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Ethiopia: End stifling of peaceful protests

Amnesty International is concerned that the rights to freedom of expression, association and assembly are once again under attack in Ethiopia. Two political opposition parties have reported to Amnesty International the arrests of many of their members in various locations around the country in recent weeks, in relation to efforts to hold peaceful protests.

Both parties are protesting, among other cited grievances, against the continued imprisonment of political opposition members, journalists and members of the Muslim community, many of whose arrests were themselves related to peaceful protest movements.

Blue Party arrests

The Blue (Semayawi) party, a political opposition party, has reported that on the evening of 31 August, federal police and intelligence officers forcefully entered their office in Ginfla in Addis Ababa, where party members were preparing for a peaceful demonstration planned for the following day. Party members at the office at the time have told Amnesty International that everyone present – estimated by them to be between 60 and 90 people – was arrested and taken to three police stations in Addis Ababa – Sostegna (third) police station, Gedam Sefer and Jan Meda stations in Arada sub-city. All those arrested were reportedly released without charge after several hours in detention and after providing their personal details to the police.

A number of arrested party members told Amnesty International that they and many others were severely beaten while detained at the police stations, resulting in a number of injuries.

One party member detained at Jan Meda police station, told Amnesty International that they were beaten for about 20 minutes by several policemen and now had pain in their kidneys. The individual reported that while they were beaten, the police said, “You are eating three times a day, how can you make a demonstration to bring down the EPRDF [the ruling party]. Do you think we can let you do this?” Another party member, who was detained at Gedam Sefer police station, told Amnesty International that he has had treatment for back pain as a result of being kicked and beaten by police while detained. Another person interviewed by Amnesty International said that they were only beaten for around five minutes, as they were at the end of the group “waiting to be beaten.” But, they said, some of those arrested with them were beaten for over an hour.

The party also reports that police confiscated all equipment and materials found in the party office, including laptops, sound systems and generators for the demonstration, banners, T-shirts and flags. One of the arrested party members Amnesty International spoke to said that he and others were forced to remove the Blue party T-shirts they were wearing and hand them over to the police.

Some party members reported that police had told them that the demonstration was illegal because they had not received permission. The Blue Party says it had informed the authorities 12 days in advance – much more notice than the 48 hours required by law, and had received no written response to request a change to the date or location of the demonstration.

According to the Proclamation to Establish the Procedure for Peaceful Demonstration and Public Political Meeting (No. 3/1991), anyone planning to hold a demonstration must provide written notice to the relevant authorities 48 hours in advance, providing specifics of the nature, time, location and number of expected participants. The administrative office must provide a written response to the applicant within 12 hours if it is preferable that the demonstration be held at a different time or location. However, opposition parties and organisers of protests have frequently reported difficulties in attempting to notify the authorities of planned demonstrations.

A government spokesperson reportedly told the BBC that no such crackdown had taken place.

However, the allegations by Blue Party members fit a long-standing pattern of credible reports of intimidation of peaceful protestors and of political opposition parties, including arrests and confiscation of equipment ahead of political meetings.

Unity for Democracy and Justice arrests

The opposition Unity for Democracy and Justice party (UDJ) has also reported that numerous members of the party were arrested in various locations around the country during July and August 2013. All were reportedly arrested whilst distributing flyers promoting a series of demonstrations and public meetings and a related petition demanding the amendment or abrogation of the Anti-Terrorism Proclamation and the release of UDJ and other political leaders, religious leaders and journalists currently imprisoned under the law.

The UDJ says that in the last two months, members of the party have been arrested in Mekele, Gondar, Dessie, Walaita zone, Fiche town in North Shewa, and Addis Ababa. 62 party members were reported to have been detained in Addis Ababa in the last two weeks, after distributing flyers. Most of those arrested were reportedly released without charge after several days' detention. However, several people reportedly remain in detention in various locations. One person is reported to have been detained without charge for 12 days.

A UDJ representative told Amnesty International that organisers of demonstrations and public meetings in Bahir Dar, Arba Minch, Gondar and Walaita zone also experienced other forms of harassment by government authorities, including the confiscation of loud-speakers, tearing down posters, and a party member being expelled from his job due to his involvement in the protests. The planned demonstration in Mekele and the public meeting in Walaita zone reportedly had to be cancelled due to the extensive harassment faced by the party members.

Protesting against protest-related arrests

Among the issues both the UDJ and Blue parties are protesting about, is the government repression of the peaceful Muslim protest movement, and the detention and prosecution of key figures of the movement.

For over 18 months, large swathes of Ethiopia's Muslim population have staged regular peaceful protests against alleged government interference in Islamic Affairs. The protests have been met with repressive tactics including hundreds of arrests, the prosecution of the movement's leaders on terrorism charges, and several incidents of alleged excessive use of police force which resulted in the deaths of a number of protestors.

The government has continually attempted to discredit the movement and to associate it with extremism and terrorism. A few days before the Blue Party demonstration planned for 1 September, the government-allied Inter-Religious Council announced that a demonstration would take place on the same date and in the same location against 'Muslim extremism.'

The UDJ and Blue party demonstrations are also protesting against the continued imprisonment of a number of political opposition party members and journalists, imprisoned for exercising their right to freedom of expression, in many cases in relation to peaceful protest movements.

Both parties are calling for the release of journalist Eskinder Nega and UDJ leaders Andualem Arage and Nathnael Mekonnen, who are serving lengthy prison sentences on terrorism charges after they discussed at a public meeting whether the Middle East and North Africa style uprisings could spread to Ethiopia. The parties are also calling for the release of journalists Reyot Alemu and Woubshet Taye, and opposition leader Zerihun Gebre-Egziabher, who are also serving prison sentences under the Anti-Terrorism Proclamation for their alleged involvement with, and [journalistic] reporting on the Beka! (Enough) movement in 2011 that called for peaceful protests to take place.

The UDJ is particularly focussing its protests and petition on the misuse of the Anti-Terrorism Proclamation, which has been used in all of the above cases, and calling for the amendment or abrogation of the proclamation. Amnesty International has repeatedly expressed concern about the vague provisions in the Anti-Terrorism Proclamation, which continues to be used to prosecute and thereby silence dissenting and critical voices.

Peaceful protests and the rights to freedom of expression and assembly

As a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, Ethiopia is obliged to respect, protect and fulfil the rights to freedom of expression, association and assembly. Despite this, and a further Constitutional protection of the right to peacefully assemble and demonstrate in Ethiopia, the government continues to deny those rights to anyone demonstrating against government policy or practice. Over the last couple of years Ethiopia has seen hundreds of people arrested because of their actual or alleged involvement with peaceful protest movements.

No one should be arrested for the peaceful exercise of their rights, including for participation or involvement in a peaceful protest movement, planning protests or reporting on them [in a journalistic capacity]. Allegations of police use of unnecessary or excessive force against protestors or torture or other ill-treatment of detainees should be immediately and promptly investigated.

The Blue Party is now planning another demonstration for 7 September. Amnesty International calls on the Government of Ethiopia to respect its international law obligations and ensure the rights to freedom of expression, association and assembly for all persons without discrimination.

As eyes begin to turn towards the parliamentary elections due to be held in 2015, the Ethiopian government must release its stranglehold on political participation. The authorities must allow political opposition parties to function without harassment, and allow all persons, including peaceful protest groups, to exercise their rights to freedom of expression, assembly and association.