

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PUBLIC STATEMENT

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ETHIOPIA: AUTHORITIES MUST DROP PROPOSED CHANGES TO THE CSO LAW, HALT RESTRICTIONS ON CIVIC SPACE

In 2018, a new administration took power in Ethiopia after the former ruling Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) leadership, including Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn, receded from power following a four-year-long period of public protests. The protest that led to these changes started in 2014 in the Oromia region and spread to the Amhara region. For years, protestors demanded justice and equity, including an end to gross human rights abuses.

When assuming power, the current administration, led by Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, repeatedly claimed that it would end ongoing rights violations and establish a rights-respecting state for its people. In his acceptance speech in front of parliament, Prime Minister Abiy promised: "We need to respect all human and democratic rights, especially to free expression, assembly, and organisation, by upholding the constitution that emerged from this understanding of freedom.¹ The rights of all our citizens to take part in all structures and at all levels in a democratic manner need to be fully realized."

The new administration launched what it called a justice sector reform aimed at reversing repressive laws and creating a legal and institutional governance system that respects rights.² As part of this campaign, the government, under the leadership of the then Office of the Attorney General (OAG), now renamed the Ministry of Justice (MoJ), established the Legal Justice Affairs Advisory Council (LJAC) in June 2018. The LJAC, mandated to initiate and lead the legal reform process, was established only two months after the appointment of the new Prime Minister, igniting hope that legal reform was among the new leadership's top priorities.³ The LJAC was a council comprised of prominent lawyers, legal academics, and members of civil society. Under the leadership of the LJAC, 15 major proclamations underwent different levels of change, ranging from full repeal to amendment.⁴

Among the repressive laws that were repealed were the notorious Anti-Terror Proclamation (ATP), which had been used to crack down on peaceful dissent for nearly a decade, the law governing Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) that constrained the space for civil society, and amendments were made to the media law.

However, authorities are now amending the majority of the proclamations that were reformed since 2018, reversing the human rights gains enabled through the legal reforms by reintroducing repressive provisions.⁵

As part of this campaign, new amendments to the Organisation of Civil Societies Proclamation of 2019 (CSO Proclamation) are now underway. In June 2025, Amnesty International obtained a 14-page draft amendment proclamation from reliable sources. The contents of the unofficial draft law are consistent with those of another document tabled by the Ministry of Justice at a meeting in June, where it communicated the draft changes to selected members of civil society.

Amnesty International is also aware that the amendment process is led by the MoJ. Until mid-August, the MoJ continued carrying out the drafting and consultation process in strict secrecy.

¹ <https://www.opride.com/2018/04/03/english-partial-transcript-of-ethiopian-prime-minister-abiy-ahmeds-inaugural-address/>

² <https://www.africanews.com/2018/10/09/ethiopia-to-reform-judicial-system-amend-repressive-laws-president/>

³ https://www.researchgate.net/publication/361851698_Righting_Human_Rights_through_Legal_Reform_-_the_Ethiopian_Experience_from_Past_to_Present

⁴ Accademia: Righting Human Rights through Legal Reform - the Ethiopian Experience from Past to Present, 2020, Abadir Ibrahim

⁵ Freedoms Under Fire: New Media Law Walks Back Years Of Progress

Two individuals close to the matter, interviewed by Amnesty International, said that consultations were held with CSOs that were handpicked by the government and known for their support from the authorities.⁶ Authorities have so far failed to provide the draft text to members of broader civil society and the wider public.

In July 2025, Amnesty International requested the Council of Civil Society Organisations, a statutory council that represents all CSOs in Ethiopia, to provide feedback on its official position on the amendments via email. The organisation has not received feedback.

PROPOSED ELIMINATION OF THE CIVIL SOCIETY SELF-GOVERNANCE MODEL

Among the major changes introduced by the proposed amendment is the alteration of the Civil Society Organisation Board's (the Board) composition, a governance body that serves as the highest administrative organ of civil society organisations in Ethiopia. The board is mandated to set policy direction for the Authority for Civil Society Organisations in Ethiopia (the Agency or ACSO), a federal agency that is directly accountable to the MOJ governing the CSO regime in the country. Under the 2019 Law, the board also serves as an appellate body for the decisions made by the Director General of the Agency. The law also reformed the Board to include representatives from civil society, allowing them to hold seven votes out of a total of 11, while the government retained four. This model was widely praised for introducing a framework of self-governance.

However, the proposed amendment aims to reduce the total number of board members to seven, allocating five seats for government-appointed members and leaving only two for members of CSOs. The proposed amendment also eliminates the requirement for two members from the National Federation of Disability Associations, as well as representatives from women's and youth associations, to hold seats on the board.

The proposed change in the board's composition would significantly reverse the achievements made in 2019, and if approved, it would represent a significant setback for the promotion and protection of human rights in the country. If enacted, this change will render checks and balances nearly impossible within the current governance structure, resulting in a structural lack of independence and oversight, and effectively closing the door to accountability of ACSO.

NEW BAN ON FUNDING POLITICAL ADVOCACY, ELECTION MONITORING, OR VOTER EDUCATION

Among the major positive shifts introduced by the 2019 CSO law was that it allowed national CSOs to engage in political advocacy. The proposed amendment does not ban national institutions from carrying out such advocacy; rather, it prohibits donor organisations or foreigners (including individuals) from funding national CSOs that work on political advocacy or elections.

This proposed amendment is an indication that the recently intensified crackdown on human rights defenders, CSOs, and media is widely linked to the upcoming elections and the human rights challenges confronting the country ahead of the elections.

It also leaves room for abuse of discretion by introducing vague and overly broad language that refers to "political advocacy," which presents a risk of executive officers, including security forces and law enforcement, taking arbitrary measures. This ban will also likely impact media organisations registered as non-profits (which is a growing model globally in the face of challenges to the free press presented by the for-profit model).⁷

The proposed amendment also makes it mandatory for CSOs to report any financial support (domestic or foreign) within 15 working days of receipt, including details of the source, amount, and purpose. Organisations currently submit their

⁶ Interview by voice call with a CSO leader, Addis Ababa, July 2025; Interview by voice call with a CSO leader, Addis Ababa, July 2025

⁷ For-Profit News Outlets are Exploring Nonprofit Models

audit reports, thereby indicating their donors. However, the proposed amendment seeks to grant the Agency more power to control the financial sources of CSOs. If the amendment passes, in addition, CSOs would have to file an application and get permission before setting up a bank account, and ACSOs would be given access to bank statements and have the right to approve any loan requests by a CSO.

In addition to the ongoing global funding crisis in humanitarian, development, and rights-related activities, the proposed changes will further weaken national CSOs in Ethiopia, which are especially essential as the country continues to face two ongoing armed conflicts, to which international actors have limited access. Grassroots humanitarian and rights organisations are crucial in this context, as they facilitate collaboration with global actors on the implementation of projects.

Ethiopia has successfully sealed its borders to regional and UN scrutiny, justifying this move by claiming it has national means to monitor and report on the ongoing human rights crises. However, the practice has fallen far short of that promise, and with the introduction of this amendment, which threatens the existence of national civil society organisations, people suffering rights abuse will have no avenues of recourse.

NEW VAGUE GROUNDS FOR DENIAL OF REGISTRATION, SUSPENSION BY THE ACSO

The proposed amendment introduces a new clause that allows ACSO to reject registration applications if an organisation is “believed to be a threat to national security.” The broad and vague nature of this clause opens the door to arbitrary decisions, potentially silencing peaceful dissent or critical CSOs under the pretext of national security concerns. The proposed provisions also lower the threshold for the necessary evidence for ACSO to suspend a CSO. The new clause proposes that the agency may suspend the organisation if “it has suspicions,” replacing the existing law that necessitates “having proof” that there is a grave breach of the law. ACSO would also be empowered to suspend the bank accounts of CSOs, partially or entirely, when they suspend their licenses.

REMOVAL OF JUDICIAL APPEALS OVER DECISIONS MADE BY THE BOARD

The new draft has also removed the right to appeal to a federal court over the Board's decisions by proposing that the Board's decisions will be final.

This will leave CSOs vulnerable to unchecked government power exercised by the executive, as the proposed composition of the Board will comprise a majority of government representatives. Removing access to justice for CSOs clearly shows that authorities are determined to exercise full control over the activities of CSOs; this has also been evident throughout the amendment process.

THE SHARP RISE IN AUTHORITARIAN PRACTICES IN ETHIOPIA

Amnesty International is among the organisations that have supported and engaged publicly in the process of reforming repressive laws in Ethiopia since 2018.⁸ The organisation has also directly engaged the legal reform process, particularly in the CSO law changes, by contributing through its research and submitting input directly to legislators.⁹

Our continued public and direct efforts urge the government to institutionalize the 2018 law reform changes and ensure genuine reform, thereby creating a rights-respecting climate in the country. The 2018 amendments to the notorious Anti-Terrorism Proclamation, the CSO Proclamation, media law, and the amendment of the establishment proclamations of key independent institutions were seen as a testament to the promised transition in Ethiopia. Over the course of the past year, almost all of the gains obtained through this reform have been reversed as the government amended the latest proclamations by reintroducing repressive provisions.¹⁰ If approved, the current changes in the CSO law will move the country towards a total closure of civic space.

⁸ Ethiopia: Skirting human rights violations: Recommendations for the reform of Ethiopian Human Rights Commission - Amnesty International

Ethiopia: Release of ‘coup’ suspects without charge follows continued abuse of anti-terrorism law - Amnesty International

⁹ Ethiopia: Commentary on Ethiopia's draft CSO law - Amnesty International

¹⁰ A Threat To Press Freedom In Ethiopia's New Media Law

WHAT DOES THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE CSO LAW LOOK LIKE?

Over the past few years, authorities have increasingly engaged in violating the current legal framework and cracking down on CSOs, with a particular focus on human rights organisations. This was exemplified last year when ACSO suspended the licenses of prominent rights groups based on unfounded allegations of 'acting against the national interest.' In mid-July 2025, authorities suspended the license of the Ethiopian Health Professionals Association after the organisation endorsed demands put forth by a national movement of medical professionals.

If entered into law, the recently proposed legal amendments will effectively legitimize the arbitrary measures that have primarily been implemented by ACSO. These changes will send a strong chilling message to the broader civil society actors, deterring organisations from engaging in their day-to-day activities without fear of government persecution. The broad set of activities that could be defined as "political advocacy," whose funding is banned under the proposed amendment, makes it ultimately impossible for organisations to avoid self-censorship.

Over the past year, there has been a surge in the amendment of laws, with diminishing public consultation and little to no incorporation of inputs gathered from stakeholders.

If the draft amendments are passed into law, it will be the final sign that the entire legal reform that was introduced in 2018 is fully reversed. Amnesty International has also expressed concern that if the continued closure of the civic space is not halted, it will further intensify the crackdown on human rights in Ethiopia.

This was a pattern observed following the 2005 election in the country, where multiple opposition groups resorted to armed struggle after the total closure of civic space, followed by the enactment of the draconian legal framework that governed CSOs from 2009 to 2019.

People in Ethiopia cannot afford to lose the last available rights monitoring organisations, mainly at the grassroots level, which this amendment now threatens to do.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To the Ethiopian authorities:

- Immediately drop the proposed amendment to the current CSO law
- Respect, protect, promote and fulfil the human rights of everyone in the country, including the rights to freedom of expression, association and peaceful assembly
- Comply with the law and refrain from violating the existing proclamation
- End ongoing crackdown on human rights defenders (HRDS), activists, CSOs, journalists, and other people simply for peacefully exercising their human rights
- End the current tactic of an influx of new laws, directives, and circulars designed to tighten the grip on CSOs further, as the existing civil and criminal legal system is sufficient to govern CSOs.
- Any introduction of a new law or an amendment must be backed by a demonstrated legal gap, and there should be a process in which members of CSOs participate before these changes are made into draft laws.
- Authorities must abandon the current tactic of rushing amendments and carrying them out in secrecy. A justified process must ensure genuine transparency and participation of CSOs and stakeholders.

To Ethiopia's development partners

- Urgently engage Ethiopian authorities and urge them to drop the proposed amendments
- Increase efforts to enhance the broader international human rights scrutiny in Ethiopia.
- Increase direct support to human rights defenders and non-governmental organisations in the country who are currently monitoring and reporting the current human rights crisis.