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Attacks on the Press 2010 - Ethiopia

Top Developments

- Editor Dawit Kebede honored with International Press Freedom Award.
- Authorities jail critical journalists, jam VOA Amharic broadcasts.

Key Statistic

- **7:** Hours that two newspaper editors were interrogated as Zenawi gave speech on freedom of choice.

The ruling Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front, or EPRDF, imprisoned journalists, jammed foreign broadcasters, and blocked websites as it swept general elections in May. The government-controlled National Electoral Board declared the EPRDF-led coalition of Prime Minister Meles Zenawi, in power since 1991, the winner in all but two of 547 contested parliamentary seats, prompting opposition allegations of voter intimidation and ballot-rigging, as well as U.S. and European Union criticism. Zenawi won another five-year term as his government dismissed criticism of the vote as a smear campaign. Opposition leader Birtukan Mideksa was kept in prison until October.

As Ethiopian leaders trumpeted their economic growth, the government increasingly asserted its adherence to the development model of China. "We do not follow the liberal democratic principles which the Western countries are pushing us to follow," Deputy Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn told the U.S. government-funded broadcaster Voice of America. In September, at Columbia University's World Leaders Forum in New York, Zenawi delivered a keynote address that portrayed a decline in Western economic models and criticized the West's purported impositions on Africa. In the speech, he described a new era in which Africans have the choice of alternative models of development. "The fact that Africans now have a choice is ... fundamentally liberating," he said. During a question-and-answer session after the speech, CPJ's Mohamed Keita challenged the prime minister to reconcile his description of choice with his administration's repression of journalists. "Over the years, in bringing choice to Ethiopians, we have had to trample on a few toes," Zenawi responded. "And those few toes have had difficulty accepting the status quo in Ethiopia."

Illustrating the government's willingness to trample on toes, police in Addis Ababa interrogated two editors of the weekly *Sendek* for seven hours shortly before Zenawi took the dais in New York. Police said they had summoned the editors over a license violation; local journalists said the license was up-to-date and the questioning was actually motivated by the paper's publication of an interview with an opposition leader.

Facing such harassment, journalists rarely dared to challenge gaps between the nation's successes

and its shortcomings. Paradoxes included the government's claims of economic growth, even as the U.N. 2010 Human Development Index ranked Ethiopia in the bottom dozen countries worldwide. The index measures quality-of-life issues such as life expectancy, education, and standard of living.

Ethiopia's embattled independent press still felt the loss of the newsmagazine *Addis Neger*, which closed in 2009 when its editors, harassed by the government, fled into exile. The editors continued to publish an online edition of *Addis Neger* from exile, but domestic readership was severely curtailed.

In its absence, the weekly *Awramba Times* stepped in as the sole political publication to regularly question government claims, local sources said. The *Awramba Times* is among a handful of politically oriented newspapers that the government authorized in the years since it shuttered the independent press in the tumultuous aftermath of the 2005 election.

The government sought to intimidate *Awramba Times* staffers in reprisal for their challenging coverage. In May, for instance, the newspaper published a column comparing opposition fervor in the 2010 vote to that during the hotly contested 2005 election, according to local journalists. Desta Tesfaw, head of the government-controlled media regulatory agency, summoned one of the paper's top editors, Dawit Kebede, and accused the *Awramba Times* of "intentionally inciting and misguiding the public," the journalist said. The threats led Editor-in-Chief Woubshet Taye to resign.

Kebede reported in June that the newspaper's mail was being destroyed and tampered with at Teklay Posta Bet, the national postal headquarters. Post office manager Bezabih Asfaw told CPJ that he would investigate, but denied any tampering. In July 2010, *Ethio Channel*, a private pro-government publication, ran columns accusing *Awramba Times* of "working in collaboration with Ginbot 7 to remove the government from power," according to local journalists. The government has banned Ginbot 7, an opposition political movement, and labeled it a terrorist organization.

Kebede, who was imprisoned in the 2005 crackdown, was honored in November 2010 with CPJ's International Press Freedom Award in recognition of his courage in the face of government intimidation.

The government continued to harass other journalists targeted in the 2005 crackdown. In March, a panel of three Supreme Court judges reinstated fines imposed on the dissolved Fasil, Serkalem, Sisay, and Zekarias publishing houses; their principals were individually acquitted of antistate crimes. The fines, which ranged from 15,000 birr (US\$1,100) to 120,000 birr (US\$8,800), were heavy by Ethiopian economic standards.

Authorities also escalated pressure on the U.S. government-funded broadcaster Voice of America (VOA), zeroing in on the station's hour-long Amharic-language programs, which had been broadcast into Ethiopia since September 1982. In February, VOA reported that its listeners in Ethiopia heard only static. CPJ sources in Ethiopia confirmed the reports, noting that VOA's broadcasts in the Afan Oromo and Tigrigna languages experienced no interference. The Ethiopian government initially denied involvement. "This is absolutely a sham," spokesman Shimelis Kemal told CPJ. "The Ethiopian government does not support the policy of restricting foreign broadcasting services in the country. Such practices are prohibited in our constitution." Other international stations broadcasting Amharic-language programming into Ethiopia, including the German public broadcaster Deutsche Welle, also reported recurring interference, according to CPJ research.

During a March press conference, Zenawi left little doubt that the government was in favor of jamming foreign-based stations. Comparing VOA's Amharic service to Radio Télévision Libre des Mille Collines, the Rwandan station infamous for incitement during the 1994 genocide, Zenawi said VOA broadcasts were "destabilizing propaganda." He declared he would officially authorize jamming of foreign stations once government technicians had full capability. Following Zenawi's comments, spokesman Kemal charged that "VOA in the past has repeatedly broadcast programs and statements that tend to incite, foment hatred between different ethnic groups," according to news reports. VOA denied any accusations of incitement or unprofessionalism. VOA journalists said

Ethiopian officials have refused to respond to the service's requests for comment or information for years.

The government's animosity toward VOA may have played a role in the expulsion of Heather Murdock, a contributor who covered the May elections and was arrested in June while reporting in the eastern region of Harar. Authorities accused Murdock of attempting to contact the Ogaden National Liberation Front, a separatist group battling government troops in the area. (Harar borders the restive Ogaden region, where independent journalists are denied access, according to CPJ research.) Murdock denied the accusations, telling CPJ she was working on a story about hyenas.

The shift in the government's tone, from denial of abuses to defiance of criticism, occurred as Human Rights Watch released a report concluding that authorities had created a climate of fear ahead of the May elections through a "coordinated and sustained attack" on political opponents and journalists. In January, for instance, security agents in the northern city of Mekelle arrested Jason McLure of Bloomberg News after he interviewed leaders of the local opposition party Aarena Tigray about allegations of government harassment, according to local journalists. McLure was held for five days.

With four journalists behind bars when CPJ conducted its annual census of imprisoned journalists on December 1, Ethiopia was the second-worst jailer of the press in the region. Only [Eritrea](#), with 17 jailed journalists, had a worse record.

Officially, authorities claimed to have relented in their persecution of journalists. "The government has rectified many, many practices such as pretrial detention of journalists. Prosecutors are not encouraged to press charges against journalists," government spokesman Kemal told CPJ in August. Yet authorities in the northeastern region of Afar held editor Akram Ezedin of the private Islamic weekly *Al-Quds* in pretrial detention for two months on defamation charges stemming from stories critical of the region's Islamic Council. Ezedin, 17, was arrested on September 11, the day his father, Publisher Ezedin Mohamed, was set free after serving nine months in prison for a 2008 column criticizing Zenawi's description of Ethiopia as "orthodox Christian," according to local journalists.

Two journalists from the government-controlled Ethiopian Radio and Television Agency – editor Haileyesus Worku and reporter Abdulsemed Mohammed – were imprisoned in apparent reprisal for Worku's alleged attempts to copy sensitive footage of the 2005 post-election violence. A week after the arrests, government spokesman Bereket Simon told CPJ the journalists had been "caught 'red-handed,'" but he would not detail the accusations. The two journalists were eventually charged with copyright violation. A trial, which was being conducted behind closed doors, was ongoing in late year.

Mohammed, a 14-year veteran, was one of several senior journalists demoted by the state broadcaster during a politicized civil service overhaul that replaced professional journalists with party cadres, journalists told CPJ. They believed the charges against Mohammed were politically motivated reprisals for his lack of membership in the ruling party.

As in past years, Ethiopian authorities refused to account for the whereabouts, health, or legal status of Eritrean state journalists Saleh Idris Gama and Tesfalidet Kidane Tesfazghi, who have been held incommunicado on unsubstantiated accusations of terrorism since late 2006.

Ethiopian authorities imposed considerable Internet censorship: Websites for VOA, CPJ, and the URL-shortening service bit.ly were among those inaccessible in the country, according to local Internet users. The government's monopoly on Internet service took a turn in March when it awarded France Telecom a three-year contract to manage the state-run Ethiopian Telecommunications Corporation. Terms of the deal were not disclosed, according to local news reports.