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Ethiopia Digital Rights Landscape Report

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Ethiopia Digital Rights Landscape Report

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This report is part of 'Digital Rights in Closing Civic Space: Lessons from Ten African Countries'; the Introduction is also recommended reading.

1. Introduction

Ethiopia is a country of many paradoxes. It has some of the lowest levels of internet penetration in the world, yet applies some of the severest measures for surveilling and censoring online communication (HRW 2014). It has charted new avenues of collaboration with emerging donors, especially China, but also continues to be Africa's largest recipient of development aid from traditional Western donors (Fourie 2015; Gagliardone 2019). Ethiopia has championed uses of information and communication technologies (ICTs) that have later been adopted elsewhere in Africa, from videoconferencing for government communication to commodities exchanges, and yet it is considered backward when it comes to digital innovation (Rashid 2015).

The Ethiopian government, led since 1991 by the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) coalition, has developed a distinctive approach towards digital media in Africa. Defending its monopoly of telecommunications, while almost all other countries on the continent liberalised their markets, the government sought to balance developmental opportunities offered by ICTs with their destabilising potential – with mixed results. On the one hand, through support from the Export-Import Bank of China (Exim Bank) and telecom giants ZTE and Huawei, it managed to expand access without competition. Its tight control of digital space enabled the government to enforce drastic measures to curb dissent, including pervasive censorship and surveillance, and internet shutdowns in moments of crisis (Dahir 2016; Marchant and Stremlau 2020).

And yet, Ethiopian citizens displayed significant abilities in making use of digital media to mobilise and challenge the government: first in 2005, in the aftermath of the only contested elections in the country; and later in the sustained waves of protests that emerged first in the Oromia region, then spread to other corners of the country, ultimately leading to a significant change in the balance of power, with the appointment of the first prime minister of Oromo descent, Abiy Ahmed.

The new prime minister initiated a significant process of reform, freeing imprisoned journalists and activists, and allowing greater freedoms to opposition parties and media outlets. Ongoing transformations, however, have created new tensions, leading to another wave of protests in 2020

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and to the resurgence of older forms of repression, including internet shutdowns and imprisonments. These left Ethiopia at a crossroads between normalising of the relationship between the government and oppositional forces, or continuing the authoritarian rule that had characterised the country for more than two decades. The civil war that erupted in November 2020, between the central government in Addis Ababa, and the Tigrayan People's Liberation Front (TPLF), once the dominant force within the EPRDF coalition, represents a tragic turn in the process of transformation initiated by Abiy Ahmed, and has had significant repercussions on online debates among Ethiopians in Ethiopia and in the diaspora, leading to a polarisation among opposing factions (Wilmot 2020).

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2. Political landscape

The Ethiopian government's approach to digital media has to be located in the longer history of the relationship with opposition politics and traditional media, and what can be considered the 'original sin' in the contemporary history of communication in Ethiopia: the fact that when the new leaders came to power, after two decades of civil war, they opened the space for debate but refused to engage with the very debates they had allowed to bloom (Gagliardone 2014b).

In the early 1990s, the EPRDF had to show it was different from its oppressive predecessors. In the ostensibly unipolar world that emerged after the fall of the Soviet Union, the pressure to respect certain rights and freedoms was significant and freer media represented an opportunity to boost the new government's international legitimacy (Stremlau 2011). At the domestic level, liberalisation of the press also helped signal to a population traumatised by decades of war that a new breed of rulers was now in power.

The Transitional Government of Ethiopia, which was established to write a new constitution and build the foundations for a new Ethiopian state, soon created the conditions for the first private newspapers to start publishing and later spelled out their rights in the relatively progressive press law passed in 1992. However, these measures were to be undermined by the EPRDF's lack of commitment to the freedoms it had allowed, and its failure to understand what it really meant to allow a plurality of voices to compete in a post-war scenario.

The criticism in the private press took on an increasingly adversarial tone, but the EPRDF leadership stuck to its policy, ignoring dissenting voices and labelling them as 'anti-peace' and 'anti-constitution'. This stemmed from a belief that those writing for the private press were not part of the EPRDF's constituency in any case, so there was little need to expend political capital either repressing or engaging them (*ibid.*). Over time, however, the trading of accusations and the inability of opposing factions to command each other's attention progressively poisoned the debate in ways that would have repercussions beyond the press.

When the internet started to be employed as a space to discuss Ethiopian politics, debates were rapidly captured by the polarised tones that had characterised the press. Platforms such as Ethiopian Review, Nazret and Ethiomedia, all launched by Ethiopians in the diaspora, hosted articles that equally could have appeared in the newspapers printed in Addis Ababa. Indeed, from the very beginning it became common to find references and connections between online and printed articles.

The new media, rather than being seized by a new generation of leaders and advocates as an opportunity to test innovative ideas, were largely captured by 'old politics'. Instead of debating new issues, as occurred in nearby Kenya, authors returned to old grievances that had their roots in the 1960s and 1970s when the movements challenging Emperor Haile Selassie, and later the Derg military dictatorship, started to appear. While some middle ground did emerge, both online and offline, the discussions the more moderate outlets promoted tended to remain in the background and were unable to galvanise or mobilise passions and political energy in the same way as more extreme pieces that polarised debate.

The early 2000s represented a moment of transition, when the EPRDF, still allowing oppositional forces to voice their criticism, sought ways to develop a more aggressive strategy to seize the opportunities offered by digital media. In 2001, the prime minister, Meles Zenawi, emerged from the split within the EPRDF that followed the two-year war with Eritrea with his leadership called into question. He responded by launching an ambitious project to reinforce the state. The institutional connections between the centre and the peripheries were strengthened and the state was reformed to function as a more active player in social and economic renewal. Digital media came to play a central role in this strategy of transformation and capacity building.

This time, rather than hastily adopting a policy it could not master, or refusing to adopt a technology for fear of its destabilising potential, the government closely connected its strategy in the ICT sector to the principles on which its larger political project was based; in particular, the ideas of revolutionary democracy, ethnic federalism and the developmental state (Bach 2011; Abbink 2011b).

The concepts of revolutionary democracy and ethnic federalism emerged during the guerrilla war waged against the Derg, which was initially fought in the name of the right to self-determination for the people of Tigray, but later expanded in scope to include the goal of national liberation. Once the guerrilla fighters came to power, the ideology of ethnic federalism was used to reframe Ethiopia, no longer as a unitary nation but as a federation of ethnicities, which at least on paper were all entitled to the same right to self-determination. By connecting the Tigrayan minority to other oppressed groups and offering them, at least in principle, the opportunity to participate in the re-founding of the nation, the EPRDF presented its *de facto* capture of the state as a victory for all marginalised groups.

Ethnicity emerged as both a means and an end. It served as an operational principle for the redistribution of resources to those recognised as separate ethnic groups, but the provision of material benefits along ethnic lines was also aimed at convincing people on the ground that it was in their interests

to be recognised as ethnically diverse. By building the state and creating new institutions and new rules for citizens to relate to central and local authority and claim their rights, the EPRDF aimed to be building the nation, offering new categories and ideational referents for Ethiopians to think of themselves as citizens (Aalen 2006; Pausewang, Tronvoll and Aalen 2002).

The concept of revolutionary democracy also emerged during the struggle in the bush, but its definition continued to evolve after the EPRDF came to power. Revolutionary democracy rejects the focus on the individual that characterises liberal democracy, preferring to stress group rights and consensus. It favours a populist discourse, claiming a direct connection between the leadership and the masses, bypassing the need to negotiate with other elites that advance competing ideas of the nation state and the role different groups have within it (Bach 2011; Hagmann and Abbink 2011). Through the contribution of Meles Zenawi himself, new concepts were progressively added to the core tenets of ethnic federalism and revolutionary democracy, borrowed largely, but selectively, from the models of the developmental state; and stressing in particular the importance of state stability and the role of a determined developmental elite in supporting economic performance and avoiding rent-seeking (Fisher and Anderson 2015).

At the turn of the millennium, various large-scale projects sought to implement these principles on the ground, becoming their technological embodiments. Woredanet and Schoolnet – an e-government and e-learning project, respectively – used digital media to sustain a complex process of state and nation building. Woredanet, which stands for 'network of district [*woreda*] administrations' employs the same protocol that the internet is based upon. But rather than allowing individuals to independently seek information and express their opinions, it enabled ministers and cadres in Addis Ababa to videoconference with regional and *woreda* offices, and instruct them on what they should be doing and how. Schoolnet uses a similar architecture to stream pre-recorded classes for a variety of subjects, from mathematics to civics, to all secondary schools in the country, while also offering political education to schoolteachers and other government officials.[1]

The faith in this complex process of state and nation building, the roll-out of large-scale projects, and their combined ability to create a stronger connection between the political vanguard and Ethiopian citizens, were among the reasons that convinced the Ethiopian government to allow the first contested elections to take place in 2005. Prior to this, elections in Ethiopia had mostly been held for the EPRDF to reaffirm its control over the country and for external consumption, rather than to provide a real opportunity for political competition (Abbink 2011a).

1   For more information on these systems, see Gagliardone (2014a, 2016).

The results of this political gamble, however, were unexpected. After election day, when the EPRDF realised it had suffered greater losses than it was ready to accept and people started protesting over the delay in issuing the results (Carter Center 2005), government repression led to the imprisonment of most political leaders, and the censoring of some of the communication channels that had been used to support mass mobilisation (see section 4). As the EPRDF closed avenues for popular protest and forcefully consolidated power, it also began an ambitious project to legitimise these measures and weave them into a more coherent strategy (see section 3).

The government also sought, and found, new partners that could support it in this new endeavour. China emerged as the most significant ally. At an ideational level, China's ability to balance control of information and the dramatic growth of internet users became a model and source of legitimation for the restrictive practices the Ethiopian government employed in the aftermath of the elections. The Chinese government not only aided Ethiopia indirectly, by offering legitimation for alternative models of media engagement, but also directly, through the provision of essential technical and financial support (see section 4).

In the decade that followed the 2005 elections, the system created by the EPRDF through trial and error appeared to hold, ensuring two rounds of uncontested elections and the apparent consolidation of power at the centre. Some of the steps taken reinforced elements commonly perceived as characteristic of a developmental state model, such as strengthening the bureaucracy and reinforcing the power of the developmental elite, together with its autonomy (Leftwich 1995; Aalen and Tronvoll 2009; Hagmann and Péclard 2010).

Behind the shell of the vast majorities ensured by the EPRDF in parliament, however, a number of events progressively undermined the party's hegemonic project. The death of Meles Zenawi in 2012 represented a challenge not only for its political allies, but also for a larger network of political and economic actors who had embraced his vision of developmentalism. A controversial figure, at both national and international levels, Meles had emerged not only as a political leader, but also as an ideologue able to support a distinctive idea of African development (de Waal 2013; Lefort 2013). The apparently smooth transition, managed behind closed doors by the main power brokers within the EPRDF, and the handling of the premiership to Meles' deputy, Hailemariam Desalegn, only for a short while appeared to guarantee the legitimacy of the same coalition of forces and political project to continue guiding the country.

Following uncontested elections in 2015, which were marked by the apathy of both opposition parties and activist groups, in a somehow unexpected turn of events there were widespread protests that broke out first in the Oromia and Amhara regions in 2015–16, and later expanded to the rest of the country. They were to significantly reconfigure the power balance in Ethiopia. Echoing features that characterised protests in Tunisia and Egypt in 2011 and 2012, the loss of credibility of elections as instruments of change, and their securitisation to avoid outbursts of violence, had elevated other, apparently less critical phenomena – such as the proposal of a new policy to extend the administrative borders of Addis Ababa further into the Oromia region – to the level of possible catalysts of participation and protest.

The protests, framed not as a generic attempt by activists to overthrow an authoritarian government, but in the context of the very type of ethnic politics promoted by the EPRDF to rule over a diverse society, asserted how the largest ethnic group in the country, the Oromo, had been excluded from power, and shook the EPRDF's ability to maintain control over power. They ultimately led to the replacement of Hailemariam Desalegn by the first Ethiopian prime minister of Oromo descent, Abiy Ahmed. The new prime minister initiated a wave of reforms that dramatically reopened civic and political space, freeing journalists and activists who had received long jail sentences and promising a redefinition of political competition in Ethiopia (Workneh 2020; Fisher and Gebrewahd 2019). A new wave of protests in 2020, however, has called some of these reforms into question and has seen the resurgence of old forms of repression by Abiy's regime, including internet shutdowns, and imprisonment of protesters and journalists (Ayana 2020).

3. Civic space landscape

Ethiopia has a long history of tension with civil society organisations, tempered in some periods by the need to attract foreign aid and to appease requests from donors to channel some of their funds through non-governmental organisations (NGOs). During the Derg regime (1974–91) NGOs were tightly tied to the government (apart from those created by guerrilla groups in control of some areas in the north of the country). Since the EPRDF came to power in 1991, there has been greater liberalisation of the sector, allowing international NGOs to operate in the country and the emergence of some national NGOs, but also trying to exert control on large government-organised NGOs, able at the same time to attract donor funding, but also to make use of it in ways strongly controlled by the central power.

Similar to the case of the media (see section 2), this situation drastically changed after the contested elections of 2005, when the government began to seek ways to contain the influence of civil society organisations and close civic space in ways that would not irk the international community. The main tactic used by the government has been to exploit the United States (US)-backed securitisation agenda and promote laws that, on paper, were meant to contain the emergence of organisations that might threaten national security and stability, but in practice created a new space to pursue dissenters and critics (Roberts 2019).

In August 2009, the Ethiopian parliament enacted its first piece of legislation aimed specifically at combating terrorism. Framed as an attempt to comply with requests from the United Nations (UN) and the US to take the fight against international terrorism to global level, it created the legal preconditions to actually prosecute critical voices within Ethiopia (or Ethiopians in the diaspora). As indicated by the incarceration of journalists, bloggers and political opponents that followed, a legal provision aligning with international demands was used not only to fight terrorists, but also to stifle dissent. It was around this time that Ethiopia's ranking on Freedom House's Freedom Index descended from 'partially free' to 'not free' (see Figure 3.1).

Figure 3.1 Freedom House ranking for ADRN countries, 2000–19[2]

	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
Zimbabwe	Partially free	Partially free	Not free	Not free	Not free	Not free	Not free	Not free	Not free	Not free	N/A	Not free	N/A	Not free	Not free	Not free	Partially free	Partially free	Partially free	Partially free
Zambia	Partially free	Partially free	Partially free	Partially free	Partially free	Partially free	Partially free	Partially free	Partially free	Partially free	N/A	Partially free	N/A	Partially free	Partially free	Partially free	Partially free	Partially free	Partially free	Partially free
Uganda	Partially free	Partially free	Partially free	Partially free	Partially free	Partially free	Partially free	Partially free	Partially free	Partially free	N/A	Partially free	N/A	Partially free	Partially free	Not free	Not free	Not free	Partially free	Not free
Sudan	Not free	Not free	Not free	Not free	Not free	Not free	Not free	Not free	Not free	Not free	N/A	Not free	N/A	Not free	Not free	Not free	Not free	Not free	Not free	Not free
South Africa	Free	Free	Free	Free	Free	Free	Free	Free	Free	Free	N/A	Free	N/A	Free	Free	Free	Free	Free	Free	Free
Nigeria	Partially free	Partially free	Partially free	Partially free	Partially free	Partially free	Partially free	Partially free	Partially free	Partially free	N/A	Partially free	N/A	Partially free	Partially free	Partially free	Partially free	Partially free	Partially free	Partially free
Kenya	Not free	Not free	Not free	Partially free	Partially free	Partially free	Partially free	Partially free	Partially free	Partially free	N/A	Partially free	N/A	Partially free	Partially free	Partially free	Partially free	Partially free	Partially free	Partially free
Ethiopia	Partially free	Partially free	Partially free	Partially free	Partially free	Partially free	Partially free	Partially free	Partially free	Partially free	N/A	Not free	N/A	Not free	Not free	Not free	Not free	Not free	Not free	Not free
Egypt	Not free	Not free	Not free	Not free	Not free	Not free	Not free	Not free	Not free	Not free	N/A	Not free	N/A	Not free	Not free	Not free	Not free	Not free	Not free	Not free
Cameroon	Not free	Not free	Not free	Not free	Not free	Not free	Not free	Not free	Not free	Not free	N/A	Not free	N/A	Not free	Not free	Not free	Not free	Not free	Not free	Not free

Legend: ■ Free   ■ Partially free   ■ Not free

Note: ADRN – African Digital Rights Network.

Source: Adapted from Freedom House (2019)

Ethiopia was relatively late to enact domestic anti-terrorism legislation, compared to other countries that introduced similar laws in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks in the US on 11 September 2001 (9/11) to comply with UN Security Council Resolution 1373, which requires states to ensure 'terrorist acts are established as serious criminal offences in domestic laws' (UN Security Council 2001). Coming into force only in mid-2009, Ethiopia's Anti-Terrorism Proclamation was framed nonetheless as a response to the resolution passed eight years earlier and international pressure to combat terrorism.

However, when the proclamation is considered not just in relation to the evolution of international and domestic terrorism, but also to other legal instruments the Government of Ethiopia has been developing during the same period and to the type of individuals who have been targeted, it acquires a different, more pernicious, meaning. The Anti-Terrorism Proclamation shares with the Charities and Societies Proclamation (2009), the Telecom Fraud Offences Proclamation (2012) and the Regulation for the Re-establishment of the Information Network Security Agency (INSA) (2013) the common goal of extending the government's 'legitimate' sphere of action, while limiting the possibility for other actors – domestic and international – to influence policy and politics in Ethiopia.

2 Data not available for 2010 and 2012.

A powerful example of how governments have been able to exploit the negative sentiment emerging against civil society organisations mentioned above and use it to increase control over them, is how the Charities and Societies Proclamation has restricted NGOs that receive more than ten per cent of their financing from foreign sources from engaging in human rights and advocacy activities. The Telecom Fraud Offences Proclamation has re-affirmed the state monopoly over telecommunications, imposing severe sanctions on any operator trying to compete with or bypass Ethio-Telecom, and has extended the provisions of the Anti-Terrorism Proclamation to the online sphere (Article 6).

Since its creation, the INSA, shaped in the guise of the US National Security Agency (NSA), has taken on the responsibility of 'protecting' the national information space, 'taking counter measures against information attacks', which the law frames as any 'attack against the national interest, constitutional order, and nation's psychology by using cyber and electromagnetic technologies and systems' (Government of Ethiopia 2013). Examining the profiles of individuals convicted under the Anti-Terrorism Proclamation helps to further clarify the motivations behind the law and to understand how, similar to what had been experienced in other countries – including Colombia, Nepal, the Philippines and Uganda – the Ethiopian government interpreted the global war against terrorism as an opportunity to pursue domestic enemies while fending off external pressure and condemnation.

Out of the 33 individuals convicted under the Anti-Terrorism Proclamation between 2009 and 2014, 13 were journalists. Some of them were accused of planning terrorist attacks on infrastructure, telecommunications and power lines (Woubshet Taye and Reeyot Alemu); others of supporting Ginbot 7, an organisation led by Berhanu Nega, who in the 2005 elections had won the seat of mayor of Addis Ababa, and was included on the country's terror list soon after its establishment (Eskinder Nega, Abebe Gelaw, Fasil Yenealem and Abebe Belew). Two journalists (Solomon Kebede and Yusuf Getachew) who worked for the newspaper *Ye Musilmoch Guday* were charged with plotting acts of 'terrorism, intending to advance a political, religious, or ideological cause' (HRW 2013), as part of a broader crackdown on Ethiopian Muslims. Two Swedish journalists, Johan Persson and Martin Schibbye, who had embedded themselves with the Ogaden National Liberation Front to cover the conflict in southern Ethiopia were also charged under the Anti-Terrorism Proclamation, but were pardoned by the president after having served 450 days in prison. Some journalists have been charged in absentia; those apprehended in Ethiopia have been sentenced to up to 18 years in prison.

Numerous international organisations, including the Committee to Protect Journalists, Reporters Without Borders, Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch have accused the Ethiopian government of taking advantage of a law they have labelled as 'deeply flawed' to persecute and silence critical voices. The government has responded to this criticism by re-asserting the legitimacy of its acts.

The reliance on the Western-backed anti-terrorism agenda to pursue domestic goals, however, does not end with legal norms, but extends to the material and technological innovations that have come with it. As revealed by the leaks of security contractor Edward Snowden, in the aftermath of 9/11 the US NSA:

> set up the Deployed Signals Intelligence Operations Center – also known as 'Lion's Pride' – in Ethiopia's capital, Addis Ababa… It began as a modest counterterrorism effort involving around 12 Ethiopians performing a single mission at 12 workstations. But by 2005, the operation had evolved into eight US military personnel and 103 Ethiopians, working at '46 multifunctional workstations'.
>
> (Turse 2017)

In a leaked document, the officer-in-charge of Lion's Pride in 2005, Katie Pierce, explained, 'The benefit of this relationship is that the Ethiopians provide the location and linguists and we provide the technology and training' (*ibid.*).

Alongside Lion's Pride, the Ethiopian government's hunger for tools that could expand its ability to control communications led it to uniquely combine technologies purchased from a diverse range of actors. ZTE, as the largest telecommunication provider in the country, offered a customer management database, which, in addition to collecting records of calls made in Ethiopia, could allow access to the content of text messages and phone call audio when needed. Another tool developed by ZTE, called ZXMT, which used deep packet inspection to scan internet traffic, is also likely to have been used in Ethiopia, even if irrefutable evidence is missing (Marczak *et al.* 2014).

The Ethiopian authorities have actively shopped in the European market for advanced surveillance technologies, acquiring tools to spy not only on individuals living in Ethiopia, but also on Ethiopians in the diaspora. The government purchased FinSpy, a surveillance system sold by a firm first headquartered in the UK and later in Germany, to allow remote access to computers infected with FinSpy software. Hacking Team, an Italian company that provided 'eavesdropping software' that 'hides itself inside target devices' – which, ironically, was hacked in 2015, leading to 400GB of private communications entering the public domain – provided services

to the Ethiopian government allowing it to acquire communications from opposition leaders and journalists in the diaspora (Marczak *et al.* 2014; HRW 2014; Gagliardone 2019).

As this complex web of legal and technical resources indicates, far from being pushed into complying with an agenda imposed from above, either by partners in the West or in the East, the Ethiopian government has displayed a remarkable ability to exploit the weaknesses of different agendas to strengthen its own political plan.

Table 3.1 Civic space timeline

Year	Shift	Implication
2000–05	New media plurality.	Opening of civic space to engage millions in political discourse and democratic participation.
2009	Restrictive NGO law.	Disengagement.
	Restrictive anti-terrorism law.	Increasing use of global anti-terrorism agenda to stifle dissent.
2010	Arrests of activists.	Chilling effect and closing of space.
2015	First wave of protests in the Oromia region.	Unprecedented threat to EPRDF dominance over Ethiopia.
2018	Abiy Ahmed becomes prime minister.	Wave of reforms and opening up.
2020	New wave of protests in Oromia.	New tightening of civic and political space.

Sources: Authors' own, based on Gagliardone (2014); Stremlau (2011); Mulualem (2019); Chala (2015); Bach (2011).

4. Technology landscape

The strategy elaborated by the EPRDF-led government to shape digital technologies in Ethiopia has been fairly distinctive in Africa. The evolution of this strategy can be mapped following two parallel trajectories: one charting the efforts to maintain a strong, centralised control over expanding access to digital media; the other in response to attempts by opposition forces to use digital technologies as instruments for political change.

While most countries on the continent slowly overcame their scepticism towards liberalising internet provision, only to later introduce regulatory or technical mechanisms to contain the tensions these measures unleashed, the Ethiopian government decided from the very beginning to sacrifice access for control and security. In the 1990s, when the first initiatives to promote internet access in Africa began to take shape, in Ethiopia, as elsewhere on the continent, there were great expectations regarding the internet's potential. Eventually, however, the government's concerns prevailed in defining the initial and future steps that the internet would take in the country.

The initiative launched to structure Ethiopia's first moves in the internet era, called BITE (Bringing Internet to Ethiopia), is a vivid example of this approach. Initiated in 1995 by Dawit Yohannes, the speaker of the House of Peoples' Representatives, BITE was aimed at producing concrete recommendations on how policymakers could handle the internet effectively. Initial debate benefited from the active participation of representatives from NGOs and professional bodies, who were trying to strike a balance between the hype coming from the West and the initial scepticism and conservatism shown by the EPRDF. BITE's suggestion was to create a public network service provider, a 'not-for-profit service organisation with the main objective of serving the public and developing services' (Furzey 1995), independent from any actor in particular and accessible to all. The Ethiopian government, however, rejected the idea and decided to place service provision under its direct control.

This was only the first of a series of frustrations the private sector and civil society faced in their attempts to import tools, regulatory norms and best practices emerging at the international level. The efforts made by actors other than the government to develop a more dynamic information environment were strongly opposed. This reaction was motivated by the need to slow down the pace of transformation in order to exert more control over it; and by the desire to occupy the new political space that was created by the internet in ways that would primarily benefit the government and its national project.

This stubborn project, however, had the result of containing mobile and internet expansion for many years to come. As neighbouring countries – Kenya above all – marked rapid progress in extending connectivity across their national territories, Ethiopia languished at the bottom of digital rankings. In a dramatic move, in 2006 the government managed to secure a unique form of support that would allow it to maintain control over digital technologies while extending connectivity. In 2017, internet penetration in Ethiopia stood at just 18.6 per cent (see Figure 4.1).

Figure 4.1 Percentage of the population with internet access in Ethiopia
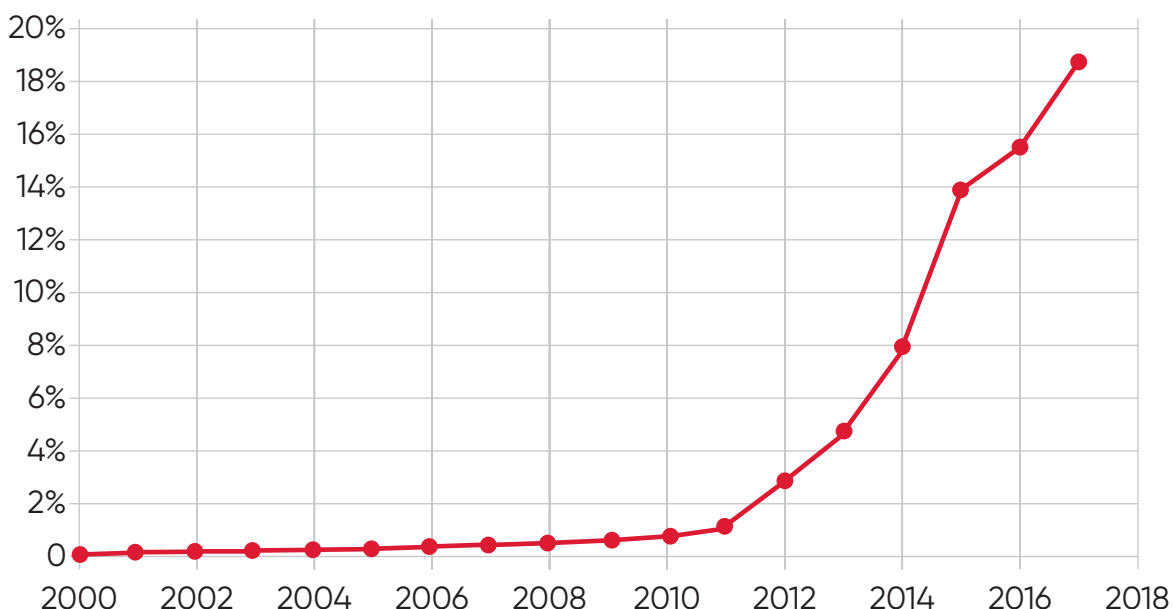
Source: Based on data from ITU (2020)

On 8 November 2006, Chinese telecom giant ZTE and the Ethiopian Telecommunication Corporation signed the largest agreement in the history of telecommunications in Africa. Backed by China Development Bank, ZTE offered a loan of US$1.5bn (to which it added US$0.4bn for engineering) to overhaul and expand Ethiopia's telecommunications system. The loan, to be repaid over 13 years, was disbursed in three phases. The first phase had a particularly symbolic value. Branded the 'Millennium Plan', it was expected to produce its results – laying down more than 2,000km of fibre-optic cable connecting Ethiopia's 13 largest cities – by 11 September 2007, the day marking the beginning of the new millennium on the Ethiopian calendar.

The second and third phases similarly focused on infrastructure development, expanding coverage to rural areas and building the capacity of the system to support 20 million mobile users (from the initial 1.2 million) and more than a million internet broadband users. Resources also went towards upgrading the government's ambitious Woredanet and Schoolnet projects, allowing some public administrations and schools served by the two systems to progressively switch from expensive and inefficient satellite connections to terrestrial broadband.

China's support allowed the Ethiopian government to reach goals no other African country had achieved before, dramatically expanding access under a monopoly. Elsewhere in Africa, liberalisation of the market has driven expansion in coverage and lowered costs. Countries that opted for a system tightly controlled by the state, such as neighbouring Eritrea, have severely lagged behind in developing information infrastructure and services. By providing capital, equipment and expertise, all with no strings attached in terms of policy changes (e.g. liberalising the market), ZTE not only brought the Ethiopian government out of the cul-de-sac in it had put itself into by stubbornly defending its monopoly; it also helped it realise its vision of a tightly controlled but developmentally oriented national information society.

On 7 June 2011, the now rebranded Ethio-Telecom issued a tender to further boost the capacity of Ethiopia's mobile phone network to 50 million subscribers by 2015 and to introduce 4G connectivity in selected areas. The tender was similarly based on a vendor-financing scheme, as had previously been the case with ZTE. However, in contrast to 2006, the tender was public and various companies competed. As *The Wall Street Journal* put it, however, 'again, financing won the day, with the two [ZTE and Huawei] pledging a total of US$1.6bn. Western equipment suppliers, such as Ericsson and Alcatel Lucent SA, couldn't match the Chinese offer' (Dalton 2014).

With the signing of two separate contracts of US$800m each with Huawei and ZTE, competition was introduced in the shape of a rivalry between two Chinese companies that have been contending for shares of the Chinese market for a long time. China's contribution, therefore, served not only to support the unique vision elaborated by the EPRDF, but also to introduce and experiment with limited forms of competition that would not threaten the government's hegemonic position in shaping Ethiopia's information society.

Shifting the attention towards digital activism, Ethiopia has similarly charted a distinctive trajectory. During the events that followed the contested parliamentary elections of 2005, Ethiopian protesters combined new and traditional communication channels in ways that closely resembled the use of media that would characterise the 'Arab Spring' in 2011 (Gagliardone 2016; Harlow and Johnson 2011). Yet during these protests, Facebook was still in its infancy, with no presence in Africa, and Twitter had yet to be launched.

In Ethiopia in 2005, bloggers represented a new critical node that allowed innovative forms of communication to be experimented with. In the 1990s, Ethiopians in the diaspora had already created platforms that allowed bloggers to voice their opinions (e.g. Nazret), in ways that pre-dated the approach later adopted by online magazines such as Slate or *The Huffington Post* (Skjerdal 2011).

By 2005, however, a younger generation of journalists and activists (e.g. Enset, Ethio-Zagol), who were less aggrieved by long-term power struggles, had begun to experiment with new ways of reporting that eschewed the most polarised tones (*ibid.*), becoming representative of a new willingness to embrace technology to promote political change. In a move that dramatically increased their reach, commentaries and political manifestoes published online began to be printed and were turned into leaflets for distribution on the ground in Ethiopia. Before and after the 2005 elections, mobile phones, and especially SMS (text messages) were also widely used to mobilise protests in real time and disseminate calls to action initially posted on web forums.

This convergence of different media channels used in 2005 deeply resonates with the 'media relays' that characterised the protests in Tunisia and Egypt in 2010, when activists combined different media to reach those who had no access to the latest technologies (Wilson and Dunn 2011; Aouragh and Alexander 2011). Yet, in striking contrast to the media and scholarly attention given to the Arab Spring, similar use of new media in Ethiopia five years earlier received negligible international attention. International news coverage mostly focused on the political violence around the elections and not on this revolutionary use of new media *avant la lettre.*

While international commentators did not understand or report on these early forms of digital activism in Ethiopia, the Ethiopian rulers took notice. So much so that, after the protests and the violence had subsided, the Ethiopian government started to progressively trim the complex communication network that had assembled different voices across a plurality of media. First, the SMS network was interrupted (June 2005). A few months later, some of the most vocal Ethiopian journalists who challenged the results of the elections and called for greater democracy were arrested and their papers forced to close (November 2005). Finally, one year after the contested elections, the government started to block access to blogs and websites where dissenting opinions were found (May 2006).

This 'failed revolution' represented the beginning of a complex process of negotiation between the Ethiopian government and various generations of digital activists seeking to use new media to promote political change. Two events epitomise the evolution of this process, indicating significant shifts in the power dynamics between government and civil society.

The first was the emergence and repression of yet another generation of digital activists seeking to use social media to engage and seek to constructively challenge the Ethiopian government. Centred on Zone9, a collective of bloggers created in 2012, the criticism that emerged in this phase distanced itself from older grievances and accusations. Instead, it advocated reform from within, rather than beyond the political framework created by the EPRDF. Unlike bloggers posting on diaspora-led platforms such as Nazret or Ethiomedia, they decided not to attack core elements of the EPRDF's ideology (i.e. ethnic federalism and revolutionary democracy). The Zone9ers, on the contrary, asked Ethiopian rulers to #RespectTheConstitution, the hashtag used for one of their campaigns pressuring the government to live up to the principles it had established to rebuild the nation after the civil war, including the right to freedom of expression.

In contrast to many bloggers in the Ethiopian diaspora who tended to write in English, most Zone9ers privileged Amharic in their posts, signalling a willingness to contribute to national debates and reach a broader audience within Ethiopia. Rather than considering Ethiopian rulers as enemies to confront and attack, they exploited the power of social networking platforms such as Twitter to initiate conversations with those in power; for example, engaging in unprecedented debates with Foreign Minister Tedros Adhanom, the government's most active presence on social media.

Despite efforts to build a middle ground from which to engage with the Ethiopian government, and calling for reform from within rather than an overthrow of the regime, on 25 April 2014, six of the bloggers – Abel Wabella, Atnaf Berhane, Mahlet Fantahun, Natnail Feleke, Zelalem Kibret and Befekadu Hailu – were arrested, along with three other journalists – Asmamaw Hailegeorgis, Tesfalem Waldyes and Edom Kassaye. The initial charges included working with international human rights organisations and taking part in digital security training (BBC News 2014). The group was subsequently also charged with terrorism. The accusations included collaborating with outlawed opposition groups such as Ginbot 7 and conspiring with foreign organisations to use social media to destabilise Ethiopia. Some of the evidence given in support of the charges of terrorist activity during the court cases included the use of Tactical Technology Collective's 'Security in a Box: Tools and Tactics in Digital Security' and blog commentary on Wael Ghonim's book *Revolution 2.0* about the use of social media during the Arab Spring and its potential relevance for Ethiopia.

The arrests stirred a high-profile international social media campaign to free the arrested bloggers, which spread online behind the #FreeZone9Bloggers hashtag. The popularity of the campaign was unprecedented in Ethiopia. After its launch, the campaign gained visibility internationally, including the first Africa-wide 'tweetathon' organised in solidarity by Nigerian and Tanzanian bloggers, and legal petitions addressed to the African Union and the UN Human Rights Council.

The campaign was especially active during the initial months of imprisonment, and was promoted by international human rights and freedom of speech organisations such as the Committee to Protect Journalists, Human Rights Watch, Global Voices, the Media Legal Defence Initiative, Electronic Frontier Foundation and Reporters Without Borders. After tens of delayed court hearings and over 500 days in prison without charge, the Zone9 bloggers were finally acquitted of terrorism charges in October 2015 (BBC News 2015).

Table 4.1 Technology timeline

Year	Shift	Implication
1995	Bringing internet to Ethiopia (BITE) commission.	First failed attempt at multi-stakeholder engagement in Ethiopia; it poisons the relationship between government and civil society in the digital space.
Late 1990s	Launch of first blogging platforms by the Ethiopian diaspora (e.g. Ethiomedia, Nazret, Ethiopian Review).	First attempts with online media are very antagonistic towards the EPRDF-led government, creating a perception that online media are by nature adversarial.
2004	State-sponsored projects Woredanet and Schoolnet go online.	These projects represent the first attempts by the Ethiopian government to use digital media to empower its communication and control with the peripheries of the state.
2005	First openly contested elections in Ethiopia and widespread censorship online.	After losing control of more seats in parliament than expected, and blaming digital media for some of the losses, the government begins its first experiment with online censorship, building the foundations for subsequent measures to control and contain online dissent.
2006	First contract with ZTE for network expansion project.	Largest Chinese intervention in ICTs in Africa.
2011	Second contract with ZTE and Huawei to further expand mobile and internet connectivity.	Consolidation of relationship with China.
2016	First internet shutdown in Ethiopia.	Proclaimed by the government as a measure to prevent cheating in national exams – but it will become increasingly pervasive in the country in stifling political dissent.
2017	Qero and Faro hashtags and memes.	Opening up of new space with new actors outside formal civic organisations.
2018	Rise to power of Abiy Ahmed and opening up of online spaces.	Greater freedom allowed for online media, as well as for the press.
2019	Return to internet shutdowns and repressive measures.	Initial opening by Abiy's government called into question; return to 'old tactics'.

Sources: Authors' own, based on Chala (2019); 2018; Mulualem (2019); Marchant and Stremlau (2020); Gagliardone (2013); Skjerdal (2011); Gagliardone (2016).

5. Digital rights landscape

As mentioned in previous sections, the Ethiopian government has been able to combine skills and tools acquired from different partners (e.g. surveillance training from the US government; software sold by European, Israeli and Chinese companies) to develop a complex apparatus of surveillance. It has also developed unique systems to project its control over the country, while improving service delivery. An example is TeleCourt, a system offering remote trials through plasma-screen TVs disseminated in government offices (Beyene, Zerai and Gagliardone 2015). Its centralised control of telecommunications has also made it relatively easy to enact internet shutdowns at local and national levels. Internet shutdowns became a recurring feature starting from 2016, affecting either specific regions where protests emerged (e.g. Oromia), or extending to the whole country (sometimes with the exception of the capital Addis Ababa) when protests became more generalised.

The threat posed by the rising discontent ultimately leading to widespread protests in the Oromia and Amhara regions, and the role social media played in fuelling and coordinating the protest, also led the Ethiopian government to develop and sharpen its computational propaganda tools (Chala 2018; Bradshaw and Howard 2019). Available evidence illustrates how the government has mostly made use of human agents (e.g. paid trolls or individuals belonging to party ranks) to steer public opinion, on issues related to the causes and motivations of protests, but also in the preparation of events of national relevance (e.g. religious or public events), as well as promoting fake news that could undermine support for dissenting groups (Chala 2018). As political competition became fiercer after the rise to power of Abiy Ahmed, new fronts of disinformation emerged, pitting members of the EPRDF coalition against one another (Chala 2019). Also, oppositional voices have joined the fray and popular representatives of political parties that have emerged as an alternative to the EPRDF have been accused of fomenting disinformation in ways that can lead to violence among competing ethic groups (Meseret 2020).

Individuals and civil society organisations are caught in a complex conundrum. In the past (e.g. during the 2005 elections discussed in section 2), Ethiopian journalists and activists displayed great ingenuity in combining old and new media, and a variety of tactics to amplify their messages and reach different types of audiences. Collaborations have emerged between activists and academics to assess digital rights in the country (e.g. between the OpenNet Initiative and The Citizen Lab to uncover surveillance; collaborations with the University of Oxford to map hate speech online) but these have not led to a consolidation of skills in the country that can be easily deployed when required (Marczak *et al.* 2014; OpenNet Initiative 2007; Gagliardone *et al.* 2016).

6. Conclusion

Ethiopia is at a complex crossroads. On the one hand, the rise to power of Abiy Ahmed built the foundations for important reforms in the media and civic space. Since 2018, media outlets have blossomed, also allowing long-time critics of the regime to launch publications and voice their opinions. Telecommunications have been liberalised, ending the anachronistic monopoly that had characterised Ethiopia for decades. Greater opportunities for political competition have been created and future elections – originally planned for August 2020, but postponed due to Covid-19 – may be the most contested since 2005.

On the other hand, Abiy's reforms have created tensions within the EPRDF coalition, especially with the once hegemonic Tigrayan People's Liberation Front. In 2020, new waves of protests led to the resurgence of repressive techniques used by rulers who preceded Abiy, including internet shutdowns and the imprisonment of critics of the regime. Digital activism holds the promise of engaging the government on new grounds, allowing the consolidation of digital rights and new alliances between extra-parliamentary and formal politics. But these avenues are fragile and it is unclear how they will evolve in the short and medium terms.

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