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Freedom in the World 2016 - Ethiopia

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Freedom Status: Not Free

Aggregate Score: 15

Freedom Rating: 6.5

Political Rights: 7

Civil Liberties: 6

Ratings Change:

Ethiopia's political rights rating declined from 6 to 7 due to the government's systematic constriction of political space surrounding the May parliamentary elections. The ruling party took all the seats in the lower house, the preelection period was marked by the detention and arrest of opposition members, and discrimination against and harassment of Muslims and the Oromo population limited their participation in the political process.

Quick Facts

Capital: Addis Ababa

Population: 98,148,000

GDP/capita: \$565.20

Press Freedom Status: Not Free

Net Freedom Status: Not Free

OVERVIEW

In 2015, Ethiopia held its first parliamentary elections since the death of longtime Prime Minister Meles Zenawi in 2012. The ruling party and its allies won 100 percent of the seats, eliminating the token opposition member elected in 2010. Opposition party members were intimidated, detained, beaten, and arrested in the run-up to the polls.

Five journalists with the Zone 9 blogging collective, which is known for coverage of governance and human rights issues, were acquitted of terrorism charges in October 2015 after spending a year and a half in prison, though prosecutors later appealed their acquittals. Charges against two other Zone 9 bloggers and three associated journalists were dropped in July; the same month, journalist Reeyot Alemu was released from prison. Nevertheless, harassment, arrests, and prosecutions of opposition figures and journalists continued. Notably, in August, courts convicted 17 participants in the landmark 2012 protests staged by members of Ethiopia's Muslim

community, as well as a journalist with a Muslim newspaper, on terrorism charges; their sentences ranged from 7 to 22 years.

Protests over a controversial government plan to cede parts of Oromia State to the federal capital region of Addis Ababa resumed in November 2015, and human rights groups reported more than 75 people were killed in clashes between demonstrators and Ethiopian security forces. In December, Ethiopian authorities called the mostly peaceful protesters "terrorists," and authorized the Anti-Terror Task Force, a military body, to respond to them. Prominent Oromo opposition leaders, scores of protesters, and at least one journalist were arrested in connection with the demonstrations.

Tensions between Ethiopia and Eritrea heightened in 2015, and formal dialogue remains frozen. Border clashes occurred in July, and the Ethiopian Federal Police reported that 30 "infiltrators" were killed or captured. The Ethiopian-Eritrean border remains highly militarized, and reports that U.S.-based opposition leader Berhanu Nega (deemed a terrorist by Ethiopia for his affiliation with banned group Ginbot 7) planned to travel to Eritrea to lead a rebellion strained relations further. In July, Ethiopian prime minister Hailemariam Desalegn threatened "appropriate action" if Eritrea continued supporting actors trying to destabilize Ethiopia. Meanwhile, on-again, off-again peace talks between the government and the Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF), a separatist group that has fought for independence since 1991, continued in Nairobi, Kenya. Two ONLF negotiators allegedly abducted while in Nairobi were released by Ethiopian authorities in June.

POLITICAL RIGHTS AND CIVIL LIBERTIES

Political Rights: 4 / 40 (-3)

A. Electoral Process: 1 / 12

Ethiopia's bicameral parliament is made up of a 153-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 state legislatures; members of both houses serve five-year terms. While the lower house's seats are equal to a fixed number of constituencies, the upper house's seats are adjusted in proportion with the population. The lower house selects the prime minister, who holds most executive power. The president, a largely ceremonial figure, serves up to two six-year terms and is indirectly elected by both houses. Hailemariam has served as prime minister since 2012, and Mulatu Teshome as president since 2013.

As in past contests, Ethiopia's 2015 parliamentary and regional elections were tightly controlled by the ruling coalition, the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), with reports of voter coercion, intimidation, and barriers to registration. Elections were held on time, and official results were released within a month.

The opposition lost their sole seat in parliament, as the EPRDF and its allies took all 547 seats in the lower house. Both the opposition party coalition Medrek and the Semayawi Party, also known as the Blue Party, voiced serious concerns about the ruling party's behavior leading up to and on election day, and ultimately rejected the election's results.

The African Union (AU) was the only international organization to send election observers to Ethiopia's 2015 contest. (The European Union was not invited to observe, its officials said in February, noting that the EPRDF had rejected recommendations it issued following the 2010 elections.) The AU declared elections "peaceful and credible," but noted irregularities including voter coercion and inconsistent poll hours.

B. Political Pluralism and Participation: 0 / 16 (-2)

Opponents of the EPRDF find it nearly impossible to operate inside Ethiopia. In the lead-up to the May 2015 elections, opposition party members were intimidated, detained, beaten, and arrested. The Semayawi Party reported that more than 50 of its members were arrested ahead of the polls. Three opposition members were killed in the aftermath of the elections, though the Ethiopian government denies opposition claims that the killings were politically motivated. Eighteen Semayawi Party members were arrested in July for planning a demonstration to take place during U.S. president Barack Obama's visit to Ethiopia later that month.

Both the Unity for Democracy and Justice Party, formerly represented by one seat in parliament, and the Semayawi Party alleged that the EPRDF used procedural technicalities to block their candidates' registration. Nearly half of Semayawi candidates were deregistered on administrative grounds, a decision the opposition group pointed to as evidence of government repression. The opposition repeatedly questioned the independence of the National Electoral Board of Ethiopia. Separately, in the wake of the December 2015 Oromo protests, leaders of the opposition Oromo Federalist Congress were arrested on suspicion of inciting violence.

Political parties in Ethiopia are often ethnically based. The country's major ethnic parties are allied with the EPRDF, but have no room to effectively advocate for their constituents. The EPRDF coalition is comprised of four political parties and represents several ethnic groups. The government favors Tigrayan ethnic interests in economic and political matters, and the Tigrayan People's Liberation Front dominates the EPRDF. The 1995 constitution grants the right of secession to ethnically based states, but the government acquired powers in 2003 to intervene in states' affairs on issues of public security. Secessionist movements in Oromia and the Ogaden have largely failed after being put down by the military.

C. Functioning of Government: 3 / 12 (-1)

Ethiopia's governance institutions are dominated by the EPRDF, which controlled the succession process following Meles' death in 2012. The EPRDF continues its tight hold on Ethiopian politics under Hailemariam, who was reelected as party chair in August 2015 at the EPRDF's annual congress.

Corruption remains a significant problem in Ethiopia. EPRDF officials reportedly receive preferential access to credit, land leases, and jobs. Petty corruption extends to lower-level officials, who solicit bribes in return for processing documents. In response to a 2013 World Bank study detailing the country's corruption, the Federal Ethics & Anti-Corruption Commission made a string of high-profile arrests of prominent government officials and businessmen throughout 2013 and 2014, resulting in several convictions. In May 2015, the Ethiopian parliament removed two federal judges from the bench in connection with past corruption convictions. Despite cursory legislative improvements, enforcement of corruption-related laws remains lax in practice. Ethiopia was ranked 103 out of 168 countries and territories by Transparency International's 2015 Corruption Perceptions Index.

Civil Liberties: 11 / 40*D. Freedom of Expression and Belief: 3 / 16*

Ethiopia's media are dominated by state-owned broadcasters and government-oriented newspapers. Privately owned papers tend to steer clear of political issues and have low circulation, and journalists operating inside the country practice self-censorship. Defamation is a criminal offense, and a 2008 media law increased fines for defamation and allows prosecutors to pursue

cases without complaints from aggrieved parties. The law also allows prosecutors to seize material before publication in the name of national security.

According to the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), Ethiopia holds at least 10 journalists behind bars – the second-highest number of jailed journalists in sub-Saharan Africa after Eritrea as of December 2015. Restrictions are particularly tight on journalists perceived to be sympathetic to protests by the Muslim community, and journalists attempting to cover such events are routinely detained or arrested. In August 2015, Yusuf Getachew, arrested while covering the 2012 Muslim protests as editor of *Ye Muslimoch Guday* magazine, was convicted on terrorism charges and sentenced to seven years in prison. A terrorism case against Yusuf's colleague, Solomon Kebede, was ongoing at the year's end. Oromo Radio and TV anchor Fikadu Mirkana was arrested in December 2015 for unknown reasons, though the channel had been airing stories about the outbreak of the Oromo protests.

Those reporting on opposition activities face harassment and the threat of prosecution under Ethiopia's sweeping 2009 antiterrorism law. Since 2011, at least 15 journalists have been convicted under its provisions. In July 2015, the government released five journalists and bloggers, two of them associated with the Zone 9 collective, and dropped the incitement and terrorism charges levied against them. A day later, the government released journalist Reeyot Alemu, who was convicted in 2011 of "planning and promoting a terror attack" and originally sentenced to 14 years in prison, though that was later reduced to five on appeal. Reeyot had nearly served her full term when released. In October 2015, the remaining Zone 9 members originally arrested in 2014 were acquitted of terrorism charges, though one, Befekadu Hailu, still faced separate charges of inciting violence at the year's end. At the end of December, prosecutors appealed the acquittal and summoned the bloggers back to court. *Negere Ethiopia* editor-in-chief Getachew Shiferaw was also arrested in late December; observers expected him to be charged under the antiterrorism law. Print editions of that paper, affiliated with the Semayawi Party, have been shut down, though it continues to publish online.

Due to the risks of operating inside the country, many Ethiopian journalists work in exile. According to CPJ, 34 Ethiopian journalists went into exile between June 2014 and May 2015, a sharp increase from previous years. Authorities use high-tech jamming equipment to filter and block news websites seen as pro-opposition. According to Human Rights Watch (HRW), since 2010 the Ethiopian government has developed a robust and sophisticated internet and mobile framework to monitor journalists and opposition groups, block access to unwanted websites or critical television and radio programs, and collect evidence for prosecutions in politically motivated trials. In 2015, leaked emails from the Italian company Hacking Team revealed that Ethiopia was paying for its surveillance tools as late as March 2015, some of which targeted Ethiopians in the diaspora. The Ethiopian government denies that Hacking Team's surveillance software is used to illegally target journalists and opposition leaders. Hacking Team later in 2015 said it had severed its relationship with Ethiopian authorities.

The constitution guarantees religious freedom, but the government has increasingly harassed the Muslim community, which comprises about 34 percent of the population. (About 44 percent of people in Ethiopia are Orthodox Christian, while about 19 percent are Protestant.) In August 2015, 18 Muslim activists (including Getachew) who were arrested following the 2012 protests over alleged government involvement in the Muslim community's affairs were sentenced to prison terms of between 7 and 22 years on terrorism charges. The activists maintain their innocence. Also in August, authorities arrested another 20 people and charged them with promoting an extremist Islamic ideology and of attempting to topple the government and establish a new one based in Sharia (Islamic law).

Academic freedom is often restricted in Ethiopia. The government has accused universities of being pro-opposition and prohibits political activities on campuses. There are reports of students being pressured into joining the EPRDF in order to secure employment or places at universities; professors are similarly pressured in order to ensure favorable positions or promotions. The Ministry of Education closely monitors and regulates official curricula, and the research, speech, and assembly of both professors and students are frequently restricted.

The presence of the EPRDF at all levels of society – directly and, increasingly, electronically – inhibits free private discussion. Many people are wary of speaking against the government. The EPRDF maintains a network of paid informants, and opposition politicians have accused the government of tapping their phones.

E. Associational and Organizational Rights: 0 / 12

Freedoms of assembly and association are guaranteed by the constitution but limited in practice. Organizers of large public meetings must request permission from the authorities 48 hours in advance. Applications by opposition groups are routinely denied and, in cases when approved, organizers are subject to government meddling to move dates or locations. Since 2011, ongoing peaceful demonstrations held by members of the Muslim community have been met with violent responses from security forces.

In April 2015, tens of thousands of people turned out to mourn 30 Ethiopian migrants murdered by the Islamic State militant group in Libya. The demonstration included Ethiopians frustrated with the government, and clashes between protesters and police broke out following pro-EPRDF speeches. The Ethiopian government blamed the chaos on the Semayawi Party, who reported that their members were detained and beaten by security forces. At least 100 people were reportedly arrested in the demonstrations' aftermath.

Demonstrations erupted in November 2015 after land was cleared for an investment project linked to the controversial Addis Ababa Master Plan, which envisioned the expansion of the capital into parts of Oromia State. Protests quickly spread throughout the region, and clashes between demonstrators and the police left at least five dead, according to the government. Activists allege that as many as 75 people were killed after security forces used excessive force against protesters – firing live ammunition, beating protesters, and detaining hundreds without charge, sometimes during late-night home raids. While some protesters were responsible for property damage (in at least one case burning down a police station), the government alleged that they were also linked with terror groups, and dispatched the Anti-Terror Task Force to combat them.

The 2009 Charities and Societies Proclamation restricts the activities of foreign nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) by prohibiting work on political and human rights issues. Foreign NGOs are defined as groups receiving more than 10 percent of their funding from abroad, a classification that includes most domestic organizations as well. The law also limits the amount of money any NGO can spend on "administration," a controversial category that has included activities such as teacher or health-worker training. Since the law's approval, the government has amended the "administration" category so that salaries, transport, and training costs would not be considered administrative expenses; however, some NGOs have reported that the directive is not being implemented. NGOs have struggled to maintain operations as a result of the law.

Trade union rights are tightly restricted. Neither civil servants nor teachers have collective bargaining rights. All unions must be registered, and the government retains the authority to cancel registration. Two-thirds of union members belong to organizations affiliated with the Confederation of Ethiopian Trade Unions, which is under government influence. Independent unions face harassment, and trade union leaders are regularly imprisoned. There has not been a legal strike since 1993.

F. Rule of Law: 3 / 16

The judiciary is officially independent, but its judgments rarely deviate from government policy. The 2009 antiterrorism law gives great discretion to security forces, allowing the detention of suspects for up to four months without charge. Conditions in Ethiopia's prisons are harsh, and detainees frequently report abuse. CPJ and Ethiopian sources reported that former *Feteh* editor Temesgen Desalegn, who was convicted on defamation charges in 2014 and sentenced to three years in prison, has been denied medical care and family visits.

Yemen's June 2014 arrest and extradition of British citizen Andargachew Tsige to Ethiopia at the government's request sparked outrage from human rights groups. Andargachew is secretary general of the banned opposition group Ginbot 7, and was sentenced to death in absentia in 2009 and again in 2012 for allegedly plotting to kill government officials. As of 2015 he remains detained in solitary confinement at an undisclosed location in Ethiopia, according to the British government, which continues to be denied access to him.

The federal government generally has strong control and direction over the military, though forces such as the Liyu Police in Somali Region sometimes operate independently.

Repression of the Oromo and ethnic Somalis, and government attempts to co-opt their political parties into EPRDF allies, have fueled nationalism in the Oromia and Ogaden regions. Persistent claims that government troops in the Ogaden have committed war crimes are difficult to verify, as independent media are barred from the region.

Same-sex sexual activity is prohibited by law and punishable by up to 15 years' imprisonment.

G. Personal Autonomy and Individual Rights: 5 / 16

While Ethiopia's constitution establishes freedom of movement, insecurity – particularly in eastern Ethiopia – prevents unrestricted movement into affected sites.

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. The government has evicted indigenous groups from various areas to make way for projects such as hydroelectric dams. It has also leased large tracts of land to foreign governments and investors for agricultural development in opaque deals that have displaced thousands of Ethiopians. Indian firms have leased the majority of land available to foreign firms; that amount is reported to be more than 3.5 million hectares (13,500 square miles). Up to 70,000 people have been forced to move from the western Gambella region, although the government denies the resettlement plans are connected to land investments. Similar evictions have taken place in Lower Omo Valley, where government-run sugar plantations and hydroelectric dams have put thousands of pastoralists at risk by diverting their water supplies. Journalists and international organizations have persistently alleged that the government withholds development assistance from villages perceived as being unfriendly to the ruling party.

Women are relatively well represented in parliament, holding nearly 39 percent of seats in the lower house, 32 percent in the upper house, and four ministerial posts. Legislation protects women's rights, but these rights are routinely violated in practice. Enforcement of the law against rape and domestic abuse is patchy, and cases routinely stall in the courts. Female genital mutilation and forced child marriage are technically illegal, though there has been little effort to prosecute perpetrators. Ethiopia has made some progress in recent years implementing its National Action Plan to Eliminate the Worst Forms of Child Labor. However, many children continue to work in dangerous sectors and lack access to basic education and services. In September 2015,

Ethiopia charged three men with smuggling after a number of Ethiopian migrants died – including those killed by the Islamic State in Libya – while trying to reach Europe.

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