

ESKINDER NEGA - ETHIOPIA

Eskinder Nega is an Ethiopian journalist and blogger who has been jailed seven times by the government of Meles Zenawi including convictions for treason and terrorism. He received the PEN/Barbara Goldsmith Freedom to Write Award in May 2012, and Amnesty International designated him a prisoner of conscience.

Eskinder attended high school and college in the U.S., returning to Ethiopia in 1991. He founded his first newspaper, *Ethiopsis*, in 1993, but soon found himself in conflict with the government of Meles Zenawi and was forced to close.

As editor of the newspaper *Satenaw*, Eskinder was arrested on 28 November 2005 following demonstrations against the results of the Ethiopian general election on 15 May 2005, which saw Meles stay in power but were alleged to be fraudulent. Eskinder was charged with the capital offenses of treason, "outrages against the Constitution" and "incitement to armed conspiracy". Amnesty International designated him a prisoner of conscience, "detained solely for exercising his right to freedom of expression", and called for his immediate release. The group also protested the "poor and unsanitary" conditions of his detention at Karchele prison.

Eskinder was found guilty and served seventeen months' imprisonment before being released by presidential pardon at the end of 2007. Eskinder's wife, journalist Serkalem Fasil, was also detained for seventeen months, giving birth to their son Nafkot while still imprisoned.

Following the conviction, Eskinder lost his license to practice journalism, and his newspaper was closed by authorities in 2007. He nonetheless continued to publish online.

Eskinder was arrested again on 14 September 2011 after publishing a column that criticized both the Ethiopian government's detainment of journalists as suspected terrorists and its arrest of Ethiopian actor and activist Debebe Eshetu. Ethiopian anti-terrorism legislation prohibits "any reporting deemed to 'encourage' or 'provide moral support' to groups and causes the government deems 'terrorists'". According to BBC News, these same laws "criminalize commentary that is critical of the government", and Amnesty International accused the government of "using counter-terrorism measures to stifle dissent".

Along with four politicians arrested the same day, Eskinder was accused of involvement in Ginbot 7, a political party recently added to Ethiopia's list of terrorist organizations. In November, he and his co-defendants

were accused by state media of being "spies for foreign forces". Eskinder was found guilty of terrorism charges on 23 January 2012.

Eskinder's trial drew international attention, with twenty IPI World Press Freedom Heroes—including Pap Saine, Fred M'membe, Gwen Lister, and Kenneth Best—co-signing a letter to Meles on 23 April, stating their "extremely strong condemnation of the Ethiopian government's decision to jail journalist Eskinder Nega". The U.S.-based Committee to Protect Journalists described the trial as "an affront to justice" and the accusations as "politicized charges used by the government to intimidate journalists and chill news-gathering activities". Human Rights Watch called on the Ethiopian government to release Eskinder and the imprisoned journalists, stating, "The detention of Debebe Eshetu, Eskinder Nega, and Andualem Aragie is just the latest reminder that it is very dangerous to criticize the government in Ethiopia."

In a ceremony on 1 May 2012, Eskinder was announced as the winner of PEN America's PEN/Barbara Goldsmith Freedom to Write Award. The group's president described him as "that bravest and most admirable of writers, one who picked up his pen to write things that he knew would surely put him at grave risk". His wife Serkalem accepted the award on his behalf, stating "I accept this award on behalf of Eskinder Nega at a time when freedom of expression and press freedom are at the lowest in Ethiopia ... If Eskinder were standing here, he'd accept this award, not just as a personal honour, but on behalf of all Ethiopian journalists who toil under withering conditions today".^[2]

On 4 May, Temesgen Desalegn, editor of the Ethiopian newspaper *Feteh*, was fined by the court for publishing a statement from Eskinder's trial in which he stated his innocence and criticized the proceedings.

In last July the 13th, Eskinder Nega and 23 others were found guilty. Eskinder was sentenced to 18 years in prison.