



MEDIA STATEMENT

2 June 2016

Ethiopia: End use of counter-terrorism law to persecute dissenters and opposition members

The Ethiopian Government must end its escalating crackdown on human rights defenders, independent media, peaceful protestors as well as members and leaders of the political opposition through the Anti-Terrorism Proclamation (ATP) says a group of civil society organisations (CSOs).

“The government’s repression of independent voices has significantly worsened as the Oromo protest movement has grown,” said Yared Hailemariam, Director of the Association for Human Rights in Ethiopia (AHRE). “The international community should demand the end of this state-orchestrated clampdown and the immediate release of peaceful critics to prevent the situation from deteriorating further.”

The recent escalation in the use of the ATP to prosecute peaceful protesters, journalists, bloggers, human rights defenders, and opposition leaders and members is indicative of the Ethiopian Government’s growing intolerance of dissent. Largely peaceful protests began in November 2015 against the dispossession of land without adequate compensation in the Oromia region. In response to the protests, the Ethiopian authorities have arbitrarily arrested thousands of people and several hundred people have been summarily killed by the security services while participating in the protests.

While the bulk of those arrested since February 2016 have not been charged, several are currently being prosecuted under the ATP. These include Getachew Shiferaw (Editor-in-Chief of the online newspaper *Negere Ethiopia*), Yonathan Tesfaye Regassa (former head of public relations for the opposition Semayawi Party), Bekele Gerba (Deputy Chair, Oromo Federalist Congress (OFC)) and Dejene Tufa (Deputy General Secretary, OFC) and Gurmesa Ayana (secretary, OFC). Fikadu Mirkana, (news editor and a reporter with the public Oromia Radio and TV), was arrested on 19 December 2015, charged under the ATP and released five months later in April 2016.

Getachew was held in Maekelawi Detention Centre after his arrest on 25 December 2015. On 22 April 2016, upon reaching the four-month limit for investigations permissible under the ATP, the court ordered the Federal Police to close the investigation. Yet Getachew remained in police custody and on 23 May was charged under the ATP. He has since been moved to the Kilinto detention centre.

“The Ethiopian government is using laws and judicial processes that fail to meet international human rights standards to harass and stifle dissent, targeting activists, human rights defenders, opposition party leaders and journalists ” said Haben Fecadu, Campaigner at Amnesty International.

Despite repeated calls from CSOs, independent UN experts, the European Parliament, and numerous governments, including the United States, the Ethiopian authorities continue to arbitrarily detain and prosecute scores of peaceful protestors for exercising their rights, using the broad provisions of the ATP to criminalise peaceful expressions of dissent. Since the enactment of the ATP in 2009, human rights defenders, journalists, bloggers and peaceful protestors have been prosecuted and convicted under its provisions.

“The international community – including the United Nations – should unconditionally condemn the arbitrary arrest and detention of human rights defenders in Ethiopia,” said Hassan Shire, Executive Director of DefendDefenders (East and Horn of Africa Human Rights Defenders Project). “The Ethiopian government’s use of counter-terrorism as a smokescreen to target the peaceful work of human rights defenders is an affront to its regional and international obligations.”

Most recently, on 10 May 2016, blogger Zelalem Workagenehu was sentenced to five years and four months in prison under the ATP. Zelalem, who works for the independent diaspora blog, *De Birhan*, was convicted under charges of conspiring to overthrow the government and supporting terrorism under the ATP. The activities on which these charges were based included organising a digital security training course and reporting on the peaceful protest movements in the country. Though the Federal High Court acquitted some of his co-defendants on 15 April 2016, the police re-arrested two of them only hours after they were released from Kilinto Prison on 17 April 2016 and detained them at Maekelawi Prison for a night. Yonathan Wolde and Bahiru Degu were charged with applying to participate in the same training, described by the government as “training to terrorise the country,” and of being members of Ginbot 7, a banned Ethiopian opposition party, which they deny.

Zelalem and Bahiru described for the trial court their conditions of and treatment in detention. Zelalem said he was detained in “Siberia” in the central Maekelawi Prison in Addis Ababa and was tortured by interrogators.

"Independent civil society and media is being quashed out of existence in Ethiopia," said Tor Hodenfield, Policy and Advocacy Officer at CIVICUS. "The international community must call for more than tokenistic releases of human rights defenders and encourage the Ethiopian government to support avenues of peaceful dissent."

Several members and leaders of opposition political parties have also been targeted under the ATP. Bekele Gerba and 21 other individuals were arrested on 23 December 2016, and charged under the ATP. They were then held for a four-month long investigation without access to their lawyer. Authorities transferred them to Kilinto Detention Centre on 22 April 2016. On 11 May 2016, the Prison Administration declined to bring the defendants to Lideta Federal High Court since all the defendants wore black suits, in expression of their mourning for the people killed during the protests. On 4 May 2016, former Spokesperson of the opposition Semayawi (Blue) Party, Yonathan Tesfaye Regassa, was charged with “incitement, planning, preparation, conspiracy and attempt” to commit a terrorism related act under the ATP.

On 25 April 2016, the Federal High Court sentenced the former Governor of Gambella Region, Okello Akway Ochalla, to nine years imprisonment under the ATP. Okello fled Ethiopia after the 2003 massacre in the region, and obtained Norwegian citizenship. He was arbitrarily arrested in South Sudan in March 2014 and handed over to Ethiopian security forces. He was originally charged under the ATP. The trial of Okello and his co-defendants was marred by violations of fair trial guarantees and including the use of witness testimonies in exchange for non-prosecution under the ATP.

The undersigned CSOs demand the competent Ethiopian authorities to take the necessary steps to bring the ATP in line with its international, regional and constitutional human rights obligations and immediately and unconditionally release all human rights defenders, journalists, bloggers and opposition party leaders and members imprisoned for peacefully exercising their rights.

Amnesty International

Article 19

Association for Human Rights in Ethiopia (AHRE)

CIVICUS: World Alliance for Citizen Participation

Civil Rights Defenders

Defend Defenders (East and Horn of Africa Human Right Defenders Project)

Ethiopia Human Rights Project (EHRP)

Front Line Defenders

International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH)

For more information please contact:

Yared Hailemariam, Executive Director, Association for Human Rights in Ethiopia on: yaredh@ahrethio.org

Hassan Shire, Executive Director, DefendDefenders on: executive@defenddefenders.org

Matthew Reading-Smith, Senior Communications Officer, on matthew.reading-smith@civicus.org

