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Ethiopia: Conviction of government opponents a 'dark day' for freedom of expression

More Ethiopian government opponents have been convicted on trumped up terrorism and treason charges in what Amnesty International called "a dark day" for freedom of expression.

Iconic dissident journalist Eskinder Nega and leading members of the political opposition, Andualem Arage and Nathnael Mekonnen, along with five other men, were found guilty on charges of 'Terrorist Acts,' 'Encouragement of Terrorism,' and 'High Treason' and several other charges.

A further 16 men were found guilty in absentia, including several journalists and one human rights activist. The verdict follows the conviction of five dissidents on similar charges in January.

"This is a dark day for justice in Ethiopia, where freedom of expression is being systematically destroyed by a government targeting any dissenting voice," said Claire Beston, Amnesty International's Ethiopia researcher.

"We believe that Eskinder, Andualem and Nathnael are prisoners of conscience - convicted because of their legitimate and peaceful activities, and particularly for advocating peaceful protest against the government. They should be immediately and unconditionally released."

The trial was marred by serious irregularities, including allegations of torture made by at least one defendant, which were not investigated.

Statements by the Prime Minister and programmes aired on state TV pronouncing the guilt of the defendants violated their right to be presumed innocent and exerted significant political pressure on the court.

Ethiopia's Anti-Terrorism Proclamation, used to convict the defendants on several of the charges, enables the prosecution of legitimate and peaceful activities as 'terrorist' acts.

"We believe the defendants did not receive a fair trial," said Beston. "The verdict seemed to be a foregone conclusion."

"Evidence presented against Eskinder, Andualem and Nathnael did not demonstrate criminal wrongdoing, instead much of the evidence showed their peaceful and legitimate activities."

Several pieces of evidence against Eskinder, a journalist who won this year's prestigious PEN/Barbara Goldsmith Freedom to Write Award, centred on his discussion of whether last year's Middle East and North Africa uprisings could spread to Ethiopia.

A key part of the evidence against Eskinder and Andualem were impassioned speeches they had made at

a public meeting about Ethiopians' need to struggle peacefully for freedom.

Another defendant, Kinfemichael Debebe, made a speech at the same meeting and may also have been targeted for exercising his right to freedom of expression.

Amnesty International does not have full details of the activities and political affiliations of the other defendants in the case, largely due to the authorities' tight control of information dissemination.

However, the flaws in the trial alone make their convictions unsound. Those defendants should be retried in a fair trial, or released.

Wednesday's verdict is the latest example of the Ethiopian authorities' ruthless crackdown on freedom of expression.

It echoes the conviction of five dissidents, including three journalists and an opposition leader, given lengthy prison terms in January, also under the Anti-Terror Law and Criminal Code.

Both trials appear to have been motivated, at least in part, by the government's fear of popular protests breaking out.

"The government is not distinguishing between peaceful calls for reform and terrorist activities. In both trials, freedom of expression has been criminalised. The government is outlawing the legitimate activity of journalists and opposition members," said Beston.

Attacks on freedom of expression also persisted outside the courtroom. In November, one of the last independent publications was forced to shut down and its editor fled the country after being threatened with arrest.

In late April, the editor of one of the country's only remaining independent newspapers was fined 2,000 Ethiopian Birr (about US \$115) accused of "biased coverage" of the trial, after the paper published defendants' statements.

A few days later, the government activated a legal directive that compels printers to censor the content of the newspapers and publications they print.

Printing firms are now obliged to remove any content that may be defined as illegal or problematic by the government. The same broad definitions of the anti-terror legislation mean that much legitimate subject matter could fall into this category.

"This move towards self-censorship is a further chilling example of the Ethiopian government's determination to stamp out any criticism or independent commentary of its actions," said Beston.

"The authorities are ensuring it is not possible for the people of Ethiopia to either hear or express dissent."