

Suppression of information production in Ethiopia

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Introduction

The Ethiopian state is taking steps to suppress the very first part of the information cycle: the production of information. While the main suppression activities have domestic roots within Ethiopia, they also reach producers of information abroad, such as international media, activists and academics. In this way, there is a clear link between domestic and foreign information manipulation and interference (FIMI), and Ethiopia's information suppression may therefore affect information freedom also within Europe. Overall, these efforts are more reactive than proactive, prioritising short term survival of a fragile regime over the consistent, long-term strategies found in strong capacity states such as China, Russia and Rwanda.

Summary

The Ethiopian government actively suppresses the production of information both domestically and internationally, targeting journalists, academics, and civil society organisations, with significant implications for freedom of expression. Legal mechanisms, including the Media Law (2021) and anti-terrorism legislation, have been used to silence dissent, while bureaucratic barriers and financial pressures restrict independent reporting. Journalists face harassment, arrests, and forced exile, and foreign media access is tightly controlled. Academics experience self-censorship and fieldwork restrictions, while CSOs are targeted through harassment and suspensions. To counter this, international actors should advocate for institutional independence, protect journalists and activists, and promote transparency, accountability, and collaboration between civil society and academia.

Context

Located in the strategically important Horn of Africa, Ethiopia has traditionally been considered as a key political player, hosting the headquarters of the African Union and acting as an important ally for major global powers in an unstable region between Sudan, Eritrea and Somalia. From 1991 to 2018, the country was led by the same authoritarian political party, the Ethiopian Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF). In this period, the production of information was severely suppressed, despite the existence of formally democratic institutions. Eventually, popular protests and internal cracks in the party brought a new national leadership in 2018. The new Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed reversed many of the most repressive laws, released political

Key Messages

- Since 2020, press and academic freedom in Ethiopia has declined significantly due to regressive legal amendments and extra-legal actions, efficiently suppressing information production
- Domestic journalists face harassment and intimidation online and offline, arrests, and forced exile, and have restricted access to conflict zones
- Foreign media and academics are targeted through restrictions (licence/visa denials), being kicked out of the country, restricted access to conflict zones, and online intimidation.
- Civil society organisations (CSOs) face crackdowns, suspensions, and operational disruptions



prisoners, invited exited opposition back home, and new independent media flourished. But this did not last long. When the war between the former national leadership of the EPRDF, now retreated back to their home region of Tigray, and the federal government started in 2020, the progress made in terms of information freedom had already been reversed. The regression of information freedom continued also after the war was over in 2022, leaving the producers of information on Ethiopian affairs both at home and abroad in a fragile position.

Suppressing information production

Following the ARM project's conceptualisation of information suppression, actors suppress the production of information by targeting either individuals or professionals within the media and academic sphere, or human rights defenders, affecting freedom of expression. The production of information can be suppressed by the following means: Legal deterrence, extra-legal intimidation, harassment and threats towards public figures, journalists, and academics, or making the collection of primary information difficult by restricting access to public statistics, and archives, or declining visas for researchers.

Ethiopia's shrinking information production spaces

The Ethiopian government suppresses the production of information on key developments and critical political events, actors and issues, particularly linked to the many conflicts in the country. Based on review of literature, reports and interviews with key informants, the ARM team has identified the following steps the Ethiopian government has taken to restrict the production of reliable and open information:

1. Regressive trends and press freedom erosion

- Post-2018 legal trends: Initial improvements in legal frameworks post-2018 were reversed by regressive legal revisions, increasingly weaponising laws to repress dissent.¹
- The Media Law of 2021: While initially progressive, protecting press freedom, loosening defamation laws, and safeguarding journalists, it was undermined by a 2025 amendment granting the Prime Minister control over the Ethiopian Media Authority (EMA). This politicised the EMA, enabling the targeting of independent journalists and ignoring safeguards like protections against pre-trial detention.
- Anti-Terrorism and Hate Speech Laws: Vague definitions in anti-terrorism legislation and the newly adopted Hate Speech Proclamation have been used to prosecute journalists, particularly those covering conflicts in Tigray, Amhara, and Oromia.
- SLAPPs: While not referred to as such, many of the legal actions aiming at suppressing information production share the characteristics of Strategic Litigation against Public Persons (SLAPPs). Costly and lengthy legal battles are imposed against media houses, journalists and CSOs to deter independent information production.
- State of Emergencies: Frequent declarations of states of emergency during conflicts in Tigray, Amhara, and Oromia have overridden legal protections, leading to mass arrests, journalist intimidations, and suppression of independent reporting.

¹ UNESCO 2022 'Assessment of the Media Development in Ethiopia' www.unesco.org/en/articles/assessment-media-development-ethiopia

2. Bureaucratic barriers and financial strain

- Media license renewal: The annual renewal of media licenses is intentionally made complex, creating anxiety and allowing regulators to exert control over independent media.
- Information access and bureaucratic hurdles: Government offices routinely deny or delay access to information unless it aligns with positive narratives. Officials have even demanded to review drafts before sharing information.²
- Financial repression: Heavy taxation on media outlets, often seen as a deliberate effort to cripple operations, exacerbates financial struggles, particularly given the limited profitability of news media.

3. Direct suppression of journalists

- Restricted access to conflict zones: Independent journalists are barred from covering key conflict areas, including Tigray, Amhara, and Oromia.³
- Foreign media restrictions: Several foreign TV channels were suspended in 2023, and one French and two British journalists were expelled in the period from 2021 to 2025, reporting for the Economist and New York Times.
- Intimidation and harassment: Journalists face routine threats, distressing phone calls, and physical assaults. Online harassment, often through coordinated government-affiliated accounts, is pervasive.⁴
- Forced disappearances and arrests: Kidnappings of journalists by suspected government agents have risen, alongside arrests under vague charges, forcing many into exile.⁵ At least 54 journalists have fled since 2020, with some even targeted abroad.⁶
- Vandalism of media offices: Media outlets like Ethiopia Insider and Addis Standard have reported burglaries targeting essential tools like laptops and cameras, disrupting operations and intimidating journalists.⁷

4. Suppression of academic freedom

- Restricted research and self-censorship: Academics face restrictions on field access, permits, and data collection. To avoid intimidation and job insecurity, university staff impose self-censorship on politically sensitive topics.
- University autonomy undermined: Despite a 2023 bill granting autonomy to universities, leadership positions remain controlled by ruling party loyalists, stifling academic freedom.

² Online interviews with foreign and domestic journalists (June and September 2025).

³ For an overview of attacks on the media post-2018, see CPJ 2024 'Submission to the United Nations Universal Periodic Review of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia 47th Session of the UPR, Human Rights Council' cpj.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/UPR-Submission_-Ethiopia_-Committee-to-Protect-Journalists.pdf

⁴ Interview with former editor of targeted media house (September 2025).

⁵ See for example The Reporter (August 16 2025). Ethiopian Reporter's Yonas Amare Abducted by Masked Men www.thereporterethiopia.com/46502/

⁶ CPJ - June 18, 2024. Fleeing prolonged media crackdown, Ethiopian journalists struggle in exile. @ cpj.org/2024/06/fleeing-prolonged-media-crackdown-ethiopian-journalists-struggle-in-exile/

⁷ Online interviews with domestic journalists in exile (September 2025). See also The Reporter - July 22, 2023, "Targeted robberies" against press provoke anger, demands for investigation www.thereporterethiopia.com/35602/

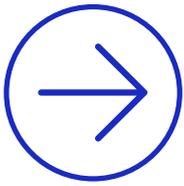
- Harassment of academics: Academics have faced detentions and harassment. Hundreds of Amhara university staff were imprisoned after the 2023 Fano insurgency in Amhara region, with many charged under anti-terrorism laws.⁸ Foreign academics critical of the government have also been denied access and targeted by state media and in social media.

5. Increasing repression and control of Civil Society Organisations (CSOs)

- Regulatory constraints: The 2019 progressive NGO law is under revision, with a 2025 draft proposing enhanced executive powers to suspend or dissolve CSOs under vague national security pretexts.
- Targeting of human rights groups: Organisations like the Ethiopian Human Rights Council and Center for Advancement of Rights and Democracy have faced harassment, suspensions, and burglaries aimed at disrupting their operations.⁹
- Broader intimidation: CSOs face the same challenges as media outlets, including detentions, harassment, and financial pressure, further curbing their ability to produce independent information.

⁸ Amnesty International 2024 Ethiopia: End the month-long arbitrary detention of thousands in Amhara Region www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2024/11/ethiopia-end-the-month-long-arbitrary-detention-of-thousands-in-amhara-region/

⁹ UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights Defenders (2025) Ethiopia: alarming rise in the cases of suspension of civil society organizations at the end of 2024 (joint communication) srdefenders.org/ethiopia-alarming-rise-in-the-cases-of-suspension-of-civil-society-organizations-at-the-end-of-2024-joint-communication/



Policy recommendations

Ethiopia is manoeuvring its strategic position in the Horn of Africa between traditional Western development partners, emerging powers in the Middle East (esp. United Arab Emirates), China as the most important investor and trading partner, and Russia searching for stronger African presence. In this context, it is challenging for the European Union to actually influence Ethiopian policies on information freedom, without risking further alienation in its relationship with the country. The fact that Ethiopia is a signatory to key international human rights conventions creates nevertheless a space for carefully tailored messages and engagement in diplomatic dialogue, along the following lines:

- **Support independent institutions:** Press for the restoration of the Ethiopian Media Authority's independence, emphasising the importance of non-partisan regulation in protecting press freedom.
- **Provide protection for journalists:** Offer asylum pathways, legal aid, and capacity-building programs for exiled Ethiopian journalists, while condemning harassment and violence targeting media professionals.
- **Promote transparency and accountability:** Encourage Ethiopia to grant journalists access to conflict zones and improve government transparency through EU-supported training programs and technical assistance for information-sharing mechanisms.
- **Strengthen academic and civil society collaboration:** Fund academic and civil society initiatives that promote independent research and reporting, while advocating against laws restricting CSO operations.
- **Address online harassment:** Partner with Ethiopian stakeholders to combat digital harassment and disinformation, ensuring the safety of journalists and activists in online spaces.

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About the ARM Project

Coordinated by the Chr. Michelsen Institute (CMI), the ARM project delves into authoritarian strategies for information control beyond borders. While foreign disinformation receives ample scrutiny, other forms of foreign information manipulation and intervention (FIMI) remain overlooked.

Analysing Russia, China, Ethiopia, and Rwanda, ARM conceptualises and addresses different forms of FIMI. The project will explore the extent that major global players like China and Russia, alongside Ethiopia and Rwanda, engage in transnational information suppression, particularly targeting European diaspora communities.

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