

ETHIOPIA ADDED TO CIVICUS MONITOR WATCHLIST

OVERVIEW OF RECENT RESTRICTIONS
TO CIVIC FREEDOMS





The political situation in Ethiopia deteriorated rapidly in the latter quarter of 2020. Since early November 2020, the government of Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed has been engaged in armed conflict with the leading party in the Tigray region, the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF). On 4th November 2020, a six month [state of emergency](#) was declared in Tigray. Claims emerged that the conflict was escalating towards a state of [civil war](#), as thousands were [killed](#) and tens of thousands were internally displaced or [fled](#) into neighbouring Sudan. The ongoing conflict and humanitarian crisis in Tigray remained alarming and worrisome in light of the elections scheduled for June 2020. The June elections were postponed and tensions increased in the lead-up to the elections as members of the political opposition accuse the government of targeting some of its members with arrests while others have boycotted the polls.

ATTACKS, CENSORING AND KILLING OF JOURNALISTS

Widespread [communication blackouts](#) have continued in Ethiopia as the armed conflict in the Tigray region continues. The shutdown of the internet, messaging services and other forms of communication has made it increasingly difficult for people in Ethiopia and the Ethiopian diaspora to obtain reliable information on what is happening. This has resulted in [misinformation](#) spreading widely during the conflict. The right to freedom of opinion and expression has further declined in Ethiopia. Several journalists have been harassed, intimidated, arrested and deported by Ethiopian authorities.

More recently, on 17th April 2021, Federal Defence Forces [arrested](#) two journalists in Mekelle. Fitsum Berhane, an AFP news agency reporter, and Tamirat Yemane, a local media reporter were arrested for spreading “false propaganda”. Both journalists had previously been arrested in February. On 9th May 2021, a reporter and coordinator for the Oromo Broadcasting Network, Sisay Fida, was [shot](#) dead by two unidentified gunmen on his way home from a wedding. On 20th May 2021, Ethiopian authorities [deported](#) New York Times journalist Simon Marks. Marks was detained after he was summoned by officials to meet in Addis Ababa, and the authorities held him for eight hours before he was deported. This is one of the many occasions in which journalists in Ethiopia have been detained or attacked. The [arrest](#) of Dawit Kebede, the [arrest](#) of Kumerra Gemechu, a cameraman working for Reuters, and the [killing](#) of Dawit Kebede (not the same Dawit Kebede who remains in prison) who worked for Tigray regional state TV are some of the other notable attacks against the freedom of the press for journalists.

ETHNIC AND RELIGIOUS GROUPS DISCRIMINATED AGAINST FOR FREEDOM OF ASSOCIATION

As the Tigray conflict continues, reports claim Ethiopian authorities have detained thousands of Tigrayans for months without charge on allegations that they are “traitors.” The government admits to arresting a few top-ranked military personnel; however, the AP has reported that the detainees vary from military officers to office workers and priests. Others have reported patterns of discrimination against ethnic Tigrayans, although Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed has stressed that the Federal Government's fight is with the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), not Tigrayans as a group. On 9th May 2021, security personnel violently [dispersed](#)

ABOUT THE CIVICUS MONITOR

The [CIVICUS Monitor](#), an online platform that tracks threats to civil society in countries across the globe, rates civic space – the space for civil society – in Ethiopia as “[Narrowed](#)”.

The data provides the basis for civic space ratings, which are based on up-to-date information and indicators on the state of freedom of association, peaceful assembly and expression. Countries can be rated as:

CLOSED

REPRESSED

OBSTRUCTED

NARROWED

OPEN



and fired teargas at thousands of Muslim believers who converged on Meskel Square, a public square in Addis Ababa, for a Grand Iftar celebration planned by the Ethiopian-Muslim community of Addis Ababa. The Mayor issued an apology on behalf of the city after videos and images from the event depicting the chaotic scenes caused outrage.

PROTESTERS AGAINST ARBITRARY ARRESTS ARE ATTACKED BY SECURITY FORCES

On 5th February 2021, protestors marched in different parts of Oromia regional state, including Ambo, to demonstrate for the [release](#) of Oromo opposition politicians Jawar Mohammed, Bekele Gerba and Hamza Borana. Police arrested and beat up several protesters. Between 9th and 12th February 2021, protests [broke out](#) in Mekelle town and spread to Wukro Adigrat, Axum, Shire and Abiyi-Adi. Reports suggest an unknown number of people were injured or killed. On 27th January 2021, 20 political prisoners, including Bekele Gerba and Jawar Mohammed, started a 40-day [hunger strike](#) in prison to demand the release of political leaders. The political leaders ended the hunger strike on 8th March 2021, following concerns from community leaders, Olympian Derartu Tulu and religious leaders about the state of their health. On 19th May 2021, security agents allegedly took away 13 people, including Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) leader Colonel Gemechu Ayana, after a court ordered their release. According to lawyer Tuli Bayisa, the Federal High Court's third anti-terrorism and constitutional bench acquitted 12 defendants who had been charged with terrorism. The 13 people seem to remain in security forces' custody.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To the government of Ethiopia:

- Guarantee the respect for freedom of expression and the media at all times by releasing all journalists in jail and respect Ethiopia's domestic and international human rights obligations.
- Drop charges against human rights defenders, members of the political opposition and others and take legal measures to ensure their protection.
- Guarantee online freedoms at all times and desist from disrupting access to the internet and social media.
- Guarantee that under all circumstances journalists are able to carry out their legitimate human rights activities without fear of reprisals and free of all restrictions including judicial harassment.
- Allow free access to humanitarian groups providing aid to conflict areas and hold to account all those involved in attacking humanitarian aid agencies.

To the African Union:

- Exert pressure on the Ethiopian authorities to identify lasting solutions to the Tigray conflict and to stop using violence as a means of ending the conflict.
- Call on the Ethiopian authorities to guarantee the fundamental rights and freedoms of all members of the political opposition before, during and after the elections.

To the international community:

- Urge Ethiopia to abide by its international human rights obligations and to fulfil its voluntary commitments and pledges.