



AFRICAN FREEDOM  
OF EXPRESSION  
EXCHANGE (AFEX)

# Internet Freedom in Ethiopia

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## 1.0 Introduction

In the age of rapid digital expansion, internet freedom holds immense significance in shaping societies and empowering individuals. Within Ethiopia, a nation experiencing significant growth in digital connectivity, the topic of internet freedom has garnered substantial attention.

Internet freedom will enable Ethiopians to access an array of information, including news, educational resources, research materials, and global perspectives. It has offered an avenue for individuals to expand their knowledge, stay informed, and engage in continuous learning. Internet freedom has empowered Ethiopians to freely express their opinions, share their thoughts, and engage in public discourse. This fosters a culture of open dialogue, encourages diverse viewpoints, and contributes to a vibrant democratic society. An open and free internet enables economic growth and entrepreneurship as it provides a platform for businesses to reach customers, market products and services. Internet freedom fuels innovation, fosters digital entrepreneurship, and contributes to job creation and economic empowerment.

The internet plays a crucial role in connecting people, bridging distances, and fostering social development. Internet freedom in Ethiopia will thus facilitate communication, allow individuals to maintain relationships, and enable participation in social networks. It will enhance access to healthcare information, educational resources, and other social services. Internet freedom has the potential to amplify the voices of marginalized communities in Ethiopia and enable them to share their experiences, advocate for their rights, and promote social inclusion. It provides a platform for underrepresented groups to express themselves, seek support, and advocate for change.

The KeepItOn Coalition, a global network of over 300 human rights organizations from 105 countries working to end internet shutdowns, have appealed to all relevant authorities to take the needed steps to ensure that the people of Ethiopia have unconstrained access to the internet and digital communications platforms at all times. They cautioned against the continued weaponization of internet shutdowns in Ethiopia, most especially in the regions of Tigray and Amhara. They also advised that open, secure, reliable, and available internet is crucial to ensuring and protecting human rights, as well as safeguarding safety during difficulties and wars.

Ethiopia is one of the most restrictive nations in the world when it comes to internet usage. The government controls the country's telecommunications infrastructure, enabling it to shut down or limit information streams and access to internet and mobile phone services.

The war in Ethiopia has resulted in not only the loss of lives and mass destructions but also losses in revenues of businesses to the tune of \$146 Million in 2022 due to the

internet shutdown in the Tigray region<sup>1</sup> even after a treaty was signed a year ago to end two years of conflict.

Furthermore, an open and free internet will foster Ethiopian government transparency and accountability. It will allow its citizens to access information about public policies, government actions, and public expenditures. Internet freedom enables citizen journalism and provides a means for holding public officials accountable for their actions.

This report delves into the current state of internet freedom in Ethiopia, highlights the challenges it encounters, and explores opportunities for cultivating a more open and inclusive digital environment.

## 2. The Ethiopian Internet Freedom Environment

The general environment of internet freedom in Ethiopia is characterized by a combination of progress and challenges. While there have been notable developments in terms of increased internet access and connectivity, there are still significant concerns regarding restrictions on freedom of expression and access to information. The general overview of the environment of internet freedom in Ethiopia include but not limited to access to the internet, digital divide, government control and censorship, internet shutdowns, social media and online speech, online surveillance and privacy etc.

Ethiopia has witnessed an expansion in internet access in recent years, with increased availability of mobile internet services and the deployment of fiber-optic infrastructure. As of 2021, Ethiopia had relatively low internet penetration rate compared to global standards. The International Telecommunication Union reported that only around 22% of the Ethiopian population had access to the internet. However, internet penetration rates remain relatively low compared to some other countries, and rural areas still face significant challenges in terms of connectivity and affordability.

There is a digital divide between urban and rural areas in Ethiopia. Urban centers tend to have better internet infrastructure and higher levels of connectivity, while rural areas experience limited access and connectivity gaps.<sup>2</sup> Bridging this divide and ensuring equal access to the internet for all Ethiopians remains a significant challenge.

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<sup>1</sup> Internet shutdowns cost Ethiopia \$146 million in 2022, Quartz, <https://qz.com/ethiopia-lost-146-million-due-to-internet-blackouts-1849978475>

<sup>2</sup> COVID-19, Distance Learning and Educational Inequality in Rural Ethiopia available at <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1275420.pdf>

The Ethiopian government exercises significant control over the internet and online content. There have been instances of website blocking, content filtering, and restrictions on social media platforms during times of political unrest or elections.<sup>3</sup> These actions have led to concerns about censorship and limitations on freedom of expression.

These shutdowns involve deliberate disruptions or restrictions of internet access across the country, severely impacting communication, access to information, and the exercise of digital rights.

Social media platforms have gained popularity in Ethiopia, creating spaces for individuals to express their opinions and engage in online discussions. However, there have been instances of arrests and harassment of individuals for their online activities, including critical political speech. Such actions can create a chilling effect on freedom of expression and online discourse.

Concerns exist about surveillance practices and the protection of individuals' privacy rights. The Ethiopian government has been known to utilize surveillance tools, content filtering mechanisms, and interception of communications. The lack of clear legal frameworks for data protection and privacy exacerbate these concerns.

There is an emerging digital rights advocacy movement in Ethiopia, with civil society organizations, activists, and human rights defenders advocating for greater internet freedom and the protection of digital rights. These efforts aim to raise awareness, challenge restrictive policies, and promote an open and inclusive digital environment.

In summary, while Ethiopia has witnessed advancements in internet access and infrastructure, there are challenges regarding freedom of expression, access to information, and privacy. The government's control over online content, instances of internet shutdowns, and limited protections for digital rights highlight the need for continued advocacy, policy reforms, and international collaboration to promote and protect internet freedom in Ethiopia.

### **3. The Legal and Regulatory Environment**

The Ethiopian Constitution guarantees freedom of expression, freedom of the press, and the right to information. These provisions form the basis for protecting internet freedom, although their interpretation and implementation may vary.

The 2009 Anti-Terrorism Proclamation, while primarily aimed at combating terrorism, contains provisions that have been criticized for their potential to limit freedom of

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.accessnow.org/press-release/ethiopia-social-media-protest/>

expression. The broad language and vague definitions in the law can be interpreted in a manner that restricts online speech and imposes harsh penalties for dissent.

The 2016 Computer Crime Proclamation criminalizes various computer-related offenses, such as unauthorized access, interception of data, and dissemination of false information. While intended to address cybercrime, concerns have been raised about its potential for misuse and impact on freedom of expression online.<sup>4</sup>

The 2021 Hate Speech and Disinformation Prevention and Suppression Proclamation is a recent law which aims to combat hate speech and disinformation. While addressing legitimate concerns, there is a need to ensure that its implementation does not unduly restrict freedom of expression or lead to censorship.

It is important to note that interpretations and implementation of these laws can vary, and the legal landscape surrounding internet freedom in Ethiopia continues to evolve. There is a need for ongoing efforts to strike the right balance between protecting national security interests and upholding fundamental rights and freedoms, including freedom of expression, privacy, and access to information.

Ethiopia has employed content filtering mechanisms and surveillance tools, ostensibly for national security reasons. However, the lack of transparency and accountability surrounding these practices raises concern about potential abuses and their impact on internet freedom.

Currently, Ethiopia does not have a comprehensive data protection legislation. The absence of specific laws addressing data privacy and security leaves individuals vulnerable to potential misuse of their personal information.

Furthermore, the Ethiopian government regulates Internet Service Providers. Internet Service Providers are required to obtain licenses, and there have been instances of government-directed internet shutdowns during times of political unrest or elections, limiting access to information and stifling freedom of expression.

Promoting a legal environment that respects and safeguards internet freedom requires a clear, balanced, and rights-respecting legislation. Efforts to review and revise existing laws and regulations to align with international standards can play a crucial role in ensuring that internet freedom is protected and upheld in Ethiopia.

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<sup>4</sup> Some Remarks on Ethiopia's New Cybercrime Legislation available at <https://www.ajol.info/index.php/mlr/article/view/153608>

## 4. Factors Hindering Internet Freedom in Ethiopia

Internet freedom in Ethiopia faces several major challenges. These challenges can impede access to information, limit freedom of expression, and hinder the development of an open and inclusive digital environment. Here are some of the key challenges:

### *Internet Shutdowns*

Ethiopia has experienced instances of internet shutdowns during times of political unrest or elections. These shutdowns, while aimed at controlling the flow of information, effectively limit access to crucial updates and stifle freedom of expression.

The harshest shutdowns to date occurred in the regions of Amhara in 2019 and Oromia in 2020. Both went on for weeks, and NetBlocks has estimated a loss of \$4.5 million for each day the country's Internet was cut.

Internet blackouts have a profound impact on communication, commerce, and civil liberties. For instance, it had been sixty (60) days since Facebook, Messenger, Telegram, YouTube and TikTok were blocked in Ethiopia without any legal basis on February 11, 2023. Many international organizations called on the government to restore access to the social media websites. Amnesty International for example, in March 2023 called on Ethiopian authorities to restore access to the blocked social media platforms.<sup>5</sup> In the statement, Amnesty said the blockade clearly violated rights to freedom of expression and access to information and “further stains the country’s already dismal record on media freedom”. It further urged the Ethiopian authorities to restore access to the platforms without delay and to end the culture of interfering with people’s right to express themselves.

The Ethiopian government has frequently demonstrated that it uses partial and complete internet shutdowns as an approach to clampdown on protests and prevent conflict. However, this practice is unsustainable and as noted earlier, a human rights violation. The shutdowns are without legal backing allowing the government to violate the rule of law and accountability.

### *Limited Access and Connectivity*

Despite notable progress in recent years, internet penetration remains relatively low in Ethiopia, especially in rural areas. High cost of internet, infrastructure limitations, limited connectivity and a lack of digital literacy hinder widespread access to the internet, and impedes the realization of its transformative benefits for all Ethiopians. For instance, internet users in Ethiopia in January 2023 were 20.86 million and internet penetration rate stood at 16.7% at the beginning of 2023. For a total population of 124.9

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<sup>5</sup> Rights group Amnesty calls on Ethiopia to end social media blackout  
Available at <https://www.rfi.fr/en/africa/20230310-rights-group-amnesty-calls-on-ethiopia-to-end-social-media-blackout>

million people, this reveals that 83.30% of the population were offline at the beginning of 2023 which indicates that a significant portion of the population do not have internet access. Meanwhile, 30.7% of the country's total internet user base used at least one social media platform in January 2023, with the overall gender split among social media users at 34.1% female and 65.9% male in Ethiopia. The cost of one gigabyte of mobile internet in Ethiopia costs, on average, one U.S. dollar in 2022 which ranked Ethiopia 73 in 233 countries worldwide, from the cheapest to the most expensive for mobile data. <sup>6</sup>

### ***Government Control and Censorship***

The Ethiopian government exercises significant control over the internet and online content. One major aspect of government control in Ethiopia is the monopoly of the state-owned Ethiopian Telecommunications Corporation (ETC) over the telecommunications sector.

This monopoly allows the government to exercise significant control over internet infrastructure and service provision.

The government has consequently implemented various measures to control and monitor online activities, often leading to restrictions on freedom of expression, access to information, and privacy concerns.

Aside internet shutdowns and deliberate disruptions/restrictions of social media platforms during periods of civil unrest or political tension, the government actively filters and blocks websites and online news outlets that are critical of the government or promote dissenting views. Independent media outlets and opposition voices often face suppression, leading to limited access to diverse sources of information. Surveillance of internet users is widespread in Ethiopia. The government employs sophisticated technologies to monitor online communications and identify dissidents most often under the pretext of protecting national security. This surveillance creates a climate of fear and self-censorship among internet users.

These practices raise concerns about the curtailment of freedom of expression and the infringement on individuals' privacy rights. Again, the 2009 Anti-Terrorism Proclamation and the 2016 Computer Crime Proclamation provide legal grounds for the government to stifle online activism and suppress freedom of expression. These laws have been used to arrest and prosecute individuals for their online activities, including social media posts and online discussions.

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<sup>6</sup> Digital Ethiopia 2023 available at <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2023-ethiopia>

Unlocking Ethiopia's potential: A look at the Country's Booming ICT Industry available at <https://www.telecomreviewafrica.com/en/articles/features/3380-unlocking-ethiopia-s-potential-a-look-at-the-country-s-booming-ict-industry>



### *Legal Framework*

The legal framework pertaining to internet freedom in Ethiopia requires both further development and clarification. Some laws, like the Anti-Terrorism Proclamation (2009) and the Computer Crime Proclamation (2016), contain provisions with broad and open-ended definitions. These provisions leave room for interpretations that may limit freedom of expression. Additionally, the absence of a comprehensive data protection legislation raises concerns about the privacy and security of personal data. This regulatory gap underscores the need for more specific and robust legal safeguards in the digital space. With regards to the Anti-Terrorism Proclamation (2009) provision, the proclamation's definition of terrorism is broad and includes acts that could be interpreted as political dissent or peaceful activism. This ambiguity can be used to suppress freedom of expression and assembly. Also, the law criminalizes providing support or encouragement to terrorism, but the definition of "support" is not clearly defined, leaving room for subjective interpretation.

Additionally, the Computer Crime Proclamation (2016) provision under distribution of false information, criminalizes the distribution of false information but it does not clearly define what constitutes "false information". This lack of clarity can lead to the restriction of online speech that is critical of the government or other authorities.

Lastly, the definition of Hate Speech and Disinformation Prevention and Suppression Proclamation (2021) law seeks to combat hate speech and disinformation, but the definitions of these terms are subjective and open to interpretation. This can potentially result in restrictions on legitimate expression and dissent.

These provisions have been criticized for their vague language, which can be exploited to stifle freedom of expression and limit open discussions on political, social, and cultural issues. The ambiguity in these laws underscores the need for greater clarity and precision to ensure that they do not unduly infringe upon individuals' rights to freedom of expression and information.

### *Social and Cultural Factors*

Social and cultural factors significantly influence people's use of the internet in Ethiopia. Societal norms, cultural sensitivities, and political dynamics can contribute to self-censorship and limitations on online expression.<sup>7</sup> The influence of social and cultural factors on people's use of the internet in Ethiopia is the prevalence of self-censorship among individuals due to societal norms and government restrictions. For instance, many Ethiopians are aware of the government's surveillance and strict online content regulations, and may choose to refrain from expressing certain opinions or discussing sensitive topics online to avoid potential consequences. This form of self-censorship is influenced by cultural values that prioritize avoiding conflict and maintaining harmony within the community as well as a fear of repercussions for expressing dissenting views. These factors can create an environment where

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<sup>7</sup> The paradox of social media and Ethiopian politics available at <https://firstmonday.org/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/10862/10498>



individuals may feel hesitant to engage in open dialogue or express dissenting opinions.

## **4. Conclusion and Recommendations**

Addressing these aforementioned challenges requires concerted efforts from various stakeholders, including the government, civil society organizations, and international partners. Policy reforms, advocacy for digital rights, investment in infrastructure and digital literacy programs, and fostering open dialogue on internet freedom are crucial for overcoming these challenges and promoting a more open and inclusive digital environment in Ethiopia.

To promote internet freedom in Ethiopia, the following recommendations can be considered:

### **Government**

Ethiopia can pursue policy reforms by updating and revising existing laws and regulations to align with international standards and also advocate for the development of comprehensive legislation that protects digital rights and ensures transparency in the implementation of internet policies. Government can achieve this by enacting and enforcing legislation that protects freedom of expression and access to information online, establishing an independent regulatory body to oversee the telecommunications sector and ensuring fair competition and promoting transparency in internet censorship practices and engaging in regular dialogue with civil society. This approach can provide a solid foundation for promoting internet freedom while simultaneously addressing legitimate national security concerns.

Additionally, it is recommended that the government creates an enabling environment by investing and strengthening the infrastructure and accessibility, promoting digital literacy programs, and reducing the cost of internet access are essential steps toward expanding connectivity and bridging the digital divide. By ensuring that all Ethiopians have the opportunity to participate in the digital realm, the nation can harness the full potential of internet-driven opportunities.

Furthermore, it is suggested to the Ethiopian government that providing support to civil society organizations, human rights groups, and media outlets that advocate for internet freedom and digital rights is very crucial. Government is encouraged to strengthen their capacity to document and report on internet censorship, surveillance, and violations to raise awareness and mobilize action.

### **Civil Society**

Civil society should continue to advocate for digital rights and internet freedom through awareness campaigns and education programs, providing legal support for

individuals and organizations facing internet censorship or harassment and collaborating with international organizations to document and report on violations of internet freedom in Ethiopia.

### **International Community**

International pressure and collaboration can encourage the Ethiopian government to address concerns and adhere to international human rights standards. Collaborating with global experts and sharing best practices can provide valuable insights, expertise, and support for Ethiopia's efforts in safeguarding digital rights.

### **Telecommunication Companies**

Lastly, it is highly recommended that encouraging digital innovation and entrepreneurship will promote internet freedom and foster an environment that supports digital innovation and entrepreneurship. This involves promoting initiatives that encourage the development of local digital platforms, applications, and services that respect user privacy and contribute to the growth of the digital economy. By implementing these recommendations, it is possible to foster an environment that upholds internet freedom, facilitates access, and respects digital rights in Ethiopia.

In conclusion, internet freedom stands as a crucial aspect of promoting democratic values, facilitating economic growth, and driving social development within Ethiopia. By addressing the challenges outlined above and embracing the opportunities for reform, the nation can create an environment that fosters digital rights, innovation, and inclusive access to information. Collective efforts, both domestically and through international collaboration, can pave the way for a more open, free, and inclusive digital future for all Ethiopians.

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