

Media Freedom an integral part of Ethiopia's developmental path

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This week the World Bank Group delivered an uplifting news. It was widely circulated among Ethiopians and friends of Ethiopia. The report was a reaffirmation of the appropriateness the developmental direction and the enormous progress made so far and a testament to the two decades of works. The report highlighted:

Ethiopia has averaged a 10.7% economic growth rate over the last 10 years, more than double the annual average of countries in Sub-Saharan Africa, which was around 5.2%. However, despite having a huge potential to contribute to Ethiopia's economy, the development of oil, gas, and mineral resources are not among the key drivers of the country's growth.

The pace of poverty reduction in Ethiopia since 2000 has been impressive, and particularly so when compared to other African countries. Only Uganda has had a higher annual poverty reduction during the same time period. Ethiopia is one of the most equal countries in the world and low levels of inequality have, by and large, been maintained throughout this period of economic development.

Life expectancy increased and progress was made towards the attainment of the Millennium Development Goals (MDG), particularly in hunger, gender parity in primary education, child mortality, HIV/AIDS, and malaria. While in 2000 only 1 in 5 women in rural areas had an antenatal check-up, more than 1 in 3 women attended an antenatal check-up in 2011. Women are now having fewer births—

the total fertility rate fell from 7.0 children per women in 1995 to 4.6 in 2011— and infant and child mortality rates dropped considerably.

At the same time, the prevalence of stunting was reduced from 58% in 2000 to 44% in 2011 and the prevalence of undernourishment fell from 75% in 1990-92 to 35% in 2012-14. The share of population without education was also reduced considerably from 70% to less than 50%. Finally, the number of households with improved living standards measured by electricity, piped water and water in residence doubled from 2000 to 2011.

However, in the same week, the neoliberal camp brought a self-contradictory narrative.

A report from Human Rights Watch claimed the media in Ethiopia has no freedom. The self-contradiction was that the report noted a freedom of expression is necessary for a sustained development. Therefore, do not the fact that there is a continuous strong growth in Ethiopia indicate the existence of freedom of press, as Human Rights Watch's report itself suggested?

One of the most problematic statements in the report states:

The EBA is empowered, among other responsibilities, to “ensure that the broadcasting service is conducted in such a manner that contributes to the proper social, economic, political and cultural development of the country.”

This is overly broad and far exceeds international norms and best practices on media regulation.

The Broadcasting Service Proclamation also states that public broadcasting service shall “enhance the participation of the public

through the presentation of government policies and strategies as well as activities related to development, democracy and good governance.”

This clause is absent in the law for commercial (private) broadcasters, however the community broadcasting service shall among other things “carry out its activities based on the needs of the community regarding development, education and good governance.”

The ideological problem of this paragraph is very clear that it doesn't need much elaboration. Nonetheless, its overall tone.

It is telling nevertheless that Human Rights Watch labeled some Ethiopia media *"are content to churn out the government propaganda promoting and exaggerating the government's development successes"*.

The matters that are considered as problems in the report indicate the narrow outlook adopted by the writers of the report. For example, the report stated:

The Mass Media Law states that defamation and 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.

There are also limitations on broadcasting licenses being granted to “an organization of a political organization or of which a political organization is a shareholder or a member of a political organization's supreme leadership is a shareholder or member of its management at any level.”

Restricting licenses only to organizations without political connections is contrary to constitutional provisions about the freedom of the media. As previously discussed, licensing and regulation of the broadcast media in

Ethiopia is prone to politicization.

While these may seem valid concerns at first look, they grossly miss the context.

Indeed, the constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia guarantees freedom of expression. The constitution declared in Article 29 “Right of Thought, Opinion and Expression”:

(1). everyone has the right to hold opinions without interference.

(2). 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.

(3). Freedom of the press and other mass media and freedom of artistic creativity is guaranteed. Freedom of the press shall specifically include the following elements: (a) Prohibition of any form of censorship. (b) Access to information of public interest.

However, the constitutional right “Right of Thought, Opinion and Expression” is not an absolute right. As Article 29, sub-article (6) declares:

“Legal limitations can be laid down in order to protect the well-being of the youth, and the honour and reputation of individuals. Any propaganda for war as well as the public expression of opinion intended to injure human dignity shall be prohibited by law.”

It is based on this constitutional stipulation that the government issued legislations aimed at for freedom of expression by closing legal loopholes used to misuse and abuse the freedom of press as well as enforcing the legislations.

However, at the same time, the government have to place sufficient safeguards, such as, establish a legal framework exempting journalists from pre-trial detentions and to establish the right of access to information - which is "one of the continent's most progressive freedom of information laws".

It should not be overlooked that only two decades ago, Ethiopia had only one television service, two radio services, four newspapers and two magazines. All explicitly owned and used by the government solely for the dissemination of communist ideology and official rhetoric. Their contents were uniform with no regional variation.

The free exercise of media is a new phenomenon that began in 1991; when freedom of Expression was acknowledged in the Transition Period Charter adopted on June 1991. Privately-owned newspapers and magazines flourished since then.

However, many chose to abuse and misuse of the freedom despite calls from officials, other political parties and academicians and a disapproving public opinion. Nonetheless, the government hesitated to deploy the necessary administrative and legal tools to discipline the press, hoping that the press will mature gradually.

Years passed by and the publishing news and stories with outright fictional claims, defaming individuals and organizations continued unabated. One of the often cited example is the catastrophic outcome that happened to the first privately owned bottled water factory by a newspaper.

A certain newspaper demanded the firm to give it some money and when the firm refused that newspaper published a false allegation of contamination. As a result, the firm lost market and went bankrupt.

There were also several other newspapers with outrageous and destabilizing contents, therefore, suspected of being controlled by outlawed opposition parties and foreign governments.

Therefore, the government had to close the legal loopholes that were used to misuse and abuse the freedom of press and put in place sufficient safeguards. However, at the same time, the government moved to exempt journalists from pre-trial detentions and establish a legal framework to establish the right of access to information.

However, the media in Ethiopia continued a steady growth. Today, there are 6 television services, of which four transmitted by regional governments from their capitals. The national television provides news and programs at half a dozen local languages, while providing air time for privately-owned shows and transmissions from regions which are yet to launch their own TV. Private-owned television stations are expected to start once Ethiopia completes the on-going technology transition from analogue to digital broadcast technology.

The growth in radio services is even more dazzling. Today, there are 3 MW radio services and dozens of FM radio services, almost half of which are privately owned. This is in addition to the more than a dozen community radios.

In fact, now the government is preparing to ensure citizens right to be informed by widening the accessibility of information as it can be received through various electronic equipment including mobile sets, laptops and others.

Ethiopian Broadcasting Authority (EBA) is working to upgrade the terrestrial television service in the country from analogue to digital technology and will be migrating broadcast services from analogue to digital long after the ITU's deadline of June 2015.

The move from analog television broadcast technology to digital will help to increase the number of channels to 20 from 6 at present.

In line with that, an institution known as Ethiopian Broadcasting Network Administrator will be established to ease the job of the broadcasters allowing them concentrate on the contents or programs than to worry over the technical transmission network.

In tandem with the establishment of the network administrator one more license that is 'network license' will be issued for licensees. As soon as the network administrator is built, the existing major broadcasters will be given a channel license by which they could transmit their contents digitized.

More than 20 channels are expected to be introduced as the network commences operation. It is to be recalled that licenses have been issued to two local private commercial FM radio stations this year and has also provided licenses to two community radio stations last year.

The exaggerated and overblown allegations of Human Rights Watch hardly correspond to these developments on the ground.

That was why last year, when similar allegations were made local associations of journalists.

In their joint statement, which is also relevant to this report, the Ethiopian Journalists Association (EJA), Ethiopian Free Press Journalists Associations (EFPJA) and Ethiopian National Journalists Union (ENJU) noted:

“No one has a better understanding than us about the state of Ethiopian journalists and press freedom in Ethiopia. But they release a statement without talking to us. Their statement neither represents us nor reflects the

real situation in the country.”

“We take pride in the fact that there is no journalist in prison in Ethiopia in connection with their professional duty”.

“The media landscape in Ethiopia is not restrictive. It is up to stakeholders in the media to make the most out of it. If there are gaps that need to be addressed, it should be done so by Ethiopians.”

As the leaders of the journalists associations indicated the activities of international groups is mostly influenced by misguided notions, inaccurate information, and ideological bias and at times tantamount to an intervention in internal affairs.

Indeed, there are several much needed improvements. As Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegne noted a few months ago, these are part and parcel of the works done so far. The Prime Minister said:

"Ethiopia's policy towards the media as embodied in the Information Act envisages nothing less than all round rapid effort to establish good governance, grass roots empowerment, decentralization of much of the authority for policy making to lower local self-administrative units and create rapid sustainable development."

"It was an integral component of all the important strategic goals aimed at cementing the values of free thinking, rule of law, culture of transparency and the creation of a national consensus on all that unites our society."

"the Government recognized the value and importance of popular participation, the presence of a diligent civil society, and an active and vibrant media that provides accurate, relevant and timely information to the public and promotes

uninhibited public dialogue and discussion, as well as an a free flow of information that contributes to the success and fruition of its media policy.

Despite all these commendable efforts, however, as the Prime Minister highlighted “there is always room for improvement and as a developing country, we are open to suggestions on improving our media industry”.

Regardless of the misgivings of from some foreign commenters, Ethiopia will continue work towards a media landscape that has an ever broadening level of diversity – in terms of content, ownership, content and format, to ease its resource constraints and thwart the abuse and misuse of the freedom by some members of the media, so that citizens obtain an unrestricted access to information in order to make informed decision that affect their daily lives and their long-term interests.

As Prime Minister Hailemriam urged African journalists and media leaders last year,

to take ownership of the idea as they had a key role in building the continent's image and changing it for the better.

“The African story needs to be accurately told in a way that reflects our challenges and aspirations, by and large coverage of unfolding media events by the hegemonic world media has continued to be negative, with the continent written off at one time as a failed continent.”

“if Africa’s success story is to be told in a way that accurately reflects our aspirations, achievements and challenges alike, Africa should consider building its own continental media network run by independent professionals “who are

capable of telling it as it is.”