

## **Reeyot Alemu: Young Heroine of Ethiopian Press Freedom**

**By Al Mariam**

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The past two weeks have been glorious days for Africans. Eskinder Nega, the heroic Ethiopian journalist was honored with Pen America's Barbara Goldsmith Freedom to Write Award. The award honors writers throughout the world who have fought courageously in the face of adversity for the right to freedom of expression. Charles Taylor, warlord-turned-Liberian-president, was convicted of 11 counts of war crimes and crimes against humanity by the U.N. Special Tribunal for Sierra Leone. Yesterday Reeyot Alemu, the young Ethiopian journalist, became the winner of the International Women's Media Foundation 2012 Courage in Journalism Award.

Reeyot, 31, is a teacher and columnist for the independent Ethiopian newsmagazine Feteh. When she and her co-defendant Woubshet Taye were arrested in June 2011, they were accused of plotting to sabotage telephone and electricity lines and held incommunicado. In a June 17 column in Feteh, Reeyot criticized Zenawi's harebrained public fundraising campaign for the so-called Grand Renaissance Dam on Abay River project. That column seemed to have gotten Zenawi's goat. But Reeyot has been persistent in her criticisms. She even had the audacity to nick Zenawi's scared cow, the half-baked so-called five-year growth and transformation plan. In September, Reeyot and Woubshet were charged with "conspiracy to commit terrorist acts and participation in a terrorist organization" under Meles Zenawi's cut-and-paste anti-terrorism law.

The so-called evidence of "conspiracy" against Reeyot in kangaroo court consisted of intercepted emails and wiretapped telephone conversations she had about peaceful protests and change with other journalists. Reeyot's articles in Feteh and other publications on the Ethiopian Review website on the activities of opposition groups were also introduced as evidence.

Reeyot and Woubshet had no access to legal counsel during their three months in pretrial detention. Both were denied counsel during interrogations. The kangaroo court refused to investigate their allegations of torture, mistreatment and denial of medical care in detention.

Regime mouthpiece Shimeles Kemal blathered in interviews about Reeyot and Woubshet's certain involvement in planning terrorist acts while the case was pending in court. He seemed totally clueless of Art. 20 (3) of the Ethiopian Constitution which guarantees: "During proceedings accused persons have a right to be presumed innocent." The kangaroo court sentenced Reeyot to a 14 year prison term and fined her birr 33,000.

As to the judgment of the kangaroo court, Amnesty International was appalled: "There is no evidence that they are guilty of any criminal wrongdoing. There is no evidence that they are guilty of any criminal wrongdoing. We believe that they are prisoners of conscience, prosecuted because of their legitimate criticism of the government. They must be released immediately and unconditionally." Human Rights Watch was confounded by the idiocy of the charges: "According to the charge sheet, the evidence consisted primarily of online articles critical of the government and telephone discussions notably regarding peaceful protest actions that do not amount to acts of terrorism. Furthermore, the descriptions of the charges in the initial charge sheet did not contain even the basic elements of the crimes of which the defendants are accused...."

In recognizing Reeyot for its Courage in Journalism Award, the IWMF's stated:

Women are grossly under-represented in journalism and the media in Ethiopia. There are few Ethiopian journalists in Ethiopia (state media), and even fewer in the independent media. Journalism in Ethiopia is traditionally dominated by males and societal and cultural expectations discourage women from choosing the field of journalism. Cultural stereotypes are particularly discouraging to young women interested in journalism. The fact that the Ethiopian Government pursues and persecutes courageous, brave and professional women journalists does not bode well particularly for young women who may be interested in journalism. As a result, women's

voices (as reporters, editors, journalists, decision-making chambers) are rarely heard and women's issues are often relegated to secondary position.

Congratulations to Press Freedom Heroine Reeyot Alemu!

After her sentence, Reeyot's father, Ato Alemu, in an interview said that his daughter will not apologize, seek a pardon or apply for a clemency. "As a father, would you rather not advise your daughter to apologize?" Ato Alemu replied:

This is perhaps one of the most difficult questions a parent can face. As any one of us who are parents would readily admit, there is an innate biological chord that attaches us to our kids. We wish nothing but the best for them. We try as much as humanly possible to keep them from harm.... Whether or not to beg for clemency is her right and her decision. I would honor and respect whatever decision she makes... To answer your specific question regarding my position on the issue by the fact of being her father, I would rather have her not plead for clemency, for she has not committed any crime.

When Zenawi jailed Birtukan Midekssa in December 2008, he emphatically and sadistically guaranteed that "there will never be an agreement with anybody to release Birtukan. Ever. Full stop. That's a dead issue." No doubt Zenawi would like to make Reeyot, Eskinder, Woubshet, the Swedish journalists Martin Schibbye and Johan Persson , the 193 unarmed protesters massacred in 2005.... a dead issue. But they shall live in our hearts, in our spirits and even our souls, for they are freedom of expression personified.

This past Monday I raised my pen to salute my hero Eskinder Nega. Today I rise up to salute my heroine Reeyot Alemu. In the face of the wicked enemies of press freedom, my cup runneth over! Two home runs in one week! It just doesn't get better than that!

FREE REEYOT ALEMU!

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