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Freedom on the Net 2021 - Sudan

Not Free

33

/ 100

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Last Year's Score & Status

30 / 100 Not Free

Scores are based on a scale of 0 (least free) to 100 (most free)

Overview

Sudan has seen relative improvements in internet freedom under the reforms of the interim government led by Abdalla Hamdok, the first civilian prime minister since former president Omar al-Bashir came to power in a 1989 coup. The interim constitution, the Sudan Constitutional Charter, safeguards rights and freedoms, including freedom of expression, freedom of the press, and the right to access the internet; the transitional government has signaled it will seek to liberalize the online regulatory environment. The practical extent of these reforms remains to be seen, as Sudanese internet users continue to face arrest, harassment, and intimidation for their online activities. Nationwide and localized internet shutdowns remain common, and the transitional government has ordered blocks of websites, including over 30—many of them news sites—blocked in July 2021.

Since military leaders and civilian protesters ousted the repressive regime of former president al-Bashir and his National Congress Party (NCP) in April 2019, a transitional government has ruled the country. Military and civilian leaders share power on the Transitional Sovereign Council (TSC), which assumed control from the Transitional Military Council (TMC), until they are replaced by an elected government, scheduled for 2024. The government has begun to enact reforms and open the civic space, albeit slowly, though security personnel associated with the abuses of the old regime remain influential. Violence involving security forces, other armed groups, and rival ethnic groups have continued in many parts of the country.

Key Developments, June 1, 2020 - May 31, 2021

- Multiple connectivity restrictions were reported during the coverage period, including localized shutdowns in Port Sudan, Kassala, and West Darfur, and short-term nationwide shutdowns during the high school examination period in September 2020 (see A3).
- The transitional government may have strengthened the autonomy of the country's telecommunications regulator by establishing a stand-alone ministry on telecommunications and digital transformation as part of the cabinet reshuffle in February 2021 (see A5).
- Sudanese internet users continued to be targeted by online manipulation campaigns, some linked to individuals in Russia (see B5).
- While Sudanese internet users were arrested for their online activities, particularly those criticizing the transitional government and security forces, such arrests were less systematic than in previous years (see C3).
- No cyberattacks on civil society organizations and media sites were reported during the coverage period, a stark improvement from the regular targeted hacking attempts under the al-Bashir regime (see C8).

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

Internet penetration remains low, with 30.9 percent of the population—representing 13.38 million people—using the internet as of January 2021, according to the Digital 2021 report, a 2.4 percent increase from 2020.¹

According to data from the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), less than 1 percent of the population had a fixed-broadband subscription as of 2018.² Meanwhile, the 2019 GSMA Mobile Connectivity Index reported that 47 percent of the population has a mobile broadband connection.³ However, these figures are based on the total number of SIM cards, so the reported penetration rate may be inflated by individuals who have multiple SIM cards. Nevertheless, the available data suggests that most internet users have mobile subscriptions.

An unreliable electricity supply limits internet service in Sudan, including in major cities that have been subject to periodic power rationing due to inadequate electricity production to meet the growing urban demand, lack of state funds to purchase diesel and petroleum, and lack of maintenance at refineries due to unavailable and expensive spare parts. Power cuts, which can last up to 12 hours,⁴ usually peak in the summer when demand is highest, especially in Khartoum, where a growing population and severe weather have intensified demand.

Khartoum accounts for approximately 70 percent of the country's electricity usage.⁵ Most rural areas have unsteady access to electricity, if any electricity at all, and the overall insecurity of the system has caused electricity prices to skyrocket. In January 2021, several towns in the Darfur region had limited or no power for over a week, sparking protests and threats by the East Darfur governor to resign over the federal government's slow response.⁶ Though internet infrastructure is generally equipped with backup generators to mitigate internet disruptions, the generators do not always work.⁷

Telecommunications companies struggle with endemic corruption and debt to foreign lenders, primarily in China, according to an industry veteran. The resulting lack of investment in infrastructure has caused a degradation in internet services, exacerbated during the COVID-19 pandemic.⁸

In March 2021, subscribers of internet service provider (ISP) Zain experienced a disruption for several hours, during which some users were unable to make calls or access internet.⁹

A2 0-3 pts

Is access to the internet prohibitively expensive or beyond the reach of certain segments of the population for geographical, social, or other reasons? 0 / 3

Internet access is prohibitively expensive for many users, and the country's economic crisis increased relative prices further during the coverage period.

Since 2011, a sustained petroleum scarcity has led to drastically increasing inflation and skyrocketing prices for services, trends that continued in 2020. ¹⁰ Sudan's inflation rate remained high, reaching 412.8 percent in June 2021. ¹¹ In February 2021, the central bank increased the official exchange rate by 680 percent to align with the rates of illegal markets, contributing to a sharp increase in staple prices. ¹² The central bank also imposes limits on cash withdrawals from automated teller machines (ATMs). ¹³

Internet prices continued to increase during the coverage period, with all major networks imposing price increases. ¹⁴ As of August 2021, a 1 GB monthly bundle offered by Zain and the partly state-owned Sudan Telecom Company (Sudatel) costs 485.50 (\$8.75) and 395.75 Sudanese pounds (\$7.14), respectively, ¹⁵ which is unaffordable for most residents; the Ministry of Finance raised the minimum wage to 3,000 Sudanese pounds (\$54) for government employees in April 2020. ¹⁶ Even though prices are considered expensive, a 2021 study by the UK-based telecommunications company Cable found that Sudan ranks 5th in a global comparison of internet prices. The study did not assess affordability. ¹⁷

After Zain increased its prices on multiple occasions, many users took to social media to threaten boycotts. According to a Zain manager, the company has taken this action into consideration and has planned for "up to one third of [their] users" to switch to other service providers. The manager claims that pending improvements to service quality will drive a return of customers. ¹⁸

Students remain disenfranchised by the increases in prices. In July 2020, the Minister of Higher Education and Scientific Research directed universities to commence e-learning to combat the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic. Critics noted that the cost of internet access is a major barrier for

students' participation in e-learning.¹⁹ To mitigate this problem, some professors at public universities distributed prerecorded lectures in audio format to be shared on Telegram channels and other platforms.²⁰

According to a survey conducted by Afrobarometer in 2018, women in Sudan are nine percent less likely to access the internet regularly than men. In 2013, the same survey reported a five percent gender divide in internet access.²¹

The Universal Access Fund, a government resource designed to ensure that mobile and internet networks are available for rural and lower-income populations who otherwise would be marginalized because of cost, has failed to expand access to rural communities. The fund levies taxes on telecommunications companies, though payment is reportedly an issue.²²

A3 0-6 pts

Does the government exercise technical or legal control over internet infrastructure for 2 / the purposes of restricting connectivity? 6

Score Change: The score improved from 1 to 2 because the Sudanese government did not impose politically motivated long-term connectivity restrictions during the coverage period, though short-term nationwide restrictions and localized connectivity restrictions in Port Sudan and al-Geneina were reported.

The government frequently exercises control over the internet infrastructure, and internet access was shut down nationwide and locally during the coverage period.

Sudanese authorities ordered nationwide internet shutdowns for three to four hours a day for over a week in September 2020, during the national high school examinations. ²³ The order for the September 2020 shutdown, issued by the public prosecutor and communicated to the public through a text message sent to users stating that the decision was made by a judicial entity, prompted a lawsuit against telecommunications companies from the Consumer Protection Association.²⁴ After the coverage period, in June 2021, internet services were again disrupted for three hours a day for twelve days amid nationwide exams. The public prosecutor reportedly ordered the shutdown at the request of the minister of education, with the support of the minister of the interior.²⁵

In January 2021, residents in Al-Geneina, West Darfur state, also reported disruptions to internet connectivity and cell reception. A local activist interviewed said that there was no formal shutdown, but the network was very weak and remained degraded until March 2021.²⁶

In August 2020, internet connectivity and cell reception were restricted in Port Sudan due to clashes.²⁷ The city was placed under curfew after over 30 people were killed amid violent clashes between Beni Amer and Nuba tribespeople in the region.²⁸ Internet connectivity was restricted for several days in Port Sudan in August 2019, during the previous coverage period, due to similar violence.²⁹

Mobile internet services were suspended for three days in May 2020 in the city of Kassala. Activists suggested that the Kassala state government restricted connectivity in order to maintain calm during a TSC delegation visit. Clashes between different factions of the Beja ethnic group led to deaths and property damage. Residents using mobile service providers Zain and MTN were chiefly affected, although the shutdown may have affected other providers. Fixed-line internet services were not affected.³⁰

Sudan experienced a near-total network shutdown, lasting 36 days, between early June and July 2019, during the previous coverage period.³¹ In early June 2019, security forces attacked a peaceful protest in Khartoum, killing 127 people, injuring hundreds more, and sexually assaulting dozens.³² The timing of the shutdown limited the spread of information about the massacre on the internet, including evidence of abuses perpetrated by security forces.³³ During the shutdown, internet services were intermittently available via some Canar Telecom and Sudatel asymmetric digital subscriber line (ADSL), fixed-line connections.³⁴ Canar Telecom and Sudatel services are often used by government offices, but because both providers rely on expensive fiber-optic infrastructure, very few individual users can afford their services.³⁵ Some Sudanese internet users reported that they sought to purchase fixed-line connections from Canar Telecom and Sudatel during the shutdown, but were told that the companies had run out of stock, possibly indicating that authorities sought to limit internet access.³⁶

In July 2019, after the internet shutdown, the Khartoum District Court ordered Zain to resume internet services.³⁷ That same month, a Zain executive disclosed that the company restricted internet services under orders from the Telecommunications and Post Regulatory Authority (TPRA), the telecommunications regulator (see A5).³⁸ In September 2019, a court ruled that Sudatel and MTN Sudan could be sued by their subscribers for the June shutdown and ordered the companies to issue public apologies.³⁹

Sudan is connected to the global internet through international gateways controlled by Sudatel, Zain, and Canar Telecom, which are in turn connected to five submarine cables: Saudi Arabia-Sudan-1 (SAS-1), Saudi Arabia-Sudan-2 (SAS-2), Eastern Africa Submarine System (EASSy), FALCON, and Africa-1, the largest cable.

A4 0-6 pts

Are there legal, regulatory, or economic obstacles that restrict the diversity of service providers? 3 / 6

There are no legal or regulatory obstacles that restrict the diversity of service providers, though there are economic constraints.

According to an industry source, the TSC has considered increasing taxation on the telecommunications industry, but insiders pushed against this decision to ensure that Sudan remains a market for companies regardless of its volatility. The government is due to renegotiate its contracts with MTN and Zain when the two companies' licenses expire in the next two years.[40](#)

Canar Telecom, one of the four licensed telecommunications providers in Sudan (offering fixed-line phone and home internet service) was partially owned by the Emirati mobile service provider Etisalat. However, Etisalat sold its shares in the company to the Bank of Khartoum for \$95 million in 2016.[41](#) The bank used its 3.7 percent share in Canar to block Zain's efforts to purchase it.[42](#) Observers believe that the government's move to increase its market share in the telecommunications industry will have a negative impact on internet freedom and reduce dynamism in the market.

Three other licensed telecommunications providers operate in Sudan: Zain, MTN, and Sudatel. MTN and Zain are primarily foreign owned.[43](#) The government owns more than 20 percent of Sudatel.[44](#) Following the ousting of the al-Bashir regime, the transitional government changed Sudatel's board of directors; for instance, TSC member Ibrahim Jaber Ibrahim now chairs the board.[45](#) The al-Bashir regime reportedly had significant sway over the company's board of directors.[46](#)

The government may also retain a stake in MTN's Sudanese operations, after anticorruption investigators seized assets held by a prominent businessman linked to the al-Bashir regime. The assets included shares in MTN Sudan, though the number of shares and what has happened to them since the April 2020 confiscation is unclear.[47](#) After the MTN group left Syria in August 2020, which company officials framed as part of a medium-term disengagement from its Middle Eastern operations,[48](#) some speculated MTN would also end its Sudanese operations; no evidence has corroborated this speculation.

Zain also has some apparent links to the government. Zain Sudan appointed Osama Kahin as its new general manager in April 2019.[49](#) Kahin is seen as an independent figure, according to a local source, unlike Zain executive Al-Fatih Erwa, who was formerly a security officer.[50](#)

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? 0 / 4

The regulatory bodies that oversee service providers historically lacked independence, though recent changes don't indicate movement toward autonomy. The TPRA, which replaced the National Telecommunications Corporation (NTC) in 2018,[51](#) is tasked with regulating internet use and telecommunications licensing, facilitating competition, producing telecommunications statistics, and developing the telecommunications and information technology (ICT) industries.[52](#) It is also responsible for determining what content is accessible on the internet (see B3).[53](#)

In February 2021, the transitional government created the Ministry of Telecommunications and Digital Transformation (MTDT).[54](#) According to an industry source, the ministry plans to bring the TPRA under its wing.[55](#)

In July 2019, the TMC appointed Major General Sadiq Jamal al-Deen al-Sadig as the head of the TPRA, [56](#) replacing Mustafa Abdel Hafeez, who was appointed director of the NTC in December 2018.[57](#) In September 2019, the TSC separated the TPRA from the Ministry of Defense and brought it under its direct administration; previously, the TPRA was under the Ministry of Information. The decisions to place the TPRA under the purview of the Ministry of Defense, and then the TSC itself, were met with criticism, as the body has the power to engage in surveillance and restrict internet connectivity. The telecommunications sector generates significant revenue for the government, as well; in 2015, the NTC collected \$560 million in taxes from industry.[58](#)

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? 5 / 6

The government did not block social media platforms during the coverage period, though the extent of content blocking under the transitional government is unclear.

On June 29, 2021, after the coverage period and hours before the beginning of scheduled antigovernment protests set for the following day, service providers (ISPs) were ordered to block 32 websites. The websites—15 of which were those of newspapers and media organizations, including Baj News, Kush News, Al-Sudani, Azza Press, Tara News, and Sky Sudan—were inaccessible on certain networks.⁵⁹ Baj News reported that the cybercrimes prosecution office gave the order, and that they had since filed a complaint, along with other outlets, against the prosecutor.⁶⁰

The ousted al-Bashir regime openly acknowledged blocking and filtering websites that it considered “immoral” and “blasphemous.” Political and social content was blocked in 2012, when the online news outlet SudaneseOnline and Facebook were intermittently inaccessible, and the “Innocence of Muslims” YouTube video was entirely blocked. Websites hosting pornography reportedly became accessible in Sudan in 2019; the authorities had previously blocked most pornographic content.

Previously, social media blocks enacted in December 2018 (see A3) curtailed the sharing of political and social content during the mass protests that began that month. Social media was instrumental in organizing demonstrations against the al-Bashir regime and the TMC (see B8). Blocking social media platforms was intended to disrupt people’s ability to access information related to the protests.

Many internet users were able to access social media through virtual private networks (VPNs). Many users without VPNs on their phones paid specialists at technology shops throughout Sudan to install them. In April 2019, several free VPNs, such as Hotspot Shield, became inaccessible, which forced some users to again pay for the installation of those that remained available.⁶¹

B2 0-4 pts

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

The Sudanese government does not systematically use legal or administrative means to force publishers and content hosts to delete legitimate content. Instead, the authorities use intimidation to coerce internet users to delete content (see C7). This became more common after protests began in December 2018 and continued into June 2019, though the practice then reportedly subsided. The General Intelligence Service (GIS) and individuals affiliated with the government harass and intimidate users to delete content they object to in Facebook groups.⁶²

In May 2020, during the previous coverage period, security forces threatened and harassed journalists Lana Awad and Aida Abel Qader to remove their reports, which were published online.⁶³ about high death rates among elderly people in North Darfur hospitals as the COVID-19 pandemic took hold (see C7). Despite the threats, they did not remove the posts.⁶⁴

Prepublication censorship has been prevalent in previous years. In early 2019, *Al-Jareeda*, one of Sudan’s few independent newspapers, was repeatedly confiscated or banned from publishing. Although the newspaper continued to publish on its website and Facebook page, authorities also threatened to shut down its online presence. The paper continued to publish online despite those threats.⁶⁵

B3 0-4 pts

Do restrictions on the internet and digital content lack transparency, proportionality to 2 / the stated aims, or an independent appeals process? 4

Little is known about the procedural aspects of the Sudanese government’s restrictions of online content. The TPRA still has not disclosed details about the 2018 social media blocks and network shutdowns. In December 2018, National Intelligence and Security Service (NISS) head Salah Abdallah admitted that the government was responsible for blocking social media platforms, but the NTC did not provide further information about the decision.⁶⁶

Under the al-Bashir regime, the TPRA managed online censorship through its internet service control unit. The regulator previously claimed that 95 percent of blocked material was related to pornography,⁶⁷ though it also acknowledged that it had not succeeded in blocking all “negative” sites in Sudan.⁶⁸ The TPRA additionally requires cybercafé owners to download blocking and filtering software.⁶⁹

The authority's website gives users the opportunity to submit requests to unblock websites "that are deemed to not contain pornography,"⁷⁰ but it does not specify whether the blocking of political websites can be appealed. Users attempting to access a blocked site were met with a page stating, "This site has been blocked by the National Telecommunications Corporation" and included links to further information and a contact email address.⁷¹ In addition to the TPRA, the prosecutor general has the power to block any site that threatens national security or violates social mores.⁷²

B4 0-4 pts

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

Government threats against online journalists and internet users have led to growing self-censorship in recent years, though some hold that freedom of expression is the most significant victory achieved by the ouster of the al-Bashir regime.

Recent actions from the Sudanese army have signaled a potential threat to the unprecedented level of freedom that journalists have enjoyed since al-Bashir's removal. In July 2020, the Sudanese army announced it would pursue legal action against activists for "insults and accusations aimed at the military"; two months prior, it committed more resources to its prosecutor, potentially to pursue such cases.⁷³ In January 2021, the army reportedly refused to issue permits for journalists to enter parts of West Darfur state to cover the conflict there and controlled the movements of journalists with permits in several areas;⁷⁴ the refusal led to delays in reporting on a critical conflict. Security forces also arrested journalists perceived to be linked to the al-Bashir regime, such as Yasir al-Ataar, a journalist and blogger from al-Gedarf who was arrested in February 2021.⁷⁵

Ordinary internet users have become more inclined to self-censor to avoid government surveillance and arbitrary legal penalties. They also rely on anonymous communication to speak candidly. WhatsApp, for example, is particularly popular in Sudan due to the platform's privacy and anonymity features.⁷⁶ Telegram was also widely used during antigovernment protests in early 2019.⁷⁷ Many journalists writing for online platforms publish anonymously to avoid prosecution.

After the formation of the transitional government, journalists and commentators who the al-Bashir regime had banned from appearing on television or in newspapers and thus exclusively worked online, returned to working through other forms of media.

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? 0 / 4

While Sudan has a vibrant online media landscape, government and nonstate actors frequently manipulate internet content to advance their agendas.

Dozens of online newspapers or media outlets have appeared since 2019, some of which appear to be affiliated with the security services or the cyber jihad unit. The outlets use sensational headlines and social media posts to malign activists and civil society organizations.⁷⁸ According to anonymous sources who spoke to the news site Al-Ain, some news outlets are linked to al-Bashir's networks. The sources identified the Sudanese Media Center, Rawan Center, and Sudani Net as connected to al-Bashir's former security services, and the outlets Al-Hakeem for Press Services, Khartoum Electronic Media Center, and National Center for Media Production as affiliated with National Congress Party, the Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated political group of which al-Bashir was the head.⁷⁹

Campaigns targeting Sudanese social media users are identified regularly. In May 2021, Facebook removed a network of accounts operated by Sudanese internet users linked to individuals in Russia. The network targeted users in Sudan, sharing content supportive of Hamdok and Yevgeniy Prigozhin, a Russian financier who has funded relief aid initiatives, and criticizing the Sudanese Ministry of Health.⁸⁰ The following month, Facebook disclosed it had removed another Sudanese network targeting domestic audiences. This network, which Facebook linked to political party the Future Movement for Reform and Development, primarily posted about Sudanese politics and current events.⁸¹

In August 2021, after the coverage period, a network on Twitter that likely included fake and hacked accounts amplified a narrative that Sudanese internet users opposed the government's decision to transfer al-Bashir to the International Criminal Court.⁸²

In October 2019, Facebook reported that it removed a network of Facebook accounts, pages, and groups, along with Instagram accounts, that focused primarily on Sudan. The Russia-based network distributed content, including false and misleading information, about events in Sudan and Russia, occasionally criticizing Sudanese protesters. Over 450,000 Facebook accounts and about 3,000 Instagram accounts followed pages and groups within the network, which was active as early as mid-2018.⁸³ A July 2019 report from the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace found that Russian

disinformation campaigns sought to shape perceptions of Sudan's democratic transition, particularly through state-affiliated media targeting Sudanese audiences with content critical of prodemocracy protesters.[84](#)

The al-Bashir government was known to spread disinformation and manipulate social media discussion through the so-called cyber jihad unit.[85](#) This unit was established under the NISS's purview in 2011, and proactively monitored content posted on blogs, social media platforms, and online news forums. The unit collected information about dissidents and reportedly orchestrated technical attacks against independent websites, especially during political events (see C8). In 2019, the unit was especially active on Facebook and Twitter, using human-run accounts to target opposition figures and protesters through harassment.[86](#) As part of its work, it also sought to report target accounts for violating community standards of social media platforms, which sometimes led to their closure or suspension. The unit also sought to sway public opinion by flooding platforms with coordinated posts, hashtags, and messages.[87](#)

The unit also spread false information to muddle debate and discredit independent news outlets and analysts who unknowingly circulated the misinformation. In January 2019, reports surfaced that three people were killed when police used live ammunition to disperse a protest in Khartoum. However, an image purportedly showing the aftermath was actually taken in Brazil; Sudanese activists asserted that the story was planted in an effort to discredit organizations that disseminated it,[88](#) including the Central Committee of Sudan Doctors and Sudan Change Now. Similar tactics were used in an effort to thwart the 2018 "bread protests," which were prompted by the government's economic policies and proposed tax increases. During these protests, members of the unit spread misinformation that the mobilization was meant to destabilize Sudan.

Despite the al-Bashir regime's ouster, the cyber jihad unit reportedly remains active in spreading fraudulent pictures, videos, and stories on social media platforms.[89](#) It has engaged in disinformation campaigns surrounding COVID-19, reportedly sharing stories claiming that the virus has not reached Sudan and that the transitional government was using the pandemic lockdown to stifle dissent. The unit reportedly sought to mobilize people to protest the lockdown.[90](#)

B6 0-3 pts

Are there economic or regulatory constraints that negatively affect users' ability to 0 / publish content online? 3

Several economic and regulatory constraints negatively affect users' ability to publish content online. For years, tight government control of the media environment prevented independent online news outlets and journalists from becoming economically viable. Political polarization further constrains the development of sustainable independent journalism.[91](#)

Access to several platforms, including Zoom and BlueJeans, was restricted during the coverage period due to US government sanctions, under which the Sudanese government was designated a sponsor of terror.[92](#) The designation—which was imposed in 1993, limited a range of corporate activities in the country, and contributed to mass poverty in the country, according to United Nations (UN) officials[93](#)—was officially rescinded in December 2020.[94](#)

Funding constraints limit the survival of online news outlets. Al-Taghyeer Newspaper, for example, relies on donor funding, while Baj News relies on funding from a businessman. The US sanctions regime prevented Sudanese news sites from generating revenue through advertisement monetization with US companies. Sudan Digital, a private Sudanese company and research entity, has reported that Facebook, Google, and other platforms are working to enable ad sales in Sudan following the end of the sanctions.[95](#) Numerous news sites are funded by affiliates of the former al-Bashir government (see B5).

In February 2020, the government appointed Lukman Ahmed, a former British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) journalist, as director of the Sudanese General Corporation for Radio and Television Transmission.[96](#) The corporation primarily regulates broadcast media, which are also an important source of news in the online media space. Ahmed and other officials indicated that they would seek to liberalize the media environment and reduce state control of broadcasters.[97](#)

In January 2020, the TSC closed two newspapers, *Al-Sudani* and *Al-Rai al-Am*, and two satellite channels, Al-Shorouk and Taiba TV, citing a need to recover state funds and alleging that individuals in the companies were involved in corruption. The four outlets purportedly received funding from the al-Bashir regime.[98](#) Al-Shorouk began broadcasting again in April 2020,[99](#) and, along with *Al-Sudani*, had popular digital media platforms. Al-Shorouk in particular served as an archive of decisions by the government and extensively covered digital media and cybercrimes.

Amendments to the Media Law passed in 2018 (see C2) require online news outlets to register with the Journalism Council, which has the power to suspend publications and prevent online journalists from posting content it objects to.[100](#) As registered outlets, online publications are required to have

a physical office, which many news sites previously avoided due to security and financial concerns.¹⁰¹

B7 0-4 pts

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

Sudan's online information space is increasingly diverse and free from constraints, though its reliability is hampered by a lack of editorial standards from online outlets, online misinformation, and manipulation by political actors (see B5).

Compared to the highly restrictive space in the traditional media sphere, which is characterized by prepublication censorship, confiscations of entire press runs of newspapers,¹⁰² and warnings from GIS agents against reporting on certain taboo topics,¹⁰³ the internet remains a relatively open space for freedom of expression. Many voices express discontent with the government on various online platforms. Online news outlets such as Al Tareeq,¹⁰⁴ Al Taghyeer,¹⁰⁵ Radio Dabanga,¹⁰⁶ Hurriyat, and Al Rakoba cover controversial topics such as corruption and human rights violations. Other news sites, like Darfur24, Nuba Times, and Sawt Al-Hamish cover regions that historically have not been represented in Sudanese media.¹⁰⁷

Facing heavy censorship, many print newspapers have shifted to digital formats, circulating censored or banned material on their websites and social media pages; as a result, residents increasingly rely on online outlets and social media for uncensored information.¹⁰⁸

The online media landscape lacks reliability, in part because the dozens of new media outlets that emerged after al-Bashir's ouster have failed to demonstrate strong editorial policies and practices. Some media websites do not share basic information, such as the names of their reporters, editors, and leadership, or the source of their funding.¹⁰⁹ Government officials reportedly attributed the June 2021 blocking of news sites (see B1) to the spread of online rumors from "unregistered sites and pages."¹¹⁰

Blogging is also popular, allowing journalists and other writers to publish commentary free from the restrictions leveled on print newspapers while providing women and ethnic and religious minorities a platform to express themselves. The more active Sudanese bloggers write in English.

However, the economic crisis and associated rise in the cost of internet access has negatively impacted the quality of content available, mainly because users are less likely to access higher-quality content, or do not access online content at all due to the high cost of data (see A2). Many people share information on WhatsApp, which uses less data than other platforms.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, false information about the virus spread online, including myths about immunization through traditional remedies. Health authorities reported that people who incorrectly believed they were immune because of such misinformation made containment strategies less effective.¹¹¹

B8 0-6 pts

Do conditions impede users' ability to mobilize, form communities, and campaign, 3 / particularly on political and social issues? 6

The internet is an increasingly important tool for mobilization, though internet shutdowns and social media blocks designed to impede online organizing have harmed the online environment. Sudanese security forces continue to respond to protests with indiscriminate forces, regularly killing protestors.

In May 2021, security forces killed protestors at demonstrations organized by Sudanese activists to commemorate the June 2019 attack on protestors by security forces, in which at least 127 people died (see A3). Though the demonstrations were organized primarily through traditional networks, activists used social media to mobilize support. Security forces violently dispersed some of the protests arbitrarily; two young men were killed because of their actions.¹¹² During a similar demonstration in June 2020, Mohammed Abdullah, a community activist who was livestreaming the protests, was shot by security forces, who apparently fired indiscriminately into the crowd. Abdullah later died of his wounds.¹¹³

Activists relied on Facebook and Twitter to mobilize protests before the June 2019 internet shutdown. During the shutdown, organizers mobilized protests through short-message service (SMS) messages.¹¹⁴ When internet services were restored in July 2019, people took to social media to circulate images and footage from the June 3rd attack in Khartoum, to call for accountability, and to organize subsequent protests.¹¹⁵

Social media and communications platforms were critical in organizing protests in early 2018, as well as the protests that began in December 2018 and ultimately led to al-Bashir's ouster.¹¹⁶ However, the government blocks of social media platforms and disruptions to network coverage limited the

ability of activists to mobilize (see A3). Ordinary users worked around the blocks through free VPNs and by circulating instructions on downloading VPNs, which allowed many users continued access to social media platforms (see A3).

The government's blocking and network disruption scheme was clearly intended to disrupt mobilization efforts, as evidenced by the armed NISS and Rapid Support Forces (RSF) agents who stopped protesters and searched their phones for videos, posts, or pictures about the December 2018 demonstrations.¹¹⁷ One eyewitness and his friend were stopped on Nile Street in Khartoum by an agent who requested their phones. Both individuals anticipated such an encounter and hid their phones in their car. "Everyone who had pictures and videos on the protests was arrested in front of us," said the eyewitness in an interview.¹¹⁸

Another eyewitness reported that her colleague was stopped and searched, and that security agents did not believe that she only had a basic mobile phone, which led them to search for a smartphone in her car.¹¹⁹

After accounts of such practices by security agents spread online, protesters sought to protect themselves by deleting social media apps and information received on WhatsApp and other platforms. Some demonstrators bought a separate phone to use at protests or when they perceived a threat from security forces.¹²⁰ Protesters also used functions available on some phones that allow users to switch to a guest account that would have fewer apps available, and therefore less incriminating information.¹²¹

C Violations of User Rights

C1 0-6 pts

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

In August 2019, the TMC, the military junta that overthrew the al-Bashir regime, and the Forces of Freedom and Change (FFC), a coalition of civilian organizations and rebel forces, signed an interim constitution, the Draft Constitutional Charter for the 2019 Transitional Period, to serve as Sudan's legal framework until a new constitution is drafted.¹²² The interim document focuses on several priorities during the 2019–22 transitional period, including the reform of existing laws that impinge upon freedoms under the transitional government's leadership.

The interim constitution includes a Rights and Freedoms Charter, which focuses on human rights, including those already specified in international agreements ratified by Sudan. The charter also enshrines the freedom of expression, freedom of the press, and access to the internet.¹²³ In addition, the interim constitution restructures Sudan's national judiciary and mandates that the transitional government ensures the judiciary's independence.¹²⁴

Civil society organizations raised concerns that the charter does not contain benchmarks for the prescribed reforms or consequences if the transitional government fails to implement them.¹²⁵

The constitution allows the cabinet and the TSC to declare a state of emergency, allowing the cabinet to take emergency measures that do not otherwise contradict the document. In extreme circumstances, the cabinet may ask the TSC to suspend the rights enumerated in the Rights and Freedoms Charter, with some exceptions.¹²⁶ In October 2019, the TSC announced a three-month state of emergency;¹²⁷ after it expired, the TSC "postponed" consideration of whether to extend the state of emergency in January 2020.¹²⁸ The TSC declared a health emergency in March 2020 in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, barring noncommercial travel and closing schools.¹²⁹

When the army ousted al-Bashir in April 2019, following four months of popular protests, the TMC announced the suspension of the constitution, a state of emergency, and a curfew, which threatened the rights of online journalists and activists.¹³⁰ That February, al-Bashir had declared a state of emergency, which also undermined basic constitutional rights.¹³¹

Sudan's courts sometimes issue rulings that affirm freedom of expression online, and the interim constitution envisages the establishment of an independent judiciary to replace the politically influenced judiciary of the al-Bashir era. In July 2019, following the previous month's internet shutdown, the Khartoum District Court ordered Zain to resume internet services.¹³² In September 2019, a court ruled that Sudatel and MTN could be sued by their subscribers for the June shutdown and ordered the companies to apologize to their subscribers.¹³³ In the past, the Constitutional Court has ruled in favor of prepublication censorship if it is deemed in the interest of national security.

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? 1 / 4

Sudanese law can be used to penalize online activists, journalists, and ordinary users in retaliation for publishing legitimate online content. The justice minister is reportedly expected to repeal these laws as part of the transitional government's plan for legal reforms, though little was shared with the media on what this reform will look like.

In July 2020, Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok signed amendments to the Law on Combating Cybercrimes of 2018, which introduced criminal penalties for the spread of fake news online¹³⁴ and is based on the Informatic Offenses (Combating) Act of 2007.¹³⁵ The July 2020 amendments increased the penalties for many activities specified in the original law, including online defamation, online extortion, hacking of government websites, and sharing false information on social media. For instance, Article 24 of the amended law imposes a penalty of up to one year in prison and a fine for those who knowingly share false information online with the intention of "fear to the people or threatening the public peace or decreasing the prestige of the state."¹³⁶

The July amendments were reportedly supported by almost the entirety of the TSC, except for the then-minister of information and another senior official.¹³⁷ The Ministry of Justice reportedly began exploring further reforms to the cybercrimes law in November 2020.¹³⁸

Also in July 2020, military officials announced that a new cybercrime commissioner would monitor and prosecute "insults" of the army.¹³⁹

According to the Social Media Exchange (SMEX), a digital rights organization, Article 23 of the 2018 cybercrime law imposes sanctions such as "imprisonment for less than one year, flogging, or paying a fine" for "anyone who uses the internet, or any means of communications, information or applications to disseminate any news, rumor or report, knowing it's fake, to cause public fear or panic, threaten public safety and offend the reputation of the state."¹⁴⁰

Amendments to the criminal code in July 2020 also carry implications for online activities. Article 153, which criminalizes "material that violates public morals," was amended to remove the punishment of flogging. The provision still imposes penalties of up to one month's imprisonment and a fine for possession of such materials.¹⁴¹ Osman M. Khartoum, a human rights lawyer, believes that the amended provision may still lead to broad arrests because of the nature of online communications, like WhatsApp group messages. Khartoum also holds that the provision, which permits a court to order "the confiscation of devices and equipment"¹⁴² used to display the materials, may be used for abusive searches and seizures of electronic devices (see C5).¹⁴³

Amendments to the highly restrictive Media Law passed in 2016 include specific clauses that address online journalism. The amendments extend onerous restrictions long placed on the traditional press to the online sphere,¹⁴⁴ such as provisions that assign fines to journalists and publications found to undermine public order or national security and hold outlets' chief editors criminally responsible for all content published by their organization.¹⁴⁵

The Informatic Offenses (Combating) Act of 2007, which provides the basis for the cybercrimes law, criminalizes the establishment of websites that publish defamatory material and content that disturbs public morality or public order.¹⁴⁶ Those found in violation of the law face fines and prison sentences of between two and five years.

National security imperatives have also opened journalists up to arrest. The 2010 National Security Act gave the NISS immunity from prosecution and the ability to arrest, detain, and censor journalists under the pretext of national security.¹⁴⁷

C3 0-6 pts

Are individuals penalized for online activities, particularly those that are protected under international human rights standards? 3 / 6

Score Change: The score improved from 2 to 3 because people were not arrested in a systemic fashion for their online activities during the coverage period, though arrests continued, particularly for those criticizing the interim government and security forces.

Arrests, prosecutions, and interrogations for online activities continued during the coverage period, particularly as heavy-handed censorship of the print and broadcast sectors led journalists to migrate online to disseminate news. Internet users continued to fear arrest for online dissent under the interim government, particularly after the June 2019 massacre.

In March 2021, Khadeeja Aldewaihi, a television presenter with Al Shorouk TV, was charged with publishing false information online under the Law on Combating Cybercrimes. Aldewaihi had been detained and interrogated multiple times in late 2020, primarily for a May 2020 Facebook post

criticizing the underfunding of health care infrastructure in Sudan and the efforts made by senior doctors to remove the minister of health.¹⁴⁸ Aldewaihi was released on bail, following an arrest warrant that was filed against her in June 2021.

In February 2021, Sudanese politician Orwa Alsadig was charged under the 2020 cybercrime law after a video of a speech Alsadig gave circulated on social media. Alsadig had spoken in solidarity about his colleague Salah Manna, who was arrested that same month for criticizing Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, the chair of the TSC; al-Burhan also initiated the charges against Alsadig.¹⁴⁹

The human rights group Euro-Med Monitor identified four journalists who faced charges under the amended Law on Combatting Cybercrimes as of December 2020: Lana Aawad, Mubarak Jumah Musa, Aida Abdel Qader, and Adel Keller.¹⁵⁰ The statuses of their cases were unknown as of August 2021.

In November 2020, Waad Bajahat, a blogger and activist, was arrested while streaming on Facebook Live after finding soldiers harassing women in the women's queue at a petrol station in Khartoum. Bajahat was arrested by a soldier and released the next day pending trial; she was reportedly beaten and threatened while in custody. Baharat was charged with defamation, insulting a public servant, publishing false news, being a public nuisance, and attacking a police officer.¹⁵¹ Bajahat was convicted on the latter two charges, charged a fine of 10,000 Sudanese pounds (\$180), and sentenced to six months in jail, though a judge had suspended the sentence in favor of probation as of April 2021.¹⁵²

In early April 2020, during the previous coverage period, Edriss Elbur, a store owner and activist, was arrested and detained for two days by the Rapid Support Forces (RSF). During Elbur's detention, RSF officers interrogated him about Facebook posts he made criticizing military group and warned him not to make similar posts.¹⁵³ Later that month, Elbur was arrested a second time, allegedly after making a complaint against the officers who originally arrested him.¹⁵⁴

Arrests of journalists and bloggers were common under the al-Bashir regime. At least 79 journalists were arrested¹⁵⁵ as protests escalated between December 2018 and February 2019, and several were held in detention for weeks. A number of journalists and bloggers were penalized for content published online. For example, in January 2018, Faisal Mohamed Saleh, an online journalist for Al Araby and Al Taghyeer, was arrested and interrogated for his coverage of the protests. Online journalist Ghurashi Awad was arrested on the same day and was also interrogated for his coverage of the protests.¹⁵⁶ Awad was reportedly detained for over a month.¹⁵⁷

In January 2019, the Sudania 24 television network reported that the State Security Prosecution had produced arrest warrants for 38 journalists and activists, including those who publish online, for incitement and publishing fake news.¹⁵⁸ According to reports, 28 of the 38 people targeted by the warrants were living outside Sudan. Their names were not revealed, which instilled fear among journalists and activists. The government has reportedly explored using Interpol to pursue those living abroad. Authorities have pursued online activists based outside Sudan before, particularly those who live in Saudi Arabia. For example, Hisham Ali,¹⁵⁹ an online activist and blogger based in Saudi Arabia, was arrested by Saudi authorities in late 2017 and transferred to Sudan in May 2018.¹⁶⁰ He was detained until his release in April 2019.¹⁶¹

C4 0-4 pts

Does the government place restrictions on anonymous communication or encryption? 3 / 4

The government does not directly restrict encryption, but SIM card registration requirements limit anonymous communication. Social media blocks in past years drove users toward VPNs and facilitated the use of encrypted communication tools like Signal and Telegram.

Article 9 of the NTC's General Regulations 2012, based on the 2001 Communications Act, obligates mobile service providers to keep a complete record of their customers' data, and authorities began enforcing mandatory SIM card registration in late 2017. Subscribers were given a deadline of December 31, 2017, to register their phone numbers using their national identity cards, which include detailed personal information such as their home address and birthplace. These requirements enable the government to access mobile user information, limiting anonymity.

C5 0-6 pts

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

Unchecked communications surveillance is a grave concern in Sudan, where the government is known to actively monitor communications on social media platforms and surveil online activists and journalists during politically sensitive periods. The government still enjoys broad authority to conduct surveillance despite legal reforms, though the extent of the security forces' technical capacity to surveil is unclear.

In July 2020, the TSC amended the 2010 National Security Law; Article 25 of the law previously granted the NISS broad authority to surveil, interrogate, and arrest people in Sudan. While the amendments included several important reforms, Article 25 of the amended law still grants the GIS “the right to request information, data, documents or things from any person and view or keep them.”¹⁶² Khattab Hamad, a telecommunications engineer, suggests that the amended version of Article 25 has been interpreted to permit security services to “lawfully violate a citizen’s privacy without asking for any permission.”¹⁶³

The NISS regularly intercepted private email messages with the aid of sophisticated surveillance technologies. An industry source argued that he has strong reason to believe that the NISS has in the past purchased surveillance equipment to start their interception at the landing stations in Port Sudan, though it remains unclear if the implementation was a success and whether the current authorities have access to the equipment.¹⁶⁴ Another pressing issue is the lawful interception clause in the contracts users sign with telecommunication companies, which is intentionally broad and gives the authorities the right to tape one’s phone without clear evidence of criminal conduct or an ongoing investigation.¹⁶⁵

According to 2013 research published by Citizen Lab, a Canadian digital rights organization, Sudanese authorities possessed high-tech surveillance equipment produced by the American technology company Blue Coat Systems, which manufactures monitoring and filtering devices. The surveillance system was initially traced to three networks inside Sudan, including the networks of private telecommunications provider Canar Telecom.¹⁶⁶ In 2017, NISS agents reportedly planted Blue Coat surveillance software in the phones and laptops of at least 11 activists during an out-of-country meeting and training. According to a local expert, the software was installed through the Wi-Fi modem shared by the group and enabled the comprehensive monitoring of their online activities.¹⁶⁷

The Sudanese government reportedly purchased software that can remotely infect an electronic device to monitor communications and steal files, known as the Remote Control System, from the Italian technology company Hacking Team in 2012. As of November 2014, Hacking Team suspended service to the Sudanese authorities.¹⁶⁸

C6 0-6 pts

Does monitoring and collection of user data by service providers and other technology 0 / companies infringe on users’ right to privacy? 6

Service providers are required to aid the government in the surveillance of their users. In one December 2020 case, such privacy violations may have facilitated an extrajudicial killing.

Reporting from Darfur²⁴ implicated communications surveillance in the killing of Baha Al-Din Nouri, who was kidnapped and tortured to death by RSF officers in December 2020. According to sources, RSF officers kidnapped Nouri after their monitoring of his calls had not yielded enough information for an arrest warrant. Whether security forces monitored Nouri’s call directly, using surveillance technology, or with assistance from a service provider is unclear.¹⁶⁹

The SIM card registration process links phone numbers to users’ personal data, which enables government surveillance (see C4). Mobile service providers are obligated to keep records of their customers’ data, including full names, full addresses, other phone numbers, and place of employment.

An activist who was summoned for questioning in early 2018¹⁷⁰ noted that an NISS officer told him that because authorities have access to the national identification system and the user information stored by telecommunications companies, they could collect extensive information about mobile users with just their phone numbers.

Telecommunications providers can be compelled to aid the government in monitoring the communications of their users, but authorities reportedly have a tighter grip on Zain and Sudatel than MTN. The NISS allegedly maintained significant involvement in telecommunications providers’ hiring processes, and NISS agents have at times apparently been embedded within the companies.

Between July and December 2019, Facebook received 52 requests for data covering 76 user accounts from the Sudanese government. Facebook produced no data in response to these requests.¹⁷¹

C7 0-5 pts

Are individuals subject to extralegal intimidation or physical violence by state authorities 2 / or any other actor in relation to their online activities? 5

Online journalists and activists often face extralegal intimidation, harassment, and violence in retaliation for their online activities. The frequency of such incidents decreased during the coverage period, in comparison to the many protesters who reported harassment from security agents after

posting on social media around the mass demonstrations in early 2019.

In May 2020, during the previous coverage period, security forces threatened and intimidated journalists Lana Awad and Aida Abel Qader for their coverage of hospital deaths that were likely related to the COVID-19 pandemic in North Darfur.¹⁷² Both women reported that individuals who identified themselves as military intelligence officers requested that they attend an interview at their headquarters, and threatened to compel them to do so, over the course of three days in El Fasher.¹⁷³

Though security forces did not systematically harass protesters for their online activity during the coverage period, activists and protesters reported that the authorities did make attempts to restrict their online activities in previous years. Demonstrators reported that security forces who violently repressed an April 2020 protest confiscated the phones of activists and journalists.¹⁷⁴ In December 2019, a group of social media activists reported that they were harassed.

Activists and protesters detained in recent years experienced long pretrial detentions and torture by the authorities. Nine young people arrested in the aftermath of the Khartoum massacre were reportedly detained for more than three months,¹⁷⁵ while a prominent activist was sentenced to four months' detention for criticizing a police officer.¹⁷⁶ Activists reported numerous cases of violent arrest by security forces and torture while in custody.¹⁷⁷

Several activists, particularly women, were targeted by harassment campaigns during the coverage period. The campaigns appeared to be led by trolls mobilizing internet users opposed to women's rights, especially in relation to Islam. In January and February 2021, Hanan Hassan, a lawyer and politician, was targeted with continuous reporting of her Facebook page, as well as online threats and harassment. Hassan, who serves on a committee working to reform Sudanese family law, had made a controversial statement about the prophet Muhammad and one of his wives.¹⁷⁸ She now uses another Facebook account and has changed her name on the platform as a result. Tahani Abbas, an activist with No to Women's Oppression was the subject of a troll campaign; personal pictures of her were circulated with derogatory comments, along with comments labeling women's rights activists in general as apostates, communists, and prostitutes.¹⁷⁹ In July 2020, high school student Ludan Tariq experienced bullying and harassment online, including criticism that she was not covering her hair, after a video of Tariq criticizing the military went viral.

Social media influencers and minority groups such as LGBT+ people are also frequent targets of online harassment.¹⁸⁰ In September 2019, during the previous coverage period, sexual videos of a young woman using the pseudonym "Kholoud" were shared online without her consent. Social media users began harassing her online, causing her to stop leaving her home; she later left Sudan.¹⁸¹

C8 0-3 pts

**Are websites, governmental and private entities, service providers, or individual users
subject to widespread hacking and other forms of cyberattack?**

1
/
3

Score Change: The score improved from 0 to 1 as no cyberattacks against government critics and media organizations were reported during the coverage period, though hacking is still relatively common and government websites experienced breaches.

Cyberattacks were reported less frequently during the coverage period than in previous years, though government websites and other important infrastructure experienced successful hacking attempts.

In June 2020, hackers defaced the websites of two universities and other websites to commemorate the Khartoum massacre.¹⁸² That same month, the Sudanese Ministry of Religious Affairs and Endowments experienced a cyberattack in which pornography was posted on its website.¹⁸³

A news article published in January 2019 cited the National Information Center when reporting that government websites were targeted by 200 daily hacking attempts. However, this figure could not be corroborated.¹⁸⁴

In January 2019, during the previous coverage period, hackers reportedly made some content housed on the website of the government-run Sudan News Agency (SUNA) inaccessible.¹⁸⁵

In previous years, independent news sites have been subjected to technical attacks, which many believe are perpetrated by the cyber jihad unit. Attacks usually intensify around significant political events and unrest, while some prominent news sites ward off daily distributed denial-of-service (DDoS) attacks. Several online outlets reported technical attacks against their websites in past years but were able to respond by increasing their cybersecurity capabilities.

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Austrian Red Cross Austrian Centre for Country of Origin and Asylum Research and Documentation (ACCORD)	Wiedner Hauptstraße 32, 1041 Wien T (Telefon) +43 1 589 00 583 F (Fax) +43 1 589 00 589 info@ecoi.net	Contact Imprint & Disclaimer F.A.Q. Data Protection Notice
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