

## **Press Freedom Violations in Ethiopia**

Sue Valentine – Committee to Protect Journalists – November 14, 2014.

Thank you for the opportunity to share our perspectives with you. The Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) promotes press freedom worldwide and defends the right of journalists to report the news without fear of reprisal. CPJ ensures the free flow of news and commentary by taking action wherever journalists are attacked, imprisoned, killed, kidnapped, threatened, censored, or harassed.

I grew up in South Africa where despite the privilege my skin colour afforded me, I was subject to an ideology that claimed to act in my interests, yet denied me freedom of expression and access to information. I grew up in an era of state-controlled radio, heavily restrictive media laws, and in an environment where any voices that challenged the status quo were demonized as terrorists. I have seen first-hand how a government sought to silence its critics by invoking the fear of terrorism and banning opposition voices.

There are three key points I'd like to put before you this afternoon as to why we are concerned about press freedom in Ethiopia:

1. Ethiopia has been the poster child for development aid from Western governments and yet press freedom has deteriorated during this time.
2. In order to hold free and fair elections in May 2015, Ethiopians must have access to a diverse, multiplicity of news sources in order to make informed decisions.
3. Lastly, the simple point that silencing critical, dissenting voices undermines equitable development and will not build a durable democracy.

Ethiopia has a proud history of never having been colonized. In recent years it has enjoyed double-digit economic growth following years of civil war and authoritarian rule, yet Ethiopia is failing its citizens. It is failing to live up to its commitments both to the United Nations

Declaration of Human Rights and to the African Charter of Human and People's Rights. In the words of Angolan journalist Rafael Marques de Morais, Ethiopia, as the host of the headquarters of the African Union, should be a symbol of the African Renaissance. Instead, he says, it stands out for leading the continent in the opposite direction.

### **So what is the evidence?**

There are currently 17 journalists and bloggers behind bars in Ethiopia according to CPJ research. Some are convicted and some are awaiting trial. A year ago, the number was seven.

Nine of the new prisoners were arrested in April this year because they are part of a blogging collective known as Zone 9. The 10<sup>th</sup> prisoner is Temesghen Desalegn, the former editor of the now defunct newspaper *Feteh* which was banned in 2012. He was sentenced to three years in jail in mid-October on conviction of defamation and publishing false news following a column he wrote in his newspaper two years ago.

The wave of detention of journalists in Ethiopia started in June 2011 -- as part of a crackdown by authorities fearful of an Arab Spring-style popular uprising. Among those arrested were columnists Reeyot Alemu and Eskinder Nega and newspaper editor Woubshet Taye.

In January 2012, a court in Addis Ababa, sentenced Reeyot and Woubshet to 14 years in prison. On appeal, Reeyot's sentence was reduced to five years.

Some months later in July 2012, five journalists living in exile were given heavy prison sentences in absentia. A sixth, Eskinder Nega, an award-winning freelance blogger, received an 18-year prison sentence.

Eskinder had been detained on previous occasions and told to stop writing critical stories about the government -- a clear warning he should leave the country. Eskinder had spent part of his childhood in the Washington DC area and could have returned to the US but he chose not to. Instead he continued to publish [online columns](#) demanding an end to corruption and political repression and calling for the security forces not to shoot unarmed demonstrators (as they did in [2005](#)) in the event the Arab Spring spread to Ethiopia.

Earlier this month Eskinder celebrated his 46<sup>th</sup> birthday in Kality prison. If he is forced to serve his full term he will be 62 years old when he is released.

Reeyot Alemu is suffering from breast tumors. Since her detention she has been threatened with solitary confinement and denied visits from her fiancé and sister. Last year, she was honored with the UNESCO Guillermo Cano World Press Freedom Prize.

Also in 2013, Woubshet Taye received the CNN Africa Journalism press freedom award. I met his wife and son at the awards ceremony in Cape Town last October. His wife told me that her son, appropriately named “Fiteh” which means justice, often asks her after visiting his father in prison: “When I grow up, will I go to jail like my Dad?” Woubshet has suffered repeated bouts of kidney infections whilst in prison and is in need of sustained treatment.

Besides the obvious injustice of jailing journalists for doing their jobs, the silencing of critical voices in Ethiopia has the effect of diminishing democracy and undermining genuine development. In the words of Reeyot Alemu: “Journalists are the voices of the voiceless.... Who will expose the unpleasant truths of those in power if not journalists?”

Eskinder, Reeyot, Woubshet and others have been prosecuted under Ethiopia’s 2009 overly broad anti-terrorism law. The use of the anti-terror law to stifle peaceful dissent and freedom of expression has been condemned by the U.S. Congress, the U.S. State Department, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, and the African Commission on Human & People’s Rights.

In September, a group of UN Special Rapporteurs issued a statement reiterating the need for Ethiopia to redefine its anti-terrorism law and to end free speech and other human rights violations in the country.

On April 23 this year, a group of young bloggers announced their intention to resume their activities after a self-imposed suspension for six months. In a space of three days, police arrested six Zone 9 bloggers on the streets & in their offices, as well as three freelance journalists. Accused at first of working with foreign human rights groups and

inciting violence via social media, they were detained without charge until July when they were charged with terrorism and inciting violence.

The Zone 9 bloggers have appeared in court 10 times since their arrest – with no progress in their case. On Wednesday this week they made their 11<sup>th</sup> appearance in court. This time there was some movement. New judges have been appointed and the police have been instructed to supply evidence or to amend the charges. We, and many others, are watching these developments with interest.

Ethiopia will hold a general election in May next year, the first since Prime Minister Mele Zenawi's death in 2012. Despite repeated appeals, including from the State Department, for Ethiopia to allow freedom of speech and to narrow the definitions in its anti-terrorism law, Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn and the ruling EPRDF (Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front) have given no indication that they are willing to allow the country's citizens to express themselves and to access multiple sources of information.

In its desire to see a strong and stable Ethiopia emerge in a region beset by factionalism and Islamic fundamentalists, the US, together with its allies, has poured in billions of dollars into Ethiopia. But despite these good intentions, press freedom has been short-changed. As our figures show, more journalists are behind bars now than were a year ago, or even five years ago. We would urge the US to use its influence to insist that democratic freedoms are integral to Ethiopia's development – Ethiopians deserve no less.

I would like to close with the words of Eskinder Nega written from prison days after his appeal was turned down in May last year and his 18-year sentence upheld:

“Democracy is a destiny of humanity which can not be averted. It can be delayed, but not defeated.”

Then, quoting the Roman poet, Horace, Eskinder adds: "Change only the name and this story is also about you. Whenever justice suffers our common humanity suffers, too.”

Thank you for your attention.