

Keynote Speech by
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Opening of World Press Freedom Day 2019
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Your Excellency Sahle-Work Zewde, President of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia,

Members of the UN family,

Members of the media

Distinguished guests,

Ladies and gentlemen,

On behalf of myself and the small and dedicated team at Addis Standard, allow me to express how honored I am to be here at this historic event not just for the media in Ethiopia but for Ethiopia itself. I would also like to take this opportunity to thank the UNESCO for having the confidence in choosing Ethiopia to be the venue for this year's World Press Freedom Day.

When I first heard a few months ago that the UNESCO was planning to host this year's event in Ethiopia, the first thought that crossed my mind was, "Wow! This is big; it means we've come a long way in a matter of months that we failed to do so in a matter of decades."

As someone who has been in Ethiopia's media space both as a practicing journalist and as a close observer for the last 20 years, I knew my reactions were not overdone and that the world was reacting the same way. After all, for the first time in more than a decade and a half, we can now proudly say with our heads held up that there is no known journalist locked behind bars for being a journalist. This in and of itself is a remarkable feat.

Since Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed assumed office in April 2018, he has made several promises highlighting the need to have a strong and independent media as one of the key pillars of change the ruling party EPRDF was attempting to bring in.

Although Prime Minister Abiy made those remarks after assuming office, the ruling party EPRDF, now led by himself, had already come to the bitter realization that without allowing strong and independent media to take root, politics the anatomy of its leadership, the art of improving democratic governance as well as nurturing healthy state-society relations are vacuous exercises of a losing political game.

Nowhere was this more visible than the four years anti-government protest in Ethiopia and the war of information that the governing party squarely lost to a bubbling social media.

The release of imprisoned journalists and activists that accompanied the coming of PM Abiy and continued after is therefore a clear testament at last we have a government that considers surviving politicking without free, independent and strong media, is nearly impossible. In fact, without free, independent and strong media, the prospect of not just politicking but bigger aspects such as state and nation building projects are incomplete.

However, as exiting as the time for the media is in today's Ethiopia, it is also a time when we in the media both in private and state owned and/or affiliated pause for a moment and do a genuine soul searching.

For far too long, our existence has been marked by what my colleague Tamrat G. Giorgis from Fortune newspaper recently said was "instrumental", by that he meant serving external purposes than what's globally recognized as principles of free, independent and strong media.

Ever since Ethiopia loosened its strict censorship on media and allowed the presence of free media to flourish after the last regime change in 1991, what should have become free and independent media industry has remained spineless and instead adopted a tactic of mere survival while at the same time being fiercely militant in its anti government narratives as the prime way of becoming media. To avoid the risk of generalizing all in one list, I can say there were always a few exceptions, but that is what they were and are: a few exceptions rather than norms.

On the flip side of that we find state owned or affiliated media houses funded and enabled by non other than public finances. Once again, with the exception of a few spots from these massively financed media houses which dominated and continued to dominate Ethiopia's media space, the public that is financing them in one way or another did not get to enjoy the fruits of a truly independent and vibrant media that it deserves.

As a result of this and a combination of many other complex dynamics, such as a demotivated human resource, lack of public respect for the profession, and a crippling media law that didn't help at all, 28 years after becoming "free", a strong and vibrant media industry is non existent in today's Ethiopia.

With that enter the new era. In the last one year the government of Abiy Ahmed had publicly pledged that under its leadership the 2009 media law which crippled the nascent progress made

since 1991 will be amended; that the media, both private and state owned, partisan and non partisan will all be free; that we will no longer be jailed for what we write and broadcast. Most importantly we will be needed to make the journey to a democratic Ethiopia worth having; and that the government needs us to be on its side in fighting against corruption and in holding it accountable when it faults the public: two of among many failures that led to four years of anti government protests which resulted in the dramatic political shift that we see within the ruling party EPRDF.

For many of us in the media, these promises were not simple promises. Even if rhetorically, the mere fact of having a government admit to the values of independent media and commit to its growth in such a manner was and is a historic moment to be cherished, and we do cherish these promises.

However, a year into this, it would be unfortunate if many of us have failed to see the writings on the wall and be on the side of caution.

Despite having massive media infrastructure including finance and human resources, change within the powerful state owned and affiliated media establishments, both at federal and regional levels, is minimal, if not negligible. Many of them have remained to be influenced by boardroom members and editors whose primary loyalty is to party politics than to media ethics; some of these media houses were at times taken hostage to the body politics of the coalition of the ruling party and its respective political offices - sometimes openly taking sides and reflecting the alarming internal power struggle within the governing party.

To the displeasure of many of us both in the media circle and outside of it, these media houses have also become complacent in producing questionable documentaries on corruption and human rights abuse suspects, matters that are being handled in the court or law. Despite the abundance of public resources at their disposals, a year on, we are also yet to see prospects of non partisan investigative reporting emerge; save for few exceptions, we are yet to see these media houses play a proactive role beyond and above urban political narratives and touching upon the lives of the majority rural Ethiopia where the effect of the change in the political order were deeply felt - often to a devastating effect of conflicts, killings and displacements. This should discomfort us all.

This dismal report card on the year long media space experiment is not limited to state owned and affiliated media houses. In fact, the picture within some of the flourishing space of privately owned media outlets is downright alarming, if not dangerous, yet. In the past few months alone, we were confronted with the unexpected rise of fake news' powerful grip on these privately owned emerging media; we are also witnessing the rising collision between the world of activism and journalism, often to a dangerous effect. While both journalism and activism are respected fields of profession in their own right, in the past few months, we have seen the increasing trend among some of the notable privately owned media organisations blending the two, producing a cocktail of toxic narratives and corrupting the space for objective reporting on people's stories. We have witnessed the use of these stories as news items by some of these privately owned influential media houses and the abuse of the same stories as input for activism by their owners and leaders often to an alarming effect of sowing discord among various sections of our diverse society.

We have also seen a rising trend among privately owned media of cracking under the pressure from organized mob like social media lobbying groups trying instead to please their demands than standing on the factual and objective side of the stories being reported.

On both sides, the rising influence of an anti-evidence, anti-expert, anti-science populist movements over the traditional and mainstream media is posing a massive threat to not only professional and ethical journalism but to the democratic transition, and the bigger peace and stability of the Ethiopian state.

We are at an extra ordinary situation and it requires a journalism that seamlessly combines freedom, responsibility and courage. As we aspire for a media landscape free from the repression and control of the state, we should also be prudent to guard the media from the unhealthy pressure and capture by other Forces.

This too should alarm us all.

This year's theme of World Press Freedom Day couldn't have come at the right moment for Ethiopia. If all goes as planned, Ethiopia will be holding its highly anticipated general elections in recent political memory in just about a year from now. Going by the repeated promises of Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed to make the 2020 general elections free and fair, we may be looking at the historic dawn of the true beginning of electoral democracy in which Ethiopians could finally decide on who should their representatives be.

It's within this context that all of us at the private and the government media should pause and do a serious soul-searching on how the actions and inactions of our media in our respective domains could affect this process and its outcomes to positive or negative consequences.

To its credit, the government of Prime Minister Abiy is working on revising the 2009 media law - a critical step but one that will be incomplete without the full participation of all of us in the sector. To this end I call upon my colleagues from both sides to take an active role by participating in the debates and discussions currently being conducted by the justice sector reform advisory council under the office of the federal attorney general. We should be constantly reminded that these debates and discussions are what would eventually give birth to the draft bill to replace the existing media law which saw the near elimination of a free, strong and independent media from our space. I also call upon the justice sector reform advisory council to make sure that all voices from all sides are included in the draft document before it became the media law to govern us.

In the mean time I ask and plead with my colleagues who have been working on establishing an independent media council for the past several years with no success as of now to continue exploring every avenue to make sure that we have self regulatory body to serve as checks and balances of our actions and inactions at this critical curve in the history of our beloved country.

While these are not the ultimate silver bullet to heal what's broken in Ethiopia's media space, they sure are the right step in the right direction and we should all seize upon every opportunity at every turn.

Once again, I would like to thank the UNESCO for having the confidence in my country to host this important event and for having me as a keynote speaker.

Have a productive deliberation through the remaining two days.