



# Human Rights League of the Horn of Africa

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## **Report on Press Freedom Violations in Ethiopia**

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Ethiopia is said to be one of the emerging democracies in Africa. When the incumbent government came to power in 1991, it promised, among other things, to establish a multiparty political system with a free press, to hold free and democratic elections, to honour and protect human rights, and to promote the rule of law based on the equality of all peoples in the country. But, after seventeen years, the peoples in Ethiopia were not blessed to see these. Instead, what have reigned in the country are fierce conflicts and controversies around those fundamental issues, and harassments, intimidations and victimizations of citizens who attempted to defend their rights.

Freedom of expression is guaranteed in both the Constitution and the 1992 Press Law. Particularly in the Constitution, it is stated that, "Everyone has the right to freedom of expression without any interference. This right shall include freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any media of his choice." (Article 29 -2) Despite this fact, except for in the Capital and in very few provincial cities who fought hard to defend these constitutional rights of theirs, the distribution of the products of independent press is literally banned in Ethiopia. The government might claim otherwise; but it is difficult to think of any other interpretation to be given to intimidating agent distributors by arresting them without court warrants, ransacking their stores and confiscating properties, labelling ordinary readers as alleged members or supporters of opposition political groups, and threatening public employees with losing jobs if they are found reading independent press publications.

Everyone's right of access to information of public interest, too, is clearly stated in the Constitution. But, doors of all public offices, including the Parliament (which is said to be the seat of people's representative), are closed against journalists from independent media. With this, the Ethiopian peoples have been denied their rights to know what is discussed and decided on their

behalf. They have also been denied their rights to express their opinions and participate in making decisions over their own collective issues. What worsens this situation is that, as hinted at in this report under the political rights (by OHRRO); even the MPs (*the non-EPRDF MPs*) are not able to hold public gatherings with their own constituencies, as it is very risky for both the MPs and the ordinary citizens. The state-controlled public media either deliberately ignore or distort the

information they disseminate. As the Ethiopian mockery regarding those media goes, it is only the time that they tell/report correctly.

The ruling party fully controlled all electronic media, including ETV, the only television broadcasting station in the country, until the end of 2007, although there have been a lot of entrepreneurs who expressed their interests as soon as the press declaration was issued in 1992 to participate in the sector. Only two FM radios were given licenses in 2007, after waiting for the minimum of seven years to the maximum of twelve years. Also, the ruling party closed the Afan Oromo Desk of the ETV, the only TV broadcaster, in 2008 for purely political reasons. By doing so, it stripped fifty to fifty five million Afan Oromo speakers (including non-Oromos) of their right to obtain information, to learn about decisions that are made and policies that are passed under their name. Protests by the beneficiary audiences and the employees as well as MPs from concerned constituencies fell on deaf ears.

The Constitution (under Article 29, 3a) prohibits any form of censorship. But, self-censorship is a way of life for Ethiopian journalists. Any form of criticism, which is actually the normal nature of genuine independent media, is very likely to cause from the least of telephonic threats, to intimidations by repeated arrests and charges, to short and long term prison sentences, to capital punishment. In July 2007, journalists Andualem Ayele, Mesfin Tesfaye, Wosenseged Zeleke and Dawit Fasil were sentenced to death on treason charges that were connected to the unrest that followed the May 2005 election. Thanks to the relentless pressure from international communities, human rights and media organizations around the world, those death sentences were reversed. But, they left behind a heavy cloud of fear that highly impacts on journalists who work for independent media in the country – that there is the possibility of the same consequence if they act against the interests of the ruling party. The 1992 Press Law, instead of benefiting the Ethiopian peoples, has become the most notorious tool of silencing any forms of oppositions from any directions against the ruling party. Ethiopian journalists have been subjected to the vague provisions listed in this press law and the resultant harsh penalties. In the last seventeen years, the Ethiopian Government has held in prison the minimum of one journalist (at any time) to the maximum of 23 journalists (at one time, which was in July 2005). Currently, it has imprisoned a female journalist called Lalise Wodajo, a mother of three and wife of journalist Dhabasa Wakjira,

who himself spent about three years (May 2004 to March 2007) in prison without any kind of verdict before fleeing the country in 2007

. Due to such harsh treatments, scores of journalists have been forced to go into exile simple to escape those unfair and unjust penalties, and scores of print media have gone out of publication. As a result, the Ethiopian Government has been named one of the worst enemies of press freedom in the world by many international media and human rights agencies such as RSF and HRW.

Whenever he is accused of human rights violations, political unrests and repression, Prime Minister Meles Zenawi, in an attempt to appeal to the international communities for tolerance, mentions that his democracy is just emerging. But, he never considered being tolerant to the independent press, which are, like his democracy, not just emerging but even younger.

The Ethiopian Internet network has been in existence for over ten years, but its rate of penetration is one of the lowest in the world. According to the Internet connectivity chart for Africa, only Liberia stands ahead of Ethiopia in having the worst Internet penetration in Africa and possibly in the world. With 0.25% penetration rate, the country and its peoples are paying dearly in terms of the opportunities they are losing in benefiting from the New (Online) Media. This, in most cases, could be ascribed to the fact that the only Internet service provision that existed so far is by the Ethiopian Telecommunication, a public agency fully controlled by the ruling party. The political environment has been discouraging and repulsive for interested independent Internet service provider.

As of October 2006, there have been attempts of jamming foreign broadcast media such as Deutsche Welle and the Voice of America Ethiopian languages services, which are the major alternative sources of information for most Ethiopians. A lot of websites that host articles and news critical of the Ethiopian government have been blocked in Ethiopia, especially after the May 2005 election. Correspondents of foreign media are either closely watched, or imprisoned like Frezer Negash, or expelled like Anthony Mitchell of the Associated Press. Foreign media still have a big problem obtaining permission from the Ministry of Information.

In general, given the very decisive role the media are playing in today's economy, it would not be difficult to estimate how much these various ways of suppression of press and political freedoms in Ethiopia are deepening the ever worsening socio-economic crises of the country. Both cases of traditional and new/online media considered, the peoples in Ethiopia have been denied the opportunities of giving and receiving information. They are not learning from and sharing with others. They are disconnected, isolated, excluded, stacked and lagging behind the world.

As the whole world understands, even currently, another round of famine which is the worst of its kind is hitting the country, threatening millions of lives. Sadly enough, like his

predecessor, Prime Minister Meles Zenawi, has banned photographs of the starving and has told field workers not to give information to foreign journalists (*The Economist, June 2008*).

Human Rights League of the Horn of Africa (HRLHA) was set up by exiled members of the former Human Rights League/HRL, originally formed in Ethiopia in 1996; but silenced from the outset by the suppressive regime in that country. HRLHA is registered as a non-profit and non-political organization in Ontario/Canada on the 14th of June, 2007.

HRLHA is aimed at defending fundamental human rights including freedoms of thought, expression and organization. It is also aimed at raising the awareness of individuals about their own basic human rights and that of others. It has intended to work on the observances as well as due processes of law. It promotes the growth and development of free and vigorous civil societies.

Countries in the Horn of Africa (Ethiopia, Eritrea, the Sudan, Kenya, Somalia, Djibouti) have become homes of widespread human rights violations. The reasons for the abuses are either political, religious, ethnic, gender or all. HRLHA is committed to expose these violations.