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Amnesty International Annual Report 2011 - Ethiopia

Head of state: **Girma Wolde-Giorgis**

Head of government: **Meles Zenawi**

Death penalty: **retentionist**

Population: **85 million**

Life expectancy: **56.1 years**

Under-5 mortality (m/f): **138/124 per 1,000**

Adult literacy: **35.9 per cent**

The ruling Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) won the parliamentary elections in May, which took place in a context of intimidation, harassment and restrictions on freedom of association and assembly. Legislation that severely limits human rights activities came into force. The independent press was severely restricted. State resources, assistance and opportunities were broadly used to control the population.

Background

Parliamentary and State Council elections took place in May. The EPRDF and a small coalition of affiliated parties won 99.6 per cent of parliamentary seats. An opposition coalition, Medrek, the Forum for Democratic Dialogue in Ethiopia, accused the government of electoral fraud and called for a rerun. The National Electoral Board rejected the call and a subsequent appeal to the Federal Supreme Court was dismissed.

The final report of the EU Election Observation Mission stated that the elections fell short of international commitments. The findings highlighted the lack of a level playing field for all contesting parties; violations of freedom of expression, assembly and movement of opposition party members; misuse of state resources by the ruling party; and a lack of independent media coverage. The Prime Minister described the report as "useless trash" and the Chief EU Observer was not granted access to Ethiopia to present the final report.

Ethiopia was considered to have one of the fastest growing economies in Africa. The government received praise from the UN for being on track to halve its poverty rate by 2015. However, the UN also stated that increasing inequality in urban areas and poor education standards were obstacles to development and that Ethiopia was not making sufficient progress on gender equality and maternal mortality.

Pre-election violence and repression

State resources, assistance and opportunities were used repeatedly before May's elections as leverage to pressure citizens to leave opposition parties. Education opportunities, civil service jobs and food assistance were often contingent on membership of the ruling party. Immediately prior to the election, voters in Addis Ababa were reportedly threatened with the withdrawal of state assistance if they did not vote for the EPRDF.

The build-up to the elections was punctuated by incidents of political violence.

- Aregawi Gebreyohannes, a candidate for Arena-Tigray, one of the opposition parties forming Medrek, was stabbed to death by six unidentified men in Tigray on 2 March. The government rejected opposition claims that the attack was politically motivated and said it had been a "personal quarrel" in a bar. A man was tried and sentenced to 15 years' imprisonment. The opposition said that the trial was "arranged and orchestrated" and that Aregawi Gebreyohannes had previously been subjected to government harassment.

Other killings were also reported. The Oromo Federalist Congress party reported that Biyansa Daba, an opposition activist, was beaten to death on 7 April because of his political activities. In May, the government announced that a policeman had been stabbed to death by two opposition members who had confessed and were carrying Medrek identity cards. Their trial and conviction reportedly took place within one week. On 23 and 24 May, two members of the Oromo People's Congress party were shot in Oromia. The opposition stated that the government's aim was to stop protests; the government stated that the men had been trying to storm a ballot collection office.

Medrek reported in February that armed men were preventing its members from registering as candidates.

Opposition parties said that their members were harassed, beaten and detained by the EPRDF in the build-up to the elections. Hundreds of people were allegedly arrested arbitrarily in the Oromia region, often on the grounds of supporting the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF), an armed group. Detention without trial, torture and killings of Oromos were reported. On 7 February, Dr Merera Gudina, leader of the Oromo People's Congress party and the Chairman of Medrek, told the media that at least 150 Oromo opposition officials had been arrested in less than five months.

Freedom of expression – journalists

Ethiopia's independent press was barely able to function. Journalists worked in a climate of fear because of the threat of state harassment and prosecution. Information was closely controlled by state bodies including the Radio and Television Agency (ERTA) and Ethiopian Press, the state publisher.

- In January, Ezedan Muhammad, editor and publisher of Ethiopia's largest Islamic weekly, *Hakima*, was sentenced to one year's imprisonment for "incitement" in connection with a 2008 column criticizing comments made by the Prime Minister. In September, Ezedan Muhammad was released, but his 17-year-old son Akram Ezedan, who had been acting as editor during his father's detention, was arrested on the same day. He was later released and the case against him dropped.
- On 4 March, Voice of America reported that its Amharic-language broadcasts were being jammed. On 19 March, the Prime Minister declared that the radio station had been broadcasting "destabilizing propaganda" and compared it to Radio Mille Collines, a Rwandan radio station that incited ethnic hatred before and during the 1994 Rwandan genocide.
- In May, Woubshet Taye, editor-in-chief of the *Awramba Times*, resigned following a warning from the Ethiopian Broadcasting Authority that he would be "responsible for any bloodshed that may occur in connection with the coming election". The *Awramba Times* had featured an article the week before about a pro-democracy demonstration during the 2005 election period.

In March, the Supreme Court reinstated fines imposed in 2007 on four independent publishing companies in the wake of a post-election crackdown in 2005, but overturned by a presidential pardon the same year. The publishers could not pay the re-imposed fines. The High Court was asked by the government to freeze the assets of the publishers and their spouses.

Internet content was censored by the state and some websites were blocked. The National Electoral Board introduced a press code which restricted journalistic activities during the elections, including a ban on interviews with voters, candidates and observers on election day.

The Mass Media and Freedom of Information Proclamation remained in force, giving the government disproportionate power to launch defamation cases, issue financial penalties and refuse media registrations and licences.

Human rights defenders

The Charities and Societies Proclamation, passed in 2009, took effect. The legislation imposed strict controls on civil society organizations and provided for criminal penalties, including fines and imprisonment. Local NGOs were barred from working on issues of human rights and democracy if more than 10 per cent of their income came from foreign sources. The law made human rights defenders fearful of working and led to self-censorship.

Some organizations significantly altered their mandates and ceased their work on human rights. Several human rights defenders fled abroad fearing government harassment following the implementation of the law.

A small number of organizations continued working on human rights and democracy issues, including the Ethiopian Human Rights Council (EHRCO) and the Ethiopian Women Lawyers Association (EWLA), although both were forced to reduce staff numbers and close offices due to the new funding rules. At the end of the year, EHRCO had only three offices (compared to 12 previously). Despite successfully re-registering with the Charities and Societies Agency, the enforcing body, the bank accounts of EHRCO and EWLA were frozen in late 2009 and remained frozen at the end of 2010.

Counter-terror and security

The Anti-Terrorism Proclamation, whose broad definition of terrorism appears to criminalize freedom of expression and peaceful assembly, remained in place. The threat of prosecution contributed to a climate of self-censorship including among journalists, who can be prosecuted for publishing articles referring to individuals or groups deemed to be "terrorists".

Prisoners of conscience and political prisoners

A large number of political prisoners and possible prisoners of conscience remained in detention.

The government continued to imprison numerous ethnic Oromos on accusations of supporting the OLF. These charges often appeared to be politically motivated.

- In March, 15 Oromo men and women were convicted of membership of the OLF in a group trial and given sentences ranging from 10 years' imprisonment to death. The 15 – arrested in 2008 along with other Oromos who were subsequently released – came from a variety of professions, and many did not know each other before being arrested and tried as a group. There were concerns that the trial fell short of international standards and was politically motivated in the run-up to the elections. Many of the detainees reported that they had been tortured. Two male detainees who were released before the trial died immediately after their release, reportedly as a result of their treatment in detention.
- Prisoner of conscience Birtukan Mideksa, leader of the Unity for Democracy and Justice Party, was released in October. She had been detained since December 2008 following a previous two-year imprisonment.

Conflicts in the Somali and Oromia regions

Low-level conflict continued between the OLF and government forces. Ethiopian refugee children reported that they had been forcibly recruited by the OLF in Kenya and trafficked back to Ethiopia to serve as porters and cooks.

Clashes continued in the Somali region in the long-running conflict between the Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF) and government forces. The ONLF published a statement on 4 February calling on the AU to investigate human rights violations, in particular alleged war crimes by government forces in the region. Access to the Somali region for international journalists and certain humanitarian organizations was restricted by the government and it remained largely inaccessible. A Voice of America journalist was expelled from Ethiopia in June after reporting on clashes between the government and the ONLF.

On 12 October, a peace deal was reportedly signed between a breakaway faction of the ONLF and the government. It was reported that under the agreement, members of the faction received immunity from prosecution and prisoners taken by the government would be released. The main ONLF group reportedly dismissed the deal as "irrelevant".

In November, reports were received that over 100 civilians had been detained in the town of Degeh Bur and transferred to a military prison in Jijiga. In December, it was

reported that Ethiopian troops had burnt a village in the Qorahey zone, resulting in the deaths of three civilians.

Death penalty

Death sentences were imposed but no executions were reported.

- A former regional official, Jemua Ruphael, was sentenced to death in June for murder and supporting an Eritrean-backed armed group.
- Hassan Mohammed Mahmoud, a former member of the armed Somali group Al-Itihad Al-Islamiya, was found guilty in March of committing terrorist acts in the 1990s and sentenced to death.

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