Electricity shortages also limit internet services in Sudan, especially in major cities that have been subject to periodic power rationing due to electricity price increases. Most of the periphery areas have unsteady or no electricity at all. Power cuts usually peak in the summer when demand for electricity is highest, especially in Khartoum, where a growing population and severe weather have intensified demand. In January 2018, the country experienced a total electricity blackout, ironically during the president's televised speech during which he was expected to address the economic situation.

Internet users access the internet from their mobile devices, though only 22 percent of residents in the capital city, Khartoum, have a smartphone, compared to 9 percent of the total population.

In addition to high prices, the quality of service for 3G users deteriorated as telecommunications companies tried to push people toward their 4G services, which is very expensive; as of mid-2018, 30 GB cost about 615 SDG (US $34) and is not enough for an entire month of service.

Consequently, internet penetration is still low at 29.6 percent, according to the latest available data from the International Telecommunications Union (ITU).

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While social media was critical for mobilizing protests against the economic crisis, the so-called Cyber Jihadists worked to thwart the movement by disseminating misinformation (see Media, Diversity, and Content Manipulation).

Numerous journalists and activists were also arrested or prosecuted for their online activities (see Prosecutions and Arrests for Online Activities).

The cybercrime law announced criminal penalties for the spread of fake news online, while amendments to the media law require online journalists to register with the Journalism Council.

The government sought to tighten restrictions on online activities in the past year, introducing a new cybercrime law and amendments to the media law introduced new restrictions on online activities (see Legal Environment).

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In October 2017, the United States lifted economic, trade, and financial sanctions first imposed on Sudan in 1997, opening up opportunities for new companies to enter Sudan and fuel a long-awaited digital revolution. However, the renewed hope was hampered by a massive economic downturn in late 2017 that saw the devaluation of the local currency and exponential spikes in inflation. Everyday citizens were hard-hit by the soaring prices of goods, including access to the internet.

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Furthermore, internet freedom in Sudan declined in the past year due to a crippling economic crisis that made access to ICTs prohibitively expensive for everyday users. The government also exerted increasing control over the online sphere by arresting online journalists and activists and introducing new restrictive laws.

Economic challenges intensified with high inflation rates in Sudan, resulting in higher costs and declining quality of services for Sudanese citizens in the past year.

The operating environment for the ICT sector has also become more expensive, impacting both telecom companies and their subscribers. A month of fixed-line internet can cost nearly half of the average monthly income in Sudan.

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Restrictions on Connectivity

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There were no reported restrictions on connectivity during the coverage period. Sudan is connected to the global internet through international gateways controlled by the partly state-owned Sudan Telecom Company (Sudatel), Zain, and Canar Telecom, which are in turn connected to five submarine cables: Saudi Arabia–Sudan (SAS-1), Saudi Arabia–Sudan–2 (SAS-2), Eastern Africa Submarine System (EASSY), PALFOS, and Alrakoba, the largest cable. Partial control over the international gateway has enabled the government to restrict internet connectivity during particular events in the past.

ICT Market

There are four licensed telecommunications operators in Sudan: Zain, MTN, Sudatel, and Canar. All are fully owned by foreign companies with the exception of Sudatel, in which the government owns a 22 percent share. However, the Sudanese government holds significant sway over Sudatel’s board of directors. Two providers, MTN and Sudatel, offer broadband internet, while Canar offers fixed phone lines and home internet. The Bank of Khartoum subsequently purchased Canar from UAE’s Etisalat in June 2016, after the bank used its 3.7 percent share in Canar to buy Zain’s efforts to purchase it. Observers believe the government’s move to increase its market share of the telecom industry will have a negative impact on internet freedom for Sudanese users due to the government’s growing ownership of the market.

Regulatory Bodies

Sudan’s telecommunications sector is regulated by the National Telecommunications Corporation (NTC), which is housed under the Ministry of Telecommunications and Information Technology. The NTC is tasked with producing telecommunications statistics, monitoring the use of the internet, introducing new technology into the country, and developing the country’s telecommunications and IT industry. It is also responsible for deciding what content should be accessible on the internet. Although it is a state body, the NTC receives grants from international organizations such as the Intergovernmental Authority on Development and the World Bank, and its website describes the body as “self-financing.”

The NTC’s website gives users the opportunity to submit requests to unblock websites “that are deemed to not contain pornography,” but it does not specify whether the appeals extend to political websites. Users attempting to access a blocked site met with a black page that explicitly states, “This site has been blocked by the National Telecommunications Corporation,” and includes links to further information and a contact email address. In addition to the NTC, the General Prosecutor also has the right to block a site that threatens national security or violates social mores.

Political or social content was last blocked in 2012, when Sudanese Online and Facebook were intermittently inaccessible and the “Innocence of Muslims” YouTube video was blocked.

Content Removal

Forced content removal was more prevalent in the past year, though the extent of the practice remains unknown.

In May 2018, Al-Tahayyeer, an independent online newspaper, published an article about a song critical of the government called “Barkawi,” written by a famous Sudan-based poet and sung by Egypt-based musician Ahmed Abdullah. After the article and the song went viral, the musician received threats from the Sudanese embassy in Cairo and was compelled to immediately remove the song from YouTube to avoid reprisals.

Digital Activism

Social media and communications platforms were critical to the organization of protests in early 2018. Between December 2017 and February 2018, mass protests broke out against the country’s economic deterioration, particularly in response to the 2018 state budget, which was seen as more focused on security and the military and heavily based on being ordinary citizens who had already seen large increases in taxes in recent years. The “bread protests” were heavily organized through Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp, and saw larger numbers of ordinary citizens engage compared to previous protests given the widespread impact of the economic crisis.

While the Cyber Jihadists tried to shut down popular Facebook pages disseminating information about the protests by reporting the pages on masse, social media was the main source of news about the protest movement. Citizens journalists posted videos of the protests, and reports on police violence against protestors was only covered online.

Violations of User Rights:

A new cybercrime law and amendments to the media law introduced new restrictions on online activities (they were passed in June 2018, after this report’s coverage period). At least one citizen was sentenced to prison, while numerous arrests and interrogations for online activities were reported. Violence against users increased.

Legal Environment

Sudan has restrictive laws that limit press and internet freedom. Most notably, the Informatics Offences (Combating) Act 2007 (also known as the IT Crime Act, cybercrimes or electronic crimes law) criminalizes the establishment of websites that criticizes the government or publish defamatory material and content that disturbs public morality or public order. Violations involve fines and prison sentences between two to five years.

New laws enacted in 2018 (after this report’s coverage period) seek to tighten restrictions on online activities. In June 2018, the National Assembly passed the Law on Combating Cybercrimes of 2018 that introduced criminal penalties for the spread of fake news online. The law also penalizes criticizing foreigners with up to two years in prison.

In June 2018, amendments to the Media Law (also known as the Press and Publications Act) were approved, which were reportedly aimed at imposing restrictions on online journalism and social media. Notably, the amendments require online journalists to register with the Journalism Council. Digital newspapers were not previously required to register, which allowed them to operate without an official physical office due to security concerns. The amendments also reportedly include a separate article on offenses in electronic publishing, which carry tough sentences.

The highly restrictive Media Law was last updated in November 2016 to include specific clauses pertaining to online journalism, extending onerous limitations long placed on the traditional press to the online sphere, such as provisions that hold editors-in-chief liable for all content published by their press outlets.

National security imperatives also restrict journalism, particularly under the 2010 National Security Act, which gives the National Intelligence and Security Service (NISS) immunity from prosecution and the permission to arrest, detain, and censor journalists under the pretext of national security.

Prosecutions and Detentions for Online Activities

Arrests, prosecutions, and interrogations for online activities continued in the past year, particularly as heavy-handed censorship on the print and broadcast sectors led journalists to migrate online to disseminate news. The arrests reflected an ongoing tactic to limit internet freedom by silencing critical voices and encouraging self-censorship.

At least one citizen was sentenced to prison for online activities during the reporting period. In July 2017, political activist Hatim Merghani was sentenced to two years in prison and a fine for publishing commentary on the
corruption of a government official on WhatsApp and other social media channels. Numerous journalists faced prosecutions for alleged cybercrime:

- In July 2017, a journalist with the Al-Arwaad newspaper was charged for defamation under the cybercrimes law for an article on the corruption of the South Darfur finance minister.

- In October 2017, journalist Ala-Alhdein Mahmoud discovered he had cybercrimes charges pending against him for being the owner of the online newspaper, the Khartoum Post, which had published an article critical of a government official. He was also accused of being the author of the anonymous article. The only evidence against him was documentation that he had added a friend to the Khartoum Post's Facebook page. He was released on bail, though his case remains open as of mid-2018.

- In a similar case, journalist Ali Alif Abdalrahmoh was arrested in March 2018 of being the owner of the independent online newspaper Al-Taghyeer and arrested for allegedly publishing false news about the assassination of an ordinary citizen at the hands of the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), a paramilitary force active in Darfur and now in Eastern Sudan on the platform. However, Abdalrahmoh worked for Al-Taghyeer, a print newspaper, which has no relation to the online version. Although he insisted on the misunderstanding, he still faces charges under the cybercrimes law on public order, which carries a maximum sentence of seven years.

Several activists and everyday citizens were arrested for their social media activities:

- In October 2017, a video circulated of a young man wearing makeup and dancing in a wedding hall. He was reportedly arrested after the party and sentenced to a fine and 40 lashes.

- In February 2018, an online activist was arrested from his house in al-Sukhni, Red Sea (state) for publishing a video on Facebook and WhatsApp that ridiculed the president during his last visit to the state.

- In April 2018, philosophy professor Dr. Esmat Mahmoud was arrested from his home while he was being interrogated about a Facebook post in which he criticized the president. The post was a link to a news article written by the same retired general who was discussed in the original Facebook post.

- Also in April, activist Mushin Mustafa from South Kordofan was arrested for posts on his Twitter and Facebook accounts voicing concerns about government corruption and the lack of services in the state. A young woman was arrested alongside Mustafa after she shared his post and commented on it on Facebook.

- Suad Fadil was charged with cybercrimes in April 2018 after she shared a video on WhatsApp in which she detailed how she had recently been removed from her position at the Sudan Communication Company and replaced with the president's niece.

In a dangerous new pattern, the public order police (also known as the morality police) have arrested individuals featured in viral videos for violating laws on personal behavior and dress codes. Sentences vary between 40 lashes for indecent clothing to jail-time and a hefty fine for indecent acts. In February 2018, a video circulated on Facebook and WhatsApp in which a group of young men and women were dancing at a party. Days later, the morality police announced that the people shown in the video were arrested and they would be presented. In March, a young woman also danced in a viral video was arrested by the same police force.

Meanwhile, the authorities continued to pursue online activists based outside Sudan, particularly those who live in Saudi Arabia. In July 2017, Saudi officials handed journalist and online activist Ad-Diyana to the NSS. Later in November, Saudi authorities arrested Hadi Al Ali Mohamed Ali, an online activist residing in Saudi Arabia, and bailed him over to the NSS in May 2018. In July 2018, Mohamed's family reported that he had been hospitalized as a result of severe torture.

### Surveillance, Privacy, and Anonymity

Unchecked surveillance of ICTs is a grave concern among citizens in Sudan, where the government is known to actively monitor internet communications on social media platforms and target online activists and journalists during politically sensitive periods. The NSS regularly intercepts private email messages, enabled by sophisticated surveillance technologies.

According to Citizen Lab research from June 2013, Sudan possesses high-tech surveillance equipment from the U.S.-based Blue Coat Systems, a technology company that manufactures monitoring and filtering devices. The surveillance system was initially traced to three networks inside Sudan, including the networks of the private telecom provider Caesar. In July 2017, NSS agents reportedly planted Blue Coat surveillance software into the phones and laptops of at least eleven activists during an out-of-country meeting and training. According to a local expert, the software was installed through the WiFi modem shared by the group and enabled the monitoring of all online activities.

Article 9 of the NTIC’s General Regulations 2012, based on the 2001 Communications Act, obligates mobile companies to keep a complete record of their customers’ data, and mandatory SIM card registration was enforced in late 2017. Subscribers were given the deadline of December 31, 2017 to register their phone numbers using their National ID, which includes detailed personal information such as home address, birthplace, and mother’s name.

### Intimidation and Violence

Online journalists and activists often face extrajudicial intimidation, harassment, and violence for their online activities, though there were fewer reported incidents of violence during the coverage period compared to previous years.

Most online violence targets social media influencers and minority groups such as LGBTI. In October 2017, a video circulated of a young man wearing makeup and dancing in a wedding hall. He was reportedly arrested after the party and sentenced to a fine and 40 lashes. The young man also received serious diagnoses online and off, which eventually led him to flee the country.

Female activists in particular are subject to multileveled attacks such as threats and smear campaigns on social media. In one prominent example from the past few years, over 15 female activists were doxed on the fake “Sudanese Women against the Hijab” Facebook group, where their private pictures were posted without their consent alongside fabricated quotes about being against the veil and religion. Some of the victims became fearful for their lives in the face of violent threats from religious fundamentalists. Two victims reported this page at the cybercrimes prosecution office to no avail; instead, one of the victims was shamed and scolded for posting her picture online. The page was only shut down after serious advocacy with international human rights groups. One group in particular sent a representative to meet with Facebook executives and campaign on this issue. The page was finally removed in April 2017.

### Technical Attacks

Independent news sites are frequently subject to technical attacks, which many believe are perpetrated by the government’s Cyber Jihadist Unit. Attacks usually intensify during political events and unrest, and severe prominent news sites ward off daily DDoS attempts. Several online outlets reported technical attacks against their websites in the past year, but they were able to respond by increasing their cyber security capabilities.

Throughout 2017, a Facebook page created by Sudanese women to post screenshots of sexual harassment incidents faced several hacking attempts following strong condemnation from numerous male users. The women also have a private group with over 7,300 members on social media called “Inboxat” (Arabic for “Inbox messages”) where they share sexual harassment messages they receive on social media with one another.

Notes:

1. Under the sanctions, Sudanese users could not download applications or software online without a VPN or access services such as Google and even online courses.


6. International Telecommunication Union, “Percentage of Individuals Using the Internet, 2000-2016,” and “Mobile-Cellular Telephone Subscriptions, 2000-2016,”


20. “Cybercrime: Cyber terrorism threatens the sovereignty of the state,” [in Arabic]

21. “Cybercrime: Cyber terrorism threatens the sovereignty of the state,” [in Arabic]

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Ahwarg was established in January 2014.

Altaghyeer [Arabic for change with political connotation] was established in 2013 following the government’s crackdown on independent journalists, who were eventually banned from practicing traditional journalism in Sudan.

Launched from the Netherlands in November 2008, Radio Dabanga focuses on reporting on Darfur and has a strong online presence and wide audience in conflict areas. It website is bilingual and runs in depth reports and features. It is a project of the Radio Darfur Network. Dabanga, “About Us,” http://bit.ly/2jgQgkJ.


Finance Minister Holds Whatapp responsible for the fuel crisis in Sudan (Arabic)- https://www.sudantribune.com/spip.php?article64012

"Sudan to unleash cyber jihadists,” BBC, March 23, 2015, bit.ly/1kpJ7nL.


It should be noted that activists rarely use the term “Cyber Jihad Unit”, in fact they refer to thee affiliated with this unit as “electronic chickens” as of 2012.

Export taxes on non-essential food items increased to almost 40% while tariffs on cars increased by 300%. The increase in car tariffs forced the tariffs authority to have to accept instalments as thousands were unable to pay the fees to bring their cars into the country.


Abdelgadir Mohammed Abdelgadir, Fences of Silence: Systematic Repression of Freedom of the Press, Opinion and Expression in Sudan, (International Press Institute, 2012) http://bit.ly/1P7wseq. According to Section 4, crimes against public order and morality Sudan cyber law, of Sudan’s Cybercrime Law (2007), intentional or unintentional producing, preparing, sending, storing, or promoting any content that violates public order or morality, makes the offender liable to imprisonment of 4 to 5 years or a fine or both. The maximum penalty for committing both crimes is 7 years or fine or both. Also, under the same section, creating, promoting, using, website that calls for, or promote, ideas against public law or morality is punished by 3 years in prison or fine or both. Cyber defamation crimes necessitate 2 years in prison or fine or both. Public order is not defined clearly in the law. Subsequently, most of the opposition content online falls under this section making online activists liable under this law.


As in the case of Hurriyat, Al-Rakoba, Al-Taghyeer, Al-Tareeg.


Interview with Alaa-aldeen Mahmoud on 8th of March 2018

Interview with Al-Taghyeer editor on Tuesday 6th of March 2018 over whatapp.

Interview with Al-Taghyeer journalist, February 2018.


Based FH consultant interviews, March 2018.

He was a Sudanese-Canadian