

Shortlist of nominees

Index on Censorship Annual

Freedom of Expression

Awards 2010

Meeting Judges Panel

Judges Panel 2010

Shaheed Fatima, human rights lawyer; Emily Bell, editor of Guardian.co.uk;
Caroline Michel, chief executive PFD; Lemn Sissay, poet and writer; Lindsey
Hilsum, international editor for Channel 4 News.

Shortlist - Bindmans Law and Campaigning Award - 2010

Netsanet Demissie / Daniel Bekele (Ethiopia)

In 2009, Netsanet Demissie and Daniel Bekele continued their struggle against the Ethiopian government and its moves to make the expression of dissent illegal. Outstanding campaigners who work to promote social justice and the eradication of poverty in Ethiopia, both were imprisoned for their efforts to ensure the 2005 elections were monitored legitimately and objectively, and for providing information and education about the election process to the electorate. Following disputed elections in 2005, Daniel Bekele was physically assaulted and, in November 2005, he and Netsanet Demissie were arrested. They were convicted in April 2007, alongside dozens of journalists, politicians, and civil society leaders, for crimes ranging from genocide to treason. Their trial was regarded as a sham by human rights and press freedom communities. Alone among the detained, Netsanet and Daniel made the decision not to sign a letter of apology to the government and contest the charges in court, testing the rule of law as a matter of principle. After a protracted series of appeals, re-submission of documentary evidence and new testimonies, they were eventually acquitted on charges of treason but convicted of incitement to overthrow the government. The trial was again regarded as deeply flawed and even the judges involved acknowledged that the civil society activities of the accused were legitimate and even commendable. They were released from prison in March 2008 and since that time have continued to speak out on the right to free expression, despite receiving threats and in a climate that is increasingly hostile to free speech and civic activism. In the same year of their release, the government enacted the Charities and Societies Proclamation, making much human rights work in Ethiopia illegal.

At the time of their arrest, Daniel Bekele worked as Head of Policy Research and Advocacy at ActionAid Ethiopia and Netsanet Demissie was Executive Director and co-founder of a local NGO, the Organisation for Social Justice in Ethiopia (OSJE). Currently, Daniel is undertaking PhD research on media law in East Africa; he speaks publicly on the situation in Ethiopia on a regular basis. In 2009, he was awarded Human Rights Watch's Alison Des Forges Award for Extraordinary Activism. Netsanet Demissie is currently based in South Africa, where he is Civil Society Watch Programme Manager for Civicus.

“Netsanet arrived on the electoral scene with a bang and in the process did what most Ethiopian human rights advocates rarely managed to do: get a federal High Court to agree with him, in a precedent-setting decision, that the nation’s election rules were violative of the Ethiopian Constitution...Both Ethiopians and foreigners who know Netsanet talk about his absolute belief in the justice system...Everyone who knew and met Netsanet speak of his political independence and the importance he accorded to impartiality.”

From Ethiopian blog *Carpe Diem Ethiopia*:

<http://carpediemethiopia.blogspot.com/2006/06/netsanet-le-netsanet.html>

“What Daniel sought to do was to move the essential elements of a free, democratic society - free speech, free press, and by acting as an election monitor, free elections - from the margins into the centre of the Ethiopian Consciousness...In a country that suffers from undeniable brain drain, you can understand our praise of this man and ultimately our love of Daniel, a man who remains and battles daily for our rights and our country.”

From Ethiopian blog *Mitmita*:

www.mitmitaye.com/2008/02/i-heart-daniel-bekele.html