

Testimony by Soleyana S Gebremichael ,
Ethiopian Human Rights defender from Ethiopian Human Rights Project and Zone9 Bloggers
and Activists Collective

Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission

Briefing on Ethiopia

November 14, 2014

Distinguished Members of the Commission and invited guests, I feel honored to address you today regarding the challenges of operating in Ethiopia as an independent voice particularly in the run up to the election in May 2015.

The democracy and human rights situation in Ethiopia has not shown meaningful signs of progress since it took a sharp turn for the worse following the disputed election of 2005. The climate of fear that prevailed following the electoral violence was further exacerbated by a series of measures taken by the government aimed at silencing its critics and voices of dissent. In response to the public's unequivocal expression of a desire for progress, the ruling Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) launched a campaign of crackdown that entrenched authoritarian rule, placing draconian restrictions against civil society, the independent media and the political opposition. The three pieces of legislation enacted after the 2005 election, namely, the Mass Media and Freedom of Information law(2008), the Charities and Societies Proclamation (CSP) and the Anti-Terrorism Proclamation (ATP) of 2009 narrowed the operational space for independent voices. This space has significantly narrowed further in recent years with rules and official actions that continue to criminalize peaceful and legitimate actions of dissent.

While the media law imposed high level of scrutiny and made the independent media self censored, the CSO law restricted foreign funding for advocacy works on human rights and civil liberties. After the ATP comes to effect, more than dozen of journalists were convicted; including renowned journalists like Eskeder Nega, Reeyot Alemu and Woubeshet Taye. Thousands more are arrested for legitimate actions and opinions and at the same time political opposition leaders were also victims of the law.

“Zone9”, group of nine blogger activists that I belong to, starts its operation in mid 2012 after the ruling party (EPRDF) wins the 99.6 % seat of the parliament on 2010 national election, the first national election after the 2005 post-election crisis. As young activists with knowledge about information communications technology we found the internet the best platform to advocate for rights of assembly, expression and other political and civil liberties in a closed society such as ours. The name of the group was named after our frequent visit to political prisoners in the infamous prison Kality with 8 zones, whom they consider the larger country as a big part of the prison by being the ninth Zone.

Youth Activism and the internet

Since Zone9 started operation as informal group, so many young Ethiopian were inspired to use the very limited internet space as a means of engagement, discourse, and place to express views and also to ask questions. Though the internet penetration in Ethiopia is less than 3%, it is disproportionately targeted by government surveillance and censorship supported by state of the art technologies.

The limitation on advocacy works of CSOs by the law in 2009 created vacant space where only a few were advocating for civil liberties and fundamental freedoms. As a group, Zone9 used the internet to address this gap by advocating for constitutional rights, freedom of expression for rights of assembly and demonstration where there was no public assembly after 2005 election

until Zone9 campaign demanded for the right to be respected and tolerance between political actors for better Ethiopia.

All campaigns mobilized hundred thousands of youths for discussion and questions. Currently all the campaigns that we demanded for respecting of the constitution, better working environment for independent media and the right to assembly were being considered as evidence for the terrorism charges we are facing. Zone9 bloggers collective members had also actively took part in international human rights forums, worked with partner organizations and submitted shadow reports for the universal periodic review (UPR) at the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) and also took part on briefings and panels at the African commission on human and people's rights. The advocacy work of the group had been blocked by the government at the end of April 2014th, by the arrest of members of six Zone9 collective bloggers and other three young journalists who had been active campaigners for freedom of expression.

Crackdown on dissent in the run up to 2015 elections

A new wave of crackdown started in April by the arrest of Zone9 bloggers was followed by widespread arrests, intimidations and political charges on media houses. Students from Oromo ethnic group who demanded clarification on the proposed master plan of Addis Ababa city that might affect neighborhood Oromo farmers had been arrested in thousands while more than 20 of them were killed by government security forces. In the months of July and August, prominent opposition party young members were arrested and four media houses had also been formally charged by the government on the charge of trying to incite violence for unconstitutional change of government and all of them were found guilty by the court. The threat of arrest and charges also caused the mass exile of more than 20 journalists and publishers into Kenya during the same period of time. On top of that, it has been more than two years that the government arrested legal representatives of the Muslim community who demanded respect for freedom of religion and non interference of the government on religious issues. In general, in less than 9 month for the run up to election, Human rights defenders, political opposition leaders, students and journalists are detained and charged. Religious leaders are still under detention and attending very extended court hearings.

After 87 days of detention and serious mistreatment including torture in detention center called "Maikelwi" in capital Addis, my colleagues Zone9 bloggers including myself in absentia, are now charged with crimes under the ATP . The same happened to opposition leaders and journalists while most other journalists left country in fear of arrest. Currently in Ethiopia, any form of dissent is not tolerated

What can US do?

While most of the International community including the US is well informed about the human rights situation in Ethiopia, the Ethiopian government is still one of the long term partners of countries like US, UK and the EU. Though the international partners had been voicing on the rights violations, not many strongly pressed the Ethiopian government to be accountable for the serious rights violations. The US government should be more forthcoming and public in their expression of concern about the worsening situation for human rights activists in Ethiopia. .

Using the bilateral leverages the US Government should continue pushing for the release arrested human rights defenders including my colleagues the Zone9 bloggers and journalists,.

With this intensified crack down and no significant action from the US and the international community, it is very likely from the May 2015 elections to end up being the same as 2010 in which EPRDF conducted a massive crackdown on dissent ahead of the elections and claimed a 99.6% win.