

**The Ethiopian Women's Human Rights Alliance (EWHRA)**

**Submission to the United Nation on the Occasion of its  
Review of the Human Rights Situation in Ethiopia under the  
Framework of the Universal Periodic Review**

**September 2013**

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## **Executive Summary**

Since its last review under the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) mechanism, Ethiopia has neglected to significantly move towards implementing much of the recommendations. In fact, Ethiopia continues to engage in a systematic violation of international standards with regard to myriad fundamental human rights. The death of Prime Minister Meles Zenawi has not impeded the mounting assaults; rather the government continues to adhere to policies set by its former head of state, in clear contravention of international standards and laws.

The general climate in the country is one filled with severe government crackdowns on basic rights, particularly freedom of expression and association, as well as increased police monitoring of peaceful and lawful activities, and arbitrary arrest of human rights defenders, opposition leaders and attacks on civil society. In addition, with the passage of the draconian Charities and Societies Proclamation in 2009, independent civil society and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), both domestic and international, have been forced to cease their operations due to these restrictive laws, effectively criminalizing internationally recognized rights. The severe restrictions on access to information, arbitrary detention of human rights activists, civil society and opposition leaders has compromised the electoral environment in Ethiopia. There is little independent criticism and virtually no political opposition in the country.

Further, through the promulgation of the Anti-Terrorism Proclamation in 2009, under the guise of rooting out terrorism, Ethiopia has detained citizens engaged in lawful activities. The broad definition of terrorism has provided the government with great latitude to disrupt peaceful protests and thwart the airing of legitimate grievances. It has also afforded the government the right to label opposition groups as terrorist organizations, thereby eliminating all dissent and creating an environment of fear of reprisals for challenging the government

In addition to the clampdown on political activities, the government continues to promote policies which foster ethnic and religious hostilities. As a result, displacement of ethnic groups as well as interference in religious affairs remains unfettered.

While Ethiopia continues to engage in massive human rights violations, in this report, the Ethiopian Women’s Human Rights Alliance (EWHRA) will focus on the Ethiopian government’s significant human rights abuses as it related to the following:

- 1. Freedom of expression;*
- 2. Freedom of association and political rights;*
- 3. Freedom of religion;*
- 4. Persecution of ethnic groups and forced displacement of indigenous people from ancestral lands;*
- 5. Freedom from arbitrary arrests and detentions.*

### **1. Freedom of Expression**

The Ethiopian government censors free speech by routinely blocking websites, closing publishing houses, confiscating newspapers and imprisoning journalists. According to the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), Ethiopia is the leading jailer of journalists in Sub-Sahara Africa and ranks among the top ten jailers in the world. Among the most noted journalists imprisoned by the Ethiopian government are award winning columnist/blogger Eskinder Nega, the recipient of the 2012 PEN/Barbara Goldsmith Freedom to Write Award and Reyot Alemu, winner of the 2013 UNESCO-Guillermo Cano World Press

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Freedom Prize. Last year, the International Women’s Media Foundation bestowed a *Courage in Journalism Award* on Ms. Alemu in absentia. Ethiopia doesn’t limit its arrest to journalists who are Ethiopian citizens. Two Swedish journalists (freed in 2012) who entered the country, without permission, to report on the ongoing conflict in Ogaden were also among the imprisoned journalists. Ethiopia also ranks 3<sup>rd</sup> in the world with respect to the number of journalists in exile, with 49 journalists exiled as a result of government persecution and iron-fisted control of the independent media.

The Ethiopian government has ignored the widespread international condemnations and repeated calls from various rights groups for the release of Ethiopian journalists. EWHRA is not aware of any concrete steps undertaken by the Ethiopian government to provide protections for freedom of expression.

### **2. Freedom of Association and Political Rights**

Political space has been severely curtailed in Ethiopia. So much so, that in the Parliamentary Election of 2010, alleged by rights groups to have been conducted in an environment that was not conducive to free and fair elections, the ruling party won with 99.6% of the vote. The Ethiopian government limited political rights, freedom of expression and association in the run up to the 2010 national elections. Through intimidation, harassment and coercion, the government swept the elections. As a result, the current government’s party controlled 545 of the 547 seats in Parliament to remain in power until 2015. The contested 2010 elections highlighted the failure of the government to develop democratic institutions in the two decades that it has been in power.

By all reasonable accounts, the Ethiopian government remains suspicious of popular participation and even more so of party politics. It has successfully excluded, imprisoned, or exiled those viewed as challenging its authority. Credible evidence exists that the ruling party continues to command an unchecked monopoly on the military and security forces. Under these stifling conditions and with very little chance for political reform, the prospects for genuine democracy in Ethiopia remain bleak.

EWHRA is not aware of any credible efforts to address the violations of civil and political rights that occurred in the lead up to the 2010 elections. Furthermore, EWHRA is unaware of any efforts to encourage political participation or open the space for reform.

In addition to limiting political participation, Ethiopia restricted the activities of civil society as a result of the passage of the Charities and Societies Proclamation in 2009. Many human rights organizations have limited their mandates to comply with the law. Credible evidence exists that many activists, human rights defenders, and lawyers, among others have fled the country for fear of persecution. In addition, the Ethiopian government has actively worked to dilute the activities of many civil society organizations by establishing counter organizations that serve as the arm of the state. For instance, the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission—which has been noted by many NGOs as a government-affiliated entity that lacks independence—was established to counter and obfuscate the work of the Ethiopian Human Rights Council (renamed Human Rights Council)—the oldest and most respected human rights organization in Ethiopia. The Ethiopian government, under the auspices of the Charities and Societies Proclamation, has denied funding to the Human Rights Council by freezing its accounts, causing the organization to virtually cease its operations.

EWHRA is not aware of any credible efforts undertaken by the Ethiopian government to guarantee that all national and international NGOs can operate without fear of harassment, intimidation or arbitrary arrest. To that end, EWHRA is unaware of any concrete steps undertaken by the Ethiopian

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government to repeal or amend the Charities and Societies Proclamation of 2009 to enable civil society organizations to fully engage in human rights work.

### **3. Freedom of Religion**

Article 27 of the Ethiopian Constitution guarantees freedom of religion and delineates the strict separation of church and state. However, the Ethiopian government in contravention of its own constitution has consistently interfered in the affairs of both the Christian and Muslim religions. Religious leaders, Orthodox, Muslim, and Protestants, are often pressured to issue broadcasted statements and messages of support for major governmental actions. In fact, the government has effectively used the Ethiopian Orthodox Church as a tool for political control by interfering in the affairs of the Orthodox Church, including in the election of the church’s leadership. The result of this interference has led to an unfortunate split of the Holy Synod into two competing power centers inside Ethiopia and in the diaspora, with the influential Orthodox Church in Ethiopia aligning itself with the Ethiopian government.

Furthermore, in an effort to pave the way for a planned sugar factory and sugar cane plantation, credible evidence exists that the Ethiopian government desecrated gravesites at the Waldeba monastery and forcibly removed monks who reside on the property. The monastery is considered one of the holiest sites for Ethiopian Orthodox Christians. Such an attack on the monastic community’s way of life and its religious learning centers is unprecedented and represents a fundamental disrespect for a deeply religious culture. It also interferes with the religious affairs of a large majority of Ethiopians.

In fact, the Ethiopian government has not provided an environment of religious tolerance whether it is for Christians or Muslims. Since 2011, Ethiopian Muslims have been engaged in peaceful protest against government interference in their religious affairs. In response to the peaceful protests, the Ethiopian government has resorted to a brutal crackdown against the peaceful protestors by arresting their leaders and closing their newspaper. Protest leaders as well as representatives from the community have been detained and held for trial. Credible evidence suggests that the detentions were politically motivated and the trials were not conducted according to internationally recognized standards. Although many of those arrested have been released, a large number of protestors remain in detention.

EWHRA is unaware of any credible efforts by the Ethiopian government to foster an atmosphere of religious tolerance in the country.

### **4. Persecution of Ethnic Groups and Forced Displacement of Indigenous People from Ancestral Lands**

Ethiopia has acted in contravention of its obligations under its own constitution and international conventions that guarantee freedom of movement within a national territory. These treaties, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Convention on Civil and Political Rights, provide that a citizen has the right to work and live in any part of his or her country. However, credible evidence, including interviews conducted with victims, indicates that since 2012, ethnic Amharas have been subjected to forcible eviction from Guraferda Bench-Maji in the Southern Regional State as well as from the Beni Shangul regions of Western Ethiopia. In interviews, victims, mostly women and children, provide horrific details regarding actions by Ethiopian security forces, including dragged victims from their homes with little beyond what they were wearing. Although it is difficult to provide the exact number of displaced families due to news blackouts, credible evidence suggests that the estimates may be in the thousands, according to clandestine radio interviews with some victims.

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In addition, displacement of indigenous people is rampant in Afar, Gambella and the Omo regions as a result of the sale of ancestral lands to investors. The unprecedented land giveaway is also taking place, at a massive scale, mainly in the lowlands of Ethiopia where the country’s minority ethnic groups and pastoralists live. These forced displacements of indigenous people are in contravention of most recognized international human rights standards. As many human right organizations have noted, the land grabs are done without meaningful consultation, consent, or compensation for loss of land, livelihoods, food security, and access to vital subsistence resources.

Through this targeting of particular ethnic groups and the displacement of indigenous people, the Ethiopian government is countering any efforts to foster ethnic harmony and its actions will ultimately lead towards destabilizing the country. EWHRA is not aware of any credible steps undertaken by Ethiopia to depoliticize ethnicity and promote policies of inclusion.

### **5. Freedom from Arbitrary Arrests and Detentions**

Through the promulgation of the Anti-Terrorism Proclamation in 2009, the Ethiopian government has used an expanded definition of terrorism to prosecute dissidents and those perceived as opposing the government. In fact, Ethiopia has prosecuted journalists who have reported on the activities of the government as well as those who report on international events perceived to incite rebellion, such as Eskinder Nega’s report on the Arab Spring. Muslim protestors, political opponents and ordinary citizens have been arrested and detained under this draconian law. In addition, the Ethiopian government continues to detain citizens perceived to be participating in separatist or opposition groups. The government’s arbitrary arrest and detention of its citizens is aided by the broad definition of terrorism under the Proclamation.

Furthermore, the application of the Anti-Terrorism law has been aided by a politicized judiciary which is filled with hand-picked judges, loyal to the government and who lack the independence required by the Ethiopian Constitution as well as international human rights standards. The judiciary has been used as a tool of “persecution by prosecution” of real and perceived political enemies of the government. Most Ethiopians have little confidence in the impartiality and neutrality of the judiciary and it is widely regarded as an institution that has become a mere extension of the government.

EWHRA is not aware of any concrete efforts undertaken by the Ethiopian government to repeal or amend the Anti-Terrorism Proclamation or to refrain from arbitrarily detaining citizens.

### **Conclusion**

The Ethiopian government has created a stifling environment wherein those within the prison walls and those outside of them are live in fear of a government that has continuously been censured by respected rights groups for its lack of adherence to international human rights standards. Ethnicity permeates politics of the country and the ruling party has been unable and unwilling to create a broader political base in this complex and diverse country. The current party dominates the political scene and governs through limited popular participation.

Civil society organizations along with the media and political groups have suffered from the promulgation of repressive laws which restrict internationally recognized and protected activities. Furthermore, restricted access to human rights defenders and independent media by the government prevents the dissemination of critical information regarding the status of human rights in Ethiopia. Although Ethiopia has been reticent if not outright resistant to visits from a special rapporteur on the

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promotion and protection of the rights to freedom of opinion and expression, such a visit is a critical step toward ensuring that Ethiopia complies with its international obligations.

### **Recommendation**

In light of the aforementioned violations, Ethiopia should strive to meet its international human rights obligations. The government should carry out the previous recommendations made through the UPR.

#### **The government of Ethiopia should:**

- Open up the political space to enable Ethiopians to participate fully in the governance of their country;
- Rescind the repressive Charities and Societies Proclamation or in the absence of that, amend the provisions of the law which are inconsistent with human rights standards;
- Rescind the Anti-Terrorism Proclamation or in the absence of that, amend provisions of the law to enable it to conform with international human rights standards;
- Revise and narrow the definition of terrorism used by the government to ensure that dissidents, human rights defenders and journalists are not detained for lawful and protected activities;
- Release political prisoners and dissidents;
- Release journalists and human rights defenders;
- Refrain from stoking ethnic hostilities;
- Halt the displacement of indigenous peoples from ancestral lands;
- Refrain from persecuting individuals and groups based on their ethnic affiliations;
- Halt the arrest and detention of dissidents using politically motivated terrorism charges;
- Cease from engaging in acts which violate internationally recognized human rights and actively work to protect, including but not limited to:
  - Freedom of assembly and political rights;
  - Freedom of expression;
  - Freedom of religion;
  - Freedom from arbitrary arrest and detention.

The Ethiopian Women's Human Rights Alliance (EWHRA) was formed in January 2009 to address the ongoing and egregious human rights violations in Ethiopia. Outraged at the massive rights abuses and concerned by the draconian law passed by the Ethiopian Parliament that is designed to silence all types of dissent and clampdown on any civil society activity, a multi-generational group of women came together to form a common platform. The goal of the organization is to mobilize against human right abuses in Ethiopia through a range of activities including policy change, letter writing campaigns and engaging international organizations. This grassroots movement relies on the effort and commitment of long time Ethiopian activists and community organizers, friends of Ethiopians, and partner organizations concerned about justice.