

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

The Relations between the Media and Political System in Ethiopia's Revolutionary Democracy from May 1991-April 2018

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Abstract

The study of the media's relation with the political system is a burgeoning area of inquiry in comparative media studies. It is widely argued that a free media system independent of political interference is vital for flourishing of democracy. However, politicians in different parts of the world try to control the media. A symbiotic relationship between media and politics is hard to find in young democracies. Even though many studies have focused on Ethiopian media and Ethiopian politics, only few of them have looked at the links between the two: especially in the context of TPLF/EPRDF's revolutionary democracy ideology. Thus, this article aims to bridge the apparent gaps by examining the interactions between media and politics from May 1991 up-to April 2018- at the peak time of the Marxist-Leninist inclined political ideology. By using in-depth interviews and consulting different documentary sources, this study concludes that the relation between media and politics during TPLF/EPRDF's revolutionary democracy has been chaotic. The nature of the media landscape has been marked by unstable environment, lack of professionalization, low media freedom and significant polarization. This precarious media environment seems to be influenced by the ideals of revolutionary democracy that aspires to monopolize vanguardism and hegemonic power by marginalizing oppositional views. Any party that follows this type of ideology tends to see media institutions as a threat to its existence. In this conundrum, media outlets failed playing impartial roles as ombudsman on the government.

Keywords: Ethiopian media; politics; revolutionary democracy; Derg; polarization; Ethiopian politics; political parties

Introduction

The period in the early 1990s was a period of significant change in global politics. For one, it was a period that marked the end of cold war. Many African countries deposed their one-party dictators and introduced a system of multi-party politics during this time. In Ethiopia, the late 1980s was a period of fierce struggle in which Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) and Tigray Peoples Liberation Front (TPLF) waged war against the Derg regime. This struggle, which used guerilla-fighting technique, came to an end in May 1991 when the leader of the Derg Colonel Mengistu Haile Mariam fled to Zimbabwe. Two years before assuming power in Addis Ababa, TPLF soldiers were able to control the administration of Tigray region (Medhane & Young, 2003). This situation led to the establishment of the EPRDF coalition party out of four ethnic dominated parties in the same year (Asnake, 2011). For almost three decades, EPRDF has been a highly influential political party in Ethiopia.

In 1980s, Ethiopia made friendship with the Soviet bloc – severing its connections with the Western world. However, as Mengistu's regime was nearly collapsing, Western governments have put their eyes on Ethiopia. Washington was the first to act. As TPLF soldiers ringed the outskirts of Addis Ababa, the United States (US) officials organized conference

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in London where different warring factions i.e. Oromo Liberation Front (OLF), TPLF, and EPLF met for the first time. This conference was a historic one because it marked the establishment of the government that led the country ever since.

Post-1991 Ethiopia is significantly different from the previous one in many aspects. Politically, multi-party politics was introduced as opposed to the former unitary government. This was followed with support from Western block which made the country one of the fastest growing economies in the past two decades. The new rule brought changes in the media sector too. For instance, it officially abolished the Derg's established culture of censorship in the media system. Besides, it made the media sector open for private companies as well. This witnessed a short-lived proliferation of private publications in the early 1990s. However, the TPLF dominated EPRDF (hereafter TPLF/EPRDF) government shortly became intolerant of criticism, which resulted in multiple detention and intimidation on reporters. As the Norwegian media scholar Terje Skjerdal (2010, p.47) notes,

[r]epressive measures against the media in the late 1990s began to push Ethiopian reporters and editors into exile. These journalists typically first went to Kenya, but many ended up as asylum seekers in Western countries, particularly the U.S. and Canada. In a publicly available document from 2006, 106 Ethiopian journalists in exile are named, of whom at least 50 have been successful in getting permanent settlement in Europe or North America. More are coming.

The relationship between media and politics is among the highly researched areas of study both in political science and media studies. Media scholars consider the media as “connective tissue” of democracy with an important role in the political process (Gunther & Mughan, 2000, p.1). In this regard, Schneider (2002) argues for a direct linkage between the media and the political system in a state. Political scientists, on the other hand, tend to see media systems “in a context of or even dependence on other social systems, especially the political system” (Engesser & Franzetti, 2011, p. 277). Many scholars seem to support the latter arguing that a media system reflects the social and political structure of a society. For instance, Hallin and Mancini (2004) state that “one cannot understand the news media without understanding the nature of the state, the system of political parties, the pattern of relations between economic and political interests, and the development of civil society, among other elements of social structure” (p.8).

In democratic systems, media and politics are interdependently connected. This means, citizens need to be informed by media to make evidence-based decisions. Media institutions, on their part, act as a watchdog that ensures government accountability. However, such a symbiotic relationship is not found in all countries. Governments in some countries rather see media institutions as a threat and at times they intimidate media institutions by passing anachronistic laws, censorship, followed by physical harassment of journalists etc (Tettey, 2001). Regardless of a crucial importance to understand the complex relationship between media and politics, much of the volume is dominated by frameworks derived from experiences of a limited number of established democracies (Hallin and Mancini, 2004; Kelly, Mazzoleni & McQuail, 2004; Esser & Pfetsch, 2004; Thussu, 2009). This poses a formidable challenge on efforts aimed at understanding the relationship between media and politics in emerging democracies, as theorizing on the subject is severely limited (Menychle, 2017).

In the face of many studies which have focused on Ethiopian media (Skjerdal, 2011, 2013; Birhanu. & O'Donnell, 2015) and the political situation (Merera, 2011; Pausewang, Tronvoll & Aalen, 2002), only a few studies have looked at the links between the media and the

political system (Skjerdal & Hallelujah, 2009; Nigussie, 2014; Menychle, 2017). And, to the best of the researcher's knowledge, there is no credible study that examines the links between media and politics in TPLF/EPRDF's ideological tool of 'revolutionary democracy'. Hence, this article aims at bridging this gap by examining the relationship between the media and political system from May 1991 up-to April 2018- when the Marxist-Leninist ideology of the revolutionary democracy was in its peak.

Methodological Considerations

The study is based on document analysis and semi-structured interviews with senior journalists and politicians in Ethiopia. This kind of interview technique was chosen for this study because of its importance in gaining deep understanding through asking broader and open-ended questions that are answered with the respondents' own words (Jensen & Jankowski, 1991; Wimmer & Dominick, 2011; Gunter, 2000). To this end, interviews were held with a total of 11 key informants working for leading newspapers, broadcast media, journalist association, media governance authority, and government ministry. Thus, undertaking in-depth interviews is a preferred approach to get a fresh look of the Ethiopian media and political landscape.

The data for this study were gathered in a month's time between 18th December 2016 and 22nd January 2017 in Addis Ababa, the capital of Ethiopia. Participants for in-depth interviews were chosen using purposive sampling. The rationale for using this technique is to interview experienced or veteran journalists with an intention of soliciting information that is historically rich and to explain the current situation. Informants were encouraged to explain questions from the perspective of their background and experience while the researcher took notes during the course of interviews.

On top of the in-depth interviews, document analysis was also used to collect data from different sources. Bowen (2009) defines document analysis as "a systematic procedure of reviewing or evaluating documents –both printed and electronic (computer based and internet transmitted) material". Thus, conducting document analysis requires examination and interpretation of data "to elicit meaning, gain understanding and develop empirical knowledge" (p. 27).

Accordingly, document analysis has been done for this article to gain insight on the nature of the legal framework of the Ethiopian media such as laws, regulations, national media policies and other related issues. In doing so, the researcher reviewed documents such as *EPRDF Party Strategy paper, the 1992 Press Law; the 2008 Proclamation to Provide for Freedom of Mass Media and Access to Information* (dubbed 'the media law'); *national media policy documents entitled Basis and Directives for a Developmental and Democratic Philosophy of Our Media Operation* (EPA, 2008) and *the 2015 Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia's Developmental and Democratic Mass Media Policy*. Moreover, the researcher has also consulted proclamations such as *the 2009 Anti-Terrorism Proclamation and the 2012 Telecom Fraud Offense Proclamation* specifically focusing on the part which deals with the media and journalists. The rationale for analyzing the aforementioned documentary sources was to inform the study from a legal perspective and get a full picture of media laws.

The ascendance of Abiy Ahmed to power as Prime Minister (PM) of Ethiopia on 02 April 2018 seems, initially, to be dramatically changing the country's stiff authoritarian history (Menychle, 2019). Immediately after assuming power, the new PM introduced a number of reforms which might lead the country to the direction of democratization. Among oth-

ers, the Abiy administration has lifted state of emergency, freed thousands of political prisoners, initiated a peace deal with the long rival Eritrea, brought many exiled opposition party members home, and re-opened more than 260 blocked news media websites (Ethiopian: Freedom of Expression, 28 June, 2018). Furthermore, the new administration is revising the country's stifling laws regarding the media, judiciary and economy. These reforms have created massive support for the government from Western countries and also gained a global recognition. The PM is already the winner of the 100th Nobel peace Prize for his efforts to "achieve peace and international cooperation"².

By specifically focusing on the period May 1991-April 2018, this article follows what Lijphart (1971) calls as 'most similar systems' design. This approach enabled the researcher to focus on a set of relatively similar and comparable cases (time frame) so as to avoid the risk of studying a huge data set with different variables. Illustratively, the period after April 2018 is significantly different from the last 27 years of TPLF/EPRDF regime. For instance, the ruling EPRDF party has changed its name with the merger Prosperity Party (PP). Besides, in what looks like a 'soft revolution', the long cherished revolutionary democracy ideology is given up now and the new leadership officially introduced alternative ideological framework dubbed as *Medemer* (መደሙር- politics of addition). The researcher believes that trying to study media and politics both in pre and post-Abiy Ahmed era would definitely make the scope of the research grand and as a result it would become incomprehensible for a single study. To alleviate this problem, this article focuses on a specific period thereby stressing on a relatively similar and comparable set of media and politics characteristics. However, the researcher argues that the events that unearthed since April 2018 and the recent political developments in the country do have their own implications on media system although that is beyond the scope of this paper.

The Birth of TPLF/EPRDF and its 'Revolutionary Democracy' Ideology

Different scholars define ideology differently. For instance, the leading Italian philosopher Antonio Gramsci, differentiates between organic ideologies and ideologies that are arbitrary, rationalistic or willed (Hoare & Smith, 1971). For Curtis and Sindre (2019), ideology can simply be defined as a belief system that provides a guide to action, and a way in which actors or systems rationalize themselves. In short, ideologies are systematic sets of ideas which identify referent group, , their goals, express grievances and programs of action among others (Sanin & Wood, 2014).

A TPLF led EPRDF coalition party has ruled Ethiopia from May 1991 to April 2018. This party used its own self-designated ideology called 'revolutionary democracy' as its guiding principle. In this journey, the party used the ideology as its unifying vision, for mobilizing supporters and recruits, by prescribing a certain way of politics to meet the defined goal (Aalen, 2019). Even though revolutionary democracy is a recurrent conception in EPRDF politics, it is scantily addressed in scholarly works. Some scholars claim the concept is not only "highly ambiguous" (Bach, 2011, p.656), but also "difficult for outsiders to capture" (Vaughan, 2011, p. 619). This is partly because only little has been written about the issue; and its meaning and significance have been in a continuous shift (Vaughan, 2011). A closer look at the genesis of Ethiopia's revolutionary democracy goes to the struggles of the TPLF. The former TPLF elite, Aregawi Berehe (2008) relates the birth of TPLF party to the popular uprisings of 1942-43 by the name 'Woyyane' which demanded a 'legitimate regional autonomy' for Tigray (p.5). At the time, the movement was crushed by Emperor Haile Selassie's soldiers. In 1960's, a movement reminiscent of the 'Woyanne' was later

2 <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/peace/2019/summary/>

re-invoked by Tigrayan students at Addis Ababa University (AAU). The movement is known by the name 'Kalai Woyyane', which literally translates as the Second Woyyane in the Tigrigna language. That is why scholars like Bach (2011) argue that TPLF grew out of student movements of 1960s and 70s in AAU. In 1971, Tigrayan students established the Tigray University Student Association, which is believed to lay a ground for the birth of TPLF in 1975. At first, the group had strong ambitions for independence of Tigray which was clearly marked in the 1976 manifesto (Bach, 2011; Aregawi, 2008). Since its inception, TPLF got its ethno-nationalist fervor from Stalin's (1942) theory of the "national question". According to Aregawi (2008, p5-6), Leftist-Marxist students from Tigray were inspired by Stalin's definition of a nation as "a historically evolved, stable community of language, and territory, economic life and psychological makeup manifested in a community of culture' (1942, p.12), and thus fought for independence of Tigray.

The ideological percepts of revolutionary democracy, however, come from "Lenin's revolutionary project" which is marked by its opposition to a capitalist liberal ideology (Bach, 2011, p.641). Lenin stressed the necessity to enlighten elites to lead the unconscious mass to the revolution. Accordingly, the promised social revolution is expected to be led by a vanguard party. This is where the TPLF elites took its blueprint for a democratic project through revolutionary means. In this process of creative borrowing of foreign ideas, TPLF elites prepared a customized version of Ethiopian 'revolutionary democracy' program and policies. According to Merera (2011), revolutionary democracy is generally presented as the antithesis of liberal democracy.

The TPLF party, however, has a culture of not being committed to its core ideologies. Before forming the EPRDF, TPLF itself made a number of ideological shifts (Aregawi, 2008). For instance, in the 1970s students who established TPLF already had Marxist-Leninist inclinations. However, a need for adapting their strategy to the conditions of rural Tigray and USSR's friendship with the Derg forced them to change their philosophy to a Maoist model around the end of 1970s (Bach, 2011). Once again, TPLF elites did not like the alliance between Maoism and bourgeoisie, and shifted their ideology to the Albanian model in the 1980s. In this period, at a key event established the Marxist Leninist League of Tigray (MLLT) on July 25, 1985 that marked the emergence of the Ethiopian version of revolutionary democracy (Bach, 2011). In the early 1990s, international donor agencies were putting pressure on many African countries to liberalize their political economy (Blankson, 2007). At this juncture, TPLF/EPRDF abandoned its Albanian model and replaced it with liberal democracy and a free market system. TPLF/EPRDF's shift of ideology was made official at a two-day London Conference brokered by US diplomats. At the conference, US officials made it clear that the US would only support Ethiopia (by extension TPLF/EPRDF) financially on the condition that the promise of democracy is fulfilled. Speaking about the terms of the agreement, the then Assistant Secretary of State, Herman Cohen, declared "[n]o democracy, no co-operation" (Pick, 1991, p. 1). That is why scholars like Bach (2011) argue that EPRDF's shift of policy was necessitated by the need to attract international funds and legitimacy. For Tefera (2019), the sudden adoption of liberal ideology was done without changing its core socialist values or revolutionary democracy. In the early 2000s, the front has also shifted its policies in line with 'developmental state' and made 'democratic developmental' models. The front makes these strategic shifts for different purposes such as gaining international funds and legitimacy (Bach, 2011); "bolster[ing] its power base" (Aelen, 2019, p.2), consolidating power and projecting domination (Tefera, 2019).

It is however important to note that these shifts have been made under the same ideological frame of a revolutionary democracy. Terera (2019) further argues:

Just as Marxist–Leninist–Maoist ideas were at the heart of revolutionary democracy; revolutionary democracy ideas were also at the heart of the developmental state rhetoric in the country. In other words, certain fundamental principles persisted and were instrumental for the continued concentration of power in the hands of the few.

This shows how TPLF/EPRDF has effectively used the revolutionary ideology as a “flexible, and malleable political, institutional and organizational tool, concealing and mitigating potential tension between policies” (Aelen, 2019, p2). Today, revolutionary democracy is practiced in ways that “rejects and endorses” liberalism (Bach, 2011, p. 656). While on the one hand it allows multiparty democracy, the front at the same time proved to be intolerant of political criticism (Hagmann & Abbink, 2011). Because of this, the dominant EPRDF is described by observers as a party that is “not inclined to sharing or giving up power” making its revolutionary democracy ideology “exclusivist and authoritarian” (Abbink, 2017, p.2). Despite the introduction of such superficial liberalizations, party documents still advocate the appropriateness of the revolutionary democracy doctrine which aspires for a vanguard party. The apparent ideological resilience creates a paradox in that while having multiparty system and liberal policies, TPLF/EPRDF stuck to the ideological line that rejects “parliamentary democracy” and defends “democratic centralism” (Bach, 2011, p. 643).

The Link between the Media and Political System

The relationship between media and politics is among the highly discussed areas of inquiry. While scholars in media and communications consider media as “connective tissue” of democracy having an important role in the political process (Gunther & Mughan, 2000, p.1), scholars in political sciences tend to see media systems “in a context of or even as dependent on other social systems” (Engesser & Franzetti, 2011, p. 277). Before looking at the dimensions of the relationships between media and politics under Ethiopia’s revolutionary democracy ideology, it is important to see the historic use of media during TPLF’s period of struggle. As argued by Stremlau (2011) the struggles of TPLF were assisted by a strong communication apparatus aimed at addressing both international and local audiences. The front used publications such as *Tatteke* (Get Armed), *Niqah* (Be Conscious), *Tegadel* (Struggle) and *Woyyeen* (Revolt) to publicize war and sell its ideologies to international readers. Besides, oral communications such as slogans, poetry, and songs were also used to mobilize support from the larger Tigrayan peasantry. In 1979, TPLF got access to radio broadcasting from EPLF stations. In 1985, the party got its own radio station, “*The Voice of the Rebellion*”³. This radio primarily broadcasted war propaganda contents such as the “destruction and brutality of the Derg and the persecution of Tigrayans” (Stremlau, 2011, p.720).

Upon holding power in May 1991, TPLF/EPRDF introduced reforms on Ethiopian media and allowed private media ownership. The Transitional Government of Ethiopia (TGE) pledged to respect human rights and freedom of expression. To this effect, Ethiopia drafted the first press law in 1992 (Proc. No.34/1992) which was seen as “positive step forward” as it freed the media from Derg’s censorship and guaranteed right of access and dissemination of information (Shimelis, 2002, p.184). This was followed by proliferation of publications – where more than 385 journals/newspapers registered in the years from 1991-1997 (Skjerdal & Hallelujah, 2009). Paradoxically, however, TPLF/EPRDF docu-

3 This media still works in the country by the name ‘Radio Fana’ and is owned by TPLF.

ments still advocate the government's interest to use the media for own propaganda purposes. For instance, in June 1993, TPLF/EPRDF prepared a 68-page Amharic document, featuring the party's revolutionary democracy strategy. This document states: "the most important mass media are controlled by the state. The documents can play a useful role by popularizing government's policies and activities ... strengthening the relationship between government and people. The organizational, manpower and other problems of this sector have been temporarily solved so that it can effectively promote the goals of revolutionary democracy" (TPLF/EPRDF strategy Document July 1993, Abridged Version).

The TPLF/EPRDF government also prepared media policy documents in 2008 and 2015. Both of the media policies aspire to shape the media system with the values of the developmental and democratic state, which is the government's ideology (Menychle, 2019). As the 2015 media policy document states, "Whosoever owns mass media, they are expected to address key issues of development, peace, democracy and good governance in the news, features and discussion forums" (Draft National Media Policy, 2015, p.10).

The development of media in the TPLF/EPRDF era is characterized by a high ingredient of volatility (Menychle, 2019). This means it is not possible to sufficiently describe the media environment in the period with as a single model (Skjerdal, 2012). The first few years stated as a period of liberalization of policies. This was witnessed with dramatic expansion of private publications (1992-96). However, unprecedented attack on media people especially imprisonment of journalists brought a period of clampdown (1996-99). In the early 2000s, there was renewed diversity of media due to government's soft attitude towards the press. This continued until post-election set back in the wake of the 2005, followed by multiple detentions of journalists and politicians. Around the period, 2010-12, there was some form of re-vitalization and softer relations between media and government. This however soon changed as Ethiopia approached its preparations for the 2015 election. Due to this, a dozen of journalists and bloggers were arrested in the year 2014, which made Ethiopia the fourth most censored state in the world. The situation has been the same for more than three years when long period of protests engulfed in the country from 2015-2018. However, the coming of PM Abiy Ahmed has changed the country's infamous history in terms of jailing of journalists. In the year 2018, CPJ has reported a rare case that there is no jailed journalist in Ethiopia for the first time in 13 years.

Ethiopia's experiment of private media proved to be shaky from the very beginning because of a multitude of factors. The first factor is related to unstable nature of political transitions. As TPLF/EPRDF took power after winning 17 years of civil war, they first expelled most journalists, labeling them as "sympathizers of the Derg" (Meseret, 2013, p.236). These journalists which were fired by the new rulers established the majority of private media outlets in the wake of liberalization and started opposing EPRDF's new political arrangement through their media. Stremlau and Gagliardone (2015, p.294) noted about this situation as:

New media outlets, rather than acting as impartial watchdogs of the government, became part of the competition for power. For those that had been actively excluded from power, such as journalists and politicians previously working for a defeated regime, media became platforms from which to attack the new leaders, escalating tensions within societies in transition.

This situation marks the beginning of a chaotic and polarized environment in the media and political system.

Polarization

Polarization is a concept frequently mentioned in Ethiopian media system to describe a situation that private and state newspapers manifest certain presuppositions (Skjerdal, 2012; Stremlau, 2011). According to Skjerdal and Hallelujah (2009, p.56), newspapers of the time not only were “strong critics of the new government” but also “had links with the opposition parties”. Some of the print publications of the period were characterized by the absence of responsible ethics in which newspaper vendors put influence on editors to write on topics which they perceived had a market value (President of a journalist association, January 2017). In general, private and government newspapers show distinct tendencies in the polarized media environment. Yet, Shimelis (2000, pp.37-38) also identified different factions within the private media in the early 2000s:

1. Newspapers that focus on soft topics such as domestic economic policy, culture, foreign news, etc (E.g. *Addis Tribune*).
2. Newspapers with favorable attitudes towards the government and its policies (E.g. *Reporter*).
3. Sensational and political newspapers which are marked with very poor and un-sourced stories (E.g. *Genanaw*, *Meyisaw*, *Tarik*)
4. Newspapers that oppose the government with strong and substantiated critique of government policies (E.g. *Tobia*).

There were a number of private newspapers with aggressive oppositional agendas such as *Ethiop*, *Seife Nebelbal*, and *Menilik* which folded in the post 2005 election crackdown. A recent study by Skjerdal (2012) sees media outlets such as *Reporter*, *Fortune*, *Addis Admass*, and *Sheger* as moderately critical media which engage in criticism of government thereby sometimes support official policy. The current media system also consists of media such as *Walta Information Center* and *Fana Broadcasting Corporate* which openly support government policy⁴ (Skjerdal, 2012; Menyehle, 2017). Even media houses such as ASRAT Media, Oromo Media Network (OMN), Tigray Media Network (TMN), Sidama Media Network etc. are established to satisfy the needs of a specific ethnic groups. In the same way, a number of TV and radio stations are established targeting a specific religious group. Therefore, today’s media polarization is no longer divided on the context of pro-government or pro-opposition camps but also with lines of ethnicity and religion.

Press Freedom under TPLF/EPRDF

Freedom of the press is a critical element in understanding the function of media in society (Himmelboim & Limor, 2008). It is widely argued that a free media system independent of political interference is vital for the flourishing of democracy. However, as Zielonka (2015) argues, politicians in different parts of the world, especially in emerging democracies, try to control the media. Thus, a symbiotic relationship between media and politics is hard to find in these young democracies. The worst of this scenario is that many African governments “regard independent media as political opposition which are capable of causing discontent and disunity in a nation and cause untold suffering to the people” (Kasoma, 1995, p.537-38). The Ethiopian situation seems to fit Kasoma’s keen observation on state-press relations in African countries. In Ethiopia, the relationship between the press and the state worsened in a short period of time because of vital problems both in the state and in the media landscape.

4 Both of them were established by EPRDF party.

International media NGOs such as *Freedom House* devise systematic mechanisms to globally track press freedom. Even though the rankings by these organizations is open to “methodological” and “political” criticisms (Nordenstreng, 2013, p.45), it generally shows the overall achievement of countries in promoting freedom. This is partly because freedom of press is “characterized” and “conditioned” by political, economic and social development of societies (Himmelboim & Limor, 2008, p. 237), in which the Nordic countries get the highest scores.

In the recent past, Ethiopia’s score in the global indices has been very low. Informants close to the government continue to attribute Ethiopia’s policy differences with neoliberal countries which fund these NGOs, as a reason for Ethiopia’s low score in their yearly reports. As an informant explains, “we didn’t say we have no problems [in press freedom] here. However, they [NGOs like CPJ and Freedom House] have biased and judgmental attitudes about Ethiopia. They always hammer us because we are poor, and we don’t fund them” (Government Minister, January 2017).

A wide array of scholarly literature documented the situation of press freedom in Africa (Kasoma, 1995, 1997; Tettey, 2001). These studies indicate that governments in Africa consider the media as a threat. In response to this assessment, they employ various techniques to cripple actors in media institutions such as: passing anachronistic laws (debilitating media laws), implementing censorship, physical harassment of journalists, denying them access to inputs etc (Tettey, 2001). Similarly, the TPLF/EPRDF government used various techniques to control the media. The first technique was to use the law – passing proclamations which directly and in-directly weaken the media environment. Although the first press law was intended to regulate the press, it has been used to stifle the growth of press through an array of punitive and prohibitive articles which were used to systematically weaken the media environment (Shimelis, 2002). The 2008 “improved” mass media law was also the same. Even though the law has commendable preamble, it was filled with draconian provisions compared to the international standards. Ross (2010) criticizes the law for its “retrogressive and draconian” provisions which indirectly protect the government, control media through registration system and excessive fines (p.1060)⁵.

Explaining how the 2008 media law is prohibitive for the work one respondent noted:

While it is true that the proclamation gives rights, it also contained contents which are repressive and restrictive to the media.... Even though defamation is less common in many countries, this proclamation included a fine of 100,000 Birr for defamation of a person who works in a public office. This makes journalists think twice before writing a story (Managing Editor, December 2016).

Ethiopian journalists also face threats from other legislations such as the 2009 Anti-terrorism Law and the 2012 Telecom fraud Offenses Proclamation which, in fact, have more severe forms of punishments than the media law (Gagliardone, 2014). Many of the interviewed journalists address the restrictive nature of the anti-terrorism law. For instance, as one editor in chief of a newspaper describes:

I fear the [anti-terrorism] law. For example, if two people join rebel groups and they said that their decision to join these groups was because of the newspaper you pub-

⁵ The new administration by Abiy Ahmed is in the process of amending these proclamations.

lished or the article you wrote, you can be accused of terrorism and can get easily jailed. It is as simple as that (Editor in chief, December 2016).

The state also uses other techniques to curb opposition press such as depriving access to information, delaying/denying of legal registration, and persecution of journalists (Skjerdal & Hallelujah, 2009). Despite promulgating access to information in the 1995 Constitution, and the 2008 mass media law, the possibility for private media for getting information from officials is dependent, inter alia, on the degree of one's proximity to the government in power. In this regard, managing editor of a newspaper shares many journalists' frustration in search for information. He says, "When journalists ask PR officers for public data, they usually lag the issue for trivial reasons. It is discouraging to see that 'access to information' proclamation is only theoretical" (Managing Editor, December 2016). This situation shows the practice of revolutionary democracy - democratic centralism at work. Thus, people holding government office decline to give information to journalists due to their due obedience to the EPRDF.

However, journalist's lack of access to information creates two kinds of problems. First, journalists will be forced to write their news based on secondary sources. When they do so, it exposes them to legal loopholes e.g. accusations of defamation (Manager of Broadcast Media, December 2016). Second, the lack of credible information from original source forces journalists to introduce self-imposed censorship on their work and as a result they focus on soft tones in their coverage about the government. Sometimes this is done intentionally to get officials' 'positive impressions about their media (Manager of Broadcast Media, December 2016). Government secrecy or public officials' lack of interest in giving information to private media journalists is widely documented. For instance, for the first 15 years of TPLF/EPRDF, no private media journalist was invited to the late PM Meles Zenawi's press conferences (Amare, 2009; cf. Allen & Stremlau, 2005, p.8).

Lack of Professionalization

According to Kasoma (1997, p.297), while African governments have continued to suppress the independent press through mechanisms of economic strangulation and draconian government regulations, "the independent press in Africa has in many cases invited the wrath of governments by practicing irresponsible journalism". Similarly, one of the peculiar characteristics of the media system in the post 1991 Ethiopia was the clear lack of journalistic professionalism. The new TPLF/EPRDF rulers got some fierce criticism from newly launched print media outlets of the early 1990s. Instead of serving as impartial (at least balanced) providers of information, Ethiopian newspapers chose to ally with the opposition political parties; thus, rejecting the journalistic value of independence and objectivity. As one informant remembers: "It was a period where people join journalism with little or no journalism training" (Managing Editor, December 2016). Even though it is difficult to tell the exact reasons for sensational reporting in the early 1990s, a veteran journalist respondent explains and argues that it was a result of market-oriented newspaper business. The respondent remembers:

It was a period of decentralization; there was a change of government; almost all civil servants of the *Derg* system were fired from their jobs and their families were in a limbo; there was unemployment; in general, there was hatred and desperation in the country. So, people actively bought newspapers to learn what is going on in the country. ... publishers of the time have run fabricated and sensational stories to boost their circulation (President of a journalist association, January 2017).

Private media journalists of the time clearly had deficiencies in practicing professional journalism. This was clearly observed in the low journalistic standards and ethics of many newspapers which were filled with “rampant misquoting, misinterpreting, and plagiarism, the focus on trivial issues, poor layout, subjectivity, sensationalism, fixation on most sordid and volatile issues, obscenity and outright lies” (Shimelis, 2002, p.198). Many respondents feel that there is slight development in terms of journalistic professionalization today. They argue that there are minimal incidents of sensational reporting by print media partly due to the fear that they could be persecuted for it.

Unstable Environment for the Media

It has been argued that the relation between media and politics is so tense. The end result of such a relationship yields to a volatile or unstable media environment. It is thus difficult to find a private newspaper which has lived for three decades as many publications have come and gone. According to data from Ethiopian Broadcasting Agency (EBA), more than 364 publications were registered by the Authority from Feb. 2009 to Dec. 2016. However, out of these, only nine of them were active and functional at the time of data collection for this study while the rest of 355 newspaper titles have vanished. According to an informant who is a media governance officer at EBA, some of the publications failed starting publication after getting registered. The informant further explained that many others quit publishing due to lack of finance (Media Governance Officer, December 2016). From a government perspective, economic factors or the failure to make profit in the media market is the main reason for the shrinkage of media. However, for other respondents, economic factors are just one side of the story. For instance, as one veteran journalist argues, many newspapers went out of market because of “government interference and confrontation, rising of printing cost, persecution and imprisonment of journalists by government” (Veteran journalist, January 2017).

At the time of the data collection of the study, the print media sector was so weak, and has been shrinking more (Skjerdal, 2017). In 2017, newspaper readers in Ethiopia can choose between 13: four state-owned and nine private newspapers (See Table 1)⁶.

Table 1: List of Ethiopian Newspapers in 2017

No	Title of the newspaper	Language	Period	Content	Ownership
1.	League Sport	Amharic	Weekly	Sport	Private
2.	Sendeq	Amharic	Weekly	Generalist	Private
3.	Reporter	Amharic	Bi-weekly	Generalist	Private
4.	The Reporter	English	Weekly	Generalist	Private
5.	Addis Admass	Amharic	Weekly	Generalist	Private
6.	Capital	English	Weekly	Generalist	Private
7.	World Sport	Amharic	Weekly	Sport	Private
8.	The Daily Monitor	English	Daily	Generalist	Private
9.	Fortune	English	Weekly	Generalist	Private
10.	Addis Zemen	Amharic	Daily	Generalist	Gov't
11.	The Ethiopian Herald	English	Daily	Generalist	Gov't

⁶ In 2020, the number of newspaper titles has increased. And some defunct publications such as *Fitih* has re-started working.

12.	Al-Alem	Arabic	Weekly	Generalist	Gov't
13.	Barissa	Oromiffa	Weekly	Generalist	Gov't

Source: EBA (2017)

Media as Hegemonic Interest

One of the manifestations of TPLF/EPRDF's revolutionary democracy was its interest to create hegemony by using the mass media as part of its propaganda machinery. A TPLF/EPRDF strategies document states:

The mass media are one instrument of our propaganda, but they are not the only means. There are also other propaganda tools which include schools, religious organizations, and various mass media organizations. In order to carry out our propaganda effectively, we must be able to exploit these tools directly and indirectly (TPLF/EPRDF strategies abridged version, p.7).

Stremlau and Gagliardone (2015, p.294) also make a similar observation. They argue:

In Ethiopia, the culture of communication of the new government was rooted in a Marxist-Leninist approach privileging channels and methods of communication that could reach the masses directly, rather than negotiating and debating visions of the new nation with elites and intellectuals. This led the new leaders, when they came to power in 1991, to invest resources in forms of communications that would allow them to speak directly with peasants in the rural areas, from village councils to remote video conferencing facilities.

As part of the creation of hegemonic public sphere, TPLF/EPRDF government played diverse roles as the owner of the largest share of Ethiopian media. The government runs the *Ethiopian Broadcasting Corporation* (mix of the former Ethiopian Radio and Ethiopian Television). The government also owns *Ethiopian Press Agency* (an office that publishes four government newspapers), and *Ethiopian News Agency* (the country's oldest news agency). Moreover, the nine regional governments as opposed to federal government, run their own mass media agencies. Additionally, the government works as the regulator of the media system. In the year 2009, the government established the Ethiopian Broadcasting Authority (EBA), as media governing body.

Concluding Remarks

This article raises the issue of the relationship between media and politics in TPLF/EPRDF's revolutionary democracy. Ethiopia made a rough transition from a unitary to federal state in the early 1990s. However, this transition which was led by the revolutionary democracy ideology did not transform the country to democracy. Even though some progress has been observed in the political landscape especially when compared with the previous regimes, a significant level of dissatisfaction is common in both the media and political system.

TPLF/EPRDF used its self-designated ideology as revolutionary democracy. This ideology shares ideas from socialist revolution and inclined in Marxist-Leninist thought. TPLF/EPRDF elites employed creative borrowing of these ideas and adapted it to the Ethiopian local society. Some scholars still believe that this ideology is ambiguous. However, despite its lack of clarity, revolutionary democracy held a firm belief on the necessity to enlighten elites to lead the unconscious mass to a revolution. In doing so, it advocates for the estab-

lishment of a vanguard party – that it did not succeed. It has been argued earlier in this paper that TPLF/EPRDF's continuous shift of ideologies was aimed at either maintaining power, getting international fund or securing legitimacy. As part of its purposes, TPLF/EPRDF introduced what Skjerdal (2013) calls as selective-liberalization in the media and political system. The front acknowledges the importance of a free press and multiparty politics in principle. In practice, however, TPLF/EPRDF's revolutionary doctrine collided with actors in both the media and political systems, promoting free press. TPLF/EPRDF document advocated for the use of media as a government propaganda machinery. This is clearly seen in the revolutionary democracy strategy documents which clearly indicate government's desire to control media.

Looking back to the events that happened in the post 1991 era, one can argue that Ethiopia's political system seems to correspond with what Voltmer (2012) describes as one-party dominance. This system of politics creates hegemonic public opinion as only the ruling party's interpretation of the political situation prevails at the expense of oppositional views which are both marginalized and delegitimized. This can be done through the ruling front's unlimited access to the state media. In the light of the discussion made so far, this paper concludes that the relationship between media and politics has been chaotic. When TPLF/EPRDF took power in 1991, the party failed undertaking a smooth transition and it instead eliminated most civil servants and journalists of the old system for political reasons. These journalists and politicians once dismissed from their offices established their own media and started opposing the new political arrangement of the country through their media outlets. Soon, the TPLF/EPRDF cadres saw the private media as a challenge to their establishment and started using different techniques and repressive measures to weaken the media and the pluralistic political environment. This situation sowed the seeds of the current polarized environment in the media system.

The government's forceful treatment of critical media and failure to negotiate with elites seem to attribute to the values and ideologies of revolutionary democracy which advocate for a vanguard party. As indicated above, revolutionary democracy aspires for a dominant role of few elites to leading the unconscious mass to the revolution (Bach, 2011). By following this ideology, TPLF/EPRDF chose to reduce a space for negotiation through mass media, favored protecting group over individual rights, and planned for a populist discourse aiming to create direct connection with the mass of the public (Stremlau, 2014). At the height of revolutionary democracy, Ethiopia had media system marked by an unstable environment, lack of professionalization, limited press freedom and a significant polarization due to the government's desire to use the media as a tool. And, a symbiotic relation between the media and political system has not been nurtured in 27 years of revolutionary democracy ideology.

As it is argued above, the coming of Abiy Ahmed as a reformist PM has brought significant change in the country including the merger of three decades old EPRDF party. Along with this, TPLF elites still stick to the ideology but they have retreated to Tigray region. The new PP party formally declared to give up the revolutionary democracy ideology. Today, the government does not seem to consider the media as a threat. For that matter, Ethiopia's notorious jails do not have journalists in them for the first time in 13 years. In short, many of the events which have unfolded in the post Abiy Ahmed era may have a different set of media and politics relations that warrants a separate study.

Acknowledgement

I would like to thank Steven Youngblood (Associate Professor) of Park University (USA) for his invaluable comments on the draft manuscript. I also thank my good colleagues who helped me in proofreading.

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* The referencing of Ethiopian authors follows the Ethiopian name tradition which uses the first name as the primary reference followed by the father's name.

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