



## **Media and multi-party elections in Africa: The case of Ethiopia**

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### **Abstract**

In any democratic country, the media serves as a watchdog of events and decisions and assists citizens to be informed about what is going on in the country. Free media also plays a very important role to conduct democratic elections. The aim of this paper is to analyze the role of the media in the African democratization process particularly in the multi-party elections that widely emerged in the continent in the 1990s. The paper investigates the contributions of the media in the emerging African democracies by using the performance of the media in the 2005 multi-party parliamentary election in Ethiopia as a case study. The paper also attempts to assess the Ethiopian press laws of 1992 and 2008, which are the only press laws in the history of the country.

**Key words:** Africa, Democracy, Ethiopia, Fourth Estate, Media, Multi-party election, Press

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## 1. Introduction

One of the most significant ways people can participate in decisions that affect their lives and hold their elected representatives responsible for results are elections (UNDP 2004: 2). In a democracy, as Reilly (2003: 12) states, elections have three major functions: First, they serve as a means for people to choose their representatives. This could be exercised in choosing their representatives to legislative or executive offices. Second, they are a means of choosing governments, and third, they give legitimacy to the political systems. According to NDI (2005), the media is necessary to educate voters how to exercise their democratic rights; to give a chance for political parties to debate with each other; to report about the election campaign, and to give the parties a platform to communicate their message to the electorate; to report election results; and to assess the election process. Considerable number of literature is available on the role of the media during elections: Jacobs and Shapiro (2005), Lange and Palmer (1995), Merloe (1995), Mickiewicz (1992), Norris and Merole (2002), NDI (1995), Owen (2007), Sachs (2007), and Wolfsfeld (1997).

Due to its useful role in a society the media is sometimes called the “Fourth Estate”<sup>1</sup>. The most important functions of the media in democratic countries are “*to cover political facts and events in the most objective, impartial and open way, promoting a variety of views and opinions as well as interpreting news in order to make the public understand the relevance of the information they receive*” (OSCE-ODIHR 2005). According to O’Neil (1998), liberal media (i.e. “free” or “independent” media) serves as a critical check on the power of the government. Berger (2002) notes that during elections the role of the media includes: scrutinizing parties and candidates, exposing electoral irregularities, and educating the public to participate in ‘free and fair elections’. The media can perform these roles by: educating the electorate about the electoral system; reporting the election campaign; serving as a platform for the information flow from the parties to the public and from the public to the political parties; serving as a debate forum for political parties, and monitoring the vote counting and the reporting of election results. In order to effectively perform their duties there has to be a media freedom, which is one of the corner stones of the “free and fair” elections. For scholars like Diamond (1992), Lawson (2002), McMillan and Zoido (2004), and Norris (2006) the freedom of press is associated with democratization. Media freedom during election include: freedom from direct censorship<sup>2</sup>; freedom from arbitrary government interference, intimidation and harassment; unlimited access to information; freedom of movement for journalists; and the right to publish public information held by the state.

<sup>1</sup> This phrase was coined by the historian Thomas Carlyle in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (though he himself has attributed it to Edmund Burke, a British politician) (*see* Carlyle 1841). It is derived from the old English idea that claims there are three estates in the British parliament. The First Estate (“The Lords Spiritual”) was made up of the high clergy; while the Second Estate (“The Lords Temporal”) and the Third Estate (“The House of Commons”) were composed of the hereditary nobility, and the common people respectively.

<sup>2</sup> “Direct censorship” is defined as, “improper and unlawful prior restraints on publication” (Coliver and Merloe, 1997:19). It also refers to “*communications from government officials that explicitly or implicitly threaten direct censorship or some other consequence for publishing items unfavorable to the government*” (Ibid.). Direct censorship and intimidation may induce a “self-censorship” (in order to avoid the government sanctions). This is usually done due to fear. Sometimes, “self-censorship” can be exercised by media outlets that are friendly with the ruling party or government. In this case, “self-censorship” is done to support the government (Ibid: 19-20).

For Howard (2004: 6) if there is “no free press,” there is “no democracy”. Therefore, democracy and a free media have special relationships. A free and independent press<sup>3</sup> will help keep the election honest and democratic, and a democratically-elected government protects the media freedom. For Fox (1998), Jones (2002), Kumar (2006), and Nye (2002) free or unrestricted media can help to overthrow dictatorial regimes and facilitates the establishment of democratic institutions. An active and informed citizenry is necessary for democratic governance. During elections a public (state) media is required to give fair coverage and equitable access to opposition parties. At present, the major problem of the media in emerging democracies is the governments’ intervention through direct censorship, physical threats and attacks, imprisonment, intimidation, and murder (Coliver and Merloe 1997:19).

The paper attempts to answer the following major research questions:

- (1) What is the role of the media in the democratization of Africa?
- (2) How did the media affect the democratization process in Ethiopia in the post-1991 period?
- (3) What are the contributions of the media in the 2005 Ethiopian parliamentary election and what are the consequences?

## **2. Media and Multi-Party Election in Africa**

As Ochilo (1993: 21-22) noted modern media was introduced to Africa by the European missionaries and colonial administrators. During colonialism, European colonialists used the media principally for the dissemination of news and other information among the European settlers. Therefore, the media in colonial Africa was not a major instrument of social and political change in the continent. In this period, the media had very little to offer to the indigenous people. In the post-colonial period (i.e. 1960s-1980s), most of the African countries became one-party states and the media became either state-owned or found itself under the strict control of African dictators. The only exceptions were Egypt, Kenya, Nigeria and Zambia where there existed some form of private ownership, and limited media freedom. After the onset of multi-party democracy in Africa in the first half of the 1990s (Wondwosen 2008a:1-14) scholars have attempted to investigate the role of the media in the African democracy and multi-party elections. The best examples are: Acayo and Mnjama (2004: 27-43), Ansah (1998: 1-16), Berger (1998: 599-610; 1999: 82-116), Franklin and Love (1998: 545-550), Ocitti (1999), Olukotun (2000: 31-44; 1996, 1997), Olukkotun and Omole (1999), Oseni (1999), Tettey (2006: 229-248, 2001, 2003, 2004), and Uzodike and Whetho (2006).

According to Deegan (2003), between 1989 and 1994 almost 100 elections had taken place in Africa. Moreover, in the 1990s alone, 42 out of 48 African countries made democratic reforms and held elections (Eid 2002: 2). Prior to the 1999 election in Botswana, many political parties failed to use the media efficiently. They used traditional methods of house-to-house campaigns and public rallies. Their heavy dependence on public rallies, though effective in some cases,

<sup>3</sup> Independent press is defined as “a press independent from governmental, political or economic control or from control of materials and infrastructure essential for the production and dissemination of newspapers, magazines and periodicals” (Marthoz 2000: 6).

greatly curtailed their opportunity to reach certain segments of the population particularly the professionals and the elderly (Mokopakgosi and Molomo 2000:11).

Illiteracy may increase the significance of broadcast media (radio and television) in many African countries. For instance, in the 1989 Namibian election 60% of the people were illiterate. Therefore, this increased the need for radio to communicate with most of the people (Coliver and Merloe 1997: 18). In Africa, access to radio and television affects the election process. For instance, in the 1992 Kenyan election, there were 82,000 televisions and 2,000,000 radios for 25 million Kenyans (Ibid). In the 2006 Congo (Zaire) election, there were 119 radio stations, 52 television stations, and 176 newspapers and magazines. Most of the media were affiliated or owned by politicians (ICG 2006: 7). In the 1991 Zambian election, for instance, the government-controlled ZNBC (Zambian National Broadcasting Company) rejected the opposition's election advertisement by offering lame excuses (Coliver and Merloe 1997:20).

Sometimes, African governments impose a martial law during elections with the aim of getting extraordinary powers to censor the media. In the 2005 election, which was the most contested multi-party parliamentary election in the history of Ethiopia, the EPRDF government declared a martial law on the night of the Voting Day (BBC 16 May 2005; Sudan Tribune 15 May 2005) sensing the electoral victory of the opposition parties. The martial law, in addition to curbing the activities of the opposition, seriously affected the free press. In the one-month ban,<sup>4</sup> which was imposed on May 15, 2005 many media people were harassed, accused and detained (*see* Addis Tribune 24 June 2005; Angola Press 8 July 2005; The Ethiopian Herald 8 June 2005; 6 July 2005). In the 1992 Kenyan election, the government confiscated publications that were critical of government activities and imprisoned many journalists. The most affected publication in this case was Society Magazine. The editors of the Society Magazine and Finance Magazine were detained for some time (Coliver and Merloe 1997:21).

One of the most pressing problems for African opposition parties during election time is getting broadcast time in state-owned or state-controlled broadcast media. In democratic countries, during elections direct access to radio or television by the opposition parties must be covered by the state, or the political parties themselves. As well known, almost all opposition parties in Africa are not financially capable of covering these expenses. Even private media owners may favor the ruling party due to various reasons, and may refuse to support the opposition parties (Coliver and Merloe 1997:27). In African transitional democracies, opposition parties may not be allowed to purchase air time on radio and television. In the 1989 Namibian election, the opposition parties were not allowed to buy air time. Furthermore, the cost factor is important in purchasing air time. In the 1985 election in Zimbabwe, only three parties including the ruling party were financially strong to purchase air time for political advertisement. The other small parties were not able to do it due to their weak financial capacity (Ibid: 28).

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<sup>4</sup> Later on the ban was extended for one more month.

As Coliver and Merloe (1997: 34) noted, “*free and fair elections depend to a significant degree upon the ability of the news media to function in an impartial and professional manner.*” In the 1992 election campaign in Kenya, the ruling party got more coverage than all opposition combined in the state-owned Kenya Broadcasting Corporation (KBC) that involves radio and television. The KBC characterized the ruling party positively while presenting the opposition negatively. On the other hand, the privately-owned KTN (Kemnya Television Network) covered the opposition more than the KBC did. In the 1991 election campaign in Zambia, the NBC (Zambia National Broadcasting Company) gave a high coverage to the ruling party than the opposition (Ibid: 35).

As I have tried to indicate, the media has played a major role and has a positive impact on the democratization process in Africa. As Hyden and Okigbo (2002) argued, “*in Africa, media and democratic transition supported one another in a bidirectional relationship.*” On the other hand, some critics characterize the media in Africa as irresponsible, biased, and full of unethical behavior (see Berger 1998: 605; Kasoma 1997; Lidetu 1998EC: 132-135; Nyamnjoh 2005; Ojo 2003; Tettey 2001, 2003, 2004; Mupfurutsa 1999; McQuail 1997: 8; and Sawant 2003:17).

### **3. Media in Ethiopia**

#### **3.1. Historical Background**

Though Ethiopia is one of the very few countries in Africa that have long history of writing, newspapers emerged in the country very late at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It is reported that the Amharic printing press was imported for the first time by a French merchant in 1897. In 1900, “*Bulletin de la Leprosie de Harar*”, a “polygraphed” periodical started to be published in Harar by the French Lazarist missionaries. In 1905, the publication name of the periodical was changed to “*Le Semaine d’Ethiopie*” (“The Ethiopian Weekly”) and continued publishing occasionally French and Amharic articles (Mocria et al 2003: 29). In 1908, the periodical continued publication by moving to Dire Dawa until 1914 (Pankhurst 27-08-04). In the mean time, the first Amharic newspaper, “*Aimero*” (“Intelligence”), was established in 1902 edited by a Greek editor, Andrea E.Kavidas. The newspaper continued till the Italian invasion of 1936. Another newspaper in French language “*Le Courrier d’Ethiopia*” (“The Ethiopian Newspaper”) was founded in 1913 by a Frenchman Alexis Desvages. This newspaper stopped publication when Italy invaded Ethiopia in 1936. The Italian legation in Addis Ababa started a newspaper in Amharic under the title “*Ya Tor Ware*” (“War news”) from 1916 to 1918 (Mocria et al 2003: 29). In 1917, a literary journal, “*Goha Sebah*” (“Down”) appeared edited by Heruy Walda Selassie, a prominent Ethiopian figure (Pankhurst 27-08-04).

#### **3.2. Media under Haile Selassie (r. 1930-1974)**

In 1925, a weekly newspaper, “*Berhanena Selam*” (“Light and Peace”) started production under the patronage of Ras Tafari Makonen (later, Haile Selassie I) but stopped production in 1936 (Pankhurst 27-08-04). From 1926 to 1933 another newspaper (in German and French) was published under the title “*Abessinien Korrespondanz*” or “*Correspondance d’Ethiopie*” edited

by an Austrian, Dr. Eric Weinzinger. Other newspapers and journals include “*L’Ethiopie Commerciale*” started in 1932 by a Greek, Christo Sakellaridis; “*Il Notziario*” in Italian in 1933; “*Kesate Berhan*” Journal in 1935; “*Atbiya Kokeb*” (“Star of the morning”) in 1935; “*Banderachen*” (“Our Flag”) newspaper in 1941. In 1941, additional newspapers started to be published. These were: “*Addis Zemen*” (“New Era”) in Amharic, “*Yeethiopia Dimts*” (“The Voice of Ethiopia”) in Amharic and English, “*The Ethiopian Herald*” in English, “*Sandak Alamachen*” “Our Flag” in Amharic and Arabic; “*Il Lunedì del Medio Oriente*” in Italian, and “*L’Ethiopie d’Aujourd’hui*” in French and Amharic (Mocria et al 2003: 29; Pankhurst 27-08-04).

In 1933, the first radio station was started by an Italian company. It continued for some time after Italy occupied Ethiopia in 1936. In 1953, short wave broadcasting was resumed. In 1963, “Radio Voice of the Gospel” which was owned by the World Federation of Lutheran Churches started broadcasting. In 1970, “Radio Ethiopia” started broadcasting in six languages. In the early 1960s, television broadcasting began for the first time in the history of the country. In 1965, an educational TV broadcasting was initiated (Daniel and Jagne 2003: 14).

Realizing the importance of propaganda, Emperor Haile Selassie established the Ministry of Information after crushing the coup attempt against his government by the Imperial Bodyguard in 1960. Prior to its organization as a Ministry of Information, it was known as “*Yegazetana Mastawekia Mesria Bet*” (“Newspaper and Information Office”) and it was organized in a department level under the Ministry of Pen (Ahadu n.d: 83). It was the Italians (1935-1941) who, for the first time, established “*Ufficio Stampa e Propaganda*”, the forerunner of the “Newspaper and Information Office” and put it under the control of the Italians political office “*Ufficio Politico*”. The Italians established this office to propagate their propaganda in Ethiopia. The Italian colonialist conducted their fascist propaganda through radio and through their monthly magazine known as the “The Light of Rome” (Ahadu n.d.: 84). After liberation Haile Selassie’s government established a Censorship Board under the “Newspaper and Information Office”. The Censorship Board<sup>5</sup> was composed of seven members (Ibid: 102). According to Ahadu (n.d: 104, 108-109), the prime activities of the Censorship Board were to censor all the news in the radio and the newspapers and to make sure that all the information passed to the public was in line with the imperial government’s interests. The newspapers were required to publish the Emperor’s picture on their front pages<sup>6</sup>. Issues such as unemployment, famine and drought, prostitution, inflation, high living costs, etc. which were regarded as damaging to the image of the monarchy were neither allowed to be published in the news papers, nor broadcasted in the radio (Ibid: 193). The Imperial government continued its tight policy on the media though there were very few sporadic attempts by some bold journalists and authors to

<sup>5</sup> However, according to Bahru (2002:193), censorship in Ethiopia began in the 1930s (i.e. before the Italian invasion) as soon as Haile Selassie consolidated his rule in the country. In November 1933, the Minister of Pen (Tsehafe Tizaz) ordered that “all printed matter would thenceforth be subject to censorship by his office.” Subsequently in early 1935 the government passed a legislation authorizing the Ministry of the Interior to censor all publications.

<sup>6</sup> Ahadu (n.d: 109) claimed that all pictures and photos were personally checked and approved by the Emperor himself before being published in the newspapers.

indirectly and subtly criticize the imperial government<sup>7</sup>. This strict policy continued even in the final months of Haile Selassie's government<sup>8</sup>. In 1974, the newly appointed Minister of Information, Ahadu Sabure, was forced to submit his resignation after serving only two months in office, due to his insistence for free media in the country<sup>9</sup> (Ibid: 223-225, 267-268).

### 3.3. The Media under the *Derg* Government (1974-1991)

During the *Derg* administration (1974-1991), the mass media was under the absolute control of the military government. After the establishment of the Workers Party of Ethiopia (WPE) in 1984, Ethiopia became a one-party state and the media was put under the full control of the party. As Wanyande (1995: 58-59) pointed out,

*“One party states, whether of the Soviet or the African variant was characterized by authoritarianism as its guiding ideology. According to this ideology, the state assumes the right to control the rest of society and to expect unchallenged obedience. It is an ideology which thrives on and encourages the suppression of criticism and any challenge to those in authority..... In the case of the media, the authoritarian ideology encourages a media system that champions the government's hegemonic agenda over the rest of society, while at the same time overlooking the government's shortcomings and excesses.”*

The *Derg* government had put all the mass media institutions under the Ministry of Information. The government also passed very strict censorship rule (Daniel and Jagne: 2003: 14). According to Mairegu (2000: 129), *“the Derg took over total control of the media by assigning its cadres to supervise the day-to-day operation of the journalists working in the state print and electronic media.”* Exposing how the state media was abused by the government, Leum (24 November 1986) jokingly said, *“In Ethiopia for example, the Ethiopia Herald is known as the Daily Mengistu, after Lt. Col. Mengistu Haile Mariam, the military ruler.”* Moreover, the *Derg* government is blamed for the persecution of many journalists and independent writers who attempted to write articles and books that exposed the regime.<sup>10</sup>

### 3.4. The Media under the EPRDF Government (1991-Present)

#### Introduction

Until the coming to political power of the EPRDF (Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front) in 1991, the country had no truly independent news media<sup>11</sup> (Coliver and

<sup>7</sup> The best examples are the novels, *“Alivolelim”* (“I Will not be Born”) written by Abe Gobegna, and *“Fikir Eske Mekabir”* (“Love unto the Grave”) authored by Haddis Alemayehu.

<sup>8</sup> The imperial government was blamed for harassing the media, and for persecuting its critics. It was rumoured that the famous TV talk show host, Asaminew Gebrewold, was murdered by the security forces of the Imperial government. However, the official version of his death was a suicide after having a conflict with his married lover.

<sup>9</sup> The media's contribution to the fall of the imperial government was very important. For instance, it was the 1973 media report titled *“The Unknown Famine”* by Jonathan Dimbleby, a British journalist that played a key role in undermining the imperial government by exposing the hidden famine in Wollo province of Ethiopia for the first time.

<sup>10</sup> It is reported that the author of the Amharic book titled, *“Oromai”*, Bealu Girma, was executed by the *Derg* for criticizing high government officials (see Genet 1994 EC.: 211-219). It is also claimed that the *Derg* government is responsible for the mysterious death of the famous novelist, Aba Gobegna.

<sup>11</sup> The “independent media” is also known as “free media” or “private media”.

Merloe 1997: 17). After 1991, many kinds of newspapers and magazines mushroomed in Ethiopia. On October 2, 1991, the newly-established EPRDF government adopted a proclamation to provide for the “determination of the application of state owned mass media” (*Negarit Gazeta* 3 October 1991). The EPRDF also adopted the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, in its Charter that served as a Constitution for the Transitional Government of Ethiopia (1991-1994). It also abolished the Censor Department of the Ministry of Information (Mocria et al 2003: 31).

### **The First Press Law (Proclamation No. 34/1992)**

The first press law in the history of the nation was adopted in 1992. According to Proclamation No. 34/1992, titled the “Proclamation to Provide for the Freedom of the Press”, the freedom of press was recognized and respected in Ethiopia and censorship of the press and any restrictions of a similar nature were prohibited (Article 3). The proclamation stated that any Ethiopian national would receive press license from the Ministry of Information or from the Information Bureau (for regions) by submitting the following particulars: the name of the proprietor or the editor in-chief of the press, the type of press activity, the address of the head office of the press, the name of the press, and the name and address of the publisher (*Article 7*). The proclamation also stipulated that the publisher or the editor of any press may not be forced to disclose the source of the news (*Article 8(4a)*). However, in case of a crime committed against the safety of the state, administration, the national defense force, or in the case of proceedings of a serious crime, the court may order the publisher or the editor of the press to disclose his (her) source of information (*Article 8(4b)*). Moreover, the proclamation requires that any press product should not give rise to criminal and civil liability (*Article 10*); should be free from a criminal offence against the safety of the state (*Article 10(2b)*); should be free from defamation or false accusation against any individual, national/nationality or organization; should be free from criminal instigation of one nationality against another, or conflict between peoples (*Article 10(2c)*); it should be free from any agitation for war (*Article 10(2)*) etc. Despite its shortcomings, according to Dessalegn (2004: 3), “*There is broad agreement among informed opinion, and especially people in the media, that the press law of 1992 has opened the door to the growth of the private press in the country.*”

### **The 1994 Constitution and the Right to Opinion**

In 1994, Ethiopia adopted a new Constitution, which was the fifth Constitution in the history of the nation<sup>12</sup>. Article 29 of the 1994 Constitution declares that, “*Everyone has the right to freedom of expression without any interference. This right shall include freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any media of his choice.*” According to the Constitution, “*Freedom of the press and other mass media and freedom of artistic creativity is guaranteed.*”

<sup>12</sup> The constitutional development in Ethiopia has passed many stages involving the 1931 and 1955 imperial constitutions, the 1974 aborted constitution, the 1987 Marxist (*Derg*) constitution, and the current federal constitution that was promulgated in 1994. (For further detail on the country’s constitutional development see Abera 1998; Fasil 1997; Fisseha-Tsion 1998; and Wondwosen 2007).

## Broadcasting Service

Though at present, broadcasting service in Ethiopia is found in a very low position in African standards, in the 1950s, while almost all African countries were under the colonial yoke Ethiopia and Egypt were the first African states to broadcast a propaganda war against colonialism (Mosia et al 1994: 5). In June 1999, a Broadcasting Proclamation was promulgated to establish a Broadcasting Agency (*Negarit Gazeta* 29 June 1999) as an autonomous federal administrative agency. The agency got the power to issue, suspend and revoke broadcasting licenses.<sup>13</sup>

In July 2007, Ethiopia replaced the then existing Broadcasting Proclamation No. 178/1999 (*Negarit Gazeta* 29 June 1999) by a new Proclamation, No. 533/2007 (*Negarit Gazeta* 23 July 2007)<sup>14</sup>. The new Broadcasting Proclamation established a broadcasting authority known as the “Ethiopian Broadcasting Authority” as an autonomous federal agency to regulate and supervise radio and television transmissions (*Negarit Gazeta* 23 July 2007). According to Article 23(3), a political organization can not be issued a broadcasting license. Article 23(2) designates that foreigners are not allowed to apply for broadcasting, and foreign capital is also not allowed. Article 23(5) bans religious (faith) organizations from owning broadcasting license. Moreover, the article bans officials of political organizations to be shareholders or to be members of the management of the organization that applies for broadcasting license<sup>15</sup>. It further stated that any organization that includes a political organization as a share holder, or if it includes a member of a political organization in its management at any level, it will not get a broadcasting license (*Negarit Gazeta* 23 July 2007). In addition, if the applicant organization for broadcasting license has foreign nationals in its management or if it is not incorporated in Ethiopia, a broadcasting license will not be issued (*Negarit Gazeta* 23 July 2007). Article 43(1) stipulates that every broadcaster should allocate free air time for legally registered political parties and candidates to publicize their objectives and programs to the public during elections. Article 43(3) also allows broadcasting service license to transmit election campaign advertisement of political parties and candidates in return for payment (*Negarit Gazeta* 23 July 2007). Article 43(3) declares that broadcasters can not demand higher payment for election campaign than the fee charged for commercial advertisements (*Negarit Gazeta* 23 July 2007). According to The Reporter (09 June 2007), “*The revised Broadcasting Service Proclamation of 2007, however, is much worse than the so far slumbering law now replaced on many established issues such as the independence of the regulatory authority, the right of access to airwaves, the licensing process etc.*”

<sup>13</sup> The strict regulation and government monopoly on broadcasting service has drawn international criticism. For instance, the US Congress wrote that: “*The Government of Ethiopia must expeditiously allow private radio and television licensing and end its monopoly on electronic media. Independent media is essential to democracy and good governance. It is unacceptable, in our view, that after fourteen years since the ouster the military dictatorship only one private radio, which is owned by the ruling party, is allowed to function*” (Congress of the United States 5 October 2005).

<sup>14</sup> The government claimed that it studied broadcast laws of Britain, Australia, Tanzania, South Africa, and India before adopting the revised broadcasting law (The Reporter 30 June 2007).

<sup>15</sup> However, according to Dessalegn (2004: 4), in 2002, there were one national and one regional party-owned radios in the country.

## The Second Press Law<sup>16</sup>

### *Version 2003*

The second press law titled “*Mass Media and Freedom of Information Proclamation*,” which was adopted by the parliament in July 2008 was initiated for the first time in 2003<sup>17</sup> by the Ethiopian government (i.e. Ministry of Information) (The Daily Monitor 28 April 2008). The draft law has passed various stages of evaluations, and discussions since its inception in 1995 EC (2003 GC). According to Article 20 of the draft proclamation, a press council would be established consisting 29 members drawn from the federal government, association of journalists, publishers, and from the public. The Council of Ministers determines the appointment of the press council members, the powers and responsibilities of the council, and its working procedure. Article 26 of the draft proclamation stipulates that the prosecutor has the power to suspend a media outlet in case of suspicion that the media outlet is about to disseminate illegal information or information that can bring damage. The draft proclamation (Article 30.9) also bans a multiple ownership of print and electronic media. Moreover, according to the draft proclamation owners of the media should disclose their sources’ of capital (Article 8). It also stipulates that money coming from abroad to establish a media is prohibited. In this case, even the Diaspora Ethiopians are not allowed to establish media in the country (Article 5).

### *Version 2008*

The other (revised) version of the draft proclamation was released in 2008. The revised version banned the censorship of private media (Article 4.1), and the detention of journalists (Article 43.1). It also gave a right for government prosecutors to stop the publication and distribution of materials by invoking national security (Article 42.2). In other words, state prosecutors can intervene prior to the publication and the distribution of the materials. For opposition members, this article is indirect censorship, though censorship is officially forbidden in the new press law (Reuters 2 July 2008). According to many local and international media people, the new proclamation restricts “freedom of expression and intimidate[s] journalists” (Mushtaq 8 July 2008). For Mushtaq (8 July 2008), one of the most disturbing article of the proclamation is Article 43(7). According to the said article, defamation or false accusation against “*constitutionally mandated legislators, executives and judiciaries will be a matter of the government and prosecutable even if the person against whom they were committed chooses not to press charge.*” This provision increased the fines for defamation to 100,000 Birr (CPJ 11 July 2008). In general, though the new media law included few improved articles (in comparison with the 1992 media law) such as the lifting of jail terms for journalists convicted of press offences, and the right to form an independent professional organization, it has also very repressive articles as we have already seen above (IFJ 10 July 2008).

<sup>16</sup> Though the Ethiopian government insisted that the second press law was revised many times, in this paper I have examined only two versions of the draft proclamation, which were made public by the government.

<sup>17</sup> In the Ethiopian calendar it was released in 1995.

In May 2008, the House of Peoples' Representatives of Ethiopia discussed the draft proclamation. The "Mass Media and Freedom of Information Proclamation" was approved by the House of Peoples' Representatives (ENA 1 July 2008) on 1 July 2008 by majority vote though 70% of the opposition MPs opposed it<sup>18</sup>. In general, 290 MPs from the EPRDF supported the bill, 77 opposition MPs opposed, and 9 opposition MPs abstained (Addis Fortune 6 July 2008; The Reporter 02 July 2008).<sup>19</sup>

### **Case Study: The Role of the Media in the 2005 Multi-Party Election in Ethiopia**

The May 2005 parliamentary election (regional and federal) was the most contested multi-party election in the history of the country (Wondwosen 2008b: 131). Prior to the election, the NEBE (National Electoral Board of Ethiopia) issued media accreditation guidelines. According to these guide lines, the media people were requested to:<sup>20</sup> "*strive for balance, accuracy and impartiality*", "*avoid facilitating discrimination based on race, sex, language, religion, political or other beliefs, national or social origins*", "*report only on credible and well-sourced facts.*" Moreover, they were requested not to "*hide key information or falsify documents.*" The guidelines also instructed the accredited media representatives not to: "*interview voters, candidates' representatives, observers or election observers during registration or polling*"; "*film, photograph or interview any voters or election officials without their consent*"; "*film, photograph or copy the Electors' Registers, voters' registration identity documents or any other documents which would infringe on the privacy of voters.*"<sup>21</sup> The guidelines also stipulated that all interviews should be conducted out side polling stations.

Prior to the election, the state-owned radio and television announced that they would give 54% of their air time (dedicated to election coverage) to the opposition parties and candidates (Mail & Guardian 23 May 2005)<sup>22</sup> various scholars confirmed that these vows were not implemented. At the end of the election, a team of Graduate School of Journalism and Communications in Addis Ababa University conducted a survey and prepared a report entitled, "*Monitoring the media coverage of the 2005 Parliamentary and Regional Council Elections in Ethiopia.*" The team evaluated the media coverage of the state controlled Television and Radio stations (i.e.,

<sup>18</sup> For Lidetu, an opposition MP from the UEDP-Medhin, the new press law is "better compared to the one in 1992" (Addis Fortune 6 July 2008; The Reporter 02 July 2008). Another opposition MP from the OFDM, Bulcha Demeksa, condemned the new press law by saying: "this is the darkest day for the press industry (Addis Fortune 6 July 2008; The Reporter 02 July 2008).

<sup>19</sup> Many opposition parties, Western donors, international media protection organizations (IPI 29 September 2004; 10 November 2004; 05 March 2004; 17 December 2003) and the independent press in Ethiopia had voiced their opposition to the draft proclamation. They condemned it as too tough, designed to serve the ruling party and the government as a tool to suppress freedom of expression in the country. Though the opposition parties and the private media condemned it as "draconian" law, the Ethiopian government appreciated the draft proclamation and considered it as a useful tool for creating a "responsible" press. According to CPJ (11 July 2008), the proclamation "*was adopted without full public consultation and was opposed by most opposition party law makers.*"

<sup>20</sup> NEBE, "NEBE Media Accreditation Information and Guidelines on Election Coverage." <<http://www.electionsethiopia.org/Whats%20New17.html>>

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> According to Bereket Simon, the then Minister of Information, "The air time allocated for use by opposition parties in the State-owned media was by far fair and exceeded the international fairness standard" (The Reporter 26 February 2005).

Ethiopian Television, Radio Ethiopia, Radio Fana<sup>23</sup>), Radio FM, and the independent print media during the election. According to their findings, the Ethiopian television's campaign-related coverage was tilted in favor of the ruling party, EPRDF (41%), followed by the two biggest opposition parties, the United Ethiopian Democratic Front (UEDF) (26%), and the Coalition for Unity and Democracy (CUD) (23%). The other smaller opposition parties and independent candidates received only 10% (The Reporter 28 May 2005). Moreover, in the Tigrigna language service of the Ethiopian Television, EPRDF received 68% of all coverage (including government activities), UEDF 19%, and CUD 10%. In the Oromifa language program, EPRDF received 48% of all coverage, UEDF 21%, CUD 16%, and the other parties and independent candidates 15%. In the Amharic language service the EPRDF got 41% of the coverage, CUD 26%, UEDF 24%, and other parties received 9% coverage (The Reporter 28 May 2005).

Concerning the Radio Ethiopia's election coverage, their findings revealed that in the Tigrigna language program, the EPRDF got 86% of the total coverage (including news on government activities). In Oromifa language service the EPRDF received 45%, UEDF 26%, CUD 18% and other parties got 11%. In the Amharic language Program, the EPRDF secured 41% of the total coverage, CUD 26%, UEDF 24%, and others 9%. In over all Ethiopian Radio coverage, the EPRDF received 41%, UEDF 26%, CUD 23%, and others 10%. In the other Radio station, i.e. Radio Fana, from the total coverage the EPRDF received 74%, CUD 13%, UEDF 6% and others 7%. In campaign related coverage, the EPRDF got 61%, CUD 20%, UEDF 9% and others 10%. Radio FM gave independent candidates 98% of campaign-related items. Furthermore, according to their findings, almost all of the private print media, which were surveyed by the researchers were against the ruling party, and portrayed the EPRDF negatively. The researchers also found out that the public (state) print media were in favor of the EPRDF (The Reporter 28 May 2005).

In the 2005 parliamentary election, the delay in releasing election results<sup>24</sup> increased the anxiety and tension of the people that in turn increased the demand for the independent newspapers.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>23</sup> The EPRDF government claims that Radio Fana is a private business agency and had nothing to do with the ruling party. However, this claim is always challenged due to the radio station's direct and indirect attachment with the ruling party (Daniel and Jagne 2003: 16).

<sup>24</sup> One of the alleged causes for the bloody electoral violence in 2005 was the NEBE's failure to release election results on time. The delays in the vote counting were slammed by the EU election observers' team. The European Union's election observer's team criticized the delays in releasing election results in light of the fact that on election night results were announced at many polling stations. The EU election team said, "These practices, taken as a whole, are seriously undermining the transparency and fairness of the elections....They also risk increasing the scope for manipulation and consequently putting in doubt public confidence in the process" (Sudan Tribune 25 May 2005). Furthermore, the EU said it "Regrets the way in which the counting of the votes at the constituency level is being conducted, as well as the way in which the release of results is being handled by the electoral authorities, the government and the political parties especially the EPRDF" (Sudan Tribune 25 May 2005). To be fair, the opposition parties such as the CUD, and the ruling party, EPRDF, as well as the NEBE were equally responsible for the delay of the election results. For instance, the CUD was in favor of the postponement of the election results release. Berhanu Nega of the CUD requested the NEBE to postpone the release indicating that there were many unresolved complaints, his party had submitted to the NEBE. The NEBE agreed to postpone the release from 8 June 2005 to 8 July 2005 (SABC News 30 May 2005). Moreover, as some news sources like *Kerala Next* (09 June 2005) confirmed, the NEBE extended the release of the final result by a month due to the volume of complaints it had to investigate.

The range of newspapers circulation increase was between 700% and 2500% (Mail & Guardian 23 May 2005). According to Tamrat Giorgis, the editor of the Fortune newspaper, *“The growth of newspaper circulation is not only because of their accuracy and consistency, but because of the public’s curiosity to know the results of their vote in the election....”* (Mail & Guardian 23 May 2005). A weekly newspaper in Amharic, *“Ethiop,”* claimed that it printed 2500% more from its previous usual print 5000.<sup>26</sup> In fact, not only the circulation, but also the price of the independent newspapers dramatically increased. On the other hand, the circulation of the two stated-controlled newspapers, *“Addis Zemen”* and *“The Ethiopian Herald”* was almost the same as before and remained at 5000 to 7000 (Mail & Guardian 23 May 2005).

#### Government Crackdown against the Independent Press

In the post-election period, the independent media journalists were accused of trespassing their limit given to them by the government. They were blamed by the government for publishing sensitive national security issues and army issues. The Ministry of Defense gave warning to those independent newspapers which were accused of violating the national security (The Sub-Saharan Informer 8 July 2005). In its statement, the Ministry of Defense said, *“Some private newspapers were engaged in circulating dozens of gossips about the army”* and warned them to refrain from *“tarnishing the good image of the army with the aim of making profit.”* It also threatened to sue those newspapers which *“tarnish the army’s fame”* (Addis Tribune 24 June 2005; The Ethiopian Herald 22 June 2005). According to the government’s allegation, *“Some of these journalists working for newspapers owned by political parties have been calling for an insurrection, and engaged in outrageous propaganda which could endanger public safety”* (Sudan Tribune 2 June 2005).<sup>27</sup>

For Prime Minister Meles Zenawi, *“Many of the private media and opposition parties are two sides of a coin.”* According to him; *“It is difficult to differentiate one from the other”* (The Ethiopian Herald 8 July 2005). Furthermore, the EPRDF government took a series of measures against the independent press in the post election period<sup>28</sup>. It arrested many editors of the independent Ethiopian newspapers (EHRCO 3 May 2006). In the crackdown process, as

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However, in the eyes of the public the delays of the release of official election results were largely caused by the massive election fraud committed during the Election Day, and during vote counting by the ruling party. Then, on 6 June 2005, University students in Addis Ababa started protesting what they called the vote rigging in the polls by the government (BBC 7 June 2005) and the violence rapidly spread to other areas causing the worst election riots in the country.

<sup>25</sup> According to Tesfu Tegegn, the managing editor of Ethiop, *“The reason is the public thinks that information about the opposition can be found in private papers, as the private papers were the ones that covered the opposition even before the voting....The public knows who he has cast his vote for and he wants to know if it goes by the book, and he believes the private media is the right place, as the state media is not providing information of the opposition”*(Mail & Guardian 23 May 2005).

<sup>26</sup> Tesfu Tegegn said, *“We are leading the print media in circulation....We printed 130000 copies in one go and in the evening there was still demand for copies...”* (Mail & Guardian 23 May 2005).

<sup>27</sup> On the other hand, however, Kifle Mulat, the head of the EFJA (Ethiopian Free Journalist Association) claimed that the editors were accused because they reported the killing of protesters by the government security in their Amharic weeklies (The Reporter 2 July 2005).

<sup>28</sup> According to the report of EHRCO (Ethiopian Human Rights Council) released on 3 May 2006, the weekly newspapers that ceased publication since November-December-2005 due to the government’s suppression include: *Addis Zena, Ethiop, Satenaw, Asqual, Menelik, Netsanet, Abay, Hadar, Dagim Wonchif, Tomar, Mezagnana, Tobia, Lisanne Hizb, and Sejfe Nebelbal.* The government, in the post-election period, accused about 14 journalists of treason and genocide (CPJ 9 March 2006).

EHRCO (3 May 2006) reported, the government took away the properties of the publishers and editors including computers, printers, scanners, cameras, fax machines and money found in cash.<sup>29</sup>

The editors of the independent media were accused of misrepresenting the security forces and defaming the Ethiopian Orthodox Church<sup>30</sup>, which was one of the local observers in the May 15 election (The Reporter 2 July 2005). The crackdown targeted not only the editors of the independent media, but also the distributors of the various independent newspapers<sup>31</sup>. These massive crackdowns drew heavy criticisms from various international free media protectors.<sup>32</sup> The Vienna-based International Press Institute (IPI) condemned the government's decision to detain the editors of the independent media who were accused of defaming the Ethiopian Air force. The editors reported that eight Ethiopian pilots who were in Belarus for training had sought asylum in protest to the ruling party's action in the election<sup>33</sup> (The Reporter 25 June 2005). The Paris-based Reporters without Borders (RSF) also condemned the harassment of the independent press. It said, "*Journalists are becoming increasingly unwelcome observers during this period of political unrest and the government is clearly unwilling to tolerate any criticism*" (Sudan Tribune 6 July 2005).

According to Kifle Mulat, the chairman of the EFJA<sup>34</sup>, the government took to court only the editors of the free press, and the journalists who work in the state media were immune from the

<sup>29</sup> It is also alleged that the Ethiopian government jammed foreign-based radio broadcasts as reported by The Christian Science Monitor (19 December 2007), UNHCR (29 April 2008), VOA (26 November 2007), and blocked various news web sites owned by the Ethiopian Diaspora such as the Ethio-Zagol, the Ethiopian Review, Mesquel Square etc (CPJ 24 May 2006).

<sup>30</sup> It is alleged that the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, which is headed by Patriarch Paulos who came from Adwa town of Tigray (the birth place of Prime Minister Meles Zenawi) is a close ally of the Ethiopian government (Nkrumah 2007).

<sup>31</sup> For instance, the New York based Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) condemned the detention of Fikre Gudu, a prominent newspaper distributor in Addis Ababa by the government. The executive director of the CPJ, Ann Cooper said, "*CPJ is concerned that Fikere Gudu's detention is part of a crackdown on the media in the aftermath of elections.....Ethiopian authorities should not impede the free flow of information, especially during this crucial period*" (IRIN 8 July 2005).

<sup>32</sup> In an open letter addressed to Prime Minister Meles Zenawi, Ann Cooper, the Executive Director of the CPJ, said "*Many local journalists have gone into hiding, fearing arrest (and) local sources told CPJ that police stationed in the government-owned printing press have prevented most private newspapers from publishing since last week*" (Reuters 9 November 2005). Later on, when the Ethiopian government pressed its charges against the independent media, Ann Cooper renewed the call: "*These charges are shocking and outrageous....They strike at the heart of Ethiopia's journalist community by criminalizing essential work of the press. The government of Prime Minister Meles Zenawi is using legal means to suppress dissent, but it is increasingly behaving like an outlaw regime*" (Milani 2005-12-23). The government refuted the allegations of the CPJ and other media defenders. Berhan Hailu, the Minister of Information, justifying his government's action against the independent media said, "*The continuity of free press in Ethiopia is insured and Ethiopia will continue forward with the already established freedom of expression in all forms....On the other hand, those who were engaged in organizing the street actions by abusing the freedom of expression prevailing in Ethiopia will be brought to justice. Therefore, the comments by CPJ is out of touch with the reality in Ethiopia*" (Reuters 9 November 2005).

<sup>33</sup> IPI Director, Johann P. Fritz condemned the detention (The Reporter 2 July 2005): "*The story of the air force pilots was a legitimate news story that warranted press coverage. The Ethiopian government must stop harassing independent journalists in Ethiopia merely because their stories cause embarrassment or are viewed as being inconvenient.....*"

*Editorial independence is central to a free and open media environment and newspapers must have the right to choose the stories that they wish to cover, no matter how badly these stories reflect on the government. By interfering in this manner, the Ethiopian government is demanding this settled principle and attempting to influence the free flow of information in the lead up to the declaration of the official election results on 8 July.*"

<sup>34</sup> In order to protect the rights of journalists in Ethiopia about four associations have been formed: the Ethiopian Journalists Association (EFJA), the Ethiopian Free Journalists Association (EFJA), the Ethiopian National Journalists

persecution. “*I had seen only two government journalists’ cases at the court during the last 14 years*”, he said. According to Kifle Mulat, the state media journalists “*are the sound of a single party*” and “*they lost the concept of the ‘fourth estate’*”<sup>35</sup> (Sub Saharan Informer 9 September 2005).

The crackdown also involved the foreign-based media outlets, which were identified by the government as pro-opposition (IPI 08 November 2005). Therefore, on June 7, 2005 the Ministry of Information<sup>36</sup> revoked the accreditation of five Ethiopian journalists who were working for the Deutsche Welle and the VOA<sup>37</sup> (Voice of America) radios (The Ethiopian Herald 8 June 2005; IPI 09 June 2005). According to Angola Press (8 July 2005), those five local correspondents of VOA and *Deutsche Welle*, were accused of unethical reporting on the post-election situation. The Ethiopian Information Minister, Berhan Hailu, accused the VOA and *Deutsche Welle* reporters of working to “*bent on destabilizing the peace and stability of the country*” and serving as a mouthpiece for the opposition party (VOA 03 November 2005).

As I have already said, the persecution of the independent media in the post-election period was so severe that not only Ethiopian nationals were persecuted, but also foreigners who worked for the foreign media. One example is the case of Emilio Manfredi, the Italian Journalist, who sought shelter at the Italian Embassy in Addis Ababa. As the Embassy told AFP, the journalist who worked for the web-based Peace Reporter News Service, had been arrested by the police and then was set free due to the Embassy’s intervention. The journalist had been reporting about the violent clashes between the police and the demonstrators (Sudan Tribune 11 June 2005). In January 2006, another foreign journalist, Anthony Mitchell, the Associated Press correspondent, was expelled from Ethiopia accused of “tarnishing the image of the nation” (CPJ 23 February 2006; IPI Mai 2007). The government also denied press accreditation (to work in Ethiopia) to some foreign journalists such as Inigo Gilmore of The Observer (CPJ 23 February 2006).

In the 2005 election, while the ruling party and the government accused the independent media as the mouthpiece of the opposition parties, the state media were also accused of pro-government bias by the opposition parties. In fact, this view was also reflected by the international election observers such as the EU-EOM (European Union Election Observation Mission). The EU observers’ team criticized the state media of bias against the opposition parties. It blamed the state media for announcing only the electoral victory of the EPRDF while ignoring the announcements of the election victories of the opposition parties (The Reporter 28 May 2005; Addis Tribune; 27 May 2005). Furthermore, the EU observers’ team criticized the

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Union (ENJU), and the Media Forum, The Ethiopian Media Women’s association (Dessalegn 2004: 13; Reporter 5 April 2008; ENA 29 March 2008).

<sup>35</sup> Perhaps, the free press members end up in court and prison because “*mostly the private media take the risk and is courageous enough to get through controversial matters on its contents, since there is a matter of marketing*”, as Zemedkun Kifle, an official in the Ethiopian Ministry of Information commented (Sub Saharan Informer 9 September 2005).

<sup>36</sup> Recently, in October 2008, the Ethiopian government officially abolished the Ministry of Information (The Reporter 01 November 2008; The Sub-Saharan Informer 01 November 2008).

<sup>37</sup> In the post-election period, five VOA journalists were charged of treason. Later on, due to the UD diplomatic pressure and other factors the charges were dropped (CPJ 22 March 2006).

state media<sup>38</sup> of reporting to the public of only favorable or positive EU statements towards the ruling party while deliberately overlooking EU's positive statements towards opposition parties (BBC 2005-05-25).

It is observed that these days many people have lost confidence on the state media. They considered the state media as one of the repression tools of the government<sup>39</sup>. The other dramatic event in the post-election period in the country was the attempted legal proceeding initiated by high government officials against the foreign-based Diaspora media. For the first time in the history of Ethiopia, many high officials<sup>40</sup> "*of the Ethiopian government filed a law suit in a US court against the American based Tensae Radio and other News editors*" for defamation and false statements<sup>41</sup> (The Ethiopian Herald 9 August 2005). Though the legal proceeding was later on dropped due to unexplained reasons, it showed the seriousness of the confrontation between the Ethiopian government and the independent media.

#### 4. Discussion

By September 2000, some 31 private news publications were found in Ethiopia (PANA 5 September 2000). In 2007<sup>42</sup>, according to the pro-government media outlet Hibe Zema (May-June 2007), there were 58 newspapers, 25 magazines, three electronic publications that publish range of issues: politics (current affairs), economic and social issues, religion, sport, gender, love, health, children recreation, construction, crime etc. Of these publications 16 newspapers and three magazines publish political issues. In terms of ownership, 40 news papers and 20 magazines were privately owned; six newspapers were government-owned; three newspapers and three magazines were owned by political organization; five newspapers and two magazines by religious organizations; three newspapers by NGOs and one newspaper was owned by an association. Moreover, one daily, twenty-two weekly, three more than once, five newspapers fortnightly and seven newspapers published monthly were in Amharic language. Only one weekly newspaper was published in Oromifa, and one weekly newspaper was published in

<sup>38</sup> The EU-EOM severely criticized the state media by citing evidences: "*For example, on May 18, while international media such as CNN and BBC covered the press conference by CUD, Ethiopian TV and Radio Ethiopia, as well as the State-owned newspapers Addis Zemen and The Ethiopian Herald completely ignored it*" (The Reporter 28 May 2005).

As early as 2000, the state media was accused of serving only the EPRDF. For instance, Mairegu Bezabih (2000: 132) said, "*As was the case in the past, the state-owned media became simply the propaganda machinery of the new government, launching violent verbal attacks on those political or ethnic groups that are ill favored by the ruling circle. This unprofessional and unethical campaign against those who hold opinions that are incongruent with those of the government has undermined the credibility of the state media and put into question the seriousness of the so-called democratization program of the government.*" (To understand how the ruling party manipulated the state media see Berhanu 1998EC: 380).

<sup>39</sup> It is said that these days the Ethiopian state television is being watched only by those who have no access to a satellite TV. According to a joke being told in Addis Ababa, the Ethiopian TV begins its broadcasting by saying "*Good evening those of you who do not have a satellite TV*" (The Reporter 13 January 2008).

<sup>40</sup> According to The Ethiopian Herald (9 August 2005), the "Tensae Ethiopia voice of Unity radio" and other foreign based media of the Diaspora Ethiopians had defamed the name of high government officials by alleging that they transferred money into foreign accounts.

<sup>41</sup> In order to intimidate the independent media, the Ethiopian Ministry of Justice repeatedly warned the local independent media to refrain themselves from defaming government officials without concrete evidences. According to the Ministry of Justice, "*....Any press, if engaged in defaming the reputation of an individual or a government official, would be held accountable in accordance with the Press law*" (The Ethiopian Herald 6 July 2005).

<sup>42</sup> From 1991 to January 2006, about 1193 private press outlets were licensed in Ethiopia (ENA 3 May 2007; The Ethiopian Herald Sunday 6 May 2007).

Tigrigna. Two daily and six weekly newspapers were published in English. Furthermore, fifteen monthly magazines were published in Amharic, six monthly magazines in English. By 2008, there were twenty-six radio stations including two state-owned radio stations (ENA 19 July 2008). Despite the above-mentioned claim of pro-government media outlets, according to The Reporter (7 *Yekatit* 1999 EC), the number of the independent newspapers in Ethiopia shrank in the post-election due to the general reduction of the quality of the independent media; the gradual slide of the media from independent or “neutral“ position to party-mouth status reflecting the view of only the opposition parties; the failure of government or other public officials to give adequate information to the independent media; the ever-increasing publishing cost; and the absence of professional ethics among the journalists of the independent media.

During elections, the media has the responsibility to inform voters in an accurate, fair and professional manner. Article 9 of the African Charter of Human and Peoples’ Rights (adopted on 12 January 1981 and came to force on 21 October 1986) says, “*Every individual shall have the right to receive information. Every individual shall have the right to express and disseminate his opinions within the law*”<sup>43</sup> However, as IFJ (1986) rightly noted, “*In countries where the broadcast and print media have been traditionally subject to control and undue political influence, particularly from the state, and sometimes from a single-party government, adjusting to multi-party conditions is never easy.*” Therefore, most of the time, in transitional democracies the media show a tendency to misuse their power by publishing unfounded or inaccurate stories (OSCE-ODIHR 2005: 23).

Journalists with sufficient professional standard offer reliable information; distinguish facts from opinions; produce clear, timely, verifiable, substantiated and accurate information; use news worthiness as basic principle ruling editorial policies; avoid prejudice, bias, discrimination, and sensationalism, and refrain from using any hate speech; respect privacy; protect confidential sources of information; defend the rights of the public; refuse to receive bribes; and defend their independence from the pressures of advertisers and other outsiders (OSCE-ODIHR 2005: 23). As Ekpou (1990) noted, “*Journalism is an endeavour in service of the public good;*” and therefore, “*journalists must be just as dedicated to that good as they are to high professional standards.*” According to Norris and Merloe (2002: 3), “*Television, radio and newspapers owned or controlled by the state should be held to the highest standards of accuracy and fairness, objectivity and balance.*” This is because, “*Government in a democracy is by definition derived from the people, and the will of the people is the basis of authority for democratic government.*” They argue that the state media are the property of the citizens and they should be always used for public interest. Moreover, the state media have an obligation to give citizens with accurate, balanced and impartial information.

<sup>43</sup> The countries that have signed or ratified the African Charter of Human and Peoples’ Rights are: Algeria, Angola, Benin, Botswana, Burkina Faso, Burundi, Cameroon, Cape Verde, Central African Republic, Chad, Comoros, Congo, Cote d’Ivoire, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Djibouti, Egypt, Equatorial Guinea, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Gabon, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Kenya, Lesotho, Liberia, Libya, Madagascar, Malawi, Mali, Mauritania, Mauritius, Mozambique, Namibia, Niger, Nigeria, Rwanda, Sao Tome e Principe, Senegal, Seychelles, Sierra Leone, Somalia, Sudan, Swaziland, Tanzania, Togo, Tunisia, Uganda, Zambia and Zimbabwe.

As OSCE-ODIHR (2005: 23) noted “*people are often influenced in their political perceptions by what they learn from the media.*” According to Lippmann (1930), “*The Press is like the beam of a searchlight that mores restlessly about, bringing one episode and then another out of darkness into vision.*” In countries where repressive regimes controlled the media the electorate always mistrust the state-controlled media (OSCE-ODIHR 2005: 25). As Jackobowic (1995:127) notes, “*The less democratic a state the more it is likely to perceive all the media as playing a political role and therefore requiring strict supervision. Such a state is prone to use administrative methods and possibly coercion.*”

The most influential medium of communication in developed countries is television. But in transitional democracies, particularly in Africa radio is the most important means of communication. This is because the distribution of television in many African countries is very limited. Moreover, the very fact that radio relies on battery power and its relative cheap price has made it the most important source of information. Furthermore, television and other media types such as newspapers, internet, etc. are confined in the cities where the affluent and educated people are living (Wondwosen and Jerusalem 2007:33). Therefore, since the majority of the people in Africa are poor, illiterate and live in the rural areas, radio is the best means of communication to address the voters (OSCE-ODIHR 2005). In the USA, for instance, in the 1960s, the people gained most information from the print media. In the 1980s, however, two-thirds of the American people gained information from television and only about 20% of them from radio (OSCE-ODIHR 2005).

The Ethiopian independent media, according to Shimelis (2002: 201), “*has been libellous, uninvestigative, gullible, irresponsible and highly sensational. For some papers, the boundary between news reporting and news making is, in fact, blurred.*” According to critics (Desalegn 2004: 6; Lidetu 1998 EC: 132-135; Shimelis 2002: 201)<sup>44</sup>, the independent press failed to properly contribute to the country’s democratization process due to the unreliability of the news it provided. Moreover, it is usually based on emotions. Some of the private media tend to be partial and are unable to offer balanced views; spread rumours not facts; tend to exaggerate; sometimes fabricate; considerably fail to relate the headline and the rest of the story; lack journalistic knowledge, and hence are profit seekers. Most of the journalists in Ethiopia do not have a basic knowledge on journalism, and worse than this, they do not get skill enhancement trainings (Dessalegn 2004: 6; The Ethiopian Herald 20 July 2005). At the same time, it has to be admitted that despite its weaknesses and its infancy<sup>45</sup>, the independent media has contributed for the country’s democratization process (Lidetu 1998 EC: 148). To a certain extent, the independent media have been informative, daring and outspoken and this has incurred them the wrath of the government.<sup>46</sup> Desalegn (2004: 7) has brilliantly summarized the major source of conflict between the ruling party, EPRDF, and the independent media as follows:

<sup>44</sup> The Ethiopian Prime Minister, Meles Zenawi, has repeatedly criticized the independent media. For him, the independent media is “in a ghetto” (Nolawi n.d) and it is a “gutter press” (Dessalegn 2004: 6).

<sup>45</sup> The independent media emerged for the first time in the history of the nation in 1991.

<sup>46</sup> Since 2001, one hundred Ethiopian media personnel including thirty-seven journalists have fled the country (RAP 21, 02-07-08).

*“From the very beginning relations between the independent press and the new government were on a collision course. The new government did not preach reconciliation soon after it seized power, on the contrary, government propaganda was inflammatory, and the state media was used to fan the flames of ethnic conflict. ....The independent press on its part was equally aggressive. A great majority of the papers that were launched following the deregulation was strongly critical of the new government. Indeed, quite a number of them were established for the main purpose of attacking the government and exposing the failings of ethnic politics. Of the 65 independent papers that are published at present less than five percent may be described as being sympathetic to the government. To many in the emerging press, and to a good section of urban public opinion, the new government was a minority government, dominated as it was by the Tigrian-based TPLF, and hence illegitimate. Pan-Ethiopianists believed the government had brought disrepute to the country and its long history and culture.”*

## 5. Conclusion

Robinson and Kohut (1988) claimed that in advanced societies the mass media are highly regarded when compared to political leaders. Media plays an important role in the proper functioning of democracy. As Pasek (2006: 2) emphasized democracy and independent media go together and there is a bidirectional interaction between them. In a democratic process, media supports the conduct of free and fair election; encourages majority rule, political equality, and political freedom; fights for minority rights, fights against representative government and assists for having independent judiciary.

The independent media journalists face pressure not only from the government, but also from partisan politics, publishers' interests, and political leanings and advertising pressures (IFJ 1986: 5). The most serious threat to press freedom at present comes not from the direct government control and pressure, but indirectly, i.e., the creation of an atmosphere where journalists could be forced to exercise self-censorship (IFJ 1986: 6). The media is expected to report freely and scrutinize the election process in order to expose possible corruption and to prevent interference in the election management. In election times, the media is expected to inform the public about the election campaigns, the activities of the election management body, the activities of the candidates, the problems and incidents that occurred in the election process etc. (ACE Encyclopedia, Olukotun 2000: 33; OSCE-ODIHR 2005:26). In democratic elections, the people should get the point of views of all contesting parties fairly and equitably so that they make informed choices. This can be implemented through the vehicle of the media (Merloe 15 September 1995). The media has at least three subjects to report on during election. These are: the political parties and candidates; the issues, and the voting process (Howard 2004: 7).

Though, as Merrill (1991) said press freedom is an ideal, which no country has ever achieved, for Berger (24 February 2002) six preconditions are necessary for the media to contribute in conducting “free and fair” elections. These are: a legal framework for media freedom, *de facto*

media freedom on the ground, general pluralism of media voices, independent media regulation, journalists associations, and media supportive society that enjoys freedom of expression. In drafting media laws, various professional bodies should be consulted. These ideally include: journalists' associations, broadcasters' trade unions, media councils, journalists' training institutions, independent electoral commissions etc. Any media law that is made by the legislative should get the consultation of stakeholders: the media, political parties, election administrators, the electorate, and the media council or any existing media regulatory body (ACE Encyclopedia).

Though the government media in Ethiopia is old by the Sub-Saharan Africa standards, for the first time in the history of the nation the independent media officially and legally emerged in 1991 with the coming to power of the EPRDF (Tsega and Abebe 2000). For the last seventeen years the EPRDF government has been accusing the independent media of bias and lack of reliability. Ironically, however, the government officials themselves are contributing for the unreliability of the independent media by refusing to give direct information despite the fact that in the press laws of the country, the government officials are instructed to provide information to the media people (both the state media and the independent media). According to Dessalegn (2004),

*“A persistent problem facing the free press is government discrimination and harassment. There is open and deliberate discrimination of the free press by the government which has taken the form of refusing to give information to it and not inviting any of the papers for press conferences or news worthy official events..... The press conferences given by the Prime Minister in the last ten years have always excluded the free press. The government media and that of the ruling party are given preferential treatment.”*

Therefore, the government should create an environment conducive to a free press.<sup>47</sup> At present, Ethiopian journalism lacks the financial, technical and professional resources that are vital to quality news (Capital 12 March 2006; Clark 2005). As ARTICLE 19 (Global Campaign for Free Expression) (March 2003) insisted, professionalism in the media at best is promoted through self-regulatory mechanisms. If in case this is too unrealistic, a certain body with regulatory power can be established, but it should be properly independent from the government interference. Moreover, the press council which the EPRDF government proposed as a regulatory body is very hard to accept due to the government's involvement as the press law clearly indicates.

<sup>47</sup>According to the Annual World Wide Press Freedom Index published by the Reporters without Borders Ethiopia's media freedom ranks in different years were as follows: 2008 (142<sup>nd</sup>), 2007 (150<sup>th</sup>), 2006 (160<sup>th</sup>), 2005 (131<sup>st</sup>), 2004 (112<sup>th</sup>), 2003 (124<sup>th</sup>), 2002 (107<sup>th</sup>). For further detail see Reporters Without Borders, <<http://www.rsf.org>>

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