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Freedom on the Net 2023 - Ethiopia

NOT FREE

26

/ 100

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LAST YEAR'S SCORE & STATUS

27 / 100 Not Free

Scores are based on a scale of 0 (least free) to 100 (most free). See the [research methodology](#) and [report acknowledgements](#).

Overview

Conflicts between the Ethiopian federal government and regional forces in Tigray, Amhara, and Oromia have led to sharp restrictions on the human rights of internet users. An internet shutdown that the federal government imposed in Tigray Region in 2020 began to abate during the coverage period after a peace agreement was signed in November 2022 and infrastructure was gradually restored. However, the government repeatedly restricted connectivity in conflict-affected areas of Amhara and Oromia, which increased the challenges of reporting on human rights violations and enabled the spread of misinformation. After the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church (EOTC) criticized the government's recognition of a breakaway synod of bishops and called for protests in February 2023, the government blocked major social media platforms nationwide through the end of the coverage period. The government of Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed continued to crack down on media outlets and journalists with an online presence, including by detaining journalists without charge for up to two months, revoking press licenses, and abducting and intimidating prominent online reporters.

The appointment of Prime Minister Abiy, who came to power in 2018 after his predecessor resigned in the face of mass protests, set off a transitional period in Ethiopia. Abiy pledged to reform the authoritarian state and has held elections and implemented some liberalization policies. However, Ethiopia remains beset by civil conflict and intercommunal violence, abuses by security forces and violations of due process are still common, and many restrictive laws remain in force. Between late 2020 and the November 2022 peace deal, fighting between the federal government and the Tigrayan People's Liberation Front (TPLF) led to the displacement of hundreds of thousands of people and credible allegations of atrocity crimes, and the violence in Tigray has spilled over into neighboring Amhara and Afar regions.

Key Developments, June 1, 2022 – May 31, 2023

- Telecommunications infrastructure in Tigray began to be restored after the federal government and the TPLF signed a peace agreement in November 2022, enabling phone and internet access in the region for the first time since November 2020 (see A1).
- Amid an escalation in violence involving federal forces, the rebel Oromo Liberation Army (OLA), and Amhara regional forces, Ethiopian authorities imposed a communications blackout in the Kellem Wollega area of western Oromia in July 2022, sporadically restricted connectivity in Oromia during the coverage period, and blocked access to mobile data in several cities in Amhara in April 2023 (see A3).
- Authorities restricted access to the social media platforms TikTok, Facebook, Telegram, and YouTube from February 2023 until after the end of the coverage period in response to efforts by the EOTC to organize antigovernment rallies via social media (see B1).
- Several online journalists were arrested and detained for up to two months at a time—before being released without charges—in retaliation for their reporting during the coverage period (see C3).
- Four online journalists and activists were abducted by security forces during the coverage period, and several journalists fled the country to avoid renewed detentions (see C7).

A Obstacles to Access

A1 0-6 pts

Do infrastructural limitations restrict access to the internet or the speed and quality of internet connections? 1 / 6

Despite marginal gains in internet access, Ethiopia remains one of the least connected countries in the world.

As of January 2023, DataReportal reported that Ethiopia's internet penetration rate was 16.7 percent of the total population.¹ The International Telecommunication Union (ITU) cites the same 16.7 percent figure in its most recent data.² However, state-owned Ethio Telecom, the leading internet service provider (ISP), states that there are about 31.3 million internet users in the country, which would represent about 26 percent of the population.³ Internet penetration rates vary substantially between urban and rural areas (see A2).

In May 2022, Ethio Telecom launched fifth-generation (5G) mobile network technology in the capital, Addis Ababa. The company's chief executive announced that it planned to build 150 5G sites over the next 12 months.⁴

The electricity infrastructure is somewhat unreliable, and internet access was inhibited by power outages and protracted conflict during the coverage period. Since November 2020, internet and electricity services have been disrupted in Tigray Region due to a civil war between federal forces and the TPLF. Beginning in July 2021, as TPLF fighters advanced south from Tigray and occupied key cities in Amhara Region, residents in the affected areas temporarily lost access to electricity, banking, and communication services (see A3).⁵ After a peace agreement was signed in November 2022,⁶ such services were partially restored in and around Tigray.

Internet speeds declined during the coverage period. As of March 2023, Ookla reported median mobile data download and upload speeds of 16.48 Mbps (megabits per second) and 11.56 Mbps, respectively.⁷ The median fixed-line download and upload speeds increased during the coverage period to 8.08 Mbps and 8.86 Mbps.⁸

According to the Digital 2023 report, there were 66.80 million mobile accounts capable of connecting to the internet in Ethiopia as of January 2023.⁹ In a bid to boost smartphone ownership, Ethio Telecom introduced installment and credit plans for prospective customers in early 2020.¹⁰

A2 0-3 pts

Is access to the internet prohibitively expensive or beyond the reach of certain segments of the population for geographical, ¹ / ₃ social, or other reasons?

While a series of price reductions in recent years have made mobile and fixed-line broadband internet services more affordable for Ethiopians,¹¹ prices have been kept artificially high due to state-owned Ethio Telecom's dominant market position.¹² Prior to the cuts, Ethiopians had spent an average of \$85 per month for limited mobile or fixed-line

internet access, whereas better-quality services in neighboring Kenya and Uganda cost less than \$30 a month.

In January 2022, Ethio Telecom instituted price cuts of up to 45 percent for broadband services as a new, competing service provider prepared to enter the market (see A4).¹³ After this round of cuts, connections with a speed of 2 Mbps that had cost 699 birr (\$13) per month were reduced to 499 birr (\$9), while connections with a speed of 4 Mbps that had cost 1,099 birr (\$20) per month were reduced to 699 birr (\$13).

Telecommunications infrastructure is almost entirely absent from rural areas, where nearly 80 percent of the population resides.¹⁴ A handful of signal stations serve the entire country, resulting in network congestion and frequent disconnections.¹⁵ In smaller towns, users often hike to the top of the nearest hill to receive a stronger signal for their mobile devices. Ethio Telecom launched 4G service in parts of Oromia Region in February 2021, making high-speed mobile data accessible outside of Addis Ababa for the first time.¹⁶ In October 2021, Ethio Telecom announced that 4G service coverage had been expanded to an additional 22 towns beyond the 53 municipalities where such service had been available as of June 2021.¹⁷

Many Ethiopians rely on cybercafés, universities, and government offices for internet access. In rural areas and small towns, cybercafés are reportedly the most common means of accessing the internet. Cybercafé prices range from 7 to 10 birr (\$0.13 to \$0.19) for an hour of access. Rates in rural cybercafés tend to be higher.

There have been some efforts to address the urban-rural divide and the gender gap in internet usage. In March 2019, Ethio Telecom announced that it would distribute mobile phones to women in rural areas.¹⁸ That July, it announced that it would provide mobile customers with 1 GB of internet data and 20 minutes' worth of local calling credits free of charge.¹⁹ The impact of such efforts remains unclear.

A3 0-6 pts

Does the government exercise technical or legal control over internet infrastructure for the purposes of restricting connectivity? ^{1 / 6}

The government regularly imposes connectivity restrictions, often for political reasons and with little transparency.

On November 3, 2020, a total internet and telecommunications blackout was imposed in Tigray Region after conflict broke out between federal and Tigrayan security forces.²⁰ The shutdown remained in place during part of the current coverage period, until a peace agreement was reached in November 2022.²¹ The disruption obstructed the flow of information throughout the conflict,²² preventing the media from reporting on

Ethiopian, Eritrean, and TPLF military actions that human rights groups later described as mass atrocity crimes.²³ The communications restrictions also impeded the documentation of rights abuses and the distribution of humanitarian aid; security forces blockaded food supplies to cause mass food insecurity, engaged in sexual violence, and attacked aid workers.²⁴

Ethio Telecom blamed “law enforcement operations” for the service shutdown in Tigray, releasing closed-circuit television camera footage of armed individuals forcibly entering its Mekelle compound and deactivating the power source.²⁵ A March 2021 statement from Prime Minister Abiy blamed unnamed “perpetrators” for the attack on the Ethio Telecom Mekelle site and accused the TPLF of damaging fiber-optic cables.²⁶

As TPLF forces advanced into Amhara and Afar Regions, the Ethiopian government declared a state of emergency and suspended banking, electricity, and internet services in any town that they occupied.²⁷ In September 2021, internet users reported that Gondar, a locality in Amhara, was under siege by TPLF forces and experiencing a network blackout.²⁸ After TPLF forces gained control of Woldia, another Amhara town, in August 2021, internet, telephone, transportation, water, and electricity services were suspended.²⁹ The internet blackout continued in both Woldia and Gondar until January 2022.³⁰

In February 2022, internet and phone services were reportedly suspended in some parts of Oromia Region, including Kellem Wollega, amid an escalation in violence attributed to Ethiopian forces, forces affiliated with the rebel OLA, and Amhara regional forces.³¹ Kellem Wollega suffered another communications and internet blackout in July 2022.³² Authorities reportedly continued to sporadically restrict connectivity in conflict-affected areas in Oromia during the coverage period,³³ though the number and duration of these restrictions could not be verified.³⁴

On April 3, 2023, authorities blocked access to mobile data in several major cities in Amhara Region (Gondar, Bahir Dar, and Woldia) after protests erupted in response to the federal government’s decision to dissolve the Amhara regional special forces.³⁵ Mobile data remained inaccessible in cities in Amhara as of May 1, 2023.³⁶ On August 3, 2023, after the end of the coverage period, authorities blocked internet access in Amhara Region.³⁷

The Ethiopian government’s predominant control over the country’s telecommunications infrastructure via Ethio Telecom enables it to restrict information flows and access to internet and mobile phone services. As a landlocked country, Ethiopia has no direct access to submarine cable landing stations; instead, it connects to the international internet via satellite, a fiber-optic cable that passes through Sudan and connects to its

international gateway, and another that passes through Djibouti to an international undersea cable. All connections to the international internet are completely centralized under Ethio Telecom, allowing the government to cut off traffic at will.

A4 0-6 pts

Are there legal, regulatory, or economic obstacles that restrict 1 / the diversity of service providers? 6

The space for independent initiatives in the information and communication technology (ICT) sector, entrepreneurial or otherwise, is extremely limited. Ethio Telecom long held a firm monopoly on fixed-line and mobile services, and while a second telecommunications provider recently began operating, it still faces considerable disadvantages.

In June 2021, the Ethiopian Communications Authority (ECA) issued a license that would allow the Global Partnership for Ethiopia to become the country's second telecommunications provider. The partnership—a consortium led by Safaricom of Kenya that also included Britain's Vodafone, South Africa's Vodacom, the Sumitomo Corporation of Japan, and British International Investment (formerly the CDC Group)—bid \$850 million for the license.³⁸ In June 2020, the ECA had reported receiving 11 complete submissions from operators applying for two new telecommunications licenses offered by the government.³⁹ Safaricom began providing mobile service in Addis Ababa in October 2022,⁴⁰ and had expanded its coverage to 21 cities by the end of 2022.⁴¹

Safaricom operates in Ethiopia through an infrastructure-sharing agreement with Ethio Telecom.⁴² In December 2022, Ethio Telecom threatened to sue Safaricom, blaming it for a service interruption in Afar Region that lasted for several hours. The issue was eventually resolved through an agreement between the two parties.

In November 2022, the Ethiopian government expressed renewed interest in selling a stake in Ethio Telecom. The ECA also announced its intention to issue an additional telecommunications license to new bidders.⁴³ The government had halted its previous efforts to sell a 40 percent stake in Ethio Telecom in March 2022, citing "recent developments and fast-moving macroeconomic changes globally and from a country perspective."⁴⁴ Officials had initially announced its intent to sell the stake in May 2020,⁴⁵ as part of its broader moves to open the country's telecommunications market to other players,⁴⁶ and a tender process for the sale was launched in June 2021.⁴⁷ An estimated \$40 million of a \$300 million World Bank loan finalized in 2019 was committed to support the diversification of the telecommunications sector, including the restructuring and partial privatization of Ethio Telecom.⁴⁸

China is a key source of investment for the Ethiopian telecommunications industry. Two major Chinese firms, ZTE and Huawei, were involved in

upgrading Addis Ababa's mobile broadband networks to 4G technology and expanding 3G networks elsewhere.⁴⁹ In February 2020, the Ethiopian government paid Huawei 173 million birr (\$3.2 million) to install long-term evolution (LTE) network infrastructure in Addis Ababa.⁵⁰ The partnership enabled the government to maintain its hold over the telecommunications sector,⁵¹ though the networks built by the Chinese firms have been criticized for their high cost and poor service.⁵² In 2018, the Beijing-based telecommunications company Hengbao was contracted to supply SIM cards for Ethio Telecom.⁵³ These relationships have led to growing fears that Chinese entities may be assisting the authorities in developing more robust ICT censorship and surveillance capacities (see C5).⁵⁴

While the government maintains that ICT infrastructure is crucial for the modernization of the economy,⁵⁵ onerous government regulations still stymie the sector. For example, imported ICT items are tariffed at the same high rate as luxury items, unlike other imported goods such as construction materials and heavy-duty machinery, which are given duty-free import privileges to encourage investments in infrastructure.⁵⁶ Ethiopians are required to register their laptops and tablet computers with the Ethiopian customs authority before they travel out of the country, ostensibly to prevent individuals from illegally importing electronic devices. Observers believe the requirement enables officials to monitor citizens' ICT activities by accessing the devices without consent.⁵⁷

Cybercafés are subject to burdensome operating requirements under the Telecom Fraud Offences Proclamation of 2012,⁵⁸ which prohibits them from providing Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) services and mandates that owners obtain a license from Ethio Telecom through an opaque process that can take months. Violations of the requirements entail criminal liability, though no cases of prosecution have been reported.⁵⁹

A5 0-4 pts

Do national regulatory bodies that oversee service providers and digital technology fail to operate in a free, fair, and independent manner? 1 / 4

In August 2019, the government established the ECA, the primary regulatory body overseeing the telecommunications sector.⁶⁰ Prime Minister Abiy appointed Balcha Reba as its first director general; Balcha previously led the ECA's predecessor, a directorate of the Ministry of Innovation and Technology.⁶¹

In June 2020, the ECA opened a public consultation process on five draft directives, including regulations for consumer protection, dispute resolution, and telecommunications licensing. It made the draft directives available on its website in English and Amharic.⁶²

Activists and civil society groups have raised concerns about the ECA's independence. In May 2020, Kifle Yilma, a law professor at Addis Ababa University, wrote that the regulator's mandate remained unclear, referring to overlapping responsibilities that it appeared to share with other government ministries and agencies.⁶³

In October 2021, the Information Network Security Agency (INSA), a government entity that has de facto authority over the internet with a mandate to protect the communications infrastructure and prevent cybercrime, was placed directly under the supervision of Prime Minister Abiy after he formed a new government in the wake of the June 2021 general elections.⁶⁴

B Limits on Content

B1 0-6 pts

Does the state block or filter, or compel service providers to block or filter, internet content, particularly material that is protected by international human rights standards? 2 / 6

Score Change: The score declined from 4 to 2 because the government blocked multiple social media platforms for four months during the coverage period.

The government blocks internet content, including social media platforms. In February 2023, the EOTC expressed outrage at the government for interfering in its internal affairs, after the government recognized a breakaway synod of Oromo bishops.⁶⁵ The EOTC attempted to organize a public rally via social media, which prompted the government to restrict access to prominent social media platforms such as TikTok, Facebook, Telegram, and YouTube beginning on February 9. The blocking lasted until July 19, 2023, after the end of the coverage period.⁶⁶

Ethiopia has a nationwide internet blocking and filtering system that can be deployed at any time for political reasons. To filter the internet, authorities generally block specific internet protocol (IP) addresses or domain names at the level of the connection to the international gateway. Deep packet inspection (DPI) is also employed, enabling blocking based on a keyword in the content of a website or of a communication such as an email message.⁶⁷

B2 0-4 pts

Do state or nonstate actors employ legal, administrative, or other means to force publishers, content hosts, or digital platforms to delete content, particularly material that is protected by international human rights standards? 2 / 4

Internet users have reported incidents of content removal, and a 2020 law requires social media companies to remove comments that are considered hate speech or disinformation within 24 hours' notice.

In March 2020, Yayesew Shimelis, a journalist, posted a video on YouTube and Facebook with information about the government's response to COVID-19. The Health Ministry said the information was false, and Yayesew claimed that his Facebook page was suspended without his knowledge.⁶⁸ He returned to Facebook later the same month.⁶⁹

In February 2020, the government passed the Hate Speech and Disinformation Prevention and Suppression Proclamation (see C2). Under the law, social media companies are required to remove content that is reported as disinformation or hate speech within 24 hours of receiving notice, though there are no penalties or sanctions for companies that do not comply.⁷⁰

Nonstate actors such as organized youth groups have reportedly coerced bloggers and other users to remove objectionable content, usually by way of threats. In the past, politically unfavorable content was often targeted for removal by security officials, who personally sought out users and bloggers and instructed them to take down the material in question.

B3 0-4 pts

Do restrictions on the internet and digital content lack 0 / transparency, proportionality to the stated aims, or an 4 independent appeals process?

There are no transparent procedures for determining which websites are blocked or why, precluding any avenues for appeal. The authorities do not publish lists of blocked websites or criteria for how blocking decisions are made, and users receive a generic error message when trying to access blocked content. The decision-making process does not appear to be controlled by a single entity, as various government bodies—including INSA, Ethio Telecom, and the Ministry of Innovation and Technology—seem to maintain their own lists, contributing to a phenomenon of inconsistent blocking.⁷¹ The lack of transparency is exacerbated by the government's typical refusal to admit its censorship efforts. Government officials have flatly denied the blocking of websites or jamming of international satellite services while also stating that the government has a legal and a moral responsibility to protect the Ethiopian public from extremist content.

Social media companies operating in Ethiopia have faced criticism for a lack of transparency in content moderation and enforcement of their community standards. Photos showing violent deaths have in some cases remained on platforms for years without content warnings, despite requests from family members that the posts be removed.⁷² In December 2021, Meta's Oversight Board called for the company to conduct a human rights due diligence assessment on Facebook and Instagram's role in spreading hate speech that increased the risk of violence in Ethiopia.⁷³ In January 2022, Meta stated that it would examine

the feasibility of such an assessment while continuing existing human rights due diligence efforts.⁷⁴

Meta has stated that it invests in technology to moderate hate speech in Ethiopia, but violent or harmful content is often not removed in a timely fashion. In December 2022, two individuals filed a case in Kenya, where Meta's East African content moderators are located, accusing the company of failing to remove Facebook posts that incited hatred and violence against a professor who was later murdered and a human rights researcher who fled Ethiopia (see B7).⁷⁵

B4 0-4 pts

Do online journalists, commentators, and ordinary users practice self-censorship? 1 / 4

Media freedom and freedom of expression in Ethiopia remained constrained during the coverage period, as the government and security forces applied pressure that encouraged self-censorship among journalists. The online environment was rife with manipulation, misinformation, and targeted harassment (see B5, B7, and C7), further contributing to self-censorship on the internet.

Harassment and attacks against journalists covering the Tigray conflict, which had deterred uninhibited reporting in the previous coverage period, decreased following the November 2022 peace agreement.

Ethiopia's media regulator, the Ethiopian Media Authority (EMA), has politicized licensing to retaliate against media coverage that it deems unfair. In March 2021, the authority's deputy director general threatened to take measures against non-Ethiopian media organizations that were "disseminating misinformation and unbalanced reporting," alleging that some of those outlets were coordinating with the TPLF.⁷⁶ The authority suspended the press licenses of *Economist* journalist Tom Gardner and expelled him from the country in May 2022,⁷⁷ and had previously suspended the press licenses of several other foreign journalists.⁷⁸ In November 2021, the EMA warned four international media outlets that their licenses would be revoked if they continued to disseminate what it called false propaganda and undermined Ethiopia's national security in their coverage of the Tigray conflict (see B6).⁷⁹

In May 2023, the EMA temporarily suspended the media license of an association affiliated with the EOTC after it aired a breaking news alert and shared a statement from a committee regarding "lingering tensions" between bishops.⁸⁰ The EMA claimed that the content could provoke conflict among church followers.⁸¹

When it first came to power in 2018, the Abiy government had eased state restrictions on the media, and citizens flocked to social media to participate in conversations about their country's potential transition from

authoritarianism and to hold the government accountable for promised reforms.

Self-censorship remains common in the LGBT+ community. Same-sex sexual activity is a criminal offense in Ethiopia,⁸² deterring open discussion of related topics. Although there are various Ethiopian LGBT+ groups on Facebook, most are run by anonymous accounts.

B5 0-4 pts

Are online sources of information controlled or manipulated by the government or other powerful actors to advance a particular political interest? 1 / 4

Online misinformation is rife in Ethiopia. The government has sought to shape the information environment, and some nonstate actors control large numbers of followers who engage in trolling and harassment.

After the April 2023 assassination of Girma Yeshitila, the head of the ruling Prosperity Party in Amhara Region, the purported recording of a phone conversation between alleged members of Amhara's informal Fano militia surfaced online, suggesting that the militia had plotted to murder Girma. The authenticity of the audio, which was posted by an anonymous account and then circulated by government supporters and state-affiliated media, was contested by Amhara activists, who claimed that it was doctored by government authorities as a pretext to prosecute Amhara activists and journalists.⁸³ A fact-checking organization then disputed claims that a digital forensics company had proven the audio to be false and generated using artificial intelligence (AI) tools.⁸⁴ After the release of the audio on social media, 47 suspects, including journalists, were detained on accusations of plotting to overthrow the government (see C3).⁸⁵ Also in April, another recorded phone conversation, allegedly between journalist Meskerem Abera and prominent Amhara physician Wondwosen Assefa, was leaked by government supporters on Twitter; the recording featured criticism of the government, and both individuals were arrested.⁸⁶

In November 2021, Facebook removed a post by Prime Minister Abiy because it allegedly incited and supported violence. In the post, the prime minister vowed to "bury" his government's enemies.⁸⁷

In June 2021, Facebook announced that it had removed a network of inauthentic accounts associated with INSA. The accounts posted primarily in Amharic and promoted Abiy, his Prosperity Party, criticism of Egypt and Sudan related to their objections to Ethiopia's Blue Nile dam project, and criticism of opposition groups including the Oromo Liberation Front, the Ethiopian Democratic Party, and the TPLF.⁸⁸ In response, the director of INSA accused Facebook of removing accounts that posted about the reality in Ethiopia and announced that it was building a domestic social media platform to replace Facebook and WhatsApp.⁸⁹

The government and the TPLF both sought to shape the online information environment during the Tigray conflict. Social media accounts falsely claiming to represent diplomats, journalists, and other experts spread progovernment narratives online.⁹⁰ The government also attempted to label online critics as sources of disinformation. For instance, INSA reported that the TPLF was disseminating 25,000 Twitter posts containing disinformation daily;⁹¹ researchers found this claim to be unsubstantiated.⁹² The government established an online fact-checker that spread partisan narratives in response to purported misinformation,⁹³ further degrading trust in information shared on social media.⁹⁴

The TPLF allegedly coordinated party loyalists in the “Digital Woyane” campaign,⁹⁵ in which participants posed as members of different ethnic groups to incite tensions on social media. During the Tigray conflict, Ethiopian officials and progovernment social media users accused pro-Tigrayan accounts of being Digital Woyane members coordinated by the TPLF, without substantiation.⁹⁶

The Eritrean government, whose military forces participated in the Tigray conflict in cooperation with the Ethiopian government, may have also attempted to shape the online environment in Ethiopia. A report published in May 2021, which used falsified information to allege a widespread TPLF-coordinated disinformation campaign, may have been linked to the Eritrean government’s global social media strategy; the report was promoted by Eritrean government accounts, Ethiopian government accounts, and social media users who supported both governments.⁹⁷ Misinformation in general proliferated during the Tigray conflict (see B7), exacerbated by the restriction of internet access in Tigray (see A3).

Despite low levels of internet access, the government of former prime minister Hailemariam Desalegn (2012–18) was known to employ an army of online trolls to distort the information landscape.⁹⁸ Opposition groups, journalists, and dissidents used the contemptuous Amharic colloquial term “Kokas” to describe progovernment commentators under Hailemariam.⁹⁹ According to observers, Kokas posted negative comments about Ethiopian journalists and opposition groups on Facebook and Twitter and were known to receive benefits such as money, land, and employment promotions in return.¹⁰⁰ It is uncertain whether the Abiy government uses the same online manipulation tactics, but supporters of the former government have accused the current government of doing so. They scornfully refer to supporters of the current government as “Tekas.”

B6 0-3 pts

**Are there economic or regulatory constraints that negatively 1 /
affect users’ ability to publish content online? 3**

Lack of adequate funding is a significant challenge for independent online media in Ethiopia, as the risk of government reprisal dissuades local businesses from advertising with politically critical websites. A 2012 Advertising Proclamation also prohibits advertisements from firms “whose capital is shared by foreign nationals.”¹⁰¹ The process for launching a website on the country’s .et domain is expensive and demanding,¹⁰² requiring a business license from the Ministry of Trade and Industry and a permit from an authorized body.¹⁰³

The Media Proclamation, which took effect in April 2021, reformed media laws in the country. It restructured the Ethiopian Broadcast Authority into the EMA; established a mandate for the EMA to regulate all media outlets, including online media; and created a new self-regulatory mechanism for the media industry. The reform package also decriminalized defamation (see C1).¹⁰⁴ In June 2021, the EMA began licensing online media outlets and monitoring the 30 that were initially registered.¹⁰⁵

In October 2021, Awlo Media Center, an online media outlet, announced that the government had confiscated its equipment for several months, arrested and abducted some of its employees, and sealed its offices. As a result, the outlet ceased operations that month (see C3).¹⁰⁶

In July 2021, the EMA recalled the certification of registration of *Addis Standard*, a prominent news site, causing the outlet to suspend operations; a government official cited content published by *Addis Standard* that allegedly advanced the agenda of the TPLF.¹⁰⁷ After the outlet’s executives met with EMA leadership, the regulator returned its registration certification.¹⁰⁸

B7 0-4 pts

Does the online information landscape lack diversity and 2 / reliability? **4**

Various constraints impede the development of diverse media outlets and perspectives online. With few exceptions, the media tend to favor the government in their coverage. Domestic usage of social media platforms, particularly Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Telegram, and Instagram, has been expanding and slowly replacing the popularity of older blogging services, but these platforms also suffer from misinformation and polarization.¹⁰⁹

Misinformation has led to offline violence and made the documentation of human rights abuses more difficult in Ethiopia. In November 2021, during the previous coverage period, university professor Meareg Amare was murdered following the spread of Facebook posts inciting hatred and violence against him, which the company failed to remove until after his death (see B3).¹¹⁰ Fisseha Tekle, a researcher at Amnesty International, fled Ethiopia and reported fearing for his life after he received a flood of

harassment on Facebook for his work uncovering human rights violations.¹¹¹

The Tigray conflict spurred widespread misinformation on social media sites. The government and the TPLF both sought to control the information environment (see B5), with journalists facing harassment and accusations that they were misinformed.¹¹² Connectivity restrictions in Tigray made it much more difficult to access news about what was happening on the ground (see A3), facilitating the spread of speculation and falsehoods.¹¹³ For instance, after a clash between the federal army and TPLF forces, many reports indicated that social media accounts unintentionally spread a doctored picture while discussing the fighting.¹¹⁴

The spread of unconfirmed information, the phenomenon of purportedly false news, and the growing problem of hate speech in the context of ethnic clashes have had a major negative effect on the credibility of legitimate online information. In early February 2023, when the rift between the EOTC and the government dominated the online conversation, hate speech and misinformation prevailed on social media despite the blocking of several platforms (see B1). Influencers on TikTok posted videos that featured ethnic slurs, hate speech, and in some cases explicit calls for violence against other ethnic groups.¹¹⁵

Ethiopian online media lack diversity in some sensitive areas, such as coverage of LGBT+ issues.

B8 0-6 pts

Do conditions impede users' ability to mobilize, form communities, and campaign, particularly on political and social issues? 2 / 6

Despite hostile conditions caused by poor internet access and repressive laws, online activism has gained considerable momentum and influence over the past several years. Social media and communications platforms have been integral to the mobilization of widespread antigovernment protests in Oromia and Amhara Regions since 2015,¹¹⁶ enabling activists to post information about the demonstrations and publicize cases of police brutality as the government cracked down on protesters.¹¹⁷ Activists have also used social media platforms to consistently report on the arrests, trials, and releases of political prisoners. The government has routinely shut down networks and blocked social media in order to hinder mobilization efforts (see A3 and B1).

In February 2023, the Ethiopian government restricted access to social media platforms TikTok, Facebook, Telegram, and YouTube in response to a planned protest against the government's support for a breakaway synod within the EOTC (see B1).

Social media users mobilized around the Tigray conflict. Under the #TigrayGenocide and #NoMore hashtags on Twitter, users shared information about the ways in which Tigrayans were affected.¹¹⁸ The #NoMore hashtag has also been used to demand the end of foreign interference in Ethiopia's domestic affairs.¹¹⁹ In November 2021, Twitter suspended the trending hashtags feature in Ethiopia, alleging that it was being used to incite physical harm. Protesters then used the #NoMore campaign to criticize Twitter for limiting their ability to share their narratives on the war.¹²⁰

In late 2020 and early 2021, social media users mobilized around the need for aid in Tigray.¹²¹ Appeals made under the banner of the #AllowAccessToTigray hashtag demanded that the government grant humanitarian access to the region, where residents faced mass food insecurity and physical attacks.¹²² Researchers found that pro-Tigray digital activism was highly coordinated to raise awareness about the conflict, with thousands of users seemingly joining Twitter to participate in the campaigns.¹²³

C Violations of User Rights

C1 0-6 pts

Do the constitution or other laws fail to protect rights such as freedom of expression, access to information, and press freedom, 1 / including on the internet, and are they enforced by a judiciary 6 that lacks independence?

The law formally guarantees fundamental freedoms for Ethiopian internet users, but these rights have been routinely flouted in practice. The 1995 constitution provides for freedom of expression, freedom of the press, and access to information, while also prohibiting censorship.¹²⁴

The Media Proclamation, which reformed media laws in the country, took effect in April 2021. Prime Minister Abiy linked the new law to support for freedom of expression and press freedom; it allowed for partial foreign ownership of media companies and decriminalized defamation.¹²⁵ The 2008 Freedom of Mass Media and Access to Information Proclamation, known as the press law, also affirms constitutional safeguards for fundamental rights.¹²⁶ The Media Proclamation repealed problematic provisions of the 2008 law that restricted free expression, such as complex registration processes for media outlets and high fines for defamation.¹²⁷ The criminal code previously penalized defamation with a fine or up to one year in prison.¹²⁸

Article 93 of the constitution permits the government to suspend the "political and democratic rights" recognized by the charter when a state of emergency is declared.¹²⁹

In November 2021, following the advance of TPLF forces into Afar and Amhara Regions, the Council of Ministers declared a six-month state of emergency across the country.¹³⁰ Authorities used the resulting emergency powers to crack down on media houses and arrest online and broadcast journalists (see C3).¹³¹ In February 2022, after TPLF forces were pushed out of Amhara Region, the state of emergency was lifted.¹³²

In November 2020, the Council of Ministers had declared a six-month state of emergency in Tigray.¹³³ A task force formed to implement the state of emergency was granted broad powers to curtail rights, including by cutting Tigray off from the communications infrastructure; such actions sharply restrict access to information and freedom of expression online.¹³⁴ In the preceding years, the government had imposed states of emergency multiple times to halt protests in Oromia and Amhara.¹³⁵

The judiciary is officially independent, but in practice it is subject to political interference, and judgments rarely deviate from government policy.

C2 0-4 pts

Are there laws that assign criminal penalties or civil liability for online activities, particularly those that are protected under international human rights standards? 0 / 4

Several laws that were designed to restrict and penalize legitimate online activities remained in place during the coverage period.

In February 2020, the government enacted the Hate Speech and Disinformation Prevention and Suppression Proclamation, a law intended to combat online disinformation and speech that “deliberately promotes hatred, discrimination, or attack against a person.” The law criminalizes posting or sharing content on social media that authorities determine to cause violence or disturbances of public order. Its penalties include fines of up to 100,000 birr (\$1,900) or up to five years’ imprisonment, with the steepest punishments for users with more than 5,000 followers. The law does not carry penalties for tagging such content.¹³⁶

The 2016 Computer Crime Proclamation also criminalized an array of online activities.¹³⁷ Civil society activists expressed concern that the law would be used to intensify a crackdown on critical commentary, political opposition, and public protest.¹³⁸ For example, content that “incites fear, violence, chaos, or conflict among people” can be punished with up to three years in prison.¹³⁹ Other problematic provisions ban the dissemination of defamatory content, which can be penalized with up to 10 years in prison,¹⁴⁰ and the distribution of unsolicited messages to multiple email addresses (spam), which carries up to five years in prison.¹⁴¹

The 2012 Telecom Fraud Offences Proclamation extended the violations and penalties defined in the 2009 Anti-Terrorism Proclamation and the criminal code to electronic communications, including both fixed-line and mobile internet services.¹⁴² However, the antiterrorism legislation was repealed in January 2020.¹⁴³

C3 0-6 pts

Are individuals penalized for online activities, particularly those 2 / that are protected under international human rights standards? 6

Online journalists were arrested in large numbers during the coverage period, as the government cracked down on media outlets and reporters in reprisal for their work.

In May 2023, the federal police announced that they would take action against individuals who “spread false information to mislead the public” on social media.¹⁴⁴ The statement also claimed that those spreading false information were attempting to undermine investigations into suspected terrorists.

Multiple online media contributors were arrested amid the tensions surrounding the EOTC schism. In March 2023, federal police arrested YouTube-based journalists Gentet Ashagre and Aragaw Sisay. They were accused of inciting violence using social media, though authorities did not specify which of their videos prompted the arrests.¹⁴⁵ In February 2023, authorities also detained and questioned Yosef Ketema, a journalist for the EOTC Afaan Oromoo broadcasting service who had been conducting frequent interviews with religious figures.¹⁴⁶

In February 2023, security forces detained Tewodros Asfaw, a founder of the YouTube channel Ethio Selam, which is known for its criticism of the government. After spending nine days in detention, he was released on 30,000 birr (\$560) in bail.¹⁴⁷ He was detained again in April 2023 and held for two months before being released on 15,000 birr (\$280) in bail in June, after the end of the coverage period.¹⁴⁸

In April 2023, online journalists Meskerem Abera, Abay Zewdu, and Dawit Begashaw were arrested by security forces, prompting international advocacy groups to call for their release.¹⁴⁹ According to local reports, police accused Meskerem Abera, who founded YouTube-based media outlet Ethio Nikat, of providing military training to informal groups. Meskerem had previously been detained for several weeks in December 2022 on charges of using social media to undermine the government.¹⁵⁰

Later in April 2023, Ethiopian authorities arrested 47 individuals in connection with the assassination of a senior Amhara official (see B5). The government also released a list of 11 individuals who were wanted in the case and announced that it was seeking to extradite those living outside of Ethiopia. The list included online journalists from the YouTube-based

media outlet Ethio-360 who were located in the United States, as well as Gobeze Sisay, who had previously been charged for allegedly spreading false rumors online.¹⁵¹ Security forces later announced that they had detained Sisay on terrorism charges in Djibouti after he left Ethiopia.¹⁵²

In January 2023, a court in Mekelle, the capital of Tigray Region, acquitted three out of five journalists from Tigray TV who had been detained for eight months by the TPLF-led regional government. They were accused of spreading misinformation and enemy propaganda due to their work during the period that the outlet was controlled by the federally backed Tigray interim regional administration. The other two journalists facing the same charges remained in local police custody.¹⁵³

In February 2023, police in Somali Region arrested journalist Muhiyadin Mohammed Ali on charges of “spreading false propaganda” on social media, after he criticized the regional ruling party on Facebook Live. He was held in a police station for two days and released on the condition that he would not publish articles critical of the government for three months.¹⁵⁴

In May 2022, the government arrested and detained 19 media workers as part of an “anticrime operation.” Solomon Shumiye, host of the YouTube channel Gebeyanu and a journalist from the YouTube-based media outlet Toha TV, was among those arrested.¹⁵⁵ A court released Shumiye on bail in June 2022.¹⁵⁶

In July 2021, police detained two employees of Ethio Forum, a YouTube broadcaster, including Yayesew Shimelis. Officials cited “affiliation with a terrorist group which is banned by the parliament” as the reason for the arrests.¹⁵⁷ Authorities arrested Yayesew again in May 2022 for allegedly inciting the public against the government.¹⁵⁸ After he was released on bail without charges on June 20, 2022, he was arrested yet again on June 28 by security personnel in plainclothes; Yayesew’s colleague Abebe Bayu was abducted a day later. They were each held for more than a week before being released and have since fled Ethiopia (see C7).¹⁵⁹

In December 2021, Tamerat Negera, founder of the online media outlet Terara Network, was arrested.¹⁶⁰ The federal police did not give an explanation for his arrest. He appeared in court in a different district after seven days, during which his family did not know his whereabouts.¹⁶¹ He was finally released in April 2022 on bail of 50,000 birr (\$930).¹⁶² Tamerat faced intimidation after his release and returned to the United States, where he had lived in exile for several years prior to 2018, in November 2022 (see C7).¹⁶³

C4 0-4 pts

Does the government place restrictions on anonymous 2 /
communication or encryption? 4

Anonymous communication is compromised by strict SIM-card registration requirements. Upon purchase of a SIM card through Ethio Telecom, Safaricom, or an authorized reseller, individuals must provide their full name, address, government-issued identification number, and a passport-sized photograph. Ethio Telecom's database of SIM registrants enables the government to terminate individuals' SIM cards and bar them from registering new ones. Internet service subscribers are also required to register their personal details, including their home addresses, with the government.

There are no explicit restrictions on encryption, though police officers and members of the security services may assume malign intent on the part of individuals who use encryption.

C5 0-6 pts

Does state surveillance of internet activities infringe on users' 1 / right to privacy? 6

Government surveillance of online and mobile phone communications is pervasive in Ethiopia, and the relevant laws and practices have not been reformed since Prime Minister Abiy took office in 2018. Police have been known to force detainees to hand over passwords to their phones and social media accounts, enabling manual searches of their devices.

Activists have reported in previous years that their phone communications were under surveillance. During the coverage period, a recording of an alleged phone conversation between journalist Meskerem Abera and a Fano militia member was leaked and circulated online by progovernment bloggers.¹⁶⁴ The authenticity of the recording could not be independently verified, but its circulation raised concerns that Meskerem was under communications surveillance.¹⁶⁵

The 2016 Computer Crime Proclamation strengthened the government's surveillance powers, enabling real-time monitoring or interception of communications when authorized by the justice minister. The law also obliges service providers to store records of all communications and metadata for at least a year.¹⁶⁶

Ethiopia's telecommunications and surveillance infrastructure has been developed in part through investments from Chinese companies with backing from the Chinese government, leading to strong suspicions that the Ethiopian government has implemented highly intrusive surveillance practices modeled on the Chinese system. A 2014 Human Rights Watch report revealed significant evidence that the Ethiopian government had deployed a centralized system developed by Chinese telecommunications firm ZTE to monitor mobile networks and the internet.¹⁶⁷

ZTE's customer-management database (known as ZSmart) has been installed at Ethio Telecom, providing the government with full access to

user information and allowing it to intercept short-message service (SMS) text messages and record phone conversations.¹⁶⁸ ZSmart also allows security officials to locate targeted individuals through real-time geolocation tracking of mobile phones.¹⁶⁹ While it is unclear whether the government has made full use of ZTE's sophisticated surveillance system, the authorities frequently present intercepted emails and phone calls as evidence during trials of journalists and bloggers, or as a scare tactic during interrogations.¹⁷⁰

Exiled dissidents have been frequent targets of surveillance-enabling malicious software, or spyware, over the years. In February 2018, the Toronto-based Citizen Lab published research detailing how spyware from an Israeli company was used against Jawar Mohammed, an Oromo political activist and the once-exiled executive director of the diaspora-run news outlet Oromia Media Network (OMN), which had been banned by the previous government for allegedly inciting violence and promoting terrorism.¹⁷¹

Previous Citizen Lab research published in 2015 found that Remote Control System (RCS) spyware had been used against employees of ESAT, a diaspora-run media outlet based in the United States, in 2014.¹⁷² Analysis of the RCS attacks uncovered credible links to INSA.¹⁷³

C6 0-6 pts

Does monitoring and collection of user data by service providers and other technology companies infringe on users' right to privacy? 1 / 6

Ethiopian law allows the government to obtain user information from telecommunications service providers.

The Computer Crime Proclamation requires service providers to store records of all communications and related data for at least a year, and this information must be shared with the government if requested.¹⁷⁴ The lack of separation between state-owned Ethio Telecom and the government raises significant concerns about the company's degree of cooperation with authorities. Ethiopia lacks a data protection law, though a draft Data Protection Proclamation was published in August 2022.¹⁷⁵ If adopted, it would establish a personal data protection commission tasked with regulating the use of personal data in Ethiopia.¹⁷⁶

C7 0-5 pts

Are individuals subject to extralegal intimidation or physical violence by state authorities or any other actor in relation to their online activities? 1 / 5

Online journalists and ordinary users face the threat of extralegal violence, particularly amid the heightened interethnic hatred associated

with the recent conflicts in Tigray and other regions.

Two journalists with the YouTube-based media outlet Ethio Forum, Yayeew Shimeles and Abebe Bayu, were abducted in June 2022.¹⁷⁷ Both were released in July 2022 after being held for more than a week.¹⁷⁸ In June 2023, after the end of the current coverage period, they announced that they had left Ethiopia and began posting Ethio Forum videos from abroad.¹⁷⁹

In April 2023, Genet Asmamaw, a journalist for the YouTube channel Yeneta, was abducted and beaten by security forces after she interviewed the former commander of Amhara's regional special forces,¹⁸⁰ prompting international organizations to call for an investigation to hold the perpetrators accountable.¹⁸¹

In May 2023, social media activist Ermias Mekuria was abducted. His whereabouts were unknown for two weeks,¹⁸² after which he reportedly appeared in court.¹⁸³ The status of his case after the coverage period was unclear.

Tamerat Negera, founder of an online news network, was released on bail in April 2022 after being detained without charge for 118 days (see C3). He fled the country in November 2022, with sources close to him citing the risk of rearrest.¹⁸⁴

Tigrayans who have been released from military camps in Afar have reported facing torture and inhumane conditions while in detention.¹⁸⁵ Several journalists who were arrested and detained were held in military camps in Afar.

Hate speech proliferated during the Tigray conflict, with many social media users employing ethnic slurs to characterize the opposing side. A report that studied online misinformation in Ethiopia found that about a quarter of sampled posts contained hate speech, with an even greater amount of hate speech shared in response to those posts.¹⁸⁶ Ethiopians reported an escalation of violent ethnicity-based attacks during the conflict, including incidents targeting Tigrayan and Amhara people.¹⁸⁷ Experts raised concerns that online hate speech was contributing to an environment conducive to offline abuse and violence.¹⁸⁸

Social media users also harassed and intimidated people simply for sharing content related to the Tigray conflict. For instance, Haben Girma, a disability rights activist who is deaf and blind, reported that she was attacked by online trolls who mocked her disability after she posted about the conflict.¹⁸⁹

Journalists reported experiencing increased online harassment during the Tigray conflict,¹⁹⁰ especially as internet users mobilized along

progovernment and pro-TPLF lines (see B5, B7, and B8). Tom Gardner, the journalist for the *Economist* whose accreditation was revoked in May 2022 (see B4), accused the government of using social media to spread claims that he was “aligned with the TPLF,” which prompted harassment against him online.¹⁹¹

Almost a third of 487 Ethiopian women surveyed by Pollicy, a technology consulting firm, reported experiencing online sexual harassment, stalking, or other forms of harassment in an August 2020 study.¹⁹² LGBT+ people also experience online harassment. For instance, when a US-based LGBT+ tour company announced its plan to offer a trip to Ethiopia in 2019, it received death threats and hate messages on social media.¹⁹³

C8 0-3 pts

Are websites, governmental and private entities, service providers, or individual users subject to widespread hacking and other forms of cyberattack? ^{2 / 3}

Score Change: The score improved from 1 to 2 because there were no reported cyberattacks aimed at media houses, journalists, or civil society during the coverage period.

Government entities and political parties are frequently subjected to cyberattacks, while opposition journalists and activists have reported being targeted with such attacks by security forces in the past.

In May 2023, INSA reported that it had responded to more than 4,400 actual or attempted cyberattacks targeting Ethiopian institutions over the course of nine months, preventing 19 billion birr (\$353 million) in damages and lost revenue.¹⁹⁴

In early June 2021, INSA detailed an attempted cyberattack meant to breach 37,000 computers in Ethiopia, which it attributed to a group that had previously targeted Ethiopian websites in connection with the controversial Blue Nile dam project.¹⁹⁵

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