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2013 Scores

Status: Not Free
Freedom Rating: 6.0
Civil Liberties: 6
Political Rights: 6

Overview

The death of Prime Minister Meles Zenawi was announced in August 2012, following months of speculation about his declining health, and he was replaced by his former deputy, Hailemariam Desalegn. Despite the change in personnel, the regime continued its pattern of harassing and imprisoning political opponents, journalists, and, increasingly, the country's Muslim population. Meanwhile, Ethiopian troops carried out a series of military incursions into Eritrea in March, the first since the end of the war in 2000.

Ethiopia, one of the few African countries to avoid decades of European colonization, ended a long tradition of monarchy in 1974, when Emperor Haile Selassie was overthrown in a Marxist military coup. Colonel Mengistu Haile Mariam ruled the country until he was toppled by guerrilla groups in 1991. The main rebel group, the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), formed a provisional government with Meles Zenawi as head of state.

In 1995, the EPRDF introduced democratic institutions and a new constitution, and Meles was elected prime minister in polls boycotted by most of the opposition, which claimed harassment of its supporters. The EPRDF easily won the 2000 legislative elections, and Meles began his second five-year term. Opposition parties and some observers criticized the government's conduct of the vote.

A border dispute with Eritrea, which had gained formal independence from Ethiopia in 1993 after a long guerrilla conflict, triggered a 1998-2000 war between the countries. Ethiopia later rejected the findings of an international commission that awarded the contested area to Eritrea, and the two neighbors have remained at odds ever since.

The EPRDF and its allies led the 2005 parliamentary elections, though the main opposition parties won a third of the seats. Claiming that voter fraud had deprived them of outright victory, opposition supporters took to the streets. The authorities responded harshly, killing at least 193 people and arresting more than 4,000. Several opposition figures received long sentences, and though all were pardoned and released in 2007, some were later rearrested.

The 2010 parliamentary and regional elections were tightly controlled by the EPRDF. Voters were threatened with losing their jobs, homes, or government services if they did not turn out for the ruling party. Opposition meetings were broken up, and candidates were threatened and detained. Opposition-aligned parties saw their 160-seat presence in Parliament virtually disappear, with the EPRDF and its allies taking all but two of the 547 seats in the lower house. Meles was sworn in for a third term as prime minister.

Shorn of their representation in Parliament and under pressure by the authorities, opponents of the EPRDF found it increasingly difficult to operate. In 2011, Parliament's lower house declared five groups to be terrorist entities, including the U.S.-based opposition movement Ginbot 7. Any journalist who interviewed movement members faced arrest on terrorism charges. Domestic nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) estimated that there were up to 400 political prisoners by the end of 2012. In June 2012, 24 journalists and opposition activists were found guilty of offences under the law, including the award-winning journalist Eskinder Nega, who was sentenced in July to 18 years in prison.

Ethiopia entered a new and potentially turbulent chapter when the death of Prime Minister Meles was announced in August following months of speculation about his failing health. On the surface, there was a smooth political transition. Meles' former deputy, Hailemariam Desalegn, was quickly sworn in as prime minister and installed as chairman of the EPRDF in September.

Tensions between Ethiopia and Eritrea remained high after a 2011 UN report accused Eritrean officials of a failed plot to bomb an African Union summit in Addis Ababa. In March 2012, Ethiopian troops carried out a series of military incursions into Eritrea, the first since the end of the war. The authorities said the attacks were aimed at rebels responsible for kidnapping a group of foreign tourists in the Afar region of Ethiopia.

Also in 2012, there was halting progress in ending the conflict between the government and separatist rebels in the Ogaden region, who have fought for independence since 1991. Talks between the government and the Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF) were convened in Kenya but broke down in October without agreement.

Political Rights and Civil Liberties

Ethiopia is not an electoral democracy. Parliament is made up 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,

with both serving five-year terms. The lower house selects the prime minister, who holds most executive power, and the president, a largely ceremonial figure who serves up to two six-year terms. All of these institutions are dominated by the EPRDF, which tightly controlled the 2010 elections and the succession process following the death of Prime Minister Meles Zenawi in 2012. While the 1995 constitution grants the right of secession to ethnically-based states, the government acquired powers in 2003 to intervene in states' affairs on issues of public security.

Corruption is 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 allegedly solicit bribes in return for processing documents. In a survey of 1,000 people conducted by Transparency International (TI) in 2011, 64 percent of respondents reported having had to pay a bribe to customs officials, and 55 percent to a member of the judiciary. Ethiopia was ranked 113 out of 176 countries surveyed in TI's 2012 Corruption Perceptions Index.

The media are dominated by state-owned broadcasters and government-oriented newspapers. One of the few independent papers in the capital, *Addis Neger*, closed in 2009, claiming harassment by the authorities. Privately-owned papers tend to steer clear of political issues and have low circulations. A 2008 media law criminalizes defamation and allows prosecutors to seize material before publication in the name of national security.

Journalists reporting on opposition activities face serious harassment and the threat of prosecution under the country's sweeping 2009 Antiterrorism Proclamation. In July 2012, six journalists were convicted of terrorism. While five were convicted in absentia, the sixth, Eskinder Nega, received 18 years in prison. The judge said that he had consorted with the political group, Ginbot 7, a designated terrorist entity in Ethiopia. The United States, European Union and the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights expressed dismay at the verdicts. In other cases, the courts reduced sentences handed out to journalists convicted of terrorism. In August, a columnist with the *Feteh* weekly newspaper had her 14-year sentence reduced to 5 years; while in September, two Swedish journalists who had received 11-year sentences in 2011 for assisting the ONLF were pardoned.

Due to the risks of operating inside Ethiopia, many of the country's journalists work in exile. The Committee to Protect Journalists says that Ethiopia has driven 79 journalists into exile in the past decade, more than any other nation. The authorities use high-tech jamming equipment to filter and block news websites seen as pro-opposition. Legislation adopted in May criminalizes the use of telecommunications devices to transmit any "terrorizing message." Critics said the vaguely worded law also effectively banned the use of Skype and other voice-over-internet protocol services that cannot be closely monitored by the government.

The constitution guarantees religious freedom, but the government has increasingly harassed the Muslim community, which has grown to rival the Ethiopian Orthodox Church as the country's largest religious group. Muslim groups accuse the government of trying to impose the beliefs of an obscure Islamic sect, al-Ahbash, at the expense of the dominant Sufi-influenced strain of Islam. Before his death, Meles said the Muslim community was a source of extremism, claiming it had links to Al-Qaeda.

Academic freedom is restricted. The government has accused universities of being pro-opposition and prohibits political activities on campuses. There have been reports of students being pressured into joining the EPRDF in order to secure places at universities.

The presence of the EPRDF at all levels of society inhibits free private discussion. Many people are wary of speaking against the government for fear of being overheard by party officials. The EPRDF maintains a network of paid informants, and opposition politicians have accused the government of tapping their telephones.

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. Peaceful demonstrations were held outside mosques in July 2012, but the security forces responded violently, detaining protestors, including several prominent Muslim leaders. A total of 29 Muslims were eventually charged with offences under the antiterrorism law. They were awaiting trial at year's end.

The 2009 Charities and Societies Proclamation restricts the activities of foreign 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 captures most domestic organizations as well. NGOs have struggled to maintain operations as a result of the law, which also requires them to reregister with the authorities. According to Justice Ministry figures, there were 3,522 registered NGOs before the law was passed and 1,655 afterward. In 2010, the Human Rights Council (HRCO) and the Ethiopian Women Lawyers' Association had their bank accounts frozen for violating the rules on receiving foreign funds. An appeal against the ruling by the HRCO was rejected by the Supreme Court in October 2012.

Trade union rights are tightly restricted. 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. There has not been a legal strike since 1993.

The judiciary is officially independent, but its judgments rarely deviate from government policy. The Antiterrorism Proclamation gives great discretion to the security forces, allowing the detention of suspects for up to four months without charge. It was used in 2011 to detain more than 100 members of opposition parties; terrorist suspects were denied legal assistance while they awaited trial. A total of 31 people have been convicted under the law, 12 of them journalists. Conditions in Ethiopia's prisons are harsh, and detainees frequently report abuse.

The government tends to favor Tigrayan ethnic interests in economic and political matters, and the EPRDF is dominated by the Tigrayan People's Liberation Front. Repression of the Oromo and ethnic Somalis, and government attempts to co-opt their parties into subsidiaries of the EPRDF, have fueled nationalism in both the Oromia and Ogaden regions. Persistent claims that war crimes have been committed by government troops in the Ogaden are difficult to verify, as independent media are barred from the region. However, Human Rights Watch accused government paramilitaries of executing 10 men during an operation in the Gashaamo district in March 2012.

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. 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.

Journalists and international organizations have persistently alleged that the government has withheld development assistance from villages perceived as being unfriendly to the ruling party.

Women are relatively well represented in Parliament, having won 152 seats in the lower house in the 2010 elections. Legislation protects women's rights, but they are routinely violated in practice. Enforcement of the law against rape and domestic abuse is patchy, with cases routinely stalling in the courts. Forced child labor is a significant problem, particularly in the agricultural sector. Same-sex sexual activity is prohibited by law and punishable with imprisonment.

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