

Newspapers and journalists face threats and legal pressure

Reporters Without Borders is alarmed by the steadily worsening climate of harassment and intimidation that the Ethiopian authorities have imposed on the media, especially the private media.



"By taking legal action against news media that criticise its policies or simply dare to ask awkward questions, the government is trying to suffocate them," Reporters Without Borders said. "As they are unable to pay exorbitant legal costs, newspapers risk bankruptcy when they are sued or prosecuted."

The press freedom organisation added: "Prime Minister Meles Zenawi and his government have been tightening their grip on news and information in the last months. Ethiopia has joined the list of sub-Saharan countries that are keeping a close eye on the media and are trying to control or influence editorial policies. Due to their increasing intolerance, the authorities are doing everything they can to stifle the critical impulses of journalists and to make life difficult for the private media."

Journalist in the government's sights

Eskinder Nega, a former journalist jailed along with his wife in 2005 for supporting the protests that followed legislative elections, is again under pressure from the authorities.

On 11 February 2011, police officers briefly arrested him as he left an Internet cafe and took him to central police headquarters. Because of several articles posted online, Eskinder Nega has been accused of tacitly calling on the country to rise up against the government, following the examples of Tunisia and Egypt.

The police commissioner described the articles as "inciting street demonstrations" and "a call for the suspension of parliament." It was also reported that he warned Nega that he would be the first person the police would look for if any kind of violence broke out in the country. "We are not forbidding you to write what you want, but we are issuing you with a serious warning," he reportedly added.

Prior to 2005, Nega was a press proprietor who owned four Amharic-language weeklies: *Satenaw*, *Minilik*, *Askual* and *Ethiop*. On his release in 2005 he was stripped of his right to run a newspaper. This ban still applies.

Avalanche of charges against weekly newspaper *Fitih*

The state prosecutor has brought more than 30 charges against the Amharic-language weekly *Fitih*. On 22 January, the editor, Temesgen Desalegne, was summoned by police to hear the charges against him. Accusations included "tarnishing the image of the ruling coalition." He was released after posting bail of US\$500.

Fitih recently also faced a libel suit by a parliamentarian, Asheber Woldegiorgis. In 2010, the newspaper was prosecuted by the Ethiopian Broadcast Agency, a state body in charge of issuing licences.

This is the first time since 1991 that a newspaper in Ethiopia has been facing more than 30 charges. *Fitih*'s publisher, Mastewal Birhanu, describes the situation as an "attempt to suppress the right of expression in the country."

Tip of the iceberg

Reporters Without Borders fears that the cases of *Fitih* and Nega are just the tip of the iceberg. Harried, intimidated and disheartened by the "warnings," journalists have begun to censor themselves.

Reporters Without Borders is also puzzled by certain cases of websites being blocked and suspects they are being deliberately censored. The Facebook page of *Addis Neger*, an Addis Ababa-based weekly that voluntarily suspended publication in December 2009, is mysteriously unavailable.

Reporters Without Borders strongly urges the Ethiopian government to do everything it can to allow the private press to do its job without fear of intimidation, financially damaging lawsuits and self-censorship. The organisation would also like to take this opportunity to remind the government of Ethiopia of a number of pledges it made to protect the constitutionally guaranteed right of the press. Reporters Without Borders remains hopeful to see these pledges translated into action immediately.

Source: Reporters Without Borders

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