



ETHIOPIA

Area: 1,104,300 sq. km.
Population: 77,431,000.
Language: Amharic.
Head of government: Meles Zenawi.

The international community might have believed that legislative elections in May 2005 would mark the end of “authoritarian democracy” and the beginning of a genuine openness. But the polling fiasco and the riots which followed them dashed this hope. Around 15 journalists have been in prison since November 2005 after being picked up in a crackdown on the opposition coalition.

After a disastrous year, 2006 in Ethiopia was a static one. Some 20 journalists spent it in cells in Addis Ababa, part of a group of at least 76 members of the opposition, civil society and the private press prosecuted for “treason”, “conspiracy” to overthrow the government and “genocide”. Their trials before the federal high court opened on 2 May. The general disapproval, including from Ethiopia’s traditional allies, failed to get Prime Minister Meles Zenawi to budge. For him, there was no doubt that the opposition wanted to engineer a coup and to take revenge on ethnic Tigreans like himself.

Fourteen newspaper editors or publishers were rounded up in the space of one month in November 2005. From December onwards, other journalists were arrested and sentenced in defamation cases. All were still detained as of 1st January 2007.

Since 1st January 2006, two other journalists were added to the list of the “November prisoners”. Solomon Aregawi, of *Hadar*, arrested in November 2005, was charged on 21 March 2006 with “insulting the Constitution” and “genocide”, along with 32 other prisoners, members or supposed members of the CUD, Goshu Moges, of the weekly *Lisane Hezeb*, arrested on 19 February was charged with “treason” on 19 April. A number of other journalists and opposition figures or organisations, were charged while out of the country and tried in absentia.

It is against this tense background, aggravated by the war with Somalia and the standoff at the

Eritrean border, that several privately-owned newspapers are continuing to appear in Addis Ababa. Self-censorship is commonplace, particularly on military issues. Ethiopian journalists are held to an imposed patriotism and foreign correspondents closely watched. Anthony Mitchell, working for the *Associated Press (AP)*, was forced to leave the country on 22 January for having allegedly “tarnished the image of the country”. Foreign media have great difficulty in obtaining accreditation from the Information Ministry, which is essential to be allowed to work legally in Ethiopia.

Reporters Without Borders has been worried since 2004, about the plight of two journalists working for the Oromo service of public television *ETV*. They were arrested in April of that year, along with other *ETV* staff, since released, following a violent crackdown on an Oromo student demonstration on the Addis Ababa University campus, on 4 January 2004. The two journalists were accused of being informers for the separatist Oromo Liberation Front (OLF).

For the first time in its history, the Ethiopian government appears to have launched itself into web censorship. From May to June 2006, most blogs and opposition websites were inaccessible in the country. The government denied being behind it. However, at the end of November, these online publications against mysteriously disappeared, which makes the hypothesis of political censorship appear more plausible.