

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PUBLIC STATEMENT

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Ethiopia: Draft Law Would Wreck Civil Society

Amnesty International today called on Ethiopia's Parliament to reject the proposed new Charities and Societies Proclamation when it is tabled for debate in the next few weeks. The organization said that if passed into law, the Charities and Societies Proclamation would wreck Ethiopian civil society's ability to meaningfully operate in the country, and would have a negative impact on the human rights of citizens throughout Ethiopia.

Ethiopia's federal government claims that this proposed law is intended to encourage financial transparency and accountability among non-governmental organizations (NGOs), but its oppressive provisions demonstrate the government's increasing intolerance of the work of human rights activists and civil society organizations. Amnesty International said the bill is a ploy by the government to conceal human rights violations and prevent public protest and criticism of its actions.

The bill has been revised at least twice over the last few months, but without any change to its most menacing provisions, such as:

- The proposed new legislation would criminalize human rights activities undertaken by both international and Ethiopian organizations who receive more than 10 percent of their funding from abroad.
- Activities that would become illegal include campaigning for gender equality, children's rights, disabled persons' rights, conflict resolution and judicial and law enforcement capacity-building.
- The law would establish a Charities and Societies Agency with broad discretionary power over civil society organizations, which would allow strict government control and interference in the operation and management of civil society organizations.

Civil society actors including the political opposition, human rights activists and journalists already face increasing pressure that hinders their activities in Ethiopia. The country's human rights record has markedly deteriorated since disputed 2005 elections, when at least 187 demonstrators were killed and members of the political opposition party, the Coalition for Unity and Democracy (CUD), journalists and civil society activists were arrested and tried for treason.

Background

The draft Charities and Societies Proclamation law purports to address perceived inadequacies in the existing legal regime and to "provide for the proper administration and regulation of charities and societies". It also claims to "ensure the realization of citizens' right to association enshrined in the constitution". However, the provisions of the act do the exact opposite. The provisions and objectives of the draft bill violate international and regional human rights treaties to which Ethiopia is a party, and if passed would lead to an increase in human rights violations.

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