

Human Rights Watch

Torture, Former Combatants, Political Prisoners, Terror Suspects, & Terrorists

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Former High Official Arrested

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(Nairobi) - The recent arrest of [Eritreas](#) former finance minister is a troubling sign that repressive tactics continue despite changes in Eritreas diplomatic engagements. Human Rights Watch [released a video](#) about Eritrean political prisoners including [21 senior government officials and journalists](#) detained in 2001 after they criticized President Isaias Afewerki.

Eritrean authorities arrested Abrehe Kidane Berhane, the former finance minister, on September 17, 2018, after he criticized President Isaias on [YouTube](#) and in a two-volume book, urging an end to Isaiass dictatorship and transfer [of] power to [a] new generation of [young leaders](#). Berhanes YouTube video and book, *Eritrea Hagerey* [Eritrea, My Country], echo the same concerns.

There was hope that change would come for Eritreas many political prisoners after Eritrea and Ethiopia made peace this year, ending three decades of enmity, said [Maria Burnett](#), East Africa director at Human Rights Watch. But, Berhanes arrest shows nothing has changed. Jailing critics in Eritrea remains the norm.

Eritrea has detained thousands of political prisoners in the last three decades. Eritrea should release all political prisoners, Human Rights Watch said.

In 2001, security forces arrested 11 high government officials who had [signed letters](#) to the president a few months earlier, complaining he was acting without restraint, even illegally. They wanted the government to convene the legislature regularly, hold new elections, and allow political parties to operate. None of their recommendations were carried out. Instead, the 11 officials and at least 10 journalists who reported on their criticism [were arrested and have been held incommunicado](#), without trial, ever since.

Robel Asrat, whose brother Amanuel was the editor-in-chief of the newspaper *Zemen*, when he was arrested in 2001, told Human Rights Watch recently that, We havent seen him for 17 years, with no access to his family. For 17 years, not only him ... His colleagues too. We dont even know where they are. You can understand how terrible the situation is if we cannot even see them.

Eritrea also imprisons people of faiths the government deems unlawful. The government treats Jehovahs Witnesses especially harshly, denying them ration cards and work permits. [Fifty-three are in detention](#), including three arrested and sent to a military training camp 24 years ago.

In his [book and video](#), Berhane says that Eritreas struggle for independence was never to install dictatorship. We need ideas and principles to guide us not individuals with absolute power. He said the president should reconvene the National Assembly, which hasnt met since January 2002. Once convened, he predicted, the legislature would replace Isaias in a peaceful, legal, civilized and Eritrean manner. Berhane warned, [i]f there is any force that wants to derail the process, he would have to face the Eritrean youth. Berhane asked Isaias to debate him about his ideas on Eritrean television. Instead, Berhane was arrested.

Berhane had expressed some of the same concerns before, but not publicly. He had been active in Eritreas fight for independence from Ethiopia, starting in 1975. After independence in 1991, he held a number of high-level government positions, including minister of finance.

In 2012, Berhane was frozen in his ministerial position, a common penalty for officials who displease the president, because he had begun to urge reforms internally. Although frozen officials keep their positions and salaries, they are not allowed to exercise the functions of their office. Two years later, Berhane asked to be allowed to resign. His request was granted, and he has been unemployed since.

According to family and media reports, Berhanes wife, Almaz Habtemariam, [was arrested](#) in January this year and is currently held in

Hazhaz Prison and Rehabilitation Center in the capital, Asmara. As in Berhanes case, the government has brought no charges and gives no reason for her arrest. Family members told Human Rights Watch they believe her arrest was intended to cause Berhane suffering and intimidate him from going public with his criticism.

There is no reason for him to stay in jail for writing a book Berhanes nephew Solomon Habtom told Human Rights Watch. We dont know where he is right now. He has medical issues. The government, as they have done in the past, they may give us his body, telling us that he died from sickness. Before its too late, they need to free him now. We are worried he may die in prison.

Eritrea has not held elections since 1993. Isaias himself has never been elected and has refused to put into effect a constitution approved by the then-functioning legislature in 1997. The [constitution mandated](#) periodic elections, including protections for fundamental human rights, including freedoms of speech, press, peaceful assembly and religion, and provided for due process of law and an independent judiciary. The constitution also outlaws slavery and forced labor.

Eritreans over age 17, and some who are younger, are subject to [national service](#) in civilian and military positions for unlimited periods, rather than the 18 months [specified in Eritrean law](#). During their prolonged conscription, they are [subject to systematic abuses](#), including torture, lack of food, and pay insufficient to support a family. No institutional recourse exists. The endless conscription prompts thousands of Eritreans, including children, to [flee the country](#) each month.

In 2016, a United Nations Commission of Inquiry [found](#) that the Isaias government engaged in systemic, widespread and gross human rights violations. In July, the United Nations Human Rights Council adopted a resolution by acclamation [c]ondemn[ing] in the strongest terms the reported systematic, [widespread and gross human rights violations](#) that have been and are being committed by the Government of Eritrea in a climate of generalized impunity. The council urged the government to guarantee the right and opportunity of all citizens to take part at all levels in the political process.

Any governments seeking to engage with Isais or do business in Eritrea should be pushing for the release of Eritreas long-suffering political prisoners, Burnett said. The arrest of Berhane for speaking out betrays the hope that peace and diplomacy would permit conditions inside the country to improve.

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