MEDIA AND POLITICS…

Review

Media and Politics in Ethiopia: A Critical Analysis

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Abstract

The paper aimed at analyzing the political discourse and dynamics of the Ethiopian media in the last three regimes. To this end, scholarly works such as books, articles and other sources in the area of media (print and electronics) and politics were reviewed. Discourse analysis was applied to examine the various debates of the media practices and politics in Ethiopia. The study revealed that media and politics in Ethiopia are highly intertwined. The political history of the nation throughout all periods has dictated the development of Ethiopian media. The media has served wishes and whims of those on power. During the incumbent government, however, some improvements have been discerned with the introduction of dual ownership system for the first time in the nation’s history, but overall working condition is debatable. The professionalism of journalists, media management and organization and independence of the media need to be improved. Mainly, the analysis indicates that the media must be run by an independent media council and should exercise self regulation.

*Keywords:* Democracy /Freedom /Government /Media / Opposition /Private

1. Introduction

1.1 Background to the Study

The political history of Ethiopia demonstrates that the country has undergone a lot of social, cultural, religious, and economic changes that have witnessed its present level of development. The country is said to be one of the pioneers of world civilization having more than 3000 years of history (Harold, 2006). Besides, Ethiopia is the cradle or origin of human beings as archeological studies demonstrate. According to Marcus (2002, p.1), the archeological findings in Ethiopia reveal that the country is the origin of human ancestors as it is marked with the foundation of the human fossil called “Lucy”, or “Dinknesh”, which means “wonderful” in Amharic language, and scientifically known as *Australopithecus afarensis* of relatively young hominin woman, found in 1974 and dates back to almost four million years. In addition to the foundations of Lucy, later findings also proved that Ethiopia is the origin of human species.

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2 The study emphasizes on the history of print media (often referred as press), due to low development and expansion of electronic media in Ethiopia, as compared to the print media.
Moreover, according to Adeuumobi (2007, p.1), “Ethiopia’s history stretches back to antiquity, with references to Ethiopia in the Bible and classical Greek literature”. Similarly, Henze (2001) expresses that the country has a very long history. Bahru and Pausewang (2002) mention Ethiopia as one of the pioneers of the world civilization saying that “The first recorded kingdom in Ethiopia grew around Axum during the 3rd century BC. Axum was an offshoot of the Semitic Sabean kingdoms of southern Arabia. This is also further elaborated by Pankh rust (1999, p.4) who said: “The history of Ethiopia had gone long years back even before Frumentius, a Christian youth from Syria bound for India, [who ] was shipwrecked off the Ethiopian coast, around 330AD.”. This then brought the conversion of “Aksumite realm to Christianity. Besides, according to Kefyalew (1999) Ethiopian long time history can be also traced in the writing of Herodotus (400-300 BC), who is the renowned ancient Greek philosopher.

Additionally, Ethiopia was one of the world’s powers and had long contact with the territory to the Indian Ocean during the period of Axumite civilization before 3rd millennium BC. The Ethiopian Civilization reached its peak during the Axumite Civilization. Then Ethiopia was the trade-center for Europe, the Middle East and Asia, and Red Sea was the major route. Furthermore, during Emperor Ezana (325AD), Ethiopia controlled many areas including today’s Yemen, Saudi Arabia, South Asia to the Madagascar and parts of Nubia of the present Sudan ( Henze, 2001, p.20).

The country’s political, cultural and religious revival were witnessed in the period right after the reign of Atse or Emperor Lalilbella (is also called Saint Lalibella ), around 1150, who built the eleven Rock Hewen Churches made of a single rock. This marked the political stability and revival of the political administration. There were so many political successors who succeeded Emperor Lalibela to the time of Zemen Mesafint Era of Princess/ (1840-1855), and to the time of Emperor Tewdros (Marcus, 2002).

On the other hand, regarding the historical development of the media, which is also often referred as press, in Ethiopia, it is possible to argue and to trace back its beginning to the early years of Christianity when Geez became the dominant medium. Getachew (2003, p. 562) says that the written form of communication is said to be started when the Geez alphabet came into being as early as the 4th century of the Axumite era. Then Geez became the medium of politics, culture and religion.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

The history of media in Ethiopia can be most likely traced back to the time of ancient kings who started using the awaj negari, that is to say news announcer. The religious and non-religious publications as well as the different historical and religious writings on parchment may mark the beginning of early press in Ethiopia. Formally, however, modern press in Ethiopia is said to be started during the time of Emperor Menelik II. Afterwards, the media in Ethiopia has gone through a lot of challenges under the authoritarian governments of the past who used the media for fulfilling their wishes.

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3 Geez is one of the descendents of the Sabean language (one of the Semitic languages) and mother for Amharic language.
and whims. That means, the past governments have been said to muzzle the press for their parochial interests, and consequently, the freedom of the press on the one hand and the people’s right to free expression on the other were curtailed. Gudeta (2008) says that the media was used only for satisfying the wishes and whims of governments. It was only used for disseminating government agenda (Tikikel, 2007) and was authoritarian (Getachew, 2003).

In the present government, however, there have been good improvements in introducing dual ownership system (Gudeta, 2008), contextualizing press freedom and making further media declarations like Press Declaration 1992, Access to Media Declaration 2007, and Broadcasting Declaration 2009 (Nigussie, 2011). Nevertheless, there are problems with regard to journalists intimidation and imprisonments (Mariegu, 2000; Ellene, Mesfin & Alemayehu, 2003). According to Birhane (2002), the media has been used as a means to propagate government agenda. There is also polarization of media where the private media often negates the development efforts of the government and the government media mostly cover favorable news about its activities (Nigussie, 2011). To the researcher’s knowledge, however, the aforementioned as well as other studies have not investigated the dynamics of media and politics and how the media has upheld democracy in Ethiopia. Hence, the present study, through evaluating the political dynamics and discourses of the media in the country, demonstrates the interplay between media and politics.

1.3 Main Objective of the Study

The main objective of the study was to critically examine the dynamics of media and politics, the discourses related to the practice of media, and the challenges and prospects of the media in Ethiopia.

1.4 Specific objectives

The specific objectives of the study are:

1. to examine the historical development of the media in three consecutive governments of Ethiopia;  
2. to evaluate the political discourses related to the activities of the media in Ethiopia; and  
3. to identify the challenges and prospects of the media development in Ethiopia

2. Theoretical Framework

Importance of media: In today’s politics, the study of mass media cannot be seen independent of the democratic process of countries. Media, particularly free media, is characterized from its “being more participative, more oriented toward the popular, more event centered and timely, and more objective and less partisan” (Grossberg, Wartella & Whitney, 1998, pp. 324-25). So, the media, as the means to political deliberation, should
become public forum and should be geared towards performing these salient functions by providing accurate information. Jarvis and Han (2009, p. 749) underscored on the importance of media in the public sphere as it is a means to facilitate political communication by exchanging “information between a nation’s leadership, the media, and the citizenry”. Hence, media is the life heart of a government as it becomes an intermediary power between the executives, the legislators and the judiciary. It has been enjoying the role of playing a part to check and balance the power in the advanced democratic nations.

**Media Control:** According to Freedom House survey of media freedom, while 75 countries had media systems that could be classified as free, 50 had partly free media, and 61 were not free, and 111 countries still have media systems that are either partly free or not free (Sussman & Karlekar, 2002). This survey indicates that the degree of press freedom does vary depending on the nature of political systems. However, in many developing countries governments control media and the control can extend itself to editorial content. A World Press Survey conducted in 1999 by Freedom House (or Sussman) reported that in many regions of the world press freedom was hampered by unprofessional journalists and partisan control of the media. In these countries media are firmly monitored and controlled through overt and covert means by political or government forces. The Freedom House survey had found that “the muzzling of journalists was increasingly accomplished by more subtle, legalistic methods than through violence or outright repression” (p. 1).

**Freedom of Expression and Democracy:** Graber (1989, p. 27) puts “In democratic societies official control of the content of mass media is deemed unnecessary.” This is because it is believed that tight control of the media can deter the freedom of expression which is the key for the flourishing of democracy. Thus, “Entry to the mass media business is open to people representing a wide spectrum of political views” accepting that the mass media becomes the fountain of ideas and enables public participation. This enhances competition among the channels, that is, newspapers, magazines, radio and television where each media generates various viewpoints. “If some media attack the government, other media will support it. Positive and negative as well as right and wrong information will somehow balance out”. This implies that “government by the people” is the function of the right to make one voices heard.

The factors that mainly affect media freedom are both the political and economic levels of a country. In countries where appropriate policy framework is not created and the economic system is not conducive, the editorial freedom may be curtailed. Based on a study conducted in 134 nations, Weaver, Buddenbaum, and Fair (1985) concluded that “the stronger the media are economically, the less likely the government is to control these media” (p. 113). The strength of the media can also be affected by the existing policy as well.

### 3. Methods and Materials

This study is a critical analysis of the political discourses and dynamics of the media in Ethiopia. The study examined in detail the history of media or press in the country in successive governments. For this purpose, the Constitution of Ethiopia, the writings of media and political critics, government policy, various books and documents, research
and scholarly works in the area of media or press, democracy and/or politics, in Ethiopia have been reviewed and carefully studied. Discourse analysis was applied to examine the various debates of the media practices and politics in Ethiopia.

4. Analysis

4.1 Analysis of Media and Politics in Ethiopia

There are a lot of debates made about the commencement and development of media in Ethiopia. Many scholars may argue that the media in Ethiopia has not grown to the desired level. It is claimed that though Ethiopia has long years of history which stretches back to antiquity, the political history of the nation over different periods has been characterized as unstable. The media in Ethiopia, consequently, may have gone through the political twists and turns. For the purpose of this study, with regard to the political dynamics of the nation, the researcher would like to classify the media in Ethiopia into three phases: early media, birth of modern media and the development of modern media. The time of classification is based on the overall situation of the media which came along with the relative changes in the political dynamics of the nation. Besides, this section analyses the political discourses regarding the activities of the media and the challenges of media and politics in Ethiopia.

4.1.1 The political dynamics of early media and international influence in Ethiopia

*Early broadcast and print media.* Generally, it would be possible to say that the media in Ethiopia is the by-product of national and international politics. As far as early press is concerned, Ethiopia might be one of the countries which have enjoyed early fruits of the printing press, as there were indications for the modern media or press to come into existence in the beginning of the 17th century.

Most scholars (e.g. Getachew, 2003) often argue the beginning of the press is associated with the time of emperor Menelik II. However, the researcher would like to argue that the beginning of the press should not be restricted to the reign of emperor Menelik II. If press or media refers only to newspapers, the case may work true, but apart from that, if the press refers to pamphlets and books, the case would be different. Even it would be possible to say that the history of press, if it refers to books, unlike to what Getachew (2003) and some local literary scholars indicate, dated back to the time of early writing on parchment for both religious and non-religious purposes. Mainly, religious writings could be traced to the time of Siant Yared in the 5th Century (Kefyalew, 1999).

As evidence, for example, according to Gaspirani, who is cited in the book ‘Ethiopian History’4, there were many writings in Geez, which is a descendent of Sabean language. Another source stated that there were many writings published in Geez language, which became medium of education (Kefyalew, 1999). Particularly the law and proclamations of the time were written [in Geez] to reach the mass. Gasparani (n.d) said Geez had helped the country to be more advanced. Before the use of modern writing

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4 An Amharic version, undated.
system, for example, the ancient kings such as Ezana, who heralded the Orthodox church around 325 A.D (Pankhrust, 1999), Saint Yared in 500 A.D, the Philosopher King Zaraya Yacob in 14th century (Kefyalew, 1999), and, may be, all later kings, used Geez writings on parchment. Moreover, the kings used to communicate through the awaj negari, news broadcaster, or literally means ‘proclamation announcer’. That is to say, they used to announce news using drum and stick as a medium. The church also used paintings and writings to announce church news. These all mark the beginning of early broadcast and print media in Ethiopia (Nigussie, 2011).

**Introduction of printing press.** According to Ellene, Mesfin and Alemayehu (2003) and Gaspirani (n.d), Ethiopia’s long years contact with Europe, except during some years of disconnection in the Dark Age, has helped the country to have diplomatic relations with some countries. This in turn has helped the introduction of the first printing press.

The first international attempt to introduce printing machine to Ethiopia could be traced back to the 16th century. It was introduced by early missionaries who had come to Ethiopia, but was confined to the ports of the country because of internal oppositions (Ellene, Mesfin & Alemayehu, 2003).

According to Verghese (2007, p.1), the introduction of the printing press was a “happy incident” and witnessed that the printing press in India was the one to be taken to Ethiopia by western missionaries. However, since the crew encountered opposition from the then Ethiopian king, they were not able to push into the interior, and then the printing press was ported to Goa, India. Here it is explained that

... pressure was put on Portugal by Francis Xavier to dispatch printing presses to India, Ethiopia and Japan. Meanwhile, the Emperor of Abyssinia (Ethiopia) requested the king of Portugal to send a press along with the missionaries. Thus, the first batch of Jesuit missionaries left for Ethiopia on March 29, 1556. En route, they arrived in Goa on September 6, 1556. But, while they were preparing to proceed to Ethiopia, news reached them that the Ethiopian Emperor was not keen to receive the missionaries.

Moreover, as some sources indicate, there was an attempt to bring the modern printing machine to Ethiopia by the Catholic missionaries around 1550 from Portugal. But with the death of the crew leader who ported the printing machine from Europe, the machine was left where he died, at Goa, which was located in the west of India (Murthy, 1997). Murthy says the first printing machine in India is the one to be taken to Ethiopia, which was formerly called Abyssinia.

Here it would be likely to argue that Ethiopia might have enjoyed the early fruits of the invention of the printing press. Indeed, with the urge to the introduction of Catholicism, the missionaries in the seventeen century had made a lot of attempts to publish different religious books including the Holy Bible by bringing the printing machine at the red Sea. However, with the great challenge they faced from the then government, they hardly succeeded. The then government new, from history, that inviting foreigners would expose the country to invaders. For instance, the reason for the dethronement of “Atse” Susenyos (King Susenyos) was his conversion into Catholicism from the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. Then, eight thousand peasants died in the rebellion. In connection to this, Tanzanian Odessey presents Ethiopia’s resistance of the
coming of the missionaries along with their printing press which was highly interwoven with the history of the country in defending its territory. An attempt had been made by foreigners to invade Ethiopia or then Abyssinia, later became the cause for the nation to object any foreign intervention.

_During the 15th century with the expansion of the Ottoman Empire, Ethiopian fortunes were reversed. The Turks who succeeded the Mamelukes in Egypt supported the Muslim kingdoms providing both firearms and artillery; the only thing that saved the Christian empire from collapse was the Portuguese. In 1542 as a result of this, missionaries from Portugal attempted to persuade the Ethiopians to accept the Pope in Rome as the leader of the Church._

Here the attempt under the disguise of religion was to make political pacification with the aim to expand Portuguese political sphere of influence in Africa as one of the early colonizers of Africa. Catholicism was much propagated with the help of the press of the period. The conversion of Emperor Susenyos might be related to this (Gaspirano, 1950s). Later, as writings by Debra Zeneb and other scholars of the time may indicate, the press was mostly used as the mainstream to the politics of the day.

4.1.2 Birth of modern media and political dynamics in Ethiopia

According to the foregoing argument, the history of early media began before Menelik II came to power. However, as far as the history of modern media is concerned, it is associated to the era of Minelik II. For example, Ellene, Mesfin and Alemayehu (2003) argued that the first newspaper was started being published in 1890 with the coming of a four page weekly newspaper named “Aemero”, which means “intelligence”. Its publisher, Andreas Kavadias, a Greek businessman, used to publish and distribute it in Addis Ababa. The newspaper was the first of its kind to appear in Amharic and was hand-written. Later on, Kavadias obtained a polygraph machine and raised the paper’s circulation to 200.” The flag of the newspaper then was given by the emperor to show the desire of the king for knowledge or the development of the country.

Fifteen years after Aemero appeared (in 1905), Le Semaine d’Ethiopie (‘The Ethiopian Weekly’) appeared in French. Later, in the late 19th century, when the European countries ran for scrambling Africa around 1884, Italian colonizers made an attempt to colonize Ethiopia. In relation to this, the Italians published and dispatched war news as a means to propagate Italian fascism. Italy waged war on Ethiopia and the aggressor was defeated at the battle of Adowa in 1896. Since Italy didn’t refrain itself from its colonial agenda, no matter how the bloody defeat it faced, it started to produce propaganda on Ethiopia by publishing an Amharic newspaper, _Yetor Wore_ (War News) for propagating fascist news in 1915 during World War I (Ellene, Mesfin & Alemayehu, 2003).

Later, as Getachew (2003) and Ellene, Mesfin and Alemayehu (2003) argue, the Italian five years occupation of Ethiopia (1936-1940) during World War II has its own influence in the development of the media in Ethiopia though it was used to propagate fascist ideology. It was mainly meant to terrorize compatriots who opposed and fought
the fascist power. Consequently, the fascists banned the local press and took it out of the political scene.

4.1.3 The political dynamics of the media in the last three regimes of Ethiopia

This phase can be taken as the third stage in the overall development of the media/press in Ethiopia. It is relatively a modern period which lasts from 1941- to the present time, the time this manuscript is published. Hence, the following analysis is made by examining each political period: Hailiselasie, Derg, and Ethiopian Peoples’ Revolutionary Democratic Front EPRDF.

4.1.3.1 The political dynamics of the media during Hailiselasie I regime

Menelik’s attempt to modernize the country was further strengthened by his successor, imperial Haileselasie I. As compared to the preceding governments, the Ethiopian Press got its real growth during this reign. As part of Haileselasie’s endeavor, the media in this regime had grown to a better position— a number of newspapers came into existence. One contributing factor for a publication of a number of newspapers is the establishment of Berhanena Selam (Light and Peace) Printing Press in 1923 by the king. This was a good leap forward in the history of press and politics in the country.

The other contributing factor for the real development of the press during the reign of Haileselasie is Italians occupation of the country for five years. This period has its own contribution for the development of modern press in Ethiopia. Then, some newspapers were being published and radio programs were being broadcasted, by Italian fascists in Ethiopia, to propagate their war in Ethiopia and about the Second World War.

During the post Italian occupation or WWII and after that, a number of press related developments were observed. Addis Zemen (New Era) appeared in Amharic on May 5th, 1941 and later in 1942, the Press and Information Department was established under the then Ministry of Pen. In the same year, while Sendek Alamachin (Our Flag) appeared in Amharic and Arabic, the Negarit Gazeta appeared in Amharic and English. In the following year, in 1943, The Ethiopian Herald started as a weekly English newspaper. Ye-Eritrea Demts (The Voice of Eritrea) was being published in Amharic and Tigrinya by the Ethio-Eritrean Unionist Association. In 1946, the two monthly papers, Ethiopian Review (in English) and Berhanena Selam (in Amharic) were published. In 1947, major press development took place in Ethiopia and three newspapers: Zena Bete Kristyan (News of the Churches), Nuro Bezeday (living Wisely), Tekle Haimanot (Saint Tekle Haimanot) and one English Newspaper– the Daily News Bulletin (Ellene, Mesfin & Alemayehu, 2003)– came into being.

In 1950, Alemen Tebeb (The World and Wisdom), in Amharic, and Progress Economique, in Amharic and French, were launched. In 1952, L’Ethiopie d’Audjourd’hui (Ethiopia Today) was started in Amharic and French. At the same time, the Amharic counterpart of the English Daily News Bulletin also came into being. The Amharic Yezareyitu Etyopia (Ethiopia Today) also appeared in 1952. The Ethiopian
Herald and Addis Zemen became dailies by the end of 1958, and they were being published under the then Ministry of Information. Ye-Ethiopia Demits (the Voice of Ethiopia) reemerged in 1958.

The post Italian occupation was also the landmark in the flourishing of other press. The several quarterly and yearly departmental journals and publications such as the State Bank of Ethiopia, Ministry of Education, Commerce and Industry etc. came into existence. Magazines were also published during this period. Some of the monthly magazines published during this time were: The Ethiopian Mirror (English), Menen (one each in English and Amharic), Addis Reporter (English) and others which were published by the Ministry of Information, and Tewahedo (by Ethiopian Orthodox Church), Berhan (by Ethiopian Evangelical Church), Azeb (by the Ethiopian Women Welfare Association/ EWWA), and Ethiopia Observer (published in Ethiopia and Britain and edited by Sylvia Pankhurst, and others), according to Ellene, Mesfin and Alemayehu (2003).

In general, the press in the imperial regime really grew, but it had less public outreaching due to poor infrastructure, very low level of literacy, and the inadequate number of the copies of the newspapers. Most of the products of the press were accessible mainly for royal class, elites and literate city dwellers. Though the press was meant to grow at least in content (Yosef, 2005), it had a delimited content which focused mostly on the royal family and the king (Getachew, 2003), and expressed simply the whims and wishes of the king (Gudeta, 2009).

4.1.3.2 The political dynamics of the media during Derg

The ‘Political Revolution’ of 1974 that brought the dethronement of Hailsellasie put the country into an absolute political turmoil. In fact, the military government became somehow stable right after the political crisis which started in 1974 and ended in 1977 claiming the lives of many citizens, especially many officials and war generals.

During this regime media was used mainly for propaganda. Endalkachew and Senait, who are cited in Yosef (2005, pp. 38-39), read: “[During] the early days of the revolution, even if it could not last long, the press was used as a platform for relatively open discussion… However, in short period of time, the regime changed the landscape of the Ethiopian press for good, and started to use the media primarily for propaganda purposes and for the spread of socialist ideology.” Moreover, in its nationalization programme, Derg nationalized privately owned large scale printing presses. The government made a change of policy in 1987 as it introduced the Peoples Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (PDRE). The new constitution made the provision of press law in its article 47 and 67(20) as the government gives “the necessary materials and moral support of the exercise of freedoms”. In fact, the freedom of the press was not indicated clearly and it remained completely under the government control. The press was characterized as the tool of propaganda of the government with the total involvement of the government from its ‘inception’ (Senait, 2000).

As www.MassMediaDistribution.com presents, the military government solely owned the press in the country. When narrating about the nature of the government:
Derg member Major Mengistu Haile Mariam established his own leadership within that organization in February 1974 via a shootout between his followers and those of his main rival, Tafari Banti, who died in the fighting; following this, Mengistu declared himself chairman and began his military rule over the country by 1974. During the 17 years of Mengistu's rule, the government-and party-owned publications Meskerem ("September"), Serto Ader, ("Proletariat") and the pre-Derg Yezareyitu Ethiopia ("Ethiopia Today") were published in addition to the previously mentioned Addis Zemen and the Ethiopian Herald.

This would mark how the socialist military government was tyrannical and the freedom of press and expression was highly curtailed. The imperial government of Emperor Haile Selassie I, who ruled the country for half a century from 1923-1974, had relatively many newspapers as compared to Mengistu’s regime. During the military government, the works of the newspapers had socialistic orientations and, as a result, they were the forerunners of the socialistic ideology. It was completely unthinkable to have private press in the period because everything was owned by the government. The government’s major agenda was to nationalize the privately owned business and the printing press and to build socialist democratic Ethiopia after dethroning the imperial government. After dethroning the former regime, consequently, it confiscated any press outlet and put under its control. The government took the slogan of ‘Ethiopia Tekidem Yaleminim Dem’ (Let Ethiopia move forward without bloodshed) to denote the peaceful transition of power after the February 1974 revolution. Then the new government was formed on September 12 (Meskerem 2).

The new government, consequently, became an absolute dictator because it couldn’t promote public participation and didn’t opt for free press (Getachew, 2003). Censorship was severely practiced (Ellene, Mesfin & Alemayehu, 2003) and the freedom of the press was curtailed (Gebremedhin, 2006). There were only the government’s outlets (Nigussie, 2011).

The government was publishing presses that emerged during the time of Derg and pre-Derg. It was publishing a magazine called ‘Meskerem’ ("September") that marks the revolution day and a newspaper called Serto Ader ("Proletariat"), which was meant to pronounce the sovereignty of the proletariat. Additionally, the Dergu continued to publish Addis Zemen (the Ethiopian Herald), and Yezareyitu Ethiopia ("Ethiopia Today"), which came into being in the imperia period. These presses then became the mouth piece of the government (Gudeta, 2006).

4.1.3.3 The political dynamics of the media during the post 1990s

The Constitution vs freedom of press. As far as the current government, Ethiopian Peoples’ Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), is concerned, the freedom of press in Ethiopia has been put in the constitutional frame for the first time in the nation’s history (Nigussie, 2011). The constitutionalizatization of the freedom of the press is a good step forward in the democratization process of the country. In fact, Article 29, number 2 and 3 of the constitution, assures the freedom of press in Ethiopia and it goes on saying
that “Freedom of the press and mass media as well as freedom of artistic creation is guaranteed. The media shall be granted institutional independence and legal protection to enable it to accommodate different opinions and ensure the free flow of information, ideas and opinions” which is believed to be the cornerstone for the flourishing of democracy (Ethiopian Constitution, 1995). Even though the EPRDF government heralded the coming of the private press, the private press works under a political pressure. According to Democratic System Building in Ethiopia (2001), there are a lot of things to be done for the full independence of media from the government’s control. The press law in the country is still with much litigation and debate. There have been a lot of bargaining issues about its legal framework. For example, regarding Ethiopia’s draft proclamation of press freedom, Buckley et al. (2008, p. 343) criticize:

overbroad in terms of its scope, includes problematic restrictions on who may practice journalism, and provides for a government-controlled licensing system for media outlets. Also, the draft law provides for restrictions on access to information held by public authorities and broadcasting and publication content restrictions. It further provides for the establishment of a government-controlled Press Council with powers to prepare and enforce a code of ethics, powers vested in the prosecutor to suspend media outlets, and a harsh sanctions regime.

In connection to the freedom of press, Gebremedhin (2006, p.31) also explains that “although the Ethiopian Constitution guarantees freedom of expression and media freedom, the relevant laws regulating media operation are still in the process of finalization, leaving much uncertainty about the broadcast and newspaper environments.” Similarly, some critics argue that the 2008 Access to Media Declaration and the 2009 Broadcasting Regulation may limit the extent to which the freedom of speech and expression is practiced in the country.

Earlier, the attempt made by the government was quite acceptable as it set the democratic constitution that presumed to give ethnic, cultural, religious, political and economical equality though it later changed its face, according to Abbink (2006). Abbink (2006, p.3) states: “There is no doubt that post 1991 Ethiopia saw significant political institution building and that a public ethos of democracy emerged”. But Abbink argues the process has suffered from durable constraints within the political system.

Problem of bias. The media was also criticized for being full of government’s news as the fashion of the day. In my (the researcher’s) view, the press in Ethiopia should work towards serving the public interest by becoming a change agent rather than being simply the mouth piece of the government as liberalists and democratic participant theoreticians probably argue. It must be impartial and critical to cover government activities. Mairegu (2000, p.132) also criticizes the function of the media saying: “the state-owned media became simply the propaganda machinery of the new government, launching violent verbal attacks on those political or ethnic groups that are ill favored by the ruling circle”.

As far as the private media is concerned, generally, it seems to take antigovernment position, and as it is said, the private media has been owned or sponsored by opposition groups or some other vested interests (MoI, 2012). Consequently, there are
wars of words (Mairegu, 2000) or verbal attacks from those who have owned private press (Birhane, 2002). Verbal attacks are either libel (written defamation) or slander (oral defamation), which is against media law (Pember, 2003).

It is expected, nevertheless, that the media should be free from political bias since this is against constitutional right where the Ethiopian Constitution (1995:89) ensures the media should “entertain diverse opinions ” instead of indoctrinating one side’s view. In fact, taking position seems to be common in both types of media. The media, therefore, must be free from “providing sustenance for one set of interests while undermining an alternative” (Street, 2001, p.16).

Types of media: Television, Radio, and Press. With regard to television, when this study was under analysis, there was only one state-owned TV station, which operates, with a limited hour of broadcast, covering around half the land size of the country, but recently new channels are on the way to be launched by regional states media agencies like that of Amhara Mass Media Agency, Oromiya Mass Media Agency, Addis Ababa Mass Media Agency, SNNPRs Radio and Television Agency and others. Very recently, the Ethiopian Television started to broadcast its programs in three channels: ETV1, ETV2 and ETV3. This is a good progress at least in the entertainment, but lags much behind. The government also seems to work towards having its own satellite channels by distributing “Set Top Box”. This government’s effort, however, can be hampered by low level of professional competence, degree of readiness to diversify programs and the capacity to compete with foreign media.

The other television station is run by Educational Media Agency (EMA) for educational purpose. Despite the proclamation to liberalize the media, there is no one private television station. Perhaps, the current renaming of ETV as Ethiopian Broadcasting Corporation (EBC) and the subsequent attempt to kick off media council, according to The Reporter (2014), would bring a new momentum in the overall functioning of the media in the nation.

Radio. The radio has been also solely owned by the government, and it broadcasts in Amharic, Afaan Oromo, Tigrigna, Somalinya, Afargna, English, and French. There are some FM commercial radios, but they are also controlled by the national and regional governments. The Ethiopian radio, which broadcasts in Amharic, Afaan Oromo, Afari, Agnuak, Nuer, Somali and Tigrigna languages, is the major government news media. It also broadcasts using English, French and Arabic as external service. The FM commercial radios like FM which have sprang up in Addis Ababa has limited scope and mostly focused on entertainment and advertisements. Moreover, some FM radios like FM Addis, Radio Fana, FMs with different sound waves are being scaled up in some areas to reach the large public. Some community radios are also found in Harar, Yirgalem, Hawassa and Jimma where some are run by city governments like the case of Jimma and by universities like Hawassa University and Haromaya University FMs. Some FMs, like that of Bahirdar University’s, are on the way to move towards the aforementioned ones.

The print media. The print media, on the other hand, to a certain extent, has been owned by the private, but unsatisfying. Most of the newspapers have been weekly and
political in nature. Of these newspapers, Addis Zena (Fresh News), Addis Admas (New Horizon), Satenaw (The Courageous), Netsanet (Freedom), Medina (The capital), Youth City, Maheder (The Sheath), Mebreke (The Lightening), Tomar, Ethiopi, Ethio-News, The Press, The Reporter, both Amharic and English version, Abay (Blue Nile), Nation, Tobia, The Sun, Addis Tribune, Siefe Nebelbal (The Thunderbolt), Addis Neger (which is literally to mean something new), Tobia, Ruh and others have been among the major ones.

Again, there were weekly newspapers and magazines like Tsegereda (The Rose), Kalkidan (The Promise), Fashion, Style, Medical, and others which were basically entertainment and health matters newspapers. Sport newspapers were Libra, Atenna, Inter-Sport, Sky Sport, Giorgis (St. George), etc. There have been also business newspapers like Fortune, Capital, Entrepreneur and others. One of the limitations in my opinion is that there are no national dailies except Addis Zemen and The Ethiopian Herald, which were established during the period of the emperor.

Increase in number of private print media. With regard to the private press, actually there have been developments, as references written almost a decade ago indicate. According to Gebremedhin (2006, p.24), who quoted the Ministry of Information, “there were 68 newspapers and magazines published and distributed in July 2006. This is an increase from five years ago (though figures for 2000 could not be found). There are 56 newspapers and 12 magazines. Most papers are weeklies, bi-weeklies and monthlies, with only three dailies, all national, in existence.” Besides, it is also stated that “Many of the newspapers in recent years have been tabloid weeklies responding to news events, such as the 2005 elections”. Though there are increases in the number of the private press, it seems that the political presses are characterized by strong verbal attacks (Maregu, 2000).

The language of print media. Different local and foreign languages are used for publication. Most of the newspapers, for example Addis Zemen, and magazines in the country are published in the national language— Amharic (Nigussie, 2011). Whereas other two, The Ethiopian Herald and The Daily Monitor are published in English. There are weeklies Al-Alem (in Arabic) and Barissa (in Afaan Oromo) which are published (by the government) under the Ethiopian Press Agency. Moreover, there were a number of privately owned Amharic and English weekly newspapers though most of them came out of the public sphere for political sedition and some other reasons.

Banning print media. Most private political presses, which came into being with the emerging of new political parties during the establishment of the transitional government of 1991, were epitomized as party organs. Among these, there were newspapers and magazines, which were banned from publication. For example, a privately owned newspaper named Eletawi Addis (The Daily News) went out of the market during the political tension of the 2005 election. Similarly, Tobia and Ruh were banned for their sensational coverage of the incumbent government’s politics and the hostility developed with the government as they waged war of words on the party in

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6 A national daily
7 Owened privately
power, or the antagonism developed from both sides (Maregu, 2000). In fact, they were mostly politically instigated and they took extreme positions in criticizing the government. However, the media\(^8\) is expected to give a balanced coverage of information (EPRDF, 1995). The intimidation of journalists (Berhane, 2002), the rise in paper price, and the financial pressure due to paying large amount of money to renew a license have forced some of the tabloids to be closed (Getachew, 2003).

**The rise and fall of private print media.** Among the privately owned newspapers some came in and out with elections while others continue working. The rise and fall of the media particularly the private press implies the less matured state of the private media, the periodic appearance of the newspapers along with elections, and the political intolerance of the government to some extent.

To conclude this section, in the current regime (EPRDF), in fact, different newspapers with diverse contents have appeared in large number. With the licensing of the press and the declaration of the market economy, the private press, for the first time in the political history of the nation, had started to become a new public sphere, though it was limited to the city and few major cities (Nigussie, 2011).

Of course, introducing of the private press in the nation, I believe, is worth telling. *Survey of Culture and Media* (2003, p.3) supports this view saying: “The landmark event in the history of print media in Ethiopia began after the Ethiopian Peoples’ Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) came to power in May 1991”. Actually, according to *Governance Profile of Ethiopia* (2004, p.3), which is produced by Economic Commission for Africa (ECA), “the present Ethiopian Government shares the features of a democratic, federal state: adoption of a new constitution, introduction of a multi-party system, and the holding of periodic elections.”

Furthermore, though it is debatable, many have argued that the press practice has been in a continual improvement. The media has been taken as promoter of democracy (Kifyalew, 2008) and liberated itself to some extent with the introduction of dual ownership system no matter how it works under pressure (Birhane, 2002; Amnesty International, 2005). The implication of all these is that a lot to be done to improve the condition of the political system to create good governance in the country by fostering public participation and vibrant media.

### 4.2 The Political Discourses Regarding the Activities of the Media in Ethiopia

This section tries to show the inexistence of independent media in Ethiopia throughout all time. The press in Ethiopia is argued to be authoritarian (Mareigu, 2000) and meant to serve only parochial interests; it is said to be an instrument of the ruling class rather than becoming the voice of the public. The Press during the imperial regime was targeted to satisfy the interest of the imperial Crown and Royalty (Getachew, 2003).

\(^8\) Currently, when this paper was being written, private media is more appropriately defined as print media because there is no privately owned electronic media, except FMs, which offers alternative programmes in Ethiopia.
Similarly, most of the political discourse of the Derg got its foundation on socialistic orientation (Nigussie, 2011) where “socialistic government... knows and represents the best interest of the people” (Graber, 1989, p. 22) and the media was the forerunner of this socialistic ideology. Despite good media practices in the early days of the revolution, which could not last long, the regime started using the media primarily for the spread of socialist ideology (Yosef, 2005), yes for propaganda or political indoctrination. The political discourse about the activities of the media during the Derg can be said that the media was a waging tail of the government. It had no room for private rights and freedom.

Regarding the current government (EPRDF), the political discourse has encircled around the notion that the media becomes the promoter of democracy. Though the media freedom was put in the constitutional frame under Article 29 of the Constitution, which provides freedom of the press where every person has the right to seek, obtain and impart information, and Press Proclamation No. 34/1992, which gives room for freedom of press, the media cannot get its full independence in the democracy. The democratic nature of the media has been objected according to Skjerdal (2011, p.70). He argues that there is a “growing politicization of the Ethiopian state media”. Further, it shies to criticize government. “But the test of democracy lies on the freedom of criticism” (Ross, 2010). Ross says: “while Ethiopia gains respect in the political scene, the government struggles to justify its draconian control over the media”. Buckley et al. (2008, p. 343) further criticizes the government’s controlled licensing system of media outlets, the restrictions on access to information held by public authorities, broadcasting and publication content restrictions, and the establishment of a government-controlled Press Council. However, the government claims it uses the media as heralder of development and democracy (Skjerdal, 2011). Though there are some encouraging changes in the economic and political sphere of the Ethiopian government, media independence and freedom, I believe, is still the homework for the government.

4.3 The Challenges to the Development of Media and Politics in Ethiopia

The major challenges of the media and political system in Ethiopia, the researcher believes, are the result of multiple factors. First, the history of the media in the country has been marked with the governments’ ownership all over time, despite recent positive developments with the coming of current government in 1991. Nevertheless, the media has mostly become loyal supporter and fan of those who own them instead of serving public interest. I think the culture of azmari (traditional enchanter or singer) and the patron relation in Ethiopia seem to have affected the media culture to a greater extent where the media seems to be the sympathizer of only one party; it favors’ the class that has power—like what the azmari does.

Besides, the government in Ethiopia controls the media for fear that it could be used to incite rebellion as in other African, Asia and Latin American as well as in some European countries. Birhane (2002) and Getachew (2003) also believe that the government keeps an eye on the media because there is no confidence about the media’s accountability.
Moreover, the limited distribution of newspapers coupled with the less infrastructure access, has been the major challenge of the press in Ethiopia. For instance, particularly, the print media, as they have been mostly limited in the capital, rarely reach even in some major cities in the country. Furthermore, a limited financial source of the organizations which publish newspapers has minimized the number of copies to address a large number of readers all across the country. On top of that, most of the newspapers are not accessible to the rural literate because of inadequacy of transportation facility and lack of agents to distribute the newspapers.

Limited readership is the other challenge for the development of print press in Ethiopia. Still, the growing rate of the cost of publication and the increase in the price of paper as well as the lowest rate of literacy in the rural areas are said to be among the major bottle necks that have limited readership of print media. Nevertheless, in the period in which internet or online media has become part of the public sphere, the readership of print media would decline. This is because though the access to internet and the literacy level is still low, there is a tendency in which the literate may shift to online media (Paul & Peter, 2003).

The other challenge in the media is the polarization of views. Most of the private media have seemed to be organs of opposition parties. The private media is often criticized (of course, some follow professional lines) for taking one side to criticize the government, instead of being critical and impartial (Nigussie, 2011). According to Nigussie there seems to be a greater difference in the coverage pattern of the media in Ethiopia where the private mostly covers unfavorable issues about government and the government press covers mostly favorable news. There seems to be a north-south dichotomy between them.

Intimidating journalists and irregularities of private press are the other factors that have hampered the development of media and politics in Ethiopia. It seems that, according to Berhane (2002), the decline in the number of newspapers is attributed to the arrest and intimidation of journalists and the limited number of independent private newspapers, magazines and publishers. The MoI (2012), however, goes contrary to this claiming that the number of privately owned newspapers dwindles because they often emerge during political election and feather away when the election is over. In the Constitution and press proclamations, embracing the press as the pursuit of fundamental freedom, peace, democracy, justice, equality and for the acceleration of social and economic development is actually a great leap forward for the freedom of press. But, on the ground, the press has been suffering from professional competence, getting complete independence from the government as well as financial incapability to invest in the industry.

5. Discussion

The history of the press in Ethiopia can be traced back to the time of awaji negari (news announcer), during the ancient kings. In ancient Ethiopia, the writings on walls

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9 Although the radio has become the major source of news for rural citizens like most of the developing countries, the availability of radio, its price and battery costs could be major determinants.
were indicators of the beginning of writing culture. These writings later on gave birth to mass communication writings on parchment. Ethiopia, historically, is the one among those used the printing press for the first time despite the fact that the first printing press/machine, which was/were shipped to Ethiopia in the beginning of 16th century from Portuguese, was/were taken to India due to the refusal of Ethiopian king to take it into the interior. As a result, the printing machine(s) was/were confined to the former ports of Ethiopia at Massawa and Assab. Later, religious and non-religious writings were published at these ports. As far as the modern press is concerned, it was introduced to Ethiopia in the 1890, during Menelik II, but was only confined to Royal class. This has continued until the Imperial Hailesellasie ascended to power.

The period of Imperial Hailesellasie I (1923-1974) had seen better time in the number of media outlets, quality, and types. Then radio was introduced and the present daily government newspapers Addis Zemen and The Ethiopia Herald, Yezaretu Ethiopia and other newspapers came into picture. Though the press in this regime had grown to a relatively better position, it was only accessible for those who were in the royal class and the elites.

With regard to media during the military government, it was a major tool to propagate the tyranny of the regime. The number of news newspapers during this regime was fewer as compared to the imperial government of Emperor Haile Selassie I. During the military government, the works of the newspapers had socialistic orientations and, as a result, they were the vanguard of the socialistic ideology. It was completely unthinkable to have private press during this period because everything was owned by the government for public consumption. Hence, the freedom of press and expression was highly curtailed. The study that supports this finding comes from Sussman and Karlekar (2002) which indicates that in many developing countries governments control media and the control could extend to editorial content.

During the incumbent government, the dual ownership system was introduced and gave a window for airing of different views. This would be a prospect for having vibrant media in the country if further positive measures such as creating independent media council were taken. However, there has been a rise and fall of media outlets particularly private print media.

Nevertheless, the sensational coverage of the media and waging war of words with the party on power, and the antagonism developed from both sides, instead of becoming a public forum of discussion and debate, have weaken the role of the media in building the democracy. Similar finding is reported by Maregu (2000). In fact, the media were mostly politically instigated and they took extreme positions in criticizing each other. There are arguments in which journalists are intimidated and banned from covering various issues. It is also argued that “bail money and the constant arrests and imprisonment [of journalists] without charge”, lack of willingness of officials to give information, and lack of the media coverage and access to information have affected the media practice. This finding is confirmed by Ellene, Mesfin and Alemayehu (2003, p.11) who said that seeking and imparting information without restraint from government officials is not mostly materialized though the right of doing so was proclaimed in article 8 of the 1992 Press Declaration.
The financial pressure and the rise in paper price are other serious challenges in the media practice and politics in Ethiopia. A study support this finding comes from Getachew (2003, p. 4), who says: “paying large amount of money to renew a license has forced some of the tabloids to close down”. The finding also confirms the conclusion reached by Weaver, Buddenbaum, and Fair (1985): “the stronger the media are economically, the less likely the government is to control these media” (p. 113).

The coming of satellite radio and television, and internet is both a challenge and a prospect to the Ethiopian media and politics. The public by now has started to use foreign satellite without subscription by simply purchasing dishes and receivers. So this might jeopardize the media practice as there is tendency of cultural imperialism and influences that come along with globalization. This might lead to political problem in the country. Conversely, the coming of these digital media is also a prospect where citizens can get better information access on one hand. The other prospects of the media practice is that some of the private media are getting capacity and experience so that they would become major sources of information.

6. Conclusion

Media and politics in Ethiopia are highly intertwined. Ethiopia has experienced sharp twists and turns in its political history where the country has gone through the imperial and semi-feudalistic regime followed by socialist military regime of the Derg to the present evolving democracy. As a result of these twists and turns of the country’s political situation, the development of the media has not gone so far.

In Ethiopia, the media has been highly shaped by the governments which ruled over different periods. The past authoritarian governments have produced authoritarian media which served as the mouth piece of its respective governments. In other words, the media was mainly meant to serve the wishes and whims of those on power; it served the respective ideological spheres.

The relative increase in the number of newspapers during imperial government was good, but substantially decreased during the military government. However, there have recently been improvements both in number and practice of media use with the introduction of dual ownership system by the incumbent government and the private press for the first time in the nation’s history. Most of the political discourses have been done on this fact.

Certainly, the current government has introduced the private media and I believe it is worth telling. This is because the landmark event in the history of the press in Ethiopia began after the coming of EPRDF (EPRDF, 2001). Put it the other way, the press in Ethiopia, consequently, has been put in the constitutional frame and this brought dual ownership system for the first time in the nation’s history, and the constitutionalization of the freedom of the press is a good step forward in the democratization process.

Nevertheless, the government has not granted complete freedom of press media and has kept its eyes on the practice of media. There is great hostility and acute polarization between government and private media. The government has not also granted license for private television and radio agencies. Further, the lack of professional knowledge about the practice and ethics of media from both media types have affected the development of the media to a greater extent. There seems to be a suspicion from the
government side to grant license for private electronic media stations as the former is not confident on the private media’s self-regulation.

The government media is also less critical about government policy and agenda. The lack of independent media council is still a problem to proper media management and organization. Finally, the media discourses are also focused on the forgoing litigations and debates. As most of the media discourses and political dynamics in Ethiopia revealed, the media practice and its history since the imperial time have been imperiled by political influence. Some scholars, however, believe that there are positive developments in the current government, but yet to work on the full independence of the media. Generally, the present study depicts that the media control system and ownership style, lack of professionalism and the economic level of the nation have their thumbprints on the overall development of the media and politics in Ethiopia.

7. Recommendations

The Ethiopian media has gone through a number of challenges over the last three regimes in the country. The major challenge in the media is the polarization of views from which most of the private media seemed to be organs of opposition parties and the government media tends to be less critical in its news coverage. So the government has to improve the present working condition of the media by giving professional freedom to journalists and on the other hand the private media in its way must work to the direction of ethical press which is governed by public interest.

Moreover, the distribution copies of the private and government newspapers are by far low. Mainly, the limited financial sources of the private media to increase the number of copies, the lack of better infrastructure for distribution of newspapers, inexistence of printed press distributors in cities except in the capital and rarely in some major cities, the lowest rate of literacy in the urban and mostly in rural areas are major factors that affect the development of the print media in the country. Closely related to this, the growing rate of the cost of publication and the increase in the price of paper and ink are also said to be among the bottle necks in the development of the independent media.

The radio has become the major source of news for rural citizens and the uneducated, but the availability of radio, its price and energy costs have been major determinants. As internet or online media has become part of the public sphere, the readership of print media would tend to decline. This is because though the access to internet and the literacy level is still low in Ethiopian society, there is a tendency for literate and elitist to shift to online media along with many others who are shifting to Satellite Television channels such as Arabsat, Nilesat, Eurosat, etc. This has a serious risk for the media and politics in the country since these digital media pave the way to cultural imperialism and electronic colonization despite the positive roles they play in becoming alternative source of information and entertainment. Therefore, the present regime should give more emphasis to address the above mentioned challenges towards giving more freedom in establishing and encouraging vibrant media which can build the growing democracy and national development endeavor in Ethiopia. Finally, the media in the nation must be run by an independent media council and should exercise self regulation.
MEDIA AND POLITICS…

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