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Freedom on the Net 2022 - Ethiopia

NOT FREE

27

/ 100

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LAST YEAR'S SCORE & STATUS

27 / 100 Not Free

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

Overview

The conflict between the Ethiopian federal government and forces associated with the Tigrayan People's Liberation Front (TPLF), which escalated in November 2020 and continued throughout the coverage period, led to sharp restrictions on the human rights of internet users. An internet shutdown that the federal government imposed in the Tigray Region in November 2020 persisted during the coverage period, alongside localized connectivity disruptions in parts of Amhara and Afar Regions where clashes between federal government and TPLF forces also took place. The government of Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed continued to crack down on media outlets and journalists with an online presence, including by detaining journalists for up to three months, threatening to revoke and actually revoking their press licenses, and forcibly disappearing some prominent journalists.

Ethiopia is undergoing a turbulent period of political change that began when Abiy came to power after the resignation of Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn in the face of mass protests in which demonstrators demanded greater political rights. Abiy pledged to reform the authoritarian state and initially pursued the revision of some laws used by his predecessors to suppress dissent. However, his government—led by the Prosperity Party, a reconfiguration of the ethnoregional coalition that has ruled Ethiopia since 1991—reverted to authoritarian tactics amid political factionalism and rising intercommunal violence. Abuses by security forces and violations of due process are still common, and many restrictive laws remain in force. The conflict with the TPLF has led to the displacement of hundreds of thousands of people and credible allegations of atrocity crimes, and the violence in Tigray has spilled over into neighboring regions. Despite significant deficiencies linked to the ongoing conflict and state pressure on opposition parties, general elections proceeded in June 2021 after a delay from August 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and the Prosperity Party claimed a significant parliamentary majority.

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

- The communications blackout imposed by the federal government in the Tigray Region continued throughout the coverage period, impeding access to information, online communication, and humanitarian aid. Ethiopian authorities also imposed localized internet and communications blackouts in other areas where TPLF forces gained control (see A3).
- The Ethiopian Media Authority issued letters threatening to revoke the press licenses of four international media outlets, revoked the accreditation of a reporter for the *Economist*, and revoked the media license of *Addis Standard* for one week (see B6).
- Several online journalists were arrested and detained for up to three months in retaliation for their reporting during the coverage period (see C3).
- A YouTube journalist was forcibly disappeared during the coverage period, and journalists widely reported being targeted in online harassment campaigns, sometimes at the direction of

A Obstacles to Access

A1 0-6 pts

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

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

As of January 2022, DataReportal reported that Ethiopia's internet penetration rate was 25 percent of the total population.¹ According to the International Telecommunication Union, Ethiopia's internet penetration rate stood at only 16.7 percent in 2021.² Internet penetration rates vary substantially between urban and rural areas (see A2).

In May 2022, Ethio Telecom, a state-owned mobile service provider, launched fifth-generation (5G) network technology in the capital, Addis Ababa. The company's chief executive announced that it planned to build 150 5G sites over the next 12 months.³

The electricity infrastructure is somewhat unreliable, and internet access was inhibited by power outages and protracted conflict during the coverage period. Beginning in July 2021, as TPLF fighters advanced south from Tigray and occupied key cities in the Amhara Region, residents in the affected areas lost access to electricity, banking, and communication services (see A3).⁴

Internet speeds declined during the coverage period. As of July 2022, Ookla reported median mobile data download and upload speeds of 12.18 Mbps and 15.05 Mbps, respectively, and median fixed-line download and upload speeds of 4.02 Mbps and 3.66 Mbps.⁵ In June 2021, however, Ookla had reported average mobile data download and upload speeds of 22.08 Mbps and 15.67 Mbps, respectively, and average fixed-line download and upload speeds of 8.62 Mbps and 14.09 Mbps.⁶

According to the Digital 2022 report, there were 58.54 million mobile connections capable of connecting to the internet in Ethiopia as of January 2022.⁷ In a bid to boost smartphone ownership, Ethio Telecom introduced installment and credit plans for prospective customers in early 2020.⁸

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? 1 / 3

While price reductions in recent years have made mobile and fixed-line broadband internet services more affordable for Ethiopians,⁹ prices are kept artificially high due to state-owned Ethio Telecom's monopoly.¹⁰ Ethiopians had previously spent an average of \$85 per month for limited mobile or fixed-line internet access, whereas better-quality services in neighboring Kenya and Uganda cost less than \$30 a month.

In January 2022, Ethio Telecom instituted price cuts of up to 45 percent for broadband services as a new, competing service provider prepared to enter the market (see A4).¹¹ After the price cuts, connections with a speed of 2 Mbps that had cost 699 birr (\$15) per month were reduced to 499 birr (\$10), while connections with a speed of 4 Mbps that had cost 1,099 birr (\$23) per month were reduced to 899 birr (\$19). Ethio Telecom had previously announced that it would lower rates significantly for fixed-line broadband customers,¹² with cuts of up to 65 percent for residential customers in February 2020; business customers saw rates fall by as much as 69 percent, while virtual private network (VPN) users saw a decline of up to 72 percent.

Telecommunications infrastructure is almost entirely absent from rural areas, where nearly 80 percent of the population resides.¹³ A handful of signal stations serve the entire country, resulting in network congestion and frequent disconnections.¹⁴ In smaller towns, users often hike to the top of the nearest hill to receive a stronger signal for their mobile devices. Ethio Telecom launched 4G service in parts of Oromia Region in February 2021, making high-speed mobile data accessible outside of Addis Ababa for the first time.¹⁵ In October 2021, Ethio Telecom announced that 4G service coverage had been expanded to an additional 22 towns beyond the 53 municipalities where 4G service was available as of June 2021.¹⁶

Many Ethiopians rely on cybercafés, universities, and government offices for internet access. In rural areas and small towns, cybercafés are reportedly the most common means of accessing the internet. Cybercafé prices range from 7 to 10 birr (\$0.15 to \$0.21) for an hour of access. Rates in rural cybercafés tend to be higher.

There have been some efforts to address the urban-rural divide and the gender gap in internet usage. In March 2019, Ethio Telecom announced that it would distribute mobile phones to women in rural areas.¹⁷ That July, it announced that it would provide mobile customers with 1 GB of internet data and 20 minutes' worth of local calling credits free of charge.¹⁸ The impact of such efforts is unclear. Ethiopia's digital disparities were exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, as in-person activities such as education were halted.¹⁹

A3 0-6 pts

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

Score Change: The score improved from 0 to 1 because no internet shutdowns were imposed nationwide, though connectivity restrictions in Tigray remain ongoing alongside monthslong restrictions in other regions.

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

On November 3, 2020, a total internet and telecommunications blackout was imposed in Tigray Region after conflict broke out between federal and Tigrayan security forces.²⁰ The shutdown remained in place throughout the most recent coverage period.²¹ The disruption has obstructed the flow of information during the conflict,²² preventing the media from reporting on Ethiopian, Eritrean, and TPLF military actions that human rights groups later described as mass atrocity crimes.²³ The communications restrictions have also impeded the documentation of rights abuses and the distribution of humanitarian aid; security forces have blockaded food supplies to cause mass food insecurity, engaged in sexual violence, and attacked aid workers.²⁴

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

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

In February 2022, internet and phone services were reportedly suspended in some parts of Oromia Region, including Kellem Wollega, amid an escalation in violence attributed to Ethiopian forces, forces affiliated with the rebel Oromo Liberation Army (OLA), and Amhara regional forces.³¹ As of July 2022, Kellem Wollega was reportedly still under a communications and internet blackout.³²

The Ethiopian government's monopolistic control over the country's telecommunications infrastructure via Ethio Telecom enables it to restrict information flows and access to internet and mobile phone services. As a landlocked country, Ethiopia has no direct access to submarine cable landing stations; instead, it connects to the international internet via satellite, a fiber-optic cable that passes through Sudan and connects to its international gateway, and another that passes through Djibouti to an international undersea cable. All connections to the international internet are completely centralized under Ethio Telecom, allowing the government to cut off traffic at will.

A4 0-6 pts

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

The space for independent initiatives in the information and communication technology (ICT) sector, entrepreneurial or otherwise, is extremely limited. Ethio Telecom has long held a firm monopoly on fixed-line and mobile services, and while the government recently licensed a second telecommunications provider, it had yet to launch its services at the end of the coverage period.

In June 2021, the Ethiopian Communications Authority (ECA) issued a license that would allow the Global Partnership for Ethiopia to become the country's second telecommunications provider. The partnership—a consortium led by Safaricom of Kenya that also includes Britain's Vodafone, South Africa's Vodacom, the Sumitomo Corporation of Japan, and British International Investment (formerly the CDC Group)—bid \$850 million for the license.³³ In June 2020, the ECA had reported receiving 11 complete submissions from operators applying for two new telecommunications licenses offered by the government.³⁴ The consortium's services were not yet active during the coverage period, though

in January 2022 Safaricom was reportedly installing data centers in several cities across Ethiopia,³⁵ and it signed a deal with Nokia in November 2021 regarding infrastructure development for its operations in Ethiopia.³⁶

In March 2022, the government halted its efforts to sell a 40 percent stake in Ethio Telecom, citing “recent developments and fast-moving macroeconomic changes globally and from a country perspective.”³⁷ In May 2020, the government had announced its intent to sell the stake,³⁸ a step toward opening the country’s telecommunications market to other players.³⁹ A tender process for the sale was launched in June 2021.⁴⁰ An estimated \$40 million of a \$300 million World Bank loan finalized in 2019 was committed to support the diversification of the telecommunications sector, including the restructuring and partial privatization of Ethio Telecom.⁴¹

China is a key investor in the Ethiopian telecommunications industry. Two major Chinese firms, ZTE and Huawei, were involved in upgrading Addis Ababa’s mobile broadband networks to 4G technology and expanding 3G networks elsewhere.⁴² In February 2020, the Ethiopian government paid Huawei 173 million birr (\$3.6 million) to install long-term evolution (LTE) network infrastructure in Addis Ababa.⁴³ The partnership enabled the government to maintain its hold over the telecommunications sector,⁴⁴ though the networks built by the Chinese firms have been criticized for their high cost and poor service.⁴⁵ In 2018, the Beijing-based telecommunications company Hengbao was contracted to supply SIM cards for Ethio Telecom.⁴⁶ These relationships have led to growing fears that Chinese entities may be assisting the authorities in developing more robust ICT censorship and surveillance capacities (see C5).⁴⁷

While the government maintains that ICT infrastructure is crucial for the modernization of the economy,⁴⁸ onerous government regulations still stymie the sector. For example, imported ICT items are tariffed at the same high rate as luxury items, unlike other imported goods such as construction materials and heavy-duty machinery, which are given duty-free import privileges to encourage investments in infrastructure.⁴⁹ Ethiopians are required to register their laptops and tablet computers with the Ethiopian customs authority before they travel out of the country, ostensibly to prevent individuals from illegally importing electronic devices. Observers believe the requirement enables officials to monitor citizens’ ICT activities by accessing the devices without consent.⁵⁰

Cybercafés are subject to burdensome operating requirements under the Telecom Fraud Offences Proclamation of 2012,⁵¹ which prohibits them from providing Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) services and mandates that owners obtain a license from Ethio Telecom through an opaque process that can take months. Violations of the requirements entail criminal liability, though no cases have been reported.⁵²

A5 0-4 pts

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

In August 2019, the government established the ECA, the primary regulatory body overseeing the telecommunications sector.⁵³ Prime Minister Abiy appointed Balcha Reba as its first director general; Balcha previously led the ECA’s predecessor, a directorate of the Ministry of Innovation and Technology.⁵⁴

In October 2019, the ECA started a public consultation process on the liberalization of the telecommunications market and its plans to issue new telecommunications licenses;⁵⁵ the authority issued the first new license in June 2021 (see A4). In June 2020, the ECA opened a public consultation process on five draft directives, including regulations for consumer protection, dispute resolution, and telecommunications licensing. It made the draft directives available on its website in English and Amharic.⁵⁶

Activists and civil society groups have raised concerns about the ECA’s independence. In May 2020, Kinfe Yilma, a law professor at Addis Ababa University, wrote that the regulator’s mandate remained unclear, referring to overlapping responsibilities that it appeared to share with other government ministries and agencies.⁵⁷

In October 2021, the Information Network Security Agency (INSA), a government entity that has de facto authority over the internet with a mandate to protect the communications infrastructure and prevent cybercrime, was placed directly under the supervision of Prime Minister Abiy after he formed a new government in the wake of the June 2021 general elections.⁵⁸

B Limits on Content

B1 0-6 pts

Does the state block or filter, or compel service providers to block or filter, internet 4 / content, particularly material that is protected by international human rights standards? 6

Score Change: The score improved from 3 to 4 because the government did not extensively block websites or social media platforms during the coverage period.

The government blocks internet content, including social media platforms, though there were fewer reported cases during the coverage period than in previous years.

In November 2021, after a 12th-grade national exam was leaked on Facebook by people identified as OLA and TPLF supporters, the government restricted access to major social media platforms.⁵⁹ NetBlocks confirmed that the restrictions targeted Facebook, WhatsApp, Telegram, and Facebook Messenger. The platforms became accessible again by the end of the coverage period.

In June 2018, the Ethiopian government reported that it had unblocked 264 websites, which was verified by the Open Observatory of Network Interference (OONI).⁶⁰ Websites belonging to Ethiopian Satellite Television (ESAT) and the Oromo Media Network (OMN), both diaspora-based satellite television stations, were among those unblocked. Ayyantuu.net and Opride.com, prominent websites known for their reporting on the country's protests, became accessible as well.

Despite recent improvements, Ethiopia still has a nationwide internet blocking and filtering system that can be redeployed at any time for political reasons. To filter the internet, authorities generally block specific internet protocol (IP) addresses or domain names at the level of the connection to the international gateway. Deep packet inspection (DPI) is also employed, enabling blocking based on a keyword in the content of a website or of a communication such as an email message.⁶¹

B2 0-4 pts

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

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

In March 2020, Yayesew Shimelis, a journalist, posted a video on YouTube and Facebook with information about the government's response to COVID-19, which the Health Ministry said was false. Yayesew claimed that his Facebook page was suspended without his knowledge;⁶² he returned to Facebook later the same month.⁶³ In May, he accused INSA of controlling his Facebook page (see C8).⁶⁴ Yayesew was also detained shortly after he posted the video and was released on bail a month later (see C3).

In February 2020, the government passed the Hate Speech and Disinformation Prevention and Suppression Proclamation (see C2). Under the law, social media companies are required to remove content that is reported as disinformation or hate speech within 24 hours of receiving notice, though there are no penalties or sanctions for companies that do not comply.⁶⁵

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

B3 0-4 pts

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

There are no transparent procedures for determining which websites are blocked or why, precluding any avenues for appeal. The authorities do not publish lists of blocked websites or criteria for how blocking decisions are made, and users receive a generic error message when trying to access blocked content. The decision-making process does not appear to be controlled by a single entity, as various government bodies—including INSA, Ethio Telecom, and the Ministry of Innovation and Technology—seem to maintain their own lists, contributing to a phenomenon of inconsistent blocking.⁶⁶ The lack of transparency is exacerbated by the government's typical refusal to admit its censorship efforts. Government officials have flatly denied the blocking of websites or jamming of international satellite services while also stating that the government has a legal and a moral responsibility to protect the Ethiopian public from extremist content.

B4 0-4 pts

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

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

Print and broadcast journalists reporting on the Tigray conflict were physically attacked, arrested, and harassed on social media for their work, deterring uninhibited reporting. For example, the following journalists were arrested under the state of emergency imposed in November 2021 and held in detention facilities without trial: Amir Aman, a freelancer who contributes to the Associated Press, and Tamerat Negera, cofounder of the online news outlet Terara Network (see C3).[67](#)

Ethiopia's media regulator—known as the Ethiopian Broadcasting Authority (EBA) until it was restructured as the Ethiopian Media Authority (EMA) under an April 2021 law (see B6)—has politicized licensing to retaliate against media coverage that it deems unfair. In March 2021, the EBA's deputy director general threatened to take measures against non-Ethiopian media organizations that were “disseminating misinformation and unbalanced reporting,” alleging that some of those outlets were coordinating with the TPLF.[68](#) The authority suspended the press licenses of the *Economist* journalist Tom Gardner in May 2022,[69](#) Reuters journalist Giulia Paravicini in November 2020,[70](#) and *New York Times* journalist Simon Marks in March 2021; Ethiopian officials detained and deported Marks in May 2021. [71](#) In November 2021, the EMA warned four international media outlets—the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), US-based Cable News Network (CNN), the Associated Press, and Reuters—that their licenses would be revoked if they continued to disseminate what it called false propaganda and undermined Ethiopia's national security in their coverage of the Tigray conflict (see B6).[72](#)

When it first came to power, the Abiy government had eased state restrictions on the media, and citizens flocked to social media to participate in conversations about their country's potential transition from authoritarianism and to hold the government accountable for promised reforms.

Self-censorship remains common in the LGBT+ community. Same-sex sexual activity is a criminal offense in Ethiopia,[73](#) deterring open discussion of related topics. Although there are various Ethiopian LGBT+ groups on Facebook, most are run by anonymous accounts.

B5 0-4 pts

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

The government attempted to shape the online information environment ahead of the delayed national elections held in June 2021. That month, Facebook announced that it had removed a network of inauthentic accounts associated with INSA. The accounts posted primarily in Amharic and promoted Prime Minister Abiy, his Prosperity Party, criticism of Egypt and Sudan related to Ethiopia's Blue Nile dam project, and criticism of opposition groups including the Oromo Liberation Front, the Ethiopian Democratic Party, and the TPLF.[74](#) In response, the director of INSA accused Facebook of removing accounts that posted about the reality in Ethiopia and announced that it was building a domestic social media platform to replace Facebook and WhatsApp.[75](#)

In November 2021, Facebook removed a post by Prime Minister Abiy because it allegedly incited and supported violence. In the post, the prime minister vowed to “bury” his government's enemies.[76](#)

The government and the TPLF both sought to shape the online information environment during the Tigray conflict. Social media accounts falsely claiming to represent diplomats, journalists, and other experts spread progovernment narratives online.[77](#) The government also sought to label online critics as sources of disinformation. For instance, INSA reported that the TPLF was disseminating 25,000 Twitter posts containing disinformation daily;[78](#) researchers found this claim to be unsubstantiated.[79](#) The government established an online fact-checker that spread partisan narratives in response to purported misinformation,[80](#) further degrading trust in information shared on social media.[81](#)

The Eritrean government, whose military forces have participated in the Tigray conflict in cooperation with the Ethiopian government, may have also attempted to shape the online environment in Ethiopia. A report published in May 2021 that used falsified information to allege a widespread TPLF-coordinated disinformation campaign may be linked to the Eritrean government's global social media strategy; the report was promoted by Eritrean government accounts, Ethiopian government accounts, and social media users who support both governments.[82](#) Misinformation in general has proliferated during the Tigray conflict (see B7), exacerbated by the restriction of internet access in Tigray (see A3).

Despite low levels of internet access, the government of former prime minister Hailemariam was known to employ an army of online trolls to distort the information landscape.[83](#) Opposition groups, journalists, and dissidents used the contemptuous Amharic colloquial term “Kokas” to describe the progovernment commentators.[84](#) According to observers, the Kokas regularly discussed Ethiopia's economic growth in favorable terms and posted negative comments about Ethiopian journalists and opposition groups on Facebook and Twitter. In return, they were known to receive benefits such as money, land, and employment promotions.[85](#) It is uncertain whether the Abiy government uses the

same online manipulation tactics, but supporters of the former government have accused the current government of doing so. They scornfully refer to supporters of the current government as “Tekas.”

Some powerful nonstate actors also command large numbers of followers and trolls, especially on Facebook. There have been reports that online trolls pose as members of different ethnic groups to incite tensions between them. For instance, the TPLF has allegedly coordinated party loyalists in the “Digital Woyane” campaign,⁸⁶ in which participants seek to create ethnic tension on social media. During the Tigray conflict, Ethiopian officials and progovernment social media users have accused pro-Tigrayan accounts of being Digital Woyane members coordinated by the TPLF, without substantiation.⁸⁷

B6 0-3 pts

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

Lack of adequate funding is a significant challenge for independent online media in Ethiopia, as fear of government pressure dissuades local businesses from advertising with politically critical websites. A 2012 Advertising Proclamation also prohibits advertisements from firms “whose capital is shared by foreign nationals.”⁸⁸ The process for launching a website on the country’s .et domain is expensive and demanding,⁸⁹ requiring a business license from the Ministry of Trade and Industry and a permit from an authorized body.⁹⁰

In April 2021, the Media Proclamation, which reformed media laws in the country, entered into effect. It restructured the EBA into the EMA; established a mandate for the EMA to regulate all media outlets, including online media; and created a new self-regulatory mechanism for the media industry. The reform package also decriminalized defamation (see C1).⁹¹ In June 2021, the EMA began licensing online media outlets and monitoring the 30 that were initially registered.⁹²

In May 2022, the EMA revoked the media accreditation of Tom Gardner, a journalist covering Ethiopia for the *Economist*, claiming that he failed to live up to the standard of conduct for journalists and did not correct himself after receiving prior warnings.⁹³

In November 2021, the media authority issued a warning to four international media outlets—CNN, the BBC, the Associated Press, and Reuters—for “manufacturing and disseminating false news” and producing reports that defamed the country’s institutions or discredited Ethiopia’s leader. Ethiopian officials noted that the four media outlets had received licenses with the expectation that their reports would not harm Ethiopia’s national interests and threatened to revoke their licenses if the outlets did not maintain “ethical and professional journalistic operations” (see B4).⁹⁴

In October 2021, Awlo Media Center, an online media outlet, announced that the government had confiscated its media equipment for several months, arrested and abducted some of its employees, and sealed its offices. As a result, the outlet ceased operations that month (see C3).⁹⁵

In July 2021, the EMA recalled the certification of registration of *Addis Standard*, a prominent news site, causing the outlet to suspend operations; a government official cited content published by *Addis Standard* that advanced the agenda of the TPLF.⁹⁶ After the outlet’s executives met with EMA leadership, the regulator returned its registration certification.⁹⁷

B7 0-4 pts

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

Various constraints impede the development of diverse media outlets and perspectives online. With few exceptions, the media tend to favor the government in their coverage. Domestic usage of social media platforms, particularly Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Telegram, and Instagram, has been expanding and slowly replacing the popularity of older blogging services, but these platforms also suffer from misinformation and polarization.⁹⁸

The Tigray conflict spurred widespread misinformation on social media sites. The government and the TPLF both sought to control the information environment (see B5), with journalists facing harassment and accusations that they were misinformed.⁹⁹ Connectivity restrictions in Tigray made it much more difficult to access news about what was happening on the ground (see A3), facilitating the spread of speculation and falsehoods.¹⁰⁰ For instance, after a clash between the federal army and TPLF forces, many reports indicated that social media accounts unintentionally spread a doctored picture while discussing the fighting.¹⁰¹

The spread of unconfirmed information, the phenomenon of purportedly false news, and the growing problem of hate speech in the context of ethnic clashes have had a major negative effect on the credibility of legitimate online information. Misinformation circulated widely within Ethiopia and among members of the Ethiopian diaspora following the June 2020 killing of prominent Oromo singer and activist Hachalu Hundessa, and it was exacerbated by an internet shutdown imposed after violence spread in the aftermath of his death.¹⁰² Misinformation similarly proliferated after

the June 2019 assassination of the Amhara Region's president and an internet shutdown that month.¹⁰³ A surge in online misinformation and disinformation was also noted in response to Oromo activist Jawar Mohammed's October 2019 claim that the government intended to assassinate him. Rival factions within the former ruling party, the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), reportedly spread online misinformation and disinformation as the Prosperity Party was formed to succeed it at the end of 2019.¹⁰⁴

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

B8 0-6 pts

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

Despite hostile conditions caused by poor internet access and repressive laws, online activism has gained considerable momentum and influence over the past several years. Notably, social media and communications platforms have been integral to the mobilization of widespread antigovernment protests in the Oromia and Amhara regions since 2015,¹⁰⁵ enabling activists to post information about the demonstrations and disseminate news about police brutality as the government cracked down on protesters.¹⁰⁶ Activists have also used social media platforms to consistently report on the arrests, trials, and releases of political prisoners. The government has routinely shut down networks and blocked social media in order to hinder mobilization efforts (see A3).

During the coverage period, social media users mobilized around the Tigray conflict. Under the #TigrayGenocide and #NoMore hashtags on Twitter, users shared information about the ways in which Tigrayans have been affected.¹⁰⁷ The #NoMore hashtag has also been used to demand the end of foreign interference in Ethiopia's domestic affairs.¹⁰⁸ In November 2021, Twitter suspended the trending hashtags feature in Ethiopia; the platform alleged that the trending hashtags or topics incited physical harm in Ethiopia. Protesters used the #NoMore campaign to criticize Twitter for limiting their ability to share their narrative of the war.¹⁰⁹

In late 2020 and early 2021, social media users mobilized around the need for aid in Tigray.¹¹⁰ Appeals made under the banner of the #AllowAccessToTigray hashtag demanded that the government grant humanitarian access to the region, where residents faced mass food insecurity and physical attacks.¹¹¹ Researchers found that pro-Tigray digital activism was highly coordinated to raise awareness about the conflict, with thousands of users seemingly joining Twitter to participate in the campaigns.¹¹²

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 6 enforced by a judiciary that lacks independence?

The law formally guarantees fundamental freedoms for Ethiopian internet users, but these rights have been routinely flouted in practice. The 1995 constitution provides for freedom of expression, freedom of the press, and access to information, while also prohibiting censorship.¹¹³

The Media Proclamation, which reformed media laws in the country, took effect in April 2021. Prime Minister Abiy has linked the new law to support for freedom of expression and press freedom; it allows for partial foreign ownership of media companies and decriminalizes defamation.¹¹⁴ The 2008 Freedom of Mass Media and Access to Information Proclamation, known as the press law, also affirms constitutional safeguards on fundamental rights.¹¹⁵ The Media Proclamation repealed problematic provisions of the 2008 law that restricted free expression, such as complex registration processes for media outlets and high fines for defamation.¹¹⁶ The criminal code previously penalized defamation with a fine or up to one year in prison.¹¹⁷

Article 93 of the constitution permits the government to suspend the "political and democratic rights" recognized by the charter when a state of emergency is declared.¹¹⁸

In November 2021, following the advance of TPLF forces into Afar and Amhara Regions, the Council of Ministers declared a six-month state of emergency across the country.¹¹⁹ Authorities used the resulting emergency powers to crack down on media houses and arrest online and broadcast journalists (see C3).¹²⁰ In February 2022, after TPLF forces were pushed out of Amhara Region, the state of emergency was lifted.¹²¹

Previously, in November 2020, the Council of Ministers had declared a six-month state of emergency in Tigray.¹²² A task force formed to implement the state of emergency was granted broad powers to curtail rights, including by cutting Tigray off from the communications infrastructure; such actions

sharply restrict access to information and freedom of expression online.¹²³ In the preceding years, the government had imposed states of emergency multiple times to halt protests in Oromia and Amhara.¹²⁴

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

C2 0-4 pts

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

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

In February 2020, the government enacted the Hate Speech and Disinformation Prevention and Suppression Proclamation, a law intended to combat online disinformation and speech that “deliberately promotes hatred, discrimination, or attack against a person.” The law criminalizes posting or sharing content on social media that authorities determine to cause violence or disturbance of public order. Its penalties include fines of up to 100,000 birr (\$2,100) or up to five years’ imprisonment, with the steepest punishments for users with more than 5,000 followers. The law does not carry penalties for tagging such content.¹²⁵

The 2016 Computer Crime Proclamation also criminalized an array of online activities.¹²⁶ Civil society activists expressed concern that the law would be used to intensify a crackdown on critical commentary, political opposition, and public protest.¹²⁷ For example, content that “incites fear, violence, chaos, or conflict among people” can be punished with up to three years in prison.¹²⁸ Other problematic provisions ban the dissemination of defamatory content, which can be penalized with up to 10 years in prison,¹²⁹ and the distribution of unsolicited messages to multiple email addresses (spam), which carries up to five years in prison.¹³⁰

The 2012 Telecom Fraud Offences Proclamation extended the violations and penalties defined in the 2009 Anti-Terrorism Proclamation and the criminal code to electronic communications, including both fixed-line and mobile internet services.¹³¹ However, the antiterrorism legislation was repealed in January 2020.¹³²

C3 0-6 pts

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

Score Change: The score declined from 2 to 1 due to an increase in arrests and detentions of journalists, with some held in pretrial detention for as long as 90 days.

Online journalists were arrested in larger numbers during the coverage period, as the government escalated its crackdown on media outlets and reporters in reprisal for their work.

In May 2022, the government arrested and detained 19 media workers as part of an “anticrime operation.” Solomon Shumiye, host of the YouTube channel Geneyanu and a journalist from the YouTube-based media outlet Toha TV, were among those arrested.¹³³ A court released Shumiye on bail in June 2022.¹³⁴

On June 30, 2021, authorities arrested 13 people affiliated with Awlo Media Center, including Bekalu Alamrew. On July 2, police also detained two employees of Ethio Forum, a YouTube broadcaster, including Yayasew Shimelis. Officials cited “affiliation with a terrorist group which is banned by the parliament” as the reason for the arrests.¹³⁵ In August 2021, a group of 10 Awlo Media Center employees were released from a military camp in Afar Region after 40 days in detention.¹³⁶ Later that month, the two Ethio Forum employees and two other journalists were granted bail by a court in the same region.¹³⁷

Authorities arrested Yayasew again in May 2022 for allegedly inciting the public against the government.¹³⁸ After he was released on bail without charges on June 20, outside the coverage period, he was arrested yet again on June 28 by security personnel in plainclothes; his whereabouts remained unknown as of September 2022 (see C7).¹³⁹

In December 2021, Tamerat Negera, founder of the online media outlet Terara Network, was arrested.¹⁴⁰ The Federal Police did not give an explanation for his arrest. He appeared in a different district’s court after seven days, during which his family did not know his whereabouts.¹⁴¹ The court announced that his case would be handled under the state of emergency, allowing the police to detain him until the emergency ended.¹⁴² Even after the state of emergency was lifted in February 2022, however, he remained in detention, and the police were granted additional time to investigate the case.¹⁴³ He was finally released in April 2022 on bail of 50,000 birr (\$1,000).¹⁴⁴

In November 2021, Federal Police arrested Amir Aman, a freelance video reporter working for the Associated Press; Thomas Engida, a cameraman; and Addisu Muluneh, a journalist with Fana Broadcasting Corporation.¹⁴⁵ They had allegedly sent recorded interviews and footage of the OLA, an outlawed organization, to the Associated Press office in Kenya.¹⁴⁶ According to a post on his Facebook account, Muluneh was released from detention in January 2022.¹⁴⁷ In March 2022, a court denied the police's request for additional time to investigate Aman and demanded that the police hand over the investigation report.¹⁴⁸ In April 2022, Aman and Engida were released from detention, having been held for four months.¹⁴⁹

In late March 2020, Yayesew was arrested after he posted purportedly false information about the government's pandemic response (see B2).¹⁵⁰ While he was initially detained without charge, prosecutors charged him under the Hate Speech and Disinformation Prevention and Suppression Proclamation in April, citing provisions that carry a penalty of up to three years' imprisonment or a fine of 100,000 birr (\$2,100). Prosecutors also filed charges under a terrorism statute and a penal code provision, both of which were thrown out by the courts.¹⁵¹ Yayesew was released in late April 2020, after a judge granted him bail earlier that month.¹⁵² In March 2021, he appeared in court to defend himself, making him the first journalist to be prosecuted under the Hate Speech and Disinformation Prevention and Suppression Proclamation (see C2).¹⁵³

After many years in which the authorities arrested antigovernment protesters and handed down long prison sentences to critical bloggers and journalists, the government stunned observers in January and February 2018 by releasing thousands of political prisoners, including Eskinder Nega, who had been serving an 18-year sentence since 2012.¹⁵⁴ Bloggers who had been convicted on terrorism charges—Zelalem Workagegnehu, Yonatan Wolde, and Bahiru Degu, among others—were also eventually released that year, and outstanding charges against members of the critical Zone 9 blogging collective were dropped.¹⁵⁵

C4 0-4 pts

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

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

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

C5 0-6 pts

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

Government surveillance of online and mobile phone communications is pervasive in Ethiopia, and the relevant laws and practices have not been reformed since Prime Minister Abiy took office in April 2018. Activists have reported in previous years that their phone communications were under surveillance.

The 2016 Computer Crime Proclamation strengthened the government's surveillance powers, enabling real-time monitoring or interception of communications when authorized by the justice minister. The law also obliges service providers to store records of all communications and metadata for at least a year.¹⁵⁶

Ethiopia's telecommunications and surveillance infrastructure has been developed in part through investments from Chinese companies with backing from the Chinese government, creating strong suspicions that the Ethiopian government has implemented highly intrusive surveillance practices modeled on the Chinese system. These suspicions were reinforced in January 2018, when African Union (AU) officials accused Beijing of hacking into its headquarters' computer servers and secretly transferring data to servers in Shanghai over the course of five years, from 2012 to 2017.¹⁵⁷ The state-owned China State Construction Engineering Corporation built the AU's headquarters in Addis Ababa and connected the building's telecommunications infrastructure through Ethio Telecom. A 2014 Human Rights Watch (HRW) report revealed strong indications that the Ethiopian government had deployed a centralized system developed by Chinese telecommunications firm ZTE to monitor mobile networks and the internet.¹⁵⁸

Another ZTE technology, the customer-management database known as ZSmart, has been installed at Ethio Telecom, providing the government with full access to user information, allowing it to intercept short-message service (SMS) texts, and enabling it to record phone conversations.¹⁵⁹ ZSmart also allows security officials to locate targeted individuals through real-time geolocation tracking of mobile phones.¹⁶⁰ While it is unclear whether the government has

made full use of ZTE's sophisticated surveillance system, the authorities frequently present intercepted emails and phone calls as evidence during trials of journalists and bloggers, or as a scare tactic during interrogations.[161](#)

Meanwhile, exiled dissidents have been frequent targets of surveillance-enabling malicious software, or spyware, over the years. In February 2018, the Toronto-based Citizen Lab published research detailing how spyware from an Israeli company was used against Jawar Mohammed, an Oromo political activist and the once-exiled executive director of the diaspora-run news outlet OMN, which had been banned by the previous government for allegedly inciting violence and promoting terrorism.[162](#)

Previous Citizen Lab research published in 2015 found that Remote Control System (RCS) spyware had been used against employees of ESAT, a diaspora-run media outlet based in the United States, in 2014.[163](#) Analysis of the RCS attacks uncovered credible links to INSA.[164](#)

C6 0-6 pts

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

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

The Computer Crime Proclamation requires service providers to store records of all communications and related data for at least a year, and this information must be shared with the government if requested.[165](#) The lack of separation between state-owned Ethio Telecom and the government raises significant concerns about the company's degree of cooperation with authorities. Ethiopia lacks a data protection law.

C7 0-5 pts

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

Score Change: The score declined from 2 to 1 because an online journalist was abducted and forcibly disappeared, likely in retaliation for his reporting.

Online journalists and ordinary users face the threat of extralegal violence, particularly amid the heightened interethnic hatred associated with the Tigray conflict. In May 2022, Gobeze Sisay, a journalist with the YouTube channel Yegna TV, was abducted by military personnel. He was then released and returned home after nine days.[166](#) Gobeze claimed that he was accused of being an extremist Amhara and Oromophobic while in detention. Two journalists with the Ethio Forum media outlet, Yayisew Shimeles and Abebe Bayu, were abducted after the coverage period, on June 29 and June 30, 2022, respectively. Their whereabouts were still unknown at the time of writing.[167](#)

Hate speech has proliferated during the Tigray conflict, with many social media users employing ethnic slurs to characterize the opposing side. A report that studied online misinformation in Ethiopia found that about a quarter of sampled posts contained hate speech, with an even greater amount of hate speech shared in response to those posts.[168](#) Ethiopians reported an escalation of violent ethnic-based attacks during the conflict, including incidents targeting Tigrayan and Amhara people;[169](#) the violence in the aftermath of Hachalu Hundessa's murder (see A3), meanwhile, primarily targeted non-Oromo people.[170](#) Experts raised concerns that online hate speech was contributing to an environment conducive to offline abuse and violence.[171](#)

Social media users also harassed and intimidated people simply for sharing content related to the Tigray conflict. For instance, Haben Girma, a disability rights activist who is deaf and blind, reported that she was attacked by online trolls mocking her disability after she posted about the conflict.[172](#) Journalists reported experiencing increased online harassment during the Tigray conflict,[173](#) especially as internet users mobilized along progovernment and pro-TPLF lines (see B5, B7, and B8).

Tigrayans who have been released from military camps in Afar have reported facing torture and inhumane conditions while in detention.[174](#) Several journalists who were arrested and detained were held in military camps in Afar (see C3).

Tom Gardner, the journalist for the *Economist* whose accreditation was revoked in May 2022, accused the government of using social media to spread claims that he was "aligned with the TPLF," which prompted harassment against him online.[175](#)

Almost a third of 487 Ethiopian women surveyed by Pollicy, a technology consulting firm, reported experiencing online sexual harassment, stalking, or other forms of harassment in an August 2020 study.[176](#) LGBT+ people also experience online harassment. For instance, when a US-based LGBT+ tour company announced its plan to offer a trip to Ethiopia in 2019, it received death threats and hate messages on social media.[177](#)

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

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

In October 2021, the director general of INSA disclosed that cyberattacks had recently occurred while the government advanced the controversial Renaissance Dam project on the Blue Nile and held general elections. The director general also reported that Ethiopia had experienced some 2,800 attempted cyberattacks on several institutions during the fiscal year of 2020–21.¹⁷⁸

In early June 2021, INSA detailed an attempted cyberattack meant to breach 37,000 computers in Ethiopia, which it attributed to a group that had previously targeted Ethiopian websites in connection with the Renaissance Dam.¹⁷⁹

In December 2020, Ethio Telecom chief executive Frehiwot Tamiru reported that the company had repelled 39.8 billion cyberattacks between November 25 and December 7, an average of 2.8 billion attacks per day. Frehiwot attributed the campaign—which reportedly consisted of distributed denial-of-service (DDoS) attacks against financial, telecommunications, educational, and other systems—to the TPLF.¹⁸⁰ Media fact-checkers questioned the accuracy of the figures, suggesting that Frehiwot may have inaccurately represented components of a botnet as individual DDoS attacks.¹⁸¹

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