

# Ethiopia

*Political situation and  
treatment of opposition*

September 2018

Report based on interviews in Ethiopia



Ministry of Immigration  
and Integration

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Immigration Service

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# Disclaimer

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This report was written in accordance with the European Asylum Support Office's (EASO) Country of Origin Information (COI) report methodology<sup>1</sup>. The report is based on approved notes from meetings with carefully selected interlocutors.

This report is not a detailed or comprehensive survey of all aspects of the issues covered in the terms of reference and should be considered alongside other available country of origin information on the General political situation and treatment of opposition.

The information contained in this report has been gathered and presented with utmost care.

The report does not include any policy recommendations or analysis. The information in the report does not necessarily reflect the opinion of the Danish Immigration Service (DIS).

Furthermore, this report is not conclusive as to the determination or merit of any particular claim for protection, which will need to be considered on its individual facts. Terminology used should not be regarded as indicative of a particular legal position.

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<sup>1</sup> European Union: European Asylum Support Office (EASO) (2012). EASO Country of Origin Information report methodology

# Abbreviations

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|       |  |
|-------|--|
| ARRA  | Administration for Refugee & Returnee Affairs                      |
| AVR   | Assisted Voluntary Return  |
| CRRF  | Comprehensive Refugees Response Framework                          |
| CSO   | Civil Society Organisation   |
| DIS   | Danish Immigration Service   |
| DRC   | Danish Refugee Council   |
| ENDF  | Ethiopian National Defence Force                                   |
| EPRDF | Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front                  |
| IDP   | Internally displaced person  |
| IOM   | International Organization for Migration                           |
| INGO  | International Non-governmental organisation                        |
| NGO   | Non-governmental organisation                                      |
| MFA   | Ministry of Foreign Affairs  |
| OCHA  | United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs |
| ODF   | Oromo Democratic Front   |
| OFC   | Oromo Federalist Congress  |
| OLF   | Oromo Liberation Front   |
| ONLF  | Ogaden National Liberation Front                                   |
| OPDO  | Oromo People Democratic Organisation                               |
| TOR   | The Onion Router   |
| TPLF  | Tigrayan People's Liberation Front                                 |
| UN    | United Nations   |
| UNDP  | United Nations Development Programme                               |
| UNHCR | United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees                      |
| VERA  | Vital Events Registration Agency                                   |
| VPN   | Virtual private network  |

## Executive summary

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In February 2018 the Government of Ethiopia proclaimed a six months State of Emergency; only six months after the previous one had ended. This State of Emergency was supposed to remain in force until mid-August but was lifted in June 2018 at the initiative of the newly elected Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed. Whereas the previous State of Emergency was characterised by civil unrest in the regional states of Oromia, Amhara and Somali and by the arrest of numerous civilians, there were fewer violent riots and security incidents across the country during the last State of Emergency. It was imposed with less use of violence although there still had been instances where the authorities had shown force in the handling of protesters.

Immediately after his nomination Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed and the incoming administration had signaled a reformist policy. This was followed by the release of political prisoners, the closing of the Maekelawi prison, officially known as the Federal Police Crime Investigation and Forensic Sector, and the removal of three opposition groups from the national list of terrorist organisations. The new administration also decided to unblock a number of websites, blogs and radio and TV-stations – including two diaspora TV stations – which were previously unavailable to the population. These decisions had widened the political space in Ethiopia and could lead to an improvement in the human rights situation, including for members of the opposition. This development had inspired a cautious optimism among observers of the political situation in Ethiopia as the new administration had announced that it will take human rights more seriously. However, at the same time violence, ethnic clashes and abuses may continue at local level.

The overall situation for opposition parties has improved following the nomination of Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed. This relative improvement also included the youth branches of those opposition parties. The opposition groups OLF, ONLF and Ginbot 7 had been removed from the national list of terrorist organisations and their leadership had been invited to return to participate in political discussions. OLF and Ginbot 7 leaders had accepted the invitation and returned to Ethiopia. Both the OLF and the ONLF had been weakened over the past three years and lost political and military influence.

Since January 2018 the number of mass demonstrations in which students had been shot at and detained by the authorities had decreased and the overall situation for students who were active in student organisations had improved.

The Ethiopian diaspora's activities are monitored by the authorities. This includes their activities on Facebook, YouTube and personal blogs. Ethiopian citizens who participate in anti-government demonstrations in Europe or in the US were likely to be video-taped and thereby having their participation in such events documented; this surveillance would also extend to Ethiopians who had obtained a new nationality. After the nomination of the new Prime Minister, the situation for the diaspora is less threatening. Members of the diaspora who decide to return to Ethiopia are allowed to reintegrate into society as citizens, and open private businesses.

# Introduction and methodology

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This report is based on interviews with sources in Ethiopia conducted by the COI Division, DIS in Addis Ababa, from 17 - 23 May 2018. The purpose of the mission was to collect up to date information on the general political situation as well as on the treatment of members of the opposition, on documents and on issues of citizenship. In addition to the visit to the capital a short visit to the Hitsats refugee camps in Shire with the purpose of being informed about the context and procedures of relevance for the issuance of legal documents about vital events. All findings regarding documents and citizenships are reported in a separate report.

The present report focuses on the political situation in Ethiopia and the ways different opposition groups as well as people related to members of these groups are treated. A few weeks after our visit, the political situation in Ethiopia changed –the State of Emergency was lifted early and contact with the leadership of Eritrea was resumed. To reflect this development, all interlocutors who had been interviewed about the political situation in the country were invited by email to comment on the new situation and share their assessment of the implications for the human rights situation, especially for members of different opposition groups.

The terms of reference for the mission were drawn up by DIS in consultation with the Danish Refugee Appeals Board Secretariat as well as a Danish advisory group on COI<sup>2</sup>. The terms of reference are included at Appendix C to this report. The report draws on methodological guidance from the European Asylum Support Office (EASO) Country of Origin Information report methodology<sup>3</sup>.

In the process of compiling this report, the delegation interviewed ten sources, comprising representatives from Western embassies, academia, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), national authorities as well as a human rights blogger who had first hand-experience with opposition to the regime. The Danish Embassy in Addis Ababa provided valuable assistance in identifying some of the interlocutors relevant to the terms of reference. The Danish Embassy also offered logistical and technical assistance throughout the mission. The sources interviewed were selected by the delegation based on their expertise, merit and experience relevant to the mission. In addition to the empirical data material gathered from the interviews, the report is also based on available reports as well as academic articles of relevance for the terms of reference.

The sources consulted are listed in Appendix B. The interviews were conducted in English. In some, but not all, of the interviews the DIS delegation were joined by two staff members from the Danish National ID Centre who collected background information on the topic of issuance procedures of documents in Ethiopia.

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<sup>2</sup> The group consists of Danish Refugee Council, Amnesty International in Denmark, Danish Institute for Human Rights, Dignity, representatives of Danish European Mission and Open Doors, the National Commissioner of Police and the Danish Bar and Law Society (representing asylum lawyers)

<sup>3</sup> European Union: European Asylum Support Office (EASO) (2012). EASO Country of Origin Information report methodology

Prior to the interviews all interlocutors were thoroughly informed about the purpose of the mission and the fact that their statements would be included in a report to be made publically available.

The interlocutors were asked how they wished to be introduced and quoted, and all sources are introduced and quoted according to their own wishes. Some sources are referred by the name of their organisation; in accordance with their own request on this matter. Four sources preferred anonymity.

The meeting notes were validated by the sources. All notes were forwarded to the interlocutors for their approval and amendment, allowing the opportunity to offer corrections or make comment on their statements. All sources but the blogger responded and approved their statements. This source was contacted by email and informed that the delegation would include the note in the report if no response was received by the deadline. The delegation never received any response.

The report is a synthesis of the sources' statements supplemented with key publications of relevance for the topics of this report. Care has been taken to present the views of the interlocutors as accurately and transparently as possible and reference is made by number to the specific paragraphs in the meeting notes in foot notes in the report. All sources' approved statements are found in their full extent in Appendix A of this report. Based on a manual retrieval of the complete set of meeting notes, a thematic analysis has been conducted and the findings are presented in the following chapters of this report.

The report was finalised in September 2018 and is available on the websites of DIS [www.newtodenmark.dk](http://www.newtodenmark.dk). This means that it is equally available to all stakeholders in the refugee status determination process as well as to the general public.



# 1. Background

## A short history of political violence

- 1.1. Ethiopia has a well-documented history of political driven violence: civil unrest and violent repression have accompanied the transition of a multi-ethnic former empire into a modern nation-state<sup>4</sup>. Successive regimes – from the imperial administration (spanning from 1890 – 1974) to the socialist development state, the *Derg*, (1974 – 1991) and up to today's *democratic developmental state* led by the Marxist inspired Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) – has consistently used rough violence against individual citizens and opposition groups<sup>5</sup>. According to a political scientist who has observed the political history of Ethiopia, the continuity in the use of violence is a key factor in understanding how governance has been exercised in Ethiopia throughout time<sup>6</sup>. The same researcher stated that in Ethiopia political change has always happened as a result of the use of violent confrontation rather than as a result of compromise between those with power and those without power.
  
- 1.2. Central to this history of violence in Ethiopia are interregional confrontations over political representation and resources. Many of these confrontations are acted out as localised inter-communal violence between different ethnic groups: Ethiopia is a linguistically and culturally diverse country of more than 80 ethnicities/nationalities<sup>7</sup>. In order to keep the country together Ethiopia's new administrative structure has been built on the principle of ethnic federalism. The core of these principles is that the nine regional states of Ethiopia to a certain extent have self-rule, have the right to elect their leadership and use their own language<sup>8</sup>. According to several interlocutors, ethnicity remains an engine for political conflict<sup>9</sup>. According to an international NGO this was increasingly the case: ethnic competition and mistrust can be felt at all levels of society, including in organisations where much efforts have been invested in creating a workplace free of ethno-nationalist sentiments. To illustrate this phenomenon the representative of an international NGO referred to an example of a staff member of Tigrinya descent who expressed fear of being physically abused and attacked by the mob if they travelled to Oromia where people of Tigrinya ethnicity are intensely disliked<sup>10</sup>.
  
- 1.3. The regional states where most violent tensions and mass protests have taken place over time are Amhara, Oromia, which surrounds the capital, and Somalia Region, also known as Ogaden<sup>11</sup>. Even though the claims raised by protesters from Amhara, Oromia and Ogaden are far from uniform they all challenge the unity of the country and they contest how political representation and

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<sup>4</sup> Verhoeven, H. (2016). Behind the Violence in Ethiopia, Landinfo (2014). Ethiopia: Studentprotester fram til 2014

<sup>5</sup> Hagmann T. and Korf B. (2012). Agamben in the Ogaden: Violence and sovereignty in the Ethiopian-Somali frontier

<sup>6</sup> International researcher: 3

<sup>7</sup> In Ethiopia the terms 'ethnicities' and 'nationalities' are used interchangeably (British Embassy: 44). This is based on a marxist understanding of nationality and ethnic identity

<sup>8</sup> Hagmann T. and Korf B. (2012). Agamben in the Ogaden: Violence and sovereignty in the Ethiopian-Somali frontier

<sup>9</sup> National researcher: 30, British Embassy: 44, US Embassy: 83

<sup>10</sup> International NGO: 107

<sup>11</sup> British Embassy: 44, Hagmann T. and Korf B. (2012). Agamben in the Ogaden: Violence and sovereignty in the Ethiopian-Somali

economic growth have benefitted the Tigrayans, a minority ethnic group<sup>12</sup> disproportionately over other population groups<sup>13</sup>.

1.4. According to the international researcher, it is the revolutionary past of the EPRDF that is key to understanding how the party gains legitimacy and how the EPRDF dominated regime operates when it is confronted with civil unrest and interregional confrontation. Since it defeated the military dictatorship back in 1991, EPRDF and its satellite parties in the regional states has fought hard to prevent the federal state from disintegrating, especially since Eritrea left Ethiopia following the referendum in 1993<sup>14</sup>, and to maintain state sovereignty in the federal states. EPRDF is composed of four political parties but it has been dominated by the founding ethnic group, the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), representing the Tigrayans<sup>15</sup>. The means to do so have included use of violence against opposition, ethnic federalism and state led-development. Ethiopia has been praised by the international community for the government's ability to attract investments and development projects that has fostered economic growth<sup>16</sup>. However, it has also been pointed out that this economic growth of up to 10 percent per year has not benefitted the population equally: the uneven distribution of economic progress has created a growing social stratification and increased frustration in the population<sup>17</sup>. Further to the unequal distribution of wealth, the Government has also failed to create enough jobs. Ethiopia has a very young population –the median age is 18 – which means that an additional two million young people enter the labour market every year, many after having graduated from university. However, there are enough jobs to absorb this labour supply, and the jobs, which are created, are factory or sweat shop jobs, not jobs that can fulfil the expectations of a well-educated young workforce<sup>18</sup>.

## 2. State(s) of Emergency

2.1. States of emergency are far from an exception in Ethiopia. On 9 October 2016 the then government proclaimed a six months State of Emergency, which was lifted only ten months later in August 2017<sup>19</sup>. This occurred in a situation of intense civil unrest and mass protest in Oromia, Somali and Amhara regional states where demonstrators called for political reforms. Many protesters and activists were arrested and charged under the Anti-Terrorism Proclamation<sup>20</sup>. Six months later followed another state of emergency, which was declared by the Council of Ministers

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<sup>12</sup> The Tigrayans are a minority group which represents about six percent of the population

<sup>13</sup> British Embassy: 44

<sup>14</sup> After decades of civil war, a UN monitored independence referendum was held 23-25 April 1993. There were 1,173,706 registered voters and almost 100% voted for independence from Ethiopia. See [African Elections Database \(undated\). Eritrea: 23-25 April 1993 Independence Referendum](#)

<sup>15</sup> International researcher: 4

<sup>16</sup> Verhoeven, H. (2016). Behind the Violence in Ethiopia

<sup>17</sup> International researcher: 6

<sup>18</sup> British Embassy: 38

<sup>19</sup> Human Rights Watch (2016). Ethiopia: State of Emergency Risks New Abuses, Human Rights Watch (2017). State of Emergency Ends in Ethiopia

<sup>20</sup> Amnesty International (2018). Annex : Commentary on Ethiopian State of Emergency

on 16 February, 2018 and adopted by the country's federal parliament<sup>21</sup>. It was supposed to remain in force until mid-August, 2018 but this State of Emergency was lifted in June 2018 – two months earlier than expected. This happened at the initiative of the newly elected Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed after a law had been passed saying that law and order had been restored in the country<sup>22</sup>.

- 2.2. The majority of the interlocutors agreed that the State of Emergency, which had been imposed across Ethiopia in February 2018 had been implemented with 'a softer hand' than the previous State of Emergency<sup>23</sup>. The national researcher stated that the Government had shown 'relative tolerance and restraint in its use of force against peaceful demonstrators'<sup>24</sup>. The number of violent riots and security incidents across the country had been reduced although both NGO-representatives underlined that there still had been instances where the authorities had 'shown force' in the handling of protesters<sup>25</sup>. It was commonly agreed that the incoming Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed had sharply broken with the policy of the past by reaching out to the opposition and shown signs of reformist policy<sup>26</sup>.

### 3. Human rights situation

#### 3.1. General

- 3.1.1. All of those interlocutors, who commented on the situation after the delegation had left Ethiopia, confirmed that the State of Emergency had been lifted and that this constituted a significant development<sup>27</sup>. Furthermore, one source emphasised that the changing of the head of the military<sup>28</sup> and the head of the intelligence demonstrated the new Prime Minister's authority and willingness to live up to the promises he had made after his nomination<sup>29</sup>. Whereas some observers noted that the lifting of the State of emergency could lead to an improvement in the human rights situation<sup>30</sup>, the well informed diplomatic source representing the British Embassy called for caution by stating that the premature lifting of the State of Emergency did not per se have any clear impact (neither negative nor positive) on the current human rights situation, including for members of the opposition<sup>31</sup>. A recurrent expression to describe the situation even before the State of Emergency was lifted was that of 'cautious optimism' and hope<sup>32</sup>.

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<sup>21</sup> Amnesty International (2018). Annex : Commentary on Ethiopian State of Emergency

<sup>22</sup> CNN (2018). Ethiopia lifts state of emergency two months early

<sup>23</sup> EU: 63, 72, national researcher: 14, British Embassy: 41, 42, Danish Refugee Council: 118, blogger: 147

<sup>24</sup> National researcher: 11

<sup>25</sup> Danish Refugee Council: 118, international NGO: 100

<sup>26</sup> International researcher: 1, British Embassy: 42, US Embassy: 79, 80, international NGO: 95

<sup>27</sup> International researcher: 1, national researcher: 12, British Embassy: 36, EU: 63, international NGO: 95

<sup>28</sup> The Guardian (2018). These changes are unprecedented!: how Abiy is upending Ethiopian politics

<sup>29</sup> International NGO: 95

<sup>30</sup> International researcher: 2, national researcher: 13, the Fortune: 135

<sup>31</sup> British embassy: 36

<sup>32</sup> US Embassy: 79, international NGO: 100, 101, the Fortune : 135

3.1.2. The international NGO representative stated that new forms of ethnically driven violence had emerged as a result of the changed power balance within the leadership of the EPDRF. The new Prime Minister is of both Christian and Muslim background and he is the first Oromo speaking prime minister. The novelty in this allowed for many people to read hope into the figure of the new prime minister<sup>33</sup>. The Oromos, who are Ethiopia's largest population group, were pleased by the fact that 'one of their ethnicity had reached the top level of decision making power. Also the Amharas (the second largest population group in Ethiopia) were content with the prime minister. However, Abiy Ahmed was elected within the EPRDF coalition by united votes from Oromia and Amhara – that is against the two other parts of the coalition, namely the Tigrayan and the Southerners. According to the representative of the international NGO, these two groups were far from content with the current situation and as a result of their frustrations violence and ethnic clashes had reoccurred. The interlocutor found it likely that some elements from the South wished to throw out the Oromo. To illustrate this, the NGO representative mentioned the situation in the mixed town of Hawassa in the Southern Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples' Region. This region is the locus of large industrial parks, some which are Chinese built, and the region has over an extended period of time been the goal for job seeking people of various ethnic backgrounds from across the country. They come together in the factories as workers but there has been civil unrest and social tensions with violent protests, clashes, vandalism (burn of property and cars), which has led to an additional 16,000 internally displaced persons since mid-June 2018<sup>34</sup>. According to a report issued by the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs OCHA and the National Disaster Risk Management Commission in June 2018<sup>35</sup>, more than one million people had been internally displaced as a result of conflict and in dire need of humanitarian assistance, as per mid-April 2018<sup>36</sup>. The international researcher concurred that even though the new government had announced that it will take human rights more seriously human rights violations and abuses are likely to continue for some time at local level<sup>37</sup>.

### 3.2. Human rights situation in refugee camps

3.2.1. The US Embassy representatives emphasised that the human rights situation has not improved in the refugee camps: here the situation was precarious and the security situation volatile: revenge killings occur with impunity inside the camps<sup>38</sup>. Danish Refugee Council added – with specific reference to the situation in Hitsats refugee camp in Shire near the border to Eritrea – that the material conditions of and the social rehabilitation activities in the camps have improved significantly, especially for the unaccompanied minors and separated children who now benefited from better shelters and social rehabilitation activities. These improvements had had an immediate positive effect on the living conditions for people in these camps. However, the same source also added that for people in the refugees camps the long term perspectives were still not good as there were no job prospects or living

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<sup>33</sup> International NGO: 96, 108, Danish Refugee Council: 119

<sup>34</sup> International NGO: 97

<sup>35</sup> OCHA (2018). Ethiopia: Oromio-Somali Conflict –Induced displacement

<sup>36</sup> International NGO: 97

<sup>37</sup> International researcher: 2

<sup>38</sup> US Embassy: 84, 85

opportunities for people residing in the camps. Also, there was no electricity in the camps and they lacked running water<sup>39</sup>.

### 3.3. Freedom of speech

3.3.1. Following the lifting of the State of Emergency in June 2018, the Government decided to unblock a number of websites, blogs and radio and TV-stations, which were previously unavailable to the population, at least through legal channels<sup>40</sup>. According to the national researcher, this included the two diaspora based TV stations ESAT and OMN<sup>41</sup>. This decision was seen as important<sup>42</sup>. Both researchers found that the political space in Ethiopia had been widened as a consequence of this decision<sup>43</sup>. The fact that the new government had announced that it wishes to take human rights more seriously, was seen by the international researcher as 'a very promising sign'. However, he also emphasised that even though the development at national level was positive, at local level, rights violations and abuses are likely to continue for some time. It was, in his opinion, too early to say whether the federal reform agenda will translate into new realities on the ground<sup>44</sup>.

### 3.4. Human rights Commission

3.4.1. Ethiopia has a Human Rights Commission established by the Parliament and equipped with a mandate to monitor the human rights violations in Ethiopia<sup>45</sup>. The commission may investigate complaints raised by or on behalf of any person who has been sent to prison or detained by the police. The Commission will only investigate individual cases and operates through eight branch offices and offers legal advice through a hotline telephone service for free. The representative of the Human Rights Commission noted that the Commission received more than 2,000 complaints (cases) per year. The Commission has four staff members dedicated to the Commission's hotline where they offer advice, and they can bring cases before the commissioners. The amount of complaints submitted to the Commission had been constant over the past two and a half years. In 2017 it was 2,000 and in 2016 the Commission received 2,500 Complaints. These, however, do not include complaints and advices from the hotlines<sup>46</sup>.

3.4.2. According to a human rights activist from civil society, the Human Rights Commission contributed to minimalise and justify human rights violations committed by the Ethiopian authorities. He elaborated that the Commission would typically conduct a report that described how the police had used proportionate power to stop violence. However, this was seldom the case. For example the source had written to the Commission about five cases where the police had used disproportionate power, but the Commission rejected the cases.

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<sup>39</sup> Danish Refugee Council: 129

<sup>40</sup> RSF – Reporters Sans Frontières (2018). Ethiopian government unblocks 264 websites and blogs

<sup>41</sup> National researcher: 13

<sup>42</sup> International researcher: 2, national researcher: 13, British Embassy: 37, international NGO: 100

<sup>43</sup> International researcher: 2, national researcher: 11

<sup>44</sup> International researcher: 2

<sup>45</sup> Human Rights Commission: 172

<sup>46</sup> Human Rights Commission: 179

This occurred back in 2016<sup>47</sup>. The same source pointed to the limited capacity and outreach of the Commission: it was underfunded and the reports issued by the Commission would reach only a very limited audience. Thus these reports were not serving the purpose of informing policy making<sup>48</sup>.

## 4. Situation of political prisoners

- 4.1. Prime Minister Abiy had soon after his nomination announced the release of people who had been arbitrarily detained in prison. The majority of the interlocutors confirmed that an unspecified number – but at least several thousands and up to 10,000 according to Amnesty International<sup>49</sup> – had been released from prison after Prime Minister Abiy's entry into office<sup>50</sup>. The released include journalists, human rights activists and prominent politicians. The EU source estimated the number of people being detained to approximately 30,000 out of which approximately 10,000 had been released by the new administration<sup>51</sup>. The US Embassy emphasised that the new administration had still not lived up to its promise of liberating all political prisoners and opposition leaders and the national researcher explained that a number of detainees had simply 'been forgotten' and remained in prison<sup>52</sup>.
- 4.2. According to the national researcher, the parliament passed a Bill of Amnesty in June 2018<sup>53</sup> that annuls the charges against all individuals, at home and abroad, except those who are charged with murder and rape<sup>54</sup>. Effective immediately, the Bill requires these individuals to report to the Attorney General within six months to be eligible for the "certificate of amnesty", which will serve as a guarantee for their freedom upon their return to the community. This bill has far reaching significance as it literally frees many of those who fled the country since the mid-1970s until 8 June 2018<sup>55</sup>.
- 4.3. The EU representative underlined the contradictory elements of the new situation: whereas 10,000 of political prisoners had been released, others were still arrested by the police on political grounds. As another example, the source referred to an incident where one opposition leader was released from prison and was going to address his people in his home town. He was subsequently detained by the federal police, who stated that he was not allowed to address his people.

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<sup>47</sup> Blogger: 170

<sup>48</sup> Blogger: 171

<sup>49</sup> Amnesty International (2018). Ethiopia 2017/18

<sup>50</sup> International researcher: 1, national researcher : 15, British Embassy: 47, EU: 73, international NGO: 110, Danish Refugee Council: 120

<sup>51</sup> EU: 73

<sup>52</sup> National researcher: 15, US Embassy: 81

<sup>53</sup> The Addis Standard (2018). Ethiopian Parliament Passes Amnesty Bill Into Law. 28 June 2018

<sup>54</sup> National researcher: 18

<sup>55</sup> National researcher: 18

However, the regional police did not agree with the federal position, which resulted in a stand-off between federal and regional police<sup>56</sup>.

- 4.4. According to the majority of the sources interviewed, the Maekelawi prison in Addis Ababa – also known as the Federal Police Crime Investigation and Forensic Sector– had been closed by the authorities<sup>57</sup>. This was perceived as an important symbolic gesture because of the brutal history of the incarceration facility. However, the national researcher also indicated that a new prison outside of the capital had been constructed and that detainees were being transferred to this facility. One source noted that the employees who had used torture to punish detainees in Maekelawi still worked for the government<sup>58</sup>.

## 5. Treatment of opposition groups

### 5.1. Recent situation

5.1.1. The overall situation for opposition groups has improved following the nomination of Prime Minister Abiy, according to the majority of the interviewed sources<sup>59</sup>. According to media reports, charges against opposition leaders were dropped in May and subsequently the Parliament voted in favour of a law, which removed three important opposition groups –OLF, ONLF and Ginbot 7 – from the national list of terrorist organisations<sup>60</sup> and that was confirmed by sources<sup>61</sup>. According to the British Embassy, it is indicative of a new political climate that the Prime Minister, in addition to having lifted terrorism charges against opposition groups, also has invited them to return to Ethiopia to participate in political discussions. Both OLF (Jawar Mohammed, US Diaspora) and Patriotic Ginbot 7 (Andargachew Tsege, British Diaspora, who until recently was serving a life sentence in Ethiopia, and was cleared of crimes) have returned to Ethiopia<sup>62</sup>.

### 5.2. Oromo Liberation Front (OLF)

5.2.1. The OLF is active in the struggle for the liberation of Oromia region, the most populous region of Ethiopia with approximately 35 percent of the population<sup>63</sup>. Two sources stated that the OLF was not active as a political party any more in Ethiopia: over the past three years people had distanced themselves from the party out of fear of repercussions and that the leadership of the party had exiled to Eritrea<sup>64</sup>. Previously, several sources concurred, it was connected to great risk for a person to be affiliated with the OLF, perceived or real affiliation, and this risk would also extend to family members of any person perceived to be an OLF

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<sup>56</sup> EU: 75

<sup>57</sup> National researcher: 19, EU: 74, blogger: 151

<sup>58</sup> National researcher: 19

<sup>59</sup> International researcher: 1, national researcher: 12, British Embassy: 48, EU: 78, Danish Refugee Council: 121, the Fortune: 138, blogger: 167

<sup>60</sup> Africa News (2018). Ethiopia removes 'terrorist' label from OLF, ONLF and Ginbot 7 opposition groups

<sup>61</sup> National researcher: 22

<sup>62</sup> British Embassy: 36

<sup>63</sup> UK Home Office (2017). Country Policy and Guidance Note Ethiopia: Oromos including the 'Oromo Protests'

<sup>64</sup> National researcher: 20, 21, 23, blogger: 152

activist<sup>65</sup>. 'Involvement' could be as little as receiving a suspicious email or phone call<sup>66</sup>. During the previous State of Emergency which was declared in February 2018, the authorities arrested 'a very high amount of people' suspected of being involved with activities of one of the organisations on the national list of terrorist organisations<sup>67</sup>. The goal seemed to be to enforce the law through the arrest of 'as many as possible' and therefore it has historically been impossible to determine whether a detainee was in reality member of an opposition group, a sympathiser or without any connection according to the representative of the British Embassy<sup>68</sup>. With the arrival of Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, the situation seemed to have changed in that he had expressed a desire to include dissenting voices in politics and had invited leaders from OLF to Addis Ababa. Jawar Mohammed, based in the US diaspora, had accepted this invitation<sup>69</sup>.

### 5.3. The Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF)

5.3.1. The ONLF has since the mid-1990s been engaged in conflicts against Ethiopian troops in the Somali Region located in the periphery of Ethiopia<sup>70</sup>. As a political entity, the ONLF has been weakened over the past years although not to the same extent as the OLF according to the national researcher<sup>71</sup>. He further elaborated that in terms of military power, ONLF has also been weakened lately in that its military outreach capacity has diminished. This weakening follows a combination of political, economic, and military strategies adopted by the Government following the attack on a Chinese oilfield in 2007, and which led to the death of 65 Ethiopians and seven Chinese<sup>72</sup>. This attack had serious repercussions in the Ethiopian Somali region and the counter-insurgency campaign by the security forces led to a 'close down' of the regional state. This effectively took the sting out of the ONLF manoeuvring capacity and the organisation also lost important sanctuaries in Somalia and Kenya<sup>73</sup>.

5.3.2. According to the national researcher, the risk of persecution by the authorities for a person who is associated with ONLF would entail a high risk. This risk extends to a person outside of Ethiopia – or at least in a 'friendly country'. To illustrate this risk, the interlocutor mentioned the case of a medical doctor, residing in the Somali region, who had been arrested by the police. The reason behind this arrest was apparently his affiliation with an uncle, who resided in Minnesota and was a prominent and active member of the Diaspora community there. This uncle was engaged in organising anti-government protests over the internet. This affiliation apparently led to the arrest of the medical doctor back in the Somali region<sup>74</sup>. Another source, confirmed that at the point of time of the interview (May 2018) a member of the ONLF would

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<sup>65</sup> National researcher: 21, British Embassy: 48, the Fortune: 138

<sup>66</sup> The Fortune: 138

<sup>67</sup> National researcher: 21

<sup>68</sup> British Embassy: 48

<sup>69</sup> British Embassy: 36, the Guardian (2018). Jawar Mohammed's red-carpet return signals Ethiopia's political sea change

<sup>70</sup> UK Home Office (2017). Country Policy and Information Note Ethiopia: Opposition to the government

<sup>71</sup> National researcher: 24

<sup>72</sup> See also Hagmann and Korf 2012:209

<sup>73</sup> National researcher: 24

<sup>74</sup> National researcher: 25



be perceived as a terrorist and would be detained by the authorities if identified. Conditions in prisons in the Somali Region were particularly dangerous for the detainees who were at risk of being submitted to torture. Whether a family member of a suspected ONLF activist would be at risk seemed to be less of a risk now (May 2018) than previously, according to this source<sup>75</sup>. Both sources – one with first-hand experience of torture in the Makelawi centre – underlined the risk of being exposed to torture by the police if the authorities suspected one of being a terrorist.

## 6. Political youth organisations

- 6.1. According to the Danish Refugee Council, youth organisations of the opposition parties seem to be very well organised and very well controlled. The Danish Refugee Council representative further explained that a member of a political youth opposition group would be at risk of detainment depending on the specific situation. It is violence and violent actions, which are criminalised rather than membership by itself. However, it is the authorities who have the ultimate power to define what would be perceived as violence and thereby of politicising collective and individual actions<sup>76</sup>. This assessment was shared by other sources<sup>77</sup> and the representative of the British Embassy added that the Prime Minister had said that ‘everybody’ from the opposition now had a seat at the table as long as they are not engaged in terrorist or other violent activities.
- 6.2. According to the blogger, the majority of those who participated in the anti-regime mass protests were associated with the Qeero group<sup>78</sup>. The federal police were vowing to close the group down. However, when Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed paid a visit to Ambo town and made a public appearance here two months later he specifically thanked the Qeero group, which had been the very centre of the protests. The Prime Minister thanked the Qeero group for fighting for their rights and described the group as ‘the backbone of Ethiopia’<sup>79</sup>.

## 7. Situation of student organisations

- 7.1. Ethiopia has a history of political agitation at the university and student protests across regions are not uncommon<sup>80</sup>. According to both NGO and diplomatic sources the security forces have at repeated occasions had recourse to rough violence against participants in student demonstrations<sup>81</sup>. To describe the precarious situation of students, the representative of an international development NGO explained that many had been arrested and detained without being charged with any crime. The source described an event in Bishoftu in Oromia in October 2016 where an Oromo cultural festival escalated into anti-government protest and turned violent

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<sup>75</sup> Blogger 156-161.

<sup>76</sup> Danish Refugee Council: 126

<sup>77</sup> National researcher: 26, 27, British Embassy: 51, 52

<sup>78</sup> Qeero means ‘bachelor’ (young men) in Amharic but it can also be translated as ‘tiger’

<sup>79</sup> Blogger: 154

<sup>80</sup> Landinfo (2014). Ethiopia: Student protester fram til 2014

<sup>81</sup> US Embassy: 87, international development NGO: 112

and about 700 protesters allegedly died<sup>82</sup>. There were many arrests and the whereabouts of the arrested are still unknown or contested. The national researcher found that the students he had knowledge of were not motivated by a profound political conviction when they go on the streets; rather they are young people who join a movement for multiple reasons. They were mobilised via the social media (in particular Facebook) and by text messages<sup>83</sup>.

7.2. Several sources concurred that during that State of Emergency, which was declared in February 2018, the general situation for students had improved<sup>84</sup>. The national researcher assessed that the risk of university students for being victims of harassment by the authorities, seemed to have decreased since January 2018. Many of the 20,000 prisoners who have been released by the Government over the past years were probably student activists<sup>85</sup>.

7.3. The ruling party, EPRDF, was present at the university campuses and schools. This presence translated into actively seeking to recruit university students as members while prohibiting or preventing opposition parties and student organisations doing so in universities. Many students joined the various factions of the ruling party willingly (depending on their ethnic background) as it used to ease their employment opportunities after graduation. This practice had been a source of occasional conflicts and tensions among university students. The national researcher noted that EPRDF also engaged in trying to control any opposition movement within universities and many university students had been detained, arrested and maltreated by the authorities<sup>86</sup>.

## 8. Forced recruitment

8.1. According to one interlocutor, it is well established that the Liyu police, based in the Somali Region, uses of excessive force against citizens. The interlocutor was not aware of whether forced recruitment to the Liyu Police – also referred to as the Somali Regional Special Police – takes place<sup>87</sup>.

8.2. The majority of the sources did not have sufficient knowledge about whether forced recruitment takes place in Ethiopia to answer this question. One stated that to his knowledge forced recruitment does not take place<sup>88</sup>.

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<sup>82</sup> International development NGO: 112. The source made reference to Human Rights Watch (HRW) (2017). “Fuel on the Fire: Security Forces Response to the 2016 Ireecha Cultural Festival

<sup>83</sup> National researcher: 30-32

<sup>84</sup> National researcher: 31, British Embassy: 51

<sup>85</sup> National researcher: 31

<sup>86</sup> National researcher: 32

<sup>87</sup> International NGO: 114

<sup>88</sup> National researcher: 29

## 9. Situation of the diaspora

- 9.1. The Ethiopian diaspora is found all over the world but the largest community – of approximately 250,000 members – is in the US<sup>89</sup>. The interlocutors agreed that the regime monitors the activities of members of the diaspora consistently<sup>90</sup>.
- 9.2. Two sources confirmed that an Ethiopian citizen who participate in anti-government demonstrations in Europe or in the US were likely to be video-taped and thereby having their participation in such events documented; this surveillance would also extend to Ethiopians who had obtained a new nationality<sup>91</sup>. Furthermore, one source with first-hand experience of police commissioners and judges following his own Facebook page and blog mentioned that the authorities would have activity on the social media, especially Facebook pages and YouTube channels, but also blogs by political activists monitored<sup>92</sup>. The editor of a national newspaper explained that members of the diaspora who were politically engaged against the regime feared that they would be at risk if they returned to Ethiopia. As examples of what might occur, the same source mentioned that members of the diaspora could run the risk of being detained in the airport or jailed<sup>93</sup>.
- 9.3. After the nomination of the new Prime Minister, the situation for the diaspora would be less threatening and that members of the diaspora are less worried for their safety than before because of the significant change in political situation<sup>94</sup>.
- 9.4. According to the representative of the British Embassy, members of the diaspora who decide to return to Ethiopia are allowed to reintegrate into society as citizens, and open private businesses, which many choose to do with quite some success<sup>95</sup>.

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<sup>89</sup> Migration Policy Institute (2014). The Ethiopian Diaspora in the US

<sup>90</sup> National researcher: 33, British Embassy: 57, international NGO: 115, the Fortune: 140, blogger: 169

<sup>91</sup> The Fortune: 141, blogger: 169

<sup>92</sup> International NGO: 115, blogger: 169

<sup>93</sup> The Fortune: 141

<sup>94</sup> British Embassy: 55, the Fortune: 141

<sup>95</sup> British Embassy: 56

# Appendix A: meeting notes

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## International researcher

**20 April 2018 – amended 5 August 2018**

- *Could you please comment on the fact that the State of Emergency which was imposed in February has been lifted two month early (in June 2018)? To which extent does this decision affect the human rights situation in the country, especially for members of the opposition?*
  1. The early lifting of the state of emergency by the new Prime Minister Dr Abiy is a clear sign of his reformist policy. The incoming administration has, within a shockingly short time period, released political prisoners, given signals to the broad population that it will aim to be more inclusive, made peace with neighbouring Eritrea and announced a partial liberalisation of the economy.
- *In your opinion, what does the fact that the Ethiopian Government has unblocked a number of websites, blogs as well as radio and TV stations mean for the political situation in the country? To which extent does this decision affect the human rights situation, for members of the opposition?*
  2. The opening of political space by new administration is a clear departure from the policies of the past decades by its predecessors. The new government has announced that it wants to take human rights more seriously, which is a very promising sign. At the same time, at local level, rights violations and abuses are likely to continue for some time. It is too early to say whether the federal reform agenda will translate into new realities on the ground.
  3. Political change in Ethiopia may only happen through violence; there is no history of compromise between the beholders of power and those without power, between the center (the highlands) and the periphery (the lowlands). There is a notable continuity in the use of violence against political opponents in the history of Ethiopia. This has been the case regardless of regime from the Emperor, the *Derg* (the socialist regime) to the current 'revolutionary democratic regime ('the developmental state'). The incoming administration led by Prime Minister Dr Abiy has sharply broken with this legacy, by reaching out to the opposition, by inviting all Ethiopians to join the national project and by announcing a number of very important reform projects.
  4. The Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) is composed of four political parties but has long been dominated by its founder, the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF). While the TPLF continues to dominate the country's security sector, the current Prime Minister came out of the Oromo People's Democratic Organisation (OPDO), a constituent party that was long seen as a puppet of TPLF, but which managed to emancipate itself as large-scale anti-government protests rocked Oromia region in recent years.
  5. The revolutionary past of EPRDF is key to any understanding of how the regime operates as a political actor. The government has so far been committed to multi-party democracy and the

rule of law primarily a rhetorical level. In practice, the government practices 'electoral authoritarianism' and has hindered independent electoral observers (e.g. EU and Norway) in monitoring elections (except for the African Union).

6. Ethiopia has experienced an economic growth of up to 10% per annum for the past years, and everybody in society has, to some extent, benefitted from this. However, the fruit of the economic growth is distributed unequally so not everybody has benefitted as much as others and this has created a growing social stratification and a high level of frustration in the population. Inflation and shortage of hard currency continue to be problematic.
7. At federal level the security apparatus is still dominated by TPLF.
8. The Ethiopian state controls the military (Ethiopian National Defence Force (ENDF), not vice versa. The state also controls all sectors in society, including the universities. University staff members have to adhere to the ruling party to be able to establish a career.
9. The bureaucracy is the party; it is not an independent administration. There is a certain level of corruption and favouritism practiced within the administration but it is not as widespread as in e.g. Kenya. Unlike other African countries, Ethiopia has gone through a strong state-building process since the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, characterised by successful bureaucratisation and centralisation.
10. Unlike other state of emergencies in the history of Ethiopia, the current one, which was lifted in July 2018, passed through a vote in parliament where members had to vote for or against this state of emergency. At this vote, there were some signs of internal opposition within the party.

## National researcher

Following the interview the source was invited to commend on the new political situation:

11. The political space is relatively wider since May 2018; the new Prime Minister has admitted that torture was prevalent in the prisons; he also admitted that the security apparatus had been using the Anti-Terrorism Proclamation to stifle dissent and attack the opposition. People now feel relatively freer; and the Government is showing relative tolerance and restraint in its use of force against peaceful demonstrators. In all, the new Prime Minister has so far been showing the willingness to listen to various sections of the Ethiopian society. It is important to note that this is uncharacteristic of any of the EPRDF leaders we have seen since 1991. But, in the absence of strong democratic institutions including independent judiciary and independent media, there is still a sense of uncertainty.

*Could you please comment on the fact that the State of Emergency which was imposed in February has been lifted two month early (in June 2018)? To which extent does this decision affect the human rights situation in the country, especially for members of the opposition?*

12. This decision is widely welcomed by the opposition and the public at large; because the security forces were let loose to do whatever they see fit in the name of restoring law and order. As some members (even heads) of the security forces lack political neutrality (this by the way was admitted by the new Prime Minister), they had been violating human rights and harassing opposition members. There has also been arbitrary arrest. With the lifting of the state of emergency, things have improved a lot since hardliners in the security forces have no legal justification to resort to force. Opposition groups are now operating in a relatively better freedom. Some are already re-opening their offices that have been closed down before and during the state of emergency.

*In your opinion, what does the fact that the Ethiopian Government has unblocked a number of websites, blogs as well as radio and TV stations mean for the political situation in the country? To which extent does this decision affect the human rights situation, for members of the opposition?*

13. This means a lot for human rights as it directly relates to freedom of expression and opinion as well as freedom of access to information. For almost two decades, people were forced either to depend on the state owned media, which presents only one-sided stories or resort to VPN so as to get the other side of the story. There was a widespread fear of getting caught while reading or listening/watching these media. Now, almost everything is in the open. People can access the formerly blocked media. For the opposition, this means a relatively better access to media platforms. The two diaspora-based satellite TV stations (ESAT and OMN) are also accessible in Ethiopia right now. However, given the hostile content of some (not all) of the websites, radio and TV stations as well as misinformation, the Government may block them again. This depends on to what extent the new Prime Minister decides to tolerate dissenting view, anyway.

Addis Ababa, 23 May 2018

## State of emergency

14. The researcher distinguished between the rationality driving the current State of emergency, which was proclaimed on 15 February 2018 and the previous one, which lasted 10 months and was lifted in August 2017. The previous State of emergency was imposed in a situation where the country was in a state of crisis and severely affected by multiple violent events and mass protests across the country including attacks on local businesses, destruction of property and the death of many peaceful protesters. At that point of time there was a genuine need for stabilising the country, which could be seen as a reasonable justification for imposing a state of emergency. However, the current one – at the time of the interview – was imposed in a situation of relative peace, of no obvious threat to the security of the country and where people of Ethiopia had remained relatively calm. According to the source, the only legitimate reason for the declaration of a state of emergency would have been if the then Government had failed to address and stabilise the situation in Oromia and Amhara regional states where massive protests have occurred. In the view of the interlocutor, the underlying reason for the proclamation of the State of emergency was internal debates within the Government as well as divisions among different factions of the leadership: the ruling party, the EPRDF, was split on the question and that fuelled the political strife, which dominated at that point of time.

## Liberation of political prisoners

15. According to the interlocutor, the newly nominated Prime Minister had lived up to the promises made of releasing thousands prisoners and the majority of the people detained in prisons for political reasons had by now been released. It was, however, in particular renowned people, e.g. journalists, prominent politicians and human rights activities with supporters in the international community, who have been released. Nevertheless, people still claim that there are individuals who are forgotten behind bars. These are obscure politicians/opposition members who have been in jails for more than a decade. It may be that the government may not have deliberately left them in prison. They may have just been forgotten.
16. The diaspora movement has played a key role in pushing for the release of certain prisoners. Only people who had had staying power in the public memory had been released. A number of people, in particular people connected to OLF and ONLF, remain imprisoned and have been detained for the past decades without the chance of defending their case at a fair trial. These people have been forgotten and their fate unknown.
17. The source noted that the authorities only advised that a certain number of prisoners had been set free. They were never identified by their names or by a reason for their detention.
18. According to the source, the parliament has passed a Bill of Amnesty that annuls the charges against all individuals, at home and abroad, except those who are charged with murder and rape. Effective immediately, the Bill requires these individuals to report to the Attorney

General within six months to be eligible for the “certificate of amnesty”, which will serve as a guarantee for their freedom upon their return to the community. This bill has far reaching significance as it literally frees many of those who fled the country since the mid-1970s until 8 June 2018.

### **Maekelawi prison**

19. The Maekelawi prison<sup>96</sup> is notoriously known as the most brutal place in the history of Ethiopia, according to the researcher, both during the reign of the Emperor and the time of the Derg. It is a symbolic loaded place in the political history of Ethiopia as many of the prominent opposition leaders have passed by there. He was aware of the announcements made by the Government of the closure of this facility but he noted that what remains to be seen is whether this will change anything in practice. Referring to rumours in the streets suggesting that the Maekelawi prison had already been relocated to another part of the country and its detainees transferred to another correctional facility by the time when the Government made the announcement. The source suggested that the closure of the physical facility could be a mere symbolic gesture –it is possibly to be transformed into a national museum– but a gesture without substantial impact because, as he noted ‘it is not the buildings which are punishing people’. The individuals who were in charge of this torture chamber are still working for the government despite the shocking stories appearing on local (including state owned) media each week.

### **Treatment of oppositions groups**

20. Asked about the current situation and strength of the opposition groups in general, the interlocutor noted that the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) and the Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF) have not been active for the past three years. The mass protests, which have taken place over the past three years, have not been spearheaded by the opposition parties albeit their leadership like to claim they were the organisers of these events.
21. Concerning OLF specifically, the researcher characterised it as ‘basically a dead organisation now’, which has moved to Eritrea. He indicated that it remains on the national list of designated terrorist organisations because despite the fact that this organisation has been relatively inactive for the past years, many people in Oromia might feel nostalgic for the heydays of OLF, thus the agenda of the organisation – the idea of self-determination for the Oromo people – still holds mobilising power. Many Oromos today seek to disassociate themselves from the organisation because of fear of the authorities/the security forces’ crackdown on activists associated with OLF. Over the past three years, the Government has sought to silence the opposition and been careful not to accuse average demonstrators of associations with OLF as a strategy for not giving any credit to this organisation. OLF is no longer classified as a terrorist organisation by the Ethiopian authorities. Any connection to

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<sup>96</sup> Also referred to as the Federal Police Crime Investigation and Forensic Sector



OLF was until recently perceived as a liability by people who sought to avoid attention from the authorities; this would constitute a genuine, high risk. According to the interlocutor, this risk would also extend to family members of the person perceived as being connected to the OLF. While many opposition parties favourably responded to the new Prime Minister's call for returning to peaceful struggle and political dialogue, a faction of the OLF operating from Eritrea still remains undecided.

22. According to the source, the Government has recently removed OLF, ONLF and Ginbot 7 from the national list of terrorist organisations.
23. Prominent leaders of the Oromo Democratic Front (ODF), a recently founded Oromo nationalist political party, have publicly distanced itself from the OLF and its leaders are the first to return to Ethiopia from exile. Recently, the researcher noted, the Ethiopian government had started talks with these exiled members of the ODF leadership, and four of the founding fathers of ODF were currently in Addis Ababa for political talks in May 2018. According to The source, it was seen as a deliberate tactic of the Ethiopian government to seek to split the Oromo political movement back then. A prominent member of the party who had been forced to leave the country at the last election was now back in Addis Ababa and that could be perceived as promising but also as a strategy to split the party.
24. Concerning ONLF, The interlocutor emphasised that whereas this organisation has not been weakened to the same extent as the OLF but it has been seriously weakened lately in terms of military outreach capacity. Furthermore, the organisation has lost a considerably amount of legitimacy among people in the Ethiopian Somali region (formerly known as the Ogaden). This follows a combination of political, economic, and military strategies adopted by the government following the attack on a Chinese oilfield in 2007, and which led to the death of 65 Ethiopians and 7 Chinese<sup>97</sup>. This attack had serious repercussions in the Ethiopian Somali region and the counter-insurgency campaign by the security forces led to a 'close down' of the regional state. This effectively took the sting out of the ONLF manoeuvring capacity and the organisation also lost important sanctuaries in Somalia and Kenya.
25. Asked about the risk of persecution by the authorities for a person who is associated with ONLF, the researcher assessed that such a connection entails a high risk for that person of being targeted by the police and arrested if they happened to be either in Ethiopia or in 'a friendly country'. To illustrate this risk, the source mentioned the case of a medical doctor, residing in the Somali region, who had been arrested by the police. The reason behind this arrest was apparently his affiliation with an uncle, who resided in Minnesota and was a prominent and active member of the Diaspora community there. This uncle was engaged in organising anti-government protests over the web. This affiliation apparently led to the arrest of the medical doctor back in the Somali region.

### **Political youth organisation**

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<sup>97</sup> See also Hagmann and Korf 2012:209

26. The Oromo Federalist Congress (OFC) has a youth branch and its leader, Prof Merera Gudina who is also a leader of the opposition coalition, was arrested in 2015-2016, accused of initiation of anti-government demonstrations. He has now been released with others.
27. Asked about the risk that a known member of a political youth organisation from the opposition might be exposed to as a consequence of their political engagement, the source said that it was uncertain. With the new Prime Minister things were up in the open and the Government seemed undecided on which measures to use against youth organisations and their members. The rhetoric of the Prime Minister invites people to express themselves freely and that a difference of opinion is not a problem in itself but it is still too early to tell how this will be acted out in reality.

### **Liuy Police**

28. The interlocutor was only knowledgeable about the functioning and actions by the Liuy police by information gathered from social media and diaspora websites. It is a regional special paramilitary force, which has been established by the federal government to fight counter-insurgency against the ONLF and it is known to be composed of former ONLF fighters among others. The researcher did not believe that forced recruitment to the Liuy police took place; he believed men were recruited by offering them money and power.
29. Asked about forced recruitment to the Ethiopian army, the source stated that it does not exist.

### **Treatment of pupils and university students**

30. According to the interlocutor, the majority of university students who participate in mass demonstrations were not motivated by a profound political conviction when they go on the streets; rather they are young people who join a movement for multiple reasons without devoting much critical awareness to the cause of the demonstration. Most of the students were being mobilised via the social media, in particular Facebook, and via text messages, and the researcher found that in reality there was a thin line between a social and a political gathering and the motivations behind their participation would then often converge. Students often gathered in social events to discuss the misery of the country and their own situation but these discussions have increasingly taken an ethnic turn and political issues are being ethnicised.
31. Concerning the risk of university students for being victims of harassment by the authorities, the source opined that the risk seemed to have decreased over the past four months. Many of the 20,000 prisoners who have been released by the Government over the past years were probably student activists.
32. The ruling party is active in the universities and opposition within the university and many university students have previously been detained, arrested and maltreated. Until recently, the ruling party has been engaged in recruiting university students as members. Many join the

various factions of the ruling party (depending on their ethnic background) willingly as it used to ease their employment opportunities after graduation. This practice has been a source of occasional conflicts and tensions among university students. The source noted that the ruling party was engaged in recruitment while prohibiting/preventing opposition parties/organisations doing so in universities and schools.

### **The Diaspora**

- 33.** The interlocutor noted that the Government monitors the Diaspora 'every single day', and is very active in this regard, because that is the only field of resistance that where Ethiopian law cannot be enforced by the Ethiopian authorities, since they cannot physically go there. The Diaspora community is composed of a certain number of 'hardliners' with no room for any 'middle ground'. Their extremist positions might be explained by the fact that some of them have been victims of torture and persecution in Ethiopia and forced to leave the country.
- 34.** It is now possible in Ethiopia to access all YouTube channels and TV programs issued by members of the Diaspora community. This also includes their websites. What happens is that if a person frequently uses the same VPN address, that VPN will be blocked. Thus, people have become creative in using multiple VPNs. Even Voice of America has sponsored a VPN connection. Now it is also possible to use TOR to access websites.
- 35.** The discussion about political topics as well as about corruptive practices is freer and ordinary people are more willingly engage in political discussions. At least, this is the situation in Addis Ababa where the atmosphere is a little bit more relaxed than in the Somali region or in Oromia, at least in the major cities. Outside the major cities people would be more careful about discussing politics. As there is no boundary between the Government and the ruling party any critical discussion of certain political actions would be perceived as a criticism of the party.

## British Embassy

Following the initial interview two additional questions were answered by July 2018:

*Could you please comment on the fact that the State of Emergency which was imposed in February has been lifted two month early (in June 2018)? To which extent does this decision affect the human rights situation in the country, especially for members of the opposition?*

36. The State of Emergency being lifted early is an indicator (along with the changing of both the head of the military and intelligence) that the current Prime Minister has significantly more authority than the previous one. Many political commentators did not feel the latest State of Emergency was really necessary, and I think the Prime Minister's confidence to lift early also supports that theory. I do not think it has any clear impact (positive or negative) on the Human Rights situation, including for members of the opposition. However, the Prime Minister has been lifted terrorism charges against "opposition groups" and has invited them to return to Ethiopia – at this point members of both OLF (Jawar Mohammed, US Diaspora) and Patriotic Ginbot 7 (Andargachew Tsege, British Diaspora, who until recently was serving a life sentence in Ethiopia, and was cleared of crimes) have returned.

*In your opinion, what does the fact that the Ethiopian Government has unblocked a number of websites, blogs as well as radio and TV stations mean for the political situation in the country? To which extent does this decision affect the human rights situation, for members of the opposition?*

37. The unblocking of websites suggests the current Prime Minister has a genuine desire to include dissenting voices in politics, and is making a best attempt at bring dissent from the streets, civil unrest and violence and into the parliament. This is admirable; yet allowing dissenting voices into parliament may not be enough to stop civil unrest – particularly if the new voices are not perceived to represent those committing acts of violence. Overall I expect a much more open environment for opposition members within Ethiopia, but this is balanced by the likely increase in civil unrest and the potential for an increase in ethnic violence.

Addis Ababa, 17 May 2018

### **State of emergency**

38. This interview took place in the midst of the State of emergency, which was imposed across Ethiopia in February 2018 and gathered three participants from immigration, consular and political unit of the embassy. The interlocutors noted that the present State of emergency had to be evaluated in connection with the previous State of emergency, which had been lifted in August 2017. The grievances that led to protests, which then led to the proclamation of the previous State of Emergency, were in essence legitimate. Lack of jobs and fear for the future was one of them. People of Ethiopia are concerned about the possibility for their children to create a future. Ethiopia has a very young population – the median age is 18 – which means that an additional 2 million young people enter the labour market every year, many after having graduated from university. However, there has not been created enough jobs to absorb this labour supply, and the jobs, which are created, does not match the qualifications

of people with tertiary education but are rather factory or sweat shop jobs. Albeit the Government has initiated the establishment of business parks the jobs created there only amount to a fraction of what is needed and at a very low salary; thus parents and young people are worried about the future. This fear fuels a general level of frustration in the country, which contributed to mass demonstrations.

39. The interlocutors emphasised that the authorities were treating any person who might be involved in perceived anti-government activities during and after the previous State of emergency roughly. The authorities committed human rights abuses in the regional prisons across all regions and there were reports of torture from the detention centres but the level and amount of abuse varied from centre to centre. Whereas the harshness varied from place to place, there was no region, which stood out as tangibly harsher than the other.
40. The human rights abuse occurred as a result of widespread autonomy within the local administration eager to stop roadblocks and other anti-government activities. It did not happen with a mandate from the Government to 'crack-down' on human rights. The sources suggested, however, that the situation had changed after the nomination of Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed. This time, the security forces have not taken steps to arrest a high number of political activists or citizens.
41. Whereas the previous State of emergency was proclaimed as a reaction to the unrest and security situation in Ethiopia, followed by crack-down on human rights; the second State of emergency was, in the analysis of the interlocutors from the British embassy, driven by a wish to take pre-emptive steps to avoid political instability. The situation has been relatively calm since the State of Emergency was imposed across the country and the roads have, as a result of this, been opened again. There has not been a wave of arrests, this time, rather the opposite: People have been released.
42. The proclamation of the current State of emergency has been followed by a number of public declarations made by Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed in which he promises political reforms. It remains, however, to be seen whether the Prime Minister can deliver on the promises made. The interlocutors emphasised that whereas the constitution does mandate reforms, the required amount of technical capacity to carry out political and economic reform does not seem to be available in the present pool of civil servants.

### **Political and human rights situation**

43. Asked about the current political situation in Ethiopia, the interlocutors noted that the arrival of Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed had significantly changed the situation.
44. The two main ethnic groups that have expressed grievances the loudest are the Oromos and the Amharas. For the Oromos this was fuelled by a perception of Tigran dominance. This perception has been around since 1991 and is to a certain extent reflective of reality, especially during and after the revolutionary days. The Oromo people have for a long time felt

that the Oromo People Democratic Organisation (OPDO)<sup>98</sup> was being used as a token party by the regime. Ethiopia is an ethnic diverse country composed of over 80 ethnicities/nationalities<sup>99</sup> and this multitude constitutes a real challenge in a situation where all of the intelligence and all important posts, including the one of prime minister, have been held by one ethnicity: the Tigrayans. Even in cases where a top post was not occupied by a Tigran, the perception, which was possibly true, was that the Tigran elite are right behind that person.

45. In Amhara the perception is that Amharas want to turn the country back to the feudal system and the Amharas feel they have been marginalised because of that kind of perception. In addition to that, the Amharas express that they feel pushed out of their own region by the Tigrayans. There is no census to document the current demographic situation really is.
46. At this point of time, it is unclear whether any genuine political reforms are taking place. So far it is a matter of public declarations and announcements. The constitution is sound and the policies are in the right direction, but it remains a question of implementation and of capacity to deliver on promises.

#### **Liberation of political prisoners**

47. According to the participants in this meeting, many individuals who were politicians have previously been arrested and then incarcerated based on various accusations other than political convictions. The accusations range from terrorism to violence. The Government calls these people politicians who are being arrested whereas the international community refers to them as political prisoners who have been arrested because they criticised the Government. 'A great number' of these imprisoned politicians have now been released as promised by Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed. This is being referred to by the Government as a part of the political reforms whereas it is not, according to these interlocutors, in any way a reform to undo something, which was never legitimate.

#### **Treatment of opposition groups**

48. The participants in this interview emphasised that the situation had changed significantly with the arrival of Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed. Before his nomination, it was not necessary to have a very strong connection to Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF) or the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) both groups, which remain on the national list of designated terrorist groups, to be harassed by the authorities. During the previous State of emergency, the Government arrested a very high number of people who were perceived to have any connection to opposition groups. This might be explained by two factors: first, the Government suspected that a very high amount of people might be involved in subversive activities; secondly, the authorities took a law enforcement perspective from which the goal was to arrest as many as possible, including people who might not be directly involved with anti-government activities,

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<sup>98</sup> The political party in the coalition of four parties which represents their interests

<sup>99</sup> According to the source, the terms ethnicity and nationality are used interchangeably in Ethiopia – the full name for Southern Nations State is Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples Regional State – and ethnicities is also used.

simply because the authorities would rather arrest too many than too few. Therefore, it has historically been impossible to prove whether an individual who has been arrested was in reality member of an opposition group, who were a sympathiser and who had no connection.

49. However, the interlocutors concurred that the Government, via the security forces, would have 'a pretty good idea' of who was engaged with a political organisation from the opposition. This knowledge would derive from information provided through the so-called "1 to 5" groups in Ethiopia – a fine granular system of groups, which constitute a network of intelligence gathering in Ethiopia. The most recent general protest was just two weeks ago (May 2018); local security forces are not very well trained in crowd control and they will shoot at the crowd to disperse the crowd; it causes fatalities, which then causes a bigger crowd the following day. There is a real need for capacity building that the national level is reluctant to offer because it is a quite sensitive topic.
50. In the current situation, it is very difficult to say anything with certainty. The Prime Minister has invited all political groups to join the conversation about the future of Ethiopia but time will tell whether this invitation will be followed up by real action. According to sources within the opposition that the interlocutors had spoken with recently, there is 'more political space' now in Ethiopia but still 'not enough' space; people with assumed connection to opposition groups are not being arrested anymore and most political prisoners are being released.

#### **Treatment of members of youth organisations**

51. It is impossible to know whether the Government had or had had a policy of harassing young people who were involved in youth organisations of one of the opposition parties. It seems to be less relevant now because the Prime Minister has made an effort of saying that any legal or illegal organisation, be it domestic or abroad should be welcomed at the table now.
52. Asked whether a person with an engagement in a youth organisation of one of the political parties from the opposition would be exposed to risk and repercussions from the authorities, the participants in this interview answered that this was difficult to know with any reasonable certainty. They mentioned that the Prime Minister had said that 'everybody' from the opposition now has 'a seat at the table' as long as they are not engaged in terrorist or other violent activities. Again, this could change and must be followed closely in the future.

#### **Treatment of pupils and students**

53. Asked about how the Government reacts to pupils and university students who are engaged in anti-government activities, the informants said that historically the threshold for actions, which would lead to repercussions was low and students did not have to be 'that involved' to be on the Government's radar. Now it was different and it would need to be actions, which were violent for the authorities to take measures to arrest the individual. 'Violent behaviour' could be defined as participating in a demonstration or cracking windows.

54. At the Ambo University, which one of the interlocutors visited recently there had been student strikes recently where the students refused to come to the university. Then the students were told that they had to go to the university.

#### **Treatment of members of the diaspora**

55. The participants in this meeting with insights into the political situation had been informed by human rights organisations based in Nairobi that members of the diaspora are now, for the first time in 20 years, returning to Ethiopia. According to these sources, the diaspora members are less worried today than before. In the analysis of these interlocutors that was a really strong sign of change in political environment in Ethiopia.
56. Members of the diaspora who decide to return to Ethiopia are allowed to reintegrate into society as citizens, and open private businesses, which many choose to do with quite some success.
57. The interlocutor expects that the Government 'definitely' is monitoring the activity of the diaspora, especially their social media activity, from Minnesota in the US to the UK. However, only activity, which was really into hatred and violence is likely to be flagged in Ethiopia whereas political rhetoric such as 'the Government needs to change' or 'the opposition should be heard' would be monitored but not likely to lead to repercussions.

#### **Corruptive practices**

58. The members of the UK delegation at this meeting concurred that the level of corruption remains low compared to neighbouring countries where corruptive practices remains consistently high and systemic. Corruption in Ethiopia can be characterised as relatively low, but also unpredictable.
59. However, the interlocutors also noted that corruptive practices have increased at two levels over the past years in Ethiopia. First, at the top level of political life and there is now a generalised expectation among observers of Ethiopian politics that the newly nominated Prime Minister, Abiy Ahmed, will take steps to investigate suspicions of official corruption and to have bank accounts of members of parliaments inspected. Secondly, corruption has also increased at the ground level of society and remains a problem at all administrative instances. To illustrate this point, the example of the issuance of a driving license was mentioned. The Government has announced a 'crack-down' on corruption related to the solicitation of bribes from people who need a driving license. The efficiency of such an initiative remains, however, to be seen as the Government has replaced experienced staff in the administration with staff without the same amount of experience.

#### **Liyu Police**

60. The interlocutors had no knowledge of whether forced recruitment to the Liyu police takes place.
- 61.





## EU

Following the interview two additional questions were answered by July 2018:

*Could you please comment on the fact that the State of Emergency which was imposed in February has been lifted two month early (in June 2018)? To which extent does this decision affect the human rights situation in the country, especially for members of the opposition?*

63. Though the latest State of Emergency was implemented with a softer hand than the previous one, it is positive it was lifted before the expired time. This reflects a more forthcoming approach by the new Government towards opposition parties (Prime Minister Abiy started dialogue with all of them). It will be interesting to observe the new Government's approach towards the still complicated security situation in some regions (including Oromia).

*In your opinion, what does the fact that the Ethiopian Government has unblocked a number of websites, blogs as well as radio and TV stations mean for the political situation in the country? To which extent does this decision affect the human rights situation, for members of the opposition?*

64. The reopening of internet network and release of the grip on media was of outmost importance. News is now circulating more and people are connected. This includes easier communication/outreach for member of the opposition, and quicker signalling of possible human rights abuses. The press is, however, generally favourable to the new Prime Minister, it will be interesting to observe the Government's reaction in case of more critical press approach in the future.

Addis Ababa, 23 May 2018

### *Political situation*

65. The source described the current political situation in Ethiopia as a big chance for the Government to be successful. There has been a peaceful change of prime minister, which in itself was something extraordinary in Ethiopia. The previous leaders of the country died, got exiled or as the emperor got killed. The source noted that this was the first time when Ethiopia in modern time had a normal change of prime minister. The fact that the previous prime minister resigned and that pass-over of power took place as per constitution was seen as very positive. It was still extremely difficult to get information out of the inner circle. The resignation, however, did not come as a surprise, as a consequence of the protracted protests that swept throughout the country before he resigned.
66. According to the interlocutor, the EPRDF, the ruling coalition, has a very solid party line, the only going out to the public. Despite that criticism towards the Prime Minister leaked, suggesting a possible change of the Prime Minister. The timing, however, was surprisingly sudden and created an uncertain moment. The authorities stressed with the international community that they went by the constitution by getting a new prime minister and a new government.
67. The source noted that the new Prime Minister promised changes are going in the right direction. While he might not have had direct control of social media and the protests in the

fields, he used them to his own advantage. Furthermore, the Tigrayan party<sup>100</sup> miscalculated or was overconfident during the elections for prime minister, which saw Abiy successful.

68. The new Prime Minister is 42 years old with a background in the political establishment, he was in the army, and uses innovative talking – the change people was calling for. Whether he will be able to deliver on his promises has to be seen. The interlocutor advised that in general the new Prime Minister managed to calm down the situation. First he went out to the regions and talked to the people, and then he went to the Middle East talked to Saudi leaders and his next visit would be to Uganda and Egypt.
69. According to the source, the TPLF<sup>101</sup> represented six percent of the population; nevertheless they controlled the establishment and large part of the economy: big parastatal companies, the army, the security service, etc. Although the new Prime Minister did not start a purge of the old guard, he put Amhara and Oromo people in key positions. The fact that the new Prime minister himself was from Oromia defused the demonstrations in Oromia somewhat, which would have been more difficult if the EPRDF had chosen someone else as prime minister. Therefore in terms of political change, the source was optimistic. The source was more sceptical in regard to the economy and employment. The source advised that there were very few options for graduates in Ethiopia, which created frustration among young people. The source opined that if a graduate had no real options for employment in the formal sector, they would be more inclined to try to change things themselves.

#### *State of Emergency*

70. According to the source, the clashes between Somali and Oromo people had been ongoing for a long time. The Somali police target ethnic Oromos on their own territory and vice versa. They forced them to move to the other state. What was even worse, the interlocutor stated that many Somalians from Oromia could not speak Somali, which in itself constituted a problem, when they were relocated.
71. The source noted that the international community (including EU) had called for lifting of the first imposed State of emergency, and the authorities abided to that in order to appease the international community and show that Ethiopia's security situation was under control. However, 2-3 months after the prime minister resigned the Government re-introduced the state of emergency.
72. The interlocutor opined that the second state of emergency was less heavy handed. Some people were still getting arrested, but the extent of arrests was not comparable to the previous state of emergency. The source noted that there should now be ground to have the state of emergency lifted. The interlocutor also believed that if things got out of hand, it would be a huge problem for the Prime Minister. In this respect, the source referred to the internal clashes in the Somali region.

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<sup>100</sup> Tigrayan People's Liberation Front is part of the ruling coalition Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front

<sup>101</sup> Tigrayan People's Liberation Front

#### *Release of prisoners and the closure of Maekelawi center*

73. According to the source, the authorities had started to release prisoners including opposition leaders. The authorities imprisoned political around 2015/2016. The source estimated that there were approximately 30,000 persons imprisoned all in all. The source informed that the authorities started to release 10,000 including prominent opposition party leaders. While the Government is releasing prisoners, there are still others that are being arrested.
74. Regarding the Maekelawi detention centre, the source advised that it had been closed down. The source added that the closure should be seen as a symbolic gesture by the Government, since a number of people were detained and tortured there. However, the authorities had constructed a new centre outside of the city, but in a symbolic way the source opined that the closure was a good thing.
75. According to the interlocutor, the new political environment bears a range of contradictory elements. As an example the source referred to a situation, where one opposition leader was released from prison and was going to address his people in his home town. He was subsequently detained by the federal police, who stated that he was not allowed to address his people. However, the regional police did not agree with the federal position, which resulted in a stand-off between federal and regional police.

#### *Internally displaced persons (IDPs)*

76. The source advised that Ethiopia had a substantial amount of IDPs, which was caused by primarily clashes and drought. Nevertheless around 60 percent of all IDPs are conflict generated. The source opined that there were around 1.66 million IDPs in Ethiopia.
77. Regarding refugees, the source advised that Ethiopia had almost one million refugees. The source elaborated that in Ethiopia the conditions for refugees were better than for IDPs. The whole refugee system experienced a good collaboration between the Government and UNHCR. However, the UN in general tries to play the poor conditions down for refugees, because they want to be on good ground with the Government.

#### *The situation for the opposition*

78. In general it was the opinion of the source that the conditions for the opposition had improved, although, there were exceptions. The source mentioned a case where a number of persons had been released from prison and wished to celebrate. They were immediately arrested. Furthermore, there had been a number of rearrests of journalists, social media bloggers and activists. The interlocutor opined that this area was more sensitive than others. Even though there was a liberalisation of the media, the control/censorship was still there and arrests still occurred, although in a smaller scale than before. The source also opined that students got less targeted now than before, which also was due to the lack of willingness to demonstrate for the time being.

## U.S. Embassy

Addis Ababa, 18 May 2018

### State of Emergency

79. The point of departure for the discussion at this meeting was the current State of emergency which the regime had declared mid-February 2018, and which was supposed to be lifted by August 2018. The State of emergency was imposed just after the resignation of the former Prime Minister (Hailemariam Desalgn), who was replaced by Dr Abiy Ahmed as new Prime Minister. This nomination was unanimously perceived as a sign of Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Front (EPRDF) –the ruling party's– decision to open up for a certain level of controlled change in the country. According to the interlocutors, the new Prime Minister had in his declarations in a number of public appearances consistently demonstrated willingness to 'doing the right thing' as well as a dedication to induce political reforms. In the views of the participants at this meeting, the nomination of a new Prime Minister with the willingness to address a number of sensitive issues should be interpreted as a window of opportunity for an improvement in the human rights situation in Ethiopia because his willingness to lead a change process stood out as genuine. Thus, the current sentiment among Ethiopians including that of international observers at the western embassies was a generalised feeling of 'cautious optimism'.
80. The interlocutors noted that the Prime Minister's readiness to steer a political reform process has an inbuilt risk of firing back on him – if it turns out that he will be unable to pass the announced reforms through parliament. Dr Abiy Ahmed had at numerous public occasions made declarations in which he promised to address the Oromo and Amhara communities' calls for political inclusion and economic equality. The risk of disappointing these expectations was a real threat to the survival of the Prime Minister's own political project.

### Liberation of political prisoners

81. Regardless of the announced political reforms, the newly nominated Prime Minister had yet not delivered on the promises made regarding deliverance of all political prisoners and opposition leaders detained with or without a trial in prison.
82. The interlocutors were not knowledgeable about the status of the closing of the Maekelawi detention centre in Addis Ababa (also known as the Federal Police Crime Investigation and Forensic Sector).

### Political and human rights situation

83. Ethiopia is still characterised by a high level of arbitrary violence which affects the general population in urban as well as rural parts of the country. The nature of the violence is partly ethnic and it was emphasised that to be caught in the fight between two opposing ethnic groups could be a real risk for foreigners traveling in Ethiopia. The regime does not maintain total control over security forces in all of the federal republic's nine regions. To illustrate the fact that the regional security forces at times act independently of the federal government, the

example of Somali Region<sup>102</sup> was mentioned; a region where the paramilitary force, the Liuy Police operates. However, the overall assessment was that the human rights situation in Ethiopia moved in the right direction currently.

84. Previously the regime denied the fact that the humanitarian situation in Ethiopia was so severe that a high number of citizens have been forced to leave their place of habitual residence for a number of reasons including conflict and drought; and often so in the most precarious conditions. Whereas 'IDP' (internally displaced person) used to be a forbidden word, the existence of 'an IDP issue' is now fully recognised as a fact by the authorities and the level of cooperation from the Government in providing assistance to this vulnerable group has improved. However, the interlocutors noted that the Government still occasionally puts restrictions on the deliverance of humanitarian aid to certain IDP groups for political reasons; as an example the case of Somali Region where constraints on the delivery of food aid had been recurrent. It is in particular difficult to transport humanitarian help to remote areas and areas where the security situation is dangerous such as at the Kenyan border.
85. The human rights and security situation in the refugee camps is precarious; the interlocutors noted that revenge killings occur with impunity inside the camps.
86. According to the interlocutors at this meeting, there have been no amendments to the list of designated terrorist organisations made in 2011 and adopted by the Ethiopian Parliament; a list naming five organisations including Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF) and Oromo Liberation Front (OLF).

### **Treatment of pupils and students**

87. The regime is known for accepting widespread use of excessive violence by the security forces against pupils and university students who participate in anti-government mass demonstrations. As an example of this, the interlocutors referred to a recent event where the authorities shot at the crowd of non-armed student demonstrators and caused the death of nine peaceful demonstrators who were killed at this occasion.

### **Treatment of members of the diaspora**

88. The situation of members of the diaspora is ruled by its own internal dynamic, which are not obvious to external observers. The Government conducts internet surveillance, monitors the activities of diaspora members who are active on YouTube canals or otherwise engaged in internet based communication. This surveillance also includes those diaspora members who are of a low profile and who are less vocal in their anti-government agitation. It is well know

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<sup>102</sup> Also known as Ogaden.

that the Ethiopian government periodically closes down the internet – also known as ‘internet blackouts’ – blocks certain websites, which are critical towards the Government and actively seeks to restrict freedom of expression domestically: to illustrate this practice examples were given of how the authorities had contacted foreign governments, hosting large diaspora communities, and requested a foreign government to take action in order to close down TV programs or YouTube channels which were run by the diaspora communities.

89. The interlocutors noted that in the past recent years a growing number of people from the diaspora community had chosen to return to Ethiopia. The explanation for this, offered by the interlocutors was that members of the diaspora might find that there is now a chance for influencing the political development in the direction that they desire.

#### **Fair trials**

90. The judicial system in Ethiopia is weak because it suffers from lack of staff, lack of technical capacity and scarce resources. Although trial procedures under the constitution are in place, these procedures are not followed systematically.

#### **Function of Vital Events Registration Agency (VERA)**

91. The members of the US embassy delegation were not convinced of the effectiveness of VERA to register vital events such as birth, adoption, marriage, divorce and death correctly. All participants at the meetings concurred that they did not fully trust the procedures installed by this agency to prevent rigging of ID documents. The interlocutors agreed that a high number of ID documents containing inaccurate information about the document holder are in circulation.
92. The interlocutors emphasised that the fact that a document contains inaccurate information does not necessarily imply that the document in itself is fraudulent. For multiple reasons, including practical and geographical reasons, people might avoid to demand documents through the official channels and instead seek to obtain ID documents through unofficial channels.
93. Corruptive practices are widespread at all levels of society in Ethiopia, according to our interlocutors. This means that it is possible and in no way exceptional for people to acquire new, genuine ID documents with inaccurate information. Bribes are being used as a means to negotiate the issuances of ID documents where the document holder is represented as younger than they are in reality. As an effect of this, the embassy has made a decision to fact check all the breeder documents at the issuing office by themselves in order to check their validity. The consular department at this particular embassy estimates that they see approximately five fraudulent ID documents per month. Passports are rarely fraudulent as it is fairly easily possible to obtain breeder documents with inaccurate information that can be used for the demand of a new passport.

## **Situation of Eritreans in Ethiopia**

94. Ethiopia is currently the second largest recipient country of refugees in sub-Saharan Africa. The participants in this meeting recognised that the Ethiopian government hosts a large and growing number of refugees and that the authorities has managed, in collaboration with UNHCR, to offer shelter, food and basic services to these very diverse groups of refugees. The situation has been particularly critical since the government of Saudi Arabia has cracked down on the illegal workers in the country, which has led to a high number of returnees to Ethiopia. The Ethiopian government willingly welcomes Eritreans who seek protection in Ethiopia in order to embarrass the Eritrean government. The authorities do not issue documents to Eritrean refugees but offer them refugee status.



## International NGO

Following the interview two additional questions were answered by July 2018:

*Could you please comment on the fact that the State of Emergency which was imposed in February has been lifted two month early (in June 2018)? To which extent does this decision affect the human rights situation in the country, especially for members of the opposition?*

95. Yes, the State of emergency was lifted earlier. This is very much in line with the general political signals originating from Dr Abiy. Ethiopia's new Prime Minister Dr. Abiy has announced a lot of reforms to reshape the nation but implementing them is harder.

Most important and most recently the Prime Minister:

- shook up the security services – removed Ethiopia's intelligence and military chiefs along with the national security advisor
- Ended the State of Emergency before expected
- Freed long-time political prisoners
- Announced plans to liberalise the economy – selling shares in EthioTelecom and Ethiopian Air
- try to resolve a 20 year old conflict with Eritrea – Ethiopia will respect a 2002 UN commission ruling that demarcated the country's border with Eritrea

96. But there are signs of cracks in the unity within the ruling coalition EPRDF that has otherwise been in unchecked control of Ethiopia since 1991. You will recall that Abiy is the first Oromo speaking PM ever. That makes the biggest population group the Oromos very satisfied and they continue to praise him and whatever he does. Also Amaras (second largest) are still very happy. And Abiy has travelled extensively within Ethiopia and seem to be genuinely listening to the grievance of the people, wherever he appears.

97. Abiy was elected within the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) coalition by united votes from Oromia and Amhara – that meant against the two other parts of the coalition, namely the Tigrayan and the Southerners. They are not happy and we see again violence and nasty ethnic clashes. Like before is it likely "government sponsored riots" – some elements from the South want to kick out Oromos. In the mixed town of Hawassa in south where all the big industrial parks are with various ethnic groups coming together as labours, we have seen since mid-June violent protests, clash, vandalism (burn property and cars) and another 16,000 internal displaced persons. According to OCHA<sup>103</sup> more than a million people has been internally displaced and in dire need of humanitarian assistance. On the issue of the IDPs, there is no obvious plan for them to return. And not returning is a silent acceptance of displacement based on ethnicity.

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<sup>103</sup> The source made reference to OCHA (2018). Ethiopia: Oromio-Somali Conflict –Induced displacement.

98. Also, Abiy's plans for the economy may also run into resistance, as ERPDF elites are entrenched in the state-run industries at the heart of the country's economy. And finally there were also protest against Abiy's announcement on Eritrea by residents of territory. The decision may be popular in the international community but approx. 70,000 Ethiopians lost their lives in that war (over a sandy dessert) and some are asking now for what were all those lives lost.
99. So in conclusion, it is too early to say whether there will be genuine improvement on the human rights situation for the opposition. While there were welcomed changes on the leadership in central security apparatus, it is also obvious that the security apparatus remain rather loyal to those formerly in power. For example a small grenade was tossed at the recent pro-Abiy rally in Addis on Meskel Square in Addison 30 June. The event attracted several 100,000s of Ethiopians. Speculations are that as there has never been any such attack on those in power before, this could only happened because certain elements within the police allowed it to happen. Later the Addis Ababa chief of police was arrested.

*In your opinion, what does the fact that the Ethiopian Government has unblocked a number of websites, blogs as well as radio and TV stations mean for the political situation in the country? To which extent does this decision affect the human rights situation, for members of the opposition?*

100. Dr. Abiy continues to take measures in support of more freedom of expression and the unblocking of media and websites are welcomed changes. Dr Abiy enjoys wide support from the population across various ethnic groups and regions, but his actions are no doubt also causing resentment within the government coalition. See above on government sponsored riots - these continue in areas of southern Oromia, Benishangul Gumuz and North Gonder in Amhara. Therefore we are only cautiously optimistic on the human rights situation.

Addis Ababa, 16 May, 2018

### **State of emergency**

101. The interview took place four months into the state of emergency which was declared on 16 February 2018. This state of emergency was different compared to the previous one which had been declared on 9 October 2016 and then lifted by the Government in August 2017, according to the interlocutor. The difference was a certain sense of trust in the future which had emerged; a trust which seemed to be inspired by the nomination of the new Prime Minister, Dr Abiy Ahmed. The interlocutor noted that people, e.g. staff members of this NGO and others, expressed more hope in the future now. This level of hope seemed to be fuelled by the declarations made by the new Prime Minister in the early days of his mandate although nothing of substance had changed in terms of the locus of control over the country. Ethiopia is still a one-party system and ERPDF maintains full power over the rule of the country regardless of change of prime minister.
102. There has been a significant reduction in violent riots and public protests after the proclamation of the current state of emergency according to this interlocutor. Up to its entry into force, the situation across the country was characterised by instability and numerous security incidents. There were clashes on the Oromo-Somali Region border and many roads

were being blocked frequently. This has changed and the situation was notably calmer by then. The new Prime Minister had made a number of public statements, including his inaugural address, which in the views of this interlocutor had been interpreted by the general population as a new beginning. However, the informant noted that the Prime Minister had yet to address the media to advise whether the issue of political prisoners would be solved. This has later been directly addressed. Previously illegal Oromo media outlets are no longer illegal, and recently more than 200 websites run primarily by opposition and diaspora Ethiopians have been unblocked.

103. The Proclamation of the state of emergency prohibits all assembling or other kinds of moving in groups regardless of purpose as well as it puts restrictions on the freedom of association and of peaceful assembly. This has a direct consequence for civil society organisations, including international development NGOs with a global mandate to carry out advocacy and other kinds of awareness raising activities. It is important to note that it is prohibited for INGOs to engage in any gender, advocacy and right related issues.

104. According to the CSO law INGOs can engage in:

- Prevention or alleviation or relief of poverty or disaster
- Advancement of economy and social developments and environmental protection
- Advancement of health or saving lives
- Overall services provisions

But cannot engage in:

- Advancement of human and democratic rights
- Promotion of equality of nations, nationalities and peoples and that of gender and religion
- Promotion of rights of disabled and children's rights
- Promotion of conflict resolution or reconciliation
- Promotion of efficiency of justice & law enforcement service

105. Any NGO activity which requires that people gather in groups needs approval beforehand by the authorities as a consequence of the State of emergency. This is a limitation in the freedom to carry out development activities aiming at raising awareness about civil rights or even any technical awareness on for instance good agronomic practices or the like. This requires civil society organisations to carefully monitor which language they use when they make references to rights based approaches, women's empowerment, political awareness raising, etc.

106. A number of directives under the state of emergency wield power to regulate public life. According to these directives it is prohibited to communicate about security issues including access and road safety, etc. This causes trouble for civil society organisations with operations across the country as these organisations need to exchange information among staff members who travel across different regions of the country, including those regions where the security situation is volatile. Security threats include the blocking of roads as well as stone-throwing but also the danger of getting caught in gun fire when security forces have intervened to disburse

crowds. It has in particular been in Oromia State where there have been many security incidents.

### **Political and human rights situation**

107. Noting that Ethiopia's administrative structure is built on the principles of ethnic federalism, the interlocutor emphasised that ethnic division has been and still remains a source of instability over the years. Ethnicity as an engine of political conflict still dominates, and increasingly so, Ethiopia's political life. This is fuelled by the Ethiopian federal government, which uses 'ethnification' actively as a key strategy to keep the Oromia and the Somalis engaged in local conflicts at the regional level thereby preventing the Oromos from fully engaging in the competition for influence at the national level. According to the interlocutor, ethnic competition and mistrust can be felt at all levels of society, including in organisations where much efforts have been invested in creating a workplace free of ethno-nationalist sentiments. To illustrate this phenomenon the interlocutor referred to an example of a staff member of Tigrinya descent who expressed fear of being physically abused and attacked by the mob if they travelled to Oromia where people of Tigrinya ethnicity are intensely disliked. However, the interlocutor noted that there were indications of a certain reduction in the level of ethnical based animosity in the country, although it was still too early to assess whether these improvements were sustainable beyond the immediate reaction.
108. The new Prime Minister, who is of Oromo and Amhara descent with a Muslim father and a Christian mother, has called for national reconciliation and dialogue among the federal regions of Ethiopia; the interlocutor emphasised that the Prime Minister has called for a peaceful solution to the ongoing unrest in Oromia. The fact that the regime has nominated a Prime Minister of Oromo descent has altered the ethnic composition of political life and has inspired hope in a more fair ethnic balanced representation at national level and in more willingness to enter into real dialogue with opposition parties. As an indicator of this level of optimism that now prevails among people of Oromo descent, the interlocutor referred to anecdotal evidence of new-borns being given names such as 'We won' or 'At that time'.
109. Albeit the level of corruption in Ethiopia might be lower than in the neighbouring countries, corruption remains a problem according to the interlocutor. Examples of this were numerous including misuse in the judicial system. Also, land concessions sold to foreign investors is highly contested.

### **Situation of political prisoners**

110. The Prime Minister has publically announced the release of an unspecified number of prisoners. According to the interlocutor a significant number of prisoners, in particular prominent politicians, activists and human rights advocates and political "bloggers", have been released during this state of emergency. However, besides a few well known public figures, it is not clear who have been released out of the many who have been detained over the years.

Thus it remains to be established how many have in reality been released and how many remain in prison.

### **Treatment of members of opposition groups**

111. The interlocutor was unaware of whether there had been significant changes in the way the government is responding to anti-government protests organised by the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) or the Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF). However, the interlocutor knew of at least one recent example of interethnic violent conflict in 2018 in the town of Moyale near the Kenyan border and, on the Ethiopian side of the border, split between the Oromia Region on the West and the Somali region<sup>104</sup>) in the east. At this occasion, the police fired shots at the crowd and several demonstrators were killed. The interlocutor explained that this incident has been followed by calls for an investigation into the use of what appears to be excessive force by the police against demonstrators.

### **Situation of pupils and students**

112. Ethiopia has a history of politically motivated mass protests by university students in all regions. The national and regional security forces are known for having limited 'crowd control skills' and student participants in demonstrations have been shot at, killed or arbitrarily detained regardless of their role in these demonstrations. Students who have been arrested have most often been detained without being charged with any crime; many have been released without ever having been formally presented for a judge. Especially at the event in Bishoftu in Oromia in October 2016, where a Oromo cultural festival escalated into anti-government protest and turned violent and some 700 allegedly died<sup>105</sup>. There were many arrests and whereabouts of the arrested are still unknown or contested.

### **Treatment of person who have previously been detained and then released**

113. Persons, who have previously been arrested, detained and then released with or without a trial, might still be exposed to increased surveillance by the authorities.

### **Liyu police**

114. According to the interlocutor, it is well established that the Somali Regional Special Policy, also known as Liyu Police, is using excessive force against citizens. The interlocutor was not knowledgeable about whether forced recruitment to the Liyu Police took place.

### **Situation of the diaspora**

115. The level of surveillance inside Ethiopia is high and, according to the interlocutor, there is 'no doubt' that this surveillance extends to people who belong to the diaspora. The activities and utterances of those members of the diaspora who are active on social media such as YouTube are most possibly being followed closely by the secret service.

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<sup>104</sup> Also known as Ogaden.

<sup>105</sup> The source made reference to Human Rights Watch (2017). "Fuel on the Fire: Security Forces Response to the 2016 Ireecha Cultural Festival. September 19, 2017

116. The internet and telecommunication sector in Ethiopia is highly controlled by the state.

There are numerous examples of how the federal government has decided to shut down the internet to restrict citizens' communication. The Government also blocks certain websites, in particular those of diaspora groups. In Ethiopia it is against the law to access the internet via a VPN connection. In practice the law does not, however, prevent ordinary people from using VPN connections. For individuals who are not on the radar of the security service it is possible to use VPN connections to access the internet.

### **Situation of Eritreans in Ethiopia**

117. In many ways Eritrean refugees in Ethiopia benefit from a privileged status compared to refugees of other nationalities, according to this interlocutor. By contrast to other refugees, Eritreans can benefit from the out-of-camp policy which allows them to take residence out of the designated refugee camps. They can study at national institutions, but they cannot yet get a license to open a shop nor can they apply for jobs at the formal labour market. However, the Government of Ethiopia's "9 pledges" made in line with the **New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants in September 2016** and the subsequent regional policy framework of the CRRF (Comprehensive Refugees Response Framework) has the intension of allowing for full integration of the one million refugees into Ethiopia including access to all basic services.

## Danish Refugee Council

Addis Ababa, 22 May 2018

### State of emergency

118. The interview began by a juxtaposition of the two states of emergency, which have been imposed in Ethiopia over the past years. Whereas the first one, which was declared in September 2016 and only lifted in August 2017 was very 'heavy handed' and characterised by a high level of securitisation in direct response to the public anti-government protest, the second one, which was declared only six months later in February 2018 had been less heavy handed by the security forces. There have been instances where the Government has shown force but not nearly as much as in the previous State of emergency. The declaration of the last State of emergency had in reality put a lot of things in motion and has, probably as an unintended diffuse side effect, made space for some progress. According to the interlocutor, there was currently a generalised feeling of movement, of hope and that 'things were possible now', a consequence, which might be counter to what the leaders of the ruling party intended when they declared this State of emergency. It is notable that there has not been a large scale violent reaction to the proclamation of this State of emergency, as might have been expected. The nomination of a new prime minister has also fuelled hope among people. The resignation of the former Prime Minister, Hailemariam Desalegn in February, happened in recognition by the ruling party of the fact that it was no longer 'tenable' for him to be in that position giving the level of protest. According to the interlocutor, 'this is a time of hope and optimism' after a vacuum left by the resignation of the previous prime minister. Both the Oromo and the Amhara people had been increasingly marginalised over the past years and this has contributed to the level of frustration in Ethiopia and a generalised feeling of desperation and 'we have nothing to lose'. This desperation was not only enacted as participation in mass demonstrations but also in shop-owners' reluctance to open their stores, etc.

119. Regardless of ethnicity, Ethiopians can be described as 'quite nationalistic' and concerned about the unity of the country. They want their country to be peaceful and this means that they are willing to be patient with the newly nominated prime minister if only for the fact that he represents a replacement of the leadership, which has frustrated people for many years. The three weeks intermezzo between the resignation of the previous Prime Minister and the nomination of Dr Abiy Ahmed was at the same time intense and relaxed; speculations and arm chair analysis were made but there were no major security incidents. Had the choice been made for a different kind of leadership, the situation would have been very different. The choice of a prime minister of Christian and Muslim background, of Oromo ethnicity allows for people to read different things into his person, which makes him an appealing choice. To which extent he will be able to maintain this level of support by the people depends on who will be perceived as the losers and the winners of his politics, especially regarding how he intends to address the border conflict between Somalia and Oromia, including the huge amount of displaced people there.

### Release of political prisoners

120. Prior to the proclamation of the State of Emergency, the government has already released a number of political prisoners, probably 10,000s over time as per public records.

### **Treatment of opposition groups**

121. According to this interlocutor, it has become much more difficult to assess the level of risk and the nature of this risk that a person who is engaged in an opposition party would be exposed to today because things have changed with the new situation and the nomination of the new Prime Minister.
122. Based on his experience from his Ethiopian colleagues as well as from interactions with members of the international community in Addis Ababa, the interlocutor noted especially during the previous State of Emergency people feared being associated in any way with opposition parties. This was in particular but not restricted to people engaged in journalism. During the previous State of Emergency there was a significant threat against Ethiopian nationals who sat in on any forum discussing questions related to the security situation of the country, so it was a management decision in this particular NGO to disallow that. When people discussed at the work place or in the local community they were very cautious: They fear that any slip of the tongue would be interpreted as questioning the Government's authority and could lead to detainment. It is well documented that there were 8-10,000 people who were detained as a result of this.
123. The interlocutor had first-hand knowledge of people who avoided participating in a discussion among NGO staff or even texting with NGO staff because they knew that the authorities were hostile towards civil society organisations.
124. As of now, there are no reports that the security forces, under the State of Emergency, which was declared in February 2018, have detained people under suspicion of being connected to opposition parties. However, as the interview took place in the early days of the State of Emergency, it was still too early to tell how it would developed and by precaution, people seemed to still restrain from making statements which could be perceived as radically challenging the Government.
125. According to the assessment of this interlocutor, there was a wider room for freedom of expression and critical discussions of the Government's actions for intellectuals as there was for people outside of academia. For university students, the room for expression would be more restrained.

### **Situation of youth organisations within the political parties from the opposition**

126. In general, the interlocutor found the youth organisations of the opposition parties to be very well organised and very well controlled. Whether a member of a political youth opposition group would be at risk of detainment would depend on the specific situation. It is violence and violent actions, which are criminalised rather than membership by itself. However, it is the



authorities who have the ultimate power to define what would be perceived as violence and thereby of politicising collective and individual actions.

### **The situation of refugees in Ethiopia**

127. The interlocutor began by recognising the complexity of the refugee situation in Ethiopia. There are not just one refugee crisis in Ethiopia but multiple including refugees from South Sudan, refugees and asylum seekers from Somalia and refugees and asylum seekers from Eritrea; not one uniform approach can be used on all of these situations.
128. Regarding the situation of Eritrean refugees in Ethiopia they are in a privileged position compared to other nationalities. Provided that they have a sponsor, or can otherwise sustain themselves, they have the possibility of residing outside of the designated refugee camps. They are also allowed to apply for enrolment at university but not to apply for a job within the formal labour market. This is a part of the out-of-camp scheme that is implemented by the Ethiopian Government and UNHCR in Ethiopia. In principle this could be a possibility for any refugee, but in reality it is only used by Eritreans and Somalis.
129. The situation for Eritreans who reside in the refugee camps in Hitsats in Shire is without opportunities for creating a dignified future. Albeit the camps have improved significantly, especially for the unaccompanied minors and separated children who now benefit from better shelters and social rehabilitation activities, there are no job prospects or living opportunities for people there. There is no electricity in the camps and they lack running water.
130. The phenomenon of Ethiopian nationals posing as Eritrean refugees is not an unknown phenomenon but we lack solid data about how widespread it is.

### **The situation of internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Ethiopia**

131. The issue of IDPs has been a highly politicised topic in Ethiopia and very difficult to discuss on an evidence based manner. For years, it was impossible to suggest that there was a group of people in Ethiopia that had been forced to relocate. However, this is no longer the case and now the authorities recognise that there is a problem with IDPs in Ethiopia. It is in particular droughts, which have contributed to pushing people out of their habitual place of residence but also the conflicts in the Oromia-Somali regions.

## The Fortune, national newspaper

Addis Ababa, 23 May 2018

*The Fortune is a part of Ethiopia's rapidly growing media and communication sector. It is a weekly print and digital news media with a focus on business, economic development but also on national politics. The Fortune has been published since May 2000 and for the past 13 years also on the internet. It has about 50-55 staff members. Mr. Giorgis is the Managing Editor of the Addis Fortune.*

### **The State of emergency**

132. The interview took place in the midst of the State of emergency which was imposed across the country in February 2018. According to Mr. Giorgis the purpose of the State of Emergency was to equip the law enforcement with a legal mandate to exercise command over the situation across all nine regional states. The police in the regional states are accountable to the regional governments only, not to the federal government and the regime found that the security situation had 'gotten out of control' and therefore proclaimed a State of emergency in order to wield wide powers to prevent public protest and prohibit the occurrence of demonstrations.

### **Political and human rights situation**

133. The interview began by Mr. Giorgis describing his view on freedom of expression in Ethiopia as well as his own experience with the Government's efforts to control the media. He had been arrested, imprisoned, accused and convicted for violation of the press law. He was punished with a fine of the equivalent to 3,000 US dollars, which at that point of time was the highest amount that one could be fined for violating the press law. This episode occurred in 1995-96. He noted that as an editor in Ethiopia you encounter problems and harassment on a daily basis, ranging from readers and business people to ministers. In the opinion of Mr. Giorgis the situation of the free media in Ethiopia could be characterised as 'not as bad as the international community might think; not as good as the Government tries to make it look like'.
134. The political life in Ethiopia is controlled by the elites and highly centralised. The emergence of social media has challenged the elite's monopoly on information. Although radio remains the preferred media of the Ethiopian population, especially in rural areas, social media has enabled a new flow of information. This has created grounds for competing elites and for elites who can compete over the attention of people through the use of the media.
135. This interlocutor expressed that the current political development in Ethiopia inspired 'cautious optimism' because of the announcement made by Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed. He would, however, need to deliver on the promises made on economic progress to stay in office. The congress of the ruling party will be held in July 2018 and would tell whether Abiy Ahmed would be re-elected as chairman of the party; and the 2020 elections would be decisive for his political project.

### **Release of political prisoners**

136. When asked about whether the Government had lived up to promises made regarding the release of political prisoners, Mr. Giorgis noted that there was a substantial gap between what is stipulated in the Constitution and the regime's willingness to deliver on the rights in the Constitution. This interviewee found that in reality, Ethiopia has a very liberal Constitution but a rather illiberal government.

### **Treatment of opposition groups**

137. Mr. Giorgis emphasised that currently there is a multitude of opposition groups in Ethiopia; in reality up to 94 groups. However, many of them remain rather uncoordinated and people are not paying much attention to them.

138. According to Mr. Giorgis, people who were affiliated with either OLF or ONLF had been at high risk of being arrested for terrorism; the mere fact of receiving an email or a phone call from a member of OLF or ONLF could lead to repercussions. Phone calls would be transcribed and held against the receiver of the call. Having any form of relationship with a political organisation on the national list of terrorist groups is being followed by the authorities. However, Mr. Giorgis noted that the situation seemed to have sobered out a bit now and the future would tell whether the treatment of members of opposition parties would be more relaxed in the future. To illustrate the fact that the situation was less tense now, Mr. Giorgis mentioned that the leadership of the Oromo Democratic Front (ODF) has been allowed to enter Addis Ababa for political talks with the new Prime Minister.

### **Treatment of university students**

139. Asked whether affiliation with a student organisation would expose a person to repercussions by the authorities, the editor noted that the environment was less intimidating than it used to be and that people, including students were more vocal than they used to be. The Prime Minister has publicly addressed the needs to involve university students and this has inspired some optimism.

### **Diaspora**

140. The source stated that members of the diaspora community were, 'without doubt' monitored closely by the government, wherever they might reside. This is, according to the interlocutor, no secret, and that outreach includes people from the diaspora who might reside in Denmark.

141. The editor noted that if Ethiopians participate in demonstrations against the Ethiopian regime in a foreign country, be it in Europe or in the USA, would be video-taped to document their activity. This would also be the case if members of the diaspora had gotten foreign nationality. Thus they would

fear that they were to return to Ethiopia then something might happen to them upon return. As examples of what might occur, Mr. Giorgis mentioned that they could run the risk of being detained in the airport or jailed. He emphasised that this fear was in particularly high during 2017, although with the nomination of the new Prime Minister, the situation seemed to be a bit more relaxed.

## Blogger

Addis Ababa, 23 May 2018

### *State of emergency*

142. According to the interlocutor, the first state of emergency was imposed as a response to the nationwide protests in the streets, which at the time caused public unrest and security incidents, especially during the time of the Erecha festival<sup>106</sup>. Both Christians and Muslims join this festival for political purposes. During these rallies the Police fired teargas into the crowd, which caused panic and ended in several casualties. The Government itself admitted to have killed 50 protesters.
143. After the episode at the Erecha festival, people around Addis Ababa started to protest heavily. Although the mass protests during and after the Erecha festival were peaceful, the police did not tolerate them, and subsequently cracked down on them.
144. The source noted that at the time of the first state of emergency there were many protesters in the biggest three regions in Ethiopia and the government officials were united to stop all protesters, journalists, opposition politicians etc.
145. The first state of emergency was frightening, according to the interlocutor, because one had to be home before six and people were scared of what would might happen to them. The police would stop a random person on the street, search him and confiscate what he had on him. Furthermore, if the police found anything like a political picture on a person's Twitter account, Facebook etc., they would immediately arrest the person.
146. The source advised that he himself had been detained, because he had been giving a number of interviews to different media. The police explained, that the source had criticised the state of emergency on the Radio "Voice of America" and therefore was detained. The source was kept in detention for 40 days and was never taken to court to be presented for a judge.
147. The interlocutor noted that the state of emergency, which was declared on February 2018, did not target the general public: Now the authorities do not target protesters or even activists. The source added that there were many public protests that took place peacefully now, even in Oromia. The interlocutor elaborated that there was more political space now. However, in Amhara region where there also had been protests previously, the authorities still did not tolerate protesters and cracked down on them.
148. The source opined that the reason why the authorities had introduced a new state of emergency was because the ruling party coalition and especially the TPLF<sup>107</sup> feared that the election of a new prime minister would spur massive protesters. The authorities were therefore preparing for coming protests, but there had been no protests of that kind. On this ground the

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<sup>106</sup> Erecha festival is an Oromo traditional indigenous festival equivalent to thanksgiving.

<sup>107</sup> The Tigrayan People's Liberation Front

interlocutor found that it was strange that the authorities had not lifted the state of emergency already.

149. According to the interlocutor, the Prime minister has good intentions. However, the intentions must be institutionalised. The source explained that for now there had been no legal or institutional reforms. Therefore the optimism that exists now very much depends on the Government's will and/or capability to implement real reforms.

#### *Release of prisoners and the closure of Maekelawi center*

150. Asked if there has been any release of political prisoners, as promised by the Government, the source replied that there had been prisoner releases in February 2018. Although the authorities had released many prisoners, many still remained imprisoned.
151. As for the Maekelawi centre, the source advised that there was no one detained at the centre anymore. The prisoners there had been transferred to another centre. However, the total number of (political) prisoners has decreased during the second state of emergency.

#### *OLF*

152. When asked to the view on the opposition groups ONLF/OLF, the source advised that OLF did not exist in Ethiopia anymore as an active party and there would be very few active members left in the country. Even though, the Oromos are not members of OLF, the Oromo people regard the OLF as liberators, and therefore they do not see OLF as a problem. The source advised that the OLF had become a part of the Oromo history; a shared national consciousness. Since the OLF leadership exiled, there had been many other political groups in Oromia such as the OFC<sup>108</sup> party, which is now led by Dr. Merera Gudina.
153. According to the source, the OLF was still considered a terrorist group in Ethiopia by the authorities. After OLF's 50 years of struggle the group had redefined their struggle in Ethiopia. Previously the goal of OLF was Oromo independence from Ethiopia, but now the major founders of OLF had redefined their goals. The interlocutor noted that today there were three OLF groups and each of them had exile members. The most vocal of them – the ODF<sup>109</sup> was not fighting for independence anymore. The ODF had created a more positive environment where it was possible to take part in talks with the Government. The source added that five of the ODF leaders (previous OLF members) just arrived to Addis Ababa to take part in discussions with the Government.

#### *The Youth group – Qeero group*

154. According to the source, most of the protesters during the public mass protests were associated with the Qeero group<sup>110</sup>. The federal police were vowing to close the group down. However, the new Prime minister came out on the street two months later and thanked the Qeero group on his visit to Ambo town that had been the very centre of protests. At this occasion the

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<sup>108</sup> The Oromo Federalist Congress

<sup>109</sup> Oromo Democratic Front

<sup>110</sup> Qeero means bachelor in Amharic – young men, but it also means tiger.

Prime minister thanked the group for fighting for their rights and described the Qeero group as the backbone of Ethiopia.

#### *ONLF*

155. Regarding ONLF, the source advised that Somali politics in many years had been in the periphery of politics in Ethiopia. In the centre would be politics in Oromia, in Amhara and in Tigray. However, the Somali ethnic group is the third largest group in Ethiopia next to Oromo and Amhara and thus is getting closer to the centre of politics, according to the interlocutor.
156. The source noted that ONLF was still on the national terrorist list, and added that ONLF's military capacity had been reduced. This reduction happen as a consequence of the crackdown on ONLF initiated by the president of the Somali region Abdi Mohammed Omar's. According to the source, the Somali president had used special forces to successful remove ONLF from the region. The source advised that a member of ONLF in Ethiopia would be perceived as a terrorist and would definitely be arrested and dealt with accordingly by the authorities.
157. The president of the Somali region was perceived by the source as a dictator who ruled the region as his own state. The interlocutor elaborated that detainees in the prisons of the Somali region accused of being a terrorist would face torture, which would be extremely hard to survive.
158. When asked if ONLF member's family or relatives would be at risk of being targeted by the authorities, the source opined that this was not necessarily the case. However, the source emphasised that there were times when that would happen, especially when the ONLF was stronger. But it would not necessarily happen today. However, the source had no detailed information on this matter.
159. If one were to flee the Somali region, the source opined that they would be more protected in Addis Ababa, where the torture was less dire. However, the authorities in Addis Ababa were working together with the authorities in the Somalia region, and could trace the person of interest down in Addis Ababa. The source added that the Somali authorities were very harsh, and thus before they transfer detainees to the federal authorities, they would break their ankles to make sure that the detainees would not run away.
160. The interlocutor mentioned that he himself had experienced torture in the Maekelawi centre, where the police were careful not to inflict any scars on his body. The police did so to make sure that the torture would not be visible when presented in front of a judge. Other bloggers reported on everything that happened in the courts, so it made a difference whether torture was visible at trial. The blogger community reported on court trials for one year and six months and the interlocutor was one of the first persons who got acquitted at a trial. The source noted that although there were only a few independent media in Ethiopia, they were all reporting on such court trials. The police typically said that the accused were working with the diaspora community and neoliberal communities.

161. According to the source, the treatment of detainees in Tigray was harsh. The detainees would not even be taken to court and the police would beat them and torture them to force them to confess. At some point the detainee would give in and confess to anything. The police would afterwards transfer the detainee to the federal authorities.

#### *Forced recruitment to the Liyu police*

162. The source had no information on forced recruitment. The source mentioned a book written by a Swede, who was detained in the Somali Region. The book contained detailed information on the Liyu police.

#### *Forced recruitment to the army*

163. According to the interlocutor, there had been forced recruitment during the Ethiopia-Eritrean war 20 years ago. However, the source had not heard of any recent forced recruitment to the army.

#### *The situation for students*

164. The source advised that the situation was more promising now than ever before. The intimidation, harassment and arbitrary arrests had temporarily stopped. However, it was difficult to know for how long. Even though there had been a number of protests, the arrests had dramatically decreased. The source advised that the police had not interfered since October last year. The interlocutor also emphasised that currently a student engaged in protests would be safe for now.

165. The source explained that he had been arrested four times and he had never been as relaxed as now. The source told the delegation that he was arrested for attending a welcome home party. He was detained for 11 days, and then he was released without any charges. Officially he was arrested for using the wrong flag –the flag they had used at the party did not contain the Emblem of Ethiopia. Although, the fine for using a wrong flag was only 500 birr, the police kept him for 11 days in detention.

166. The source mentioned that the police were scared, because of the new political situation. Political discussions were becoming more common, and the Government had promised reforms and political space.

167. The interlocutor summarised the new situation as an opportunity for a new development for Ethiopia, because the political prisoners were being released day by day. This fed into a feeling that one could speak their mind. Every radio station was discussing political issues now; new television stations were discussing politics. Furthermore, arrests of journalist had decreased. The source also noticed that there was a positive development in the media regarding censorship as well.

#### *Diaspora*

168. It was the opinion of the source that the strong resistance to the Government came from the diaspora – especially from the USA. The relationship between the diaspora and the Government was not good.



169. The source opined that the Government monitored the diaspora closely. The authorities were very active in monitoring Social Media. As an example the source pointed at police commissioners and even judges that read the source's Facebook page. The source had met with a number of officials in evenings and at conferences where they had told the source, that they had all read his blogs – even the judges. The source had been to court many times, where he had got a lot of comments from the officials; sometimes the officials even appreciated that information the interlocutor brought to court.

#### *Human Rights Commission and the Human Rights Council*

170. According to the source, the Human Rights Commission contributed to minimalise and justify human rights violations committed by the Ethiopian authorities. He elaborated that the Commission would typically conduct a report that described how the police had used proportionate power to stop violence. However, this was seldom the case. For example the source had written to the Commission about five cases where the police had used disproportionate power, but the Commission rejected the cases. This occurred back in 2016.

171. On the other hand, the Human Rights Council was doing a good job, according to the interlocutor: They were independent, although they had limitations in their capacity. Their reports did not reach the public or the media and the reports were not used to influence policy making. Furthermore, the council could only raise 10 percent in external financial assistance due to Ethiopian rules on NGOs. The source would usually go to the council to give them information.

## Human Rights Commission

### *Mandate*

172. The Ethiopian Human Rights Commission was established by the Parliament with a mandate to monitor the human rights situation in Ethiopia. Commissioners are appointed by the parliament as per the establishment proclamation no. 210/2000. The mandate is wide and there are no aspects of state action that the Commission is restricted from monitoring. The commission may investigate complaints raised by or on behalf of any person who has been sent to prison or detained by the police. The Commission will only investigate individual cases and has no mandate to monitor incidents related to the State of emergency.

### *General working procedures*

173. The Commission may examine complaints raised by citizens, as well as initiate investigations on its own initiation based on various sources of information. The commission published annual reports, which are submitted to the parliament and other stakeholders. The Commission has also started cooperating with donors such as UNDP and UN Women.

174. The source noted that cases brought to the attention of the Commission typically would come from a person who had experienced some incident of injustice where minimum standards in fair justice were not fulfilled by the authorities, e.g. if a detained person would not be presented before a judge within 48 hours. The Commission would then inquire into situations in police stations. The monitoring part indicates if the minimum standards have been respected or not.

175. Typical topics of concern regarding prison conditions would include food rations, sanitary conditions, basic health services, and incarceration conditions for mothers with young children, etc. Furthermore, the Commission also takes up problems of harmful traditional practices such as underage brides and bride theft. The source advised that the Commission also worked with stigma and discrimination against people with disabilities and elderly persons.

176. The Commission may provide free legal aid to persons who do not have sufficient means to pay for a lawyer to represent them in court. The source gave an example where a woman and her three children had addressed the Commission. She was deprived of her children and property by her husband and could not go to court. The Commission then intervened and provided her a representative through a legal aid centre to defend her rights at court. The trial was successful and she was awarded custody of her children.

177. Regarding evidence in court, the source advised that when it is criminal cases, one has to provide three eye witnesses, and when it is a civil case, one typically needs to provide documents. Evidence could span from eye witness to medical documents depending on the specific circumstances.

178. The Commission has eight branch offices and has also hotline telephone service for free (888-8), where people can call and get advice. The source noted that the Commission received more than 2,000 complaints (cases) per year. The Commission has four staff members dedicated to

the Commission's hotline where they offer advice, and they can bring cases before the commissioners. The Commission can also give legal advice on the phone.

179. According to the source, the amount of complaints submitted to the Commission had been constant over the past two and a half years. In 2017 it was 2,000 and in 2016 the Commission received 2,500 Complaints. These, however, do not include complaint and advices from the hotlines.

180. The interlocutor further advised that the Commission also received both group complaints and individual complaints where groups primarily complained about violations of land property rights.

181. The source confirmed that the Maekelawi detention centre in Addis Ababa<sup>111</sup> had been closed.

182. The source noted that only 11 cases were not resolved last year.

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<sup>111</sup> Also known as the Federal Police Crime Investigation and Forensic Sector

## Appendix B: Sources consulted

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1. International researcher
2. National researcher
3. British Embassy
4. EU
5. U.S. Embassy
6. International NGO
7. Danish Refugee Council
8. The Fortune, national newspaper
9. Blogger
10. Human Rights Commission

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## Appendix E: Terms of reference

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### **1. General political situation and treatment of opposition**

- 1.1.** Changes in situation since the state of emergency, and the accompanying regulations, was ended in August 2017 in terms of demands for political reforms;
- 1.2.** Government response to Oromia, Amhara and Ethiopian Somali protests, especially related to treatment of:
  - 1.2.1.** members of opposition parties, the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) or the Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF);
  - 1.2.2.** university student activists; and
  - 1.2.3.** people involved in protests against the government;
- 1.3.** Status of plans announced by the prime minister to release imprisoned politicians and political activists and to close the Maekelawi detention centre in Addis Ababa;
- 1.4.** Extent to which the authorities monitor diaspora activities.





