Libya Country Report | Freedom on the Net 2018

Key Developments:

June 1, 2017 - May 31, 2018

- The Libyan Post Telecommunications and Information Technology Company, which had splintered amid the ongoing conflict, was formally reunified in early 2018, it began holding meetings and announced a number of new ICT infrastructure projects (see Availability and Ease of Access and ICT Market).
- In June 2017, mobile and landline service was restored in Sirte after militants from the so-called Islamic State were driven from the coastal town last year (see Restrictions on Connectivity).
- At least two individuals were arrested for criticizing public officials on social media (see Prosecutions and Detentions for Online Activity).

Introduction:

Internet freedom improved this year in Libya thanks to improved access and no intentional restrictions to connectivity. However, at least two individuals were arrested for expressing political opinions online, and access to Facebook was disrupted after the coverage period.

Libya remained plagued by a weak and fragmented central government. Foreign intervention, rival governments, and various militias have prevented the consolidation of power and legitimacy needed for governing. The Presidency Council, tasked with forming a new "Government of National Accord" after UN-sponsored peace talks, has been unable to exercise full control of state ministries based in Tripoli. Meanwhile, its legitimacy has been harmed by a refusal of the House of Representatives, based in the Eastern city of Tobruk, to ratify the UN peace plan and endorse the new government. While there have been tentative steps toward reconciliation between political and military leaders, violence between cities, tribes, and ideological factions continues to hinder progress.

While figures vary widely, internet penetration appears to be increasing in Libya. Of some 6.7 million Libyan residents, 20 percent are internet users, according to 2016 statistics from the International Telecommunications Union—their most recent numbers. The apparent rise in users may be correlated to better 3G coverage and the introduction of 4G LTE in some major cities. Additionally, in March 2018, the state-owned internet provider introduced 4G portable WiFi routers in several major cities. However, the announcement was met with some backlash online from users who considered the price too high, compared to similar services in other developing countries.

Internet access has been badly affected by the ongoing conflict, as electricity outages and physical damage to infrastructure have limited connectivity. However, the quality of service for those who can access the internet has improved recently. The majority of the ICT sector remains monopolized by state-owned entities. The LPTIC, which had splintered amid the conflict, was formally reunified in early 2018 and announced several new ICT infrastructure projects.

Obstacles to Access:

Availability and Ease of Access

Power and telecommunications services remain unstable across the country, with frequent cuts and stoppages due to high demand, infrastructure damage, coercion by armed groups, unauthorized construction, sabotage, and theft of ICT equipment. Despite attempts to reach a solution, there is no consensus between Libya's two opposing institutions, based in Tripoli and Tobruk, respectively, on how to rebuild infrastructure on a national scale.

While figures vary widely, internet penetration appears to be increasing in Libya. Of some 6.7 million Libyan residents, 20 percent are internet users, according to 2016 statistics from the International Telecommunications Union—their most recent numbers. However, other studies have estimated much higher usage rates.

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Earlier, in 2016, Libya Telecom and Technology (LTT) reduced the cost of its "MyFi" boxes—portable WiMax receivers that function as an on-the-go wireless connection. WiMax subscribers make up a large portion of wireless subscriptions in the country.

The national crisis and lack of rule of law have had a devastating effect on internet freedom in Libya. Prior to the revolution, the regime of the late Muammar Qadhafi targeted opposition news websites, particularly after the lifting of UN sanctions in 2003 that led to increased access to surveillance and filtering equipment. Since the overthrow and death of Qadhafi in 2011, the country has witnessed a flurry of self-expression, resulting in an increase in news sites and massive growth in Facebook use. However Libya's online journalists, bloggers, and activists have increasingly practiced some degree of self-censorship due to continued instability, increasing threats, violence, and enforced disappearances over the past years. Nevertheless, the power of the internet as an organizing tool was underlined in several recent campaigns.

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3 GB per month for LYD 30 ($US20); 10 GB per month for LYD 80 ($US56). With a Facebook service subscription, customers may choose a weekly package of 1 GB at a cost of LYD 5 ($US4), or a monthly plan with 3 GB for LYD 15 ($US11).\(^\text{22}\) The cost of a home internet connection in 2017 ranged from LYD 10 ($US7) per month to LYD 30 ($US20), after initial connection fees.\(^\text{11}\) Higher-quality ADSL subscriptions cost between LYD 20 ($US13) and LYD 50 ($US35).\(^\text{22}\) And the new LTT 4G modems launched with a subscription cost LYD 35 ($US26) for a 10 GB data plan, LYD 60 ($US45) for 20 GB, and LYD 75 ($US57) for a 30 GB plan.\(^\text{22}\) For comparison, Libya’s gross domestic product (GDP) per capita, when calculated on a per month basis, was US$870 in 2017, according to the World Bank.\(^\text{40}\)

In January and February 2018, subsidiaries of the LPTIC attended a meeting for the first time since 2014. Participants discussed strategies for further development of the ICT sector,\(^\text{27}\) including the development of a NetCo (National Telecom Company) that will be responsible for operating LPTIC projects in March 2018 announced that the body, which had splintered into faction loyal to Libya’s rival governments during the conflict, had reunified, and would begin work on infrastructure projects worth US$1.7 billion.\(^\text{22}\)

In April 2017, Libya’s mobile phone operators postponed the launch of their mobile services, reportedly over concerns that criminals and radical groups were using Libya’s services that were registered to foreign migrants passing through the country in order to communicate. Libya said it would allow foreign residents to reactivate their SIM cards if they were able to produce a valid visa and passport.\(^\text{28}\) At-Mdhare, the other mobile operator in the country, has taken similar action.

**Restrictions on Connectivity**

Libya has witnessed repeated shutdowns to internet service due to vandalism and politically motivated attacks on telecommunications infrastructure. However, no restrictions to connectivity or social media and communication platforms were recorded during the coverage period. Although, a few restrictions to connectivity occurred following the reporting period.

In June 2018, the Tobruk-based government reported that damage to a fiber-optic cable had contributed to an internet shutdown in parts of eastern and central Libya that lasted 16 hours; it was unclear by what means the cable was damaged.\(^\text{22}\)

Separately, in September 2018, Facebook was temporarily blocked in Tripoli and several other cities. The blockage took place as militant groups clashed in the capital and elsewhere; the LPTIC said that a lack of security had caused the outage, but did not elaborate.\(^\text{22}\)

Additionally, in June 2017, the LPTIC was able to restore mobile and landline services in Sirte; the services had been disconnected after IS had seized control of the city in 2015.\(^\text{41}\) Libyans had destroyed communications infrastructure before being driven from the town in late 2015.\(^\text{41}\) In August 2015, IS reportedly damaged a cable in Sirte that effectively cut off internet, landline, and some mobile phone communications linking eastern and western Libya.\(^\text{41}\) Although LPTIC stated that traffic was restored within a few days,\(^\text{41}\) it also disabled all phone networks in Sirte, banned satellite dishes, and regularly confiscated personal cell phones to check their contents.\(^\text{41}\)

In July 2016, protesters stormed the offices of the mobile phone companies LTT and Libya in Tripoli, demanding that operators shut down cell service to the entire city of Misrata. Protestors claimed the move came as retaliation after Misratan militias allegedly forced GEICO, the national electricity utility, to redirect power from Misrata toTripoli, resulting in power outages sometimes lasting 15 hours per day in the capital.\(^\text{22}\) A similar incident occurred in January 2017, when protesters stormed the headquarters of mobile phone company Almadar, demanding service be cut to Misrata for its role in the country’s political governance.\(^\text{22}\)

In a case of vandalism, large areas of southern Libya were cut off during their LTT-provided mobile and internet connections in February 2017 after the theft of copper and other infrastructure equipment.\(^\text{28}\)

**ICT Market**

The state-run LPTIC, formerly the General Post and Telecommunications Company (GPTC), is the main telecommunications operator and is fully owned by the government. In 1999, the GPTC awarded the first internet service provider (ISP) license to Libya Telecom and Technology (LTT), a subsidiary of the state-owned firm.\(^\text{27}\) Since the fall of the regime, 23 ISPs and 23 VSAT operators have been licensed to compete with state-owned ISPs.\(^\text{27}\) Of the 23 ISPs, 14 are based in Tripoli and have strong ownership ties to the government. LPTIC owns two mobile phone providers, Almadar and Libya in, while a third provider, Libya Phone, is owned by LTT.\(^\text{27}\)

LPTIC has been affected by the country’s political crisis and de facto split. LTT was officially established in 1999, representing the Tobruk government. LPTIC (representing the Tripoli government). However, the LPTIC announced in January 2017 that divisions between its board of directors had been resolved in a court case, a ruling that was upheld the same year. In March 2018, the LPTIC announced that the body had reunified.\(^\text{22}\)

LPTIC in March 2018 announced that it would consolidate its six nonmobile subsidiaries into a single telecommunications company, and launch a variety of projects to improve connectivity and access to services in Libya.\(^\text{22}\) The company also said it had signed a contract worth around US$800 million with the Saudi Arabia–based company Arascom for the provision of satellite backup services.\(^\text{27}\)

There has been a noticeable increase in the number of companies and agencies working with the LPTIC. Moreover, while the regulatory environment is plagued by ongoing disputes over the country’s political governance. The ICT regulator is the General Authority of Communications and Informatics (GACI), formerly known as the General Authority of Telecommunications (GAT).\(^\text{27}\) The GACI is tasked with regulating the telecommunications market, overseeing the issuance of licenses, and enforcing compliance with laws. In addition to its regulatory duties, the GACI also has a supervisory role in the operation of the telecommunications sector.\(^\text{27}\)

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In 2014, the Ministry of Communications and Informational appointed a committee to draft a new Telecommunication Act to set standards for the sector and replace the existing regulations surrounding ICTs. The act, which has been drafted but not yet implemented,\(^\text{27}\) also aims to create an independent Telecommunication Regulatory Authority (TRA) to oversee the industry.\(^\text{27}\)

**Regulatory Bodies**

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**Building and Filtering**

The blocking of websites for partisan reasons has been infrequent in the post-Qadhafi era, though many pornographic websites are inaccessible. The most prominent instance of politically motivated blocking since the rule of Kadhafi was in 2010 when the LTT blocked an Al-Madar, the other mobile operator in the country, has taken similar action.\(^\text{27}\)

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Even though users have faced legal and other consequences for expressing their opinions on social media, some officials are threatened by these activities, often related to national security, because the public nature of such posts can discourage retaliation. One official said, "I feel safe criticizing [high-level officials] through my Facebook, because I'm doing so transparently through a personal platform. It becomes harder for them to touch you without compromising themselves." 

Even as self-censorship increases, the online media landscape still remains much more diverse than under the Qaddafi regime. Many Libyans get their news through hundreds of Facebook pages dedicated to national and local news. Many of these pages are affiliated with professional television, radio, or print news outlets, while others lack professional standards or operate largely as propaganda outlets for warring parties. Those citizen-journalism pages are opaque about their methodology, ownership, editorial policy, or publishing guidelines.

Google was the most visited website in the country, followed by YouTube and then Facebook. Facebook serves as the main source of news about Libya for a large number of users inside and outside the country.

Digital Activism

Over the past years, Libyans have used Facebook and Twitter to mobilize around a variety of causes. Recent campaigns supported peace and movement toward a united government, promoting social justice causes, defending freedom of expression, and commemorating individuals murdered for their activism. Most of these campaigns started and spread through hashtags. For example, a Facebook page and hashtag titled #ليبيا-كوبن (Libya toward peace) sparked a national campaign. While social media activism continues to be a vibrant forum for discussion, there appears to be both a noticeable shift to less overtly political issues over the past few years, as well as a growing skepticism of the ability of digital activism to shape the political landscape amid the country's ongoing turmoil. Nevertheless, the power of the internet as an organizing tool was underlined in several recent campaigns. In March 2018, young activists from across the country joined a Facebook page called "The March of Youth," which called for peace and the reunification of Libya. A demonstration took place in Tripoli late that month under the movement's auspices. In October 2017, activists used Facebook to organize a clean-up campaign in a public square in Benghazi that had for three years been used as a military zone. And, in early 2017, there was a swift online backlash to the police's confiscation of books from a truck as it passed through a checkpoint near Al-Marj. The police deemed the books—mostly novels by Libyan and European authors—to threaten the "moral religious fabric of society." The online criticism of police prompted several organizations, including the Ministry of Culture, to denounce the seizure, and police the following day appeared on television to recant their charges.

Cyber security training is becoming more common in Libya, as users seek to protect themselves and their information in the absence of digital rights legislation. While social media has been harnessed for good causes in Libya, many have also used the power of social media to target people, organizations, and events that they do not approve of or agree with—a particularly worrying form of online bullying that can have far reaching consequences in a country without laws or security.

Violations of User Rights:

Amid the ongoing constitutional crisis and weak rule of law, there were frequent violations of users' rights in the country. Several online journalists have faced threats, detention, kidnappings, and in some cases violent attacks from militiamen. Armed factions carried out attacks with impunity, while appropriate oversight of the country's surveillance apparatus remained shrouded in doubt.

Legal Environment

Freedom of opinion, communication, and the press are guaranteed by Libya’s Draft Constitutional Charter, released by the Libyan Transitional National Council in September 2011. However, delays in the drafting of a constitution and the absence of law enforcement have contributed to weak rule if law in the country. International press freedom groups continue to call for constitutional protections for press freedom, to no avail.

Several repressive Qaddafi-era laws remain on the books due to the absence of significant legal reform in the country since the revolution. These include measures carrying harsher punishments for those who publish content deemed offensive or threatening to Islam, national security, or territorial integrity. A law on collective punishment is particularly egregious, allowing the authorities to punish entire families, towns, or districts for the transgressions of one individual. Because of their vague wording, these laws can be applied to any form of speech, whether transmitted via the internet, mobile phone, or traditional media. Meanwhile, perpetrators of crimes against journalists and activists have enjoy impunity.

Prosecutions and Detentions for Online Activities

While reports of arrests in response to online activity are uncommon, at least two such instances took place during the coverage period. In September 2017, the Information and Antiterrorism Room of Dignity Operation in Benghazi arrested local resident Ashraf Al-Maghrabi in connection with his Facebook posts criticizing the city’s administration. He was held in detention for a week. Because of their vague wording, these laws can be applied to any form of speech, whether transmitted via the internet, mobile phone, or traditional media. Meanwhile, perpetrators of crimes against journalists and activists have enjoy impunity.

Following the arrest of Ashraf Al-Maghrabi in September 2017 over his Facebook posts criticizing the city’s administration, a demonstration took place in Tripoli late that month under the movement's auspices. And, in early 2017, there was a swift online backlash to the police's confiscation of books from a truck as it passed through a checkpoint near Al-Marj. The police deemed the books—mostly novels by Libyan and European authors—to threaten the "moral religious fabric of society." The online criticism of police prompted several organizations, including the Ministry of Culture, to denounce the seizure, and police the following day appeared on television to recant their charges.

The Qaddafi regime had direct access to the country's DNS servers and spread widespread surveillance of online communications. Sophisticated equipment from foreign firms such as the French company Amesys, and possibly the Chinese firm ZTE, were sold to the regime, enabling intelligence agencies to intercept communications on a nationwide scale and collect massive amounts of data on both phone and internet usage. Correspondents from the Wall Street Journal who visited an internet monitoring center after the regime's collapse reportedly found a storage room lined floor-to-ceiling with disk drives containing terabytes of data of Libyans and foreigners with whom they communicated.

Intimidation and Violence

The breakdown of the rule of law and the growing influence of militias in Libya has resulted in a worrying upturn in politically motivated threats and violence against journalists and activists since the 2011 war. Human rights defenders, activists, and social media bloggers have been physically attacked, detained, threatened, harassed, and disappeared by armed groups, some of whom are affiliated with the state authorities, in Tripoli and elsewhere in Libya.

While no bloggers or activists were reportedly killed for online activism during the coverage period, there were cases of harassment, intimidation, and enforced disappearances. Meanwhile, politically motivated killings from 2011 on have continued and discouraged undesired online expression. In June 2017, Khalid Elhabib, a social media activist, was kidnapped by unknown gunmen in Tripoli. At the end of the coverage period, his fate was unclear, though there were no reports suggesting he had been killed. Abdelmoez Banoon, a prominent political and civil rights activist and blogger in the post-2011 uprising period, has been missing since his abduction in July 2014, in front of his home in Tripoli, by unidentified armed men linked to the Fajr Libya alliance. In September 2016, an armed group linked to the GNA’s Interior Ministry abducted Jabir Zain, a Tripoli-based human and civil rights activist and blogger, from a café in the capital, and subsequently forcibly disappeared him. His whereabouts remain unknown.

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Various actors have also harassed the power of social media to threaten, attack, and smear activists and others. For example, in late 2014 anonymous users set up a Facebook page featuring the names, photos, and addresses of Bengházi activists and calling for their assassination and kidnapping. The page was taken down after online activists reported it.

Technical Attacks

Websites are highly vulnerable to cyberattacks in Libya, with prominent news sites employing protection measures against distributed denial-of-service (DDoS) attacks. Anti-militia Facebook pages have been hacked or closed down after mass reporting by users, a significant concern given that most Libyans consider Facebook to be their main source of news.

There have been some efforts by civil society actors, the government, and others to raise awareness of and to prevent technical violence. For example, in February 2018, civil society actors and the Education Ministry hosted a cybersecurity conference focusing on internet use by terrorist groups.

Notes:

7. Data about internet users in Libya on: LPTIC, Facebook page, accessed May 10, 2015,
8. The Libya Observer - LTT introduces Libya's first 4G portable WiFi routers, March 2018,
10. 4G/LTE
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