

Joint civil society letter to Ethiopian Prime Minister-designate on recent arrests of journalists and human rights defenders

Prime Minister-Designate, Dr. Abiy Ahmed Ali

Cc: Abadula Gemed, Speaker of the House of Peoples' Representative

29 March 2018

Your Excellencies,

The undersigned international, regional and national human rights and development organisations write to express our grave concern over the recent arrest of 11 Ethiopian journalists, bloggers and political opposition leaders amid a new crackdown on fundamental freedoms. Such measures undermine the Ethiopian government's international human rights obligations as well as recent political commitments to initiate an era of widespread democratic political reform. As you assume your position as Prime Minister, we urge the Ethiopian Government to immediately and unconditionally release all human rights defenders, political activists and journalists, including the 11 individuals detained this week.

On 25 March 2018, Ethiopian police and security forces arrested journalists Eskinder Nega and Temesgen Desalegn, Zone9 bloggers Mahlet Fantahun, Befekadu Hailu, blogger Zelalem Workaggnhu and political activists Andualem Arage, Addisu Getinet, Yidnekachewu Addis, Sintayehu Chekol, Tefera Tesfaye and Woynshet Molla.

The arrests were carried out while the defenders were attending a private meeting in Addis Ababa at the home of journalist Temesgen Desalegn. The private gathering was held in recognition of the recent release of thousands of political prisoners amidst ongoing and widespread protests against political marginalisation and land grabbing in the Oromia and Amhara regions which began in late 2015. The eleven are currently being held at Gotera-Pepsi Police Station in Addis Ababa.

Days earlier on 8 March, authorities arrested Seyoum Teshome, a prominent blogger and university lecturer. Teshome, who is a frequent contributor to Ethiothinkthank.com and was detained for three months under the previous State of Emergency, is currently being held in the notorious Maekelawi Prison in Addis Ababa.

While the authorities have not publicly indicated if charges will be brought against the defenders, under the February reinstatement of the national State of Emergency, groups and individuals must seek permission from the Command Post to host public gatherings.

Prior to their release in February, several of the defenders had previously been imprisoned for periods ranging from two to seven years in relation to their legitimate work as journalists,

bloggers and political activists. Eskinder Nega and the Zone9 Bloggers are recipients of international awards celebrating their contribution to independent journalism and human rights.

The arrests follow the declaration of a national State of Emergency on 16 February by the Cabinet for a period of six months. The State of Emergency includes a number of draconian and overbroad provisions. Among other worrying violations of fundamental democratic freedoms, the State of Emergency imposes a blanket ban on all protests, the dissemination of any publication deemed to “incite and sow discord” including those who criticise the State of Emergency and allows for warrantless arrest.

Such measures are contrary to international human rights law and the Ethiopian Constitution and are counter-productive to peace and security. The invocation of the State of Emergency criminalises dissent and persecutes human rights defenders, protesters and journalists.

We urge the government of Ethiopia to: (i) immediately release all human rights defenders, political opponents and journalists detained for exercising their legitimate rights to freedom of expression, association and assembly; (ii) end all forms of harassment against journalists and all citizens with critical views on national matters and; (iii) review and amend the State of Emergency to ensure that any limitations on fundamental rights are in line with international human rights obligations.

Sincerely,

1. Access Now
2. African Law Foundation (Nigeria)
3. ARTICLE 19
4. Asia Democracy Network (ADN)
5. Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development (FORUM-ASIA)
6. Asian Legal Resource Center (ALRC)
7. Association for Human Rights in Ethiopia (AHRE)
8. Association for Progressive Communications (APC)
9. The Article 20 Network
10. Balkan Civil Society Development Network (BCSDN)
11. Bytes4All Pakistan
12. Caucasus Civil Initiatives Center
13. Center for International Environmental Law (CIEL)
14. CIVICUS: World Alliance for Citizen Participation
15. Commonwealth Human Right Initiative (CHRI)
16. DefendDefenders (East and Horn of Africa Human Rights Defenders Project)

17. End Impunity
18. Endorois Welfare Council (Kenya)
19. Ethiopia Human Rights Project (EHRP)
20. Freedom House
21. Front Line Defenders
22. Karapatan (Philippines)
23. Global Participe (Republic of the Congo)
24. Greenpeace Africa
25. International Civil Society Centre
26. International Service for Human Rights
27. JOINT - Ligas de ONGs em Mocambique (Mozambique)
28. Odhikar (Bangladesh)
29. OutRight Action International
30. Pakistan Fisherfolk Forum
31. PEN International
32. Reporters Without Borders (RSF)
33. Robert F. Kennedy Human Rights
34. Sengwer Indigenous Peoples Programme
35. Uganda National NGO Forum (UNNGOF)
36. West Africa Civil Society Institute (WACSI)
37. West African Human Rights Defenders' Network (WAHRDN)
38. World Movement for Democracy
39. World Organization Against Torture
40. Zimbabwe Environmental Law Association (ZELA)