



THE OBSERVATORY
for the Protection of
Human Rights Defenders

The Illusion of Progress:

Ethiopia's Human Rights Defenders
Under Attack



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List of acronyms

- ACSO: Agency for Civil Society Organisations
- AHRE: Association for Human Rights in Ethiopia
- CARD: Centre for Advancement of Rights and Democracy
- CAT: Committee Against Torture
- CSOs: Civil Society Organisations
- CSP: Charities and Societies Proclamation
- EHRC: Ethiopian Human Rights Commission
- EHRCO: Ethiopian Human Rights Council
- EHRDC: Ethiopian Human Rights Defenders Center
- EPFD: Ethiopian Press Freedom Defenders
- EPRDF: Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democracy Front
- EWLA: Ethiopian Women Lawyers Association
- HRC: Human Rights Committee
- HRD: Human Rights Defender
- ICHREE: International Commission of Human Rights Experts on Ethiopia
- LHR: Lawyers for Human Rights
- NEBE: National Electoral Board of Ethiopia
- NHRI: National Human Rights Institution
- OHCHR: Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights
- Proc. No.: Proclamation Number
- SOE: State of Emergency
- TPLF: Tigray People's Liberation Front
- UN: United Nations
- UPR: Universal Periodic Review

Executive Summary

This report seeks to shed light on the alarming deterioration of conditions faced by human rights defenders (HRDs) and human rights civil society organisations (CSOs), amid the restriction of civic space in Ethiopia since Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed took office in 2018. It provides comprehensive analysis and documentation of the Ethiopian government's relentless persecution of HRDs and human rights CSOs, and the systematic erosion of civic freedoms, marking a stark reversal of earlier progress and encouraging promises made by the so-called "reform government".

The country has experienced a troubling intensification of political unrest, characterised by a surge of ethnically motivated attacks that have plunged communities into chaos. The government's excessive use of force to quell protests has further exacerbated tensions, as has the controversial postponement of the 2020 general elections. This unrest was dramatically heightened by the outbreak of the devastating Tigray conflict on 3 November 2020, which lasted until November 2022. Additionally, ongoing armed confrontations in the Amhara and Oromia regions have further undermined the reform measures tentatively introduced in 2018 and 2019.

Since 2020, HRDs and human rights CSOs have been among the most targeted and persecuted groups, experiencing a wide range of human rights violations. Individuals have been abducted and held in arbitrary and prolonged detention, leaving them without communication with the outside world. Many have endured severe violence and harassment, while cases of ill-treatment and torture are disturbingly common. The spectre of enforced disappearances looms large, alongside incidents of extrajudicial killings and other serious forms of bodily harm.

In a further demonstration of the oppressive climate, many HRDs have been forced into exile, while others have faced bans preventing their entry into the country. There is also a systemic culture of intimidation directed at rights groups, often resulting in their suspension and silencing. The government has introduced repressive laws to legitimise these violations. Abuses continue unabated, prompting expressions of urgent concern from numerous entities, including well-established international human rights mechanisms, regarding the need for accountability. The persistent climate of impunity not only diminishes hopes for justice and confidence in the ongoing process of transitional justice and national dialogue, but also perpetuates a cycle of fear and repression within Ethiopian society.

The report finds that, notwithstanding the reform agenda announced by Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed upon taking office, torture and other forms of ill-treatment against dissenting and critical actors remain entrenched tools of governance. The administration has failed to implement the substantive and structural changes repeatedly recommended by United Nations (UN) treaty bodies and investigative mechanisms, opting instead for superficial measures – such as the closure of certain notorious detention facilities – while leaving the underlying legal and institutional framework untouched. As a result, the authorities have retained the capacity to resort to such practices whenever deemed expedient, particularly in relation to HRDs. Ethiopia is therefore marked by a profound contradiction: while reforms are advanced in certain areas, civic space continues to contract, underscoring the absence of genuine transformation in the protection of fundamental rights.

The report makes recommendations to the Government of Ethiopia, UN and African human rights mechanisms, and third states. It urges the Government of Ethiopia to urgently reaffirm its commitment to human rights by releasing all arbitrarily detained HRDs and withdrawing unfounded charges against them. The Ethiopian authorities should protect HRDs from torture and ill-treatment by acceding to the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court and ratifying the remaining key international human rights instruments, while ensuring all laws it enacts align with international human rights standards. The government must end harassment and intimidation of HRDs and CSOs, creating an enabling environment where they can operate freely and contribute to national dialogue, transitional justice and upcoming elections. To ensure accountability and provide effective remedies to victims, the government must conduct independent and transparent investigations into violations against HRDs. It must guarantee freedom of expression, association and peaceful assembly. The government

should also demonstrate genuine commitment to justice, accountability and democratic renewal by implementing recommendations from UN human rights mechanisms and extending standing invitations to relevant UN Special Rapporteurs and Working Groups.

UN and African human rights mechanisms must also take decisive action to address the deteriorating human rights situation in Ethiopia and the growing risks faced by HRDs and CSOs. They should urgently call on the Ethiopian government to end all forms of human rights violations, harassment, and persecution against HRDs and CSOs, and to ensure that all legislative reforms align with international human rights standards. These mechanisms should follow up on implementation of earlier recommendations aimed at strengthening civic space and protecting HRDs. By engaging with the Ethiopian government, they must ensure that cases involving HRDs are fully recognised and addressed by the transitional justice process. Moreover, they must advocate for the establishment of effective and accessible protection mechanisms for HRDs in Ethiopia and call on host governments to ensure adequate protection and support for Ethiopian HRDs in exile. These bodies should also actively seek formal invitations for country visits to Ethiopia, demonstrating their commitment to direct monitoring and ensuring sustained international oversight and pressure for reform.

Third states must press the Ethiopian authorities to comply with their international human rights obligations by protecting HRDs and expanding civic space. This includes demanding the immediate release of detained HRDs, ensuring accountability for perpetrators, and repealing or revising regressive or repressive laws. Foreign governments should also guarantee the protection of Ethiopian HRDs in exile by promptly investigating any acts of intimidation or harassment within their jurisdictions.

Finally, third states should provide increased financial and material support to CSOs and HRDs, both inside Ethiopia and abroad. This assistance should include facilitating visas and residency for exiled HRDs, as well as establishing rehabilitation programmes for individuals who have suffered arbitrary detention, torture, or other grave human rights violations.

Methodology

This report adopts a qualitative research approach to analyse the situation in relation to civic space and HRDs in post-2018 Ethiopia. It focuses on the trends, nature, and extent of human rights violations perpetrated against HRDs, as well as the continued contraction of civic space within the country through ongoing legislative amendments.

To build a comprehensive understanding, a wide array of secondary sources were reviewed, including reports by reputable human rights organisations, governmental institutions, and independent media outlets. These materials provided insights into the systematic patterns of abuse and repression experienced by HRDs and illustrated the broader human rights context in Ethiopia. The relevant legislative framework was also analysed to assess the extent of regression since legislation was initially amended during the early phase of the so-called “reform government”.

Primary data were collected through interviews and questionnaires with a total of 42 individuals. Among them, 25 were human rights workers currently active in their field, who contributed perspectives on how ongoing government actions in Ethiopia are impacting their human rights work. Seven (7) interviewees were HRDs who had been forced to flee Ethiopia due to persecution, and two (2) were still residing in Ethiopia but had been compelled to cease their human rights activities, offering insights into the lived experiences of those directly affected by these violations. Four (4) interviewees were former or current leaders of domestic human rights organisations who have faced persecution, allowing for a deeper exploration of the personal and professional challenges encountered. Interviews also aimed to highlight the current working environment for CSOs in Ethiopia, focusing on the difficulties they face due to government restrictions. Finally, four (4) interviews were conducted with relevant individuals from the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission (EHRC), the national human rights institution (NHRI), to gain insights into the government’s response to the Commission’s findings regarding human rights violations against HRDs and shrinking civic space. The interviews also addressed how the recent change in leadership of the Commission has negatively affected its work in this area.

The data derived from documentary review, questionnaires and interviews were subjected to thematic analysis, enabling identification of key patterns and trends. This analysis highlights two main phases: first, the short-lived progress achieved in the earlier years of the “reform government” in expanding civic space and protecting HRDs; and second, the subsequent rollback, marked by widespread human rights violations against HRDs and the closure of civic space.

Introduction

Human rights defenders (HRDs) are individuals or groups who actively promote and protect human rights in a peaceful manner.¹ They can be journalists, activists, community leaders, religious leaders, public intellectuals, human rights workers, or any person or group who engages in activities aimed at promoting, protecting or striving for the protection and realisation of human rights through peaceful means. They contribute to the effective elimination of violations of human rights and fundamental freedoms by collecting and sharing information on abuses, supporting victims, seeking accountability, advocating for better governance and policies, assisting in the implementation of human rights treaties, and educating the public about human rights.² In the Ethiopian context, HRDs include individuals or entities that advocate for the collective rights of ethnic, community or religious groups. Their effective contribution in this regard depends on the openness of civic space.

The work of HRDs is fraught with risks. Many individuals engaged in human rights activism face threats to their life, liberty, security, and reputation.³ Perpetrators of violations against HRDs can include state and non-state actors, such as police, military personnel, members of the judiciary, local and state authorities, security services, paramilitary groups, extreme right-wing groups, the media, and corporations.⁴

In efforts to promote and safeguard human rights, as well as to expand civic space, the year 2018 represented a pivotal moment for Ethiopia, seemingly signifying the conclusion of a repressive regime and the commencement of a democratisation process.⁵ Following a series of anti-government protests that began in November 2015,⁶ the then-ruling Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) was compelled to undertake reforms aimed at opening civic space and affirming its commitment to democratisation and the protection of human rights.⁷ This reformist agenda led to the closure of notorious torture centres like *Maekelawi* and the release of thousands of political prisoners, including HRDs, alongside significant leadership changes within the government.⁸

On 2 April 2018, Abiy Ahmed was sworn in as Prime Minister, succeeding Hailemariam Desalegn and pledging to advance democracy, human rights, and the reopening of civic space. He publicly acknowledged the repressive nature of the previous administration, apologised for past abuses⁹ and invited exiled dissident groups, activists, journalists, and politicians to return.¹⁰ Born in 1976 in Beshasha (Oromia), Abiy Ahmed rose through the EPRDF and the national security apparatus, serving as a lieutenant colonel and leading the Information Network Security Agency (INSA).¹¹ This background gave him deep command of the state's coercive tools even as he pledged liberalisation.

¹ UN General Assembly, Declaration on the Right and Responsibility of Individuals, Groups and Organs of Society to Promote and Protect Universally Recognized Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms (UN Declaration on HRDs) (1998), Article 1.

² UN-OHCHR (2004), Human Rights Defenders: Protecting the Right to Defend Human Rights, Fact Sheet No. 29, pp. 2-10.

³ Nah, A. M., Bennett, K., Ingleton, D., & Savage, J. (2013), "A research agenda for the protection of Human Rights Defenders", *Journal of Human Rights Practice*, 5(3), pp. 401-420.

⁴ Bennett, K., Ingleton, D., Nah, A. M., & Savage, J. (2015), "Critical perspectives on the security and protection of Human Rights Defenders", *The International Journal of Human Rights*, 19(7), pp. 883-895.

⁵ Herman Boko, "Abiy Ahmed: Ethiopia's first Oromo PM spreads hope of reform", *France 24*, 30 July 2018. <https://www.france24.com/en/20180730-abiy-ahmed-spreads-hope-reform-ethiopia>.

⁶ Mebratu Kelecha, "Protest, Repression and Revolution in Ethiopia", *Review of African Political Economy*, 24 January 2019. <https://roape.net/2019/01/24/protest-repression-and-revolution-in-ethiopia/>.

⁷ BBC, "Ethiopia's Abiy Ahmed: The leader promising to heal a nation", 3 January 2019. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-46735703>.

⁸ OMCT and AHRE (2021), *Ethiopia: Surviving Torture: A call to address three decades of untold tragedy for torture victims in Ethiopia*. <https://www.omct.org/site-resources/files/Ethiopia-Surviving-torture-28-07-213.pdf>.

⁹ Daniel Bekele (2019), *Restrictions on press freedom in Ethiopia: An historical analysis of Ethiopian laws and compliance with international law*. <https://ora.ox.ac.uk/objects/uuid%3Ad8236c05-32ce-4f4b-8685-c0fc4cbd4d06/files/m5e9ce4f4fb9561a1d72c146fe04af766?utm>. 2019.

¹⁰ United States Department of State (2018), *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Ethiopia*. <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/Ethiopia-2018.pdf?utm>. p. 20.

¹¹ *Britannica*, "Abiy Ahmed", <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Abiy-Ahmed?utm> (consulted on 25 November 2025).

To a certain extent, the government's stated objective of opening up civic space and creating an enabling environment for HRDs and human rights work was also reflected in a series of legal and institutional reforms introduced by Abiy's so-called "reform government". The repeal of repressive laws – including the civil society law in 2019,¹² the anti-terrorism law in 2020,¹³ and the media law in 2021¹⁴ – along with reforms to democratic institutions such as the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission (EHRC), the National Election Board of Ethiopia (NEBE) and the federal judiciary, initially fostered optimism for the establishment of a more open civic space and a conducive environment for human rights advocacy. These reforms facilitated the expansion of activities by human rights organisations and encouraged individuals in exile to return to their home country to continue their work in this field.

However, the initial wave of positive developments proved to be short-lived, insufficient and insincere. This report highlights a selective approach to human rights reforms by the Abiy Ahmed administration, treating them as discretionary "pick and choose" measures, rather than binding obligations under international law. This posture has translated into a systematic refusal to comply with certain international human rights standards. CSOs and HRDs, in particular, have been targeted precisely because of their watchdog role in holding the state accountable to its national and international commitments.

The government's stance reflects a deliberate and structured policy response, as indicated by Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed in his address to Parliament on 4 July 2024, in which he stated:

Institutions established in the name of human rights must check themselves. They've deviated from the basic definition of human rights. Institutions that claim themselves to be "human rights bodies" are not serving human rights but political motives. This is the cause of the lack of peace in many countries.¹⁵

The reform process launched in 2018 notably failed to incorporate long-standing recommendations from UN treaty bodies. Despite clear acknowledgement of the systemic use of torture in Ethiopia, the government has disregarded the Committee against Torture's (CAT) 2011 and 2023 recommendations to amend Article 424 of the Criminal Code to bring the definition of torture into full conformity with Article 1 of the Convention Against Torture.¹⁶ As a result, acts of torture that fall outside Article 424's narrow scope remain inadequately punishable, including those committed during public demonstrations or in non-custodial settings. This legal gap reflects a deliberate disregard for individuals exercising their rights through peaceful protest and effectively provides a permissive framework for their abuse.

With regard to arbitrary detention, the CAT similarly recommended in 2011 that Article 19(3) of the Constitution, which specifies that the maximum period within which anyone arrested or detained on a criminal charge must be brought before a judge "shall not include the time reasonably required for the journey from the place of arrest to the court", should be revised due to its vagueness. Yet, this provision remains unchanged. Likewise, Article 59(3) of the Criminal Procedure Code, which authorises repeated 14-day extensions of remand in custody, has not been amended. Even the ongoing revision of the 1961 Criminal Procedure Code, after more than half a century in force, has failed to close these gaps. For example, although Article 118 of the draft code (which has not yet been adopted) requires a person not released on police bail to be brought before the nearest court within 48 hours, it also permits additional "reasonable time" to produce the person in court – an open-ended clause that risks prolonging police custody beyond the 48-hour limit without clear, verifiable safeguards. Under Article 119, courts may order remand in custody in 14-day increments for up to four months based on broad criteria (gravity, complexity, evidence collection), without prescribed intervals for adversarial review or strict necessity/proportionality tests. Moreover, Article 119(4) allows up to 20 days after the investigation is complete to enable charging, potentially extending detention beyond the investigation period. Taken together, these provisions invite prolonged pre-trial detention with insufficient judicial

¹² Civil Society Organisations Proclamation No. 1113/2019.

¹³ Prevention and Suppression of Terrorism Crimes Proclamation No. 1176/2020.

¹⁴ Media Proclamation No. 1238/2021.

¹⁵ Sisay Sahl, "Outgoing Human Rights Commissioner rejects PM's political motive allegations", *The Reporter*, 6 July 2024, <https://www.thereporterethiopia.com/40953/>.

¹⁶ CAT, Concluding observations of the Committee against Torture: Ethiopia, 20 January 2011, CAT/C/ETH/CO/1, <https://docs.un.org/en/CAT/C/ETH/CO/1>; CAT, Concluding observations on the Second Periodic Report of Ethiopia, 7 June 2023, CAT/C/ETH/CO/2, <https://docs.un.org/en/CAT/C/ETH/CO/2>.

safeguards, falling short of international standards that require prompt judicial control, detention as a last resort, and regular, time-bound court reviews. These provisions continue to create conditions for arbitrary detention and abuse, undermining the credibility of claims of reform.

The early promise of democratic reforms quickly gave way to widespread human rights violations, including targeted repression of HRDs and shrinking of civic space.¹⁷ The intensification of political unrest due to ethnically-motivated attacks, excessive use of force to disperse protests and the postponement of the 2020 general elections, the outbreak of the Tigray conflict on 3 November 2020 (which lasted until November 2022), and the ongoing armed conflicts in the Amhara and Oromia regions have made human rights work increasingly difficult and have worsened the situation for HRDs. Reports indicate that HRDs have faced threats, harassment, prolonged arbitrary detention, inhumane treatment, and enforced disappearance.¹⁸ In addition, new allegations suggest that torture centres have been re-established in Awash Arba military camp, approximately 220 kilometres from the capital, Addis Ababa.¹⁹ This situation represents more than just a reduction of civic space and incidental risks faced by HRDs.

This regression has been further compounded by the government's replacement of progressive leadership of key democratic institutions, such as the EHRC and the Institution of the Ombudsman of Ethiopia, and by the introduction of bills to amend the progressive laws introduced during the initial period of the "reform government" (April 2018-mid-2020).

In addition to the gross human rights violations against HRDs, accountability for perpetrators through national mechanisms is often insufficient or even non-existent. This is largely attributable to the government's unwillingness to address these violations and its instrumentalisation of repression to silence dissenting voices, combined with the weakness of the rule of law and the prevalence of impunity. Among the reforms initiated in 2018, a critical shortcoming has been the absence of accountability for well-known and clearly identified perpetrators of human rights violations that occurred in the country between 2005 and 2018. Instead of ensuring justice for past abuses, the government has preserved a culture of impunity, which continues to serve as a central instrument of repression.

This report highlights the trend, nature, and extent of human rights violations against HRDs in Ethiopia since 2018 and provides recommendations for measures to be taken to improve the situation of HRDs, safeguard civic space, and ensure accountability for the perpetrators of human rights violations.

The report is structured into three main sections. The first section provides an overview of civic space in Ethiopia prior to 2018, examining the situation of HRDs, the challenges they faced, and the restrictions on civil liberties during this period. The second section focuses on the reform measures introduced in the early period of Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed's administration, highlighting the positive changes aimed at fostering a more open and democratic society, and their implications for civic engagement and HRDs. The third section analyses the ongoing trends and patterns of human rights violations and harassment against HRDs. It scrutinises the current state of civic space and the persistent challenges faced by HRDs in Ethiopia.

¹⁷ ProtectDefenders.Eu, "Ethiopia: Harassment of human rights defenders", 9 February 2023, <https://protectdefenders.eu/ethiopia-harassment-of-human-rights-defenders/>; *The Reporter*, "The Case for Embracing Human Rights Defenders", 3 August 2024, <https://thereportermagazines.com/3088/>.

¹⁸ United States Department of State, *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Ethiopia*, Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2018, 2019, 2020, 2021, 2022 and 2023; Befekadu Dereba and Noah Yesuf (2023), *Annual Report: The Situation of Human Rights Defenders in Ethiopia 2021-2022*, EHRDC, <https://ethdefenders.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/Final-Annual-Report-on-situations-of-HRDs-2023.pdf>; EHRC, Public Statements and Annual Human Rights Situation Reports; CIVICUS, EHRDC, DefendDefenders, Submission to the UPR 4th Cycle, April 2024, <https://defenddefenders.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/Ethiopia-UPR-Report-.pdf>

¹⁹ BBC, አዋሽ አርባ፡ በኢትዮጵያ ከጅምላ እስር ጋር ስሙ የሚገኘው የብረሃው ጓንታናዎ", 24 January 2024, <https://www.bbc.com/amharic/articles/cyejgk207ero>; Ethiopia Observer, "Awash Arba: A site of unparalleled notoriety", 27 January 2024, <https://www.ethiopiaobserver.com/2024/01/27/awash-arba-a-site-of-unparalleled-notoriety/>.

I. Civic Space and the Situation of HRDs Before 2018

Recognising the critical role of HRDs in promoting and protecting human rights, as well as the significant risks they face, the UN General Assembly adopted a Declaration on HRDs in 1998.²⁰ In 2000, the UN Commission on Human Rights established the mandate of the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of HRDs, with the aim of enhancing their protection worldwide in full compliance with the 1998 Declaration.²¹ Over time, various stakeholders – including governments, intergovernmental bodies, civil society, and HRDs themselves – have developed a range of mechanisms and practices to protect HRDs at risk.²²

Ethiopia has ratified numerous international and regional human rights instruments, including the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights in 1993, and the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment in 1994. A substantial portion of its Federal Constitution is also devoted to the recognition of fundamental rights and freedoms.²³ However, Ethiopia has yet to ratify several important human rights instruments, such as the International Convention for Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearances and the Optional Protocol to the Convention Against Torture.²⁴

Civic space and the situation of HRDs in Ethiopia before 2018 can be divided into two distinct periods, with the 2005 general election serving as a key benchmark:

- Prior to the 2005 general election, Ethiopia maintained a relatively open civic space. While challenges existed, the prevailing legal framework enabled CSOs and HRDs to operate. Organisations such as the Ethiopian Human Rights Council (EHRCO), a member organisation of OMCT and FIDH, and the Association for the Promotion of the Rights of People (APAP) were legally registered and actively engaged in activities including documenting human rights violations and monitoring electoral processes nationwide.²⁵ This relatively permissive environment was fundamentally altered in the aftermath of the 2005 elections.
- The second period, referred to as the “darkest era for human rights CSOs and HRDs” by CSO leaders and HRDs in Ethiopia, lasted from 2005 to 2018. During this time, many CSOs and HRDs were forced to cease their human rights work or alter their mandates²⁶ due to repressive measures by the then-ruling EPRDF government, in response to their activities during the 2005 pre-election and election periods.²⁷

The 2005 general election marked a peak in democratic engagement in Ethiopia’s modern political history. This period was characterised by an open civic space where CSOs and HRDs played crucial roles. Leading up to the 2005 general election, there was unprecedented political competition. CSOs organised televised debates on public policy issues, engaged in extensive voter education, and sought legal permission to monitor the polls. They also mobilised the public and raised awareness about human rights issues, fuelling concerns within the ruling EPRDF about the potential loss of political power.²⁸

²⁰ UN Declaration on HRDs, op. cit.

²¹ UN-OHCHR, Commission on Human Rights resolution 2000/61, 26 April 2000.

²² Nah, A. M. (2020), *Protecting HRDs at Risk*, Routledge, pp. 3.

²³ The Federal Constitution Proclamation No. 1/1995.

²⁴ UN Treaty Body Database, Ratification Status for Ethiopia. https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/TreatyBodyExternal/Treaty.aspx?CountryID=59&Lang=EN

²⁵ Interview with Yared Hailemariam, founding director of EHRDC and one of the founders of the Association for Human Rights in Ethiopia (AHRE), 2 March 2025. He has over 25 years of experience in the human rights sector and was recently forced to leave his position at EHRDC due to persecution and pressure from the government.

²⁶ Amnesty International, “Ethiopia: The 2009 Charities and Societies Proclamation as a serious obstacle to the promotion and protection of human rights in Ethiopia”, Written statement to the 20th Session of the UN Human Rights Council (18 June -6 July 2012), June 2012, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/afr250072012en.pdf>

²⁷ The Observatory (2006), *Ethiopia: The Situation of Human Rights Defenders From Bad to Worse*, International Mission of Judicial Observation, <https://www.fidh.org/IMG/pdf/EthiopieObs463-2engnov2006.pdf>

²⁸ Interview with Yared Hailemariam, 2 March 2025.

However, once the official election results were announced, the trajectory of democratisation, civic space, and the situation for HRDs changed significantly. When the ruling EPRDF was declared the winner, the largest opposition coalition and national parties, such as the Coalition for Unity and Democracy and the United Ethiopian Democratic Front, refused to concede defeat, leading to public protests against the outcome. The EPRDF accused opposition parties of conspiring to overthrow the government through unconstitutional means and reacted with excessive force to disperse protesters across various regions of the country.²⁹ This standoff intensified over the following months, resulting in violence between protesters and security forces nationwide. In this atmosphere of heightened polarisation, government authorities blamed CSOs and HRDs, who had monitored the election and conducted voter education, for inciting unrest and violence.³⁰

During the initial phase of the crisis, until the EPRDF consolidated power, there were no legal restrictions on civic space and civil society. From the post-2005 general election until the enactment of the Charities and Societies Proclamation (CSP) in 2009, the focus of the government authorities was primarily on suppressing opposition protests and targeting opposition leaders, leaders of CSOs, and HRDs. Approximately 20,000 protesters and around 150 opposition leaders, human rights activists and journalists were arrested, leading to the shutdown of numerous independent newspapers and magazines.³¹ For denouncing human rights violations, two prominent HRDs, **Daniel Bekele**³² and **Netsanet Demisse**,³³ were among the first to be charged with conspiracy and incitement to overthrow the government, and in 2007, both were sentenced to two and a half years in prison.³⁴ Other HRDs, including members of EHRCO, were also harassed, arbitrarily detained and charged with the same offence.³⁵ Among them, **Yared Hailemariam**, was forced into exile until the “reform government” took power in 2018.³⁶

The second phase of Ethiopia’s crackdown on civic space and targeting of HRDs took place from 2009 to 2018, particularly in the lead-up to the 2010 general election. In an effort to prevent a repeat of the strong electoral competition and the active role of CSOs and HRDs witnessed in 2005, the government introduced a series of laws specifically aimed at curtailing activities that had facilitated widespread popular mobilisation during the previous election cycle. These laws targeted independent media publishing, civil society advocacy and monitoring, human rights work, free public debate, and opposition party coordination. Yared Hailemariam described the measures as “systemic suppression of the civic space and targeting of HRDs, practically with legal backing”.³⁷

Adoption of repressive legislation targeting civil society

Three major laws were enacted in 2008-2009 to suppress civic space and target HRDs. These were the Charities and Societies Proclamation (CSP),³⁸ the Mass Media and Freedom of Information Proclamation³⁹ and the Anti-Terrorism Proclamation.⁴⁰ These laws were designed to use incapacitation, silencing, and prosecution as tactical tools. Abiy Ahmed’s “reform government” was initially praised for repealing these laws, until it began to reverse its own reforms through new amendments.

The CSP was the first comprehensive law governing non-governmental organisations in Ethiopia. The law imposed several burdens on CSOs, most notably restricting human rights and democracy-related work to Ethiopian charities and societies which received at least 90 percent of their funding from

²⁹ The Observatory (2006), *Ethiopia: The Situation of Human Rights Defenders From Bad to Worse*, op. cit.

³⁰ Saskia Brechenmacher (2017), *Surveillance and State Control in Ethiopia*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

³¹ Simegnish Yekoye Mengesha, “Ethiopia Silencing Dissent”, *Journal of Democracy*, 27(1), January 2016, p. 90.

³² In 2005, Mr Daniel Bekele was member of the Executive Committee of the Network of Ethiopian NGOs and policy, research and advocacy manager for ActionAid Ethiopia, an international NGO dedicated to the fight against poverty.

³³ Founder of Organisation for Social Justice in Ethiopia (OSJE).

³⁴ Saskia Brechenmacher (2017), *Surveillance and State Control in Ethiopia*, op. cit, p. 68; Amnesty International, Urgent Action: Defending their lives: On Trial in Ethiopia, July 2004, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/act600142006en.pdf>

³⁵ Observatory for the protection of human rights defenders (2006), *Steadfast in protest*, Annual Report 2005, pp. 77-7, pp. 77-78, https://www.omct.org/files/2006/03/3380/obs_annual_report_2005_eng.pdf.

³⁶ Interview with Yared Hailemariam, 2 March 2025.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Charities and Societies Proclamation No. 621/2009.

³⁹ Mass Media and Freedom of Information Proclamation No. 590/2008.

⁴⁰ Anti-Terrorism Proclamation No. 652/2009.

domestic sources.⁴¹ The government justified this provision by claiming it was necessary to ensure that organisations working on political issues reflect an “Ethiopian character” and to prevent so-called “colour revolutionaries” from attempting to overthrow the regime, a notion seemingly borrowed from Russia.⁴² Due to a lack of domestic funding sources, Ethiopian NGOs had previously relied almost exclusively on external aid. They faced limited alternative options, as the Ethiopian government was unlikely to support any advocacy efforts or politically related programmes. Moreover, the proclamation restricts charities and societies from allocating more than 30 percent of their budget to administrative activities, while classifying a broad range of expenditures as administrative costs.⁴³

After the CSP came into force, human rights and democracy organisations faced a tough decision: either secure 90 percent of their funding from domestic sources while continuing their advocacy work, or register as resident charities and shift towards politically neutral projects. Due to a lack of domestic funding and restrictions on foreign support, many organisations halted their independent advocacy efforts. Only about 10 percent of the 125 then existing local rights groups reregistered under the new law.⁴⁴

Some organisations, including EHRCO, recognised as the oldest independent human rights organisation in Ethiopia, and the Ethiopian Women Lawyers Association (EWLA), chose to reregister under the conditions stipulated in the CSP but struggled with limited domestic funding, forcing them to scale back their efforts. The CSP imposed additional challenges, such as granting the Charities and Societies Agency the power to deny fundraising proposals and prohibiting anonymous donations, which put individual donors at risk of political repercussions.⁴⁵ This situation led to the freezing of bank accounts for organisations like EWLA,⁴⁶ which had to cut 70 percent of its staff and halt many of its programmes, providing only limited legal aid through volunteers. Meanwhile, EHRCO closed nine of its twelve offices due to staff exodus and increased government pressure.⁴⁷ To reregister, it was required to remove election observation and voter education tasks. Moreover, international organisations like Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, which could have supported domestic monitoring efforts, were barred from entering the country or certain regions.⁴⁸

Faced with criticisms and condemnation, the then Ethiopian government argued that human rights work in the country was carried out by the EHRC, established in 2000 with a mandate to promote and protect human rights.⁴⁹ However, by then, the Commission was struggling with limited technical and financial resources and had not published any reports on human rights violations. It also lacked independence as its leaders were affiliated with the ruling party, EPRDF. In addition, its findings had contradicted information reported by independent CSOs; for example, in 2016, it rejected claims that security forces had used excessive force against demonstrators, describing the government’s response as “proportionate”.⁵⁰

The 2008 Mass Media and Freedom of Information Proclamation also effectively silenced independent media, preventing it from serving as a source of information for the public. It granted prosecutors the authority to halt any print publication deemed a threat to national security or public order – a vague provision that left room for abuse.⁵¹ This law was used to target independent newspapers. Additionally, it criminalised defamation against legislative, executive, or judicial authorities and increased fines

⁴¹ Proc. No. 621/2009, Articles 2(2) and 14.

⁴² Saskia Brechenmacher (2017), *Surveillance and State Control in Ethiopia*, op. cit, p. 69.

⁴³ Proc. No. 621/2009, Article 88(1).

⁴⁴ Saskia Brechenmacher (2017), *Surveillance and State Control in Ethiopia*, op. cit, p. 76.

⁴⁵ Proc. No. 621/2009, Article 103(1).

⁴⁶ Center for International Human Rights (2009), *Sounding the Horn: Ethiopia’s civil society law threatens human rights defenders*, Northwestern University School of Law.

⁴⁷ Saskia Brechenmacher (2017), *Surveillance and State Control in Ethiopia*, op. cit., pp. 76-77.

⁴⁸ Human Rights Watch, “Ethiopia: New Law Ratchets up Repression Government Outlaws Most Human Rights Work, Imprisons Opposition Leaders”, 6 January 2009, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2009/01/08/ethiopia-new-law-ratchets-repression#:~:text=Because%20Ethiopia%20is%20one%20of,society%20activity%20or%20peaceful%20dissent>.

⁴⁹ Establishment of the Human Rights Commission Proclamation No. 210/2000.

⁵⁰ US Department of State (2016), Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Ethiopia, <https://www.state.gov/reports/2016-country-reports-on-human-rights-practices/ethiopia/#:~:text=and%20unlawful%20killings,-Security%20forces%20used%20excessive%20force%20against%20protesters%20throughout%20the%20year,were%20killed%20in%20Amhara%20Region>.

⁵¹ Proc. No. 590/2008, Article 42.

for such defamation.⁵² The government relied on its complete control of the media and information sources to construct its narratives and cast pro-democracy movements and human rights activists as terrorists and foreign agents, tapping into popular fears of Islamic radicalism, foreign intervention, and ethnic strife.

The 2009 Anti-Terrorism Proclamation, coupled with a judiciary lacking independence, created a framework conducive to the targeting and arbitrary prosecution of HRDs. Its broad definitions of terrorist activities allowed authorities to imprison journalists for reporting on protest movements or expressing views deemed supportive of groups labelled as terrorist.⁵³ Human rights advocates also faced prosecution for allegedly supporting terrorism. The legislation was invoked against opposition politicians, activists, and journalists, often without any credible evidence of any support for terrorist groups. Judicial proceedings were used to selectively intimidate and silence high-profile activists, reporters, and civil society leaders, often based on alleged threats to national security. For instance, in 2009-2010, charges were brought against 31 individuals under the anti-terrorism law, and between 2011 and 2017, approximately 123 charges involving 985 individuals were instituted.⁵⁴ The instrumentalisation of anti-terrorism legislation to curb human rights has been denounced by regional and international human rights mechanisms.⁵⁵

One of the victims of this persecution was **Befekadu Hailu**, an HRD and blogger, who served as founding Director of the Centre for Advancement of Rights and Democracy (CARD). His arbitrary detention was recognised by the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention.⁵⁶ He recounted:

“As one of the founders of the Zone 9 Bloggers and Activists group, I championed freedom of speech with my colleagues and was persecuted for it – having been detained four times and spending 596 days combined in prison without any court convictions.”⁵⁷

The closure of civic space, along with the prosecution of HRDs, was later recognised by the so-called “reform government” led by Abiy Ahmed. In his inaugural address, on 2 April 2018, Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed emphasised the importance of democracy, freedom, and respect for human rights for the Ethiopian people, specifically highlighting the need for freedom of expression, assembly, and organisation.⁵⁸ He acknowledged the repressive nature of the previous administration and formally apologised to the victims of state aggression while inviting exiled Ethiopians to return home. However, he did not address the issue of accountability for the perpetrators of past human rights violations, signalling a continuation of the culture of impunity. Moreover, the initial commitments to create an enabling environment for human rights work proved short-lived.

⁵² Ibid, Articles 43(7) and 41(2).

⁵³ UN News, “Ethiopia’s anti-terrorism laws must not be misused to curb rights – UN”, 2 February 2012, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2012/02/402102>; Civil Rights Defenders, “Call to release the Zone 9 Bloggers and Journalists”, 25 July 2014, <https://crd.org/2014/07/25/call-to-release-the-zone-9-bloggers-and-journalists/>; FIDH et al., “Ethiopia: End use of counter-terrorism law to persecute dissenters and opposition members”, 2 June 2016, <https://www.fidh.org/en/region/Africa/ethiopia/ethiopia-end-use-of-counter-terrorism-law-to-persecute-dissenters-and>; Amnesty International, “Ethiopia: Concerns that Anti-Terrorism law is being used to suppress freedom of expression”, 1 July 2011, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/afr250052011en.pdf>; Human Rights Watch (2015), “Journalism Is Not a Crime” *Violations of Media Freedoms in Ethiopia*, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2015/01/21/journalism-not-crime/violations-media-freedoms-ethiopia>; Amnesty International, “Ethiopia: Government continues to target peaceful Muslim protest movement”, 2 November 2012, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/afr250162012en.pdf>.

⁵⁴ Zelalem Kibret (2017), “The terrorism of ‘counterterrorism’: The use and abuse of anti-terrorism law, the case of Ethiopia”, *European Scientific Journal*, 13(13), pp. 504-539; United States Department of State (2011), *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Ethiopia*.

⁵⁵ OHCHR, Press release, “UN experts urge Ethiopia to stop using anti-terrorism legislation to curb human rights”, 18 September 2014, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2014/09/un-experts-urge-ethiopia-stop-using-anti-terrorism-legislation-curb-human?LangID=E&NewsID=15056>; African Commission on Human and People’s Rights, Resolution on the human rights situation in Ethiopia, ACHPR/Res.218 (LI) 2012, 2 May 2012; UN Committee Against Torture, Concluding observations on Ethiopia, 20 January 2011, op. cit, para. 14.

⁵⁶ UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention, Opinion No. 10/2016 concerning Befekadu Hailu, Zelalem Kibret, Atnaf Berhane, Natnail Feleke, Mahlet Fantahun, Abel Wabella, Tesfalem Waldyes, Asmamaw Hailegiorgis and Edom Kassaye (Ethiopia), 14 June 2016, A/HRC/WGAD/2016/10, <https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/gen/g16/120/60/pdf/g1612060.pdf>.

⁵⁷ Interview with Befekadu Hailu, 17 March 2025.

⁵⁸ OPride, “Full English Transcript of Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed’s Inaugural Address”, 3 April 2018, <https://www.opride.com/2018/04/03/english-partial-transcript-of-ethiopian-prime-minister-abiy-ahmeds-inaugural-address/>.

II. Short-lived Wave of Reforms: 2018-2020

Mass protests, which would ultimately lead to change in leadership, erupted in the Oromia region in 2015, in opposition to the Addis Ababa Masterplan (a government plan to extend the capital Addis Ababa's administrative control into parts of the Oromia), and spread to the Amhara region in 2016.⁵⁹ Protesters raised concerns about security force abuses, the government's approach to development, the unequal distribution of political power and economic benefits and called for the release of political prisoners and greater fulfilment of political and socioeconomic rights.

The anti-government protests led to the incumbent government taking several significant measures, including the release of political prisoners and the closure of notorious torture centres. In December 2017, then Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn announced the release of over 6,000 political prisoners and transformation of the infamous *Maekelawi* torture centre into a state-of-the-art museum.⁶⁰ Among those released was Eskinder Nega, a well-known journalist and HRD, now leading one faction of the Fano militia group, along with various opposition leaders.⁶¹ In addition, charges were dropped against many HRDs and critics of the government, including **Befekadu Hailu** and **Natnael Feleke** of the website Zone 9, who had been arrested four years earlier.⁶²

The leadership change culminated in the appointment of Abiy Ahmed as Prime Minister, marking a significant political shift in the country's history. As a member of Ethiopia's ethnic majority, the Oromo, his rise carried particular symbolic significance: the Oromia region had been the epicentre of the mass protests against the government dominated by the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), with demonstrators demanding political inclusion, justice, and equality. Abiy Ahmed's appointment was thus seen as a response to popular unrest and an opportunity to address long-standing grievances and promote national reconciliation.

Against this backdrop, several progressive institutional and legal reforms were implemented to open civic space and create a conducive environment for human rights work. In particular, democratic institutions such as the EHRC and the NEBE, as well as the federal judiciary, were reformed. Amendments to their administration proclamations enhanced their independence and protected them from undue executive influence and interference. This change also enabled former HRDs and human rights activists to assume leadership roles within these institutions.

Echoing the sentiments of almost all those interviewed, one HRD, who wished to remain anonymous, stated:

"The appointment of Daniel Bekele to lead the EHRC – a body that previously covered up human rights violations before 2018 – along with Britukan Midekesa to the NEBE, which used to ensure the ruling party's electoral victories, and Meaza Ashenafi as the Chief Justice of the Federal Supreme Court – an institution accused and known for selectively prosecuting and imprisoning HRDs, activists, journalists, and opposition figures – was a significant but short-lived step."⁶³

⁵⁹ Amnesty International, "Ethiopia: After a year of protests, time to address grave human rights concerns", 9 November 2016, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/press-release/2016/11/ethiopia-after-a-year-of-protests-time-to-address-grave-human-rights-concerns/>; OHCHR, "Ethiopia: UN experts call for international commission to help investigate systematic violence against protesters", 10 October 2016, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/2016/10/ethiopia-un-experts-call-international-commission-help-investigate-systematic-violence>; AlJazeera, "Ethiopia: Mass protests rooted in country's history", 20 February 2018, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/2/20/ethiopia-mass-protests-rooted-in-countrys-history>.

⁶⁰ World Peace Foundation, "Ethiopia's new prison memorial museum?", 16 January 2018, <https://worldpeacefoundation.org/blog/ethiopias-new-prison-memorial-museum/>; BBC, Ethiopia to release political prisoners, says prime minister, 3 January 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-42552643>.

⁶¹ Mohammed Ademo, "The Many Layers of the Ethiopia Crisis", Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 20 March 2018, <https://reliefweb.int/report/ethiopia/many-layers-ethiopia-crisis#:~:text=More%20than%206%2C000%20political%20prisoners%2C%20including%20key,wanted%20to%20pave%20the%20way%20for%20reforms>.

⁶² DW, "Ethiopia releases high profile political prisoners", 14 February 2018, <https://www.dw.com/en/ethiopia-releases-high-profile-political-prisoners/a-42590273>.

⁶³ Interview with 01, 28 March 2025.

Shortly after Abiy Ahmed was appointed in April 2018, a Legal and Justice Affairs Advisory Council was established to provide guidance on reforming Ethiopia's legal and judicial systems. Notable revisions affecting civic space and human rights work, as confirmed by those interviewed, included changes to electoral laws, civil society laws, terrorism laws, and media laws.

Electoral law reforms introduced modifications to the appointment process for NEBE board members. Public nomination was introduced for candidate selection, and a relatively independent committee was formed, comprising members of the Inter-Religious Council of Ethiopia, the EHRC, representatives of CSOs, and other non-political institutions.⁶⁴ This committee was tasked with proposing candidates to the Prime Minister, who was required to consult with representatives of registered political parties before recommending nominees from the received list. The revised law also limited the grounds for the removal of board members to illness, incompetency and serious misconduct.⁶⁵ It ensured the financial autonomy of the board by allowing it to submit its budget request to Parliament without executive scrutiny.⁶⁶

Another significant achievement in creating a more open civic space and fostering a conducive environment for human rights work was the repeal of the 2009 CSP. The new 2019 CSP simplified formation requirements, expanded access to resources, and limited government intervention in the internal affairs of CSOs. As a result, numerous CSOs were formed and registered. As of July 2021, a total of 2,953 CSOs had been registered by the Agency for Civil Society Organisations (ACSO) in Ethiopia.⁶⁷ Of these, 2,460 were local organisations, while 422 were foreign-founded CSOs.⁶⁸ In addition, 61 consortiums and ten committees were registered. Interviewees consistently affirmed that the opening up of the civic space in the earlier years of the "reform government" and the repeal of the repressive 2009 CSP encouraged them to engage in or continue their work in the field of human rights. Befekadu Hailu stated:

"The previous laws enacted in 2009 severely restricted freedom of expression. Journalists, activists, and dissidents were imprisoned, and the majority of the public was silenced under those laws. However, the political reforms in 2018 and the legal reforms in 2019 briefly alleviated the climate of fear and reduced the use of laws for repression. As a result, I was able to cofound and serve as the founding director of the CARD, a human rights organisation established in July 2019."⁶⁹

Yared Hailemariam, who had gone into exile following the 2005 elections due to his human rights and election monitoring work, returned to Ethiopia in response to Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed's call. He stated:

"Under the 2019 CSP, I successfully registered the organisation I founded with my colleagues while in exile: the Association for Human Rights in Ethiopia (AHRE). This organisation was created to fill the gap in human rights work and advocacy that arose following the repressive 2009 CSP. Additionally, I established another organisation focused on advocacy, protection, and capacity building of HRDs in Ethiopia – the Ethiopian Human Rights Defenders Centre (EHRDC). While the 2019 civil society law is generally supportive, it does have a few limitations. The regulatory body, the ACSO, was cooperative by then."⁷⁰

⁶⁴ National Electoral Board of Ethiopia Establishment Proclamation No. 1133/2019, Article 5.

⁶⁵ Ibid, Article 13(2).

⁶⁶ Ibid, Article 25.

⁶⁷ International Center for Not-For-Profit Law, *Civic Freedom Monitor: Ethiopia*, <https://www.icnl.org/resources/civic-freedom-monitor/ethiopia> (accessed on 10 April 2025).

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Interview with Befekadu Hailu, 17 March 2025.

⁷⁰ Interview with Yared Hailemariam, 2 March 2025.

Additionally, interviewees from EHRCO and EWLA confirmed that both organisations had regained access to the funds frozen under the 2009 CSP and had been able to secure new funding, enabling them to expand their thematic focus and geographic coverage under the 2019 CSP.⁷¹

A further significant legal reform was the revision of the anti-terrorism law.⁷² The previous anti-terrorism law faced widespread criticism for being used to suppress and punish political dissidents, human rights activists, and journalists. In a parliamentary briefing on 19 June 2018, Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed explicitly acknowledged that security institutions had previously engaged in torture and acts that could be labelled as “terrorist acts”, highlighting the need to reform the anti-terrorism law.⁷³ The amended proclamation recognised that the former law had substantial enforcement loopholes that adversely affected citizens’ rights and freedoms.⁷⁴

The revision addressed the overly broad definition of terrorism, under which non-violent protests that typically fall within the scope of freedom of expression – such as organising rallies and publishing critical comments – could easily be classified as terrorism.⁷⁵ It also addressed the severe, flat-rate punishments, the prohibition of bail rights, and the admissibility of hearsay evidence and intelligence reports.

The media law reform was also aimed at opening civic space in Ethiopia post-2018.⁷⁶ This reform focused on two main aspects: ensuring the independence of the regulatory authority, and improving governance of mass media and access to information. The management board of the Ethiopian Media Authority is required to be non-affiliated with any political organisation and accountable to Parliament.⁷⁷ The revised law addressed provisions from the previous legislation that had a chilling effect on freedom of expression and were criticised for vaguely and broadly criminalising acts, such as incitement of unlawful actions, dissemination of false information, defamation, and hate speech.⁷⁸ Importantly, it decriminalised defamation, including against members of the legislative, executive, or judicial branches of government. Under the new framework, defamation only results in civil liability, with maximum monetary compensation reduced by more than two thirds, from 1 million Ethiopian Birr to 300,000 Ethiopian Birr.⁷⁹

The reform led to an increase in the number of media outlets in Ethiopia and allowed previously prohibited media to operate again. Interviewed journalists revealed that media liberalisation occurred before the repeal of the previous restrictive media law. They confirmed that they were able to write and broadcast about matters related to conflict and human rights abuses and even criticism of the government. By 2022, there were a total of 117 public and commercial electronic media outlets. This included 67 public and 50 commercial radio stations and television channels. Among these, 39 were television channels and 78 were radio stations.⁸⁰

Print media included 18 privately owned commercial newspapers and magazines, as well as 11 state-owned publications in circulation. Additionally, the number of registered community broadcasters reached 56, which included five television broadcasters. However, only 33 radio community broadcasters and two television community broadcasters were operational. There were also 34 registered digital media outlets in the country.⁸¹ Notably, media outlets that previously operated from abroad, such as Ethiopian Satellite Television and Radio (ESAT) and Oromia Media Network (OMN), which had been barred from broadcasting in Ethiopia, were able to resume operations within the country. This contributed to enabling public expression of dissenting voices and broadcast of information from human rights situation reports compiled by human rights organisations.

⁷¹ Interviews with 02, 14 and Dan Yirga, 16 March 2025.

⁷² Prevention and Suppression of Terrorism Crimes Proclamation No. 1176/2020.

⁷³ *AlJazeera*, “Ethiopia PM: Security agencies committed ‘terrorist acts’”, 19 June 2018, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/6/19/ethiopia-pm-security-agencies-committed-terrorist-acts>

⁷⁴ Proc. No. 1176/2020, Preamble.

⁷⁵ *Ibid*, Article 4.

⁷⁶ Media Proclamation No. 1238/2021.

⁷⁷ *Ibid*, Article 4.

⁷⁸ *Ibid*, Article 84.

⁷⁹ *Ibid*, Article 84(2).

⁸⁰ CARD (2022), *Post-2018 Media Landscape in Ethiopia: A Review*, p. V.

⁸¹ *Ibid*.

Reform measures aimed at achieving peace and ending hostilities with Eritrea led to Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed receiving the Nobel Peace Prize in 2019. However, the durability of these advances proved questionable. They began to unravel amid rising ethnic tensions, the outbreak of the Tigray war in November 2020, and ongoing conflicts in the Amhara region and parts of Oromia. Consequently, civic space has steadily contracted, and HRDs have faced increased targeting and persecution. The following section elucidates the trends and characteristics of the repression of HRDs, the curtailment of civic space, the reversal of reform achievements, and the effective return to the pre-2018 situation in the country.

III. Repression of Human Rights Organisations and HRDs: 2020 onwards

A. Demonisation of human rights defenders and organisations: a paradigm shift

Despite political and legal reforms, restrictions on civic space and the situation of HRDs remain dire, and political violence continues. After initially relying on HRDs and emblematic figures to lend legitimacy to the newly established administration, Abiy Ahmed's government shifted course from 2020 onwards, targeting those same actors. The establishment of the Prosperity Party in late 2019 – following the dismantling of the EPRDF – allowed the government to consolidate power while sidelining the TPLF from the political landscape. This restructuring, combined with the widespread protests and violence that erupted after the assassination of Oromo singer and activist Hachalu Hundessa in June 2020, significantly heightened political tensions across the country. The situation further deteriorated with the outbreak of the Tigray conflict in November 2020, which marked a decisive turning point, undermining Ethiopia's democratic trajectory. Together, these developments precipitated a sharp crackdown on civic space and CSOs, reversing the earlier reformist gains and signalling the government's growing intolerance of dissent. Human rights organisations have been subjected to systematic restrictions, while prominent HRDs have faced harassment, threats, attacks, and, in many cases, forced exile. The government does not tolerate any type of protest or peaceful demonstration unless they are pro-government. The use of excessive force to suppress protests and peaceful demonstrations has spread fear among the population and limited opportunities for exercising rights. In the few instances where protests have taken place, excessive use of force by state officials has resulted in loss of life.⁸² The narrowing of civic space and attacks on HRDs are not random occurrences; they are part of a publicly acknowledged policy designed and applied by the government itself. This is apparent from remarks made by high-ranking officials, including Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed.

For instance, Alemu Sime, then coordinator of the Democracy Building Center in the Prime Minister's Office, issued an official warning to CSOs that attempted to call for peace.⁸³ On 6 September 2022, 35 local CSOs urged an immediate end to the conflict in Tigray, Amhara, and Afar regions, as well as other affected areas.⁸⁴ Just three days later, during a meeting with representatives from over 100 CSOs, the Minister criticised their "urgent call for peace",⁸⁵ arguing that it failed to acknowledge the dangers facing the country and did not address the destruction caused by the TPLF. He expressed the government's dissatisfaction and irritation with the CSOs' statement, insisting that these organisations should focus solely on their designated tasks and refrain from commenting on current issues. He stated, "We will not allow it", and there is no "tolerance" for those who issue "statements that

⁸² ACLED, "Change and Continuity in Protests and Political Violence PM Abiy's Ethiopia", 13 October 2018, <https://reliefweb.int/report-ethiopia/change-and-continuity-protests-and-political-violence-pm-abiy-s-ethiopia>.

⁸³ Amnesty International (2023), *Report 2022/23: The State of the World's Human Rights*, Ethiopia, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/WEBPOL1056702023ENGLISH.pdf>, p. 164.

⁸⁴ CARD, "Urgent Call for Peace!", 6 September 2022, <https://www.cardeth.org/urgent-call-for-peace>.

⁸⁵ UMD Media, "Ethiopian Minister warns representatives of local Civil Society Organizations for their recently issued 'urgent call for peace' statement, Wazema Radio reported", 10 September 2022, <https://umdmmedia.com/ethiopian-minister-warns-representatives-of-local-civil-society-organizations-for-their-recently-issued-urgent-call-for-peace-statement/>.

demoralise the fighting Defence”.⁸⁶ The Minister further objected to the CSOs’ reference to “warring parties”, questioning how the government could be compared to a group intent on “disintegrat[ing]” the country. He continued:

“At this time, we don’t want anything to divide our force. If you don’t have the morale to support us, if you don’t have the will, keep quiet. Just do the work for which you have taken permits... If there is any CSO that says, “the survival of the country is none of my business”, its permit should be revoked.”

The Minister added that the government “regretted” the CSOs’ attempt to present themselves as neutral on the issue of the war, arguing that “the issue is not a political agenda or a difference in the party’s political programme, rather it is a conspiracy by the enemies of Ethiopia with their internal allies to weaken and destroy our country”.⁸⁷

A second example of this systemic state attack on civic space and HRDs can be observed in the briefing delivered on 2 November 2023 by the federal Minister of Communication, Legesse Tulu, regarding the conflict situation in the Amhara region, when he criticised the EHRC’s work and accused the institution of relying on incorrect information and being infiltrated by foreign agents. He stated:

“The government is making every effort to build independent institutions in Ethiopia, and one example of this is the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission. Such human rights institutions should be free and independent, not only from executive bodies but also from foreign influences and domestic destructive groups. The statement from the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission is based on incorrect information and lacks impartiality, having been infiltrated by foreign agents and domestic infiltrators. Therefore, all reports submitted by such institutions should not be regarded as independent and neutral.”⁸⁸

Finally, Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed’s unsubstantiated remarks about human rights institutions and HRDs during his address to Parliament on 4 July 2024, indicate the state-designed and systemic nature of the attacks on civic space and HRDs.⁸⁹

These recent accusations, attacks and the suspension by the government of human rights organisations including CARD, LHR, AHRE, EHRCO and EHRDC are discussed in detail below. A further development contributing to the shrinking civic space is the leadership change at the EHRC. The new Chief Commissioner is a long-serving political figure who previously held a cabinet position and served on the executive committee of the EPRDF during the late Meles Zenawi⁹⁰ period.⁹¹

Interviewees from the EHRC who wished to remain anonymous revealed that this shift has significantly impacted its operations. They stated:

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ ENA, “Life in Amhara Region Returning to Normalcy, Rights Commission Report Lopsided”, 2 November 2023, https://www.ena.et/web/eng/w/eng_3529837; Borkena, “Ethiopian gov’t accuses Human Rights Commission over recent report”, 2 November 2023, <https://borkena.com/2023/11/02/ethiopian-govt-accuses-human-rights-commission-over-recent-report/>.

⁸⁹ Sisay Sahlu, “Outgoing Human Rights Commissioner rejects PM’s political motive allegations”, *The Reporter*, 6 July 2024, <https://www.thereporterethiopia.com/40953/>.

⁹⁰ Meles Zenawi led the EPRDF from 1991 until his death in 2012. Under his leadership, the EPRDF maintained a tight grip on power, and the government was often criticised for its authoritarian practices, including suppression of political opposition and restrictions on civil liberties.

⁹¹ Sisay Sahlu, “Critics air doubts about political affiliation following Berhanu Adelo’s EHRC appointment”, *The Reporter*,

1 February 2025, <https://www.thereporterethiopia.com/43571/>.

“The five years of effort to establish an independent national human rights institution have been undermined. Since the new chief took over, the commission has been directed to focus on promoting human rights and education, while its monitoring and investigative functions have been severely limited. Furthermore, the ability to make investigation reports public has drastically decreased. There hasn’t been any major public output about the human rights investigations made so far. The Chief Commissioner held back the quarterly human rights situation report. This situation, disagreements and the government’s reduction of salary of the Commissioners have forced the Deputy Chief Commissioner and one of the thematic Commissioners to submit resignation before their terms came to an end.”⁹²

This situation illustrates a systematic and well-designed government strategy to reverse earlier institutional reforms. The government, through its prime minister, as quoted above, has also officially declared its intention to reform the progressive laws related to human rights institutions. As a new tactic to silence HRDs, in 2025 the government began suspending CSOs that focus on human rights issues.⁹³ As discussed in the next section, the government has drafted an amendment bill to the CSO law that restricts their functioning and empowers the government to exercise excessive control over them.

B. Disregard for United Nations bodies’ recommendations on HRDs and civic space

The actions of the Ethiopian government disregard the calls and recommendations issued by international human rights mechanisms. In particular, in 2022, the United Nations Human Rights Committee (HRC), in its concluding observations on Ethiopia’s second periodic report,⁹⁴ expressed concern about the continued harassment, attacks, arbitrary arrests, and detention of journalists, HRDs, government critics, and activists. The Committee noted the state’s use of the criminal provisions in Proclamation No. 71176/2020 on the Prevention and Suppression of Terrorism Crimes, and Proclamation No. 1185/2020 on the Prevention and Suppression of Hate Speech and Disinformation, to suppress dissenting opinions and critical reporting. The Committee recommended that the state protect individuals from such violations, hold perpetrators accountable, and review and revise the vague terminology and overly broad restrictions on freedom of expression contained in these laws.

A year later, in 2023, the CAT reaffirmed the HRC’s observations,⁹⁵ noting the absence of any improvements and the worsening of the human rights situation. The Committee issued recommendations identical to those of the HRC and expressed deep concern about allegations of reprisals against HRDs who engaged with the UN body on behalf of Ethiopian civil society during the consideration of the State Party’s second periodic report.

In 2024, during the fourth cycle of the Universal Periodic Review (UPR),⁹⁶ dozens of countries reiterated their recommendations regarding the protection of HRDs in Ethiopia against attacks, harassment, and undue interference. They called for the release of detained individuals, the ending of practices of arrest, detention, and prosecution of HRDs, the creation of an enabling environment for their work, and investigations into allegations of attacks against them. In total, Ethiopia received 14 recommendations

⁹² Interviews with 05 and 08, 13 April 2025 and 10 July 2025.

⁹³ OMCT et al., “Ethiopia: Arbitrary suspension of human rights organisations in Ethiopia is a major setback to civic space”, 28 November 2024, <https://www.omct.org/en/resources/statements/ethiopia-arbitrary-suspension-of-human-rights-organisations-in-ethiopia-is-a-major-setback-to-civic-space>; OMCT et al., “Ethiopia: Defend and Strengthen the Human Rights Movement Against Erosion!”, 13 January 2025, <https://www.omct.org/en/resources/statements/ethiopia-defend-and-strengthen-the-human-rights-movement-against-erosion>; EHR, “Lifting of the Suspension of Four Civil Society Organizations”, 3 March 2025, [https://ehrc.org/lifting-of-the-suspension-of-four-civil-society-organizations/#:~:text=While%20the%20suspension%20of%20all%20three%20CSOs,the%20Ethiopian%20Human%20Rights%20Defenders%20Center%20\(EHRDC\),&text=EHR%20is%20pleased%20at%20its%20advocacy%20efforts,by%20ACSO%20as%20of%20March%2003%2C%202025](https://ehrc.org/lifting-of-the-suspension-of-four-civil-society-organizations/#:~:text=While%20the%20suspension%20of%20all%20three%20CSOs,the%20Ethiopian%20Human%20Rights%20Defenders%20Center%20(EHRDC),&text=EHR%20is%20pleased%20at%20its%20advocacy%20efforts,by%20ACSO%20as%20of%20March%2003%2C%202025).

⁹⁴ Human Rights Committee, Concluding observations on the second periodic report of Ethiopia, 7 December 2022, CCPR/C/ETH/CO/2, <https://docs.un.org/en/CCPR/C/ETH/CO/2>.

⁹⁵ CAT, Concluding observations on the second periodic report of Ethiopia, 7 June 2023, op. cit.

⁹⁶ Human Rights Council, Report of the Working Group on the Universal Periodic Review: Ethiopia, 18 December 2024, <https://docs.un.org/en/A/HRC/58/15>.

on civic space and human rights defenders, of which it accepted only 5 and noted 9.⁹⁷ The recommendations noted were the more robust ones, calling for legal and institutional reforms such as repealing restrictive laws, amending the Civil Society Proclamation, and adopting binding guarantees for the protection of human rights defenders. In contrast, the accepted recommendations were more general in nature, focusing on practical measures to protect journalists, civil society, and defenders, and on respecting freedoms already recognised. This indicates a reluctance to commit to structural legal change that would permanently open civic space, while opting instead for more flexible, non-binding commitments that preserve broad state discretion.

In addition to disregarding the recommendations of UN bodies, Ethiopian authorities also actively worked to undermine the mandate of UN investigative mechanisms, such as the International Commission of Human Rights Experts on Ethiopia (ICHREE). Established by the UN Human Rights Council in December 2021 under Resolution S-33/1, the ICHREE was mandated to investigate conflict-related violations of international human rights, humanitarian, and refugee law since November 2020 by all parties in Ethiopia, and provide transitional justice and accountability guidance.⁹⁸ The Ethiopian authorities refused to cooperate with ICHREE investigators or grant them access to conflict-affected areas, and dismissed its findings of crimes against humanity as biased, unsubstantiated and politically motivated.⁹⁹ Ethiopia's efforts to end the commission's operations, including by introducing resolutions at the UN General Assembly to block its funding,¹⁰⁰ eventually resulted in the early termination of the mandate in 2023. This removed an independent check on broader human rights issues, including emerging restrictions on civil society, journalists, and activists, which had been denounced by the ICHREE chairperson.¹⁰¹ Indeed, although the ICHREE's mandate did not include civic space issues per se, its work covered documentation of mass detentions and restrictions on freedom of movement and freedom of assembly, especially under emergency laws.

On 9 September 2025, the European Union, on behalf of 42 countries, delivered a joint statement to the UN expressing concern about the human rights situation in Ethiopia. The statement highlighted, among other issues, restrictions on freedom of expression and assembly and the closure of civic space.¹⁰² In a statement published on 18 April 2025, the UN Special Rapporteurs on the situation of human rights defenders and on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association expressed concern about the "alarming rise" in cases of suspension of human rights CSOs.¹⁰³

The Ethiopian government's persistent disregard for recommendations from international human rights mechanisms and its attacks on civic space and HRDs are not sudden developments. As explained by Yared Hailemariam:

⁹⁷ Human Rights Council, Report of the Working Group on the Universal Periodic Review: Ethiopia, Addendum, Views on conclusions and/or recommendations, voluntary commitments and replies presented by the State under review, 18 February 2025, <https://docs.un.org/en/A/HRC/58/15/Add.1>.

⁹⁸ Human Rights Council, Situation of human rights in Ethiopia, Resolution S-33/1, A/HRC/RES/S-33/1, 17 December 2021.

⁹⁹ UN Geneva, International Commission of Human Rights Experts on Ethiopia Finds Reasonable Grounds to Believe that the Federal Government Has Committed Crimes against Humanity in Tigray Region and that Tigrayan Forces Have Committed Serious Human Rights Abuses, Some Amounting to War Crimes, 22 September 2022, <https://www.ungeneva.org/en/news-media/meeting-summary/2022/09/le-conseil-est-informe-quil-y-des-motifs-raisonnables-de-croire>.

¹⁰⁰ *Addis Standard*, Ethiopia loses second attempt to defund resources for UN rights experts, 31 December 2022, https://addisstandard.com/news-ethiopia-loses-second-attempt-to-defund-resources-for-un-rights-experts/#google_vignette.

¹⁰¹ Statement of the Chairperson of the ICHREE at the 78th Session of the UN General Assembly, Third Committee, 25 October 2023, <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/hrbodies/hrcouncil/chreethiopia/ichree-oral-stm-unga.pdf>.

¹⁰² Delegation of the European Union to the UN and other international organisations in Geneva, Joint Statement on the human rights situation in Ethiopia, United Nations Human Rights Council, 60th session, General Debate Item 2, 9 September 2025, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/delegations/un-geneva/joint-statement-hrc60-general-debate-item-2-joint-statement-human-rights-situation-ethiopia_en.

¹⁰³ UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights Defenders and UN Special Rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association, Ethiopia: alarming rise in the cases of suspension of civil society organizations at the end of 2024, Joint Communication, 13 February 2025, <https://srdefenders.org/ethiopia-alarming-rise-in-the-cases-of-suspension-of-civil-society-organizations-at-the-end-of-2024-joint-communication/>.

“The current attack on civic space and HRDs is largely related to the upcoming 2026 general elections and the transitional justice process that the country has initiated. The government understands the significant role that vibrant CSOs and HRDs can play during elections and in the transitional justice process. They are crucial for voter education, election observation, and monitoring – roles that were highlighted during the 2005 elections. Furthermore, CSOs have been actively involved in the transitional justice process, particularly by focusing on victim-centred approaches, raising public awareness, and documenting violations to hold perpetrators accountable and address victims’ needs.

These efforts are not welcomed by the government, as CSOs and HRDs may criticise the implementation of the transitional justice process and advocate for the prosecution of government officials involved in violations. Consequently, the ongoing attacks on civic space and HRDs aim to silence advocacy and monitoring efforts related to the general elections and the transitional justice process.¹⁰⁴”

C. State of Emergency used to quash dissent

Information gathered through questionnaires and interviews indicates that attacks on civic space and HRDs intensify during periods of state of emergency (SOE). Since 2020, Ethiopia has declared successive SOEs in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, escalating armed conflicts, and widespread insecurity. Although the declaration of emergencies is permitted under Article 93 of the Ethiopian Constitution, the measures adopted have consistently gone far beyond what is strictly necessary, restricting core rights and undermining the work of human rights defenders. SOE proclamations have granted authorities sweeping powers to ban assemblies, censor speech, conduct warrantless arrests, and detain individuals without charge. In practice, these powers have been used not only against armed actors but also to silence critics and close civic space. Lawyers and journalists, including **Elizabeth Kebede** and **Yayesew Shimelis** during the 2020 COVID-19 SOE,¹⁰⁵ and numerous independent reporters and opposition figures during the 2021¹⁰⁶ and 2023 SOEs,¹⁰⁷ were harassed, detained, or prosecuted solely for carrying out their professional duties. During the Tigray war, a nationwide state of emergency was declared from November 2021 to February 2022, despite the conflict being largely confined to the northern part of the country. This period saw a targeting of journalists, HRDs, and activists of Tigrayan origin, as well as those calling for peace, through arbitrary arrests.¹⁰⁸ The nationwide state of emergency declared in relation to the armed conflict with the Fano militia in the Amhara region (from August 2023 to June 2024) also targeted HRDs, journalists, and activists of Amhara origin.¹⁰⁹ This pattern indicates that, rather than being exceptional, time-bound responses to genuine crises, SOEs in Ethiopia have evolved into recurring governance tools that disproportionately target HRDs and erode fundamental freedoms.

¹⁰⁴ Interview with Yared Hailemariam, 2 March 2025.

¹⁰⁵ Human Rights Watch, “Ethiopia: Free Speech at Risk Amid Covid-19”, 6 May 2020, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/05/06/ethiopia-free-speech-risk-amid-covid-19>

¹⁰⁶ Amnesty International, “Ethiopia: End arbitrary detentions of Tigrayans, activists and journalists in Addis Ababa and reveal whereabouts of unaccounted detainees”, 16 July 2021, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/press-release/2021/07/ethiopia-end-arbitrary-detentions-of-tigrayans-activists-and-journalists-in-addis-ababa-and-reveal-whereabouts-of-unaccounted-detainees/>.

¹⁰⁷ Amnesty International, “Ethiopia: Authorities must stop using state of emergency law to silence peaceful dissent”, 19 February 2024, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2024/02/ethiopia-authorities-must-stop-using-state-of-emergency-law-to-silence-peaceful-dissent/>.

¹⁰⁸ Amnesty International, “Ethiopia: End arbitrary detentions of Tigrayans, activists and journalists in Addis Ababa and reveal whereabouts of unaccounted detainees”, op. cit.

¹⁰⁹ EHRG, “በአስቸኳይ ጊዜ ሁኔታ አዋጅ አተገባበር ጋር ተያይዞ በአዋጅ አርባ እና በተለያዩ መደቦች ባልሆኑ ቦታዎች ተይዘው የሚገኙ ሰዎችን በተመለከተ”, 2 September 2023, <https://ehrc.org/በአስቸኳይ-ጊዜ-ሁኔታ-አዋጅ-አተገባበር-ጋ/>; Amnesty International et al., “Ethiopia: Halt Crackdown Against Human Rights Groups”, 18 June 2024, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/afr25/8173/2024/en/>; EHRG, “በኢትዮጵያ በተለያዩ አካባቢዎች በግጭት ዐውድ ውስጥና ውጭ የሚፈጸሙ የሰብአዊ መብቶች ጥሰቶች አሳሳቢነትና ሥጋቶች”, 28 May 2024, <https://ehrc.org/በኢትዮጵያ-በተለያዩ-አካባቢዎች-በግጭት/>.

States of Emergency in Ethiopia (2020-2024) and Impact on HRDs

SOE	Year(s)	Stated Purpose	Main Restrictions	Documented Impacts on HRDs/Journalists
COVID-19 (nationwide)	Apr-Sept 2020	To contain the COVID-19 pandemic	Ban on gatherings; restrictions on media; criminalisation of “spreading panic”; warrantless arrests	Lawyer Elizabeth Kebede detained; journalist Yayesew Shimelis prosecuted for social media comments on COVID response
Metekel Zone	Jan 2021	To address inter-communal violence in Benishangul-Gumuz	Curfews; expanded arrest powers; command-post rule	Reports of arbitrary sweeps/detentions, including women and children; chilling effect on local HRDs
Nationwide wartime	Nov 2021-Feb 2022	To respond to the Tigray People’s Liberation Front (TPLF) advance	Arrests without warrant; censorship; suspension of due process; curfews; conscription	Mass detentions of Tigrayans, including HRDs, journalists, and aid workers; closure of civic space
Amhara	Aug 2023-Jun 2024	To curb fighting between federal forces and Fano militia	Nationwide powers: curfews, movement bans, warrantless arrests; curtailed judicial review	Arbitrary arrests of opposition figures; detention of journalists (e.g., Belay Manaye); extrajudicial killings (e.g., Merawi, January 2024)

Even outside periods of declared states of emergency, the government has demonstrated growing intolerance towards peaceful protests and demonstrations organised by various groups demanding justice and rights.¹¹⁰ This pattern has been observed in government responses to demands for self-administration by ethnic groups, such as the Wolaita;¹¹¹ public calls for access to water in the Gurage Zone;¹¹² protests by Muslim communities against the demolition of mosques in Sheger City;¹¹³ and demands from the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church communities urging the government to cease its attacks on the church.¹¹⁴

In addition to the excessive use of force against protesters, the government has also targeted activists, HRDs, and journalists who have publicly criticised and exposed its actions through various platforms.

Overall, human rights violations and persecution targeting HRDs have risen alarmingly since 2020, particularly following the outbreak of war in the northern part of the country. This trend has undermined hopes for a transition to democracy and respect for human rights – aspirations long held by the Ethiopian people – and has effectively reversed the reform gains introduced after 2018. The various forms of attacks on civic space and HRDs are addressed in the following section.

¹¹⁰ Interview with 06, 22 March 2025.

¹¹¹ EHRC, “Wolaita Zone: Lethal Force Used Against Protesters”, 11 August 2020, <https://ehrc.org/wolaita-zone-lethal-force-used-against-protesters/>.

¹¹² *Addis Standard*, “Security forces kill six, injure more than 15 people in Wolkite following protest against chronic lack of water”, 16 February 2023, <https://addisstandard.com/news-security-forces-kill-six-injure-more-than-15-people-in-wolkite-following-protest-against-chronic-lack-of-water/>.

¹¹³ EHRC, “በሸገር ከተማ ከመስጊዶች መፍረስ ጋር ተያይዞ የተነሱ ተቃውሞዎችን እና የደረሰ ጉዳትን በተመለከተ”, 1 June 2023, <https://ehrc.org/በሸገር-ከተማ-ከመስጊዶች-መፍረስ-ጋር-ተያ/>.

¹¹⁴ AfricaNews, “Ethiopia’s Orthodox Church criticises Abiy’s ‘failure to protect citizens’”, 13 August 2024, <https://www.africanews.com/2019/10/29/ethiopia-s-orthodox-church-criticises-abiy-s-failure-to-protect-citizens/>.

IV. Forms of Attack and Persecution Against HRDs and CSOs

The past five years have seen increasing attacks on HRDs and CSOs in the form of arbitrary arrest and detention, torture and ill-treatment, enforced disappearance, extrajudicial killings and other bodily harm, violence and harassment, intimidation and suspension of rights groups, as well as forced exile.

1. Arbitrary Arrest and Detention

Arbitrary arrest and detention are widely used to suppress and target HRDs in Ethiopia. The practice of arresting and detaining HRDs without legal grounds and a court warrant has become alarmingly common. Such arrests are often carried out by masked individuals, who fail to inform the detainees of the reasons for their arrest. These operations resemble abduction: excessive force is used, detainees are frequently not presented before a court of law within 48 hours, are held incommunicado and remain in custody even after being granted bail. HRDs are subjected to both mass arrests and targeted arrests. Journalists are typically the primary targets due to the visibility of their work. According to Ethiopian Press Freedom Defenders (EPFD), between 2019 and 2024, there were 244 arrests involving 201 journalists and media workers.¹¹⁵

A recent example illustrating the arbitrary nature of such arrests is the case of journalist **Yonas Amare**, a senior editor at the *Ethiopian Reporter* newspaper. On the evening of 13 August 2025, at approximately 9.30 p.m., security forces wearing red berets, military uniforms, and black face masks stormed a condominium block in Koye Fiche, on the outskirts of Addis Ababa, where he resided.¹¹⁶ According to eyewitness accounts reported by *The Reporter*, heavily armed forces confiscated residents' mobile phones, ordered them to remain indoors, and created an atmosphere resembling preparation for an armed confrontation.¹¹⁷ When Yonas Amare returned home later that night, the men immediately apprehended him and took him into custody. Despite holding him for ten days, the authorities failed to bring him before a court of law and to disclose the identity of the arresting officers or the location of his detention. He was released on 22 August 2025 together with another journalist **Abdusemed Mohammed**, who had been seized by security forces from his workplace without a court warrant and held incommunicado for 12 days without being brought before a court.¹¹⁸ The circumstances strongly suggest that both detentions were linked to their journalist activity and potentially critical reporting or broadcasting of views uncomfortable to the authorities.

The arbitrary arrest and detention of HRDs is further illustrated by instances in which detainees are kept in custody even after the court has granted bail, as in the case of **Tesfalem Woldeyes**, founder and editor-in-chief of *Ethiopia Insider*.¹¹⁹ On 8 June 2025, plainclothes security officers arrested him, without a judicial warrant. He was accused of disseminating false information about unrest during a football match between the Woliata Dicha and Sidama Buna clubs and of making a statement that “the government is only using the stadium for peaceful demonstrations by Tigrayans”. Two days later, on 10 June 2025, the Addis Ababa City First Instance Court granted him bail and issued a release order. However, the police refused to comply and insisted on keeping him in custody. Both the Appeals Court on 11 June and the Cassation Court on 12 June upheld the bail decision, stating that there was no legal basis for his continued detention. Despite these three separate judicial orders, Tesfalem remained unlawfully imprisoned for six days, until his eventual release on 13 June 2025.

The arrest and detention of journalists often occur in response to political upheaval within the country or specific regions, particularly during states of emergency. The circumstances surrounding these

¹¹⁵ Ethiopian Press Freedom Defenders, “In Abiy’s Ethiopia, 200 Journalists have been arrested since 2019”, 3 June 2024, African Arguments, <https://africanarguments.org/2024/06/in-abiy-ethiopia-200-journalists-have-been-arrested-since-2019/>.

¹¹⁶ Ashenafi Endale, “The Cost of Speaking Truth to Power in Ethiopia: Abductions, Arbitrary Arrests, and a Dim Outlook”, *The Reporter*, 23 August 2025, <https://www.thereporterethiopia.com/46588/>.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ *Borkena*, Ethiopia : Two Abducted Journalists Reportedly Released, 23 August 2025, <https://borkena.com/2025/08/23/ethiopia-two-abducted-journalists-reportedly-released/>.

¹¹⁹ Human Rights Watch, “Ethiopia Should Immediately Release Prominent Journalist”, 12 June 2025, https://www.hrw.org/news/2025/06/12/ethiopia-should-immediately-release-prominent-journalist?utm_source=chatgpt.com.

events usually determine which journalists and HRDs are targeted. The authorities invoke the same justifications used by the pre-2018 government, including allegations of inciting violence, provoking unrest, involvement in terrorism, or engaging in activities deemed harmful to national security.¹²⁰

Arrests peaked in 2020, followed by 58 arrests of 53 media workers in 2021 and 46 arrests of 42 media workers in 2023. Although arrests dropped significantly to 27 in 2024, this decline does not reflect an improvement in civic space or media freedom. Ethiopia's ranking in the *Reporters Without Borders World Press Freedom Index*, fell from 110th in 2019 to 145th in 2025,¹²¹ underscoring the continued deterioration of civic space and worsening conditions for journalists and HRDs.

The reduction in the number of arrests in 2024 can be attributed to three main factors. First, many activists and journalists critical of the government remain imprisoned. These include well-known figures such as **Tadios Tantu**, an 80-year-old veteran journalist and advocate for media freedom who has been imprisoned since 6 May 2021; **Gobeze Sisay**, a prominent investigative journalist known for reporting on government abuses, incarcerated since 6 May 2023, and previously arrested twice in 2022; **Meskerem Abera**, a commentator and founder of the YouTube-based platform *Ethio Nikat*, who has been imprisoned since 9 April 2023 – her third arrest since 2022 due to her outspoken criticism of state policies; and **Genet Asmamaw**, a journalist and women's rights advocate who has been detained since 6 April 2023.

Second, some activists have altered their engagement, opting for self-censorship or cooperating with the government instead of pursuing their human rights work, for fear of reprisals. A notable example is **Seyoum Teshome**, previously a human rights activist, who has since started working for pro-government media. He was arrested under the previous administration and provided critical support to the Abiy Ahmed government when it came to power. However, in 2021, he was subjected to beatings alongside other human rights activists, including **Muktar Osman**.¹²² Since then, Seyoum Teshome has become a supporter of the government, justifying its actions against journalists, HRDs, and activists in his media programmes.

A victim of physical violence during arrest shared his experience:

"In 2023, I was arrested once again by members of the defence force, armed with heavy weapons. They beat me repeatedly, kicked me while I was on the ground, forced me to walk barefoot under threats of being shot, and assaulted me in a vehicle. Outside the city, they took turns beating me, saying no one could escape them, and eventually carried me into a pickup truck, covering me so no one could see. Finally, they transported me to Addis Ababa. After a few days in Addis Ababa, I was moved to Awash Arba, a military camp that was truly hell on earth."¹²³

Other activists, including, **Asefa Wodajo**, have been silenced by being offered positions within the government. Meanwhile, Muktar Osman has completely ceased his activism.

The third factor contributing to the reduction in arrests in 2024 is linked to the exodus of many journalists and HRDs who have been critical of the government. As a strategy to avoid persecution and continue their journalism and human rights work in safer environments, a large number of journalists have fled Ethiopia. According to the Committee to Protect Journalists, at least 54 Ethiopian journalists and media workers have gone into exile since 2020.¹²⁴ Most of them had previously experienced

¹²⁰ Committee to Protect Journalists, "Authorities in Ethiopia detain four journalists, one media worker amid unrest", 12 August 2020, <https://cpj.org/2020/08/authorities-in-ethiopia-detain-four-journalists-one-media-worker-amid-unrest/>; EHRDC, "በአስቸኳይ ጊዜ ሁኔታ አዋጅ አተገባበር ጋር ተያይዞ በአዋጅ አርገባ እና በተለያዩ መደበኛ ባልሆኑ ቦታዎች ተይዘው የሚገኙ ሰዎችን በተመለከተ", 2 September 2023, <https://ehrc.org/በአስቸኳይ-ጊዜ-ሁኔታ-አዋጅ-አተገባበር-ጋ/>.

¹²¹ Reporters without Borders (2025), *World Press Freedom Index 2025: over half the world's population in red zones*, <https://rsf.org/en/world-press-freedom-index-2025-over-half-worlds-population-red-zones>.

¹²² Befekadu Dereba and Noah Yesuf (2023), *Annual Report: The Situation of Human Rights Defenders in Ethiopia 2021-2022*, EHRDC, op. cit, p. 4.

¹²³ Interview conducted by OMCT, 21 March 2025.

¹²⁴ International Media Support (2024), *Journalists' Safety Assessment Report*, p. 39, [IMS-Ethiopia-Journalists-Safety-Assessment-Report-2025.pdf](https://ims-ethiopia.org/IMS-Ethiopia-Journalists-Safety-Assessment-Report-2025.pdf).

arbitrary detention in Ethiopia. They include **Meaza Mohammed**, a prominent women's rights advocate and co-founder of Roha TV known for reporting on gender-based violence; **Tamirat Negera**, journalist and co-founder of Terara Network, recognized for his critical political commentary; **Yayesew Shimelis**, a well-known broadcast journalist and social media commentator who has reported on government abuses; **Belaye Manaye**, co-founder of Ethio News and investigative journalist covering conflict-related violations; **Belete Kassa**, a media professional known for documenting local governance issues; **Guyo Wariyo**, a journalist reporting extensively on the rights and grievances of communities in southern Ethiopia; **Bekalu Alamirew**, founder of Alpha TV and critic of government restrictions on civil liberties; and **Tesfa-Alem Tekle**, an experienced reporter covering human rights and regional security issues for various international outlets.¹²⁵ Some of these journalists continue to face risks even in exile.¹²⁶ For instance, journalist **Gobeze Sisay** was arrested Djibouti in 2023 and transferred back to Ethiopia under unknown circumstances.¹²⁷ In addition, the families of exiled journalists remaining in Ethiopia have faced harassment, intimidation, arrest, and beating by security forces.¹²⁸

Activists and HRDs have been arrested and detained for supporting community efforts for self-determination rights, including for the Wolaita and Gurage ethnic groups.¹²⁹ HRDs have also been arrested while conducting fieldwork. In one instance, four human rights workers from EHRDC were arrested while investigating illegal evictions and demolitions in Addis Ababa, preventing them from monitoring and reporting on human rights violations in that context.¹³⁰

The three annual national human rights situation reports produced by the state-affiliated EHRC since 2021 indicate that the detentions are mostly carried out incommunicado and outside regular detention centres.¹³¹

2. Violence and Harassment

HRDs in Ethiopia also face violence and harassment due to their work. It is common for security forces to beat, harass, and defame HRDs, particularly, during arrests. For example, on 2 June 2022, journalist Temesgen Desalegn was beaten by police in front of his family.¹³² After the beating, the police took him to another room, expelling his family from the area. Temesgen later reported the assault in the presence of witnesses to his lawyer. Since then, he has been unable to resume his journalistic and advocacy activities.

Taye Bogale Arega, a historian, activist and author, also experienced beating and harassment by state forces. On 20 March 2023, he documented visible injuries to his face in a video and photo posted on his personal social media. He wrote:

¹²⁵ Committee to Protect Journalists, "Fleeing prolonged media crackdown, Ethiopian journalists struggle in exile", 18 June 2024, <https://cpj.org/2024/06/fleeing-prolonged-media-crackdown-ethiopian-journalists-struggle-in-exile/>.

¹²⁶ Interview with journalist Belete Kassa, 7 March 2025.

¹²⁷ Committee to Protect Journalists, "Journalist Gobeze Sisay facing terrorism investigation in Ethiopia after arrest in Djibouti", 12 May 2023, <https://cpj.org/2023/05/journalist-gobeze-sisay-facing-terrorism-investigation-in-ethiopia-after-arrest-in-djibouti/>.

¹²⁸ Jemal Countess, "Exiled: The Plight of Ethiopian Journalist Abroad", 17 May 2025, <https://jemalc.substack.com/p/exiled-the-plight-of-ethiopian-journalist>.

¹²⁹ *Borkena*, "Wolayta Committee for Human Rights alleges the arrest of at least 35 activists", 14 November 2021, <https://borkena.com/2021/11/14/wolayta-committee-for-human-rights-alleges-the-arrest-of-at-least-35-activists/>; Amnesty International, "Ethiopia: Stop the use of deadly force on protesters", 14 August 2020, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2020/08/ethiopia-stop-the-use-of-deadly-force-on-protesters-2/>; EHRDC, "Wolaita Zone: Lethal Force Used Against Protesters", op. cit: *Addis Standard*, "Security forces arrest several senior gov't officials, youth, activists in Gurage zone following intensified crackdown on dissent", 4 March 2023, <https://addisstandard.com/news-security-forces-arrest-several-senior-govt-officials-youth-activists-in-gurage-zone-following-intensified-crackdown-on-dissent/>; Human Rights League of the Horn of Africa, "Ethiopia: The Government Must Allow An Independent Investigation into Human Rights Abuses Committed During Wolaita's Peaceful Protest", 14 September 2020, <https://www.humanrightsleague.org/?p=16618>; *Borkena*, "Over 100 reportedly arrested in Gurage in connection with Fano Movement", 29 October 2024, <https://borkena.com/2024/10/29/ethiopia-over-100-reportedly-arrested-in-gurage-in-connection-with-fano-movement/>.

¹³⁰ EHRDC (2024), *Second Annual Report on the Situation of Human Rights Defenders in Ethiopia 2023*, p. 15.

¹³¹ EHRC (2024), *Annual Ethiopia Human Rights Situation Report (June 2023 - June 2024)* <https://ehrc.org/download/annual-ethiopia-human-rights-situation-report-june-2023-to-june-2024/#>; EHRC (2023), የኢትዮጵያ ሰብአዊ መብቶች ሁኔታ ዓመታዊ ሪፖርት <https://ehrc.org/download/የኢትዮጵያ-ሰብአዊ-መብቶች-ሁኔታ-ዓመታዊ-3/>; EHRC (2022), የኢትዮጵያ ሰብአዊ መብቶች ሁኔታ ዓመታዊ ሪፖርት, <https://ehrc.org/download/የኢትዮጵያ-ሰብአዊ-መብቶች-ሁኔታ-ዓመታዊ/>.

¹³² Befekadu Dereba and Noah Yesuf (2023), *Annual Report: The Situation of Human Rights Defenders in Ethiopia 2021-2022*, EHRDC, op. cit, p 35.

“I suffered under the brutal regime because of its excesses and ruthlessness. I paid an immense price simply for expressing my opinions and speaking out against its abuses and deliberate crimes that violate the very foundations of human and democratic rights. The Prosperity Party-led government has committed nearly every form of internationally recognised crime against innocent civilians based on their ethnicity, as well as against those who dare to be a voice for the voiceless. My own suffering in their secret detention and torture facility, without any due process of law, stands as a stark example of this repression.”

Due to fears of further persecution, he later fled the country. In recent social media posts, he has expressed support for the government.

On 21 June 2021, journalist Abebe Bayu of the Ethio-Forum YouTube channel was attacked by a group of four unidentified men in Addis Ababa.¹³³ His work focused on covering politically sensitive topics, including conflict, human rights, and freedom of expression. His attackers handcuffed him, threatened him with a pistol, and forced him into a car near a restaurant. Inside the vehicle, they covered his eyes and physically assaulted him as they drove to the outskirts of the city. The attackers warned him not to criticise the government.

When they reached a cliff in Tulu Dimtu, located outside of Addis Ababa in the Oromia region, they took both of Abebe’s cell phones and the money he had on him. They forced him to lie face down on the ground, covered him with a jacket, and threatened to shoot him if he moved. After the men left, Abebe managed to take a taxi back to Addis Ababa, where he received treatment at a local hospital for cuts on his knee, back pain, and facial swelling from the assault. Fearing further attacks due to his reports and analyses criticising the government, he later fled the country.

On 7 September 2023, three journalists, Teshager Tsigab, Mehari Kahsay, and Mehari Selemon were beaten and arrested by security forces while covering the opposition protests in Mekelle, in the Tigray region.¹³⁴

Harassment and verbal abuse are common violations experienced by journalists, HRDs, and activists. For example, in a recording of her arrest which she obtained by calling her family while police dragged her from the office of Yeneta Media, journalist **Genet Asmamaw** can be heard asking “Why am I being arrested for being a journalist? Don’t beat me. Why are you hitting me? Why are you kidnapping me without a court order?”. The men can be heard mocking her, calling her a “vile woman” and telling her to “shutup”.¹³⁵

Befekadu Hailu described the harassment and denigration faced by HRDs in Ethiopia:

“Several forms of mistreatment, including physical surveillance, harassment, digital monitoring, and smear campaigns are aimed at defaming them. Personally, my experience in the digital space has been difficult. Various nationalist groups labelled me as a supporter of opposing factions simply because I condemned the violations of rights by all sides. As a result, I chose to remain silent and avoid social media, where I typically shared my opinions.

While working at CARD, I was consistently threatened by government officials. For instance, in September 2022, when CARD and other organisations issued a call for peace, government media and social media supporters launched a campaign against me and CARD, portraying us as agents of other groups. Senior officials even personally threatened me in the presence of other civil society representatives. Unfortunately, the surveillance and intimidation did not stop there.”

¹³³ Committee to Protect Journalists, “Ethiopian journalist Abebe Bayu abducted and assaulted by unidentified men”, 1 July 2021, <https://cpj.org/2021/07/ethiopian-journalist-abebe-bayu-abducted-and-assaulted-by-unidentified-men/>.

¹³⁴ Committee to Protect Journalists, “Three Ethiopian journalists beaten and detained while covering protest in Tigray, 21 September 2023, <https://cpj.org/2023/09/three-ethiopian-journalists-beaten-and-detained-while-covering-protest-in-tigray/>.

¹³⁵ The Coalition for Women in Journalism, “Ethiopia: Police Violently Arrest Two Amhara Women Journalists – CFWIJ Demands Immediate And Unconditional Release”, 10 April 2023.

“My colleague, co-founder of CARD and its programme head ultimately had to leave the country and seek asylum in the United States due to the surveillance and intimidation from individuals claiming to be employees of the National Intelligence and Security Service (NISS). Other HRDs, such as Dan Yirga, the former Executive Director of EHRCO, as well as Eden Fesseha and Meseret Ali, the Executive Director of the AHRE, were also forced to flee the country.”¹³⁶

The former Executive Director of EHRCO, and cofounder, and board member of EHRDC described his experience in the management of human rights organisations:

“Since its reform after 2018, the main function of the NISS has been to spy on and hack the activities of human rights organisations and HRDs. They collaborate with security forces in civilian clothes to break into the offices of human rights organisations and private media outlets. During these break-ins, they have taken equipment such as cameras, computers, and laptops. We have documented numerous reports of these incidents, including one where our own office was broken into. Hacking of HRDs’ social media platforms and emails is a common practice. My email and social media accounts have been hacked multiple times and are often beyond my control. Additionally, phone lines are also targeted.”¹³⁷

Examples of this form of targeting HRDs include the burglary of the EHRCO office on 13 February 2023, specifically aimed at removing a laptop that contained documents for a human rights investigation.¹³⁸ On 17 July 2023, *Ethiopian Insider* reported that robbers broke into its office and stole valuable newsroom equipment critical for its operations.¹³⁹ A similar incident occurred at the office of the Ethio-News YouTube channel.¹⁴⁰ Most recently, on 17 April 2025, security forces raided the office of the Addis Standard, a private media company.¹⁴¹

Befekadu Hailu underlined that intimidation and harassment faced by HRDs comes not only from the state but also from non-state actors:

“Insurgencies and ethnonationalist groups are also responsible for these attacks. Political groups associated with various nationalist factions and armed insurgencies engage in psychological warfare against HRDs. Each of these groups perceives itself as the only victim and views the perpetrators as belonging to opposing factions; they are unwilling to accept any criticism directed at their side. Moreover, they complicate the work of HRDs both online and offline. Consequently, the period following 2018 is marked by the involvement of both state and non-state actors in efforts to silence critics and HRDs.”¹⁴²

¹³⁶ Interview with Befekadu Hailu, 17 March 2025.

¹³⁷ Interview with Dan Yirga, 16 March 2025.

¹³⁸ United States Department of State (2023), *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Ethiopia*, p. 18 <https://www.state.gov/reports/2023-country-reports-on-human-rights-practices/ethiopia/#:~:text=Significant%20human%20rights%20issues%20included,conditions%3B%20arbitrary%20arrest%20or%20detention%3B>.

¹³⁹ Ibid.

¹⁴⁰ Interview with journalist Belete Kassa, 7 March 2025.

¹⁴¹ Committee to Protect Journalists, “Ethiopian police raid Addis Standard, detain 3 managers”, 22 April 2025. <https://cpj.org/2025/04/ethiopian-police-raid-addis-standard-detain-3-managers/>.

¹⁴² Interview with Befekadu Hailu, 17 March 2025.

3. Torture, Ill-treatment and Enforced Disappearances

Torture, ill-treatment, and enforced disappearances are serious forms of human rights abuse that HRDs have continued to face in Ethiopia since 2018. This has been confirmed by the Human Rights Committee in its concluding observations issued in October 2022,¹⁴³ the CAT in its concluding observations issued in May 2023,¹⁴⁴ and the Human Rights Council during the fourth UPR cycle in 2024-2025.¹⁴⁵

A. The return of torture and enforced disappearances

Between 1991 and 2018, torture in Ethiopia was primarily perpetrated by the state security apparatus across multiple detention facilities nationwide. The main perpetrators were federal police officers, intelligence personnel, prison guards, military forces, and regional security units, including the Somali region's *Liyu Police*. Torture was widespread and institutionalised in notorious centres such as Maekelawi Prison in Addis Ababa, the federal investigation hub where most political prisoners, journalists, and opposition figures were held. Jail Ogaden in Jigjiga was also described by human rights organisations as one of the most brutal sites of detention. Despite the formal closure of these facilities in 2018, perpetrators have not been held accountable, and Ethiopia has failed to address longstanding recommendations of the UN Human Rights Committee and CAT to ensure effective investigations, prosecutions, and reparations for victims.

Since 2020, successive states of emergency (SOEs) have created conditions for further gross violations, including torture and ill-treatment in unofficial detention facilities. HRDs and journalists have reported credible accounts of being beaten and tortured while in custody. EHRDC documented the case of Mohammed Deksiso, a university student arrested on 15 February 2021 after shouting slogans such as “Free Jawar Mohammed” and “Justice for Hachalu Hundessa” during a graduation ceremony at Jimma University. Mohammed was tortured while in detention, exemplifying the risks faced by those who express dissent in the context of emergency powers.¹⁴⁶

The use of torture and ill-treatment in Ethiopia since 2018 is not only intended to extract information, confessions, or to punish individuals for past actions. It also aims to deter the person targeted, and others, from engaging in activities that expose human rights violations, criticise the government, or report on abuses committed by state institutions and authorities or state failures in future.

Alongside torture, enforced disappearances have become commonplace in the post-2018 period. There are frequent reports of abduction and kidnapping of journalists, opposition figures, and activists who have criticised the government. Their whereabouts often remain unknown for extended periods of time. It is usually only after significant social media campaigns and public outcry that information about them is revealed, allowing their families and the public to learn about their incommunicado detention in undisclosed locations. For instance, between 2022 and 2024, EHRDC documented and reported 200 cases of enforced disappearance.¹⁴⁷ This figure includes numerous journalists, HRDs, and activists.

In a report released on 7 July 2022, the EHRDC indicated that the whereabouts of **Belay Bekele Weya**, a poet and outspoken activist renowned for his writings on social justice, were unknown for about seven days.¹⁴⁸ The same report indicated that journalists **Yayesew Shimelis**, a prominent political commentator, and **Abebe Bayu**, an investigative journalist reporting on government abuses, were abducted by marked security personnel on 28 and 29 June 2022, respectively, and their locations remained unknown at the time of the report's release. Additionally, an EHRDC statement issued on

¹⁴³ Human Rights Committee, Concluding observations on the second periodic report of Ethiopia, 7 December 2022, op. cit.

¹⁴⁴ CAT, Concluding observations on the Second Periodic Report of Ethiopia, 7 June 2023, op. cit.

¹⁴⁵ Human Rights Council, Report of the Working Group on the Universal Periodic Review: Ethiopia, 18 December 2024, op. cit.

¹⁴⁶ Befekadu Dereba and Noah Yesuf (2023), *Annual Report: The Situation of Human Rights Defenders in Ethiopia 2021-2022*, EHRDC, p. 6.

¹⁴⁷ Human Rights Council, Written submission by the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission, Human Rights Council 57th session, A/HRC/57/Nl/3, 17 December 2024.

¹⁴⁸ EHRDC, የሚደገፉ ሠራተኞችን ጨምሮ በተለያዩ የሀገሪቱ ክፍሎች ከሕግ አግባብ ውጪ እና ያለብት ቦታ ሳይገለጽ የታሰሩ ሰዎችን በተመለከተ, 7 July 2022, <https://ehrc.org/የሚደገፉ-ሠራተኞችን-ጨምሮ-በተለያዩ-የሀገር/>

15 December 2021 confirmed that **Tamerat Negera**, journalist and co-founder of Terara Network known for his democracy-focused reporting, had been missing since his arrest on 10 December 2021, and that **Keberom Worku**, a regional reporter who covered governance and community rights issues, had been unaccounted for since 26 October 2021.¹⁴⁹ Following disclosure of their whereabouts and their release, some journalists and activists have remained silent, likely due to fear for their safety and the risk of further persecution.

B. The resumption of torture centres: Awash Arba military camp, the Guantanamo of Ethiopia

Severe cases of torture, ill-treatment, and enforced disappearances of opposition leaders, journalists, and activists have been reported, especially in irregular detention centres like the Awash Arba military camp.¹⁵⁰ Located 220 kilometres east of Addis Ababa, Awash Arba military camp serves as the primary site for detaining individuals arrested under successive states of emergencies, HRDs, journalists and government critics.¹⁵¹ The site is not formally designated as a detention centre under Ethiopia's penal or correctional system. Instead, it appears to function as a de facto military-run camp for human rights defenders and other detainees, often without due process or formal charges. This detention centre, which also serves as a military training centre, is located in the desert in the hottest area of the country. Abuses are primarily perpetrated by military officers (often operating under command posts activated during states of emergency), with testimonies suggesting coordination with federal police and intelligence agents who determine transfers to the site.

Testimonies collected by OMCT from HRDs and journalists who were detained in Awash Arba show a pattern of use of multiple methods of physical and psychological torture, such as repeated beatings, denial of fresh air and natural light, death threats, mock executions, overhearing executions, sensory assault (blasting loud music repeatedly), coupled with sleep deprivation, exposure to extreme heat, denial of basic necessities including medical care, food, drinking water and sanitation, and deliberate exposure to dangerous wild animals resulting in bites and serious injuries. Torture is carried out not only to extract confessions but also to deter HRDs from continuing their work. Testimonies suggest that it is often used as an instrument of ethnically motivated retaliation, as perpetrators frequently make derogatory remarks about the victim's ethnic group, asserting that the group has been politically suppressed and has no possibility of regaining power.

A human rights worker, who visited the site described the conditions:

"It is located in a desert, and the temperature is unbearable for humans. There are no human settlements nearby. The detainees are housed together in a large hall. However, when someone is needed for interrogation or torture, that individual is taken to a separate room. Taking pictures of the camp is strictly prohibited."¹⁵²

Journalist **Yayesew Shemelis**, known for his outspoken political commentary and reporting on government abuses, has described the physical and psychological torture he endured at Awash Arba, referring to the prison as "little hell".¹⁵³ BBC Amharic has likewise described the facility as "the desert Guantanamo".¹⁵⁴ Yayesew recounts being kidnapped from his home at night by masked men, armed with guns; being held in a room infested with wild animals such as frogs and mice; and later being taken for interrogation in a room where a dead body had been placed. His testimony highlights the extreme risks faced by journalists who use their platforms to expose rights violations and defend civic freedoms.

¹⁴⁹ EHRG, የሚዲያ አባላት መታሰር, 15 December 2021, <https://ehrc.org/የሚዲያ-ባለሙያዎች-መታሰር/>.

¹⁵⁰ Human Rights Watch, "Ethiopia: Halt Crackdown Against Human Rights Groups" 18 June 2024, (reporting detention of journalists at Awash Arba under harsh conditions).

¹⁵¹ OMCT (2025), *Global Torture Index – Ethiopia Country Factsheet*, <https://www.omct.org/site-resources/files/factsheets/Factsheet-Ethiopia-EN.pdf>, (documenting use of Awash Arba as a site of mass incarceration, torture, and incommunicado detention).

¹⁵² Interview with O9, 12 July 2025.

¹⁵³ Yayesew Shemelis (2024), የሴራ እርካብ፣ የደም መንብር, pp. 267 et seq.

¹⁵⁴ BBC Amharic News, "አዋሽ አርባ፡ በኢትዮጵያ ከጅምላ እስር ጋር ስሙ የሚነሳው 'የበረሃው ኅንጻ' ሲሆን", 24 January 2024, <https://www.bbc.com/amharic/articles/cyejgk207ero>.

A journalist from Amhara region with more than 75k followers on Facebook and nearly 100k followers on YouTube was arrested, detained and tortured in Awash Arba for interviewing political leaders and activists with critical views on Ethiopia. During an interview with OMCT, he stated:

“In August 2023, I was captured and held for three days in a dark room without light, water, or food. Fifteen days after my arrest – under the state of emergency declared following the conflict in the Amhara region – I was transferred to a military camp. There, I was denied adequate water, food, medical care, and sanitation. I became seriously ill and lost a lot of weight. When I asked to go to hospital, the request was refused; I was later taken briefly to a medical centre but received no real treatment, and I believed the medication given to me was intended to harm me. After two months I was returned to the camp, where I remained; in total, I spent about 11 months in detention without access to a lawyer or my family. The camp was guarded by the army, and our cells were guarded by federal police. Detainees – especially Amhara people – were brought to this military training camp under the state of emergency. We were kept incommunicado; our families did not know where we were, and we did not know where they were. We faced psychological torture, death threats, denial of medication and fresh air, constant confinement under heavy guard, and no toilets. There were dangerous animals, including scorpions and snakes. On 14 December 2023, the International Committee of Red Cross (ICRC) visited us at the military camp, and I was allowed to send a letter to my family. In prison, if anyone cried, additional torture followed. Our appearance changed drastically because of the conditions; after release, our families barely recognised us. On 15 February 2024, a storm destroyed five houses in the camp area, injuring several prisoners. An inspector told us there was a plan to kill us there. I was later transferred to federal police custody.¹⁵⁵”

Another journalist working at an independent outlet called Ethio-News, who is currently in exile also testified about his detention at Awash Arba:

“I have been detained several times – twice in 2020 and again starting on 13 November 2023. That day, as I left my office, I was seized and taken to a federal police facility in Addis Ababa, where I was held for 26 days in a small, airless room, without adequate food, medication, a lawyer, or any appearance before a court. We were barred from seeing our children. There were only two toilets: one was an open pit near water inhabited by crocodiles and infested with scorpions and snakes; the other was reserved for military personnel.

After 26 days, I was transferred to a military camp about 16km outside Addis Ababa – often called the “Ethiopian Guantánamo” – where political detainees are kept. The national army guarded the perimeter, and federal police guarded the cells. Fresh air was scarce, and for five months I was completely isolated from my family and lawyer. Guards subjected us to psychological torture, death threats, and punishment for crying; we were denied medicine and kept indoors for long periods. There was a torture room, and guards blasted military music to wake us. At times, I believed they intended to kill us. In December 2023, the ICRC visited the camp, and for the first time I was allowed to send a letter to my wife confirming I was alive.

I was later returned to federal police custody for another 20 days. A commander and intelligence officers told me I might be released – but only if I kept my phone number and address unchanged and stopped my work, warning that I would be killed if I continued. In total, I spent several months in detention, much of it incommunicado and outside judicial oversight, under state-of-emergency measures that targeted people like me – especially Amhara detainees – while keeping our families in the dark about our whereabouts.¹⁵⁶”

¹⁵⁵ Interview conducted by OMCT on 21 March 2025.

¹⁵⁶ Interview conducted by OMCT on 21 March 2025.

A human rights defender, who had endured suffering since the previous regime, testified about the environmental and physical torture he suffered in Awash Arba:

“I am a peaceful human rights and democracy advocate. Following the 2023 nationwide state of emergency linked to the conflict in the Amhara region, security forces arrested me at night, beat me severely, and held me in total isolation. I was tortured, threatened with death, denied visits, and brought to court only after eight days, accused of organising a peaceful protest online. During three weeks in detention, I was kept in a filthy cell with almost no food or sanitation, which caused serious health problems.

Despite previous abuses, I continued speaking out against human rights violations, gaining many followers. Later in 2023, I was arrested again by heavily armed soldiers, beaten repeatedly, forced to walk barefoot under threats of being shot, and transported to Addis Ababa and then to Awash Arba – an infamous military camp used for political detainees. Conditions there were horrific: extreme heat, contaminated water, no toilets, constant torture, gunfire at night, snakes entering the sleeping area, and executions occurring nearby. Many detainees suffered severe illness, trauma, or death.

I spent months in incommunicado detention, much of it under conditions amounting to torture. After being moved between facilities – including an additional torture site in Semera – I was eventually taken back to Addis Ababa. The prosecutor later closed my case, and I was released. The entire ordeal was justified by the authorities under the state of emergency, even though detentions continued after it was lifted.¹⁵⁷”

The testimony of another journalist and torture survivor of Awash Arba confirms the methods of physical and psychological torture used, including voluntary exposure to insect bites, sensory assault and death threats:

“I am one of the victims of the environmental and physical torture of the other Maekelawi, Awash Arba. When I arrived, the temperature was around 38–40 degrees Celsius. We were made to sit on hot stones from 10 a.m. until 4 p.m. under the burning sun, without being allowed to drink any water. The investigator told us, “I will keep you under the sun the whole day unless you speak the truth.” This treatment was used both as punishment and to obtain confessions. It was extremely unbearable. In addition to the sun, they also used biting insects as a form of torture. The investigator threatened us, saying, “Unless you answer my questions, I will make you spend the whole night being bitten by mosquitoes.” Because of the harsh weather, the dense forest, and the nearby river, there were many different types of biting insects. My legs, up to my thighs, were covered in wounds from the constant insect bites. Since the doors and windows were always left open, the insects, snakes and spiders came inside freely. These added to the constant fear and suffering we endured. They used to torture people at night beside the river. Prisoners were tied to trees and beaten, and sometimes left alone in that terrifying place overnight. I personally saw someone whose nail had been forcibly removed. To instil fear and stress, they made us see the fresh graves of war prisoners who had been killed. We were forced to use the graves as toilets, which was horrifying. They wanted us to believe that the same fate awaited us. We could not sleep at night because we constantly heard gunshots as they executed war prisoners. Every night, we feared it might be our last. We were also subjected to forced labor as a form of degrading torture. We were made to collect wood from the forest for cooking and were not allowed to use the soldiers’ toilets, yet we were forced to clean them as a group. This work was exhausting, humiliating, and clearly intended to punish and degrade us. On 24 February 2024, a tornado struck the area and destroyed around 5 halls, including the one we used to use as a restaurant. During the tornado, we all fell to the ground and I fainted.”

¹⁵⁷ Interview with 41, 2 September 2025.

“When I woke up, there was heavy rain, and I found myself completely soaked. No one came to pick me up or help me. We were only about 50 meters from the river, and the strong wind and rain were sweeping everything toward the water. I consider myself lucky not to have been carried away by the river. I had never imagined finding myself in such a situation, I had only ever seen such scenes in movies. While natural disasters can happen anywhere, what made this unbearable was that they deliberately kept us there despite knowing the risks. It was as if they wanted us to suffer more. I had severe pain from the storm, and I had to be supported by my friends to move from place to place. I was prohibited from receiving medical treatment and had to suffer for months. Whenever we went to the military clinic in the compound, they gave us an addictive medicine called Tramadol, which is formally categorised as a narcotic drug in Ethiopia. Many people became addicted to it. Whenever they felt stressed and wanted to fall asleep, they used to go to the clinic and bring that medicine. Mr. Yohannes Buayalew, the former Vice President of the Amhara Regional State and a member of the Amhara Regional State Parliament, became seriously ill. His foot was swollen, and he was unable to stand while he was in Awash Arba and later in Semera. However, he was denied medical treatment for around four months and suffered greatly (...).”

The same journalist also reveals having been tortured in another site located in Semara city, the capital of Afar region:

“...Later, when confronted about the physical torture they committed at AwashArba, the authorities opened a new torture centre in Semera, the capital city of the Afar regional state. It was a private house with more than 22 single rooms, located on the outskirts of the city. Only soldiers were present, and there was no one to answer our questions. We were detained in dark rooms and only realised our location months later. The soldiers spoke a language we could not understand and frequently humiliated us. The temperature in Semera was extremely high, and while a healthy person would normally need at least four litres of water per day, we were given only half a litre for 24 hours. The food was disgusting, and despite being sick, there was no one to look after us. Another method of torture in Semera was psychological: they played the same music on loudspeakers repeatedly, day and night, throughout our entire stay. I cannot express the feelings of despair and anxiety we experienced from this constant noise. Even now, I struggle with my own children’s repeated shouting or voices. It was deeply traumatising. They used this place as a torture centre [to] move people from Awash Arba to torture. A fellow detainee named Isayas died there while being tortured. At Awash Arba, the soldiers used loud military-style shouts and claps to wake us and call us for meals. This in itself was traumatising, and even now, I feel extreme stress whenever I hear clapping. In short, the physical, psychological, social, and economic suffering I have endured simply for exercising my right to freedom of expression and advocating for human and democratic rights is unimaginable and beyond description.¹⁵⁸”

Yared Hailemariam describes the torture and ill-treatment of detainees at Awash Arba military camp – which he refers to as the *new Maekelawi* torture centre – with new means of torture related to the harsh environment:

“The location of Awash Arba, primarily used for military training, exposes detainees to extreme climate conditions. It is a hot, dry, and sandy area. The government intentionally moves arbitrarily detained HRDs to this difficult environment, which is often far from where they were first detained, making it a form of torture by nature. Furthermore, denial of medical treatment, family visitation, and proper food are also employed as means of torture. All those detained in Awash Arba military camp face these abuses.¹⁵⁹”

¹⁵⁸ Interview with 42, 4 September 2025.

¹⁵⁹ Interview with Yared Hailemariam, 2 March 2025.

The closure of Maekelawi prison in 2018 was widely presented as a reform measure, yet the subsequent use of Awash Arba military camp illustrates the persistence of torture and ill-treatment in Ethiopia under a different guise. Maekelawi, as the official federal investigation centre in Addis Ababa, was long documented by the UN Human Rights Committee and CAT as a site of systematic violations by federal police and intelligence officers, including coercion of confessions, beatings, and prolonged incommunicado detention. Today, Awash Arba, a remote military facility in Afar region with no formal legal basis as a detention centre, has assumed a similar function.

Nevertheless, the ruling party continues to deny the existence of torture cases in Ethiopia. In his opening speech at the Prosperity Party's second general assembly on 31 January 2025, Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed stated that "believe it or not, for the last six years [since he assumed power], not a single person has been tortured".¹⁶⁰

This persistent use of torture and ill-treatment highlights Ethiopia's ongoing failure to comply with its international obligations, which require the absolute prohibition of torture, prompt investigation of allegations, prosecution of perpetrators, and provision of effective remedies to victims. The shift from an "official" detention facility like Maekelawi to an unacknowledged military camp such as Awash Arba does not mitigate state responsibility; rather, it aggravates the violation by operating outside any recognised legal framework. Although incidents of torture and ill-treatment have been reported by credible sources, formal complaints remain few and effective investigations appear almost non-existent or invisible to the public. The combination of secrecy, fear, weak institutions and emergency powers create an environment of near-total impunity.

4. Extra-Judicial Killings and Other Bodily Harm

In the post-2018 period, extra-judicial killings of HRDs mainly occurred in the context of conflict and protests in Ethiopia. Excessive use of force by security forces to quell protests led to the deaths of several demonstrators. The EHRC investigated, documented, and reported on extra-judicial killings that took place in various parts of the country. In its June 2023 report, the EHRC documented the extra-judicial killings of two protestors and numerous injuries during protests against the demolition of mosques in Sheger City on 26 May 2023.¹⁶¹ An earlier report published in August 2020 documented 6 extra-judicial killings by security forces during protests for statehood in the Wolaita Zone on 9 August 2020.¹⁶² On 15 February 2023, security forces killed three and injured 15 protestors during a demonstration in Wokite Town in Gurage Zone, where residents were protesting the lack of access to fresh water while carrying empty jerry cans.¹⁶³ The EHRC also documented eight extra-judicial killings on 4 February 2023, when security forces used excessive force against Ethiopian Orthodox Church followers who were protesting the installation of bishops they claimed were illegally appointed in the town of Shashemene.¹⁶⁴ Extra-judicial killings have also been committed against community leaders. A clear example is the execution of 16 members of the Karayu Gadda leadership, Oromo cultural and social leaders, by Oromia State security forces on 1 December 2021, highlighting the systemic risk faced by all HRD groups.¹⁶⁵ Journalists, activists, and government critics have likewise been subjected to extrajudicial killings. Journalist Dawit Kebede Araya was shot dead by security forces in the city of Mekelle on 19 January 2021.¹⁶⁶ On 9 May 2011, another journalist, Sisay Fida, was killed in the

¹⁶⁰ GMN, "Ethiopia's path to prosperity is inevitable' President of Prosperity Party Abiy Ahmed", YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GEF3R7cWU84>.

¹⁶¹ EHRC, "በሽገር ከተማ ከመስጊዶች መፍረስ ጋር ተያይዞ የተነሱ ተቃዋሚዎችን እና የደረሰ ጉዳትን በተመለከተ", 1 June 2023, <https://ehrc.org/በሽገር-ከተማ-ከመስጊዶች-መፍረስ-ጋር-ተያ/>.

¹⁶² EHRC, "Wolaita Zone: Lethal Force Used Against Protesters", op. cit.

¹⁶³ *Addis Standard*, "Security forces arrest several senior gov't officials, youth, activists in Gurage zone following intensified crackdown on dissent", op. cit.

¹⁶⁴ EHRC (2023), የኢትዮጵያ ሰብአዊ መብቶች ሁኔታ ዓመታዊ ሪፖርት, <https://ehrc.org/download/የኢትዮጵያ-ሰብአዊ-መብቶች-ሁኔታ-ዓመታዊ-3/>.

¹⁶⁵ EHRC (2022), በከረዩ የሚችሉ ገዳ የጅላ አባላት ግድያ ላይ የተደረገ የምርመራ ሪፖርት, <https://ehrc.org/download/በከረዩ-የሚችሉ-ገዳ-የጅላ-አባላት-ግድያ-ላ/>.

¹⁶⁶ Committee to Protect Journalists, "Reporter Dawit Kebede Araya shot and killed in Ethiopia", 28 January 2021, <https://cpj.org/2021/01/reporter-dawit-kebede-araya-shot-and-killed-in-ethiopia/>.

town of Dembi Dolo.¹⁶⁷ More recently, on 10 April 2024, Oromo rights activist and government critic Beti Urgessa was assassinated by security forces in the town of Meki.

These extrajudicial killings were not investigated by competent authorities, and the perpetrators were not brought to justice. In some cases, investigations by rights groups were prohibited by the government. Notably, the EHRC was warned against investigating Beti Urgessa's assassination and was prohibited from releasing a report. His family has since fled the country due to fears of persecution.

5. Intimidation and Suspension of Rights Groups

Since 2020, intimidation and suspension of human rights CSOs have emerged as a growing pattern of persecution in Ethiopia. The civic space opened by the 2019 legal reforms began to contract, as rights groups advocating for peace during the Tigray war faced warnings and intimidation. This situation reached a peak when Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed remarked that the institutions claiming to be 'human rights bodies' were not serving human rights but political motives.¹⁶⁸

Following the Prime Minister's statement, ACSO temporarily suspended several prominent local human rights organisations. In separate letters issued on 21 November 2024, ACSO announced the suspension of CARD, AHRE, and Lawyers for Human Rights (LHR), claiming that they lacked political neutrality and engaged in activities that endangered citizens' interests and the nation.¹⁶⁹ In December 2024, it also announced the suspension of EHRCO, the country's oldest independent human rights organisation, which had not been suspended even under the 2009 CSP, and the EHRDC, alleging that they lacked independence and acted beyond their mandates.¹⁷⁰

These suspensions were later lifted, then reinstated, before eventually being definitively lifted in March 2025 due to pressure from international and national rights groups. However, members of these organisations continue to face surveillance and intimidation. An interviewee who wished to remain anonymous stated:

"After the suspension was lifted, the ACSO did not simply allow us to return to our work freely. Instead, it imposed suffocating conditions. We were told we must report every single activity in advance, disclose the institutions we collaborate with, and submit details of our sources of funding at all times. The Authority made it clear that our survival depends on constant oversight and compliance. They insisted that we work hand-in-hand with them, and that our focus be limited to so-called "safe" activities – such as generic awareness-raising or the promotion of human rights – rather than independent investigations or advocacy that might hold the state accountable. In reality, it was not a lifting of the ban, but a replacement of outright prohibition with surveillance and control."¹⁷¹

Another source emphasised the extent of state intrusion:

"The intimidation has gone far beyond oversight. The ACSO leaders even informed certain organisations, such as the EHRDC, that they should change their leadership if they wanted to continue operating. I believe the resignation of Yared Hailemariam, the Executive Director of EHRDC, is directly connected to such pressure. Imagine – the level of interference has reached the point where the authorities are not only monitoring what we do, but also prescribing who should lead our organisations. This is not regulation; it is state control designed to weaken civil society from within."¹⁷²

¹⁶⁷ Committee to Protect Journalists, "Oromia Broadcasting Network journalist Sisay Fida shot and killed in Ethiopia", 21 May 2021, <https://cpj.org/2021/05/oromia-broadcasting-network-journalist-sisay-fida-shot-and-killed-in-ethiopia/>.

¹⁶⁸ Sisay Sahlu, "Outgoing Human Rights Commissioner rejects PM's political motive allegations", op. cit.

¹⁶⁹ OMCT et al., "Ethiopia: Defend and Strengthen the Human Rights Movement Against Erosion!", op. cit.; OMCT et al., Ethiopia: Arbitrary suspension of human rights organisations in Ethiopia is a major setback to civic space, op. cit.

¹⁷⁰ OMCT et al., "Ethiopia: Defend and Strengthen the Human Rights Movement Against Erosion!", op. cit.

¹⁷¹ Interview with 07, 20 March 2025.

¹⁷² Interview with 10, 4 August 2025.

In his media briefing announcing his resignation, Yared Hailemariam mentioned that he had faced harassment and intimidation for his human rights work. In addition to health issues, he cited several factors that contributed to his resignation:

“For over a year now, I have faced growing pressure because of the statements and clarifications I provided to both domestic and international media about the human rights situation in our country, as well as my social media posts aimed at raising public awareness about rights and accountability. Despite the clear threats, intimidation, and harassment I faced from security forces, and the unusual calls I received on my mobile phones, I continued my work. But the pressure only intensified. My advocacy made me a target of surveillance and constant suspicion. Ultimately, I realised that under these conditions, I could no longer freely and effectively fulfil my responsibilities. It is this growing intimidation and fear for my safety that has forced me to resign.”¹⁷³”

In addition to these measures, ACSO covertly drafted a bill aimed at amending the progressive civil society law introduced in 2019.

6. Forced Exile and Prohibition of Entry to the Country

The government has silenced critics and HRDs by forcing them into exile and prohibiting the return of those who travel abroad. This forced exile occurs in two main ways. First, the government poses a threat of persecution to HRDs due to their work with human rights organisations, compelling them to leave the country so they cannot lead their organisations or continue their human rights work. Notable victims of this type of forced exile include the former EHRCO Director **Dan Yirga**, as well as former AHRE Directors **Eden Fissiha** and **Meseret Ali**, and co-founder and former programme head of CARD **Atnaf Berhane**.¹⁷⁴ These HRDs were specifically targeted for their engagement with international and regional human rights mechanisms. Security forces and state authorities warned them to cease engagement with these mechanisms, asserting that it undermines the government’s efforts to improve diplomatic relations with international communities. One HRD interviewed shared his experience:

“When I return from a human rights mission abroad, intelligence and security officials harass and interrogate me at the airport. They consistently ask me where I went, for what purpose, and which institutions I engaged with. In some instances, they claim, “We knew where you went, why you went there, and with which institution.” They question me, asking why I am exposing the government to foreign forces and why I am not pursuing alternative activities. They suggest that if I work with the government, I would be better off. If I do not stop my engagement, they warn, I am gambling with my life. Their words are abusive.”¹⁷⁵”

The second category of involuntary exile is directly orchestrated by government authorities. As Yared Hailemariam noted, certain HRDs and journalists have been instructed to leave the country based on fabricated claims that criminal charges are being prepared against them.¹⁷⁶

A 2024 report by International Media Support indicates that, between 2020 and 2024, approximately 54 journalists were forced into exile due to ongoing harassment, incarceration, and fears of further persecution.¹⁷⁷

¹⁷³ Facebook post, Yared Hailemariam, <https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=10238163741451560&set=a.10201347663672625>.

¹⁷⁴ Interview with Yared Hailemariam, 2 March 2025.

¹⁷⁵ Interview with Dan Yirga, 16 March 2025.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷⁷ International Media Support (2024), *Journalists’ Safety Assessment Report*, op. cit.

Many journalists and HRDs in exile remain unsafe. They often flee to neighbouring countries like Uganda and Kenya, where Ethiopian authorities and security have established collaboration.¹⁷⁸ Incidents of attempted abduction have been documented,¹⁷⁹ leaving exiled HRDs feeling insecure, with their families back home also facing targeting and harassment.

As exiled human rights CSOs and HRDs face many challenges to continue their work from abroad, their departure has significantly weakened Ethiopian civil society by shrinking the space for advocacy and citizen mobilisation, and has crippled monitoring and reporting of human rights violations, reducing accountability and enabling abuses to occur with less international scrutiny.

In addition to forcing HRDs into exile, the state has prohibited political dissenters and critics of the government from entering Ethiopia after travelling abroad. A recent example is the case of **Lidetu Ayalew**, a well-known government critic who travelled to the USA for medical treatment. Despite holding an Ethiopian passport, he was denied re-entry to Ethiopia due to a requirement from the Ethiopian embassy that he obtain special permission to return.¹⁸⁰ Similarly, **Abune Petros**, a religious leader critical of the government and known for his firm stance on church matters, was barred from entering Ethiopia after arriving at Bole International Airport on 6 February 2024, following religious festivities in the United States.¹⁸¹ It was only in a statement released on 2 May 2025, that the government announced the lifting of the entry ban for Abune Petros and two other Ethiopian Orthodox Church bishops who had faced similar prohibitions due to their comments on the government.¹⁸²

7. Legislative Reprisal

A further form of state attack on civic space and HRDs is the reintroduction of repressive laws. As discussed in Section II, between 2018 and 2020 several repressive laws were repealed, included revisions to the anti-terrorism law and the law governing CSOs. However, the recent attempt to amend these laws suggests a return to the previous system of instrumentalisation of laws to curtail civic space, silence and persecute HRDs, and entrench impunity for human rights violations.

On 17 June 2025, the Ethiopian Parliament passed an amendment to the Anti-Money Laundering and Counter-Terrorist Financing Law, which it was later forced to re-consider. The amendment provided blanket legal immunity for undercover agents who commit crimes deemed “beyond their control” during operations.¹⁸³ Article 26(4) of Proclamation No. 1387/2025 grants these agents immunity from criminal liability, with the exception of homicide, without offering clear definitions, independent oversight, or judicial safeguards.

The law’s vague terminology, particularly the undefined notions of “undercover agent” and “beyond control”, opens the door to gross human rights violations, including arbitrary detention, torture, enforced disappearance, and illegal surveillance, with total impunity. The lack of precise legal language violates Ethiopia’s obligation to uphold the absolute prohibition of torture as well as the right to an effective remedy, as stipulated in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the Convention Against Torture.

As discussed above, the UN Human Rights Committee in its 2022 concluding observations, and the CAT in its 2019 and 2023 concluding observations, emphasised the urgent need for the Ethiopian government to explicitly criminalise torture. They called for a thorough, impartial, and effective investigation of all allegations of torture, along with accountability of perpetrators. However, the newly introduced immunity provision directly contradicts these calls from international human rights mechanisms and effectively institutionalises impunity within the legal framework.

¹⁷⁸ Interview with journalist Belete Kassa 7 March 2025.

¹⁷⁹ Interview with Dan Yirga, 16 March 2025.

¹⁸⁰ Addis Standard, “Lidetu Ayalew says barred from returning to Ethiopia, plans to travel via another airline,” 11 February 2025, <https://addisstandard.com/lidetu-ayalew-says-barred-from-returning-to-ethiopia-plans-to-travel-via-another-airline/>.

¹⁸¹ Orthodoxy Cognate Page, “Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church Synod Secretary Denied Entry into Ethiopia, Sparks Confusion and Anger Among Faithful”, 7 February 2024, <https://ocpsociety.org/ethiopian-orthodox-church-leader-denied-entry-sparking-widespread-concern/>.

¹⁸² Borkena, “Abiy Ahmed’s Gov’t Lifts Entry Ban on Three Orthodox Archbishops”, 3 May 2025, <https://borkena.com/2025/05/03/ethiopia-abiy-ahmeds-govt-lifts-entry-ban-on-three-orthodox-archbishops/>.

¹⁸³ Tsion Tadesse, “Parliament green lights controversial new law”, *The Reporter*, 18 June 2025, <https://www.thereporterethiopia.com/45658/>.

This development signifies a regression from the political opening experienced in Ethiopia after 2018, during which the country appeared to be moving away from years of authoritarian repression and aligning more closely with international human rights standards. By enacting Article 26(4), Ethiopia is retracing a dark and troubling legacy, which now poses even more serious implications. The new law pre-emptively shields investigative agents from prosecution, stripping the courts of their constitutional authority to determine criminal liability. This not only violates the principle of accountability but also undermines existing safeguards in Ethiopia's Criminal Code, which already provides exemptions in cases involving accidents or force majeure. Article 26(4) bypasses due process, effectively giving covert actors a blank cheque.

In response to public outcry, widespread criticism, and concerns expressed by human rights institutions, the Ethiopian Parliament was forced to reconsider the law in an emergency session held 20 days later.¹⁸⁴ However, it remains unclear how the provision has been amended, since the draft has not been made public.

Similarly, proposals to reform the legal framework governing CSOs are being examined, which would undermine the 2019 reform that repealed the notoriously restrictive 2009 Proclamation and was widely celebrated as a progressive step toward opening civic space, as discussed in Section II.¹⁸⁵ One of the most regressive changes in the recent Draft Amendment to the 2019 Proclamation¹⁸⁶ concerns the composition of the Civil Society Organisations Board. The 2019 law mandated a Board of eleven members, with a majority (seven) from CSOs and required inclusion of women and persons with disabilities.¹⁸⁷ The draft amendment reduces the Board to seven members, four of whom are appointed by the Ministry of Justice, while CSO representation is reduced to two members.¹⁸⁸ Furthermore, it entirely removes the provision on gender and disability representation.

This fundamental change reshapes the governance of CSOs by eroding their voice and strengthening state control over regulatory oversight. Given the Board's power to direct policy and review ACSO's administrative decisions,¹⁸⁹ reducing civil society representation undermines the principle of participatory governance. It introduces a clear power imbalance that favours government interests over those of civil society.

Second, the draft amendment introduces "threat to national security, peace, or interest" as a new and undefined ground for denying registration or cancelling the legal status of CSOs.¹⁹⁰ This is in addition to existing requirements that organisations must operate lawfully and within the framework of Ethiopian law. Crucially, the draft fails to define what constitutes a "threat to national security, peace or interest", instead vesting ACSO with unchecked discretion to determine such threats in collaboration with other unnamed authorities.

This subjectivity, coupled with the removal of judicial review over these decisions,¹⁹¹ creates an opaque and highly discretionary regulatory environment. Although subsequent consultations with CSOs led to an agreement to remove this provision, its status will only be clear once the final version is released. If retained, the provision would enable arbitrary targeting of organisations critical of the government or those working on sensitive issues such as human rights, democracy, or environmental justice. The proposal marks a reversion to the ethos of the 2009 law, where national security was a pretext for shrinking civic space.

Third, the draft amendment imposes significant administrative burdens and restricts operational autonomy. It requires all CSOs to seek prior written authorisation from ACSO, rather than to simply

¹⁸⁴ *Addis Standard*, "Parliament scraps undercover agent immunity clause in money laundering law", 7 July 2025. <https://addisstandard.com/parliament-scrap-undercover-agent-immunity-clause-in-money-laundering-law/>.

¹⁸⁵ Draft Proclamation to Amend the Organizations of Civil Societies Proclamation No. 1113/2019, Proclamation No. ___/2025.

¹⁸⁶ FIDH et al., "Ethiopia: New draft law threatens to dismantle civil society", 2 July 2025. <https://www.fidh.org/en/region/Africa/ethiopia/ethiopia-new-draft-law-threatens-to-dismantle-civil-society>.

¹⁸⁷ Proc. No. 1113/2019, Article 8.

¹⁸⁸ Draft Amendment Proc. No. ___/2025, Article 3.

¹⁸⁹ Proc. No. 1113/2019, Article 9.

¹⁹⁰ Draft Amendment Proc. No. ___/2025, Articles 4 and 10.

¹⁹¹ *Ibid*, Article 6.

inform under the 2019 law, in order to sell or transfer any property, even in routine transactions.¹⁹² It empowers the agency to appoint auditors at its own discretion, with costs borne by the CSO,¹⁹³ and allows it to dictate partnership of foreign CSOs with domestic entities under the guise of “localisation”.¹⁹⁴

These provisions not only delay essential activities but also constitute undue interference in internal affairs. Rather than acting as a regulator, the state assumes a managerial role, fundamentally undermining the independence of civil society.

In addition, the draft bill significantly constrains the ability of CSOs to access foreign funding, particularly for activities related to democracy and human rights. While the 2019 law permits domestic CSOs to solicit funds from any lawful source,¹⁹⁵ the new draft prohibits foreign funding for activities related to political advocacy, voter education, election observation, or any election-related work.¹⁹⁶

These restrictions operate on two levels: they (1) completely bar foreign organisations from engaging in such domains and (2) prohibit domestic organisations from receiving foreign technical, financial, or material support for such work. Furthermore, CSOs must report the source, amount, and purpose of any foreign funding within 15 days of receipt.¹⁹⁷ This regulatory shift isolates organisations engaged in democratic reform and aligns with a broader global trend of weaponizing funding regulations to suppress dissent.

In addition, unlike the 2019 law, which granted CSOs perpetual legal personality once registered, the draft amendment introduces a temporal dimension: all CSOs must renew their registration every four years.¹⁹⁸ This measure creates uncertainty, particularly for organisations working in politically sensitive areas, as it enables the government to use non-renewal as a form of reprisal or silencing.

The draft bill also expands administrative sanctions that can be imposed on CSOs, including written warnings, suspension, and dissolution. The grounds for such measures are longlisted and vaguely worded, including failure to comply with undefined regulatory obligations or being deemed a threat to national security. Moreover, the sanctions are made harsher prolonging the duration of suspension, and introducing monetary fines.¹⁹⁹ It further empowers the Director General of ACSO to suspend the CSO under investigation for three months, with a possibility for the Board to extend the period for an additional three months.²⁰⁰ The draft bill also repeals the right to appeal administrative decisions to a court of law. The lack of clarity and the absence of adequate appeal mechanisms elevate the risk of political targeting and administrative harassment.

¹⁹² Ibid, Article 7 and Proc. No. 1113/2019, Article 61(4).

¹⁹³ Draft Amendment Proc. No./2025, Article 8.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid, Article 11.

¹⁹⁵ Proc. No. 1113/2019, Article 63(1c).

¹⁹⁶ Draft Amendment Proc. No./2025, Articles 9 and 10.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid, Article 16.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid, Article 14.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid, Article 19.

²⁰⁰ Ibid, Article 17.

V. Conclusions and Recommendations

The early period of the post-2018 “reform government” in Ethiopia instilled hope for democratisation and the protection of human rights. It marked a departure from the country’s repressive past and opened new horizons for civic space and HRDs. Key developments included the release of HRDs, journalists, activists and political prisoners from detention; acknowledgment of past abuses; the closure of torture centres like *Maekelawi*; institutional reform of democratic entities such as the EHRC, the NEBE and the federal judiciary; and legal reforms to repeal oppressive laws and replace them with more progressive legislation, such as the laws governing CSOs, media, and anti-terrorism.

However, these gains in opening up civic space and creating an enabling environment for HRDs have not been sustained. The outbreak of the Tigray conflict in 2020 marked a turning point, with the government reversing earlier advances. Since then, a series of states of emergency have been declared – and an ongoing de facto state of emergency has been observed – which the government has systematically used to shrink civic space and silence political dissent, criticism, and reports of gross human rights violations. The Ethiopian government has become increasingly aggressive towards HRDs and CSOs, with Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed explicitly warning about the need to review the practices, procedures, and laws of human rights organisations.

Since 2020, the range of tools used to persecute and attack HRDs and civic space in Ethiopia has broadened. These approaches aim to weaken and dismantle CSOs at a time when they are desperately needed, especially with the upcoming national elections in 2026 and the initiative for a transitional justice process.

The suspension of local human rights organisations on ambiguous and politically motivated grounds, including allegations of “lack of neutrality” and acting against national and citizens’ interests, has drawn concern from the UN Special Rapporteur on human rights defenders. Requirements that these organisations submit their work plans, partnership details, and funding sources to the ASCO for approval, together with a new bill to amend the progressive 2019 CSO law, indicate a significant rollback of reforms.

The prevalence of arbitrary, prolonged, and in some cases incommunicado detentions – affecting more than 200 journalists between 2020 and 2024 – alongside violence, harassment, torture, ill-treatment, enforced disappearances, extrajudicial killings, and forced exile of government critics, journalists and HRDs, have severely restricted civic space and worsened the situation for HRDs in the country. The re-emergence of unofficial detention facilities converted into torture centres, such as Awash Arba military camp and Semera centre, shows a troubling resurgence of past practices of state-sanctioned torture. These gross human rights violations and abuses against HRDs persist despite repeated concerns and recommendations raised by international human rights mechanisms.

The report makes the following recommendations:

To the Government of Ethiopia:

- Release all HRDs currently held in arbitrary detention and withdraw all unfounded charges against them;
- Uphold and safeguard HRDs’ entitlement to protection from torture and other forms of ill-treatment;
- Accede to the Rome Statute and ratify the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance and the Optional Protocol to the Convention Against Torture;
- Ensure that legislative amendments comply with international human rights standards;
- Cease all acts of harassment and intimidation directed towards HRDs and CSOs in Ethiopia, and in exile outside the country, ensuring that they are able to conduct their legitimate activities without interference or fear of reprisal;

- Create an enabling environment for HRDs and CSOs to actively and meaningfully participate in and monitor the transitional justice process, national dialogue and the upcoming national elections;
- Respect the right of citizens to enter the country;
- Ensure independent, impartial, transparent, and effective investigations into all human rights violations against HRDs, with the aim of holding those responsible accountable;
- Provide appropriate and effective remedies and reparations to HRDs subjected to human rights violations;
- Guarantee and facilitate, without exception, the exercise of rights related to freedom of opinion and expression, freedom of association, and freedom of peaceful assembly, in accordance with Ethiopia's obligations under international human rights instruments and other relevant standards, including the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the UN Declaration on HRDs;
- Fully implement the recommendations issued by UN human rights monitoring mechanisms, including the Human Rights Committee, the Committee Against Torture, and the Universal Periodic Review, concerning the protection of HRDs;
- Extend standing invitations and coordinate country visits for all relevant UN Special Procedures, including the Special Rapporteur on the Situation of HRDs, the Special Rapporteur on the Rights to Freedom of Peaceful Assembly and Association, the Special Rapporteur on the Promotion and Protection of Freedom of Opinion and Expression, and the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention.

To the UN and African Human Rights Mechanisms:

- Urge the Ethiopian authorities to cease all forms of human rights violations, as well as any attacks and persecution directed at HRDs and CSOs;
- Urge the Government of Ethiopia to ensure that any amendments to domestic legislation are fully aligned with international human rights standards.
- Follow up on the implementation of recommendations aimed at enhancing civic space and safeguarding HRDs in Ethiopia;
- Engage with the Ethiopian authorities to ensure the ongoing transitional justice process fully considers and incorporates cases involving HRDs;
- Ensure the establishment of effective and accessible protection mechanisms for Ethiopian HRDs;
- Advocate for the governments of countries hosting Ethiopian HRDs in exile to provide them with sufficient and effective protection;
- Seek an invitation to undertake an official visit to Ethiopia.

To Third States:

- Urge the Ethiopian authorities to uphold their obligations regarding HRDs and civic space. This includes releasing HRDs in detention, opening up civic space, holding perpetrators accountable, and reversing regressive and repressive laws. It is essential that the situation of HRDs and civic space in Ethiopia remains high on the political agenda, including in bilateral and multilateral engagement;
- Provide appropriate protections and support for Ethiopian HRDs residing in their jurisdictions, including by promptly investigating any instances of intimidation, harassment, or reprisal carried out within their jurisdiction;
- Increase financial and material support to CSOs and HRDs, including those in exile. Such support should include issuing visas and other documents that allow for the long-term stay of Ethiopian HRDs in host countries, as well as establishing rehabilitation programmes for defenders who are victims of arbitrary detention, torture, ill-treatment, and other serious human rights violations.

Establishing the facts Investigative and trial observation missions - Through activities ranging from sending trial observers to organising international investigative missions, FIDH has developed rigorous and impartial procedures to establish facts and responsibility.

Experts sent to the field give their time to FIDH on a voluntary basis.

FIDH has conducted more than 1,500 missions in over 100 countries in the past 25 years. These activities reinforce FIDH's alert and advocacy campaigns.

Supporting civil society Training and exchanges - FIDH organises numerous activities in partnership with its member organisations, in the countries in which they are based. The core aim is to strengthen the influence and capacity of human rights activists to boost changes at the local level. Mobilising the international community

Permanent lobbying before intergovernmental bodies - FIDH supports its member organisations and local partners in their efforts before intergovernmental organisations. FIDH alerts international bodies to violations of human rights and refers individual cases to them. FIDH also takes part in the development of international legal instruments.

Informing and reporting Mobilising public opinion - FIDH informs and mobilises public opinion. Press releases, press conferences, open letters to authorities, mission reports, urgent appeals, petitions, campaigns, website... FIDH makes full use of all means of communication to raise awareness of human rights violations.

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Created in 1985, the World Organisation Against Torture (OMCT) works for, with and through an international coalition of over 200 non-governmental organisations - the SOS-Torture Network - fighting torture, summary executions, enforced disappearances, arbitrary detentions, and all other cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment or punishment in the world and fighting for the protection of human rights defenders.

Assisting and supporting victims

OMCT supports victims of torture to obtain justice and reparation, including rehabilitation. This support takes the form of legal, medical and social emergency assistance, submitting complaints to regional and international human rights mechanisms and urgent interventions. OMCT pays particular attention to certain categories of victims, such as women and children.

Preventing torture and fighting against impunity

Together with its local partners, OMCT advocates for the effective implementation, on the ground, of international standards against torture. OMCT is also working for the optimal use of international human rights mechanisms, in particular the United Nations Committee Against Torture, so that it can become more effective.

Protecting human rights defenders

Often those who defend human rights and fight against torture are threatened. That is why OMCT places their protection at the heart of its mission, through alerts, activities of prevention, advocacy and awareness raising as well as direct support.

Accompanying and strengthening organisations in the field

OMCT provides its members with the tools and services that enable them to carry out their work and strengthen their capacity and effectiveness in the fight against torture. OMCT presence in Tunisia is part of its commitment to supporting civil society in the process of transition to the rule of law and respect for the absolute prohibition of torture.

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THE OBSERVATORY

Activities of the Observatory

The Observatory is an action programme based on the belief that strengthened cooperation and solidarity among human rights defenders and their organisations will contribute to break the isolation they are faced with. It is also based on the absolute necessity to establish a systematic response from NGOs and the international community to the repression of which defenders are victims.

With this aim, the Observatory seeks to establish:

- > A mechanism of systematic alert of the international community on cases of harassment and repression of defenders of human rights and fundamental freedoms, particularly when they require urgent intervention;
- > The observation of judicial proceedings, and whenever necessary, direct legal assistance;
- > International missions of investigation and solidarity;
- > A personalised assistance as concrete as possible, including material support, with the aim of ensuring the security of the defenders victims of serious violations;
- > The preparation, publication and world-wide dissemination of reports on violations of the rights and freedoms of individuals or organisations working for human rights around the world;
- > Sustained action with the United Nations and more particularly the Special Rapporteur on Human Rights Defenders, and when necessary with geographic and thematic Special Rapporteurs and Working Groups;
- > Sustained lobbying with various regional and international intergovernmental institutions, especially the Organisation of American States (OAS), the African Union (AU), the European Union (EU), the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), the Council of Europe, the International Organisation of the Francophonie (OIF), the Commonwealth, the League of Arab States, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the International Labour Organisation (ILO).

The Observatory's activities are based on consultation and co-operation with national, regional, and international non-governmental organisations.

With efficiency as its primary objective, the Observatory has adopted flexible criteria to examine the admissibility of cases that are communicated to it, based on the "operational definition" of human rights defenders adopted by FIDH and OMCT: "Each person victim or at risk of being the victim of reprisals, harassment or violations, due to his or her commitment, exercised individually or in association with others, in conformity with international instruments of protection of human rights, to the promotion and realisation of the rights recognised by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and guaranteed by the different international instruments".

To ensure its activities of alert and mobilisation, the Observatory has established a system of communication devoted to defenders in danger.

This system, called Emergency Line, can be reached through:

E-MAIL: alert@observatoryfordefenders.org

FIDH TEL: + 33 1 43 55 25 18

OMCT TEL: + 41 22 809 49 39



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