



Australian Government
Refugee Review Tribunal

Country Advice

Ethiopia

Ethiopia – ETH36379 – Oromos –
Education – Employment – Opposition
groups
23 March 2010

1. Please provide information on any oppression by the Ethiopian Government of Oromo people including discrimination in education and employment.

Although the Oromo form the largest single ethnic group in Ethiopia, ethnic Tigrawis have dominated the institutions of power since 1991. Despite Ethiopia's appearance as a democratic federation of titular homelands, the ruling Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) has monopolised government using a combination of force and corrupt electoral practices. As the largest ethnic group, with the most organised opposition, Oromos are the most politically suppressed and suffer a high level of human rights abuses. While the EPDRF has lifted many cultural restrictions on the Oromo, employment in the public service and enrolment in state-run education institutions remains conditional on EPRDF patronage and therefore loyalty. Disloyal Oromos frequently lose government jobs and are expelled from schools and universities.

Ethnic Oromos constitute over 40 percent of the population of Ethiopia, numbering at least 18 million people.¹ Minority Rights Group reports that despite their demographic significance in Ethiopia, the Oromo historically have "had little influence and representation within the Ethiopian/Abyssinian State." However, "Oromo individuals accepting the Amharized state structure have held prominent positions within the army, bureaucracy and the noble court throughout modern history." Nevertheless, "[t]heir language and identity as Oromo ... have been suppressed."² It was this disenfranchisement and cultural suppression that led to the formation of the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) in 1973 and its significant role in the defeat of the Dergue junta in 1991, together with the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) and the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF).

Following the Dergue's defeat in 1991, Eritrea gained independence, while the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) has maintained dominance, largely due to its suppression of all opposition and armed conflict with its former ally, the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF).³ Post-Mengistu Ethiopia is technically a democratic federation of titular ethnic homelands; however, in reality it is a one party state of the Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), a coalition dominated by the Tigrawi elite of the TPLF that surround Prime Minister Meles Zenawi.⁴ Consequently, many Oromo grievances dating from the Selassie and Mengistu eras remain unresolved.

¹ 'Oromo of Ethiopia' (undated), World Directory of Minorities <http://www.faqs.org/minorities/Sub-Saharan-Africa/Oromo-of-Ethiopia.html> – Accessed 22 March 2010 – Attachment 1

² CORI 2010, *CORI Country Report – Ethiopia*, January, p.70 – Attachment 2

³ Vaughan, S. 2003, *Ethnicity and Power in Ethiopia*, PhD thesis, University of Edinburgh, p.146

<http://ihasa.org/documents/special-reports/ethnicity-in-ethiopia.pdf> – Accessed 19 March 2010 – Attachment 3

⁴ International Crisis Group 2009, *Ethiopia: Ethnic Federalism and Its Discontents*, Crisis Group Africa Report N°153, 4 September, p.15 – Attachment 4

Included in the EPRDF coalition is the Oromo People's Democratic Organisation (OPDO); however, many suspect that the OPDO is part of a façade of ethnic and political inclusiveness. The International Crisis Group (ICG) reports that most Oromo view the OPDO as a construct and puppet of the TPLF, a view the ICG largely shares; "[t]he TPLF established the OPDO as the vanguard Oromo party in 1990."⁵ The general consensus is that Oromos in the OPDO have protected their own interests rather than supporting the economic development and cultural rights of the Oromo. A number of genuine Oromo political parties do exist, many of which attempt to participate in local and national elections.

The combination of unrealised cultural and political aspirations, the perception that the TPLF has economically exploited Oromiya and the TPLF's ill-treatment of Oromo opposition party candidates/supporters has engendered a hatred of the EPRDF, according to the ICG. This hatred in turn fuels support for OLF and its separatist aspirations. Treatment of those associated, or accused of association, with the OLF is particularly harsh; "[h]arassment, intimidation and imprisonment of suspected OLF supporters remain widespread. Public and sometimes private criticism of OPDO and the regime are met by arrest. Detainees are regularly tortured and deprived of due process, and there are frequent but unsubstantiated allegations of targeted killings and disappearances of OLF members. A recurrent government method to silence critics is to accuse them of being OLF, OPC (formerly ONC) or OFDM members... Unsurprisingly, Oromiya has the country's highest level of reported human rights violations"⁶ The Oromo Support Group stated in 2007 that it had recorded "3,981 extra-judicial killings and 943 disappearances of civilians suspected of supporting groups opposing the government. Most of these have been Oromo people. Scores of thousands of civilians have been imprisoned. Torture and rape of prisoners is commonplace, especially in unofficial detention centres, often in military camps."⁷

Australia's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) has stated in the past that the EPRDF/TPLF commonly silence Oromo opposition and government critics by accusing them of supporting the OLF. Furthermore, DFAT states that family members of critics are also subject to harassment; "Oromos are very vulnerable to suspicion by officials that they support the OLF. If a person is believed by the authorities to be associated with the OLF, that person's family members often also fall under suspicion of being associated with the OLF... Harassment of family members can continue after the death of the first family member suspected of association with the OLF if the authorities are not convinced that there are no links between the OLF and the other family members."⁸

More recently, there is evidence that the EPRDF has begun to associate criticism and dissent with terrorism, and therefore employs the fight against terror to silence critics. In 2010 Human Rights Watch reported that the EPRDF government passed legislation in July 2009 that "permits the government and security forces to prosecute political protesters and non-violent expressions of dissent as acts of terrorism."⁹

Ethiopia's poor democratic credentials extend to the conduct of elections. In the 2008 local elections Human Rights Watch reported that in "the vast majority of constituencies there were

⁵ International Crisis Group 2009, *Ethiopia: Ethnic Federalism and Its Discontents*, Crisis Group Africa Report N°153, 4 September, p.4 – Attachment 4

⁶ International Crisis Group 2009, *Ethiopia: Ethnic Federalism and Its Discontents*, Crisis Group Africa Report N°153, 4 September, pp.26-27 – Attachment 4

⁷ Oromo Support Group (2007), OSG Press Release No. 43, July 2006-2007 <http://www.oromo.org/osg/pr43.htm> – Accessed 7 May 2008 – Attachment 5

⁸ DIMA Country Information Service 2003, *Country Information Report No.24/03 – Ethiopia: Oromo Ethnic Group*, (sourced from DFAT advice of 31 January 2003), 4 February – Attachment 6

⁹ Human Rights Watch 2010, *World Reports Country Summary: Ethiopia*, January – Attachment 8

no opposition candidates at all, and candidates aligned with the EPRDF won more than 99 percent of all available seats... Where opposition candidates did contest they faced abuse and improper procedural obstacles to registration. Candidates in Ethiopia's Oromia region were detained, threatened with violence by local officials, and accused of affiliation to the rebel Oromo Liberation Front."¹⁰ Protests disputing the results of the 2005 elections resulted in large numbers of arrests, detentions and deaths.

National elections are scheduled for 2010; however, it already appears that the EPRDF is making attempts to thwart participation by opposition groups. In November 2009 *BBC News* reported that the National Electoral Board of Ethiopia (NEBE) may be obstructing the registration of political parties.¹¹

Employment

As stated previously, a common perception among the Oromo is that the TPLF has "plundered" Oromiya, the official titular homeland; "coffee, agricultural produce, livestock and water – are said to be siphoned off by the federal government. Such views are shared by many politically aware Oromos, including members of the ruling OPDO." Furthermore, "[p]leasant grievances also result from forced, state-led development projects that require farmers to provide unpaid labour."¹² A 2009 Freedom House report concurs with many of these grievances, stating that "[t]he government has tended to favour Tigrayan ethnic interests in economic and political matters."¹³

While there is little evidence that Oromos are discriminated against in employment in the private sector, Oromos seeking employment in the public sector face a number of obstacles. Employment and promotion within the Ethiopian public service is based on patronage, with employees owing allegiance to various individuals and coalition partners in the EPRDF. The ICG reported in 2009 that "[h]igher officials promote lower ones to government posts that offer regular income and privileges, eg, access to food aid, fertilizer and scholarships. Appointees owe allegiance to patrons. Employment in the public sector or selection for state-sponsored education requires being a member or close to the party."¹⁴ Therefore, only Oromos with connections to the Oromo People's Democratic Organisation (OPDO) in Oromiya are likely to gain public sector employment.

Oromos employed in the public sector have been dismissed from employment if they associate with opposition political parties or are suspected of having political sympathies with the opposition, particularly the OLF. The US Department of State has reported that in March 2009 six school administration employees and one agricultural bureau employee, all of whom ran as candidates for the Oromo People's Congress (OPC) in the 2008 local elections, were "arrested and charged with inciting violence."¹⁵ DFAT has reported that ethnic Oromos are

¹⁰ Human Rights Watch 2009, *World Reports Country Summary: Ethiopia*, January – Attachment 7

¹¹ 'Ethiopian opposition coalition voices concern over recognition delay' 2009, *BBC News*, source: *The Reporter*, 23 November – Attachment 9

¹² International Crisis Group 2009, *Ethiopia: Ethnic Federalism and Its Discontents*, Crisis Group Africa Report N°153, 4 September, pp.26-27 – Attachment 4

¹³ Freedom House 2009, *Freedom in the World Country Report – Ethiopia*, 16 July – Attachment 10

¹⁴ International Crisis Group 2009, *Ethiopia: Ethnic Federalism and Its Discontents*, Crisis Group Africa Report N°153, 4 September, p.15, footnote 153 – Attachment 4

¹⁵ US Department of State 2010, *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices 2009 – Ethiopia*, 11 March – Attachment 11

discriminated against and that they have received reports that indicate that “Oromos suspected of links with the OLF [are] being dismissed from employment.”¹⁶

Education

There is no information available on whether the Oromo are discriminated in admissions to all levels of education, or via the various curricula. No information is available on variations in resources provided to predominantly Oromo schools vis-à-vis or ethnic groups. There is some evidence that school curricula promotes the virtues of the ruling EPRDF; however, for some time Oromo students have been able to study in Oromo. As in the case of public sector employment, there is evidence that students and teaching staff critical of the ruling regime have been expelled/sacked. Oromo appear to be the ethnic group most affected by such actions.

During the reign of Selassie, Amharic was the sole language of the public service and education. The ICG argues that this rule was overturned by the EPRDF; however, many Oromo actually “credit this to the earlier OLF campaign for Oromo literacy rather than the EPRDF.”¹⁷ There may be some basis to such an argument; Sarah Vaughan states in a 2003 thesis that it was in fact the Marxist Dergue junta that was responsible for introducing greater rights for the Oromo and others, after it toppled Selassie.¹⁸ Whoever is responsible, it appears that being Oromo speaking is no longer a barrier to education.

While there does not appear to be language or ethnic restrictions on Oromos attending school or university in Ethiopia, there is evidence that other expressions of Oromo identity and culture are prohibited in state-run education institutions. Minority Rights Group reported in January 2004 that “government forces arrested 349 Oromo students in Addis Ababa during a protest for their right to stage an Oromo cultural event at the university.” As a consequence of the protest, it was reported that those detained “were forced to march over gravel for hours, barefoot or on their knees.”¹⁹ Linguistic freedom therefore has not resulted in freedom of expression, be it academic freedom or cultural expression.

As stated previously, such protests can elicit accusations from the authorities of support for the OLF and therefore terrorism. The Oromo Support Group has reported that large numbers of Oromo students have been expelled on the pretext that they are OLF supporters.²⁰ The Oromo Youth Association indicates that that expulsion is only one repercussion. In a 2009 letter to the President of Cornell University, the Oromo Youth Association claim that students “in elementary schools, high schools, colleges and universities have been the target of the brute security and military forces of the regime where thousands from all levels have been dismissed from schools” and that “[s]everal of those who participated in peaceful demonstration demanding their rights as members of the society have been brutally beaten and/or murdered in front of their parents. Many have been extra-judicially killed or

¹⁶ DIMA Country Information Service 2003, *Country Information Report No.24/03 – Ethiopia: Oromo Ethnic Group*, (sourced from DFAT advice of 31 January 2003), 4 February – Attachment 6

¹⁷ International Crisis Group 2009, *Ethiopia: Ethnic Federalism and Its Discontents*, Crisis Group Africa Report N° 153, 4 September, pp.26-27 – Attachment 4

¹⁸ Vaughan, S. 2003, *Ethnicity and Power in Ethiopia*, PhD thesis, University of Edinburgh, p.146

<http://ihasa.org/documents/special-reports/ethnicity-in-ethiopia.pdf> – Accessed 19 March 2010 – Attachment 3

¹⁹ Minority Rights Group International 2008, *World Directory of Minorities and Indigenous Peoples – Ethiopia: Oromo* – Attachment 12

²⁰ Oromo Support Group 2007, ‘OSG Press Release No. 43’, July 2006-2007

<http://www.oromo.org/osg/pr43.htm> – Accessed 7 May 2008 – Attachment 5

disappeared without a trace rounded up by the regime's henchmen from their homes, schools and university campuses."²¹

There is independent information to support these claims. The US Department of State has detailed an incident in February 2009 at Gedo Secondary School in West Shoa Zone, Oromiya in which students were fired on by police, resulting in at least one death, several severely injured and a number of arrests. According to the State Department, students "refused to attend classes and demonstrated inside the school compound" after they "found a flier containing hateful remarks about Oromos."²² According to Freedom House, student strikes protesting "police brutality and various government policies have led to scores of deaths and injuries as well as hundreds of arrests." "Many students were killed, injured, or arrested during protests against the May 2005 election results."²³

Education unions have had little success in influencing government policy. The ICG reports that "[l]eaders of the Ethiopian Teachers Association, one of the biggest trade unions, who criticised EPRDF language and education policy, faced imprisonment and had their offices ransacked in 2005."²⁴ In 2010 UNESCO reported that the ETA has since been closed down by the Government and "ordered to hand over its assets and name... It was replaced by a new pro-government union by the same name." UNESCO reports that ETA Deputy General Secretary Assefa Maru was killed and former ETA President Taye Woldesmiat has been detained for six years while many other officials and their families have been detained and tortured.²⁵

The ICG also reports that academic freedom and independence has been abolished in the country's universities; "[t]he appointment of teaching faculty and staff close to the ruling party and the pressure to accept government-defined student quotas has ossified the institution. The government recently established thirteen new state universities that are expected to admit 120,000 students. It hopes this bold initiative will not only expand education but also create a loyal academic elite."²⁶

At the other end of the education spectrum, a 2008 report on childhood poverty in Ethiopia states those children "whose fathers are from the ethnic groups of Amhara and Tigrawi were more likely to be enrolled in pre-school."²⁷ The report does not, however, suggest that this trend is due to discrimination. However, as the authors of the report are all employed at the University of Addis Ababa, they are unlikely to be seeking to raise the ire of the EPRDF.

Attachments

1. 'Oromo of Ethiopia' (undated), World Directory of Minorities
<http://www.fags.org/minorities/Sub-Saharan-Africa/Oromo-of-Ethiopia.html> – Accessed 22 March 2010.

²¹ Oromo Youth Association 2009, 'Protest Letter to Cornell University', Gadaa.com, 24 March – Attachment 13

²² US Department of State 2010, *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices 2009 – Ethiopia*, 11 March – Attachment 11

²³ Freedom House 2009, *Freedom in the World Country Report – Ethiopia*, 16 July, 2009 – Attachment 10

²⁴ International Crisis Group 2009, *Ethiopia: Ethnic Federalism and Its Discontents*, Crisis Group Africa Report N°153, 4 September, p.21 – Attachment 4

²⁵ UNESCO 2010, *Education under Attack 2010 – Ethiopia*, 10 February – Attachment 14

²⁶ International Crisis Group 2009, *Ethiopia: Ethnic Federalism and Its Discontents*, Crisis Group Africa Report N°153, 4 September, p.21 – Attachment 4

²⁷ Woldehanna, T. et al 2008, *Young Lives: Ethiopia Round 2 Survey Report*, Young Lives website, September – http://www.younglives.org.uk/pdf/publication-section-pdfs/country-reports/Eth_survey_report_2.pdf – Accessed 22 March 2010 – Attachment 15

2. CORI 2010, *CORI Country Report – Ethiopia*, January.
3. Vaughan, S. 2003, *Ethnicity and Power in Ethiopia*, PhD thesis, University of Edinburgh <http://ihasa.org/documents/special-reports/ethnicity-in-ethiopia.pdf> – Accessed 19 March 2010.
4. International Crisis Group 2009, *Ethiopia: Ethnic Federalism and Its Discontents*, Crisis Group Africa Report N°153, 4 September.
5. Oromo Support Group (2007), OSG Press Release No. 43, July 2006-2007 <http://www.oromo.org/osg/pr43.htm> – Accessed 7 May 2008.
6. DIMA Country Information Service 2003, *Country Information Report No.24/03 – Ethiopia: Oromo Ethnic Group*, (sourced from DFAT advice of 31 January 2003), 4 February. (CISNET Ethiopia CX72798)
7. Human Rights Watch 2009, *World Reports Country Summary: Ethiopia*, January.
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9. ‘Ethiopian opposition coalition voices concern over recognition delay’ 2009, *BBC News*, source: *The Reporter*, 23 November. (FACTIVA)
10. Freedom House 2009, *Freedom in the World Country Report – Ethiopia*, 16 July. (CISNET Ethiopia CX230127)
11. US Department of State 2010, *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices 2009 – Ethiopia*, 11 March <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2009/af/135953.htm> – Accessed 18 March 2010.
12. Minority Rights Group International 2008, *World Directory of Minorities and Indigenous Peoples – Ethiopia: Oromo*. (REFINFO)
13. Oromo Youth Association 2009, ‘Protest Letter to Cornell University’, Gadaa.com, 24 March. (CISNET Ethiopia CX223373)
14. UNESCO 2010, *Education under Attack 2010 – Ethiopia*, 10 February. (REFINFO)
15. Woldehanna, T. et al 2008, *Young Lives: Ethiopia Round 2 Survey Report*, Young Lives website, September – http://www.younglives.org.uk/pdf/publication-section-pdfs/country-reports/Eth_survey_report_2.pdf – Accessed 22 March 2010.