

Exiled journalist convicted of terrorism

By [Sophie van Leeuwen](#)

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Ethiopia is becoming an increasingly repressive state, especially in the realm of media and telecommunication.

Europe was reminded of this when news recently broke that journalist Fasil Yenealem, who is exiled in the Netherlands, was convicted of terrorism in Addis Ababa. RNW spoke with the 39-year-old Ethiopian at a small, self-built studio in Amsterdam where he presents his regular Ethiopian Satellite Television (ESAT) news show.

"It's very dangerous to work for us. To the government in Addis Ababa, we are terrorists," Yenealem says, referring to ESAT and its many anonymous reporters in Ethiopia.

"There have been demonstrations of young people in southern Ethiopia," he says. "They revolt against the repression of the government. They are about 300 people and they meet secretly. They say they fight for justice and freedom."

From Amsterdam, Yenealem manages to contact his correspondents via email and secret phone numbers. And through them, ESAT receives information about young people who are demonstrating, who are being arrested and who are being killed. "Up until today, none of our correspondents has been identified," he says.

Yet Yenealem is not at ease in the Netherlands. He's far away from his family and daily life is expensive. Since he was released from prison, he says he has been followed.

"It's very scary. It's almost impossible to be a journalist in Ethiopia. Even in the Netherlands I receive phone calls. A voice tells me: 'You have to stop. You can't terrorize and destabilize our country!'"

"One of the harshest prisons"

In 2005, Yenealem was imprisoned for criticizing the re-election of Ethiopian Prime Minister Meles Zenawi. Before that, he was publisher and editor-in-chief of independent magazine *Addis Zena*.

"Prison in Ethiopia was very harsh," he recalls. "I had to share my prison cell - which was about the same size as this office - with 400 people. There was only one toilet. Some people were very aggressive, others were mad. It's one of the harshest prisons in the world."

After a year and a half of incarceration, he was released, with hopes to continue his career as a journalist in Ethiopia. But he had to give up. "A police officer advised me to leave the country," he says.

According to Yenealem, Ethiopian authorities became extremely scared after the Arab Spring. "They blocked almost all critical websites," he says. "The internet is slower than ever. Making a phone call via Skype is almost impossible. Facebook is being controlled."

"In the long term, they can't control us. The more they control, the more they push people to stand for their rights. That's what's happening at the moment. Everywhere in Ethiopia there is hope."

A censorship pandemic?

Yenealem's observations are consistent with those of Jan Abbink, a social sciences professor at the VU University Amsterdam who regularly visits the Horn of Africa.

"Censorship in Ethiopia is very efficient," says the Dutch professor. "The anonymous network Tor, which allows websites to evade government measures, is being blocked. Ethiopia is a pioneer in Africa."

"Other countries like Sudan and Rwanda might follow the example of Ethiopia," the professor predicts. "Many countries in Africa have only one internet provider. This means there is no choice. You have to use state-controlled internet. I don't see change in the near future."

The Ethiopia conundrum

Ethiopia has received billions of dollars of development aid in the past decades, despite accusations of violent repression by human rights organisations such as Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International.

"Donor countries face a dilemma," says Abbink. "Ethiopia is a partner in the fight against Islamists, for example, in Somalia. Also, Ethiopia is cooperating to reach the Millennium Goals of the UN, like improving health care and infrastructure. But if people have to keep their mouths shut, I don't think this is the best model to improve."

Meanwhile, now being convicted of terrorism means Yenealem risks spending the rest of his life in an Ethiopian prison.

"My security situation is more and more desperate. I can't do anything about it. I have to accept it," he says. But Yenealem will not be deported to Ethiopia - at least, he hopes not.

Source: [allAfrica](#)

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