDF leader Meles Zenawi became interim president.

During the ensuing transitional period, the EPRDF government fostered the emergence of democratic institutions, and a new constitution took effect in 1995. The EPRDF dominated that year's elections, which were boycotted by most of the opposition, and Meles became prime minister. He began a second five-year term after the May 2000 elections, which the EPRDF won in a landslide victory over the weak and divided opposition. Opposition parties and some observers criticized the government's conduct of the vote.

A dispute over the border with neighboring Eritrea, which had gained formal independence from Ethiopia in 1993 after a long guerrilla conflict, resulted in open warfare from 1998 until 2000. The Eritrea-Ethiopia Boundary Commission (EEBC) was established in the wake of the bloody fighting to draw a new border. It announced its decision in April 2002, laying out a boundary that assigned the town of Badme to Eritrea. The commission's judgments were supposed to be binding on both sides, but Ethiopia

rejected the EEBC decision.

The May 2005 elections for the powerful lower house of Parliament resulted in a major increase in opposition representation. The EPRDF and its allies won 327 seats, while the two main opposition parties took 161 seats, up from 12 in the previous Parliament. The governing coalition also won elections for eight of nine regional parliaments. Notwithstanding their significant gains, opposition parties argued that interference and fraud in the electoral process had deprived them of outright victory. Street demonstrations led to violence, excessive use of force by the authorities, and widespread arrests. At least 193 people were killed and more than 4,000 were arrested, including leading opposition figures who were later charged with capital offenses. Under considerable pressure from human rights groups, the government ultimately pardoned and released those defendants in 2007.

At the end of 2006, Ethiopia sent troops into Somalia, routing Islamist groups that had taken control of Mogadishu and the southern parts of the country. The offensive enabled Somalia's fragile Transitional Federal Government to establish a presence in Mogadishu, but clashes between Ethiopian forces and Somali militias continued through 2007 and 2008. The prospect of renewed violence in the border dispute with Eritrea presented another area of concern. In November 2007, the EEBC demarcated the boundary by map coordinates in a ruling accepted by Eritrea but rejected by Ethiopia. The UN Security Council voted to end its peacekeeping mission in July 2008. Meanwhile, the Ethiopian military also sought to quell ongoing unrest in the eastern Ogaden region.

The government maintained its tight control over the country's officially pluralist political institutions in 2008. Citing harassment by the ruling party, the opposition decided to boycott local elections during the year. Revised draft and actual laws regulating the press and civil society created the potential for expanded government interference, and there was violence and repression in several provinces with a significant opposition presence. These problems were exacerbated by rising food prices and a drought that threatened as many as eight million people, according to the United Nations.

Political Rights and Civil Liberties

Ethiopia is not an electoral democracy. However, the presence of a significant elected opposition at the national level since 2005 does mark a possible step forward in the development of the country's democratic political culture. Prior national elections had resulted in allegations from opposition parties and civil society groups of major irregularities, including unequal access to media, lack of transparent procedures, a flawed election law, and a partisan National Electoral Board.

The opposition claimed fraud again in 2005, and European Union and other observers stated that the elections did not meet international standards, citing problems including faulty voter-registration lists and significant administrative irregularities. However, observers led by former U.S. president Jimmy Carter concluded that despite its serious problems, the balloting essentially represented the will of the Ethiopian people.

The country's legislature is bicameral, consisting 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. Lawmakers in both houses serve five-year terms. Executive power is vested in a prime minister, who is chosen by the House of People's Representatives. 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 political scene continues to be dominated by the EPRDF. Citing intimidation and arrests of its candidates, opposition parties boycotted local elections in April 2008, which predictably

resulted in a large margin of victory for government supporters. Opposition parties have long argued that their ability to function is seriously impeded by government harassment, although observers also note that some opposition parties have at times used rhetoric that could be interpreted as advocating violence or otherwise failed to comport themselves in a manner consistent with a democratic political culture.

The government has taken a number of steps to limit corruption, but it has also been accused of participating in corrupt practices. In 2007, former prime minister Tamrat Layne and former defense minister Seye Abreha were convicted on corruption charges. Ethiopia was ranked 126 out of 180 countries surveyed in Transparency International's 2008 Corruption Perceptions Index.

The news media are dominated by state-owned broadcasters and government-oriented newspapers. Opposition and civic organizations have criticized slanted news coverage. The Committee to Protect Journalists in 2007 cited the Ethiopian government for backtracking on press freedom issues. It noted increased imprisonment of journalists, with many reporters going into exile by choice or coercion. This trend continued in 2008, as the government forced two more magazines out of circulation using laws against the disturbance of public order. Also during the year, Parliament adopted a new media law after years of debate. The measure barred government censorship of private media and the detention of journalists, but it allowed prosecutors to seize material before publication in the name of national security. Furthermore, it gave the government broader powers to pursue defamation cases against the media.

A number of privately owned newspapers exist, but they struggle to remain financially viable and face intermittent government harassment. In 2006, licenses were awarded to two private FM stations in the capital. Internet usage is confined mainly to major urban areas.

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 Somalis, Oromo, and Afari.

Academic freedom is restricted. In recent years, student strikes to protest police brutality and various government policies have led to scores of deaths and injuries as well as hundreds of arrests. Student grievances include perceived government repression of the Oromo ethnic group. Many students were killed, injured, or arrested during protests against the May 2005 election results.

Freedoms of assembly and association are limited. A number of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) are active, but they are generally reluctant to discuss issues and advocate policies that may bring them into conflict with the government. The government closely regulates NGO activities and has introduced draft legislation that it claims would provide heightened financial transparency among NGOs and enhance their accountability to stakeholders. This legislation was under final consideration by parliament at the end of 2008. Both Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International have severely criticized the proposed law, arguing that it would codify provisions designed to control and monitor civil society groups while punishing those that do not have the government's favor.

According to the Workers' Group of the International Labor Organization (ILO), there are severe restrictions on the rights of trade unions in Ethiopia. The labor laws authorize only one trade union in companies employing more than 20 workers. Government workers in "essential industries," a term that is broadly defined, are not allowed to strike. The Confederation of Ethiopian Unions is under government control. The law governing trade unions states that a trade organization may not act in an overtly political manner, and some union leaders 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. The efficacy of police, judicial, and administrative systems at the local level is highly uneven. Some progress has been made in reducing a significant backlog of court cases. Human Rights Watch in 2006 reported that the government used intimidation, arbitrary detentions, and excessive force in rural areas in the wake of the 2005 election-related protests.

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 Democratic Front. Discrimination against and repression of other groups, especially the Oromo, have been widespread.

The government recently established a women's affairs ministry, and Parliament has passed legislation designed to protect women's rights in a number of areas. 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. Violence against women and social discrimination are reportedly common. Societal norms and limited infrastructure prevent many women from seeking legal redress for their grievances. While illegal, the kidnapping of women and girls for marriage continues in parts of the country. 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.

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