



The implications of politicized education for academic freedom in Ethiopia

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Despite the formal recognition of fundamental human rights and freedoms under the 1995 Ethiopian constitution, freedom of association and expression have been seriously restricted in Ethiopia in the last few years. Particularly after the controversial general elections in 2005, the Ethiopian regime has used different pretexts to restrict freedom of association and expression. For instance, the regime passed a new charity law that prohibits local civil society groups from engaging in the promotion of human rights and democratic rights.¹ In addition to this, the regime has enacted a sweeping Anti-Terrorism Law that targets political opponents, human rights activists and journalists.²

¹ In February 2009 the Ethiopian parliament passed into law the Charities and Societies Proclamation (No.621/2009). The law places severe administrative restrictions on the work of human rights non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in Ethiopia. Only Ethiopian charities and societies may work on human rights issues in Ethiopia. International NGOs are prohibited from working on them. The law also explicitly prohibits Ethiopian charities or societies who may work on human rights from receiving more than ten percent of their funding from foreign sources. Since many of the local charities are supported by international donors, the law has practically banned the former from engaging in human rights activities.

² In 2009 a controversial anti-terrorism law was established in Ethiopia. The law criminalises any contact or reporting that encourages individuals or groups which the government labelled 'terrorists.' By broadly defying acts of terrorism, the Ethiopian government is using the law to crack down on journalists and opposition

Why has the country's democratic transformation and protection of human rights deteriorated even by African standards? Many Western observers of the Ethiopian situation do not have a deep insight into the nature of the current regime and its ideology. Despite the problems posed by the absence of a democratic culture and the existence of poverty in the country, currently the most serious impediments to democratization and protection of human rights in Ethiopia are the leftist ideological tendencies of the ruling Ethiopian Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF). Despite the party's outward recognition of fundamental human rights and democratic values, it runs the country with leftist-oriented ideological principles that largely contradict the principles of freedom and democracy recognized under the constitution. One of the major ideological policies pursued by the regime is a revolutionary democracy that does not permit the existence of any independent institutions in the country or any real separation of powers, since all institutions of government are ideologically entrenched in the state apparatus. In addition, the political space has been further restricted in Ethiopia since the 2005 general election through the reinvention of the 'developmental state model'. The model presupposes the wider role and competence of the government in controlling social, economic and political measures to realize economic prosperity.

The ideological policies adopted by the regime have affected academic freedom and the quality of education in Ethiopia. Since universities have been historically epicentres for political movements, EPRDF has used different mechanisms to stifle political movements in higher education institutions. One of the serious measures undertaken by the regime to weaken academic freedom in the country was to dismiss 41 highly qualified professors from Addis Ababa University in 1993. The professors were expelled from their work due to their

leaders who are critical of the regime. Several journalists and opposition political leaders are currently serving long prison sentences after they have been charged with terrorism related charges.

critical opinions on the country's political situation. The regime has also prevented any move to make the universities autonomous in administering their own affairs. To this day, university presidents and other university officials are directly appointed by the Prime Minister rather than elected by the university community. The major task of the university officials is basically to hamper any political movement in the universities rather than working to bring about quality of education.³

The regime also controls the content of classroom sessions through its party networks in the universities. Government officials have publicly stated that teachers do not have the right to say anything outside the issues indicated in the curriculum.⁴ This has created an overwhelming burden on teachers to apply self-censorship to avoid reprisal from the regime. In high schools and primary schools, teachers are openly required to be members of EPRDF. There are cases where teachers who refused to be members of the party have lost their job. In the last five years, university students have been told that they will not be employed by government agencies unless they become members of EPRDF.⁵ Since the government is the major employer in the country, students are therefore obliged to register for party membership. Once they become party members, they stop criticizing the government and are expected to spy on their teachers and other students who are not friendly to the regime. Such systematic application of party ideology has seriously undermined academic freedom and

³ See The 2006 U.S. State Department Country Report on Human Rights Practices <http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/hrrpt/2006/78734.htm>

⁴ See *The anguish of higher education students in Ethiopia*, <http://freedomfororomo.wordpress.com/2013/06/13/the-anguish-of-higher-education-students-in-ethiopia/>; *The Unhappy Legacy of Meles Zenawi*, Freedom House, August 22, 2012, <http://www.freedomhouse.org/blog/unhappy-legacy-meles-zenawi>; Alemayehu G. Mariam, *Ethiopia: Indoctrination*, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/alemayehu-g-mariam/ethiopia-indoctrination_b_706199.html

⁵ See *The anguish of higher education students in Ethiopia*, <http://freedomfororomo.wordpress.com/2013/06/13/the-anguish-of-higher-education-students-in-ethiopia/>; *The Unhappy Legacy of Meles Zenawi*, Freedom House, August 22, 2012, <http://www.freedomhouse.org/blog/unhappy-legacy-meles-zenawi>; Alemayehu G. Mariam, *Ethiopia: Indoctrination*, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/alemayehu-g-mariam/ethiopia-indoctrination_b_706199.html

quality of education in the country and injected an atmosphere of fear in the education system. Unless the regime guarantees administrative autonomy to the universities and refrains from politicizing education, the quality of education in the country will further deteriorate in the coming years leading to a deeper social and political crisis.