

The government of Prime Minister Meles Zenawi has been tightening its grip on political power after it saw the opposition parties gaining ground in the May 2005 general elections — elections marred by allegations of vote rigging and violent crackdowns. The violence unleashed by security forces in the aftermath of the first contested election in Ethiopian history not only claimed the lives of 193 people and caused injuries to 763 others, but it also shattered the hope for a transition to democracy. As a result of the speedy backtracking to what critics describe as outright authoritarianism, Ethiopia's transition to democracy and good governance suffered tremendously. Ethiopia's progress toward democracy had brought significant development funding from the U.S. and Europe in recent years; with that progress stalled, the future of this money is uncertain.

New Laws Roll Back Civil Society

Throughout 2008, two controversial draft bills introduced in parliament dominated political conversations. International non-governmental groups such as Human Rights Watch, CIVICUS, Amnesty International and the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), among many others, joined local political and civic groups in voicing their concerns over the bills, which critics say were aimed at further curtailing freedom of expression and the work of civil society organizations. Despite criticisms and condemnations, the parliament, widely accused of being a rubber stamp of the ruling party, enacted the bills into law without any significant amendments. The Mass Media and Access to Information Proclamation became law on December 4, 2008 and the Civil Society Proclamation entered into force a month later.

In a country like Ethiopia, which is heavily reliant on foreign aid, the Civil Society Proclamation forbids local NGOs from accepting more than 10 percent of their budget from foreign sources and bars civic groups and NGOs from engaging in human rights-related activities. "The law will have a crippling effect on civil society in Ethiopia. We are deeply disappointed that Parliament has passed this regressive law, which undermines democratic values and the people of Ethiopia," said Ingrid Srinath, Secretary General of CIVICUS, World Alliance for Citizen Participation.

"The law... will prevent CSOs from taking part in democracy building initiatives and acting as a check and balance against human rights abuses. Key provisions of

the law infringe upon freedom of association guarantees in the Constitution of Ethiopia, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the African Charter on Human and People's Rights," CIVICUS argued in a January 2009 press release.

No "Tampering"

In a recent interview with Walta Information Center, one of the media outlets run by the ruling party, Bereket Simon, Minister of the newly restructured Ministry of Information (renamed the Government Communication Affairs Office), defended the government's decision to ban NGOs and civic organizations from working on issues of human rights. "Bringing money from outside doesn't warrant foreign NGOs and foreign-funded NGOs tampering with Ethiopian politics," he said.

Despite the government's best efforts to defend its restrictive laws and policies, four powerful U.S. senators — Senator Russell Feingold, Senator Johnny Isakson, Senator Patrick Leahy and Senator Richard Durbin — wrote an open letter to Prime Minister Meles Zenawi expressing fears over what they called, "the erosion of political freedom and rule of law in Ethiopia." They expressed their fear that the law regulating the operation of civil society groups could "undermine the work done by many organizations in areas of human rights, gender equality, child rights, the rights of the disabled and conflict resolution." The senators also noted in their letter that the re-arrest of Birtukan Mideksa, leader of the Unity for Democracy and Justice Party, was worrying as it, "signaled the government's waning commitment to democratic principles."

Banned in Addis Ababa

CPJ, which named Prime Minister Meles Zenawi's administration as the worst backslider globally on press freedom in 2007, has repeatedly accused the government of strangling the press in Ethiopia. Oblivious to the irony, the CPJ website and CPJ email addresses have since been blocked by the Ethiopian Telecommunications Corporation, the country's official Internet service provider.

Tom Rhodes, CPJ's Africa Program coordinator, said that the new press law, coupled with the restrictive Civil Society Proclamation, would only make matters worse. He said that the government's claim to ensuring good governance and fighting corruption could not be credible in the absence of a robust free press and civil society. He mentioned the fact that CPJ also wrote a letter to U.S.

President Barack Obama earlier in 2009, urging him to commit his administration to defending press freedom in countries like Ethiopia where repressive measures and attacks against journalists have crippled the free press.

Dr. Seid Hassan, Professor of Economics and editor of the Journal of Business and Public Affairs at Murray State University, has been researching the effects of corruption on economic development and governance in Ethiopia. In an interview with Global Integrity, he emphasized that the major obstacle to tackling corruption is the government itself. “Despite the fact that the government has set up an anti-corruption commission, funded by Western donors, senior government officials close to the prime minister and his wife that are alleged to have been engaged in unlawful business activities are protected from public scrutiny.”

Hassan indicated that a number of companies run by the Endowment Fund for the Rehabilitation of Tigray [EFFORT], which is affiliated with Tigrian People’s Liberation Front, are not only enjoying preferential status before government regulators but are also weakening the market economy and free enterprise in Ethiopia.

“As these companies are illegally set up as party parastatals, they don’t even pay income tax and have free access to cheap loans from the National Bank as well as the Commercial Bank of Ethiopia,” Hassan said.

“I have also heard that these party businesses do not even repay what they owe to the banks, which could be true. Such allegations call for sincere investigations.”

Hassan points out that the corrupt practices of these businesses have never been investigated by the anti-corruption commission, which has long ignored public outcry. “As far as my research is concerned, Ethiopia is the only country in the world where the ruling party is engaged in profiteering business malpractices [under the guise of humanitarian work]. If this is not corruption, what else can it be?” Professor Hassan asked.

Graft Starts at the Top

Allegations of graft against senior government officials are not uncommon. In a recent news story, “Dignitaries in Business,” the African Intelligence publication Indian Ocean Newsletter (ION) named a number of officials who the author says advanced their business interests via abuse of the public trust.

According to ION, these include a roster of the country's most senior leaders and their families, which ION says have all been using state power to advance their businesses, speed land transactions, or facilitate the construction of luxury villas. Independent sources confirm that these officials have outside business interests. However, verifying the ION claim that state power was abused to advance these businesses is difficult. Ethiopia's restrictive press laws play their part here, as does the lack of conflict-of-interest disclosure laws.

Whether the anti-corruption commission will be able to investigate allegations against senior government officials and party-run businesses is a matter that will pose a test for its credibility.

"In a normal country, the media and civic society play vital roles in exposing and scrutinizing corruption and abuse of political power. In Ethiopia, investigating allegations of corruptions and abuses has been assigned only to a government commission which has been engaged in selective outrage," said Markos Tesfaye, a freelance journalist based in Addis, who works under different pseudonyms for fear of reprisal. He says his priority has now shifted to leaving the country rather than living in fear of persecution and prosecution for doing his job.

"It is very sad that ordinary citizens live in fear without any protection from a government that is violating every rule, including its own constitution," he said.

