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Freedom on the Net 2022 - Sudan

NOT FREE

29

/ 100

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LAST YEAR'S SCORE & STATUS

33 / 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

Lieutenant General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan's October 2021 coup against the transitional government reversed improvements in internet freedom secured under the administration of Prime Minister Abdulla Hamdok, who eventually resigned in January 2022. The military government responded to anticoup protests by imposing a nationwide internet and communications shutdown and launching a campaign of repression against Sudanese online journalists, media outlets, and activists. Authorities threatened to revoke media licenses for journalists and outlets that spoke out against the coup and arbitrarily and violently arrested journalists who were covering the protests. Hopes that the online regulatory environment would be liberalized were dashed when al-Burhan suspended articles of the interim constitution and subsequently undermined protections for freedom of expression and the press. Despite the military's violent crackdown, activists continued to leverage social media platforms to document human rights abuses committed by authorities and organize mass demonstrations.

After military commanders and a prodemocracy protest movement ousted the repressive regime of longtime president Omar al-Bashir and his National Congress Party (NCP) in 2019, Sudan was ruled by a transitional government in which military and civilian leaders agreed to share power until national elections could be held. The government began to enact reforms, and space for the exercise of civil liberties slowly opened. However, the process was thrown into turmoil by the October 2021 coup and ensuing crackdown. Throughout the transition period, violence involving security forces, other armed groups, and rival ethnic communities has persisted in many parts of the country.

Key Developments, June 1, 2021 - May 31, 2022

- Immediately following the October 25, 2021, coup, the military leadership imposed a 25-day nationwide internet and communications shutdown to prevent anticoup protesters from mobilizing. The Telecommunications and Post Regulatory Authority (TPRA), the country's telecommunications regulator, forced internet service providers (ISPs) to defy a court order to fully restore internet access (see A3).
- Though internet access in was partially restored on November 18, 2021, mobile access to Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, and Instagram remained restricted until November 24. ISPs were also ordered to block 15 news and media organizations' websites for several days in June 2021 (see B1).
- Prodemocracy activists reported that security forces inspected protesters' phones and ordered them to delete photos or videos documenting violence during the October 2021 protests (see B8).
- Several online journalists were arrested in retaliation for their coverage of the coup and violent crackdown. Journalists sustained injuries from security officers as they were arrested and were detained without medical treatment (see C3 and C7).

A Obstacles to Access

A1 0-6 pts

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

Internet penetration remains low, with 30.9 percent of the population—representing 14 million people—using the internet as of January 2022 according to the *Digital 2022* report, a 2.4 percent increase from 2021.^{[1](#)}

According to data from the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), there were 28,782 fixed-line broadband connections as of 2020.^{[2](#)} Meanwhile, the ITU reported that 42.3 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.

Mobile service provider Sudani, which operates under the partially state-owned Sudan Telecom Company (Sudatel), became the first provider to offer 5G services when it started trial operations in Khartoum in February 2022.^{[4](#)}

An unreliable electricity supply limits internet service in Sudan, including in major cities that have been subject to periodic power rationing. Power cuts, which can last up to 12 hours,^{[5](#)} 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,^{[6](#)} while most rural areas have unsteady access to electricity. 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.^{[7](#)} Though internet infrastructure is generally equipped with backup generators to mitigate internet disruptions, the generators do not always work.^{[8](#)}

Telecommunications companies struggle with endemic corruption and debt to foreign lenders. The resulting lack of investment in infrastructure has caused a degradation in internet service, exacerbated during the COVID-19 pandemic.^{[9](#)}

In March 2021, Zain subscribers experienced an hours-long disruption, during which some users were unable to make calls or access the internet.^{[10](#)}

A2 0-3 pts

Is access to the internet prohibitively expensive or beyond the reach of certain segments of the 0 / population for geographical, social, or other reasons? 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 shortage has led to drastically increasing inflation and skyrocketing prices for services.^{[11](#)} Trends that continued the coverage period. As of June 2022, Sudan’s inflation rate was 148.90 percent.^{[12](#)} In March 2022, the Ministry of Finance raised the telecommunications value-added tax (VAT) by 5 percent, which raised connectivity costs.^{[13](#)}

Internet prices continued to rise during the coverage period, with all major providers imposing price increases.^{[14](#)} As of August 2021, a 1 gigabyte (GB) monthly bundle offered by Zain and Sudatel cost 485.50 (\$1.10) and 395.75 Sudanese pounds (\$0.90), respectively;^{[15](#)} which is unaffordable for most residents. The Ministry of Finance raised the minimum wage to 12,000 pounds (\$27.12) for government employees in January 2021.^{[16](#)}

After Zain imposed multiple price increases, 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.^{[17](#)}

Students remain disenfranchised by price increases. In July 2020, the higher education minister directed universities to commence e-learning to combat the spread of COVID-19. Critics noted that the cost of internet access is a major barrier for students’ participation in e-learning.^{[18](#)} To mitigate this problem, some professors at public universities distributed prerecorded lectures in audio format to be shared on Telegram channels and other platforms.^{[19](#)}

In October 2021, the Ministry of Education launched a new free e-learning platform in collaboration with Ministry of Telecommunications and Digital Transformation (MTDT), Microsoft, the UN Children’s Fund, and Sudan’s four main ISPs (Zain, MTN, Sudani, and Canar).^{[20](#)}

According to a survey conducted by Afrobarometer in 2018, women in Sudan are 9 percent less likely to access the internet regularly than men.^{[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](#)}

MTN and Zain provide zero-rating services by offering subscribers free, but sometimes limited, access to Facebook services.^{[23](#)}

A3 0-6 pts

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

Score Change: The score declined from 2 to 1 because the government restricted internet connectivity following the October 2021 coup and ahead of planned anticoup protests.

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

On October 25, 2021, authorities began shutting down internet and telecommunications services and disabled mobile services several days later, ahead of planned mass protests.²⁴ Activists alleged that the government disrupted services to prevent protesters from coordinating.²⁵ On November 11, the Khartoum Court ordered ISPs to restore internet access. However, the TPRA countered the court’s decision and ordered ISPs to maintain their restrictions to “preserve national unity and national security” a day later.²⁶ Access was partially restored on November 18, though there were still restrictions on social media platforms until November 24 (see B1).²⁷

After authorities restored internet access in November 2021, internet services were disrupted on December 25, 2021; on January 2, 2022, for 12 hours; and on June 30, 2022, for 24 hours, amid mass protests.²⁸

In June 2021, internet services were disrupted for three hours a day for 12 days amid nationwide exams. The public prosecutor reportedly ordered the shutdown at the request of the education minister, with the interior minister’s support.²⁹

Sudan experienced a near-total network shutdown, lasting 36 days, between early June and July 2019.³⁰ In early June 2019, security forces attacked a peaceful protest in Khartoum, killing 127 people, injuring hundreds more, and sexually assaulting dozens.³¹ The timing of the shutdown limited the spread of information about the massacre on the internet, including evidence of abuses perpetrated by security forces.³² During the shutdown, internet services were intermittently available via some Canar Telecom and Sudatel asymmetric digital subscriber line (ADSL) connections.³³

In July 2019, after the internet shutdown, the Khartoum District Court ordered Zain to resume internet services.³⁴ That same month, a Zain executive disclosed that the company restricted internet services on the TPRA’s orders.³⁵ 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 issue public apologies.³⁶

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.

The government increased taxes on telecommunications services, forcing companies to increase internet prices (see A2). The government is due to renegotiate its contracts with MTN and Zain when the two companies’ licenses expire in 2024 and 2027, respectively.³⁷

Four licensed telecommunications providers operate in Sudan: Canar Telecom, Zain, MTN, and Sudatel. In August 2021, the TPRA licensed three companies, Lolo Tech, Vision Valley, and Morgan Zone, to provide wireless broadband services.³⁸

MTN and Zain are primarily foreign owned.³⁹ The government owns more than 20 percent of Sudatel.⁴⁰ Following the ousting of the al-Bashir regime, the transitional government changed Sudatel’s board of directors; for instance, Transitional Sovereign Council (TSC) member Ibrahim Jaber Ibrahim now chairs the board.⁴¹ The al-Bashir regime reportedly had significant sway over the company’s board of directors.⁴²

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 in 2020. The assets included shares in MTN.⁴³

Zain has reportedly maintained links to the government. According to a local source, Zain appointed Osama Kahin as its new general manager in April 2019. Kahin is seen as an independent figure, unlike his predecessor, Al-Fatih Erwa, a former security officer. Hisham Allam was appointed chief executive in 2020.⁴⁴

A5 0-4 pts

Do national regulatory bodies that oversee service providers and digital technology fail to operate in a 0 / free, fair, and independent manner? 4

The regulatory bodies that oversee service providers historically lacked independence, though recent changes indicate no movement toward autonomy. The TPRA, which replaced the National Telecommunications Corporation (NTC) in 2018,⁴⁵ is tasked with regulating internet use and telecommunications licensing, facilitating competition, producing statistics, and developing the information and communications technology (ICT) sector.⁴⁶ It is also responsible for determining what content is accessible on the internet (see B3).⁴⁷

In February 2021, the transitional government created the MTDT⁴⁸ and brought the TPRA under its purview. In October 2021, the coup authorities arrested the MTDT minister;⁴⁹ Adel Hassan Mohamed Hussein was named to that post in January 2022.⁵⁰ In July 2019, Major General Sadiq Jamal al-Deen al-Sadig was appointed as the head of the TPRA.⁵¹ Al-Sadig was involved in the decision to restrict internet access following the October 2021 coup and directed ISPs to ignore a court order to restore internet service.⁵²

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.⁵³

B Limits on Content

B1 0-6 pts

Does the state block or filter, or compel service providers to block or filter, internet content, 3 / particularly material that is protected by international human rights standards? 6

Score Change: The score declined from 5 to 3 because the government continued to block social media platforms after internet connectivity was partially restored.

Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, and Instagram were restricted on mobile services in Sudan even after internet services were partially restored in November 2021 (see A3).⁵⁴ These services became available later that month.

On June 29, 2021, hours before antigovernment protests were scheduled to begin, 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 for several days.⁵⁵ Baj News reported that the cybercrime prosecutors gave the order and that it, along with other outlets, filed a complaint over the instruction.⁵⁶

The ousted al-Bashir regime openly acknowledged blocking and filtering websites that it considered “immoral” and “blasphemous.” Websites hosting pornography reportedly became accessible in Sudan in 2019; the authorities had previously blocked most pornographic content. In July 2021, however, the TPRA announced that it would continue to block pornographic websites, citing the Telecommunications Law of 2018.⁵⁷

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.⁵⁸

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 2 / 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. The General Intelligence Service (GIS) and individuals affiliated with the government harass and intimidate users to delete content they object to in Facebook groups.⁵⁹

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.⁶⁰

B3 0-4 pts

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

Under the TPRA Act of 2018, the TPRA is mandated to protect the national security of Sudan, which is vaguely defined.⁶¹ Furthermore, the law allows the TPRA to shut down any wireless device, wireless station, or broadcast station if these stations are violating rules and regulations outlined in other laws. The TPRA Act was used to justify the internet shutdown following the October 2021 coup, as well as previous internet shutdowns.

In December 2020, the TPRA approved the 2020 regulations on content filtering and website blockage.⁶² The regulations give TPRA the mandate to block certain categories of websites including gambling sites, peer-to-peer file sharing sites, VPN sites, and sites which call for atheism, as well as “any additional classifications that the authority considers.”⁶³ Under Article 8 of the regulations, ISPs must immediately block websites once they receive a TPRA notice or face fines of up 300,000 pounds (\$681).⁶⁴

The TPRA’s website gives users the opportunity to submit requests to unblock websites “that are deemed to not contain pornography,”⁶⁵ but it does not specify whether the blocking of political websites can be appealed. In addition to the TPRA, the prosecutor general has the power to block any site that threatens national security or violates social mores.⁶⁶

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, Salah Abdallah, head of the now-defunct National Intelligence and Security Service (NISS), admitted that the government was responsible for blocking social media platforms, but the NTC did not provide further information about the decision.⁶⁷

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,⁶⁸ though it also acknowledged that it had not succeeded in blocking all “negative” sites in Sudan.⁶⁹ The TPRA additionally requires cybercafé owners to download blocking and filtering software.⁷⁰

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.

While journalists enjoyed a hitherto unprecedented level of freedom in the immediate aftermath of al-Bashir’s ouster, the army has since done much to restrict it.

While journalists enjoyed an unprecedented level of freedom in the immediate aftermath of al-Bashir’s ouster, the army has since done much to restrict it. In October 2021, Al-Democracy, a newspaper that transitioned into a digital outlet after the coup, reported that their offices were under surveillance by security forces.⁷¹ 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.⁷²

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.⁷³ Many journalists writing for online platforms publish anonymously to avoid prosecution. Since the October 2021 coup, protestors and activists relied on individuals living outside of Sudan to upload content they collect to avoid surveillance and arrest.⁷⁴

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.

During the coverage period, government officials tried to pressure news outlets operating online and offline to avoid using negative language to describe the government. In February 2022, the National Council of Press and Publication issued a letter to the *Al-Jareda* newspaper, warning it to change its description of the TSC, which it called “putschist” in its reporting.⁷⁵ *Al-Jareda* preserved their original language on Facebook.⁷⁶

In February 2022, Beam Reports, a Sudanese fact-checking agency, reported that the Sudanese Rapid Support Forces (RSF) used an inauthentic research center to promote an alleged study that confirmed the RSF’s role in fighting illegal immigration and human trafficking. According to Beam Reports, the RSF also used a group of Facebook accounts to disseminate the work.⁷⁷

The government imposed editorial directives on media outlets following the October 2021 coup. The directives, which indicated media outlets should refer to the coup as an “action” or “decision,” were provided orally through the Press and Publications Council and the Private Media Department of the Ministry of Culture and Information (MCI) to Sudan TV, Sudanese Radio, and other outlets.⁷⁸

In February 2022, Alhadi Mohammed Alameen, an online journalist for Sudan Tribune, received a request to refrain from reporting on terrorism and religious extremism. It was unclear who sent the message.⁷⁹ Rather than adhering to the request, Alameen stopped writing altogether.⁸⁰

Dozens of online newspapers and other outlets have appeared since 2019, some of which appear to be affiliated with the security services or the so-called cyberjihad unit, which has persisted beyond the al-Bashir era. The outlets use sensational headlines and social media posts to malign activists and civil society organizations.⁸¹ According to anonymous sources who spoke to the news site Al-Ain, some 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 NCP, the Muslim Brotherhood–affiliated political group that al-Bashir led.^{[82](#)}

Campaigns targeting Sudanese social media users are identified regularly. In January 2022, Marc Owen Jones, a disinformation researcher, identified a network likely including inauthentic and hacked accounts to share content about the United Arab Emirates’ support for and relationship with Sudan.^{[83](#)} In August 2021, a Twitter network that likely included inauthentic and hacked accounts amplified a narrative that Sudanese internet users opposed the government’s decision to transfer al-Bashir to the International Criminal Court.^{[84](#)}

The al-Bashir government was known to spread disinformation and manipulate social media discussion through the so-called cyberjihad 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 harass opposition figures and protesters.^{[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 additionally sought to sway public opinion by flooding platforms with coordinated posts, hashtags, and messages.^{[87](#)}

The cyberjihad unit spread false information to muddle debate and discredit independent news outlets and analysts who unknowingly circulated the misinformation. For example, Sudanese activists asserted that the unit planted a false story about the killings of protesters in an effort to discredit organizations that disseminated it,^{[88](#)} including the Central Committee of Sudan Doctors and Sudan Change Now.

Despite the al-Bashir regime’s ouster, the cyberjihad unit reportedly remains active in disseminating inauthentic content on social media platforms.^{[89](#)} It has engaged in disinformation campaigns surrounding COVID-19, reportedly sharing content claiming the coronavirus 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 publish content 0 / 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 previous 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, according to UN officials^{[93](#)}—was officially rescinded in December 2020.^{[94](#)}

In February 2022, Twitter allowed Sudanese users to register accounts with a local phone number.^{[95](#)} Twitter previously restricted Sudanese users from registering with local numbers because of US sanctions.

The cost of issuing a license to establish any media services center, including news sites, is 400,000 pounds (\$907)^{[96](#)} in a country where the average annual salary is 480,000 pounds (\$1,090).^{[97](#)} The fees, which are imposed under the Press and Publication Act of 2009, severely restrict the media environment.

In January 2022, the MCI revoked the accreditation of Al Jazeera Mubasher journalist Mohammed Omar and photographer Badawi Bashir for their “unprofessional coverage of the Sudanese affairs.” The outlet’s broadcast license was also revoked.^{[98](#)}

Funding constraints limit the survival of online news outlets. Al-Taghyeer, 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. In 2021, Sudan Digital, a private Sudanese company and research entity, reported that Facebook, Google, and other platforms are working to enable ad sales in Sudan following the end of the sanctions.^{[99](#)} 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.^{[100](#)} 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.^{[101](#)} Ahmed was removed in October 2021 but was reappointed by then prime minister Hamdok in December 2021;^{[102](#)} he was dismissed again in April 2022.^{[103](#)}

In March 2020, Hussein Khogali, the owner of Omdurman TV and an NCP loyalist, announced that he would close the outlet because of its inability to pay broadcasting fees.^{[104](#)} Khogali wrote an article saying that the government refused to place official and semiofficial advertisements on the channel, effectively boycotting the outlet.^{[105](#)}

B7 0-4 pts**Does the online information landscape lack diversity and reliability? 2 / 4**

Sudan’s online information space is increasingly diverse, 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,¹⁰⁶ and warnings from GIS agents against reporting on certain taboo topics,¹⁰⁷ 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,¹⁰⁸ Al-Taghyeer,¹⁰⁹ Radio Dabanga,¹¹⁰ 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.¹¹¹

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.¹¹²

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.¹¹³ Government officials reportedly attributed the June 2021 blocking of news sites (see B1) to the spread of online rumors from “unregistered sites and pages.”¹¹⁴

Citizen journalism has grown after al-Bashir’s ouster, which has contributed to increasing reliability of the media space by offering multiple sources of information.¹¹⁵ 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.

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.¹¹⁶

B8 0-6 pts**Do conditions impede users’ ability to mobilize, form communities, and campaign, particularly on 3 /
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 environment. Sudanese security forces continue to respond to protests with indiscriminate force, regularly killing protesters.

In May 2021, security forces killed protesters at demonstrations organized by Sudanese activists to commemorate security officers’ June 2019 attack on protesters, in which at least 127 people died. 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, causing the deaths of two young men.¹¹⁷ 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.¹¹⁸

Activists relied on Facebook and Twitter to mobilize protests before the October 2021 internet shutdown. Organizers then mobilized protests through short-message service (SMS) messages, until mobile services were also restricted.¹¹⁹ When internet services were restored in November 2021, people took to social media to circulate images and footage from a clash that took place in Khartoum that month, to call for accountability, and to organize subsequent protests.¹²⁰ Between November 18 and 24, when internet services were restored but social media platforms remained restricted, Proton VPN offered free VPN access to Sudanese users.¹²¹

Social media and communications platforms were also 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.¹²² However, government blocks of social media platforms and disruptions to network coverage impacted mobilization efforts (see A3). Ordinary users circumvented the blocks through free VPNs and by circulating instructions on downloading VPNs, which allowed many users continued access to social media platforms (see B8).

During the October 2021 protests, security forces allegedly inspected participants’ mobile phones to delete evidence of rights abuses committed by security officers.¹²³ For instance, a political activist and a lawyer wrote a Facebook post in which she claimed that an army officer asked to examine photographs; when she refused, she was taken to a police station.¹²⁴

After accounts of security officers’ practices spread online, protesters sought to protect themselves by deleting social media apps and information received on WhatsApp and other platforms. Some demonstrators acquired separate phones to use at protests or when they perceived a threat from security forces.¹²⁵ Protesters also used functions

available on some phones that allowed them to use guest accounts that would have fewer installed apps available (and, therefore, less incriminating information).¹²⁶ In November 2021, an anonymous team of digital security experts created a guide to securing phones to help protesters protect themselves if they faced inspection.¹²⁷

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, including on the internet, and are they enforced by a judiciary that lacks independence? 0 / 6

Score Change: The score declined from 1 to 0 because the suspension of select articles of Sudan’s interim constitution undermined protections for fundamental rights.

In October 2021, General al-Burhan dissolved the transitional government in a military coup and suspended some of the 2019 interim constitution’s articles. Al-Burhan specifically suspended articles related to the government’s composition—namely the TSC, the cabinet, and the Transitional Legislative Council—creating “a legal conundrum” in enforcing other provisions and jeopardizing the constitution’s freedom-of-expression protections.¹²⁸ In addition to suspending parts of the constitution, the general declared a state of emergency that was lifted in May 2022.¹²⁹

In August 2019, 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 the interim constitution, the Draft Constitutional Charter for the 2019 Transitional Period, to serve as Sudan’s legal framework until a new constitution is drafted.¹³⁰ 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.¹³¹ In addition, the interim constitution restructures Sudan’s national judiciary and mandates that the transitional government ensures the judiciary’s independence.¹³²

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.¹³³ In October 2019, the TSC announced a three-month state of emergency;¹³⁴ after it expired, the TSC “postponed” consideration of whether to extend the state of emergency in January 2020.¹³⁵ The TSC declared a health emergency in March 2020 in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.¹³⁶

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.¹³⁷ That February, al-Bashir had declared a state of emergency, which also undermined basic constitutional rights.¹³⁸

Sudanese courts sometimes issue rulings that affirm freedom of expression online. In November 2021, the Khartoum District Court ordered telecommunications providers to resume internet services.¹³⁹ After ISPs failed to execute the court’s decision, arrest warrants were issued for their managers;¹⁴⁰ an inside source later claimed that telecommunications providers restored internet access due to political and economic pressure, not because of the court decision.¹⁴¹ 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.

According to an April 2022 report, Sudanese authorities are preparing a law that criminalizes insulting state leaders.¹⁴²

In July 2020, then premier Hamdok signed amendments to the Law on Combating Cybercrimes of 2018 (LCC), which introduced criminal penalties for the spread of purportedly false news online¹⁴³ and is based on the Informatic Offenses (Combating) Act of 2007.¹⁴⁴ 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 LCC 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.”¹⁴⁵

The July 2020 amendments were reportedly supported by almost the entirety of the TSC.¹⁴⁶ The Ministry of Justice reportedly began exploring further reforms to the LCC in November 2020.¹⁴⁷

Also in July 2020, military officials announced that a new cybercrime commissioner would monitor and prosecute “insults” lodged against the army.¹⁴⁸

According to the Social Media Exchange (SMEX), a digital rights organization, Article 23 of the LCC 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.”¹⁴⁹

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.¹⁵⁰ 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”¹⁵¹ used to display the materials, may be used for abusive searches and seizures of electronic devices (see C5).¹⁵²

The Informatic Offenses (Combating) Act of 2007, which provides the basis for the LCC, criminalizes the establishment of websites that publish defamatory material and content that disturbs public morality or public order.¹⁵³ Those found in violation of the law face fines and two-to-five-year prison sentences.

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.¹⁵⁴

C3 0-6 pts

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

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 October 2021 coup.

After the October 2021 coup, security forces arrested 10 journalists, including one Darfur²⁴ journalist and two photographers from the Chinese state-operated Xinhua news agency.¹⁵⁵ All 10 journalists were later released without charge.

In February 2022, Mohanad Hamid, a member of the Central Committee of the Sudanese Doctors, was arrested for two weeks after calling for a mobilization against the coup online and offline.¹⁵⁶

In April 2022, Sulaima Ishaq, the director of the Combating Violence against Women Unit, was sued by the GIS because she allegedly “leaked” information to online outlet Alintibaha about two rape cases associated with Sudanese security forces.¹⁵⁷

In March 2021, Khadeeja Aldewaihi, a Al-Shorouk TV presenter, was charged with publishing false information online under the LCC. Aldewaihi had been detained and interrogated multiple times in late 2020, primarily for a May 2020 Facebook post criticizing the underfunding of health-care services and senior doctors’ efforts to remove the health minister.¹⁵⁸ 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 LCC after a video of a speech Alsadig gave circulated on social media. Alsadig had discussed colleague Salah Manna, who was arrested that same month for criticizing General al-Burhan; al-Burhan also initiated the charges against Alsadig.¹⁵⁹

The human rights group Euro-Med Monitor identified four journalists who faced charges under the amended LCC as of December 2020: Lana Aawad, Mubarak Jumah Musa, Aida Abdel Qader, and Adel Keller.¹⁶⁰ The statuses of their cases were unknown as of May 2022.

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.¹⁶¹ Bajahat was convicted on the latter two charges, charged a fine of 10,000 pounds (\$180), and sentenced to six months in jail, though a judge had suspended the sentence in favor of probation as of April 2021.¹⁶²

Arrests of journalists and bloggers were common under the al-Bashir regime. At least 79 journalists were arrested¹⁶³ 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.¹⁶⁴ Awad was reportedly detained for over a month.¹⁶⁵

Authorities have pursued online activists based outside Sudan, particularly those who live in Saudi Arabia. For example, Hisham Ali,^{[166](#)} a Saudi Arabia-based online activist and blogger, was arrested by Saudi authorities in late 2017 and transferred to Sudan in May 2018.^{[167](#)} He was detained until his release in April 2019.^{[168](#)}

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 required 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.

Sudanese authorities used their access to mobile networks to trace the locations of and arrest some activists after the October 2021 coup.^{[169](#)}

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.”^{[170](#)} A former 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.”^{[171](#)}

The NISS regularly intercepts 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 purchased surveillance equipment to facilitate 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.^{[172](#)} 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.^{[173](#)}

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.^{[174](#)} 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.^{[175](#)}

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.^{[176](#)}

C6 0-6 pts

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

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 Darfur^{[24](#)} 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.^{[177](#)}

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. Under the Telecommunications Law of 2018, telecommunications companies must provide customer data to authorities upon request.^{[178](#)}

An activist who was summoned for questioning in early 2018¹⁷⁹ noted that an NISS officer told him that the agency could collect extensive information about mobile users with just their phone numbers because authorities have access to the national identification system and the user information stored by telecommunications companies. A politician arrested after the October 2021 coup claimed that the government traced his location and identified his close contacts based on his SIM card activity.¹⁸⁰

Though all telecommunications providers can be compelled to aid the government in monitoring the communications of their users, 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 2021, Facebook received five requests for data covering eight user accounts from the Sudanese government. Facebook produced no data in response to these requests.¹⁸¹

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? 2 / 5

Online journalists and activists often face extralegal intimidation, harassment, and violence in retaliation for their online activities.

In November 2021, Ali Farsab, a journalist with online news outlet Ultra Sudan, was allegedly beaten by soldiers as they arrested him while he was covering demonstrations in Bahri El Muasasa. Despite sustaining a scalp injury, he was allegedly held in detention without treatment.¹⁸² In the same month, authorities allegedly beat Darfur24 journalist Abdalmonim Madibo in the process of arresting him for covering protests.¹⁸³

In November 2021, the editor in chief of a prominent independent news site reportedly fled Sudan to avoid arrest.¹⁸⁴

In May 2020, 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.¹⁸⁵ Both women reported that individuals who identified themselves as military intelligence officers requested and then tried to compel them into attending an interview at their headquarters over a three-day period in El Fasher.¹⁸⁶

Security forces harassed protesters for their online activity during the coverage period, and authorities did make attempts to restrict their online activities (see B8). Demonstrators reported that security forces who violently repressed the protests following the October 2021 coup confiscated the phones of activists and journalists (see B8).

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 2019 Khartoum massacre were reportedly detained for more than three months,¹⁸⁷ while a prominent activist was sentenced to four months’ detention for criticizing a police officer.¹⁸⁸ Activists reported numerous cases of violent arrest by security forces and torture while in custody.¹⁸⁹

Several activists, particularly women, were targeted by harassment campaigns during the previous 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.¹⁹⁰ 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.¹⁹¹

Social media influencers and minority groups such as LGBT+ people are also frequent targets of online harassment.¹⁹² In September 2019, 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.¹⁹³

C8 0-3 pts

Are websites, governmental and private entities, service providers, or individual users subject to 1 / widespread hacking and other forms of cyberattack? 3

Cyberattacks were reported less frequently during the coverage period than in previous years.

In June 2020, hackers defaced the websites of two universities and other websites to commemorate the Khartoum massacre.¹⁹⁴ That same month, the Ministry of Religious Affairs and Endowments experienced a cyberattack in which pornography was posted on its website.¹⁹⁵

In January 2019, hackers reportedly made some content housed on the website of the government-run Sudan News Agency (SUNA) inaccessible.¹⁹⁶

In previous years, independent news sites have been subjected to technical attacks, which many believe are perpetrated by the cyberjihad 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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