

How the media is faring in Ethiopia

By [Muthoki Mumo](#)

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During a trip to Addis Ababa in January, it was impossible to miss the signs that Ethiopian media are enjoying unprecedented freedom. A flurry of new publications were on the streets. At a public forum that CPJ attended, journalists spoke about positive reforms, but also openly criticised their lack of access to the government.



Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed speaks during a press conference in Addis Ababa, in August 2018. Since Abiy's election, conditions for Ethiopia's journalists have improved, but some challenges remain. Credit: CPJ/AFP/Michael Tewelde.

At a press conference, journalists from state media and the Oromia Media Network, an outlet [previously banned](#) and accused of terrorism, sat side by side.

Mesud Gebeyehu, a lawyer who heads the Consortium of Ethiopian Rights Organizations, an alliance of human rights groups, told CPJ he had been on television "many times" in the past year to speak about human rights, an issue that was previously taboo for the media.

Ethiopia, which was one of the [most-censored countries](#) in the world and one of the [worst jailers of journalists](#) in sub-Saharan Africa, has gone through dramatic reforms under the leadership of Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, who took office last April. In 2018 - for the first time in 14 years - CPJ [recorded no journalists](#) behind bars in its annual census. And the country ended its [block](#) of over 260 websites and [ban on](#) media outlets forced to work in exile.

"I was fighting for [press freedom], but I did not expect it to happen in such a short time," said Abel Wabella, a journalist who was [detained](#) and [charged with terrorism](#) under the previous government.

In May, Ethiopia will host UNESCO's annual World Press Freedom Day: a reflection, UNESCO [said](#), of the country's commitment to democratic and media reforms.

Though the Ethiopian press is much freer today than before Abiy took power, CPJ spoke to over a dozen journalists and rights defenders who said that challenges remain, including the risk of attack and arrest, especially in restive regions; attracting advertisers in a market where businesses are wary of being seen to support critical publications; accusations of sowing divisiveness; and a proposed law that could curtail their newly found freedoms.

CPJ also attempted to reach the government for comment on conditions for the press. The Prime Minister's press secretary, Billene Seyoum, acknowledged receipt but did not respond to CPJ's emailed questions sent on April 24.

Perhaps most fundamentally, journalists told CPJ they are anxious for the freedoms they are enjoying to be rooted in law, rather than guaranteed only by the good will of the Abiy government.

The reforms "are not legally nor institutionally guaranteed until now. They are so because the leaders on top are willing, but neither their willingness nor their hold on power is permanent," Befekadu Hailu, a journalist and social activist who edits the *Addis Maleda* weekly, told CPJ.

A [council](#) established under the attorney general's office is reviewing a raft of laws including those previously used to restrict the press, such as the [anti-terror proclamation](#) and the [mass media](#) law, according to media reports.

Most of the journalists with whom CPJ spoke with said they were happy with the reform process, which included [public consultations](#). Befekadu said he believes those involved are "independent". Jawar Mohammed, executive director of the Oromia Media Network, said that those involved could move faster and communicate more frequently and clearly with the public.

Hate speech 'law'

However, a proposed law on hate speech is splitting opinion.

The government last year [said it would draft](#) the law in response to concern about [toxic rhetoric online](#) that some say [amounts to incitement to violence](#) or has the potential to exacerbate divisions, [largely along ethnic lines](#), according to reports. The government has previously responded to tension by cutting off access to the internet. CPJ [documented](#) two such shutdowns under Abiy's government, during unrest in Addis Ababa in September and in the Somali region during a crisis in August.

Yared Hailemariam, the executive director of the Swiss-based Association for Human Rights in Ethiopia, told CPJ said that the media stand accused of "aggravating" tension. "It is a reflection of the political situation in the country, tension is high," he said.

Most of those who spoke with CPJ said they felt there was a need for Ethiopian media to grow into "professionalism" and to act more "ethically" and "responsibly" within the newly opened space. But even so, some, like Befekadu, said they feared the hate speech law could have a "chilling effect on freedom of expression."

"They want to give the government more power to regulate speech. Given the divisiveness in the country, it is understandable. But we need to be careful... we should not allow government to pass legislation which gives them reason to take down content they don't like," said Endalk Chala, assistant professor at Hamline University in Minnesota, who has studied Ethiopian media.

A copy of the draft law, viewed by CPJ, includes criminal penalties for hate speech and publishing "false news." The privately owned *Addis Fortune* warned in an [April 13 article](#) that the draft law would not be a "golden bullet ... to contain hate speech" and raised concerns that it harks back to laws Ethiopia previously used to suppress critical speech.

Eskinder Nega, who launched the weekly *Ethiopia* last year, months after he was freed from [almost seven years](#) in prison, said that ideas ought to be allowed to flourish, hate will be "filtered out". Jawar said it was "dangerous" to invite government regulation of speech, suggesting instead a peer regulatory mechanism for the media.

New papers

Jawar and Eskinder are among the prominent media personalities whose work has been [criticized](#) for inflaming tensions, according [to media reports](#).

Both strongly refuted these views. Jawar said that a strong political and advocacy position was being conflated with divisive speech. Eskinder said that while he has strong opinions, he has never advocated for violence. In a follow up email exchange on April 26, Eskinder told CPJ that the [allegations of divisiveness](#) were part of a "manufactured debate" and based on a misinterpretation of his work.

For the new papers that have mushroomed in Addis Ababa, financial concerns are urgent.

Abel can attest to that - he established the weekly *Addis Zeybe* in October, only for the paper to go out of print after four editions following financial pressures and distribution challenges.

Abel told CPJ that publications have a hard time attracting advertisers, whom he said can be shy of being associated with critical publications. This was a sentiment echoed by Jawar, who recently established a magazine, *Gulale Post*.

"Businesses are cautious. This is a popular government so they don't want to be seen as being anti-government," said Eskinder.

The government has also not been very open to the media, with Abiy hosting [only a couple of press conferences](#) with local journalists since he came to power, according to media reports and two of the journalists with whom CPJ spoke.

Journalists in Ethiopia also still face the risk of attack. CPJ has documented how mobs attacked a crew from the state-run Dire Dawa Mass Media Agency, in Meiso, in the Oromia region in July, in an incident that [killed their driver](#), and how two journalists with the privately owned Mereja TV were briefly detained by police in Legetafo, in the same region, and assaulted by a mob upon their release [in March](#). The regional government made initial promises to investigate, but Mereja TV chief executive Elias Kifle told CPJ in April that authorities had not investigated the crime.

Oromia government spokesperson Admasu Damtew did not answer CPJ's phone calls or text messages on April 24 and April 27.

"They [have fulfilled] their obligation of respecting human rights, but the Abiy administration also has to protect people, to protect journalists, to protect human rights organizations from being attacked," Yared, from the Association for Human Rights in Ethiopia, told CPJ.

The Economist [reported](#) last month that reform under Abiy "is not the first blossoming of free media", pointing to how liberalisation in the 1990s was followed by crackdowns in the 2000s. When CPJ asked Befekadu if he thought this current era of freedom would last he said, "I cannot say yes or no. But there is equal chance for the change to regress as it can progress. It needs collective effort of the media, civil society, and government to save it from falling into the vicious cycle."

[Reporting from Addis Ababa and Nairobi.]

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