**NGO contribution on the list of issues in Ethiopia**

Submitted by: Maat for Peace, Development and Human Rights

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**Introduction**

In this report, Maat for Peace, Development and Human Rights would like to point out a number of issues related to the recent deterioration of basic civil and political rights in the country, despite the commendable steps taken by the country after March 2018. But things have turned upside down, and the government has resorted to the same tools once used by previous governments to crackdown protests and silence opposition. In this report, Maat focuses on Article 1 and Article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

**Article 1: The right to self-determination**

The State party report stated that “since submitting the previous report, the Federation Council has received eleven self-rule and recognition requests from various ethnic groups and communities,” but the State party report did not mention any of them, nor did it address the model of Sidema that has demonstrated relative success.[[1]](#footnote-1) However, many violations have been committed in the process, and Maat for Peace would like to point out them.

On 22 July 2019, at least 25 people have died in clashes between Ethiopian security forces and activists in southern Ethiopia, during the protests across the Sidama region. Activists from the Sidama ethnic group were set to hold a referendum on establishing their own federal state.[[2]](#footnote-2) In July 2018, Sidama representatives submitted their request for a referendum on having their own officially recognized region. As part of the constitution, the Ethiopian government must hold a referendum within a year of a request from any ethnic group which wishes to form a separate entity.[[3]](#footnote-3) As the one-year deadline approached, it became clear that the vote would not be organized on time, leading to escalating tensions and violence that resulted in 25 casualties. The request was ultimately deferred to 13, 2019, then rescheduled to November 20, 2019.

Eventually, after many disputes and casualties, the referendum took place and the preliminary results demonstrated that 98% of voters were in support of statehood.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Until mid-2020, namely, five months after the people of Sidama Zone voted in a referendum to become a regional state, many Sidama people are anxious about unconstitutional delays in the transfer of power from the Southern Nations region to the new federal state. And before that, On 30 April and 1 May, the head of security in Sidama Zone and regional special police kidnapped and abused several prominent Sidama scholars, activists and civilians in Hawassa, Dalle and Lokka Abbaayya districts and afforded them no due process.[[5]](#footnote-5) There are already over 2,000 Sidama political prisoners in detention across Sidama and Hadiya regions in Ethiopia. The latest mass arrest in Sidama occurs at the time when prisoners in Ethiopia and many countries are being released to save lives amid the coronavirus pandemic. The authorities have resorted to harassing Sidama civilians to silence the legitimate grievances of the people arising from procrastination in formalizing Sidama Regional State.[[6]](#footnote-6)

In the same southern region, there were similar demands for self-determination from another ethnic group, Wolaita, which met the same fate. On August 9, 2020, at least ten people were killed in Ethiopia and dozens were injured, in clashes between protesters and security forces in the southern region. The initial information that Maat received was that the security forces had cracked down on peaceful civilians and shot them with live bullets in the head, stomach and chest, claiming the lives of 10 people, including a child so far, and injuring more than 30 others. These protests erupted in the wake of arresting local officials, activists, and members of political parties, who seek to establish a new independent region for their ethnic group (Wolaita).

**In this regard, Maat for Peace, Development and Human Rights calls on the Committee members to seek clarification from the government of the State party about what measures it has taken to ensure that people of Sidama region have full right to self-determination. We also call on the committee to clarify the findings of the examination of the ethnical claims of self-determination submitted by Wolaita as well. Additionally, we call on the Committee to request more details about what was mentioned in the State party's government report regarding consideration of recognition of self-rule from various groups and ethnic communities for the 11 requests submitted to the government.**

**Article 19 - Freedom of opinion and expression**

Maat for Peace, Development and Human Rights expresses its grave concern about the blatant crackdown on freedom of opinion and expression in the country, whose citizens have long suffered from flagrant violations and suppression even on social media platforms.

Despite the unthinkable reforms introduced in April 2018, that were mentioned in the state party report, Maat expresses its dissatisfaction with the state party’s permanent use of justifications such as “the spread of hate speech and dangerous misleading information,” and “exceptional circumstances”, among others, which cannot be accepted, especially since the price paid citizens is too heavy. Maat, therefore, wishes to clarify the following:

**a. The continuous crackdown on media professionals:**

The anti-terrorism declaration that began to be reconsidered and amended in August 2018, continued to be used, in one way or another, as a tool to stifle the press, crack down on protests and restrict freedom of assembly, even the use of the Internet, until the new law was passed in Parliament in early 2020. The media is still reluctant to criticize the government or raise serious questions about its policy. Perhaps the media were trying to stand by the government and support it during this new transitional phase, but after the passage of more than two years since the beginning of these reforms is a sufficient time for the media to shift its attitude, adopting a growth mindset and offering constructive critic about the government. Perhaps the real reason is that the Ethiopian authorities leave no stone unturned to ensure press and media freedom is entrenched both in practice and in law. For example, in June 2018, the Ethiopian Broadcasting Authority (EBA), which is a key regulatory body, ordered two TV stations to explain why they did not cover a pro-government rally in Addis Ababa.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Regional police detained two journalists working for Mereja TV, a website that was blocked in June 2018, while the two journalists were reporting home demolitions and allegations of forced displacement.[[8]](#footnote-8) Logically, this does not jeopardize the country's security at all as constantly claimed by the government. Moreover, on July 13, 2018, while traveling from Dire Dawa to Addis Ababa, a group of young reporters were intercepted and charged with espionage. Their equipment was vandalized, and they were severely beaten, leading to the death of their driver one week later.

It should also be noted that in October 2019, the security forces surrounded the home of Jawar Muhammad, an influential blogger and journalist[[9]](#footnote-9); and the government tried to withdraw his security clearance.[[10]](#footnote-10) On October 23, 2019, Jawar Muhammad posted on Facebook saying that the bodyguard appointed by the federal authorities to protect him had received orders to withdraw, and he claimed that this was part of a plan to attack him. Following these accusations, thousands of supporters of Jawhar Muhammad took to the streets denouncing the practices of the State party's Prime Minister.[[11]](#footnote-11) Jawhar Muhammad is a popular figure on social media.[[12]](#footnote-12) Police fired bullets and tear gas as thousands protested in Ethiopia on October 23, 2019, and protests quickly spread to the cities of Adama, Ambo and Jimma. The death toll at that time reached about 86, including 4 women.[[13]](#footnote-13)

On June 7, 2019, the police in Addis Ababa prevented the journalist (Askender Nega) from holding a press conference to announce plans for his new TV station, "Sinai". Police officers blocked the entrance to the Hilton Hotel, where they transported the journalists and other attendees. This comes on the heels of a similar move took place on June 3, when police prevented holding an earlier press conference organized by "Askender" to announce his plans for his TV channel in a hotel in Addis Ababa as well.[[14]](#footnote-14) Although the laws of Ethiopia do not require press conferences to be approved or licensed.[[15]](#footnote-15) The unspoken reason is that he is always making fun of the government on his social media pages.

After the outbreak of the Coronavirus (Covid-19), the crack down on the media in the country did not stop. On March 27, federal police arrested Yayesew at a relative’s home in the town of Legetafo. Yayesew contributes a column to the privately owned Feteh magazine and hosts a weekly political program on Tigray TV, a broadcaster owned by the Tigray regional government. The arrest came after Yayesew published a report on the COVID-19 virus on Facebook and YouTube on March 26 that was condemned by Ethiopia’s national Ministry of Health. In his report, Yayesew alleged that the Ethiopian government had told religious leaders to prepare 200,000 graves to accommodate deaths from the virus.[[16]](#footnote-16)

In early July 2020, and after the murder of Hachalu Hundessa, a much-loved Oromo singer and activist, mass demonstrations sparked in the country, and hundreds of people were killed during the wave of unrest that swept Ethiopia. The government did not stop arbitrary arrests, it rather continued to arrest thousands of people in few weeks. Among them was the journalist Jawar Muhammad, founder of the Oromia Media Network. The government justified its behavior by commenting that the channel incited violence during the post-Hondesa protests, even though an IT technician and a driver were among those arrested.[[17]](#footnote-17)

**b. Internet Shutdown: using the same usual tools**

Since 2016, the Internet has been closed more than six times under the cloak of national security, quelling rising protests, controlling strikes, and exam cheating.[[18]](#footnote-18) There have even been decisions to indict online bloggers on charges of inciting violence under Article 257 of the Criminal Code. [[19]](#footnote-19)

During the wave of protests in September 2018, the government shut down the internet in parts of the country where there were demonstrations. The government returned again in June 2019, blocking the internet across the country in an effort to prevent high school exams from being leaked to social media.[[20]](#footnote-20)

This shows that the Ethiopian government is ready to return to using the same repressive tools, once used by previous government, to deal with problems, which opens the door to the possibility of using the same tools to suppress freedoms of opinion and expression. About 16 million Ethiopians, who make up 15.4% of the total population, are denied their right of expression.[[21]](#footnote-21)

This point of view was confirmed by Ethiopia’s prime minister who said that if deadly unrest in the country continues with online incitement, internet in the country could be cut off “forever.” Abiy said Ethiopia wants the internet to help drive development but warned that it is “neither water nor air.”[[22]](#footnote-22) The motives prompted him to say this at such time is understandable, but it sounds the alarm bells at the possibility of exploiting these circumstances if happened again in the future, and imposing arbitrary restrictions on freedom of opinion and expression through the Internet, under the pretext of "exceptional circumstances", as was the case before 2018.

This is indeed what happened when the Prime Minister of the State party carried out his threats. Since January 3, 2020, the authorities have disconnected mobile phone networks, landlines, and internet services in western Oromia’s Kellem Wellega, West Wellega, and Horo Gudru Wellega zones. In East Wellega, residents reported that the internet and social media services were blocked, with text and cell service available only in major towns. The shutdown has been imposed in areas under federal military control and comes amid reports of government military operations against the armed wing of the once-banned Oromo Liberation Front (OLF).[[23]](#footnote-23) The Deputy Chief of Staff General, Berhanu Gula, admitted in March 2019 that the government had cut communication services in an attempt to carry out successful operations against the rebels from the Oromo Liberation Front.

This measure casts a shadow on citizens' rights to expression during a period when the Internet is cut off, and makes it difficult for journalists to cover some incidents and contact information sources. In fact, internet disruption affects not only civil and political rights, but also economic and social rights, at a time when the urgent need for the Internet is emerging in light of the outbreak of the Coronavirus.

These examples illustrate the way the current authorities deal with the press, the media and whatever comes in the way of the government.

**C. Academic freedoms in Ethiopia**

Institutions of higher education in Ethiopia witness scenes of violence among students due to ethnic and religious differences. In the past two years, the security situation in universities has deteriorated due to ethnic-based violence. What led to the killing of students at the universities of Assosa, Adigrat, Aksum, and Deberemarkos over the past two years. There were other cases of violence in other universities such as Poli Hora University and University of Meto, due to other reasons. Students, professors, and academics are increasingly targeted in violent attacks - an unacceptable trend that jeopardizes the future of freedoms at universities in general. For example, what happened on June 9, 2018, when an unknown individual carried out a grenade attack on students studying in the Della University library, wounding at least nine people. To date, there is little information available regarding the motive behind the attack, or the identity of the perpetrators.[[24]](#footnote-24) However, this example was just the beginning. Ethnic-triggered clashes in various Ethiopian universities since last November have killed more than ten students and left many others injured.

Perhaps most notably, what happened in January 2020, according to a report published by the Ethiopian Ministry of Science and Higher Education, the protest and unrest in Ethiopia has caused 35,000 students from 22 universities to quit their classes. The ministry stated that it has taken various disciplinary measures against more than 640 students and 40 university staff, who are suspected of involvement in unrest, as part of anti-unrest measures in various Ethiopian universities.[[25]](#footnote-25) The clashes have prompted Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed to warn that his government could close down universities if the unrest continues.[[26]](#footnote-26)

To quell the situation, and as a future precaution, around 30 million learners in Ethiopian schools and nearly a million in the 50 public universities and more than 250 private academic institutions, all of which represent high potential transmission sites.[[27]](#footnote-27)

The Ministry of Science and Higher Education announced on Tuesday that students, freshman students or otherwise, will have to sign an agreement with district-level education offices in the areas where they (and their parents) live.

The Ministry has prepared a form which will be filled out by students and their parents, and submit it to the education office in their areas of residence. The ministry has made it clear that it will hold both parents and students for wrongdoings that will negatively impact peace and security in the universities.[[28]](#footnote-28) This is despite the fact that most of the college students are of legal age (18 years according to the constitution). However, the new regulations hold parents responsible for the behavior of these students.

Accordingly, two things must be warned: The first is the inability of the government to control the security situation inside universities, despite many warnings from student groups that they receive threats. The second is the arbitrary measures taken by the government that prevented this huge number of students from exercising their right to academic education. Even if it is understood that a large part of the decision is due to the tension resulting from these disturbances, it is important to reduce losses as much as possible, especially since the threat to close or actually close universities may only postpone the crisis not offering an overall solution.

**In this regard, Maat for Peace, Development and Human Rights calls on the members of the committee to seek clarification from the government of the State party about the measures it has taken to achieve justice, and the procedures for reparation and compensation for those affected by these repressive measures.**

**It should also clarify the alternatives provided by the government of the State party in the wake of the internet blackout and the economic and political rights that have affected it, especially in light of Covid-19. As well as clarification about the government's measures to ensure academic freedoms in universities.**

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2. Ethiopia referendum: Dozens killed in Sidama clashes”, BBC, 22 July 2019, <https://bbc.in/39CWtQM> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. ويشكل سكان المنطقة 4% من سكان إثيوبيا البالغ عددهم 105 ملايين نسمة وهم أكبر عدد من السكان بين المجموعات العرقية البالغ عددها 56 مجموعة والتي تشكل ولاية (القوميات والشعوب الجنوبية [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Ethiopia Holds Referendum to Determine Statehood for Sidama Zone”, ifes, 15 Jan 2020, <http://bit.ly/33aEi2G> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. More arrests in Sidama as authorities refuse to hand power to new region”, Ethiopia Insights, May 8, 2020, available at: <https://bit.ly/2YNBwjC> [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. More arrests in Sidama as authorities refuse to hand power to new region”, op.cit. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Fisseha Tekle," OPED Ethiopia: Fragile new-found press freedom must be buttressed in law and practice ", Amnesty International, 3 May 2019, available at: <http://bit.ly/32I6VmB> [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Ethiopia: Abiy’s First Year as Prime Minister, Review of Freedom of Expression”, Human Rights Watch, April 3, 2019, available at: <http://bit.ly/33VxBAq> [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. () يحمل جواز سفر أمريكيا، هو ناشط من عرق الأورومو الذي يمثل أكبر عرقية في البلاد. انتقده بعض الإثيوبيين لاستخدامه لغة مشوبة بالعرقية لكن الكثير من شباب الأورومو يعتبرونه بطلا أحدث التغيير السياسي الذي أدى لتعيين آبي أحمد العام الماضي رئيسا للوزراء [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Tiksa Negeri, “Hundreds gather outside house of Ethiopian activist after deadly day of protests”, Reuters, OCTOBER 24, 2019, available at: <http://bit.ly/2BDs5GD> [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. جوهر محمد.. معارض شرس يتحدى آبي أحمد في إثيوبيا" روسيا اليوم، 29.10.2019، على <http://bit.ly/3cRemxm> [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Simon Marks, “Protests in Ethiopia Threaten to Mar Image of Its Nobel-Winning Leader”, The New York Times, Oct. 23, 2019, available at: <https://nyti.ms/32NeQiA> [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. ارتفاع عدد ضحايا تظاهرات إثيوبيا.. وأبي أحمد: "قوى تعرقل التقدم"، مصراوي، 03 نوفمبر 2019، على الرابط التالي: <http://bit.ly/3aRfXBF> [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. أُطلق سراح إسكندر نيغا، وهو صحفي ومدون، من السجن في فبراير 2018 بعد قضاء سبع سنوات من عقوبة السجن لمدة 18 عامًا. منذ إطلاق سراحه، كان ينشر مقالاته في صحيفة إثيوبية أسبوعية. وظل يقود المناقشات حول قضايا مثل الديمقراطية والقومية العرقية وإدارة أديس أبابا [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Ethiopia: Stop harassing Eskinder Nega for his opinions”, Amnesty, 7 June 2019, at: <http://bit.ly/2xowCxL> [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Ethiopian journalist Yayesew Shimelis detained following COVID-19 report”, CPJ, April 1, 2020, available at: <https://bit.ly/2LfppnB> [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. In Ethiopia, a musician's death and a transition in trouble”, The Humanitarian, 7 August 2020, available at: <https://bit.ly/31PKAEn> [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Yohannes Eneyew Ayalew, “The Internet shutdown muzzle(s) freedom of expression in Ethiopia: competing narratives”, 20 May 2019, available at: <http://bit.ly/2pNyY5q> [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Ethiopia: Free expression and online anonymity must be respected”, Article 19, APRIL 13, 2017, available at: <https://bit.ly/2NUD98q> [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. وهذه ليست المرة الأولى التي تقطع فيها أديس أبابا خدمات الإنترنت أيام الامتحانات؛ إذ أقدمت على خطوة مماثلة قبل عامين ونصف، حين منعت الإنترنت من 31 مايو وحتى 8 يونيو في عام 2017، بعد ظهور أوراق الامتحانات على الإنترنت. وللمزيد من التفاصيل انظر:   
     " إثيوبيا تحجب الإنترنت خشية تسريب الامتحانات"، موقع العين الإخباري، 2019/6/11، على الرابط التالي: <http://bit.ly/35ZAphX> [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Yohannes Eneyew Ayalew, op.cit [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Ethiopia will cut internet as and when, 'it's neither water nor air' - PM Abiy”, Africa News, 02/08/2019, available at: <http://bit.ly/2W6it0w> [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Ethiopia: Communications Shutdown Takes Heavy Toll”, HRW, March 9, 2020,  <http://bit.ly/2IPLV5j> [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Academic Freedom In Ethiopia”, Scholars at risk Network, June 09, 2018, available at: <https://bit.ly/2UKQR0C> [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Unrest in universities forces 35,000 students to quit class”, Xinhua News Agency 24 January 2020, available at: <https://bit.ly/3dCjhTg> [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Ethiopia State of Higher Education: 35,000 Students to Quit Class from 22 Universities”, Endangered Scholars Worldwide, available at: <https://bit.ly/2xso0q6> [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Lessons from the shutdown – How one university responded”, UWN, 26 March 2020, available at: <https://bit.ly/2Uo144e> [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Ethiopia introduced new university admission rule as a security measure”, September 24, 2019, borkena, available at: <https://bit.ly/2QTc4UV> [↑](#footnote-ref-28)