

“Censorship by Detention”: A Look at the Detention of Human Rights Defenders in Ethiopia Since 2020

I. Background

Governments in Ethiopia have a long history of political repression and human rights abuses that goes back many years. There have been historical attacks and repression of human rights defenders (HRDs) in Ethiopia particularly in relation to major incidents including the disputed elections of May 2005 and the subsequent demonstrations of November 2005, the 2015 nationwide protests and the current repressions after 2018 political reform. The crackdown and trials of 2005 have had a detrimental effect on human rights activists, forcing some to quit their work, others to go into exile, and placing some at risk of grave human rights abuses. There are documented records of individual HRDs being targeted for their human rights work. For instance, Assefa Maru, a human rights defender and acting director of Ethiopian Teachers Association was assassinated in May 1997. On the other hand, following the 2015 to 2018 protests, the government responded to the protests with a heavy-handed approach, using excessive force and arresting thousands of people, including human rights defenders. Under the EPRDF regime, HRDs, journalists and media personnel were subjected to multiple forms of human rights violations, including torture, arrest, detention, and intimidation.

Since the appointment of Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed in 2018, Ethiopia has undergone political and economic reforms. However, the country has also witnessed a deteriorating media environment and an increase in the detention of human rights defenders, journalists, and opposition figures. Globally, dozens of countries are increasingly putting human rights defenders behind bars under fabricated charges as part of a broader effort to silence any form of dissent.¹ Detention has been used as a tool to silence dissents and critical voices by Ethiopian governments. The arrests of human rights defenders have been carried out under vague and broad legal provisions, often related to national security, attempt to overthrow the government, creating mistrust between government and the people, and counter-terrorism. This has enabled the government to justify the detention of

¹ OMCT, “Censorship by detention”: New campaign spotlights the imprisonment of human rights defenders’ (10 October 2022) <<https://www.omct.org/en/resources/news-releases/censorship-by-detention-new-campaign-spotlights-the-imprisonment-of-human-rights-defenders>> accessed 24 July 2023

activists and journalists who are critical of government inactions. By detaining human rights activists, Ethiopian authorities for a long time seek to undermine the credibility of these individuals and silence their voices, ultimately hindering efforts to address systemic issues including pervasive human rights violations by state and non-state actors.

II. Pattern of Arrest of HRDs

The 2020 World Press Freedom Index by Reporters without Borders (RSF) ranked Ethiopia at 99 out of 180 countries in the world. Meanwhile, over the past five years since 2018, hundreds of HRDs including journalists have been arrested at various times, and several of them many times over. There are a record number of increases in the unlawful detention and harassment of journalists in Ethiopia after a low record in 2019 and 2020 following the 2018 reform. Detentions of HRDs have taken place in a context of widespread human rights violations. Key causes for the increasing crackdown are the political unrest, forced evictions, ethnic attacks and armed conflict in the country. Reporting on politically sensitive issues, including actions of military, protests, and ethnic attacks are also used to justify detentions. In this regard, a veteran journalist, Temesgen Desalegn case is a prime example. Temesgen who is the founder and managing director of the independent weekly Amharic “Feteh” (meaning “Justice”) magazine was released on November 16, 2022, after 5 months and 3 weeks of detention for allegedly publishing information about the defense force.

Recently published report by Reporters without Borders, the Press Freedom Index revealed a deteriorating state of press freedom in Ethiopia. In the 2022 edition, Ethiopia was positioned as the 114th country out of 180, while in the 2023 edition, it experienced a decline and was ranked 130th out of 180 countries.² The pattern of the arrests suggests that the government is using detention as a form of censorship to suppress and intimidate dissent.

Detaining HRDs serves as a strategic tool to stifle dissent, silence critical voices, and maintain a climate of fear and intimidation. In situations marred by human rights violations and heightened political tensions, HRDs often find themselves as the primary targets of detention as their effort to expose injustices and opposition to government policies often face resistance from governments.

² Reporters without Borders, ‘Ethiopia’ <<https://rsf.org/en/country/ethiopia>> accessed 25 July 2023

This systematic practice of targeting HRDs through arbitrary arrests and detentions aims to stifle their ability to speak truth to power, investigate critical issues, and inform the public. In Ethiopia, the detention of HRDs and dissents who exercise their freedom of expression has become the new normal and is being used as a strategy to ease current political tensions in an attempt to suppress dissenting voices, control the narrative, and maintain a semblance of stability.

For instance, on 2020, in relation to the outbreak of the conflict in Northern Ethiopia several HRDs including journalist has been detained. In the beginning the government has been calling the conflict a “law enforcement operation” rather than a war. Thus, journalists and commentators expressing dissenting views, or doing independent reporting, became vulnerable to arrest, threats, expulsions, and other forms of attacks.³ The fight to control the narrative of the conflict was one of the major reasons for the increasing hostility against HRDs. Similarly, dozens of HRDs including independent journalists are detained in relation to current armed conflict in the Amhara region. Some are detained without the protection of the law and some forced to flee the country due to the crackdown.

Moreover, in addition to detaining HRDs repeatedly as a means to ease political tensions there is a similar pattern in the arrest of HRDs. To mention, conflation of journalistic work, of critical commentary with criminal activity is normal among authorities in Ethiopia. Dozens of journalists were subjected to detentions and serious criminal charges including terrorism charges for exercising freedom of expression and doing their journalistic duties. Nevertheless, it is normal to drop charges after the tensions ease even if they were terrorism charges. This shows that the charges are only used to silence and create fear among HRDs. This trend signals a bad message to others making them to self-censor or quit their work. Furthermore, there is a practice of keeping HRDs under custody and asking for more days to remand and investigate even if the courts allowed bail. This serves as a tactic in order to prolong their detention without having formal charges against them. Also seizure of media equipment, forensic search of journalists’ and media organizations’ digital equipment by security agencies has become a threat to freedom of expression

³ Muthoki Mumo, ‘Journalists face growing hostility as Ethiopia’s civil war persists’ (CPJ, August 1, 2022) <<https://cpj.org/2022/08/journalists-face-growing-hostility-as-ethiopias-civil-war-persists/>> accessed 25 July 2023

impacting the works of HRDs. Media equipment's are essential for the realization of freedom of expression and the arbitrary taking of this materials of HRDs is in violation of the right.

Besides, the pattern of arrest of HRDs is conducted in violation of the laws of Ethiopia. The media law prohibits pre-trial detention of persons charged with committing an offense through the media.⁴ However, there have been instances of detentions of HRDs who conducted interviews via media houses which are in violation of the media law. For instance, on August 25, 2022, HRD Meaza Mohammed and Asaye Derbie conducted an interview aired on “Roha Media” and later on they were detained on September 7 & 11, 2022 respectively. Some HRDs such as journalist Meaza Mohammed, Temesgen Desalegn, Bekalu Alamirew, Yayesew Shimelis, Gobeze Sisay, Tewodros Assefaw and activist Meskerem Abera have been detained more than three times.

In general, the detention of HRDs is a concerning issue that requires attention and action to protect HRDs. Particularly the repeated detention of HRDs to ease current tensions sends a chilling message that dissent will not be tolerated and creates a culture of silence. The space for HRDs in Ethiopia has increased to shrink from time to time as a result of detention of HRDs and the following are some of the instances documented since 2020 showing some of the data.

List of Human Rights Defenders (HRDs) detained in 2020

No.	Name	Sex	Position	Date of arrest	Release Status
1	Yayesew Shimelis	M	Journalist	March 27, 2020	April 23, 2020 (1 st arrest)/Exiled
2	Temesgen Desalegn	M	Author and Journalist	October 14, 2020	Released 15 Oct. 2020 (1 st arrest)
3	Misgan Zinabe	M	Journalist	October 14, 2020	Released 15 Oct. 2020
4	Dasu Dula	M	Journalist	September 05,2020	Released 08, 2020
5	Bahillu Nacho	M	Journalist	September 05,2020	Released 08, 2020
6	Soraa Jirmaa		Journalist	September 05,2020	Released 08, 2020

⁴ Media Proclamation No. 1238/2021 Art. 86

7	Sabboontuu Ahmed	F	Journalist	September 05,2020	Released 08, 2020
8	Getachew Alemayehu	M	Journalist	September 05,2020	Released 08, 2020
9	Habtaamu Abera	M	Journalist	September 05,2020	Released 08, 2020
10	Baayisaa Turaa	M	Journalist	September 05,2020	Released 08, 2020
11	Binyam Yonas	M	Journalist	September 05,2020	Released 08, 2020
12	Sinboo Dajanee	F	Journalist	September 05,2020	Released 08, 2020
13	Belay Manaye	M	Activist & Journalist	July 05, 2020	August 20, 2020 released after 46 days
14	Misganaw Kefelegn	M	Media Personnel	July 05, 2020	August 20, 2020 released after 46 days
15	Nathaniel Gech	M	Journalist	September 1, 2020	Released Sept. 4, 2020 (1 st arrest)
16	Getiye Yalew	M	Journalist	October 1, 2020	Released on Oct. 5, 2020
17	Wako Nole	M	Journalist	October 14, 2020	Released after a day
18	Bikila Amenu	M	Journalist	October 14, 2020	Released after a day
19	Ibsa Gadisa	M	Journalist	October 14, 2020	Released after a day
20	Ermias Mulugeta	M	Journalist	October 26, 2020	Released after 9 hours
21	Yassin Juma	M	Kenyan Journalist	July 2,2020	Released after 49 days
22	Medhanie Ekubamichael	M	Journalist	November 07, 2020	Released On December 9, 2020 after 32 days
23	Bekalu Alamirew	M	Journalist	November 04, 2020	Released on Nov. 20, 2020 (1 st arrest)
24	Yonatan Mulugeta	M	Journalist	August 05, 2020	August 20, 2020 released after 46 days

25	Nathaniel Gech	M	Journalist	October 6, 2020	Released October 18, 2020 (2 nd arrest)
26	Elizabeth Kebede	F	Activist Lawyer	April 4, 2020	May 6, 2020
27	Dawit Kebede	M	Journalist	November 30, 2020	February 1, 2021

List of Human Rights Defenders (HRDs) detained in 2021

No.	Name	Sex	Position	Date of arrest	Status
1	Abebe Bayu	M	Journalist	Arrested b/n June 30-July 02, 2021	Released 18 August 2021/Exiled
2	Yayesew Shimelis	M	Journalist	”	Released 18 August 2021(2 nd arrest)/Exiled
3	Fanuel Kinfu		Journalist	”	Released 18 August 2021
4	Bekalu Alamirew		Journalist	”	Released 18 August 2021(2 nd arrest)
5	Fana Negash		Journalist	”	Released 9 August 2021
6	Miherete Geberkirestos		Journalist	”	Released 9 August 2021
7	Musse Hadra		Journalist	”	Released on 9 August 2021
8	Nebeyu Mikael		Journalist	”	Released 9 August 2021
9	Melkamfire Yemam		Journalist	”	Released 9 August 2021
10	Fikerte Yensu		Journalist	”	Released 9 August 2021
11	Tewlde Tadesse	M	Lawyer of Awlo Media	”	Released 9 August 2021

12	Kibrom Worku	M	Journalist	October 22, 2021	26 January 2022
13	Tamirat Negera	M	Journalist	December 10, 2021	Released on 6 April 2022/ Exiled On 21 November 2022
14	Meaza Mohammed	F	Journalist	December 10, 2021	Released on January 18, 2022 (1 st arrest)
15	Eyasped Tesfaye	M	Journalist	December 8, 2021	Released on 19 January 2022
16	Tesfa-Alem Tekle			October 31, 2021	Released on 15 January 2022
17	Ermias Alemu			October 2021	Released
18	Abdusalaam Hasan			November 21, 2021	Released
19	Mikiyas Tilaun	M	Journalist	September 2021	Released on 17 March 2022
20	Tesfalem Woldyes	M	Journalist	October 2, 2021	Released on October 5, 2021
21	Amir Aman	M	Journalist	December 15, 2021	Released on 1 April 2022
22	Addisu Muluneh	M	Journalist	December 15, 2021	Released on 18 January 2022
23	Thomas Engida	M	AP Camera Man	December 15, 2021	Released on 1 April 2022
24	Abay Zewdu	M	Journalist and Humanitarian	July 17, 2021	Released on 29 July 2021 (1 st arrest)
25	Girmay Gebru	M	Journalist	February 30, 2021	March 3, 2021
26	Tamirat Yemane	M	Journalist	February 30, 2021	March 3, 2021
27	Alula Akalu	M	Journalist	February 30, 2021	March 3, 2021
28	Fistum Berhane	M	Journalist	February 30, 2021	March 3, 2021
29	Desu Dulla	M	Journalist	November 18, 2021	Released

30	Bikila Amenu	M	Journalist	November 18, 2021	Released
----	--------------	---	------------	-------------------	----------

List of Human Rights Defenders (HRDs) detained in 2022

No.	Name	Sex	Position	Date of arrest	Status
1	Awkee Ali Ibrahim	M	Journalist	Feb. 6, 2022	Released before 14 Feb. 2022
2	Najib Tayib	M	Journalist	Feb. 6, 2022	Released before 14 Feb. 2022
3	Muhyddin Mohammed	M	Journalist	Feb. 6, 2022	Released before 14 Feb. 2022
4	Gobeze Sisay	M	Journalist	April 01, 2022	Released on 11 Nov. 2022 (1 st arrest)
5	Gobeze Sisay	M	Journalist	Abducted on May 01, 2022	Abducted for 9 days & released on May 9, 2022 (2 nd arrest)
6	Temesgen Desalegn	M	Journalist	May 26, 2022	Released on November 16, 2022 (2 nd arrest)
7	Meaza Mohammed	F	Journalist and Humanitarian	May 28, 2022	Released on June 20, 2022 (2 nd arrest)
8	Meskerem Abera	F	Journalist	May 21, 2022	June 15, 2022
9	Gashaye Negusse	M	Journalist	May 19, 2022	Released on 18 July 2022
10	Getenet Yalew	M	Journalist	May 19, 2022	Released on 18, 2022
11	Habtamu Melese	M	Journalist	May 19, 2022	Released on 18 July 2022
12	Daniel Mesfin	M	Media personnel	May 19, 2022	Released on 18 July 2022

13	Kelemu Gelagay	M	Media personnel	May 19, 2022	Released on 18 July 2022
14	Yayesew Shimelis	M	Journalist	May 26, 2022	Released on 20 June 2022 (3 rd arrest)
15	Gebremariam Tizazu	M	Journalist	May 19, 2022	Released on July 2022
16	Meaza Mohammed	F	Journalist	Sept. 7, 2022	Released on Oct. 13, 2022 (3 rd arrest)
17	Gobeze Sisay	M	Journalist	Sept. 7, 2022	November 11, 2022 (3 rd arrest)
18	Solomon Shumye	M	Journalist	May 20, 2022	Released on June 17, 2022 (1 st arrest)
19	Asaye Derbie	M	Activist	Sept. 11, 2022	Released on Oct. 13, 2022 (1 st arrest)
20	Meskerem Abera	F	Activist	23 May 2022	Released on 15 June 2022 (1 st arrest)
21	Belay Bekele Weya	M	Poet and Activist	June 28, 2022	Released on July 4, 2022 (1 st arrest)
22	Yayesew Shimelis	M	Journalist	June 28, 2022	Released on July 9, 2022 (4 th arrest)/exiled
23	Bekalu Alamirew	M	Journalist	May 27, 2022	Released on 28 June 2022 (3 rd arrest)
24	Tihitina Belay	F	Activist	May 19, 2022	Released on 18 June 2022
25	Abay Zewdu	M	Journalist and Humanitarian	10 Sept. 2022	Released on 13 Oct. 2022 (2 nd arrest)

26	Asaye Derbie	M	Human Rights Activist	7 Sept. 2022	Released on 13 Oct. 2022 (2 nd arrest)
27	Sabontu Ahmed	F	Journalist	26 May 2022	30 May 2022
28	Solomon Shumye	M	Journalist	17 Dec. 2022	Released after 5 hours on 17 Dec. 2022 (2 nd arrest)
29	Meskerem Abera	F	Activist	December 13, 2022	Released on 5 January 2023 (2 nd arrest)
30	Gobeze Sisay	M	Journalist	Sept. 7, 2022	Released on 11 Nov. 2022 (4 th arrest)
31	Addisu Getaneh	M	Lawyer and Human Rights Advocate	May 23, 2022	Released on 18 June 2022
32	Hailemicheal Gessesse	M	Journalist	May 2022	Released on 19 March 2023
33	Misgna Syoum	M	Journalist	May 2022	Released on 11 Jan. 2023
34	Teshome Temalew	M	Journalist	May 2022	Released on 11 Jan. 2023
35	Haben Halefom	M	Journalist	May 2022	Released on Dec. 2022
36	Dawit Mekonnen	M	Journalist	May 2022	Released on 19 March 2023
37	Yared Awoke	M	Journalist	May 19, 2022	Released on

List of Human Rights Defenders (HRDs) detained in 2023

No.	Name	Sex	Position	Date of arrest	Status
-----	------	-----	----------	----------------	--------

1	Abay Zewdu	M	Journalist and Humanitarian	April 6, 2023. Detained three times before	Released on April 25, 2023 (3 rd arrest)
2	Meskerem Abera	F	Rights Activist and analyst	April 9, 2023. Third arrest since 2022.	Detained (3 rd arrest)
3	Genet Asmamaw	F	journalist	April 6, 2023	Detained
4	Assefa Adane	M	Negere Wolkait Media Editor	April 6, 2023	Detained
5	Senayit Ayalew	F	Journalist	April 13, 2023	Released on April 27, 2023
6	Elias Debas	M	Journalist	April 13, 2023	Released on April 27, 2023
7	Tewodros Asfaw	M	Political Analyst and Journalist	April 13, 2023	Released on June 10, 2023 (2 nd time)/exiled
8	Gobeze Sisay	M	Journalist and Activist	May 6, 2023 Third time arrest	Detained (5 th arrest)
9	Ermias Mekuria	M	Activist and Humanitarian	May 12, 2023	Abducted and detained
10	Dawit Begashaw	M	Arat Killo YouTube channel, Founder, Ethiopian Media Professionals Association Executive Member, Journalist	April 12, 2023	Detained
11	Aleligne Mihretu	M	Defense lawyer for detained HRDs	April 7, 2023	Released on bail 25 April 2023
12	Samuel Assefa	M	Journalist	April 4, 2023	Released on April 13, 2023
13	Sisay Awgichew	M	CSO leader	April 2023	Detained
14	Yosef Ketema (Deacon)	M	EOTC TV - reporter	February 13, 2023	Released on 21 Feb. 2023

15	Aragaw Sisay	M	Journalist	March 26, 2023	Released on April 25, 2023
16	Beyene Wolde	M	Journalist	March 2, 2023	Released on April 12, 2023
17	Getnet Ashagri	M	Journalist	March 26, 2023	Released on bail April 25, 2023
18	Daniel Tesfaye	M	EHRCO Human Rights Expert	January 5, 2023	Released on bail January 12, 2023
19	Bezuayehu Wondimu	M	EHRCO Human Rights Expert	January 5, 2023	Released on bail January 12, 2023
20	Bereket Daniel	M	EHRCO Human Rights Expert	January 5, 2023	Released on bail January 12, 2023
21	Nigussie Berhanu	M	Media analyst	Abducted on March 14, 2023	Released after being ill-treated for 4 days (1 st arrest)
22	Yeayineabeba Gizaw	F	“Yehabesha Weg” magazine Managing Director	Abducted on April 2023	Released unconditionally on April 5, 2023 after being ill treated
23	Asaye Derbie	M	Activist	June 05, 2023	Released on 18 July 2023 (3 rd arrest)
24	Melat Dawit	F	Artist	May 23, 2023	June 3, 2023
25	Tesfaye Hailemariam	M	Writer and Social Media Influencer	April 25. 2023	April 26, 2023
26	Temesgen Desalegn	M	Journalist	Detained on May 20, 2023 & June 27, 2023	Released on May 21, 2023 & June 27, 2023 Respectively (3 rd and 4 th arrest)
27	Azariya Solomon	M	EHRCO Human Rights Expert	March 27, 2023	March 28, 2023
28	Henok Adissie	M	Teacher and activist	April 2, 2023	Detained

29	Genet Ayalew	F	EHRCO Human Rights Expert	March 27, 2023	March 28, 2023
30	Daniel Tesfaye	M	EHRCO Human Rights Expert	March 27, 2023	March 28, 2023
31	Bekalu Alamirew	M	Journalist (arrested for the 4 th times)	August 6, 2023	Detained (4 th arrest)
32	Abay Zewdu	M	Journalist and Humanitarian	August 10, 2023	Detained (4 th arrest)
33	Tewodros Asfaw	M	Journalist	February 14, 2023	February 22, 2023 (2 nd arrest)/exiled
34	Yidinekachew Kebede	M	Activist Lawyer, Social Media Influencer and Journalist	August 17, 2023	September 1, 2023
35	Belay Bekele	M	Poet HRD	August 17, 2023	Detained (3 rd arrest)
36	Fekadu Mahitemework	M	Journalist	August 25, 2023	September 4, 2023
37	Ashebir Tsegaye	M	Journalist	August 26, 2023	Detained
38	Nigussie Berhanu		Political analyst and host	August 30, 2023	Detained (2 nd arrest)
39	Tewodros Zerfu	M	Journalist	August 26, 2023	Detained
40	Yehualashet Zerihun	M	Journalist	September 11, 2023	October 27, 2023
41	Firew Tekle	M	Journalist	September 25, 2023	October 2, 2023
42	Lij Bini (Social Media name)	M	Activist	September 26, 2023	October 26, 2023 (3 rd arrest)
43	Teshager Tsigab	M	Journalist	September 7, 2023	September 11, 2023
44	Mehari Kahsay	M	Journalist	September 7, 2023	September 9, 2023
45	Mehari Solomon	M	Journalist	September 7, 2023	September 9, 2023

46	Elias Debas	M	Journalist	September 18, 2023	Detained
47	Meseret Tamiru	F	Media Personnel	February 14, 2023	Released on February 28, 2023
48	Amanuel Asifaw	M	Media Personnel	February 14, 2023	Released on February 28, 2023

