



Human Rights Watch

Civil Society Crackdown in Ethiopia ^[1]

by

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Published in:

New Internationalist ^[2]

January 4, 2013

On 1 January 2013, Ethiopia ^[3] took up its seat on the United Nations Human rights Council. The uncontested election – Africa put forward five countries for five seats – has raised some eyebrows, given the country’s own poor rights record. Elected member countries are obliged to ‘uphold the highest standards in the promotion and protection of human rights’. Yet, in Ethiopia, hundreds of political prisoners languish in jails where torture is common and a crackdown on the media and civil society is in full swing.

The blogger Eskinder Nega exemplifies the fate of those who dare to speak out. Eskinder was arbitrarily arrested and jailed following the controversial 2005 elections. After his release from prison two years later, he was placed under ongoing surveillance and banned from publishing. Then, in 2011, he was rearrested, convicted in an unfair trial under Ethiopia’s broad terrorism law, and sentenced to 18 years in prison.

Since the 2005 elections, the human rights situation in Ethiopia has progressively deteriorated: the government has shut down legitimate political avenues for peaceful protest; and opposition leaders, civil society activists and independent journalists have been jailed or forced to flee. Furthermore, state-driven development policies, including large-scale agricultural development and ‘villagization’ programmes, have seen communities forcibly relocated from their traditional lands, without adequate consultation or compensation, to villages that lack basic services

The ruling party has passed a host of laws attacking the media and civil society, including the Charities and Societies Proclamation that has made independent human rights work in the country almost impossible. The state has frozen the assets of the last two remaining groups – the leading women’s rights organization, the Ethiopian Women Lawyers Association (EWLA) – which has provided free legal aid to over 17,000 women – and the Human Rights Council (HRCO).

Ethiopia’s security forces have in recent years been implicated in crimes against humanity and war crimes in the Somali and Gambella regions. But Ethiopia has not only succeeded in stemming criticism at the national level but also internationally. And the worsening human rights situation has not dampened donors’ enthusiasm, even when their assistance has harmed democratic institutions or minority populations. Ethiopia’s friends and partners in the region should use its three-year term on the Council to put its rights abuses under the international spotlight. They should use debates to urge the Ethiopian government to release all political prisoners, lift unlawful restrictions on civil society and the media, and stop blocking visit requests by UN human rights experts.

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