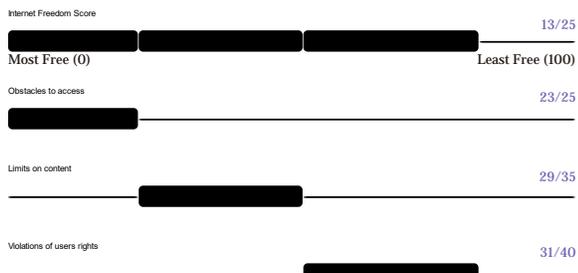


Ethiopia Country Report | Freedom on the Net



Key Developments:

May 31, 2017 - June 1, 2018

- Internet access improved slightly though remained low during the coverage period (see Availability and Ease of Access).
- The government under former Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn responded to ongoing antigovernment protests with frequent internet shutdowns and blocks on social media, though access was restored in April 2018 under the new prime minister (see Restrictions on Connectivity).
- A few blocked websites became accessible in May 2018, while hundreds more were unblocked in June, reflecting the new government's openness to critical voices and independent news (see Blocking and Filtering).
- Online self-censorship decreased palpably as citizens flocked to social media to participate in their country's transition from authoritarianism (see Media, Diversity, and Manipulation).
- Following the resignation of Prime Minister Desalegn, the authorities imposed a six-month state of emergency that placed restrictions on certain online activities to quell antigovernment unrest (see Legal Environment).
- In a positive step, the ruling EPRDF party released hundreds of political prisoners, including imprisoned bloggers, before his resignation—a trend that new Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed continued. A few bloggers were arrested for short periods during the state of emergency (see Prosecutions and Arrests for Online Activities).

Introduction:

Internet freedom in Ethiopia remained highly restricted during the coverage period but saw incremental improvements following the resignation of former Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn in February 2018 and the appointment of Abiy Ahmed to the seat in April. Positive developments were observed in growing access to the internet and censored content, decreasing online self-censorship, and the release of imprisoned bloggers.

Antigovernment discontent and unrest has engulfed Ethiopia since 2015, when large-scale protests first erupted against the government's plan to infringe on land belonging to the marginalized Oromo people. The protest movement spread through the country and evolved in 2016-2017 into unprecedented demonstrations seeking regime change and democratic reform. To suppress the unrest, the authoritarian government under Prime Minister Desalegn deployed heavy-handed tactics, including violently arresting protesters, silencing bloggers, enacting repressive laws, and censoring the internet, among other tactics. Popular social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter used by citizens to mobilize were frequently blocked, when the entire internet was not taken offline altogether.

The unrest reached a tipping point in early 2018 following a burst of renewed antigovernment protests in November 2017. In January and February, the ruling Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) stunned observers by releasing thousands of political prisoners, including blogger Eskinder Nega, who had been serving an 18-year sentence since 2012. Imprisoned bloggers convicted on terrorism charges were also eventually released, while outstanding charges against the critical Zone 9 bloggers were dropped.

In another surprise move, Prime Minister Desalegn announced his resignation in February, leading to the appointment of Abiy Ahmed in April. In the interim, the authorities imposed a six-month state of emergency, which included restrictions on certain online activities, including banning the circulation of "any information that could cause disturbance or suspicion." Mobile internet services were shut down nationwide for several days following Desalegn's resignation in February.

Since his appointment in April, new Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed has projected the image of a reformer, easing restrictions on the media and promising democratic reforms in his inaugural address. Under his short tenure, the internet has become more accessible, as networks were less disrupted and content became less censored. Citizens have flocked to social media to participate in conversations about their country's transition from authoritarianism and to hold the new government accountable to promised reforms, resulting in a palpable decline in self-censorship online and off.

While Ethiopian citizens have become optimistic about the direction their country is heading, repressive laws that have enabled authoritarianism remain on the books, including laws designed to constrain freedom of expression and enable unchecked surveillance.

Obstacles to Access:

Internet access improved slightly though remained low during the coverage period, while the government responded to ongoing antigovernment protests with frequent internet shutdowns throughout the coverage period. Access was restored in April 2018 under the new prime minister, whose government has also announced intentions to liberalize the telecommunications sector.

Availability and Ease of Access

Ethiopia is one of the least connected countries in the world with an internet penetration rate of only 15 percent, compared to 3 percent in 2015, according to the latest data from the International Telecommunications Union (ITU).¹ The uptake of mobile phones in Ethiopia has been the primary driver of incremental growth in internet access, according to a January 2018 report produced by "We Are Social" and Hootsuite.² Accordingly, mobile phone penetration has grown rapidly, up from 51 percent in 2016 to 60 percent in 2017,³ though further growth may be hampered by the government-owned telecom's efforts to disconnect at least 2.7 million "illicit" mobile phones beginning in September 2017.⁴

Ethiopia's low penetration rates stem from underdeveloped telecommunications infrastructure, which is almost entirely absent from rural areas, where about 85 percent of the population resides. A handful of signal stations service the entire country, resulting in network congestion and frequent disconnection.⁵ In a typical small town, individuals often hike to the top of the nearest hill to find a mobile phone signal.

Nonetheless, connection speeds have been improving, particularly in urban areas, though it remains painstakingly slow in rural areas. A speed test conducted in Addis Ababa in May 2018 found an average connection speed of 6.28 Mbps for downloading and 0.21 Mbps for uploading with a 150 millisecond latency.⁶ By contrast, average global download speeds as of July 2018 were 22.81 Mbps.⁷ Such slow speeds result in sluggish download times, even of simple images. Logging into an email account and opening a single message can take several minutes at a standard cybercafé with broadband in Addis Ababa, and even longer in rural areas.⁸

Access to ICT services remains prohibitively expensive for most Ethiopians, largely due to the government's monopoly over the telecoms sector, which provides consumers with few options. Prices are set by state-controlled EthioTelecom and kept artificially high.⁹ In a positive step, reforms under new Prime Minister Abey Ahmed include intentions announced in June 2018 to privatize EthioTelecom and open up the country's telecoms market to other players.¹⁰

Mobile internet prices increased slightly in the past year, from ETB 5 to ETB 7 (USD \$0.25) per day for 25 MB of data or from ETB 3,000 to nearly ETB 4,000 (USD \$140) per month for 30 GB. Nonetheless, the lower cost of the daily 25 MB package is extremely limited considering a standard Google search uses up to 79 KBalane. Regularly loading websites containing 1 GB of multimedia content could cost USD \$9 a day.¹¹ Ethiopians can spend an average of USD \$100 per month for limited mobile or fixed wireless internet access. Better quality services in neighboring Kenya and Uganda cost less than USD \$30 a month.

Telecommunications devices, connection fees, and other related costs are also beyond the means of many Ethiopians. As a result, Ethiopia has among the lowest smartphone ownership rates in the world at only 4 percent according to a 2016 Pew survey.¹²

Most Ethiopians still rely on cybercafés, universities, and government offices for internet access. Cybercafé access costs ETB 7-10 (USD \$0.30-0.35) for an hour of access. However, since internet cafés are not as accessible outside urban areas, rates in rural cybercafés are higher. In addition, digital literacy rates are generally low. Frequent power outages are common, even in the capital Addis Ababa, making internet service unreliable.

Restrictions on Connectivity

Internet shutdowns were a frequent occurrence in Ethiopia throughout 2017 and 2018, as the government continued to disrupt network connectivity to stifle antigovernment protests and online criticism.

The Ethiopian government's monopolistic control over the country's telecommunications infrastructure via EthioTelecom 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; thus, it connects to the international internet via satellite, a fiber-optic cable that passes through Sudan and connects to its international gateway, and the SEACOM cable that connects through Djibouti to an international undersea cable. All connections to the international internet are completely centralized via EthioTelecom, enabling the government to cut off the internet at will.

Network shutdowns have been common since November 2015, when large-scale demonstrations began against the government's plan to appropriate land from the Oromia region of the country.¹³ The antigovernment protest movement remained ongoing through 2017, with shutdowns affecting the Amhara and Oromia regions most heavily. In response to violent clashes during student protests in December 2017, the government imposed a blanket internet shutdown on all regional states, leaving haphazard access available only in the capital city, Addis Ababa.¹⁴ Mobile internet services were then shut down nationwide for several days following the resignation of Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn in February 2018, coinciding with the country being placed under a state of emergency. Oromia state experienced another unexplained internet blackout for over two weeks in March 2018.¹⁵

In a positive step, most network connectivity returned to the country in April 2018 when the new Prime Minister Abey Ahmed began instituting reforms,¹⁶ though network shutdowns were reported in August 2018 in the country's eastern region during a conflict between federal troops and regional leaders.¹⁷

ICT Market

The space for independent initiatives in the ICT sector, entrepreneurial or otherwise, is extremely limited, with state-owned EthioTelecom holding a firm monopoly over internet and mobile phone services as the country's sole telecommunications service provider. In a positive step, the government under new Prime Minister Abey Ahmed announced in June 2018 intentions to privatize EthioTelecom and open up the country's telecoms market to other players.¹⁸ It had previously been reported in May 2018 that EthioTelecom had decided to subcontract a local private company to sell fixed-line internet services.¹⁹

Since 2010 China has been a key investor in Ethiopia's telecommunications industry.²⁰ Particularly, two main Chinese telecoms companies Zhongxing Telecommunication Corporation (ZTE) and Huawei were involved in upgrading Addis Ababa's broadband networks to 4G and expanding 3G networks elsewhere.²¹ The partnership has enabled Ethiopia's authoritarian leaders to maintain their hold over the telecoms sector,²² though the networks built by the Chinese firms have been criticized for their high cost and poor service.²³ In May 2018, Beijing-based telecommunications company Hengbao was contracted to supply SIM cards for EthioTelecom.²⁴ These relationships have led to increasing fears that the Chinese may also be assisting the authorities in developing more robust ICT censorship and surveillance capacities (see Surveillance, Privacy, and Anonymity).²⁵

Onerous government regulations also stymie other aspects of the Ethiopian ICT market. For one, 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.²⁶ Ethiopians are required to register their laptops and tablets at the airport with the Ethiopian customs authority before they travel out of the country, ostensibly to prevent individuals from illegally importing electronic devices, though observers believe the requirement enables officials to monitor citizens' ICT activities by accessing the devices without consent.²⁷

Local software companies also suffer from heavy-handed government regulations, which do not have fair, open, or transparent ways of evaluating and awarding bids for new software projects.²⁸ Government companies are given priority for every kind of project, while smaller entrepreneurial software companies are completely overlooked, leaving few opportunities for local technology companies to thrive.²⁹

Cybercafés are subject to burdensome operating requirements under the Telecom Fraud Offences Proclamation of 2012,³⁰ which prohibit them from providing Voice-over-IP (VoIP) services, and mandate that owners obtain a license from EthioTelecom via an opaque process that can take months. Violations of the requirements entail criminal liability, though no cases have been reported.³¹

Regulatory Bodies

The Ethiopian Telecommunications Agency (ETA) is the primary regulatory body overseeing the telecommunications sector. In practice, government executives have complete control over ICT policy and sector regulation.³² The Information Network Security Agency (INSA), a government agency established in 2011 and controlled by individuals with strong ties to the ruling regime,³³ also has significant power in regulating the internet under the mandate of protecting the communications infrastructure and preventing cybercrime.

Limits on Content:

A few blocked websites became accessible in May 2018, while hundreds more were unblocked in June, reflecting the new government's openness to critical voices and independent news. Online self-censorship decreased palpably as citizens flocked to social media to participate in their country's transition from authoritarianism.

Blocking and Filtering

Hundreds of websites remained blocked during the coverage period, from media outlets to human rights and LGBTI organizations, to opposition sites and circumvention tools. In a positive step, a manual test conducted in May 2018 by local researchers on the ground found that a large number of websites tested by Freedom House each year since 2012 had been unblocked, though several of these websites had not been updated for years and appeared abandoned.³⁴ Nonetheless, a number of sites remained blocked during this test, including Ethiopian news websites, political party websites, and the websites of international digital rights organizations, including the Electronic Frontier Foundation and Tactical Technology Collective. Select tools such as text messaging apps and services on Google's Android operating system on smartphones were also inaccessible, but at irregular intervals and for unclear reasons.³⁵

During antigovernment protests throughout 2017, social media and file-sharing platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, and Dropbox were repeatedly blocked, including during student protests in December.³⁶ The blocks on social media first impacted networks in the Oromia region but later spread to other regions,³⁷ and eventually manifested in a shutdown of entire internet and mobile networks for days and months at a time (see Restrictions on Connectivity). Unrelated to protests, the government has also been known to block access to social media to prevent cheating during university examinations.³⁸ Social media and communications platforms have been accessible since internet networks were restored in April 2018.

Later, on June 22, 2018 (after this report's coverage period), the Ethiopian government reported that it had unblocked a list of 264 websites, which was verified by the Open Observatory of Network Interference (OONI).³⁹ Websites that have become accessible include those of U.S.-based diaspora satellite television stations, Ethiopian Satellite Television (ESAT), and the Oromo Media Network (OMN). Ayyantuu.net and Opride.com, prominent websites also known for their reporting on the protests, have become accessible as well.

Despite the recent improvements, Ethiopia still has a nationwide, politically-motivated internet blocking and filtering scheme that can be redeployed at any time. To filter the internet, specific internet protocol (IP) addresses or domain names are generally blocked at the level of the EthioTelecom-controlled international gateway. Deep-packet inspection (DPI) is also employed, which blocks websites based on a keyword in the content of a website or communication (such as email).⁴⁰

There are no procedures for determining which websites are blocked or why, precluding any avenues for appeal. There are no published lists of blocked websites or publicly available criteria for how such decisions are made, and users are met with an 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 the Information Network Security Agency (INSA), EthioTelecom, and the ICT ministry—seem to be implementing their own lists, contributing to a phenomenon of inconsistent blocking. This lack of transparency is exacerbated by the government's continued denial of its censorship efforts. Government officials flatly deny 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.

Content Removal

Politically objectionable content is often targeted for removal, usually by way of threats from security officials who personally seek out users and bloggers to instruct them to take down certain content, particularly critical content on Facebook. The practice suggests that at least some voices within Ethiopia's small online community are being closely monitored.

During protests in February 2018, the Facebook page of prominent political activist, Jawar Mohammed, who had over 1.2 million followers at the time of the incident, was continuously blocked.⁴¹ Jawar suspected that the Ethiopian government played a role in manipulating or pressuring the social media platform to block and remove certain posts from his verified Facebook page.⁴²

Media, Diversity and Content Manipulation

Media and freedom of expression remained limited throughout 2017, though citizens began to feel less fearful in early 2018 when former Prime Minister Desalegn began releasing hundreds of political prisoners in January before resigning in February. Self-censorship continued to decrease palpably through 2018, as the government under new Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed instituted progressive reforms and eased restrictions on the media. Citizens flocked to social media to participate in conversations about their country's transition from authoritarianism and to hold the new government accountable to promised reforms.

Nonetheless, various constraints still impede the development of diverse media and perspectives online. 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."⁴³ The

process for launching a website on the local .et domain is expensive and demanding,⁴⁴ requiring a business license from the Ministry of Trade and Industry and a permit from an authorized body.⁴⁵ While the domestic Ethiopian blogosphere has been expanding, most blogs are hosted on international platforms or published by members of the diaspora community.

Despite Ethiopia's low levels of internet access, the former government was known to employ an army of trolls to distort Ethiopia's online information landscape.⁴⁶ Opposition groups, journalists, and dissidents used the contemptuous Amharic colloquial term, "Kokas," to describe the progovernment commentators.⁴⁷ Observers say the Kokas regularly discussed Ethiopia's economic growth in favorable terms and posted uncomplimentary 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.⁴⁸ It is uncertain whether the new government continued using the same online manipulation tactics.

Meanwhile, the spread of unconfirmed information, the phenomenon of fake news, and the growing problem of hate speech in the context of ethnic clashes have had a major chilling effect on the credibility of legitimate online information, particularly in response to the flood of rumors about the power struggle within the ruling Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) coalition that swarmed social media right before the appointment of Abiy Ahmed as prime minister in February 2018.

Digital Activism

Despite oppressive conditions caused by poor access and a hostile legal environment, 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 2015,⁴⁹ enabling activists to post information about the demonstrations and disseminate news about police brutality as the government cracked down on protesters.⁵⁰ Activists have also used social media platforms to consistently report the arrests, trials, and releases of political prisoners.

The use of such tools to fuel the protest movement led the government to block access to several platforms during the first half of the coverage period and shut down internet and mobile networks altogether. Repeated internet shutdowns and blocks on social media platforms also hindered mobilization efforts (see Blocking and Filtering and Restrictions on Connectivity).

Violations of User Rights:

Following the resignation of Prime Minister Desalegn in February 2018, the authorities imposed a six-month state of emergency that placed restrictions on certain online activities to quell antigovernment unrest. In a positive step, the ruling EPRDF released hundreds of political prisoners, including imprisoned bloggers, before the prime minister's resignation—a trend that new Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed continued. However, a few bloggers were arrested for short periods during the state of emergency, which was eventually lifted in June 2018.

Legal Environment

To quell escalating antigovernment protests that forced the resignation of the country's prime minister, the government imposed a six-month state of emergency on February 17, 2018 that included restrictions on certain online activities, including banning the circulation of "any information that could cause disturbance or suspicion."⁵¹ Like the previous state of emergency imposed in October 2016, which lasted until August 2017, the authorities also criminalized accessing or posting content related to the protests on social media, as well as efforts to communicate with "terrorist" groups, a category that included exiled dissidents. Emergency rule also undermined fundamental rights, banning unauthorized protests and allowing the authorities to arbitrarily arrest and detain citizens without charge. In a positive step, the new Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, who took office in April 2018, ended the state of emergency in June, two months early.⁵² The move was a reflection of easing tensions in Ethiopia.

Fundamental freedoms are guaranteed for Ethiopian internet users on paper, but the guarantees have been routinely flouted in practice under authoritarian rule. The 1995 Ethiopian constitution provides for freedom of expression, freedom of the press, and access to information, while also prohibiting censorship.⁵³ These constitutional guarantees are affirmed in the 2008 Mass Media and Freedom of Information Proclamation, known as the press law, which governs the print media.⁵⁴ Nevertheless, the press law also includes problematic provisions that contradict constitutional protections and restrict free expression, such as complex registration processes for media outlets and high fines for defamation.⁵⁵ The Criminal Code also penalizes defamation with a fine or up to one year in prison.⁵⁶ As of September 2018, these laws remain on the books under the new prime minister.

Several laws designed to restrict and penalize legitimate online activities and speech are also still in place. Most alarmingly, the 2012 Telecom Fraud Offences Law extends the violations and penalties defined in the 2009 Anti-Terrorism Proclamation and Criminal Code to electronic communications, which explicitly include both mobile phone and internet services.⁵⁷ The antiterrorism legislation prescribes 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 vaguely defined.⁵⁸ The law also bans VoIP services such as Skype⁵⁹ and requires all individuals to register their telecommunications equipment—including smartphones—with the government, which security officials typically enforce at security checkpoints by confiscating ICT equipment if the owner cannot produce a registration permit, according to sources in the country.

Under the former government, Ethiopia passed a new Computer Crime Proclamation in June 2016 that further criminalized an array of online activities.⁶⁰ Civil society expressed concern that the law would be used to further crack down on critical commentary, political opposition, and social unrest.⁶¹ For example, content that "incites fear, violence, chaos or conflict among people" can be punished with up to three years in prison, which could be abused to suppress digital campaigns.⁶² Other problematic provisions ban the dissemination of defamatory content, which can be penalized with up to 10 years in prison,⁶³ and the distribution of unsolicited messages to multiple emails (spam), which carries up to five years in prison.⁶⁴

While the restrictive legal environment for media and freedom of expression remained unchanged under the new government, Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed promised democratic reforms during his inaugural speech to parliament in April 2018.⁶⁵

Prosecutions and Detentions for Online Activities

Following years of arresting antigovernment protesters and handing out long prison sentences to critical bloggers and journalists, the ruling EPRDF party stunned observers in January and February 2018 by releasing thousands of political prisoners, including blogger Eskinder Nega, who had been serving an 18-year sentence since 2012.⁶⁶ Imprisoned bloggers convicted on terrorism charges—Zelalem Workagegnehu, Yonatan Wolde, and Bahiru Degu, among others—were also eventually released, while outstanding charges against the critical Zone 9 bloggers were dropped.⁶⁷

Despite the progress, authorities made new arrests under the state of emergency imposed in February 2018. On March 8, 2018, police arrested Seyoum Teshome, a well-known academic and blogger, for criticizing the state of emergency on his blog.⁶⁸ He was released on April 16 without charges.⁶⁹ Separately, several bloggers and journalists were rearrested on March 26 while at a social gathering, which were prohibited without prior authorization under the state of emergency.⁷⁰ Those arrested included recently released Eskinder Nega, though they were all released after twelve days in prison.⁷¹

Surveillance, Privacy, and Anonymity

Government surveillance of online and mobile phone communications has been pervasive in Ethiopia and has not been reformed since the new prime minister came into office in April 2018.

The Computer Crime Proclamation enacted in June 2016 strengthened the government's surveillance powers, enabling real-time monitoring or interception of communications authorized by the Minister of Justice. The law also obliges service providers to store records of all communications and metadata for at least a year.⁷²

Ethiopia's telecommunications and surveillance infrastructure has been developed in part by investments from Chinese telecommunications companies with potential ties to the Chinese government, creating strong suspicions that the Ethiopian government has implemented highly intrusive surveillance practices styled after the Chinese system. These suspicions were reinforced in January 2018, when African Union officials accused China of hacking into its headquarters' servers and secretly transferring data files to servers in Shanghai over the course of five years, from 2012 to 2017.⁷³ The state-owned China State Construction Engineering Corporation had built the AU's headquarters in Addis Ababa and connected the building's telecommunication infrastructure through Ethiopia's state-run EthioTelecom.

A 2015 Human Rights Watch report revealed strong indications that the Ethiopian government had deployed a centralized monitoring system developed by the Chinese telecommunications firm ZTE to monitor mobile phone networks and the internet.⁷⁴ Known for its use by repressive regimes in Libya and Iran, the monitoring system enables deep packet inspection (DPI) of internet traffic across the EthioTelecom network and has the ability to intercept emails and web chats.

Another ZTE technology, known as ZSmart, is a customer management database installed at EthioTelecom that provides the government with full access to user information and the ability to intercept SMS text messages and record phone conversations.⁷⁵ ZSmart also allows security officials to locate targeted individuals through real-time geolocation tracking of mobile phones.⁷⁶ While the extent to which the government has made use of the full range of ZTE's sophisticated surveillance systems is unclear, the authorities frequently present intercepted emails and phone calls as evidence during trials against journalists and bloggers or during interrogations as a scare tactic.⁷⁷

Meanwhile, exiled dissidents have been frequent targets of surveillance malware over the years. In February 2018, Citizen Lab published research detailing how spyware from an Israeli company had been used against Jawar Mohammed, the exiled executive director of the Oromia Media Network (OMN). OMN is a diaspora-run independent satellite television, radio, and online news media outlet, based in Minneapolis, Minnesota, that had been banned by the former Ethiopian government for inciting violence and promoting terrorism.⁷⁸

Previous Citizen Lab research published in March 2015 found that Remote Control System (RCS) spyware had been used against employees of the Ethiopian Satellite Television Service (ESAT) in November and December 2014. ESAT is also a diaspora-run independent satellite television, radio, and online news media outlet, based in Alexandria, Virginia.⁷⁹ Made by the Italian company Hacking Team, RCS spyware had been advertised as "offensive technology" sold exclusively to law enforcement and intelligence agencies around the world, with the ability to steal files and passwords and intercept Skype calls and chats.⁸⁰ While Hacking Team denied that it dealt with "repressive regimes,"⁸¹ analysis of the RCS attacks uncovered credible links to the Ethiopian government, with the spyware's servers registered at an EthioTelecom address under the name "INSA-PC," referring to the Information Network Security Agency (INSA), the body established in 2011 to preside over the security of the country's critical communications infrastructure.⁸²

In a positive step, the new Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed—who himself is regarded as one of the founders of INSA—forced the resignations of INSA officials who were accused of monitoring and hacking activists, leading to some optimism that INSA may become less abusive in its surveillance powers.⁸³

Anonymous communication is compromised by strict SIM card registration requirements. Upon purchase of a SIM card through EthioTelecom or an authorized reseller, individuals must provide their full name, address, government-issued identification number, and a passport-sized photograph. EthioTelecom'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, state-owned ICT provider EthioTelecom 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.⁸⁴

Intimidation and Violence

Amidst escalating antigovernment protests in 2017 and early 2018, the authorities reportedly harassed, detained, and abused several people who used their digital devices to record footage of demonstrations. Political prisoners, many of whom were imprisoned for their online writings, have been notoriously subjected to grave human rights abuses, including torture, while in detention.⁸⁵ Imprisoned bloggers reported being held in degrading conditions and tortured by prison guards seeking to extract false confessions.⁸⁶

Under the former government, security agents frequently harassed and intimidated bloggers, online journalists, and ordinary users for their online activities. Independent bloggers were often summoned by the authorities

to be warned against discussing certain topics online, while activists reported that they were regularly threatened by state security agents.⁸⁷ Ethiopian journalists in the diaspora were also targeted for harassment.⁸⁸

In a positive step, new Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed fired the head of Ethiopia's prison service and other top officials in July 2018 based on allegations of systemic torture within the prison system.⁸⁹

Technical Attacks

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 targeted Jawar Mohammed, the exiled executive director of the Oromia Media Network (OMN) throughout 2016 and 2017 (see also: Surveillance, Privacy, and Anonymity). OMN is a diaspora-run independent satellite television, radio, and online news media outlet, based in Minneapolis, Minnesota, that had been banned by the former government for inciting violence and promoting terrorism.⁹⁰

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