

ETHIOPIA

	2011	2012
INTERNET FREEDOM STATUS	Not Free	Not Free
Obstacles to Access (0-25)	21	22
Limits on Content (0-35)	26	27
Violations of User Rights (0-40)	22	26
Total (0-100)	69	75

* 0=most free, 100=least free

POPULATION: 87 million
INTERNET PENETRATION 2011: 1 percent
WEB 2.0 APPLICATIONS BLOCKED: Yes
NOTABLE POLITICAL CENSORSHIP: Yes
BLOGGERS/ ICT USERS ARRESTED: Yes
PRESS FREEDOM STATUS: Not Free

INTRODUCTION

Ethiopia is the second most populous country in Africa, but poor infrastructure and a government monopoly over the telecommunications sector have notably hindered the growth of information and communication technologies (ICTs). Consequently, Ethiopia has one of the lowest rates of internet and mobile telephone penetration on the continent. Despite low access, the government maintains a strict system of controls and is the only country in Sub-Saharan Africa to implement nationwide internet filtering.

In 2011, in the wake of the Arab Spring protests in the Middle East and several online calls for similar demonstrations in Ethiopia,¹ the government reacted by strengthening internet censorship and carrying out a systematic crackdown on independent journalists, including at least one blogger. Beginning in June 2011, over ten journalists were sentenced to long prison terms,² mostly on questionable charges of terrorism. Among them was the editor of an exiled online news website who was sentenced in absentia to life imprisonment. A prominent dissident blogger based in Ethiopia was also arrested in September 2011 and sentenced to 18 years in prison in July 2012.³ The latest crackdown is part of a broader

1 René Lefort, "Beka!" ("enough"). Will Ethiopia be next?" openDemocracy.net, May 26, 2011, <http://www.opendemocracy.net/ren%C3%A9-lefort/beka-enough-will-ethiopia-be-next>.

2 Yukio Strachan, "Prisoners of Conscience: Swedish Journalists Jailed in Ethiopia," Digital Journal, December 29, 2011, <http://digitaljournal.com/article/316820>.

3 William Easterly et al., "The Case of Eskinder Nega," *The New York Review of Books*, January 12, 2012, <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2012/jan/12/case-eskinder-nega/?pagination=false>; "Ethiopia sentences Eskinder, 5 others on terror charges," Committee to Protect Journalists, July 13, 2012, <http://cpj.org/2012/07/ethiopia-sentences-eskinder-six-others-on-terror-c.php>.

trend of growing repression against independent media since the 2005 parliamentary elections, in which opposition parties mustered a relatively strong showing.⁴

Internet and mobile phone services were introduced in Ethiopia in 1997 and 1999, respectively.⁵ In recent years, the government has attempted to increase access through the establishment of fiber-optic cables, satellite links, and mobile broadband services. It has refused to end exclusive control over the market by the state-owned Ethiopian Telecommunication Corporation (ETC). However, in December 2010 France Telecom took over management of ETC for a two-year period, renaming it Ethio Telecom in the process.⁶ China has also emerged as a key investor and contractor in Ethiopia's telecommunications sector.⁷ Given allegations that the Chinese authorities have provided the Ethiopian government with technologies that can be used for political repression, such as surveillance cameras and satellite jamming equipment,⁸ some observers fear that the Chinese may assist the authorities in developing more robust internet and mobile phone censorship and surveillance capacities in the coming years.

OBSTACLES TO ACCESS

Ethiopia's telecommunications infrastructure is among the least developed in Africa and is almost entirely absent from rural areas, where about 85 percent of the population resides. In 2011, only 829,000 fixed telephone lines were in actual operation (a decrease from 908,000 lines in 2010⁹), serving a population of 83 million for a penetration rate of less than 1 percent, according to the International Telecommunication Union (ITU).¹⁰ Similarly, as of

⁴ Julia Crawford, "Ethiopia: Poison, Politics and the Press," Committee to Protect Journalists, April 28, 2006, <http://cpj.org/reports/2006/04/ethiopia-da-spring-06.php>.

⁵ The first use of internet-like electronic communication was in 1993, when the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA) launched the Pan African Documentation and Information Service Network (PADISNET) project, establishing electronic communication nodes in several countries, including Ethiopia. PADISNET provided the first store-and-forward email and electronic-bulletin board services in Ethiopia. It was used by a few hundred people, primarily academics, and staff of international agencies or nongovernmental organizations.

⁶ William Davison, "France Telecom Takes Over Management of Ethiopia's Monopoly," Bloomberg, December 3, 2010, <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2010-12-03/france-telecom-starts-two-year-management-contract-at-ethiopia-utility.html>.

⁷ Isaac Idun-Arkhurst and James Laing, *The Impact of the Chinese Presence in Africa* (London: africapractice, 2007), http://www.davidandassociates.co.uk/davidandblog/newwork/China_in_Africa_5.pdf.

⁸ Hilina Alemu, "INSA Installing Street Surveillance Cameras," *Addis Fortune*, March 21, 2010, <http://www.addisfortune.com/Vol%2010%20No%20516%20Archive/INSA%20Installing%20Street%20Surveillance%20Cameras.htm>; "China Involved in ESAT Jamming," *Addis Neger*, June 22, 2010, <http://addisnegeronline.com/2010/06/china-involved-in-esat-jamming/>.

⁹ International Telecommunication Union (ITU), "Fixed-telephone subscriptions," 2010, accessed July 18, 2012, <http://www.itu.int/ITU-D/ICTEYE/Indicators/Indicators.aspx#>.

¹⁰ International Telecommunication Union (ITU), "Fixed-telephone subscriptions," 2011, accessed July 18, 2012, <http://www.itu.int/ITU-D/ICTEYE/Indicators/Indicators.aspx#>.

the end of 2011, internet penetration stood at 1.1 percent, up from 0.75 percent in 2010.¹¹ Mobile phone penetration in 2011 was higher at roughly 17 percent with a little over 14 million subscriptions, up from an 8 percent penetration rate in 2010.¹² While all of the above reflect very slight improvements in access compared to 2010 (except for fixed-telephone lines), such penetration rates represent extremely limited access to ICTs by global comparison.

The combined cost of purchasing a computer, initiating an internet connection, and paying usage charges places internet access beyond the reach of most Ethiopians. A 2010 study by the ITU found that Ethiopia's broadband internet connections were among the most expensive in the world when compared with monthly income, second only to the Central African Republic,¹³ and merely 27,000 broadband subscriptions were recorded in 2011.¹⁴ Prices are set by Ethio Telecom and kept artificially high. In April 2011, Ethio Telecom announced a new set of pricing packages,¹⁵ reducing the subscription charge from US\$80 to US\$13 and the monthly fee from over US\$200 per for unlimited usage to fees of between US\$17 and US\$41 for between 1 GB and 4 GB of use. By comparison, the annual gross national income (GNI) per capita at purchasing power parity was US\$1,110 (or US\$92.50 per month) in 2011.¹⁶ Although the new tariffs have rendered the service slightly more affordable—though still relatively expensive—for individual users, cybercafe owners have complained that the lack of an unlimited usage option could hurt the financial viability of their business.¹⁷ Furthermore, an adult literacy rate of 30 percent means that the majority of Ethiopians would be unable to take full advantage of online resources even if they had access to the technology.¹⁸ Radio remains the principal mass medium through which most Ethiopians obtain information.

The majority of internet users rely on cybercafes to access the web, though connections there are often slow and unreliable. Internet access via mobile phones has grown over the

¹¹ International Telecommunication Union (ITU), "Percentage of individuals using the Internet, fixed (wired) Internet subscriptions, fixed (wired)-broadband subscriptions," 2011, accessed July 13, 2012, <http://www.itu.int/ITU-D/ICTEYE/Indicators/Indicators.aspx#>.

¹² International Telecommunication Union (ITU), "Mobile-cellular telephone subscriptions," 2011, accessed July 13, 2012, <http://www.itu.int/ITU-D/ICTEYE/Indicators/Indicators.aspx#>.

¹³ Jonathan Fildes, "UN Reveals Global Disparity in Broadband Access," BBC News, September 2, 2010, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/technology-11162656>.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ "Residential Tariff," Ethio Telecom, accessed July 16, 2012, <http://www.ethiotelecom.et/products/residential-tariff.php>.

¹⁶ World Bank, "Gross national income per capital 2011, Atlas method and PPP," World Bank Databank, 2011, accessed July 18, 2012, <http://databank.worldbank.org/databank/download/GNIPC.pdf>.

¹⁷ Elias Gebreselassie, "Ethio-Telecom Limits EVDO Internet Access," Addis Fortune, April 3, 2011, http://addisfortune.com/Vol_10_No_570_Archive/Ethio-Telecom%20Limits%20EVDO%20Internet%20Access.htm; "Ethio-Telecom unveils wide-ranging tariff changes across all services," TeleGeography, April 5, 2011, <http://www.telegeography.com/products/commsupdate/articles/2011/04/05/Ethio-Telecom-unveils-wide-ranging-tariff-changes-across-all-services>.

¹⁸ UNICEF, "Ethiopia: Statistics," accessed July 16, 2012, http://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/ethiopia_statistics.html#67.

past year, particularly in semi-urban areas, but slow speeds are a constant problem. A 2010 study commissioned by Manchester University's School of Education found that accessing an online email account and opening one message took six minutes in a typical Addis Ababa cybercafe with a broadband connection.¹⁹ The number of cybercafes has grown in recent years and continues to expand in large cities, after a brief period in 2001–02 during which the government declared them illegal and forced some to shut down. Since July 2002, the Ethiopian Telecommunications Agency (ETA) has been authorized to issue licenses for new cybercafes.

The authorities have placed some restrictions on advanced internet applications. In particular, the use or provision of Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) services or internet-based fax services—including at cybercafes—is prohibited,²⁰ with potential punishments including fines and up to five years in prison.²¹ The government instituted the ban on VoIP in 2002 after it gained popularity as a less expensive means of communicating and began to drain revenue from the traditional telephone business belonging to the state-owned Ethiopian Telecommunication Corporation (ETC), or Ethio Telecom.²² Despite the restriction on paper, many cybercafes offer the service with few repercussions.

Social-networking sites such as Facebook, the video-sharing site YouTube, and the Twitter microblogging service are available, though very slow internet speeds make it impossible to access video content. International blog-hosting websites such as Blogger have been frequently blocked since the disputed parliamentary elections of 2005, during which the opposition used online communication to organize and disseminate information that was critical of the ruling Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF).²³ In addition, for two years following the 2005 elections, the ETC blocked text-messaging via mobile phones after the ruling party accused the opposition of using the technology to

¹⁹ Andinet Teshome, *Internet Access in the Capital of Africa* (School of Education, University of Manchester, 2009); EthioTube video, 8:56, posted by "Kebena," accessed August 06, 2010, <http://www.ethiotube.net/video/9655/Internet-Access-in-the-Capital-of-Africa-Addis-Ababa>.

²⁰ Ethiopian Telecommunication Agency (ETA), "Telecommunication Proclamation No. 281/2002, Article 2(11) and 2(12)," July 2, 2002, accessed July 25, 2012, [http://www.eta.gov.et/Scan/Telecom%20Proc%20281_2002%20\(amendment\)%20NG.pdf](http://www.eta.gov.et/Scan/Telecom%20Proc%20281_2002%20(amendment)%20NG.pdf). As an amendment to article 24 of the Proclamation, the Sub-Article (3) specifically states, "The use or provision of voice communication or fax services through the internet are prohibited" (page 1782).

²¹ ETA, "Telecommunication Proclamation No. 49/1996, Articles 24 and 25," November 28, 1996, accessed July 25, 2012, http://www.eta.gov.et/Scan/Telecom%20Proc%2049_1996%20NG1.pdf.

²² Groum Abate, "Internet Cafes Start Registering Users," *Capital*, December 25, 2006, http://www.capitalethiopia.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=259:internet-cafes-start-registering-users-&catid=12:local-news&Itemid=4.

²³ Bogdan Popa, "Google Blocked in Ethiopia," Softpedia, May 3, 2007, <http://news.softpedia.com/news/Google-Blocked-In-Ethiopia-53799.shtml>.

organize antigovernment protests. Text-messaging services did not resume until September 2007.²⁴

Around May 26, 2011, on the eve of a planned opposition demonstration inspired by anti-government protests in the Middle East and celebrations for the anniversary of the ruling party coming to power, the internet was cut off for at least half a day.²⁵ It remained unclear whether the cause of the shutdown was a deliberate government attempt to restrict communication at a sensitive time, a technical problem, or sabotage of a fiber-optic cable. Separately, when high-profile international events, such as a meeting of the African Union, have taken place in Addis Ababa and other major cities, the government has redirected much of the country's bandwidth to the venues hosting visitors, leaving ordinary users with even slower connections than usual.

Ethiopia is connected to the international internet via satellite, a fiber-optic cable that passes through Sudan and connects to its international gateway, and another cable that connects through Djibouti to an international undersea cable.²⁶ In an effort to expand connectivity, the government has reportedly installed several thousand kilometers of fiber-optic cable throughout the country in recent years.²⁷ There are also plans in place to connect Ethiopia to a global undersea cable network through the East African Submarine Cable System (EASSy) project. The EASSy project itself was completed and launched in July 2010, but its effects on Ethiopia have yet to be seen.²⁸ The government has sought to increase access via satellite links for government offices and schools in rural areas. WoredaNet, for instance, connects over 500 *woredas*, or local districts, to regional and central government offices, providing services such as video conferencing and internet access. Similarly, SchoolNet connects over 500 high schools across the country to a gateway that provides video- and audio-streamed educational programming.²⁹ The impact of such projects has been limited, however, as internet speeds across these networks remain almost prohibitively slow and outages are common.

The ETC, or Ethio Telecom, retains a monopoly on all telecommunications services, including internet access and both mobile and fixed-line telephony. Connection to the

²⁴ Human Rights Watch, "Ethiopia: Repression Rising Ahead of May Elections," news release, March 24, 2010, <http://www.hrw.org/en/news/2010/03/24/ethiopia-repression-rising-ahead-may-elections>.

²⁵ "Internet is down through out Ethiopia – update," Ethiopian Review, May 26, 2011, <http://www.ethiopianreview.com/content/33165>.

²⁶ Hailu Teklehaimanot, "Unraveling ZTE's Network," *Addis Fortune*, August 22, 2010, <http://www.addisfortune.com/Interview-Unraveling%20ZTEs%20Network.htm>.

²⁷ Samuel Kinde, "Internet in Ethiopia: Is Ethiopia Off-Line or Wired to the Rim?" *MediaETHIOPIA*, November 2007, http://www.mediaethiopia.com/Engineering/Internet_in_Ethiopia_November2007.htm.

²⁸ Brian Adero, "WIOCC-EASSy Cable Ready for Business," *IT News Africa*, July 23, 2010, <http://www.itnewsafrika.com/?p=8419>.

²⁹ Kinde, "Internet in Ethiopia."

international internet is centralized via Ethio Telecom, from which cybercafes must purchase their bandwidth. The Ethiopian Telecommunications Agency (ETA) is the primary regulatory body overseeing the telecommunications sector.³⁰ Although it was established as an autonomous federal agency, in practice the ETA is tightly controlled by the government.

The space for independent initiatives, entrepreneurial or otherwise, is extremely limited.³¹ In October 2011, the government announced³² that earlier in the year, it had begun granting permission to private companies that run internet-dependent operations to acquire and use VSAT links, connections previously restricted only to governmental and international organizations per special authorization.³³ Under the new directive, which has yet to be made public as of May 2012, companies are reportedly permitted to use the technology for their own operations but are barred from providing services to third parties, thereby maintaining Ethio Telecom's monopoly on public internet access.

Liberalization of the telecommunications sector is expected to greatly increase internet and mobile phone penetration, but the prospects for such loosening remain uncertain. Despite repeated international pressure to do so, the Ethiopian government has been reluctant to ease its grip on the sector.³⁴ While some observers consider the December 2010 entry of France Telecom as manager of Ethio Telecom to be a potential move toward liberalization, others are skeptical of the government's commitment to allowing greater public access to information and communication technologies (ICTs). The foreign partnership may simply be an effort to improve service delivery while maintaining the state monopoly. Even so, under the new management, users continue to complain that speeds delivered are lower than advertised, service is regularly interrupted, and the quality of customer assistance has declined, possibly due to loss of morale following layoffs.³⁵

³⁰ ETA, "Telecommunication Proclamation No. 49/1996, Part Two," November 28, 1996, accessed August 24, 2010 http://www.eta.gov.et/Scan/Telecom%20Proc%2049_1996%20NG1.pdf.

³¹ Al Shiferaw, "Connecting Telecentres: An Ethiopian Perspective," *Telecentre Magazine*, September 2008, <http://www.telecentremagazine.net/articles/article-details.asp?Title=Connecting-Telecentres:-An-Ethiopian-Perspective&articleid=163&typ=Features>.

³² "Private VSAT Permit Directive Number 2/2003" as noted in: "Ethiopia to liberalise VSAT market," Screen Africa, November 16, 2011, <http://www.screenafrica.com/page/news/industry/1097820-Ethiopia-to-liberalise-VSAT-market>.

³³ Yelibenwork Ayele, "Companies in Ethiopia Permitted to Use VSAT," 2Merkato.com, October 3, 2011, <http://www.2merkato.com/20111003380/companies-in-ethiopia-permitted-to-use-vsats>.

³⁴ "US urge Ethiopia to liberalise telecom sector," *Voices of Africa*, March 10, 2010, http://voicesofafrica.africanews.com/site/list_message/26217; Technology Strategies International, "ICT Investment Opportunities in Ethiopia—2010," March 1, 2010, <http://www.marketresearch.com/Technology-Strategies-International-v3460/ICT-Investment-Opportunities-Ethiopia-2663628/>.

³⁵ Meron Tekleberhan, "Internet Connection a Persistent Problem in Ethiopia," *Ezega.com*, December 26, 2011, <http://www.ezega.com/news/NewsDetails.aspx?Page=heads&NewsID=3169>.

LIMITS ON CONTENT

Ethiopian authorities persistently deny engaging in online censorship,³⁶ but the results of the most recent independent tests conducted by the OpenNet Initiative (ONI) in 2009 and checked again by Freedom House at the end of 2011, indicate otherwise. Both sets of tests indicated that the Ethiopian government imposes nationwide, politically motivated internet filtering.³⁷ The blocking of websites is somewhat sporadic, tending to tighten ahead of sensitive political events. This on again, off again dynamic continued in 2011, though there were also indications that the technical sophistication of the government's blocking had increased and that periods of openness were shrinking.

The government's approach to internet filtering has generally entailed hindering access to a list of specific internet protocol (IP) addresses or domain names at the level of the international gateway. One blogger reported in January 2011, however, that since mid-2010, the government had been introducing more sophisticated equipment capable of blocking a webpage based on a keyword in the URL path. The observable evidence he cited included the blocking of the individual Facebook page of the exiled news outlet *Addis Neger*, as well as the fact that blocked content could no longer be accessed via Google cache as was previously possible.³⁸ In July 2011, Ethio Telecom released a tender calling for bids to develop deep-packet inspection (DPI) to be implemented by mid-2012,³⁹ which would make the existing censorship apparatus more sophisticated.

Testing by ONI found that the filtering focuses primarily on independent online news media, political blogs, and Ethiopian human rights groups' websites.⁴⁰ International news outlets such as the U.S.-based Cable News Network (CNN) and nongovernmental organizations such as Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, and Reporters Without Borders—all of which have criticized the Ethiopian government's human rights record—were available as of early 2009. However, tests conducted by Freedom House found that in 2010 and 2011, the websites of Freedom House, Human Rights Watch, and Amnesty International were inaccessible.

³⁶ "Ethiopia: Authorities Urged to Unblock Websites," Integrated Regional Information Networks (IRIN), May 25, 2006, <http://www.irinnews.org/report.aspx?reportid=59115>.

³⁷ OpenNet Initiative, "Regional Overview: Sub-Saharan Africa," accessed May 28, 2010, <http://opennet.net/research/regions/ssafrica>.

³⁸ Daniel Berhane, "Ethiopia's web filtering: Advanced technology, hypocritical criticisms, bleeding constitution," Danielberhane's Blog, January 16, 2011, <http://danielberhane.wordpress.com/2011/01/16/ethiopias-web-filtering-advanced-technology-hypocritical-criticisms-bleeding-constitution/>.

³⁹ Azi Ronen, "Ethio Telecom Issued a Tender for DPI," Broadband Traffic Management (blog), July 7, 2011, <http://broabandtrafficmanagement.blogspot.com/2011/07/ethio-telecom-issued-tender-for-dpi.html>.

⁴⁰ OpenNet Initiative, "Regional Overview: Sub-Saharan Africa," <http://opennet.net/research/regions/ssafrica>.

Ethiopian websites and blogs that are typically blocked but that suddenly became available in early 2009 included CyberEthiopia, Ethiopian Review, Ethiopian Media Forum, Quatero, and Ethiomedia. Several observers suggested that the loosening came in response to the 2008 U.S. State Department human rights report on Ethiopia released in February 2009,⁴¹ which accused the government of restricting internet access by blocking politically oriented websites.⁴² CyberEthiopia, a prodemocracy website, commented in March 2009 that the erratic nature of internet filtering may be a deliberate tactic by the authorities to create confusion and buttress government claims that there is no systematic or pervasive filtering in the country.

By mid-2010, all newly available websites and several others—including the online version of *Addis Neger*, a leading independent newspaper that was forced to close in December 2009⁴³—were temporarily inaccessible again, apparently as part of the government's broader election-related restrictions on the free flow of information.⁴⁴ These websites were blocked for much of 2011, but were briefly unblocked in May 2011, coinciding with a UNESCO event for International Press Freedom Day and the release of a report by the Committee to Protect Journalists criticizing internet censorship in Ethiopia; the timing again reflected the government's possible efforts to loosen online censorship when under international scrutiny, only to impose it again when the spotlight is removed.⁴⁵ By late May, many of the above websites, and some new ones, were blocked again after activists created a Facebook page titled "Beka!" (Enough!)⁴⁶ calling for anti-government protests inspired by the Arab Spring uprisings to take place on May 28, 2011.⁴⁷ As of early 2012, the above-mentioned websites, as well as those of Ethsat (an independent exile television station) and Dilethiopia (an opposition website) were inaccessible. Further, an independent test conducted by Freedom House in early 2012 found that 65 websites related to news and views, 14 websites belonging to different Ethiopian political parties, 37 blogs, 7 audio-video websites, and 37 Facebook pages were not accessible in Ethiopia.

⁴¹ Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, "Ethiopia," in *2008 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of State, February 2009), <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2008/af/119001.htm>.

⁴² Mohamed Keita, "Ethiopia Lifts Filtering of Critical Web Sites—At Least for Now," Committee to Protect Journalists (blog), March 4, 2009, <http://cpj.org/blog/2009/03/ethiopia-lifts-filtering-of-critical-web-sites-at.php>.

⁴³ Reporters Without Borders, "Weekly Forced to Stop Publishing, Its Journalists Flee Abroad," news release, December 4, 2009, http://en.rsf.org/ethiopia-weekly-forced-to-stop-publishing-04-12-2009_35258.html.

⁴⁴ Oromsis Adula, "Election 2010, Blogging, Medrek, and the Future of Ethiopia," Gadaa.com, May 25, 2010, <http://gadaa.com/oduu/3799/2010/05/25/the-2010-election-blogging-medrek-and-the-future-of-ethiopia/>.

⁴⁵ Haleta Yirga and Merga Yonas, "Ethiopia: Freedom of expression being suppressed," *The Reporter Ethiopia*, May 7, 2011, <http://www.thereporterethiopia.com/Politics-and-Law/ethiopia-freedom-of-expression-being-suppressed.html>; Jillioan C. York, "Africa's cascade of Internet censorship," *AlJazeera*, May 12, 2011, <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2011/05/2011512134039497302.html>.

⁴⁶ René Lefort, "'Beka!' ('enough')." Will Ethiopia be next?"

⁴⁷ David Smith, "Ethiopia's 'day of rage' hopes to oust Meles Zenawi from power," *The Guardian*, May 27, 2011, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/may/27/ethiopia-day-of-rage-protest>.

In addition to website blocking, some restrictions are also placed on mobile phone text-messaging. In particular, mobile phone users, businesses, and civil society groups are unable to send a message to more than ten recipients without prior approval of its content from Ethio Telecom.⁴⁸

Procedures for determining which websites should be blocked and when are extremely opaque. There is no published list 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 a blocked website. This lack of transparency is exacerbated by the government's continued denial of its censorship efforts. The decision-making process does not appear to be centrally controlled. Thus, various governmental entities, along with the Information Network Security Agency (INSA) and Ethio Telecom, seem to be implementing their own lists, contributing to the phenomenon of inconsistent blocking.

The increased repression in 2011 against journalists working in traditional media as well as against a number of bloggers has generated a chilling effect in the online sphere. Few Ethiopian journalists work for both domestic print media and as correspondents for overseas online outlets, as this could draw negative repercussions. Many bloggers publish anonymously to avoid reprisals.

In addition to censorship, the authorities use regime apologists, paid commentators, and pro-government websites to proactively manipulate the online news and information landscape. Acrimonious exchanges between a small number of apologist websites and a wide array of diaspora critics and opposition forces have become common in online political debates. Lack of adequate funding represents another challenge for independent online media, as fear of government pressure dissuades Ethiopian businesses from advertising with politically critical websites.

Regime critics and opposition forces in the diaspora increasingly use the internet as a platform for political debate and an indirect avenue for providing information to local newspapers. However, given the low internet penetration rate, the domestic Ethiopian blogosphere is still in its infancy. Blogging initially blossomed during the period surrounding the 2005 parliamentary elections and the subsequent clampdown on independent newspapers. This growth has slowed somewhat since 2007, when the government instituted a blanket block on the domain names of two popular blog-hosting websites, Blogger and Nazret.com. Some political commentators use proxy servers and anonymizing tools to hide their identities when publishing online and to circumvent filtering. Among general internet

⁴⁸ Based on an interview with individuals working in the telecom sector who requested to remain anonymous, as well as a test conducted by a Freedom House consultant who found it was not possible for an ordinary user to send out a bulk text message.

users, however, circumvention tools are rarely employed, and most people simply forego accessing websites that are blocked.⁴⁹

Over the past two years, the use of social-networking sites, most notably Facebook, as platforms for political deliberation, social justice campaigns, and information sharing has gained momentum. For example, in March 2012 some activists used social media to launch campaigns on behalf of Ethiopian female domestic workers working in the Middle East who were being abused.⁵⁰ Nevertheless, many civil society groups based in the country are wary of mobilizing against the government. In February 2011, opposition activists launched the Facebook group “Beka!” (Enough!) calling for a “day of rage” and anti-government protests to be held on May 28. The intention was to have a counter demonstration the same day as a government-sponsored rally celebrating the anniversary of Prime Minister Meles Zenawi’s rule. No protest materialized, however.⁵¹ This appeared to be because the calls for protest were mostly coming from the Ethiopian diaspora rather than from within the country, as those inside Ethiopia still harbored fear from the bloody crackdown on opposition demonstrations after the 2005 elections and from the most recent round of opposition activist arrests in April 2011 (see “Violations of User Rights”).⁵²

VIOLATIONS OF USER RIGHTS

Over the course of 2011 and through mid-2012, the Ethiopian government’s already poor treatment of journalists and internet users deteriorated dramatically. A systematic crackdown and series of prosecutions, including over eight Ethiopian journalists and two Swedish reporters, caused many journalists to flee into exile, stripping the country of its last remaining independent voices.⁵³ In 2011, such repression spread for the first time against bloggers and internet users, with several arrests and at least one prosecution reported.

⁴⁹ Interview with an Ethiopian blogger and political commentator, August 8, 2010.

⁵⁰ Endalk, “Ethiopia: Netizens Take Campaign for Shweya Mullah Online,” *Global Voices*, October 13, 2011, <http://globalvoicesonline.org/2011/10/13/ethiopia-netizens-take-campaign-for-shweya-mullah-online/>; Endalk, “Ethiopia: Outrage Over Abuse of Ethiopian Domestic Worker in Lebanon,” *Global Voices*, March 12, 2012, <http://globalvoicesonline.org/2012/03/12/ethiopia-outrage-over-abuse-of-ethiopian-domestic-worker-in-lebanon/>.

⁵¹ “What happens on facebook remains on facebook: The “Beka” revolution evangelists on facebook revisited,” Endalks’ Blog, June 24, 2011, <http://endalk.wordpress.com/2011/06/24/what-happens-on-facebook-remains-on-facebook-the-%E2%80%9Cbeka%E2%80%9D-revolution-evangelists-on-facebook-revisited>.

⁵² Jawar Mohammed, “Nonviolent Struggle: Ethiopian Exceptionalism?” *Democracy: Liberty, Security, & Prosperity* (blog), February 27, 2011, <http://dhummuugaa.wordpress.com/2011/02/27/nonviolent-struggle-ethiopian-exceptionalism-2/>; David Smith, “Ethiopia ‘day of rage’ hopes to oust Meles Zenawi from power”; Eskinder Nega, “Understanding the absence of Ethiopia’s ‘day of rage,’” *Gasha for Ethiopians*, June 3, 2011, <http://www.ethiopianguasha.org/tmp/EskinderNega3June2011.html>; David Shinn, “Revolutionary Winds from North to South of the Sahara: Wishful Thinking?” *East Africa Forum*, June 13, 2011, <http://www.eastafricaforum.net/2011/06/13/prof-david-shinn-revolutionary-winds-from-north-to-south-of-the-sahara-wishful-thinking/>.

⁵³ “Ethiopia: Crackdown ‘A Threat to Democracy,’” *AllAfrica.com*, December 1, 2011, <http://allafrica.com/stories/201112020788.html>.

Constitutional provisions guarantee freedom of expression and media freedom.⁵⁴ Nevertheless, in recent years the government has adopted laws—namely the Mass Media and Freedom of Information Proclamation and the Anti-Terrorism Proclamation—that restrict free expression.⁵⁵ According to Human Rights Watch, the 2008 Mass Media and Freedom of Information Proclamation has some positive aspects, such as a ban on the pretrial detention of journalists. However, it also introduced crippling fines, licensing restrictions for establishing a media outlet, a clause permitting only Ethiopian nationals to establish mass media outlets, and powers allowing the government to impound periodical publications.⁵⁶ A criminal code that came into force in May 2005 provides for “special criminal liability of the author, originator or publisher” when writings are deemed to be linked to offenses such as treason, espionage, or incitement; in such instances, the penalty may be life imprisonment or death.⁵⁷ Also under the criminal code, publication of a “false rumor” is punishable by up to three years in prison.⁵⁸

In 2009, the government enacted the Anti-Terrorism Proclamation, which includes an overly broad definition of terrorism that gives the authorities wide discretion when suppressing nonviolent dissent. Under the legislation, publication of a statement that is likely to be understood as a direct or indirect encouragement of terrorism is punishable by up to 20 years in prison.⁵⁹ In 2011, the authorities made extensive use of this law to prosecute a number of individuals who had criticized the government both online and offline, or who had reported on the activities of Ginbot 7, a banned opposition political party that the government has declared a terrorist group. The crackdown generated a notable chilling effect and international condemnation. In September 2011, the well-known dissident blogger Eskinder Nega⁶⁰ was arrested on terrorism charges shortly after publishing an online column calling for greater political freedom and criticizing the use of the Anti-Terrorism Proclamation to silence political dissent.⁶¹ Nega was put on trial in March 2012,

⁵⁴ “Constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, Article 29,” Parliament of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, accessed August 24, 2010, <http://www.ethiopar.net/>.

⁵⁵ Human Rights Watch, *Analysis of Ethiopia’s Draft Anti-Terrorism Law* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2009), <http://www.hrw.org/en/news/2009/06/30/analysis-ethiopia-s-draft-anti-terrorism-law>.

⁵⁶ “Freedom of the Mass Media and Access to Information Proclamation No. 590/2008,” *Federal Negarit Gazeta* No. 64, December 4, 2008.

⁵⁷ International Labour Organization, “The Criminal Code of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, Proclamation No. 414/2004, Article 44,” accessed August 24, 2010, <http://www.ilo.org/dyn/natlex/docs/ELECTRONIC/70993/75092/F1429731028/ETH70993.pdf>.

⁵⁸ International Labour Organization, “The Criminal Code of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, Proclamation No. 414/2004, Articles 485 and 486,” accessed August 24, 2010, <http://www.ilo.org/dyn/natlex/docs/ELECTRONIC/70993/75092/F1429731028/ETH70993.pdf>.

⁵⁹ “Anti-Terrorism Proclamation No. 652/2009,” *Federal Negarit Gazeta* No. 57, August 28, 2009.

⁶⁰ Nega is also the 2011 recipient of the PEN/Barbara Goldsmith Freedom to Write Award. Sarah Hoffman, “That Bravest and Most Admirable of Writers: PEN Salutes Eskinder Nega,” PEN American Center (blog), April 13, 2012, <http://www.pen.org/blog/?p=11198>.

⁶¹ Endalk, “Ethiopia: Freedom of Expression in Jeopardy,” *Global Voices*, February 3, 2012, <http://advocacy.globalvoicesonline.org/2012/02/03/ethiopia-freedom-of-expression-in-jeopardy/>.

found guilty of terrorism in July, and sentenced to 18 years in prison.⁶² In January 2012, Elias Kifle, editor of the U.S. based Ethiopian Review website known for its fierce criticism of Prime Minister Zenawi, was sentenced in absentia to life imprisonment.⁶³ In a lower-profile case, two youth were arrested on charges of terrorism in August 2011 while using the internet in an Addis Ababa cybercafe, likely to visit opposition websites; according to unconfirmed reports, they were later released.⁶⁴

Government surveillance of online and mobile phone communications is a concern in Ethiopia, though there is a lack of concrete evidence as to the scale of such practices. In a series of trials of journalists and bloggers throughout 2011 and early 2012, government prosecutors have presented intercepted emails and phone calls between the journalists as evidence.⁶⁵ Upon purchasing a mobile phone, individuals are asked to register their SIM card with their full name, address, and government-issued identification number. Internet subscription account holders also are required to register their personal details, including their home addresses, with the government.

For a period following the 2005 elections, cybercafe owners were required to keep a register of their clients, but this requirement has not been implemented since mid-2010. Nevertheless, there are strong suspicions that cybercafes are required to install software to monitor user activity, which arose after a few incidents were reported of users getting arrested while leaving internet cafes in 2011. The arrests were followed by government warnings that “visiting anti-peace websites using proxy servers is a crime.”⁶⁶ The use of such monitoring software remains unconfirmed.

The key government body involved in surveillance is the Information Network Security Agency (INSA),⁶⁷ which is suspected of engaging in internet filtering and email monitoring.⁶⁸ There have also been reports of the government using technology obtained from the Chinese authorities to monitor phone lines and various types of online

⁶² Markos Lemma, “Ethiopia: Online Reactions to Prison Sentence for Dissident Blogger,” Global Voices, July 15, 2012, <http://globalvoicesonline.org/2012/07/15/ethiopia-online-reactions-to-prison-sentence-for-dissident-blogger/>.

⁶³ “Ethiopia Sentences 3 Journalists to Long Prison Terms,” Voice of America News, January 26, 2012, <http://www.voanews.com/english/news/africa/Ethiopia-Sentences-3-Journalists-to-Long-Prison-Terms-138214754.html>.

⁶⁴ “Ethiopia: Crackdown in Addis Ababa Internet Cafes, Two arrested on Tuesday,” *Addis Neger*, August 12, 2011, <http://addisnegeronline.com/2011/08/crackdown-in-addis-ababa-internet-cafes-two-arrested-on-tuesday/>.

⁶⁵ “Ethiopian blogger, journalists convicted of terrorism,” Committee to Protect Journalists, January 19, 2012, <http://cpj.org/2012/01/three-journalists-convicted-on-terrorism-charges-i.php>.

⁶⁶ “TPLF regime Arresting Internet Café Users in Addis Ababa,” Ethiopian Review, August 12, 2011, <http://www.ethiopianreview.com/forum/viewtopic.php?f=2&t=30136>.

⁶⁷ “Mission Statement,” Information Network Security Agency of Ethiopia, accessed June 2, 2010, <http://www.insa.gov.et/INSA/faces/welcomeJSF.jsp>.

⁶⁸ Chris Forrester, “... While Ethiopia Starts Jamming,” Rapid TV News, June 23, 2010, <http://www.rapidtvnews.com/index.php/201006236926/while-ethiopia-starts-jamming.html>.

communication.⁶⁹ According to internal sources working in the industry, INSA is currently testing tools that will enable its officials to mask their identities to acquire user information such as usernames and passwords, which could lead to full-fledged phishing attacks against government opponents in the future.⁷⁰ To date, cyberattacks and other forms of technical violence have not been a serious problem in Ethiopia, partly due to the limited number of users.

While it has been common for traditional media journalists in Ethiopia to face considerable harassment and intimidation, leading several to flee the country, prior to 2011 such threats did not affect online activists and bloggers. With the 2011 crackdown against online journalists such as Eskinder Nega, however, dissident bloggers and netizens are beginning to experience increasing levels of intimidation for their work.

⁶⁹ Helen Epstein, "Cruel Ethiopia," *New York Review of Books*, May 13, 2010, <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2010/may/13/cruel-ethiopia/>.

⁷⁰ Interview with individuals working in the technology and security sector in Ethiopia, who requested to remain anonymous, January 2012.