

# Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada

[Home](#)

> [Research Program](#)

> Responses to Information Requests

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## Responses to Information Requests

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17 October 2014

### **ETH104974.E**

Ethiopia: Semayawi Party (Blue Party), including origin, mandate, leadership. Structure, legal status, and election participation; party membership; treatment of party members and supporters by authorities  
Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, Ottawa

#### **1. Overview**

The Semayawi party [also known as the Blue Party] is an opposition party in Ethiopia (*The Africa Report* 3 June 2013; AI 26 Apr. 2014; VOA 3 June 2013). It was reportedly formed in early 2012 (IHS Global Insight 4 June 2013). Several sources indicate that it is a new political party (ibid.; Sudan Tribune 5 Sept. 2013; Ethiomedia 1 Sept. 2013).

Sources report that following the 2005 elections, there were protests in which approximately 200 people were killed (*The Guardian* 3 June 2013; IHS Global Insight 4 June 2013; *The Independent* 5 June 2013; *The Economist* 8 June 2013) and "thousands were arrested" (ibid.). According to Inter Press Services (IPS), many of the leaders of the Semayawi Party took part in the 2005 protests (IPS 6 June 2013). Similarly, Voice of America (VOA) said the party is "a small offshoot of an opposition group that collapsed following the 2005 elections" (VOA 3 June 2013).

#### **1.1 Mandate**

According to the Semayawi Party's program, its vision is

[t]o see an Ethiopia where all democratic rights are respected, where there is good governance and rule of law which works responsibly and accountably for the fulfillment of the wishes of the people, where economic and social prosperity reigns, that is the pride of its citizens, that contributes its own share to good relations between the world's people. (Semayawi Party n.d.a)

Sources indicate that the Semayawi Party is primarily represented by and focused on youth (VOA 3 June 2013; Semayawi Party n.d.b, 1). According to a speech delivered by the party chairman at the US embassy, the Semayawi Party aims to address problems facing Ethiopian youth such as youth unemployment, lack of educational opportunities, and "lack of basic freedoms" (ibid., 1, 2). The same source indicates that the party aims to maximize "opportunities for all youth regardless of social background" (ibid., 5).

The party's program states that the Semayawi Party was founded "to seize political power in order to make our country free of poverty and war and make it a country where justice and peace reigns" (ibid. n.d.a). The party reportedly promotes "peaceful struggle" to gain political power (ibid.) or "nonviolent social and political change" (Mariam 16 Mar. 20 14).

The program further explains that the party is guided by the principles of "liberal democracy" and promotes individual rights over collective rights (IPS 6 June 2013; Semayawi Party n.d.a). According to the speech by the chairperson, the party reportedly promotes "free and fair elections" and "rule of law" (ibid. n.d.b, 9). The party also aims to address extreme poverty and hunger, general unemployment, and corruption (ibid., 2). The party reportedly promotes unity and is against division "along ethnic, religious, regional and linguistic lines" (ibid., 4). The Solidary Movement for a New Ethiopia, a US-based NGO that promotes social justice and human rights in Ethiopia (SMNE n.d.), describes the Semayawi party as "seeking to move an 'inclusive' Ethiopia forward" (ibid. 5 June 2013).

According to Amnesty International (AI), the Semayawi party has spoken out against the imprisonment of opposition members and journalists as well as "government repression of the peaceful Muslim protest movement, and the detention and prosecution of key figures of the movement" (AI 5 Sept. 2014).

## 1.2 Leadership

Several sources indicate that Yilkal Getnet [also known as Yilkil Getnet, Yilekal Getachew, Yenekal Getinet] is the Semayawi Party chairman (Ethiopian Review 12 Oct. 2013; Ethiomedia 22 Mar. 2014). According to IPS, he was a youth activist during the 2005 protests for another opposition party and, following the protests, he spent 3 months in a "military concentration camp" followed by 3 months in prison (IPS 6 June 2013).

Other Semayawi Party leaders mentioned by sources include:

- Sileshi Feyisa, Vice Chairman (Ethiopian Review 12 Oct. 2013);
- Yidnekachew Kebede, Head of Legal Affairs (ibid.; Ethiomedia 1 Sept. 2013; Semayawi Party 17 Mar. 2014);
- Getaneh Balcha, Head of Organizational Affairs (ibid.; Mariam 16 Mar. 2014);
- Berhanu Tekleyared, Head of Public Relations (ibid.; Semayawi Party 17 Mar. 2014);
- Yonatan Tesefaye, Youth Affairs Head (ibid.);
- Endashaw Emishaw, Head of Office (Ethiopian Review 12 Oct. 2013);
- Hanna Walelegin, Head of Women Affairs (ibid.);
- Abel Ephrem, member of Public Relations Committee (Mariam 16 Mar. 2014);
- Bekalu Adane, member of the Central Committee (Ethiopian Review 12 Oct. 2013);
- Yonas Kedir, member of the Central Council (ibid.); and
- Yeshewas Asefa, "a leader" (Human Rights Watch 19 July 2014).

## 1.3 Structure

Information about the Semayawi Party structure was scarce among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response. There is reportedly a "Central Committee" and a "Central Council" (Ethiopian Review 12 Oct. 2013). Details about the Central Council and Central Committee could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response. According to the speech by the party chairman, the party has "opened contact points in rural areas" (Semayawi Party n.d.b, 9). According to the National Electoral Board of Ethiopia, the party is "country-wide" (Ethiopia Dec. 2012).

The Semayawi Party has support from a Washington-based group called the Semayawi Support North America (SSNA n.d.). According to its website, the support group shares "the core values and principles" of the Semayawi Party and its mission is to

provide all rounded support to Semayawi Party; to provide a forum for Semayawi supporters and other like-minded individuals in North America to get involved in the struggle; to disseminate research articles and/or materials and information which have relevant bearings on Ethiopia, Semayawi supporters and the Ethiopian Diaspora in North America. (ibid.)

In December 2013 and January 2014, Yilkal Getnet reportedly met with members of the Ethiopian diaspora communities in Washington, Atlanta, Houston, Dallas, San Jose, Los Angeles, Las Vegas and Seattle to introduce the party and garner moral and financial support (AI Mariam 20 Jan. 2014).

## 1.4 Legal Status

The Semayawi Party is registered (as the Blue Party) as a political party in the National Electoral Board of Ethiopia (Ethiopia Dec. 2012). According to the chairman's speech, the Semayawi Party has "certification" from the election board but faced "extreme difficulties" in obtaining the certification (Semayawi Party n.d.b, 9). Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

## 1.5 Election Participation

The last parliamentary and regional elections in Ethiopia were reportedly in 2010 and the next one is scheduled for 2015 (Freedom House 2014). The Semayawi [or Blue] Party did not appear on the National Electoral Board of Ethiopia's list of parties participating in elections, though the parties on the list registered in 2009 or earlier (Ethiopia Dec. 2012).

## 2. Party Membership

Information about the requirements and procedures for party membership, as well as information about membership cards, could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

## 3. Involvement in Protests and Treatment by Authorities

According to AI, the Semayawi Party staged several protests in 2013-2014 during which a number of the demonstrators and organizers were arrested and temporarily detained (AI 26 Apr. 2014). Similarly, Freedom House reported that the Semayawi party said that the government arrested large groups of their members and held them without charge (Freedom House 2014).

The US Department of State's *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2013* indicates that some people were arrested in connection to a 17 March 2013 protest organized by the Semayawi Party (US 19 Apr. 2014, 15). Further information about this protest could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

Several sources report that on 2 June 2013, the Semayawi Party organized the first government-permitted public protest since 2005 (*The Guardian* 3 June 2013; US 19 Apr. 2014, 15; IHS Global Insight 4 June 2013). The protest occurred in Addis Ababa (ibid.; *The Africa Report* 3 June 2013; *The Independent* 5 June 2013). The number of protesters ranged from government estimates of 2,000 (VOA 3 June 2013), to 4,000 (*The Economist* 8 June 2013), to estimates by organizers of 15,000-20,000 (VOA 3 June 2013). Sources report that the protest was peaceful and the police did not intervene (*The Economist* 8 June 2013; SMNE 5 June 2013). Rally participants included people from different parties, ethnicities, religions and regions (ibid.). Similarly, VOA reported that participants represented "a broad spectrum of Ethiopian youth" (VOA 3 June 2013).

Sources indicate that the protesters called for the release of imprisoned journalists and political activists and government action to address unemployment, corruption and inflation (*The Africa Report* 3 June 2013; IHS Global Insight 4 June 2013; *The Independent* 5 June 2013). They also called for the stop of state "interference in religious affairs" (IPS 6 June 2013; SMNE 5 June 2013).

According to IHS Global Insight, in June and July of 2013, the Semayawi Party staged protests in the northern Amhara and Southern Nations Nationalities and Peoples (SNNP) regions against the "harassment of opposition members and the controversial land redistribution system" (IHS Global Insight 30 July 2013). They also threatened to increase the frequency of protests if the government did not release political prisoners by August 2013 (ibid.). Corroborating and further information about these protests could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

Sources report that on 31 August 2013, authorities raided the Semayawi party's headquarters (US 19 Apr. 2014, 15; Ethiomedia 1 Sept. 2013; AI 5 Sept. 2013). According to AI, federal police and intelligence officers forcefully entered their office in Ginfile in Addis Ababa while members were preparing for a demonstration the following day and all members present (estimated at 60-90) were arrested and detained, but were released without charge several hours later (ibid.). A number of the party members who were detained told AI that they and many others were "severely beaten" and sustained injuries while in custody (ibid.). Sources report that 60-100 people were temporarily detained and some were beaten (ibid.; US 19 Apr. 2014, 15; BBC 2 Sept. 2013). In addition, the police reportedly confiscated equipment from the office (AI 5 Sept. 2013; Human Rights Watch 2014). Human Rights Watch reports that the planned protest was cancelled as a result of the raid (ibid.). AI indicated that a government spokesperson denied the action against the Semayawi party, but AI noted that the allegations "fit a long-standing pattern of credible reports of intimidation of peaceful protestors and of political opposition parties" (AI 5 Sept. 2013). Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

According to the Ethiopian Review, the following leaders and members of the party were detained by authorities as they left the office on 11 October 2013: the Semayawi Party Chairman, Vice Chairman, Head of Legal Affairs, Head of Office, Head of Women's Affairs, a member of the Central Committee, a member of the Central Council and five other members (Ethiopian Review 12 Oct. 2013).

According to the Semayawi Party website, 14 members of the Semayawi Party, including the Organization Affairs Head, the Legal Affairs Head, the Public Relations Head, and the Youth Affairs Head, were arrested in the town of Gonder in February 2014 for attempting to hold a peaceful public demonstration (Semayawi Party 17 Mar. 2014).

Sources report that in March 2014, seven female members of the Semayawi party were arrested after they chanted slogans calling for freedom, justice and the release of political prisoners during a run to mark International Women's Day (Mariam 16 Mar. 2014; AI 26 Apr. 2014). According to AI, the women were released without charges after spending ten days in detention (ibid.). Al Mariam, a professor of political science at the State University of California at San Bernardino who specializes in constitutional law and African politics and is a self-declared supporter of the Semayawi Party, indicated in a blog article that the women were victims of threats and physical assaults while in detention (Mariam 16 Mar. 2014).

Sources indicate that in March of 2014, security officials at the Addis Ababa airport held the chairman of the Semayawi Party and prevented him from traveling to the US to attend a US-sponsored training session for African leaders (Ethiomeia 22 Mar. 2014; Semayawi Party 22 Mar. 2014).

AI reported that the Semayawi Party told them that 20 of its members were arrested on 24 and 25 April 2014, including the Vice Chairman of the party, and were detained in multiple police stations in Addis Ababa (AI 26 Apr. 2014). The chairman was also reportedly detained at this time, but later released (ibid.).

AI and Human Rights Watch reported that on 8 July 2014, Semayawi member Yeshewas Asefa was arrested, along with three members of other political parties, on "terror" charges (Human Rights Watch 19 July 2014; AI 10 July 2014). According to AI, he was being held in the Maikelawi federal police detention centre in Addis Ababa but Semayawi party members who tried to visit him in detention were denied access until after the police investigation was concluded (ibid.). According to AI and Human Rights Watch, detainees at Maikelawi are sometimes subject to "torture" during interrogation (ibid.; Human Rights Watch 2014). AI also states that "terror" charges are "commonly used as a pretext to put dissenters behind bars in Ethiopia" (AI 10 July 2014). According to Freedom House, in 2011, more than 100 members of opposition parties had been detained under the 2009 antiterrorism law (Freedom House 2014).

This Response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Research Directorate within time constraints. This Response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim for refugee protection. Please find below the list of sources consulted in researching this Information Request.

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## Additional Sources Consulted

**Oral sources:** Attempts to contact representatives of the following organizations were unsuccessful within the time constraints of this Response: Semayawi Party; Semayawi Support North America; Solidarity Movement for a New Ethiopia.

**Internet sites, including:** Africa Confidential; Africa Research Bulletin; ecoi.net; Europa World Online; Factiva; International Crisis Group; International Federation for Human Rights; Political Handbook of the World; United Nations – Refworld.

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[Top of Page](#)

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