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Freedom on the Net 2021

Ethiopia

NOT FREE

27

/100

A. <u>Obstacles to Access</u>	4 /25
B. <u>Limits on Content</u>	12 /35
C. <u>Violations of User Rights</u>	11 /40

LAST YEAR'S SCORE & STATUS

29 /100 Not Free

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



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, sharply restricted human rights online. The federal government imposed a months-long internet shutdown in Tigray, while the online environment was marred by increased manipulation, misinformation, hate speech, and targeted harassment. The government of Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed continued to restrict freedoms of expression and the press, including with the arrests of online journalists. Promisingly, plans to reform the telecommunications sector neared fruition. A media reform law passed in February 2021 and the partial privatization of the telecommunications sector continues.

Ethiopia is undergoing a turbulent period of political change that began when Abiy came to power after the resignation of Hailemariam Desalegn in the face of mass protests in which demonstrators demanded greater political rights. Abiy pledged to reform the authoritarian state and has overseen a revision of some laws used by his predecessors to suppress dissent. The Abiy-led, ruling Prosperity Party—a reconfiguration of the ethnoregional coalition that ruled Ethiopia since 1991—has partly reverted to authoritarian tactics, jailing opposition leaders and limiting media freedom in the face of growing regional and intercommunal violence. After the long-awaited August 2020 general elections were postponed due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Prosperity Party won a significant majority in June 2021, in elections that were marred by irregularities.

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

- On November 3, 2020, the Ethiopian government imposed a communications blackout on the Tigray region as Ethiopian and Tigrayan security forces fought. Connectivity remained disrupted as of July 2021, impeding access to information, online communication, and humanitarian aid (see A3).
- Authorities imposed a nationwide internet shutdown for several weeks in July 2020, after mass violence followed the murder of prominent Oromo singer and activist Hachalu Hundessa (see A3).

- Telegram was briefly blocked during national exams in March 2021, while Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram, and Facebook Messenger were briefly inaccessible in May 2021 (see B1).
- The Tigray conflict distorted the Ethiopian online environment, with increased manipulation by government actors, widespread misinformation, online campaigns, and an escalation of online harassment and hate speech (see B5, B7, B8, and C7).
- Several online journalists were arrested in retaliation for their reporting during the coverage period, while journalists widely reported being targeted in online harassment campaigns, sometimes at the hands of Ethiopian government figures (see B5, C3, and C7).
- A media reform law that passed in February 2021 has empowered a new media regulator to regulate online news outlets and decriminalized defamation (see B6 and C1).

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 access, Ethiopia remains one of the least connected countries in the world. However, Ethiopians in major urban areas have seen considerable gains in both internet and telephone connectivity during the coverage period, as part of a trend that began with the introduction of reforms in April 2018.

As of January 2021, Datareportal reports that 24 million people use the internet in Ethiopia, ¹ representing 20.6 percent of the total population. The 2.1 percent gain in internet penetration since 2020 may be attributed to increased reliance on internet services during the COVID-19 pandemic, with state-owned telecommunications company Ethio Telecom providing several packages targeting users who “stay at home.” ² Data from the International Telecommunication Union indicates that Ethiopia’s internet penetration rate stood at only 18.6 percent ³ in 2017, compared with

15.4 percent in 2016. ⁴ Internet penetration differs substantially between urban and rural areas (see A2).

Ethiopia's electricity infrastructure is not totally reliable, and internet access was limited during the coverage period due to power outages. In February 2021, a high-voltage power line was attacked, causing a week-long power outage in Tigray that the government attributed to the TPLF.

⁵ The Ethiopian government also enforced a month-long blackout in Tigray as the conflict escalated, exacerbating the effects of the connectivity disruption (see A3). ⁶

While internet speeds have increased with the expansion of fourth-generation (4G) services in Ethiopian cities, ⁷ the country still fares poorly in global rankings. As of June 2021, Ethiopia was ranked 106th and 158th in Ookla's SpeedTest global index for mobile and fixed-line broadband speeds, respectively. Ookla reported average mobile data download and upload speeds of 22.08 Mbps and 15.67 Mbps, respectively, and average fixed-line upload and download speeds of 14.09 Mbps and 8.62 Mbps. ⁸ These figures represented an increase over test results seen in Addis Ababa in May 2018, which found an average download speed of 6.28 Mbps and an upload speed of 0.21 Mbps, along with a 150-millisecond latency. The speeds encountered in the 2018 test made it difficult for users to download even simple images. A test conducted by a Freedom House researcher in 2016 found that logging into an email account and opening a single message took several minutes at a standard cybercafé with broadband in Addis Ababa, and even longer in rural areas. ⁹

During the COVID-19 pandemic, which forced most people to conduct business online, Ookla reported that mobile broadband speeds fell by 22 percent and fixed-line broadband speeds fell by 5 percent. ¹⁰

According to the Digital 2021 report, there are 44.7 million mobile connections in Ethiopia capable of connecting to the internet as of January 2021. ¹¹ In a bid to boost smartphone ownership, Ethio Telecom introduced installment and credit plans for prospective customers in March 2020. ¹²

In September 2019, the World Bank announced a \$300 million loan to support the expansion of high-quality internet services for Ethiopian individual, business, and government users. ¹³

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
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While price reductions in recent years have made mobile and fixed-line broadband internet services less prohibitively expensive for Ethiopians, ¹ prices are kept artificially high due to state-owned Ethio Telecom's monopoly. ² Ethiopians have previously spent an average of \$85 per month for limited mobile or fixed-line internet access. Better-quality services in neighboring Kenya and Uganda cost less than \$30 a month. In May 2020, the Abiy government announced its decision to finalize the offering of a 40 percent stake in Ethio Telecom to private companies (see A4). ³

In February 2020, Ethio Telecom announced it would lower rates significantly for fixed-line broadband customers, ⁴ reducing rates for residential customers by up to 65 percent; 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. A 1 Mbps residential connection that previously cost 978 birr (\$31) per month cost 499 birr (\$16) after the price cut, while 4-Mbps services that previously cost 3191 birr (\$103) per month were made available for 699 birr (\$23). Ethio Telecom also began offering 12-month payment plans for installation-related costs for clients situated over 500 meters from the provider's nearest connection point. ⁵

Ethio Telecom has instituted price cuts in recent years. For example, in April 2020, Ethio Telecom introduced special rates to incentivizes people to stay indoors during the COVID-19 pandemic, which included data packages of 100 MB for five birr (\$0.11) and 250 MB for 10 birr (\$0.23).

⁶ In August 2018, the provider introduced a new pricing structure, stating that it reduced rates by 43 percent for mobile internet service, 40

percent for voice calls, 43 percent for text messaging, and 54 percent for fixed-line broadband internet connections. ⁷ During that time, Ethio Telecom advertised a 25 MB data plan for 3 birr (\$0.09) a day, a reduction from the 7 birr reported during the 2017–18 coverage period. While the 25 MB package was made more affordable, its usefulness was still limited; a standard Google search uses up to 79 KB of data. Customers who loaded websites containing 1 GB of multimedia content under that pricing structure could have spent the equivalent of \$9 per day. ⁸

Public internet access is reportedly becoming more common in major cities such as Addis Ababa, Bahir Dar, Mekele, Adama, Hawasa, and Dire Dawa, as internet service and Wi-Fi are freely available in public places such as hotels, regional universities, phone shops, and internet cafés. ⁹ Telecommunications infrastructure is almost entirely absent from rural areas, where nearly 80 percent of the population resides. ¹⁰ A handful of signal stations serve the entire country, resulting in network congestion and frequent disconnections. ¹¹ 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 in February 2021, making high-speed mobile data accessible outside of Addis Ababa for the first time; ¹² as of June 2021, 4G service is available in 53 municipalities across the country. ¹³

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 rates range from 7 to 10 birr (\$0.18 to \$0.26) 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. ¹⁴ That July, it announced that it would provide mobile customers 1 GB of internet data and 20 minutes' worth of local calling credits free of charge. ¹⁵ The impact of such efforts is unclear.

Ethiopia's digital divide was exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, as in-person activities such as education were halted. ¹⁶

A3 0-6 pts

Does the government exercise technical or legal control over internet infrastructure for the purposes of restricting connectivity?	0 / 6
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Score Change: The score declined from 1 to 0 because of a months-long internet shutdown in Tigray, which hampered reporting on the Tigray conflict and limited the efficacy of humanitarian aid, and nationwide connectivity restrictions imposed by the government in July 2020 after the assassination of Hachalu Hundessa.

The government frequently imposes connectivity restrictions, often for political means and with little transparency.

On November 3, 2020, a total internet and telecommunications blackout was imposed in Tigray after conflict broke out between Ethiopian and Tigrayan security forces. ¹ The shutdown remained ongoing as of mid-June 2021, ² though Ethio Telecom stated that it restored call services in parts of Tigray, including the regional capital of Mekelle, in February. ³ The disruption created an information blackout during the conflict, ⁴ preventing media from reporting on Ethiopian, Eritrean, and TPLF military actions that human rights groups have since described as mass atrocity crimes. ⁵ The communications restrictions also impeded the documentation of rights abuses and distribution of humanitarian aid; security forces have blockaded food supplies to cause mass food insecurity, weaponized sexual violence, and attacked aid workers. ⁶

Ethio Telecom blamed “law enforcement operations” for the shutdown, releasing closed-circuit television (CCTV) camera footage of armed individuals forcefully entering their Mekelle compound and deactivating the power distribution source. ⁷ 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. ⁸

On June 28, 2021, after the coverage period, Tigray’s telecommunications and electricity infrastructure were disconnected by the Ethiopian

government as the Ethiopian National Defense Forces withdrew from the region. The federal government had announced a unilateral ceasefire earlier that day. ⁹ As of July 2021, the blackout remained in effect, and continued to constrain humanitarian operations. ¹⁰

On June 30, 2020, Ethiopian authorities imposed a nationwide internet shutdown following the murder of prominent Oromo singer and activist Hachalu Hundessa in Addis Ababa. Connectivity was partially restored on July 14 for some fixed-line broadband users, but most of the country remained offline until July 23, 2020 when mobile networks were restored. Protests in the aftermath of Hundessa's death saw over 200 people killed. ¹¹ Following the murder, young Oromo people reportedly targeted non-Oromo and non-Muslim people in the Oromia region, with much of the violence happening before the internet shutdown. ¹²

In early January 2020, during the previous coverage period, the government disconnected mobile phone, landline, and internet services in parts of Oromia amid reports of fighting between government forces and a splinter faction of the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF), which advocates for a sovereign state for the Oromo ethnic group. ¹³ The government restored services in early April. ¹⁴ Human rights groups warned that the Oromia shutdown limited access to critical information about the COVID-19 pandemic. ¹⁵

In December 2019, the Information Network Security Agency (INSA) disclosed that the government disabled the Ethiopian internet infrastructure for 20 minutes to counter a cyberattack targeting the country's financial infrastructure (see C8). ¹⁶

In late June 2019, during the previous coverage period, the government imposed a nationwide internet shutdown that lasted at least ten days. ¹⁷ The shutdown, which affected both mobile and fixed-line connections, followed the assassination of government and military officials in the northern region of Amhara, which prompted fear of political and communal tensions. ¹⁸ That same month, mobile internet services were suspended nationwide for seven days, which some Ethiopians speculated

was a measure to stop students from cheating on national exams that week. ¹⁹

The government has justified internet shutdowns, which sometimes occurred in the context of political and ethnic violence, by citing the need to maintain security and public order. Fixed-line and mobile internet services were shut down for most of August 2018 in the eastern Sumale region, where federal troops were engaged in clashes with local authorities. ²⁰ Mobile internet access was separately shut down for three days in September 2018 in Addis Ababa following protests and an outbreak of ethnic violence. ²¹ At least 23 people were killed in the violence, ²² with some observers estimating over 50 deaths. ²³

Until April 2018, internet and mobile service shutdowns were commonly imposed in response to the large-scale demonstrations that began in late 2015—triggered by a government plan to appropriate land from the Oromia region for an expansion of the capital—and later spread to other regions and ethnic groups. ²⁴ For example, after student protests led to violent clashes in December 2017, the government imposed a blanket internet shutdown on all regional states, leaving haphazard access available only in Addis Ababa. ²⁵ Mobile internet services were then shut down nationwide for several days following the resignation of Hailemariam Desalegn as prime minister in February 2018, as the country was placed under a state of emergency. Oromia experienced another unexplained internet blackout for over two weeks in March 2018. ²⁶

The process and legal underpinnings for the shutdowns were not clear, though officials claimed that they were necessary to prevent ethnic violence and curb the spread of false news and hate speech.

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 providers?

1 / 6

The space for independent initiatives in the ICT sector, entrepreneurial or otherwise, is extremely limited. Ethio Telecom holds a firm monopoly on fixed-line and mobile services, though the government licensed a second telecommunications provider after the coverage period.

In June 2021, after the coverage period, the Ethiopian Communications Authority (ECA) licensed the Global Partnership for Ethiopia as the country's second telecommunications provider. The Global Partnership for Ethiopia—a consortium led by Safaricom that also includes Vodafone, Vodacom, the Sumitomo Corporation, and the CDC Group—bid \$850 million for the license. ¹ In June 2020, the ECA reported receiving 11 complete submissions from operators applying for two new telecommunications licenses offered by the government. ²

In May 2020, the government announced its intent to sell a 40 percent stake in Ethio Telecom, ³ a step toward opening the country's market up to other players. ⁴ A tender process for the sale was launched in June 2021, after the coverage period. ⁵ An estimated \$40 million of the \$300 million World Bank loan finalized in September 2019 is committed to support the diversification of the telecommunications sector, including the restructuring and partial privatization of Ethio Telecom. ⁶

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. ⁷ In February 2020, Ethiopian government paid Huawei 173 million birr (\$5.6 million) to install long-term evolution (LTE) network infrastructure in Addis Ababa. ⁸ The partnership enabled the

government to maintain its hold over the telecommunications sector,⁹ though the networks built by the Chinese firms have been criticized for their high cost and poor service.¹⁰ In May 2018, Beijing-based telecommunications company Hengbao was contracted to supply SIM cards for Ethio Telecom.¹¹ 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).¹²

While the government maintains that ICT infrastructure is key to modernizing the economy,¹³ 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.¹⁴ 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.¹⁵

Cybercafés are subject to burdensome operating requirements under the Telecom Fraud Offences Proclamation of 2012,¹⁶ 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.¹⁷

A5 0-4 pts

Do national regulatory bodies that oversee service providers and digital technology fail to operate in a free, fair, and independent manner?	1 / 4
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In August 2019, the government established the ECA, the primary regulatory body overseeing the telecommunications sector;¹ it is not yet clear if the ECA will operate in a fair and independent manner. Prime Minister Abiy appointed Balcha Reba as its first director general; Reba

previously led the ECA's predecessor, a directorate of the Ministry of Innovation and Technology. ²

In October 2019, the ECA started a public consultation process on the liberalization of the telecommunications market and the ECA's plans to issue new telecommunications licenses; ³ the ECA issued a new telecommunications 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. The ECA made the draft directives available on their website in English and Amharic. ⁴

Activists and civil society raised concerns about the ECA's independence. In May 2020, Kifle Yilma, a law professor at Addis Ababa University, wrote that the regulator's responsibilities remained unclear, referring to overlapping responsibilities shared with other government ministries and agencies. ⁵

Prior to the establishment of the ECA, the Ethiopian Telecommunications Agency was the primary regulatory body overseeing the telecommunications sector. ⁶ In October 2018, INSA, a government agency that has de facto authority over the internet with a mandate to protect the communications infrastructure and prevent cybercrime, was placed under a new Ministry of Peace created by the Abiy government. ⁷

B. Limits on Content

B1 0-6 pts

Does the state block or filter, or compel service providers to block or filter, internet content, particularly material that is protected by international human rights standards?	3 / 6
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The government blocks internet content, including social media platforms.

Restrictions on social media were reported several times during the coverage period. In March 2021, after a 12th grade national exam was

leaked via Telegram, an Open Observatory of Network Interference (OONI) test result showed that Telegram was blocked for at least an hour.

¹ On May 17, 2021, Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, and Facebook Messenger were blocked for several hours in Ethiopia. An OONI test run by a Freedom House consultant showed that the filtering affected four Facebook products. ² After a nationwide internet shutdown was partially lifted in July 2020 (see A3), some reports indicate that Facebook and Instagram were inaccessible. ³

In August 2019, during the previous coverage period, the website of African Arguments, a pan-African magazine, was blocked for mobile internet users, according to OONI testing. The blocking may have been instigated by articles published by the magazine that criticized the government. ⁴ In June 2019, when an American LGBT+ tour company announced its plan to offer a trip to Ethiopia, the company's owner received online death threats and its website was reportedly blocked temporarily in Ethiopia. ⁵

In June 2018, the Ethiopian government reported that it unblocked 264 websites, which was verified by OONI. ⁶ Websites belonging to Ethiopian Satellite Television (ESAT) and the Oromo Media Network (OMN), both diaspora 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, specific internet protocol (IP) addresses or domain names are generally blocked 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. ⁷

B2 0-4 pts

Do state or nonstate actors employ legal, administrative, or other means to force publishers, content hosts, or digital platforms to

2 / 4

delete content, particularly material that is protected by international human rights standards?	
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Internet users have reported incidents of content removals, while a February 2020 law requires social media companies to remove content that is considered hate speech or disinformation within 24 hours' notice.

In March 2020, Yayesew Shimelis, a journalist who has published reporting that is favorable to the TPLF, posted a video on YouTube and Facebook with information about the government's response to COVID-19, which the Health Ministry said was false later that month. Yayesew claimed his Facebook page was suspended without his knowledge. ¹ He has since returned to Facebook. ² In May, he accused INSA of controlling his Facebook page (see C8). ³ Yayesew was detained shortly after he posted the video, before being released on bail a month later (see C3). In April 2020, prosecutors charged Yayesew under the Hate Speech and Disinformation and Prevention and Suppression Proclamation (see C2).

In February 2020, the Ethiopian 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 notice, though there are no penalties or sanctions for companies that do not comply. ⁴

Nonstate actors such as organized youth groups 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
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There are no 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. ¹ 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 operations 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, with self-censorship common as the Ethiopian government and security forces targeted 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 attacked, arrested, harassed on social media, and targeted by the Ethiopian government for their reporting, contributing to an environment of self-censorship on the internet. For instance, journalist Dawit Kebede Araya, who worked for the Tigray government-owned broadcaster Tigray TV, was killed by unknown attackers in Mekele on January 19, 2021 ¹ and Lucy Kassa, a prominent freelance journalist reporting on rights abuses in Tigray, was raided and intimidated by unidentified armed men in February. ² In March 2021, BBC reporter Girmay Gibru, local journalist Tamirat Yemane and Alula Akalu and Fitsum Brhane, two translators working for the Financial Times and AFP, were arrested in

Tigray by Ethiopian security forces; they were detained for two days and later released. ³

The Ethiopian Broadcasting Authority (EBA)—formerly Ethiopia’s media regulator, until it was restructured as the Ethiopian Media Authority (EMA) following the enactment of an April 2021 law (see B6)—politicized licensing to retaliate against perceived unfair media coverage. In March 2021, the EBA’s deputy director general warned that the authority would 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. ⁴ The EBA suspended the press licenses of Reuters journalist Giulia Paravicini in November 2020 ⁵ and *New York Times* journalist Simon Marks in March 2021; Ethiopian authorities detained and deported Marks in May. ⁶

The Abiy government had eased state restrictions on the media in previous years, 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. While most bloggers and journalists who were released from prison returned to their professional activity, they began to report concerns again in September 2018 and April 2019 as rising ethnic tensions led to violence and displacement.

Self-censorship remains common in the LGBT+ community. Same-sex sexual activity is a criminal offense in Ethiopia, ⁷ deterring open discussion of related topics. Although there are various Ethiopian LGBT+ groups on Facebook, most are run by anonymous accounts.

B5 0-4 pts

Are online sources of information controlled or manipulated by the government or other powerful actors to advance a particular political interest?	1 / 4
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The Ethiopian 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. ¹ The Ethiopian government also sought to label online critics as sources of disinformation. For instance, INSA reported that the TPLF was disseminating 25,000 tweets containing disinformation daily; ² researchers found this claim to be unsubstantiated. ³ The Ethiopian government established an online fact-checker ⁴ that spread partisan narratives in response to purported misinformation, further degrading trust in information shared on social media. ⁵

The Eritrean government may have also attempted to shape the online environment in Ethiopia. A report published in May 2021 that alleges a widespread TPLF-coordinated disinformation campaign by relying on falsified information 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 supportive of both governments. ⁶

In general, misinformation also 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 former Hailemariam government was known to employ an army of online trolls to distort the information landscape. ⁷ Opposition groups, journalists, and dissidents used the contemptuous Amharic colloquial term “Kokas” to describe the progovernment commentators. ⁸ Observers say 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. ⁹ It is uncertain whether the current 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 coordinated party loyalists in the “Digital Woyane” campaign, ¹⁰ in which participants reportedly seek to create ethnic tension on social media. During the Tigray conflict, Ethiopian officials and progovernment social media users accused pro-Tigrayan accounts of being Digital Woyane members coordinated by the TPLF, without substantiation. ¹¹

B6 0-3 pts

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

1 / 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.” ¹ The process for launching a website on the country’s .et domain is expensive and demanding, ² requiring a business license from the Ministry of Trade and Industry and a permit from an authorized body. ³

In April 2021, the Media Proclamation, which reformed media laws in the country, entered into effect. The proclamation 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). ⁴

As of June 2021, after the coverage period, the EMA began licensing online media outlets and monitoring the 30 registered online outlets. ⁵ 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. ⁶ After Addis Standard executives met with EMA leadership, the regulator returned the site’s registration certification. Addis Standard has contested the process by which the EMA withdrew its certification and committed to investigating

the EMA's allegation that the news site is advancing the TPLF's agenda.

7

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 environment often leans toward the government. While domestic usage of social media platforms, particularly Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Telegram, and Instagram, has been expanding and slowly replacing the nascent Ethiopian blogosphere, these platforms also suffer from misinformation and polarization. ¹

The Tigray conflict spurred widespread misinformation on social media sites. The Ethiopian government and the TPLF both sought to control the information environment (see B5), with journalists being harassed and labelled as misinformed. ² Connectivity restrictions in Tigray made it much more difficult to access information about what was happening on the ground in the early stages of the conflict (see A3), facilitating the spread of speculation and misinformation. ³ For instance, after a clash between the federal army and TPLF forces, many reports indicated that social media accounts unintentionally spread a doctored picture to report about the fighting. ⁴

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 killing of Hachalu Hundessa, exacerbated by the internet shutdown imposed after violence spread in the aftermath of his death (see A3). ⁵ Misinformation also proliferated after the June 2019 assassination of the Amhara region's president and that month's internet shutdown (see A3).

⁶ 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 Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) also reportedly spread online misinformation and disinformation as the Prosperity Party was formed to succeed it at the end of 2019. ⁷

The media landscape has benefited from Prime Minister Abiy's reforms. Access to diaspora-based media and opposition outlets such as ESAT and OMN was restored in 2018, ⁸ and a number of new online media outlets have launched.

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

B8 0-6 pts

Do conditions impede users' ability to mobilize, form communities, and campaign, particularly on political and social issues?	2 / 6
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Despite hostile conditions caused by poor internet access and repressive laws, online activism has gained considerable momentum and influence over the past few years. Notably, social media and communications platforms have been integral to the mobilization of widespread antigovernment protests in the Oromia and Amhara regions since November 2015, ¹ enabling activists to post information about the demonstrations and disseminate news about police brutality as the government cracked down on protesters. ² 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. A total communications blackout imposed after the conflict in Tigray broke out restricted the flow of information (see A3). ³ Localized shutdowns in Oromia were imposed in January 2020 to impede an OLF faction as it reportedly engaged in fighting with government forces (see A3).

During the coverage period, activists used a variety of social media platforms to campaign for their causes. Ethiopians mobilized protesters, including in the United States and Europe, to demand justice for Hachalu Hundessa after his murder in July 2020 (see A3). ⁴ A campaign demanding the release of imprisoned Oromo political leaders, such as Jawar Mohammed and Bekele Gerba, was conducted on social media as well. ⁵

In late 2020 and early 2021, social media users mobilized around aid access to Tigray. ⁶ Calls made under the banner of the #AllowAccessToTigray hashtag demanded that the government allow humanitarian access to Tigray, where residents faced mass food insecurity and physical attacks. ⁷ 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. ⁸

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?

1 / 6

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. ¹

In April 2021, the Media Proclamation, which reformed media laws in the country, entered into effect. The new law, which Prime Minister Abiy has linked to supporting freedom of expression and press freedom, allows for partial foreign ownership of media companies and decriminalizes defamation. ² The 2008 Freedom of Mass Media and Access to Information Proclamation, known as the press law, also affirms

constitutional safeguards on fundamental rights. ³ 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. ⁴ The criminal code previously penalized defamation with a fine or up to one year in prison. ⁵

In November 2020, the Council of Ministers declared a six-month state of emergency in Tigray. ⁶ A task force formed to execute the state of emergency was granted broad powers to curtail rights, including by cutting off communication infrastructure to Tigray; such actions sharply restrict access to information and freedom of expression online. ⁷ In previous years, the government imposed states of emergency multiple times to halt protests in Oromia and Amhara. ⁸

In April 2020, during the previous coverage period, the government declared a five-month state of emergency in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. ⁹ Shortly after the declaration, the Council of Ministers gazetted state-of-emergency regulations that significantly curtailed the rights of Ethiopians, including a provision that prohibited the dissemination of “any information about COVID-19 and related issues which would cause terror and undue distress among the public.” The regulations further obligated media outlets and professionals to ensure their reporting on COVID-19 is “without exaggeration, appropriate, and not prone to cause panic and terror among the public.” ¹⁰ Article 93 of the constitution permits the government to suspend the “political and democratic rights” upheld by the constitution when a state of emergency is declared. ¹¹

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

C2 0-4 pts

Are there laws that assign criminal penalties or civil liability for online activities, particularly those that are protected under international human rights standards?	0 / 4
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Several laws designed to restrict and penalize legitimate online activities remain in place from the previous government, and a new law was passed during the previous coverage period.

In February 2020, the Ethiopian 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. Violating the law carries fines of up to 100,000 birr (\$2,700) or up to five years’ imprisonment, with the steepest penalties for people with more than 5,000 followers. The law does not carry penalties for tagging such content. ¹

Activists, civil society organizations, and the UN’s special rapporteur for freedom of opinion and expression criticized the law for profoundly chilling free expression in Ethiopia. ²

The 2016 Computer Crime Proclamation also criminalized an array of online activities. ³ Civil society activists expressed concern that the law would be used to intensify a crackdown on critical commentary, political opposition, and public protest. ⁴ For example, content that “incites fear, violence, chaos, or conflict among people” can be punished with up to three years in prison. ⁵ Other problematic provisions ban the dissemination of defamatory content, which can be penalized with up to 10 years in prison, ⁶ and the distribution of unsolicited messages to multiple email addresses (spam), which carries up to five years in prison. ⁷

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. ⁸ The antiterrorism legislation, which was repealed in January 2020, ⁹ prescribed prison sentences of up to 20 years for the publication of statements that can be understood as a direct or indirect encouragement of terrorism, which is itself vaguely defined. ¹⁰ The law also banned VoIP services such as Skype, ¹¹ and required all

individuals to register their telecommunications equipment—including smartphones—with the government. Security officials typically enforced that rule at checkpoints by confiscating ICT equipment from people unable to produce a registration permit, according to sources within the country.

C3 0-6 pts

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

3 / 6

Several online journalists were arrested during the coverage period, likely relating to their work.

On November 30, 2020, Dawit Kebede, the editor of Awramba Times, an online media outlet, was arrested. Law enforcement officials accused him of spreading false information, though he was not charged. ¹ By February 1, 2021, Dawit was released on bail. ²

On November 7, 2020, federal police arrested Medhanie Ekubamichael, editor of the Addis Standard. ³ Medhanie was accused of attempting to dismantling the constitutional order. ⁴ Medhanie stayed in detention until December 2020, though the charges were later dropped. ⁵

In November 2020, Bekalu Alamrew, a journalist with YouTube broadcaster Awlo Media Center, was arrested. ⁶ Bekalu was accused of disseminating false information online. ⁷ After more than 15 days in detention, Bekalu was granted bail and released. ⁸

In September 2020, prominent journalist and opposition figure Eskinder Nega and four others were charged under the terror act and criminal code, including on allegations that they used fake Facebook accounts to incite violence. Eskinder and one other defendant were also accused of attempting to mobilize dissident youths during the violence in the aftermath of Hachalu Hundessa's murder (see A3). The group was arrested earlier in 2020, and most of them, including Eskinder, remain detained as of May 2021. ⁹

On June 30, 2021, after the coverage period, Ethiopian 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 Yayeew Shimelis, a journalist who has published reporting that is favorable to the TPLF. Officials cited “affiliation with a terrorist group which is banned the by parliament” as the reason for the arrests. ¹⁰

Following the government’s enactment of emergency regulations in April 2020, at least two individuals were arrested or charged with criminal offenses after criticizing the government’s COVID-19 response online. In early April 2020, police detained Elizabeth Kebede, a volunteer lawyer with the Ethiopian Women’s Lawyers Association, and accused her of spreading false pandemic-related information on Facebook. The Facebook post in question named individuals reportedly infected with the coronavirus and identified personal information about those individuals.

¹¹ By early May, Kebede was released on bail. ¹²

In late March 2020, Yayeew was arrested a day after he posted purportedly false information about the government’s pandemic response (see B2). ¹³ While Yayeew was initially detained without charge, prosecutors charged Yayeew under the Hate Speech and Disinformation Prevention and Suppression Proclamation in April, under provisions that carry a penalty of up to three years’ imprisonment or a fine of 100,000 birr (\$2,700). Prosecutors also filed charges under a terrorism statute and a penal code statute, both of which were thrown out by the courts. ¹⁴ Yayeew was released in late April, after a judge granted him bail earlier that month. ¹⁵ In March 2021, Yayeew appeared in court to defend himself, making Yayeew the first journalist to be prosecuted under the Hate Speech and Disinformation Prevention and Suppression Proclamation (see C2). ¹⁶

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.

¹⁷ Bloggers who have been convicted on terrorism charges—Zelalem Workagegnehu, Yonatan Wolde, and Bahiru Degu, among others—were also eventually released, and outstanding charges against members of the critical Zone 9 blogging collective were dropped. ¹⁸

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 restrict them from registering for new ones. Internet subscribers are also required to register their personal details, including their home address, with the government. During the antigovernment protests in 2016, Ethio Telecom announced plans to require mobile phones to be purchased from Ethiopian companies and to create a tracking system for all mobile devices in Ethiopia. Observers believe the plan aims to allow the government to track and identify all communications from subscribers on its network. ¹

There are no explicit restrictions on encryption, though police officers or members of the security services may assume malign intent on the part of someone who uses 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 has been 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 that their phone communications were under surveillance in previous years.

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. ¹

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 China of hacking into its headquarters' servers and secretly transferring data to servers in Shanghai over the course of five years, from 2012 to 2017. ² 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 deployed a centralized system developed by Chinese telecommunications firm ZTE to monitor mobile networks and the internet. ³ Known for its use by repressive regimes in Libya and Iran, the monitoring system facilitates DPI across the Ethio Telecom network and has the ability to intercept emails and web chats.

Another ZTE technology, known as ZSmart, is a customer management database installed at Ethio Telecom that provides the government with full access to user information, allows it to intercept short-message service (SMS) texts, and can record phone conversations. ⁴ ZSmart also allows security officials to locate targeted individuals through real-time geolocation tracking of mobile phones. ⁵ While the extent to which the government has made use of the full range of ZTE's sophisticated surveillance system is unclear, the authorities frequently present

intercepted emails and phone calls as evidence during trials of journalists and bloggers, or as a scare tactic during interrogations. ⁶

Meanwhile, exiled dissidents have been frequent targets of surveillance-enabling malicious software, or spyware, over the years. In February 2018, 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. ⁷

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. RCS, a product of Italian company Hacking Team, was advertised as “offensive technology” and was sold to law enforcement and intelligence agencies around the world, with the ability to monitor user activity and steal data. ⁸ While Hacking Team denied that it dealt with “repressive regimes,” ⁹ analysis of the RCS attacks uncovered credible links to the Ethiopian government, with the spyware’s servers registered at an Ethio Telecom address under the name “INSA-PC,” an apparent reference to INSA. ¹⁰

In a positive step, Prime Minister Abiy—who is regarded as one of the founders of INSA—forced the resignations in April 2018 of agency officials who were accused of monitoring and hacking activists, leading to some optimism that INSA may become less abusive regarding its surveillance powers. ¹¹

C6 0-6 pts

Does monitoring and collection of user data by service providers and other technology companies infringe on users’ right to privacy?	1 / 6
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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. ¹ The lack of separation between state-owned Ethio Telecom and the government raises significant concerns about the company's degree of cooperation with the government. Ethiopia lacks a data protection law.

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
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Score Change: The score declined from 3 to 2 because of a sharp increase in online harassment and hate speech during the Tigray conflict, contributing to an environment of ethnic-based attacks against Tigrayans, Amharas, and other ethnic groups, as well as the physical abuse of blogger and social media activist Seyoum Teshome.

Hate speech proliferated widely during the Tigray conflict, with many social media users using ethnic slurs to characterize the conflict. 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 responses to those posts. ¹ Ethiopians reported an escalation of violent ethnic-based attacks during the conflict, including those targeting Tigrayan and Amhara people; ² the violence in the aftermath of Hachalu Hundessa's murder (see A3), meanwhile, primarily targeted non-Oromo people. ³ Experts raised concerns that online hate speech may have contributed to the environment for offline abuse and violence. ⁴

Social media users also targeted people sharing content relating to the Tigray conflict with online harassment and intimidation. For instance, Haben Girma, a disability rights activist who is deafblind, reported that she was attacked by online trolls mocking her disability after Girma posted about the Tigray conflict. ⁵ Journalists also reported experiencing increased online harassment during the Tigray conflict, ⁶ especially as

internet users mobilized along progovernment and pro-TPLF lines (see B5, B7, and B8).

In late March 2021, blogger and social media activist Seyoum Teshome was attacked and severely beaten by unknown assailants, along with fellow activist Muktarovich Ousmanova. Teshome, who is known for his provocative commentary about both government and opposition figures, has been arrested for his online criticism of the government, most recently in March 2018. ⁷

Under the former Hailemariam government, security agents frequently harassed and intimidated bloggers, online journalists, and ordinary users. Independent bloggers were often summoned by the authorities, who warned them against discussing certain topics online, while activists reported that they were regularly threatened by state security agents. ⁸ Ethiopian journalists in the diaspora were also targeted for harassment. ⁹

Almost a third of 487 Ethiopian women surveyed by Pollicy, a technology consulting firm, reporting experiencing online sexual harassment, stalking, or other forms of harassment in an August 2020 study. ¹⁰ 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 June 2019, it received online death threats and hate messages on social media. ¹¹

C8 0-3 pts

Are websites, governmental and private entities, service providers, or individual users subject to widespread hacking and other forms of cyberattack?	1 / 3
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Government entities and political parties are frequently subject to cyberattacks, while opposition journalists and activists have alleged that they have been targeted by security forces.

In December 2020, Ethio Telecom chief executive Frehiwot Tamiru disclosed that the company deterred 39.8 billion cyberattacks between

November 25th and December 7th, an average of 2.8 billion daily attacks. Frehiwot attributed the attack—which reported used distributed denial of service (DDoS) attacks against financial, telecommunications, educational, and other systems—to the TPLF. ¹ Media fact-checkers questioned the accuracy of the figures, suggesting that Frehiwot may have inaccurately represented components of a botnet as individual DDoS attacks. ²

In June 2020, INSA disclosed that three different groups attempted to attack the Ethiopian network structure. INSA alleged that the attack originated in Egypt, linking it to the controversial Renaissance Dam project. ³

In early June 2021, after the coverage period, INSA disclosed an attempted cyberattack meant to breach 37,000 computers in Ethiopia, which it attributed to a group that previously targeted Ethiopian websites over the Renaissance Dam. ⁴

Opposition critics and independent voices have faced frequent technical attacks over the years, even when based abroad. In February 2018, Citizen Lab published research detailing how spyware had been used to target Jawar Mohammed, then the previously exiled executive director of OMN and now an imprisoned political leader, throughout 2016 and 2017 (see C5). ⁵

According to research from the cybersecurity firm Kaspersky, a hacking group likely connected to a state government targeted at least one Ethiopian organization with a highly sophisticated malware attack. The group, which was active from 2009 to 2017, targeted military organizations, medical institutions, and telecommunications companies. Kaspersky did not disclose the identity of the targets in Ethiopia or the group's suspected state affiliation. ⁶



On Ethiopia

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Country Facts

Global Freedom Score

22/100 Not Free

Internet Freedom Score

27/100 Not Free

Freedom in the World Status

Not Free

Networks Restricted

Yes

Social Media Blocked

Yes

Websites Blocked

No

Pro-government Commentators

Yes

Users Arrested

Yes

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