

Media in Times and Places of Repression: the Case of Ethiopia

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First of all, I would like to express my gratitude to the Organizers of this event for giving me the chance to speak in front of such a wonderful gathering of media community. I have gotten the authority to speak in front of you all because an authoritarian government made me visible while trying to suppress me. I had worked in different media outlets from radio¹ to print media², but my activism for freedom of expression and the media started when government blocked my personal and collective blogs from being accessed in Ethiopia.

I will let you go through my personal experiences as well as experiences of other journalists and the media in Ethiopia. I hope this will give you a picture of what a media looks like in repressive places and times.

Ethiopia would have been a perfect place to live in - had it not been for its failure to build a fair system, more pragmatically a democratic one.

Media, as you all know it, is the soul and flesh of a democracy.

Therefore, it is easy to imagine that Ethiopia has never had a strong independent media simply because it is not a democracy.

In Ethiopia, there are two types of media, and two types of journalists. Government media and private media, also, government journalists and private journalists. The context these two comparisons are referred in Ethiopia is a bit different from the context it may be referred elsewhere. Yes, the phrase ‘government media’ is used to refer to those media

¹ I have worked as a Production Manager of *Addis Meznagna* program in FM Addis 96.3 for a couple of year.

² I have also worked as an editor for *Enqu* Magazine and as an editor-in-chief for *Weyeyet* Magazine; currently, I am also working as a Consulting Editor for an upcoming weekly newspaper, *Addis Maleda*.

outlets run by the state; but, the context is more about affiliation when it is referred in Ethiopia. Government media in Ethiopia are propaganda machines, mouthpieces of the ruling party, so are government journalists. Or, at least, they are perceived in that way.

Similarly, the phrase ‘private media’ is used to refer to those media owned by individuals and the owner’s opinion is also the opinion of the media; so, are private journalists. It is like the journalists are also privatized. In fact, there are always exceptions who maintained their independence regardless of all the odds in both sides. Anyway, this dichotomy didn’t just happen because Ethiopians are not capable of building an independent media or not because they can’t be independent journalists, but because the government has never allowed them to be so.

The history of Ethiopia’s media starts back from Emperor Menelik II’s era. This Emperor is the one who led the victorious war with the Colonial Italia in 1896. The newspaper was hand-written by a traditional scholar Blata Gebreegziabher in the local language Amharic, and distributed to 24 higher royal officials every week. Later, it was named ‘*Aimiro*’ - meaning ‘Brain’ or ‘Intelligence’³. It is the first media outlet in African language.

Fast forward half a century to Emperor Hailesilasie I’s era after the second Italo-Ethiopian war ended in the recovery of Ethiopia’s Imperial system, we find a number of media outlets that were owned by the state. The number of media outlets increased but their content was highly censored. There was Ministry of Interior which was responsible for censorship since 1935. The Ministry had the mandate to censor print media before distribution in Ethiopia whether it is published abroad or at home⁴. This ministry was named “Ministry of Censorship” at some point. Back to the Imperial era, HIM Emperor Hailesilasie had had an absolute power. Therefore, the media – the newspapers, radio and TV

³ ቴዎድሮስ በዩነ (2009)፣ ጎብረ ኢትዮጵያ ቅፅ 2፣ ፋር ኢስት አሳታሚ፣ ገጽ 127

⁴ እንዳለጌታ ከበደ (2006)፣ ማዕቀብ፣ HY International Printing PLC, ገጽ 16

stations – all owned by the state and have reported only positive achievements of the Emperor and his administration. It is hilarious to learn that it was the Emperor himself who used to decide which photo of him can be published on either of the Amharic – *Addis Zemen*, or English – *Ethiopian Herald* newspapers. If there is a story that covers his activities, then it must be published on the cover page. Apparently, if a name other than the emperor has to be mentioned, then the emperor’s name must always come first. Furthermore, on the English newspaper, his name, whenever referred in pronouns, the ‘He’ or the ‘Him’ or the ‘His’ must had begun with a capital letter,⁵ just like god’s pronoun is spelled in the Bible. The Emperor had even once said that he started Ethiopian television service so as to make Ethiopians able to watch him. After the fall of the thousands years’ old Imperial system, the emperor-worshiper media outlets turned to be government-worshiper media outlets. They proved themselves to be the same in the past two regimes after the fall of the Imperial system.

The Imperial system was thrown by a popular revolution and replaced by a military junta, the Dergue – a committee of army members that led Ethiopia in a state of emergency for close to a couple of decades. In the Dergue era, the decline for freedom of expression has further worsened. For example, University students used to have a yearly “College day” on which they had criticized the emperor’s administration, primarily in the presence of the emperor himself and his ministers who later avoided attendance in form of punishment to make the program irrelevant. In addition, some students were suspended because they had refused when they were asked to show their poems or censored before presenting it to their audiences. That was not even imaginable thing to try during the 17 years of military junta dictatorship led by Colonel Mengistu

⁵ ነጋሽ ገብረማርያም (2000)፣ ጆርገሊዝም እድገት በኢትዮጵያ፡- የግል ትዝታዎች፣ ከድግነት ወደ ልማት፡- ዕውቀትን ለትውልድ ማስተላለፍ፣ ፎረም ፎር ሶሻል ስተዲስ (2006)፣ ገጽ 117

Hailemariam⁶. The Dergue was defeated by an armed insurgency led by Tigrian People's Liberation Front (TPLF). TPLF formed a broader coalition named Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) and ruled Ethiopia ever since.

In the beginning, EPRDF was, or at least, had pretended well to be friendly with the media. In May 1991, EPRDF took control of the Ethiopian state. In October 1992, press freedom was declared. Within six months, 80 media outlets had joined the print media. They started circulation from daily to weekly basis. These newspapers were published in three local and two foreign languages⁷. In 5 years, the number of licensed free press outlets reached the mountain of 554⁸.

As the times looked free, the free press flourished. Many alternatives were there for readers to choose. However, the antagonism between the government and the free press started when the then new officials failed to welcome some members of the free press. There were previous regime's officials who owned media houses. Government officials claimed these people have lost the war in battlefield during the armed insurgency; and that they had joined the media to continue the war, which they have lost in battlefields, in propaganda⁹. There were also opposition groups' members who agreed with this conclusion¹⁰.

However, in reality, the country was restructured in ethnic-based federal demarcation in a way it is new to the historical arrangement of the country and this was prone to high criticism. There were also many tabloids, unethical and indecent prints. I assume this must be the case when a society that had no previous experience gets the freedom to publish stories without censorship for the first time. However, the government was not tolerant enough for the press to naturally evolve and

⁶ Randi Rønning Balsvik (2007), *The Quest for Expression: State and the University in Ethiopia under Three Regimes, 1952-2005*. Addis Ababa University

⁷ ቴዎድሮስ በየነ (2009)፣ ጎብረ ኢትዮጵያ ቅፅ 2፣ ፋር ኢስት አሳታሚ፣ ገጽ 1149

⁸ እንዳለጌታ ከበደ (2006)፣ ማዕቀብ፣ HY International Printing PLC, ገጽ 85

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ ተስፋ አልታሰብ (2008)፣ ሕገ መንግሥት፣ ሚዲያና ጋዜጠኛነት፣ ሮኖቦት አሳታሚ፣ ገጽ 43

find a healthy path by itself. Even though it was obvious that the credible, professional and ethical newspapers would shine out in the process, government would later use this irregularity as an excuse to suppress the media freedom in the future.

Researchers Terje Skjerdal and Hallelujah Lulie, in their analysis of the media performance since 1991 when EPRDF came to power, have categorized the state of media sphere in three periods:

“The first period was the chaotic period from 1991 to 1997 with a blooming of new newspapers and anarchy journalism. The second period, 1997-2005, saw the establishment of professionally and ethically integrated newspapers like *Reporter*, *Addis Admas*, *Fortune* and *Capital*. The last period goes from 2005 when press freedom again came under threat after editors and journalists were imprisoned and persecuted after alleged transgressions following the May 2005 elections.”¹¹

Apparently, there were intimidations against free press and journalists prior to national election of 2005. However, the threat was not much concerning to the very existence of the free press. Unfortunately, the 2005 national election was a political juncture in Ethiopia’s recent history. During the pre-election process, the late Ethiopian Prime Minister Meles Zenawi said that ‘the election would be faultless’. It didn’t happen. The election result was contested between EPRDF and its major competitors. The space for political expression has come almost to an end. Protests erupted. Opposition groups’ figures, civil society leaders and 14 journalists¹² were jailed en masse. About 74 media houses were closed at once.

In 2007, on the eve of Ethiopian millennium, all the politicians and some of the journalists were released after they were forced to sign

¹¹ Terje S. Skjerdal and Hallelujah Lule (2009), Uneven Performances by the Private Press in Ethiopia: An Analysis of 18 Years of Press Freedom, *Journal of Communication & Language Arts* Vol. 3, No. 1, 2009

¹² <https://cpj.org/2005/12/cpj-delegation-meets-with-ethiopian-ambassador-to.php>, accessed on Oct 25, 2018

humiliating ‘pardon’ request to the Prime Minister in an arbitration process that was later condemned as unjust. However, there were some journalists who had never signed on anything but were released with the politicians. The renowned journalist Eskinder Nega was one of them.

Journalist Eskinder Nega was jailed 6 times before this one. However, this seventh experience was different in many ways; he was jailed with his pregnant wife, Serkalem Fasil. She is also a journalist. She gave birth to their first son while both of them were in jail.

Eskinder Nega had previously run seven print media outlets. However, after he was released from his seventh detention in 2007, the broadcast Authority in Ethiopia denied him a license to reestablish a press house. So, he turned to be a blogger. Then, came the Arab spring, revolutionizing the Middle East in a domino effect starting from Tunisia, attracting further attention in Egypt. It was a threat to the then Ethiopian Prime Minister. The government strengthened its mission of blocking websites from being accessed in Ethiopia. 100s of diaspora based news websites, including the ethiomeia.com on which Eskinder Nega publishes his stories were blocked. Eskinder wrote a piece that made a parallel between the corrupted administrations of Middle East countries and Ethiopia and concluded that the same kind of revolution may not be a far thing in Ethiopia too. He presented this piece of writing in a political party’s public discussion forum where he was invited to. He was detained for the 8th time. This time, he was charged of bogus-terrorism charges and was convicted for 18 years of severe imprisonment. His wife flee the country with his son. He was released on the 14th of February 2018 when politics changed. I will come back to this one later again.

In pre-election 2005, things were relatively free in Ethiopia and the media was blossoming. There was no independent radio other than Fana Radio which is affiliated to the ruling party, EPRDF. However, there were hundreds of newspapers and magazines. Their circulation reached

about 100 thousand per copies in the heydays of political competition. I remember those golden times when a newspaper gets republished in the afternoon because the distribution in the morning couldn't satisfy the demand. There were more than one newspapers circulating in each day of the week.

On the other hand, post-election 2005, has been an era of repression. It was a complete opposite to the previous decade. Most of the media outlets were forcibly closed or banned, most of the journalists were exiled or have changed professions, some of the journalists were jailed, and the rest remained self-censoring. Despite the sharp rise in population, and without no significant improvement to the Internet penetration – by the way the government is the only telecom service provider in Ethiopia -, the circulation of newspapers dropped below 10 thousand. Independent newspapers were available only three days a week. Even though the number of FM radio stations increased, they have heavily censored their political contents.

Moreover, repressive laws including the press law and anti-terrorism laws made journalism work a risky business more than it already was. According to prison census by the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), there were 16 journalists in Ethiopian jails by the end of 2016.

In post-2005 era, the government declared the country as a 'developmental-state'. Thus, the new excuse to suppress political freedoms has been the economic progress the country was registering. Government media redefined its purpose as a developmental media and the journalists were called as "developmental journalists". The contextualized meaning of 'developmental journalism' as it is used in Ethiopia is 'reporting only positive achievements of the government'. In addition, the state sponsored propaganda labeled the free press as a negative force to the development of the country.

In response, the press that comes and goes down after a few months in circulation became activism platforms. One of the leading examples in

this was the defiant journalist Temesgen Desalegn. Temesgen and his editorial team redefined the purpose of their journalism as ‘revolutionary journalism’ - contrary to government’s ‘developmental journalism’ and advocated the importance of revolution in Ethiopia for a political freedom. *Fiteh* was the newspaper that was published by Temesgen and his colleagues. This newspaper reached to weekly circulation of 30 thousands, the biggest circulation after the wide-range shutdown of media in post 2005 election.

However, the age of *Fiteh* newspaper was short. Its circulation was banned by the government when it published a report about the death of the late prime minister before government announced it. Temesgen and his team bought another media house and started another magazine called *Addis Times*, it was banned; he bought another licensed newspaper called *Le’elina* and it was banned too; finally, he and his colleagues bought another licensed magazine called *Fact*, it was also banned and Temesgen Desalegn was eventually jailed in 2014 after having four of his media outlets were banned in 2 years of time.

Ethiopian government had accused the free press to be of a mouthpiece for political groups, or neoliberals. Some academicians¹³ also accused of these journalists for confusing their role with activism. Journalist Eskinder Nega, for example, studied journalism in his first and second degrees, he published seven newspapers. He was jailed eight times in relation to his work. However, many people call him more of an activist than a journalist. I have interviewed him, when he was released in 2018, whether he is a journalist or an activist. He told me his passion is for journalism; and added that, since the government is restricting his freedom to work as a journalist following his passion, he is now an activist fighting for the freedom of expression specifically and for democracy in general.

¹³ Terje S. Skjerdal, Journalists or activists? Self-identity in the Ethiopian diaspora online community, Gimlekollen School of Journalism and Communication, Kristiansand, Norway

Until recently, Ethiopia had never licensed a private TV channel. However, exiled journalists in the US and Europe have founded satellite television channels and reached Ethiopian audiences. Of these, ESAT and OMN televisions are the most watched in Ethiopia. These television channels were also activism platforms. They have played a great role in giving alternatives to government propaganda through the state-owned media. However, these satellite TV channels were jammed frequently. They had to often change their frequencies to reach audiences.

Between 2005 and now, in the period Terje and Hallelujah called a threat for the media, Ethiopia saw a newspaper called *Addis Neger* that could give many hope because it was critical and independent at best, at least, to the satisfaction of many. *Guess what happened to the editors?* They were informed that they will be persecuted in the Anti-terrorism law and each of the editors went into exiles. Even, their informant – journalist Argaw Ashine flee the country later because his name was mentioned on wikileaks in relation to this on US Embassy’s cable message in 2011¹⁴.

By the time, my colleagues and I founded the *Zone 9 Blogging Collective* in 2012, the government has successfully suppressed the media and dominated the country in narratives. We named our blog as *Zone 9* after the biggest prison in Ethiopia. Kality prison had 8 zones. And, the political prisoners in Kality used to call the entire Ethiopia outside the compound of the prison, metaphorically as *Zone 9* where political freedoms were restricted. We heard about this when we (the collective members) went there to visit one of the prisoners, journalist Reeyot Alemu.

Our blog *Zone 9* was blocked from being accessed in Ethiopia two weeks after we have created it. We recreated another one, it was blocked again; recreated a third one, blocked right away. Then, we were forced to post copies of our articles on Facebook to reach our readers. We also

¹⁴ <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-14929307>, accessed on 25 Oct. 2018

run online campaigns to demand the government respect its own constitution. Apparently, government didn't like our online-attempt to fill the gap created because independent media and civil societies were restricted on the ground. Two years later after we founded the Zone 9 blogging collective, the inevitable happened - we were jailed in April 2014¹⁵.

My colleagues and I have passed through the infamous detention center, Maekelawi - some media called it a 'torture chamber'¹⁶. It is closed now when politics changed. We were formally charged with bogus-terrorism charges after three months of detention in that torture chamber and were released free after a year and six months later. By the time of our detention, six free press outlets were closed; more than 30 editors and media house employees flee the country and the 2015 election was won by the government in 100% victory of federal and regional parliamentary seats. The motive of our detention was very clear for everyone who has been following Ethiopian politics. Silencing dissent.

After spending 18 months in jail, we were released from a prison with small zones into a bigger zone where there was high tension of popular protests. A month later, wave of protests erupted in the biggest region of Oromia. Ten months later, the second biggest region, Amhara, joined the wave of protests. In October 2016, Ethiopian government declared a state of emergency. Watching ESAT and OMN televisions and "other media" was prohibited. In the meantime, I gave interview about the brutality of the state of emergency to the Voice of America Amharic service and was jailed again. This time, I was not taken to court, rather I was transferred into military camp hundreds of kilometers away, with little basic facilities. No lawyer, no visitors, just indoctrination training.

¹⁵ The Zone 9 Blogging Collective co-founding members were nine in number. Two members were abroad by the time the six were jailed along with three freelancing journalists who closely worked with us. One co-founding member of the Zone 9 escaped detention and flee the country.

¹⁶ <http://addisstandard.com/analysis-maekelawi-ethiopia-still-running-torture-chamber-past/>, accessed on 25 Oct 2018

After forty days, I was released forced to wearing a T-shirt on which a text was written that reads “Never Again”.

Like you heard, the political repression that turned the dying independent media a platform for activism, has given birth to a popular unrest. Even State of Emergency couldn't stop it. The ruling party, EPRDF, learned about this the difficult way. In December 2017, it announced the decision to release all political prisoners and to run 'reform'. Wave of protests coupled with a faction of pro-change team within EPRDF turned the Ethiopian politics upside down in the past six months. The new Prime Minister Dr. Abiy Ahmed, who was sworn in March 2018, promised to democratize Ethiopia. Since then, journalists such as Eskinder Nega and Wubishet Taye were released among other thousands of prisoners of conscience.

Now, Ethiopia is back to optimism again. More than 200 blocked news websites are unblocked, ESAT and OMN televisions are allowed to open offices in Ethiopia, and exiled journalists are welcomed home without fear of prosecution. Journalist Eskinder Nega has launched his weekly newspaper, *Ethiopia*, a month ago. Temesgen Desalegn has regained his license to publish *Fiteh* magazine again and he completed his preparation to launch investigative reports because he believed 'the revolution is partly achieved and there is no more need to do that revolutionary journalism for now' - which he and his colleagues have formulated in counter-response to state-sponsored, 'developmental journalism'. Most of all, a committee of legal-experts are sitting down to revise the laws that were repressive and used by the government to rule by law. The revision included a number of proclamations that affected the media freedom.

I have witnessed that media is no more than a platform for activism in times and places of repression; otherwise, it is a mouthpiece for a political organization. Ethiopia is a country of 100 million people. The number of independent media organizations existed now and their

establishment is far below the demand. Now, the progress towards media freedom in Ethiopia has an equal chance to the possibility of regressing back. We need the support and solidarity of global media community.

Thank You.