

Reflections on Press Freedom in Pre- and Post-reform Ethiopia: A Practitioners' Perspective

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Abstract

Press freedom is significant for the development of democracy. Ethiopia has recognized freedom of press in the FDRE Constitution and other press regulations. This study assessed the pre-reform situation of press freedom in Ethiopia and post-reform or the period after the coming of Prime Minister Dr. Abiy Ahmed to power. We held one-on-one in-depth interviews with twelve purposively selected media practitioners working for both Government and privately-owned media based on their experience of doing journalism during pre-reform as well as post-reform era. The views of media practitioners were analyzed qualitatively. The study's findings revealed that the pre-reform press environment was one marked by repressive laws, government interventions, lack of professionalism, and weak financial capacity of media institutions. In the post-reform context, the status quo was changed and press freedom was better protected in comparative terms though there are challenges that need to be resolved. The study recommends that journalists should work under the existing legal framework, while of course should work to improve them, not to make their relationship with the Government inimical.

Keywords: Press Freedom, post-reform Ethiopia, Abiy Ahmed, Media Practitioners, Democracy

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Introduction

Freedom of the press was extensively provided in the 1995 FDRE Constitution. According to Skjerdal (2012a), the period after EPRDF marks a significantly different arena of the press in Ethiopia in terms of formal press policy and space for independent journalism. There was hardly any free press or freedom for political dissent on the ground despite the constitutions provided it in theory. The Government has monopolistically owned the media in the past over two decades. These stifled the media institutions from entertaining diverse opinions and limited the public from reflecting their views freely. Many incidents reflect that the space for freedom of the press or independence of media institutions in Ethiopia has been limited. The Ethiopian People Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) regime, which is now transformed into Prosperity Party (P.P.), has jailed several journalists during the pre-reform period, while the constitution and successive laws provided for freedom of expression and the press; the Government did not uphold these rights in practice (Tura, 2007:21). The Government started used the 1992 press law, now defunct, to intimidate journalists. This was followed by the demise of newly established media outlets and a wave of journalists in exile. Later on, a number of these media vanished due to different reasons including financial challenges and government pressure (Shimelis, 2000). CPJ's report indicates that the Ethiopian Government systematically cracked down on the remaining publications as it prepared for the May 2015 elections.

The press provides the platform for a multiplicity of voices to be heard. It is the public's watchdog, activist and guardian as well as educator, entertainer which is an indicator of democracy. Since EPRDF came to power, the Government repressed independence of media, the right to freedom of the press, and access to information. While journalists endeavored to report critical issues, they have been faced with prosecution, harassment, and torture for a longer period. Stremlau (2011: 724) stated, "Despite the initial phase of freedom in the early 1990s, a gradual restriction of media space has occurred; dozens of journalists have been imprisoned over the years. The regime has kept the state media firmly under party control, rather than allowing independent media to emerge." Due to this, the people and the governing body were in an antagonistic relationship prior to the election of Prime Minister Dr. Abiy Ahmed. According to a Human Rights report, the state tightly controls the media landscape, making it challenging for societies to access information that is independent of government perspectives. Journalists have been exercising their freedom of expression under several challenges. Some of them have faced serious harassment, arrests, and pressure, while others are forced to leave the country. Ethiopia was in the lowest rankings of press freedom indices for more than two decades.

However, Prime Minister Dr. Abiy Ahmed introduced reforms to media after coming to power. For instance, opposition politician and journalists in prison were released; exiled dissidents and banned media outlets returned to Ethiopia; individuals and organizations charged with Terrorism have been granted amnesty. This study is not interested in analyzing the impacts of those reforms as the timing period is short for such endeavor. We, however, are interested in analyzing media practitioner's reflections towards the situation of freedom of the press in Ethiopia during the pre- and post-reform Ethiopia.

The Concept of Press Freedom

The freedom of the press is the right of the press to report, to comment on, and to criticize its own government without retaliation or threat of retaliation from the authority (Hachten, 2005). Dennis and Merrill (1996) defined the freedom of the press as the right to communicate ideas, opinions, and information through the printed word without government restraint; they state that the main purpose of the freedom of the press is to promote and educate an informed electorate that can make decisions about public affairs (Dennis and Merrill, 1996, p. 5). According to the first Press Proclamation 34/1992, article 2 (1) freedom of the press is the right of citizens to launch any establishment of mass media such as newspapers, magazines, periodicals, journals, pamphlets, news agencies, radio, television, motion pictures, pictures, films, cartoons, books, music, electronics publications, plays, and includes all media of mass communication, to publish and distribute without censorship and any restriction of a similar nature, including freedom from prior restraint and liability after publication. The free flow of information as a result of the recognition of press freedom has myriad functions: Firstly, information is necessary to make rational judgments. This means that meaning full and democratic decision-making on the one hand and public ability realistically to perceive and respond to the world, on the other hand, requires widespread availability of information of general interest (Gene, 1998). Secondly, freedom of information is considered as ‘the key to world peace and its totalitarian system because the evils of propaganda will highly decrease if the concerned people are given all the information necessary to evaluate it for itself (Ibid). The press allows the Government, politicians, and public figures to communicate to citizens in an easy and efficient manner. To be an effective contributor to the democratic process, the media as a channel for ideas and information and generator of the debate must be able to offer a variety of views and operate independently. For citizens, the media is a major source of information and commentary on public issues. Media plays a great role in informing and mobilizing citizens to be part of the democratic process and development of the country.

Press laws and self-regulation of the press

Article 29 of the 1995 Ethiopian Constitution provides citizens of Ethiopia the right to hold opinions, thoughts, and free expressions. It also affords freedom of the press and mass media by ensuring the opportunity for access to information of interest to the public and prohibiting censorship. Recognition of the freedom in the Constitution, or the statute is not enough for the exercise of freedom to reach its goals. Hence, governments should give adequate legal protection to the press as a vital institution for the public while enhancing the public trust in Government. The government should limit its interference as much as possible. Accordingly, while the promotion of freedom of the press is undoubtedly essential to the existence of a democratic society, it is worth emphasizing that one important element in the promotion of such freedom is to provide legal protection to the press.

In many countries, there are formal laws that regulate the behavior of journalists, which are developed by parliament and enforced by prosecuting authorities. However, journalists also encounter a second body of rules that are developed and enforced by independent organizations or delegated under legislation to regulatory bodies (Pearson, 2004:329). Self-regulation of the press is a framework that the industry, through its own representative, establishes a non-statutory tribunal that arbitrates the behavior of its members in line with certain professional standards. Notwithstanding the large and increasing number of legal restraints of the media, it still has the power to damage reputations by falsehoods, invade privacy and conduct partisan campaigns. The unavailability of legal aid effectively deters all but the intrepid or wealthy from taking action for libel... (Robertson & Nicole, 2002:675)

Historically, in democracies, the media played a watchdog role in exposing officials' malpractices and were usually seen as the antagonist of the incumbent Government. Hence, allowing the interference of the Government to regulate the media compromised the freedom of the press by introducing laws that sometimes severely punished journalists that wrote a story against the rulers. The idea of self-regulation is predicated upon the fact that disputes over media content and behaviors of practitioners should be resolved by some independent but no legal body. Gordon and Kittos (1999:38) say that any limitation of the freedom of expression by outside forces is dangerous for several reasons: “It opens the door to any would-be determiner of “right” or “correct” expression; it assumes that media people cannot make their own decisions”.

The Ethiopian media laws are not created better working atmosphere to the journalists, making them free to report the stories by incorporating diverse ideas from different sources. For instance, Freedom of Mass Media and Access to Information (Proclamation No. 590/2008), and the Anti-Terrorism Law (Proclamation No. 652/2009) can be mentioned as some of the draconian legal frames that limit the journalists' active participation in the media (IMS, 2018). The Government of Ethiopia is now revising the press laws and others so as to create a better press situation while this article has been written.

Government and Press Relationship

The relationship between media institutions and the Government is mutual self-interest. The attitude of media

institutions to Government is partly defined by degrees of interference, which are in turn defined by the terms of regulation for a given media industry. It is also partly defined by the ideological position of the given media business, or even their proprietors, towards the state's rights, within their idea of the media-audience relationship (Graeme Burton, 2005).

When we talk about the relationship between the press and Government, we are talking about a relationship that is illustrated by 'a mutual need of politicians to appear in the media to have a platform for their positions', and that of the media 'to have the politicians appear so that they might attract an audience by having access to authority figures' (Burton 2005, p. 20). Kumar and Jones (2005, p. 227) argue that the government-press relationship on the surface is an 'acrimonious' one and the ideally thought 'cooperation' is far from what actually exists in the 'operating mode'. They assert that this relationship is multilayered; (1) 'government officials and news organizations spend a great deal of time and resource making use of the presence of the other, even if there is mutual mistrust of motives and actions, (2) there are personal and institutional relations that define the conduct of how the two sides relate to and consider each other, and (3) 'the continuing character of the relationship is based on the consistent nature of the information needs, and the institutional responses, of both partners' (ibid). According to Kumar and Jones (2005), the personal relationship is that between government officials and reporters, which appears to be bellicose in that they are sometimes critical of one another. However, they explain, the institutional relationship between media organizations and the Government is continuous in which cooperation between the two prevails with the intent of getting the most out of it.

In addition to their function of carrying information between the Government and the public, media influence political decisions and functions by disclosing what officials usually prefer to hide from the public and by monitoring the Government and other governmental political institutions' power. Due to this watchdog function, the media are considered the fourth estate added to the traditional three organs of a government that are the legislative, the executive, and the judiciary.

Kumar and Jones (2005, p. 230) see four central ways in which the 'combined' and 'singular' media can influence the Government, and the process of governing it follows as well. First, the media inform the public of the actions of officials elected to rule. Second, the information provided influences the workings of the Government for the public would act according to the information. Third, through the works disseminated to the wide public, the media inform people of the deeds of other governmental institutions. Fourth, 'information provided by the media serves as an early warning system for government officials of problems they may not have recognized or issues coming to the surface that they did not see coming.

The influence chiefly regulatory that the Government has on media mostly affects the conduct of media organizations harmfully as it puts an impediment on freedom of expression and of the press. However, a certain positive influence could be seen in some regulations on the media that are made to secure the protection of human rights. Kumar and Jones (2005) in support of the view that the government pressures the media argued all three branches of Government consistently serve as an influence on the organization, operations, and actions of news outlets. Government actions run the gamut from measures taken to regulate news organizations to procedures used to protect the routines and products of news media (p. 234). The relationship between the Government and the press during the EPRDF in Ethiopia has been hostile which Government deliberately repressed the press. The relationship between the private print media and the Government during this period is characterized as a "suspicious" one (Dejene, 2013).

Theoretical Frameworks

A discussion of the theories surrounding the freedom of the press begins with a reference to the Cold War era when, according to Siebert et. al. (1984), four theories of the press (the authoritarian, the libertarian, the Soviet, and the social responsibility) came to fruition. It also includes later theories developed, Democratic participation theory and Development Theory. Among these theories, Authoritarian and Social responsibility were selected to underpin the finding of this study. Authoritarian theory of press in the words of Siebert et al., is where the Government has absolute power and control over the press, such as ownership, content, license, and the use of mass media. The authoritarian state requires direct governmental control of the mass media, and the media are not allowed to print or broadcast anything which could undermine the established authority. Huang (2009) argues that free media is also costly to authoritarian regimes. A relatively free and credible media can inform citizens under an incompetent regime that their grievances are widely shared and then coordinate them in challenging the regime. The other theory of the press used in this study is social responsibility, a name inspired by the ideas of the U.S. Commission on Freedom of the Press in the late 1940s. In this model, the press is basically free, but it has certain obligations to society that can be expressed as "truth, accuracy, objectivity, and balance." According to Siebert et al. (1956), the goal of the social responsibility model is to diversify the media, reflecting "the diversity of society as well as [providing] access to various points of view." As opposed to the libertarianism, the principle in social responsibility is to provide an entrance to different mass media to minority groups. The journalist is accountable to his audience as well as to the government. In illustration, the theory puts

the mass media and the government at the same level, signifying an interaction where both parties are allowed to criticize each other. Although against total freedom of the media, unlike authoritarianism, social responsibility theory advocates for media self-regulation as opposed to state-regulation (Skjerdal, 1993). The supporters of social responsibility theory argue that media regulatory bodies should be set up by the media practitioners themselves, they should follow to their own codes of ethics and professional standards in journalism (Campbell, 1999). McQuail (1994) emphasizes that the media have obligations to society. The news media should be truthful, accurate, fair and objective to the extent that objectivity is attainable. In conflict with libertarian ideals, the government has the right to intervene in the public interest under some circumstances. Because this study deals with the press situation from two aspects that are before and after reform made to the country, the theories better serve the study purpose.

Methodology of the study

The study adopted a qualitative research design. In this research tradition, there is a preference “for a contextual understanding so that behavior is to be understood in the context of meaning systems employed by a particular group or society” (Bryman, 2004: 78). As the study is mainly focused on analyzing the media practitioner’s views to the situation of freedom of expression and Press in Pre- and Post-reform Ethiopia, qualitative design better serves the study’s purpose. The sampling technique used in this study was purposive sampling. According to Morse (1994:228), purposive sampling helps find interviewees /informants who have the available knowledge and experience that the researchers/ investigators needed. We adopted a variant of purposive sampling known as stakeholder sampling as it helps to “ identify who the major stakeholders are who are involved in designing, giving, receiving, or administering the program or service being evaluated, and who might otherwise be affected by it” (Given, 2008, p. 697). We involved twelve media practitioners who have better knowledge and experience on the situation of freedom of the press in Ethiopia. Those twelve media practitioners this study depended upon were purposively selected from Ethiopian Broadcasting Corporation (EBC), Ethiopian Satellite Television (ESAT), Oromia Media Network (OMN), Ethiopian Herald Newspaper, The Reporter Newspaper, and Gulele Post Magazine. Ethiopian Satellite Television (ESAT) and Oromia Media Network (OMN) are the media broadcasting from abroad before they enter the country following the reforms made. Data collected through in-depth interviews from these informants were presented qualitatively and discussed thematically along with the scholar’s ideas and previous studies. The secondary data obtained from the journals, books, newspaper, and websites also utilized to advance the analysis of the paper.

DATA ANALYSIS AND PRESENTATION

This part presents the finding of the study and the analysis. It discusses the practice of press freedom in pre-and post-reform of Ethiopia according to views of media practitioners along with press regulations and different studies conducted on the area. Government intervention, professionalism of journalists’, and financial challenges impact on press freedom were also discussed. The media practitioners were selected based on their experience of working in media and their familiarity with the study’s subject. The informant’s views were analyzed below.

The pre-reform situation of the Press in Ethiopia

The pre-reform situation of press freedom in Ethiopia was filled with the violations of press regulations amended at different times, which restricted journalist’s freedom of expression and media freedom in general. Ethiopia has been described as a media-unfriendly country for more than two decades before the changes were introduced. This is because the heavy control of the state and its restriction on the media environment has largely denied journalists, especially the independent press, to access information and report stories independently (Moges, 2017b; Stremmlau, 2011). Different researches on media development show that the media in general and private press, in particular, are suffered from limited access to information from government organizations. The political pressures have been commonly clearly seen in the media scenario in the country. Many private news outlets were shutdown, their editors were arrested, and many journalists fled to other countries; those remaining were working under fear. As a result, the country has been labeled as one of the worst hubs of journalists in the world until 2018 (Freedom House, 2019).

However, after the coming of the new Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed (Ph.D.), CPJ released a report that indicates no journalists are reported to be in jail in Ethiopia. As a result of changes brought by new leadership, the country has recently improved its ranks from 150 to 110 in the world freedom index in 2019 (Reporters Without Borders 2019).The Deputy CEO of EBC reflected on the reforms achieved said before the reform media were under the control of few government authorities who have no know-how of the media. “The media got a relatively free environment to operate, to expose faults to help the Government take corrective measures and ensure public accountability. Before the reform, even you cannot work based on existing rules and regulations there are officials who force the media institutions to change the angle of a story in favor of them, and sometimes they tend to give an alternative way to cover a story, this hegemony is not existed now in post reforms.”

(Personal interview, March 04, 2019)

Press regulations and Views of Informants

Even though the proclamations amended to protect the right to freedom of the press were filled with provisions that give journalists ample opportunities of accessing information, interviewed media practitioners for the current study expressed their concern for the law not being enacted in practice. The Deputy CEO of EBC said, even though the right of the journalists to have access to government activity was clearly stipulated within the press laws, the government authorities are not willing to inform updated information for the public. Lack of access to information is one of the greatest challenges facing our media (both private and state media) recently.” (Personal interview, March 04, 2019). Similarly, another informant from the same organization, the CEO of Ethiopian Radio (Part of EBC), said many of the journalists were troubled in the search for information. “It’s difficult to have access to different incidents, especially those reported by the defense or police offices. Sometimes they say it’s restricted by laws, but which is actually not. Our societies, in general, have not developed the habit of giving information for the media yet.” (Personal interview, March 03, 2019)

According to Article 31 of the press law of 2008, People who are refused information have a right to appeal to the public relations officer and later to the ombudsman within 30 working days. The informants of the study had criticized the law said that, even though the media law is drafted to interpret rights and responsibilities of the mass media and procedures journalists should follow in exercising their right to access to information and report information held by public bodies, it gives the opportunity for government bodies to secure documents through bureaucratic processes. The report of Freedom House shows Ethiopia as having one of the continent’s most progressive freedoms of information laws. However, access to public information is largely restricted in practice, and the Government has traditionally limited coverage of official events to state-owned media outlets (Freedom House, 2012).

The draft press was also brought a debate over excessive fines. Ross (2010:1064) criticized it as another means to oppress the media. She insists that excessive fines are imposed on the press for minor violations of the statute. According to Ross (2010), in most jurisdictions, especially developed countries, the degree of fines for defamation and rape or child labor abuse is opposite that in Ethiopia. The study informants argued excessive fines were escalated self-censorship among private media journalists. For instance, Editor in Chief of Gulele Post magazine has explained as follows “Even though, the law has provisions that encourage freedom, it contained contents which are repressive and restrictive to the media institutions. Compensations up to 100,000 Birr for moral damages of defamation through the mass media spread fears among journalists and develop self-censorship.” (Personal interview, March 13, 2019) So, Freedom of Mass Media and Access to Information Proclamation (2008) is one of the Press Proclamations that the Ethiopian Government prosecuted journalists and limited the right to freedom of expression and access to information that is outlined in the Constitution and essential to a democratic society.

The enactment of the draconian anti-terrorism law with the absence of independent judiciary worsens journalists' self-censorship and empowers the government's authority to throw journalists in to prison. The same to press laws, many of the interviewed informants addressed the restrictive nature of the anti-terrorism law. For instance, informants' from Gulele Post magazine said, “The 2009 anti-terrorism law highly increased the existing self-censorship of journalists especially working for private media. The proclamation came as the main reason for the imprisonment of journalists and the dying of various newspapers and magazines. I.e., why I was imprisoned for the last seven years and dozens of other journalists” (Personal Interview, March 13, 2019)

Government intervention to curb Press freedom

Another basic problem against freedom of expression in Ethiopia is the authoritarian political nature of the Government, the same too many other African countries. According to the Authoritarian theory of the press, the Government has absolute power and control over the press, such as ownership, content, license, and the use of mass media. The authoritarian state requires direct governmental control of the mass media, and the media are not allowed to print or broadcast anything which could undermine the established authority (McQuail, 1983). The use of media by Government as an instrument to dissent its oppositions than as an independent social institution that has a role in every affair of a society curtailed this basic right. The Government fired journalists working for Government without any solid reason. State-owned media, Oromia Radio and Television Organization (ORTO), now renamed as Oromia Broadcasting Network (OBN) can be a good example for squeezing out 20 journalists in 2014.

The informants were asked the root cause of the suppression of freedom of the press and expression in Ethiopia and argued that freedom of expression in Ethiopia is only guaranteed on paper and the ruling party amended repressive regulations to this right. “In the EPRDF regime, different provisions which protect the right to freedom of expression were stated under the Constitution and other laws than the past regime, but it’s not in practice. The laws were implemented in reverse. The Government took back this basic right by different

repressive laws like Anti-Terrorism proclamation, press law, and others. Having a different stand on politics than what the ruling party propagates was impossible. Those who opposed the authoritarian government rule were exiled from the country, detained, and lost their life.” (Personal interview, March 03-25, 2019)

It can be understood from the informants that the Government lacks concern to laws drafted to protect freedom of press and expression. The importance of the law is not its mere presence on paper rather when it is put into effect properly that it can bring a good media environment and open political space. Skjerdal, (2012: 3-4) argued that the media policy of the incumbent, the Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), is commonly portrayed as an exemplar of Ethiopia’s alleged authoritarian turn. Repressions against journalists and tightly controlled state media channels are widely used as evidence of restrictions of public liberties.

The Government used media outlets under party patronage, and journalists were intimidated by federal and regional security services before the reform or election of Prime Minister Dr. Abiy Ahmed. The editor in Chief of Gulele Post magazine argued, “The Government charged the journalists for they were reported on human rights abuses and criticized the government's brutal responses to peaceful public demonstrations held at different parts of the country. Due to deep-rooted violation of freedom of the press and expression, many writers, journalists and bloggers were detained and put into jail or exiled from their country.” (Personal interview, March 13, 2019)

The informants said that the Government categorized the public protests held at different times as “terrorists” and escalated its response against them, resulting in deaths, injuries, and the mass arrests of protesters, opposition party leaders, and journalists. The media were the voice of people at a time media such as the Ethiopian Satellite Television and Radio (ESAT) and the Oromia Media Network (OMN) were also jammed by the Government. (Personal interview, March 03-25, 2019)

Professionalism of Journalists for the healthy press

There is a lack of professionalism in Ethiopia, as the freedom of the press is a recent phenomenon (Melisew Dejene, 2013). State media are assumed to be unreliable sources of information. Journalism and media are generally stereotyped as rumor disseminators. Often it is argued that government officials and economic elites unduly use media outlets for their own purposes. On the contrary, private media are blamed by their unbalanced and sensationalist type of report (Berhanu, 2014). Even though government interference is the main cause for the limitation of freedom of the press in Ethiopia, lack of professionalism among journalists also limited the democratic roles of the media and the right to freedom of the press. The private print media are said to lack the capacity to serve the public interest. They are infants with experience of about two decades. The Government contends that the private print media are staffed with "enthusiastic people without the proper expertise favoring the opposition" (Melisew Dejene, 2013).

The Ethiopian media are not properly carrying out the democratic roles that they are expected to play due to poor understanding of some of the roles and poor level of journalistic professionalism. On the lack of media professionalism, the informants argued that there are media outlets that serve particular interest and media failed to play its role in society. For instance, Deputy COE of EBC said: “In Ethiopia, the media failed to play the role it has for the society. The journalists from both private and state media should actively play constructive roles, notably in tackling institutional failings, expanding democracy, presenting issues in a balanced manner. However, media outlets operate by serving the particular interest of forces that set agendas for them.” (Personal interview, March 04, 2019)

Editor in chief of the ‘The Ethiopian Herald’ newspaper argued other than individual editorial policy for media institutions; there is no organized code of conduct. In addition, there is no cooperation between the journalists working for state and private media. Journalists who work for the government media believe as they are only who works for the development of the nation and blame the private one as they are always who criticize the Government. On the contrary, those who work in the private Media consider themselves as a real source of information.” (Personal Interview, March 20, 2019)

He also claimed that there is political polarization which is a challenge for journalists to do nonpartisan reporting. “Political polarization in the country is the main challenge to the freedom of press and expression. The private press is acting as an opposition party press and worked with too much sensationalism. The media should not be a reflection of the polarized political scenario, which lacked balance, tolerance and disciplined culture of dialogue. So, for the better media environment both private and public media should be free from the political interest in their coverage of issues.” (Personal Interview, March 20, 2019)

Obviously, the media were under the control of Government. This limited the media role it should have to play that is disseminating information and mobilizing people for changes. But also, the professional level of journalists is a factor for bad relations with the government results in the crackdown of the media outlets. CEO of Ethiopian Radio said lack of profession for journalists is a challenge to media institutions. The media institution should train the journalists for better performance of journalism in our country and better media atmosphere. “To effectively solve the lack of professionalism among journalists, media houses should provide

their employees with facilitated learning opportunities such as university studies, short-term training, conferences and workshop.” (Personal interview, March 03, 2019)

The editor of OMN shared the view and said there should be collaboration between media houses and universities to develop the professionalism of journalists. “The link between media houses and universities might have hampered the improvement of journalists’ profession. I believe that to effectively discharge their professional responsibilities; media institutions should get continuous professional assistance from higher education institutions. And higher institution should fix their curriculum based on the need of media houses.” (Personal interview, March 19, 2019)

Financial capacity of media institutions for the rollback of press freedom

Finance is also another factor for the performance of the media that leads them to serve the interest of individuals or groups. As journalism is not the -paid professions in many places, some journalists look for ways to supplement their pay to lead a better life and have personal security (Kruger, 2004:100). Financial dependence is a cause for many media short-lived experience and distorting of facts because their source of income is only Government and few advertisers. The informants of this study argued that lack of finance is one of the major challenges for journalists recently. CEO of Ethiopian Radio argued that insufficient finance allocated for the media paved the way for corruption and the distorting of facts. “The media needs finance to exist. Especially state media who do not work for profit should get enough funding from the Government. For instance, it is not the task of EBC to collect license tax from its clients, its revenue, and customs authority job. This shows how media is under the problem of finance. This will encourage the journalists for corruption and serving the interests of the individual.” (Personal interview, March 03, 2019)

Senior journalist of ‘Reporter newspaper’, agrees with the idea said that lack of finances affected the practice of journalism in the country. “There is the great problem of finance among the media institutions. We do not have a correspondent office even in neighboring Kenya, and all our journalists are situated in the capital Addis Ababa. So, if something happened outside of the country, we have no access to information as quick and have the capacity to travel to the event place because of finance.” (Personal interview, March 25, 2019)

Next to the government attack on private media in Ethiopia, lack of finance was the case for the shutdown of a lot of newspapers and magazines. Editor in Chief of Gulele post Magazine argued that private media lost concern from the Government. “Different new broadcast and print media operated recently this is the signs of media freedom coming into the country. Especially, the print media is not as developed as it is expected due to advertising goes to broadcast media than print media.” (Personal interview, March 13, 2019)

The Chief Editor of the Ethiopian Herald newspaper claimed that social media affected conventional media with respect to generating income. The information reaches the public before the Newspaper or Magazine is provided to the market. Because individuals can disseminate information every time as a citizen journalist before the conventional produced it. So, print media should get information exclusively and should get support from the Government in the form of tax exemption (Personal interview, March 20, 2019). On the other hand, informant from ESAT added both print and broadcast media were suffering from financial problems due to the high cost of renting satellite, limited private printing enterprises, and the Government for not fairly distributing state advertising among media. (Personal interview, March 22, 2019) So, if there is lack of finance among media institutions and journalists are focus on money than their profession, they would not remain free and independent of the owners and other body influences.

Post-reform situation of Press in Ethiopia

After Abiy Ahmed came into power, press freedom was comparatively better than before, which gave the journalists the opportunity to report freely on socio-economic and political issues. Prime Minister Dr. Abiy Ahmed made different improvements after taking the oath. For the purpose of this study the researchers focused on reforms achieved to freedom of the press and expression as viewed by media practitioners. According to the media practitioners, there is a better media environment than before, a lot of broadcast and print media which restricted license was operated in the country. Media were under the control of the Government authorities got relative freedom.

Chief Editor of Ethiopian Herald Newspaper argued that the reform achieved is beyond releasing imprisoned journalists and politicians and included prohibition of self-censorship among media practitioners. “The reform includes the prohibition of self-censorship among media practitioners. The media got the freedom to write and report with responsibility, and there is no interference from the Government. The abolition of the communications affairs office also has its own effect for the freedom of the media, which is the organization that directs the media on behalf of the interest of the Government and monopolized it before.” (Personal interview, March 20, 2019)

Even though there is a reform for individuals to express their views freely than the previous status quo, there are informants who claimed that it’s not a guarantee for the protection of freedom of expression in the

country. They said there is reform from previous but it should be supported by laws and regulations. Only the promises from Prime Minister and officials cannot be a guarantee for the future exercise of democratic rights. (Personal interview, March 03-25, 2019)

The journalists and the public have the right to ask what they feel, and the Government has a duty to respond to their questions accordingly. Journalists must request information about government policies and their implementation, which can lead to more transparency and accountability of governance. Article 12 of the press law gives details of the right to access information that every individual guaranteed the right to freely express his views and access government bodies' information. But the criticisms came to the Government from this aspect even after the reform to media environment. The interviewed media practitioners argued that even though there is a reform to access to government information, there are still limitations. For instance, senior journalists from ESAT said that, even though higher government officials are working cooperatively with the media outlets in giving information, the door of most of the government institutions are still closed to journalists. "The public has the right to know government activities, but there is still a challenge to media institutions to have access to information even though higher government officials are cooperatively working with media. The officials at the lower administration fear media and not willing to see journalists. This is difficult for us to balance our report because we entertain a lot of complaining from the societies." (Personal interview, March 22, 2019)

Following government measures to facilitate the media institutions' access to information and improve media environment, a lot of new media outlets were operated and the country also improved World Freedom Index rank. According to Amnesty International reports, at least eight new privately-owned newspapers and magazines have been established, compared to only four before then.

The Media Practitioners supposed that the decision made by Prime Minister will have paramount importance in enabling Ethiopian media to entertain different points of views and discourage parochial journalism. For instance, Journalists from ESAT and OMN said that shortcomings were witnessed in both public-owned and private media outlets before the existing reforms, and they were not largely free from non-partisan reporting of critical issues. The prime minister's press conference is now open to the private media outlets were based abroad which shows changes from the Government. (Personal interview, March 19 & 22, 2019)

They also added that, before the reform, state media were manipulated by the Government and private media like ESAT & OMN was jammed by the Ethiopian Government at different times. Even the people who had access to OMN was arrested, tortured and they denied their freedom to access information. State media had no acceptance from the public because of their report was ruling party affiliated. (Personal interview, March 19 & 22, 2019)

According to the views of the informants and different reports shows, under the leadership of Prime Minister Dr. Abiy Ahmed, Ethiopia has achieved significant reforms to the media environment, which was one of the most-censored countries in the world and one of the worst jailers of journalists in sub-Saharan Africa. The Government released imprisoned journalists for the first time in 14 years and there were no journalists in Ethiopian prisons; diaspora media outlets previously banned in Ethiopia operate freely, and journalists report few threats from the Government's security services (CPJ, 2019).

Challenges to media during the Post-reform Period

Today in Ethiopia, media were enjoyed freedom relative to the pre-reform period. A large number of new publications were joined the market. However, there are challenges. One of the challenges to exercise freedom of expression and the press is a lack of understanding about the rights and duties granted to the media by some media and individuals. According to social responsibility theory, the press is basically free, but it has certain obligations to society that can be expressed as "truth, accuracy, objectivity, and balance." But this is not become the culture for the individuals and media in expressing their views which is the cause for the chaos in different parts of the country resulted in loss of many lives. One informant from OMN said individuals who overuse the freedom acquired and instigated chaos among the people and media are not also responsible as such. This will give the opportunity for the Government to bring back its suppression to the media. (Personal interview, March 19, 2019)

The increase of irresponsible social media activism and hate speech also remains a challenge to the current reform to the media landscape. The informants blamed fake news of social media as the obstacle to the current reform opened by Prime Minister Dr. Abiy Ahmed. For instance, an informant from 'The Reporter newspaper' argued that fake news on social media was a cause for chaos and instability in different parts of society. "Social media was one of the causes for chaos and instability in different parts of the community, which is against the reform going ahead. Hate speech law planned to fight false information on social media is good measures, but it should not be restrictive laws to freedom of expression." (Personal interview, March 25, 2019)

According to the informants from ESAT station, another recent challenge to media freedom is the certain groups who differentiate media of their interest and want to attack the other. They said the following: "Now what

is the challenge in the recent media atmosphere are the groups which separate media outlets from one another based on their own benefits. They need the media of their interest to cover their issues. The freedom of journalists is limited in this regard.” (Personal interview, March 22, 2019)

Informants were also asked the role they think freedom of the press and expression plays in the country’s way to the democratic state. All the informants agreed that democracy without freedom of the press is unimagined. “In the first place, democracy exists when the people participate in government decisions. And for the people to participate there should be a free press. The media exposes evil doings of the Government and makes a public opinion have influence. So, media plays an important role in underpinning democracy.” (Personal Interview, March 03-25, 2019)

The informants of this research claimed that freedom is not absolute; there should be regulations to control its impact on the honor and reputations of others. They recommended it is a time to be serious on responsibilities of individual especially media in exercising freedom of expression because the consequence is very bad if they not enjoyed properly. “At this critical time where freedom of expression is flourishing in the country, the Government, politicians, and the media should be cautious about the rights and responsibilities of them pertinent to freedom of expression and press more than any time. Everyone should express his views in a given legal system.” (Personal interview, March 03-25, 2019)

The media plays both constructive and destructive roles. So, there should be a regulation for the media to not disseminate information that harms the reputation of individuals and mislead society in general. Sharing the above argument, an informant from OMN said there are media that intentionally lead society to certain unprofessional beliefs. “There are media outlets which work for some specific interest and lead the audience to have stood on that. This is unethical for media practitioners. Media also plays the destructive role it has the power to expose the society in danger if it is not working responsibly and professionally.” (Personal interview, March 19, 2019)

CONCLUSION

This study was aimed to present the press freedom situation before and after the coming of new Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed. The study deeply analyzed the press operations and activities before the reform compared to post-reformation improvements made to the media. The study’s finding proved that the press freedom was curtailed, and the relationship between the media institutions and the Government was unfriendly in that government officials were reluctant to give any kind of information for media and intimidate journalists that are critical to them in pre-reform situation. Despite the fact that the press law permits the media to express opinions or criticisms on various issues, the Government is very critical of those views and less tolerant to criticisms by the media. Accessing information from public bodies has been a great challenge for the media, which, in turn, affects freedom of press and expression. Other than restrictive legislation and government character, lack of professionalism among media practitioners were the cause for the rollback of freedom of press and expression before the reform. The informants’ reflections show that they have been exercising their freedom of expression under several challenges. Some of them have faced arrests and pressure from the Government. The poor professionalism of the journalists was the obstacles to press freedom in both the pre- and post-reform periods. There are journalists who don’t work responsibly because the media profession is not developed in our country and uses the profession for their best interests. The study also found that finance is another challenge to media institutions, especially private media, which has its own implications for the right to freedom of the press. After the reform or the coming of a new prime minister, the Government broadened the media landscape by releasing imprisoned journalists and banned media, and freedom of the press is protected comparatively to the pre-reform period. According to views from the informants, after the reforms, the media got the freedom to write and report with responsibility, and there is no intervention from the Government as before. Before the reform prevailed, the private media institution challenged even to broadcast from foreign countries because the Government was jammed them by paying billions of dollars. Despite these improvements, unprofessional acts from individuals and some media remain challenge to media atmosphere.

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