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 EPDRF 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 (EPDRF) 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 uncheked 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). 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. According to the report, mobile phone penetration has grown rapidly, up from 2 percent in 2015 to 6 percent in 2017, 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.

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 disconnections. In a typical small town, individuals often hike to the top of the nearest hill to find a mobile phone signal.
Access to ICT services remains prohibitively expensive for most. The government monopolizes the telecoms market to other players. In a positive step, reforms under new Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed include intentions announced in June 2018 to privatize EthioTelecom and open up the country’s telecoms market to other players.

Mobile internet prices increased slightly in the past year, from EBT 5 to EBT 7 ($0.65-$0.95) per day for 25 MB of data or from EBT 3,000 to EBT 4,000 ($146-$216) 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 Kilobyte. Regularly loading websites containing 1 GB of multimedia content could cost USD 8 by day. Ethiopians can open access to social media sites and circumvention tools for limited periods (see Restrictions on Connectivity). Better quality services in neighboring Kenya and Uganda cost less than USD 83 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 just a percent according to a 2018 Pew survey.

Most Ethiopians still rely on cybercafes, universities, and government offices for internet access. Cybercafes access costs EBT 7-10 ($0.9-1.35) in an hour. However, since internet cafés are not as accessible outside urban areas, rates in cybercafes 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 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. 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. 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 over two weeks in March 2018.

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

**ICT Market**

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. The Information Network Security Agency (INSA), a government agency established in 2011 and controlled by individuals with strong ties to the ruling regime, 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 flock to social media to participate in conversations about 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.

The practice of blocking websites and other internet services well before any provocation or critical content is uploaded has been called ‘prior censorship’. On January 17, 2018, the Ethiopian government’s Information Network Security Agency (INSA) blocked access to social media and file-sharing platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, Google and Dropbox, coinciding with student protests in Addis Ababa.

This suspension was lifted on February 13, the day after a second large protest, which was also largely peaceful. The Ministry of Information explained the suspension as a precautionary measure to prevent violent content from circulating on social media. Nonetheless, access to multiple websites continued to be blocked for unclear reasons.

Online self-censorship decreased palpably as citizens flock to social media to participate in conversations about their country’s transition from authoritarianism.

**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. The practice suggests that at least some voices within Ethiopia’s small online community are being closely monitored.

During protests in February 2018, the Ethiopian government’s unprecedented attempts to manipulate and suppress the social media platform were blocked and removed and curtained posts from its verified Facebook Page.

**Media, Diversity and Content Manipulation**

Ethiopia’s media and freedom of expression were heavily restricted by the former government. 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.

Ethiopia’s rich mix of cultures and ethnicities is underrepresented in the online space due to Internet shutdowns. About 76% of the population and 98% of social media users are Amhara, who are not feeling any pressure under the new administration.

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.

Ethiopia’s small online community remains limited in size, with an estimated 5 million Facebook users and 2.4 million Twitter users. The state media and private newspapers are the main sources of information, with digital platforms quickly gaining ground.

On February 15, 2018, the same day the Facebook page of prominent political activist Jawar Mohammad, who was re-elected at 2.1 million followers after the time of the incident, was continuously blocked.

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.

Despite the recent improvements, Ethiopia’s media is still a national control-motivated internet blocking and filtering system that can be redeployed at any time.

**Surveillance, Privacy, and Content Manipulation**

In September 2017, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs announced the launch of its own spyware service, known as Sanad. While it is not clear if the service is currently in use, the announcement parallels with the country’s increasing reliance on surveillance and control.
process for launching a website on the local .et domain is expensive and demanding, requiring a business license from the Ministry of Trade and Industry and a permit from an authorized body.

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. Opposition groups, journalists, and dissidents used the contemptuous Amharic colloquial term, "Kokas," to describe the pro-government commentators. 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. It is uncertain whether the new government has continued using the same online manipulation tactics.

Meanwhile, the spread of misinformation, 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 narratives, leading to calls for greater engagement with 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, enabling activists to post information about the demonstrations and disseminate news about police brutality as the government cracked down on protesters. 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).

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." 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. 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 and access to information, while also prohibiting censorship. 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. 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 fines for defamation.

The Criminal Code also penalizes defamation with a fine or up to one year in prison. 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 and services, which explicitly include both mobile phone and internet services. The anti-terrorism 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. The law also bans VoIP services such as Skype 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. Civil society expressed concern that the law would be used to further crack down on critical commentary, political opposition, and social unrest. 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. Other problematic provisions include the dissemination of defamatory content, which can be penalized with up to 10 years in prison, and the distribution of unlicensed messages to multiple emails (spam), which carries up to five years in prison.

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.

Prosecutions and Detentions for Online Activities

Following years of arresting antigovernment protesters and handling out long prison sentences to critical bloggers and journalists, the ruling EPRDF party stood 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. 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. Despite the progress, authorities made new arrests under the state of emergency 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. He was released on April 16 without charge. 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. These arrested individuals included recently released Eskinder Nega, though they were all released after twelve days in prison.

Surveillance, Privacy, and Anonymity

Governance of 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 interruption of communications authorized by the Ministry of Justice. The law also obliges service providers to store records of all communications and metadata for at least a year. 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 suspicion 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. The state-owned China State Construction Engineering Corporation had built the AIU's headquarters in Addis Ababa and connected the building's telecommunications infrastructure through Ethiopia's state-run EthioTelecom.

A 2015 Human Rights Watch report revealed strong indications that the former Ethiopian government had deployed a centralized monitoring system developed by the Chinese telecommunications firm ZTE to monitor mobile phone networks and the internet. 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 platform installed at EthioTelecom that provides the government with full access to user data and the ability to intercept SMS text messages and make phone calls, which is illegal.

ZSmart also allows security officials to locate targeted individuals through real-time geo-tracking of mobile phones, as well as control users' ability to access email and SMS text messages. For example, Ethiopia's Mobile Network Operators (MNOs) rely on ZTE's ZSmart platform to enable "expressive regimes," a term used by the Center for the Study of Intelligence (CSI) to describe systems that allow authorities to surveil and limit internet speech and to control information flows. Catherine De Laere, a former United Nations official, has described Ethiopia's surveillance system as 

Meanwhile, exiled dissidents have been frequent targets of surveillance online. In February 2018, Citizen Lab published research detailing how spyware from an Israeli company was being 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 has been a target of harassment and smears on social media platforms. The OMN executive director said he was targeted in early 2017 when he was criticized by a pro-government social media user for posting a tweet expressing sympathy for the victims of the Oromo uprising in southern Ethiopia.

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Citizen Lab researchers found that the spyware was used against Jawar, who had been criticized for his role as an opposition leader, and that it was also used against other notable Oromo leaders, including Abdi Nuh, who had been imprisoned since 2016, and Bekele Gerba, a political activist who was arrested in January 2018 for organizing a protest in Addis Ababa.

The ZTE spyware was deployed in at least three wave of attacks, with the first wave targeting Jawar and his associates in early 2017, the second wave targeting Bekele Gerba and his associates in early 2018, and the third wave targeting Abdi Nuh and his associates in mid-2018. The researchers also found that the spyware was used against other Oromo leaders, including Jawar's brother, Hisho Jawar, who was arrested in May 2018 for organizing a protest, and Jawar's sister, Alemayehu Jawar, who was arrested in September 2018 for organizing a protest.

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In a separate incident, the former Ethiopian prime minister Abiy Ahmed was also targeted by the spyware in early 2018. The researchers found that the spyware was used against Abiy Ahmed in late 2017 and early 2018, targeting him and his family members.

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

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 throughout 2016 and 2017 (see also: Surveillance, Privacy, and Anonymity). OMI 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.

Notes:

8 According to tests by Freedom House consultant in 2016.
11 A former Bloomberg's Ethiopia correspondent, who was deported from Ethiopia in 2018, described the issue on Facebook in March 2016: “It cost me 44 birr ($2.05) to watch Al Jazeera’s latest 3-minute dispatch on Oromo protests using 4G network on my phone, which is not that much less than the average daily wage of a daily laborer in Ethiopia.” See: William Davison's Facebook post, March 29, 2016, accessed September 21, 2018, https://www.facebook.com/william.davison.23/posts/1015369368445479?ref=story
the authorities to interpret it broadly and at whim. The proclamation’s language still enables the government to ban VoIP in 2002 after it gained popularity as a less expensive means of communication and began draining revenue from the traditional telephone business belonging to the state-owned EthioTelecom. In response to widespread criticism, the government claimed that VoIP applications such as Skype would not be considered under the new law, though the proclamation’s language still enables the authorities to interpret it broadly and at whim.

The government first instituted the ban on VoIP in 2002 after it gained popularity as a less expensive means of communication and began draining revenue from the traditional telephone business belonging to the state-owned EthioTelecom. In response to widespread criticism, the government claimed that VoIP applications such as Skype would not be considered under the new law, though the proclamation’s language still enables the authorities to interpret it broadly and at whim. The government first instituted the ban on VoIP in 2002 after it gained popularity as a less expensive means of communication and began draining revenue from the traditional telephone business belonging to the state-owned EthioTelecom. In response to widespread criticism, the government claimed that VoIP applications such as Skype would not be considered under the new law, though the proclamation’s language still enables the authorities to interpret it broadly and at whim. The government first instituted the ban on VoIP in 2002 after it gained popularity as a less expensive means of communication and began draining revenue from the traditional telephone business belonging to the state-owned EthioTelecom. In response to widespread criticism, the government claimed that VoIP applications such as Skype would not be considered under the new law, though the proclamation’s language still enables the authorities to interpret it broadly and at whim. The government first instituted the ban on VoIP in 2002 after it gained popularity as a less expensive means of communication and began draining revenue from the traditional telephone business belonging to the state-owned EthioTelecom. In response to widespread criticism, the government claimed that VoIP applications such as Skype would not be considered under the new law, though the proclamation’s language still enables the authorities to interpret it broadly and at whim. The government first instituted the ban on VoIP in 2002 after it gained popularity as a less expensive means of communication and began draining revenue from the traditional telephone business belonging to the state-owned EthioTelecom. In response to widespread criticism, the government claimed that VoIP applications such as Skype would not be considered under the new law, though the proclamation’s language still enables the authorities to interpret it broadly and at whim. The government first instituted the ban on VoIP in 2002 after it gained popularity as a less expensive means of communication and began draining revenue from the traditional telephone business belonging to the state-owned EthioTelecom. In response to widespread criticism, the government claimed that VoIP applications such as Skype would not be considered under the new law, though the proclamation’s language still enables the authorities to interpret it broadly and at whim.