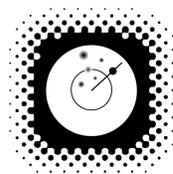


Ethiopia



Overview

Opponents of Ethiopia’s current political regime have increasingly used online media to criticize the government, and the country has responded by implementing a filtering regime that blocks access to popular blogs and the Web sites of many news organizations, dissident political parties, and human rights groups. However, filtering is not comprehensive, and much of the media content that the government is attempting to censor can be found on sites that are not banned.

Background

Ethiopia’s record on human rights and political openness took a turn for the worse after the legislative elections of May 2005. Though originally hailed by the U.S. State Department as “a milestone in creating a new, more competitive multi-party political system in one of Africa’s largest and most important countries,”¹ the elections were quickly followed by protests and riots by opposition parties alleging voter intimidation and rigging by the Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF).² Ethiopian police arrested more than 10,000 people

in Addis Ababa during the protests. According to Human Rights Watch, most were released within a month, but hundreds remained locked up. The government released 400 prisoners in March 2006,³ but it is unknown how many are still in jail.⁴ The EPRDF continued its crackdown on the opposition by arresting 76 “politicians, journalists, and civil society activists”⁵ and charging them with “‘treason’, ‘conspiracy’ to overthrow the government and ‘genocide.’”⁶ Over 80 more were arrested or charged with similar crimes in early 2006.⁷ Nearly 70 of those arrested were released or pardoned in July and August 2007,⁸ though some received prison sentences ranging from 18 months to life.⁹

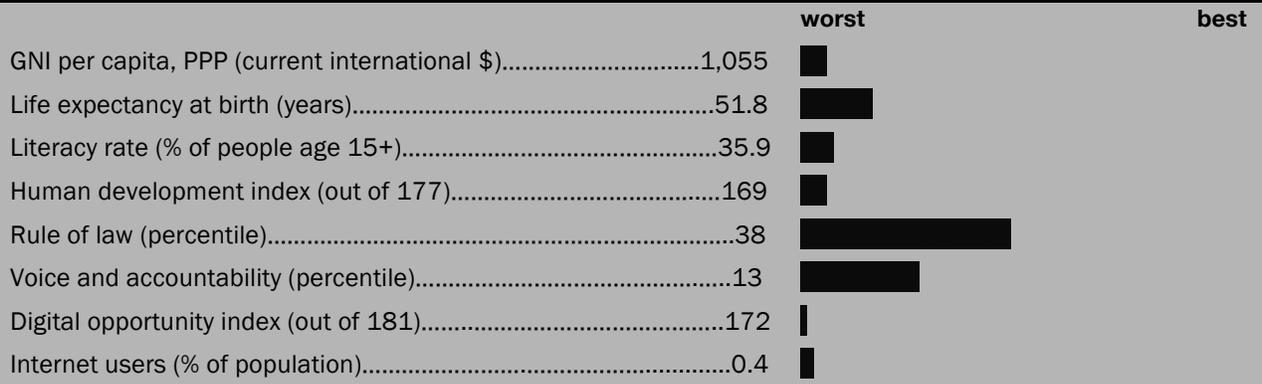
In foreign affairs, Ethiopia is involved in a border dispute with Eritrea, the subject of a war between the two states from 1998 to 2000.¹⁰ Ethiopia, on behalf of the United Nations-recognized transitional government of Somalia, has also entered into conflict with Union of Islamic Courts (UIC), an Islamist group vying for control of Somalia.¹¹ Between late 2006 and January 2009, Ethiopia maintained a presence of several

RESULTS AT A GLANCE

Filtering	No evidence of filtering	Suspected filtering	Selective filtering	Substantial filtering	Pervasive filtering
Political				●	
Social			●		
Conflict/security				●	
Internet tools	●				

Other factors	Low	Medium	High	Not applicable
Transparency	●			
Consistency	●			

KEY INDICATORS



thousand troops in Somalia. In March and April 2007 Ethiopian soldiers violated international law by using heavy artillery and rockets to fight an insurgency in Mogadishu, killing hundreds of civilians and displacing up to 400,000 people.¹² Though Ethiopian troops have since withdrawn from Somalia, Prime Minister Meles Zenawi stated in June 2009 that the country has not ruled out a future redeployment.¹³

Ethiopia's involvement in Somalia is complicated by the government's tense relationship with ethnic Somalis in the eastern part of Ethiopia. In early 2007 the Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF), a group demanding independence for the region, carried out a series of terrorist attacks. According to the Human Rights Watch, the military responded by "razing entire villages, carrying out public executions, raping and harassing women and girls, arbitrarily arresting, torturing and sometimes killing suspects in military custody; and forcing thousands to flee their homes."¹⁴ Similar human rights abuses occurred the same year in Oromia, where the government used the insurgency by the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) to justify widespread arrests and harassment of suspected government critics, including children.¹⁵ The violence is ongoing; in June 2008, satellite imagery confirmed that the military had burned

eight towns in the Ogaden region to the ground, corroborating eye-witness accounts collected and reported by the Human Rights Watch.¹⁶

Because of the rise of Islamic extremism in Somalia and the relative instability or hostility of many of Ethiopia's neighbors, the United States views Ethiopia as an important ally in the global war on terror. The U.S. supported Ethiopia's December 2006 invasion of Somalia logistically and perhaps financially, and Ethiopia still receives the largest amount of U.S. aid in sub-Saharan Africa despite international criticism of the government's human rights abuses both domestically and in Somalia.¹⁷

Fear of government reprisal drives self-censorship in the media. Among those arrested following the May 2005 elections were over twenty journalists,¹⁸ three of whom were held without trial until August 2007.¹⁹ Ethiopia's external conflicts are another source of tension between the government and the media. As of August 2008, two journalists arrested in Somalia in 2006 were still being held.²⁰ In January 2006, the Committee to Project Journalists reported that a correspondent for the U.S.-based web site *Ethiopian Review* had been arrested and detained for several days without charge.²¹ Foreign journalists have difficulties acquiring authorization to work in Ethiopia, and an

Associated Press reporter was sent out of the country in 2006 after “tarnish[ing] the image of the country.”²² The government has reportedly censored blogs and opposition Web sites, though it officially denies doing so.²³

Internet in Ethiopia

Ethiopia has the second lowest Internet penetration rate in sub-Saharan Africa (only Sierra Leone’s is lower) and is currently attempting a broad expansion of access throughout the country. These efforts have been hampered by the largely rural makeup of the Ethiopian population and the government’s refusal to permit any privatization of the telecommunications market. Only 360,000 people had Internet access in June 2009, a penetration rate of 0.4 percent.²⁴ The state-owned Ethiopian Telecommunications Corporation is the sole Internet service provider (ISP) in the country. Internet cafés are the main source of access in urban areas, and an active community of bloggers and online journalists now plays an important role in offering alternative news sources and venues for political dialogue. However, three-quarters of the country’s Internet cafés are in the capital city, and even there access is often slow and unreliable.²⁵ A test conducted by a Media Ethiopia researcher in July 2007 determined that the average connectivity speed was 5 KBps and that Internet service in most cafés was down between 10 and 20 percent of the time.²⁶

In 2005, Ethiopia announced plans to spend hundreds of millions of dollars over the next three years to connect all of the country’s schools, hospitals, and government offices, and most of its rural population, to broadband Internet via satellite or fiber-optic cable.²⁷ Between 2005 and 2007, the government spent USD40 million to install WoredaNET and

SchoolNET, two nationwide networks meant to increase connectivity.²⁸ WoredaNET provides e-mail, videoconferencing and Voice-over-Internet Protocol (VoIP) services to local governments, and SchoolNet provides streaming audio and video through a downlink-only VSAT (Very Small Aperture Terminal) satellite. The government has pledged to dedicate 10 percent of its annual budget to the development and maintenance of these networks, which are managed by the government-run Ethiopian ICT Development Authority (EICTDA).²⁹

Ethiopia has made several attempts to increase available broadband by laying 4000 kilometers of fiber optic cable along the country’s major highways, by making overtures to the East African Submarine Cable System (EASSy) and by connecting Addis Ababa to existing fiber optic networks in Port Sudan and Djibouti. These ventures have had mixed success.

The domestic network is not yet operational, though the government has promised to lay 10,000 more kilometers of cable by 2010.³⁰ Once the cable has been laid, Ethiopia will consider opening the network to a second, private operator.³¹ EASSy has been delayed multiple times by disagreements among the member countries³² (though at the time of writing it was scheduled to be completed by June 2010³³), and the line to Djibouti was sabotaged and looted, allegedly by ONLF and OLF rebels, shortly after its completion in 2006.³⁴

Currently satellite Internet is available to some large corporations, but individuals are not permitted to have private satellite connections. The ETC also bans the use of VoIP in Internet cafés and by the general population,³⁵ though its web site lists VoIP as part of the company’s future broadband strategy.³⁶

Legal and regulatory frameworks

The Ethiopian government maintains strict control over access to the Internet and online media, despite constitutional guarantees of freedom of the press and free access to information.

The state-owned Ethiopian Telecommunications Corporation (ETC) and the Ethiopian Telecommunication Agency (ETA) have exclusive control of Internet access throughout the country. The ETA is not an independent regulatory body, and its staff and telecommunications policies are controlled by the national government.³⁷ It grants the ETC a monopoly license as Ethiopia's sole ISP and seller of domain names under the country code top-level domain, ".et." Internet cafés and other resellers of Internet services must be licensed by the ETA and must purchase their access through the ETC.³⁸ Individual purchasers must also apply for Internet connections through the ETC. Though Ethiopia has considered some limited privatization of the telecommunications market, these plans are on hold until at least 2010³⁹ despite acknowledgments that the ETC has not been an effective service provider.⁴⁰

In July 2008 the Ethiopian House of Peoples' Representatives passed the Mass Media and Freedom of Information Proclamation, which the Ethiopian government claimed would ensure greater press freedom. In actuality, the proclamation increases fines for journalists convicted of defamation, allows the government to close any publication considered a threat to national security, and does nothing to reduce the overbearing powers of the Ministry of Information, which has the authority to issue or deny press licenses, monitor the media and manage the Ethiopian News Agency.⁴¹

In the face of political turmoil over the last two years, the ruling party in Ethiopia has become an increasingly active censor. In mid-2006 the government cut off access within the country to online publications run by political dissidents and to all blogs hosted on blogspot.com. The ETC denied censorship, claiming the blockage was a technical glitch but offering no further explanation.⁴² In October 2007 the Deutsche Welle and Voice of America local language radio broadcasts were jammed, blocking the rural population's main source of news.⁴³ The government has also banned reporters for the state-run news agency from using the Internet at all and now frequently jails journalists, including online journalists, for charges including treason; most private news outlets have been shut down.⁴⁴ The Committee to Protect Journalists named Ethiopia one of the top four jailers of reporters in the world in 2006,⁴⁵ and Reporters Without Borders labeled Ethiopia an "Internet Enemy" in March 2008.⁴⁶

Internet surveillance

In late December 2006, the ETA began requiring Internet cafés to log the names and addresses of individual customers, apparently as part of an effort to track users who engaged in illegal activities online. The lists are to be turned over to the police, and Internet café owners who fail to register users face prison.⁴⁷ Bloggers believe that their communications are being monitored,⁴⁸ and the state maintains the right to shut down Internet access for resellers or customers who do not comply with security guidelines. The government has closed Internet cafés in the past for offering VoIP services and for other policy violations.⁴⁹

ONI testing results

ONI conducted testing on Ethiopia's sole ISP, the ETC, in 2008 and 2009. The ETC's blocking efforts appear to focus on independent media, blogs, and political reform and human rights sites, though the filtering is not very thorough. Many prominent sites that are critical of the Ethiopian government remain available within the country.

The prime target of Ethiopia's filtering is political bloggers, many of whom oppose the current regime. Ethiopia blocks all blogs hosted at blogspot.com and at nazret.com, a site that aggregates Ethiopian news and has space for blogs and forums. Though many of the filtered Nazret blogs are critical of the government, the scope of the filtering is wide. Blocked Blogspot sites include Ethiopian and international commentators on politics and culture, including popular blogs EthioPundit and Enset.

During ONI testing in 2006 the Web sites of opposition political parties appeared to be a priority for blocking (www.kinijit.org, www.hebret.com, and others), as did sites for groups that represent ethnic minorities within Ethiopia (www.anaukjustice.org, www.oromia.org). Many of these sites are still blocked, though www.kinijit.org was available.

Many independent news sites covering Ethiopian politics or compiling international and local coverage were blocked, including CyberEthiopia, EthioMedia, EthioX, and EthioIndex. But some media sites carrying news and editorials that are unfavorable to the Ethiopian government remained available, including Addis Voice and Ethiopian Review, which had been blocked as part of the ETC's initial filtering of blogs and media sites in 2006.⁵⁰ International news sites such as CNN and Voice of America radio were not blocked.

A site calling for the freedom of jailed opposition leader [Yacob Haile-Mariam](http://www.freeyacob.com) (www.freeyacob.com), which was inaccessible in 2006, appears to have been unblocked, though sites about the imprisonment of human rights activist [Mesfin Woldemariam](http://www.mesfinwoldemariam.org) (www.mesfinwoldemariam.org) and political prisoner [Kifle Tigineh Abate](http://freekifle.org) (freekifle.org) remained inaccessible. However, information about these and other imprisoned dissidents is available via a number of human rights Web sites that are not blocked, including Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, and various Ethiopian-focused rights groups. Reporters Without Borders, which has chronicled Ethiopian Internet filtering on its Web site (www.rsf.org), is not banned.

ONI testing found that major search engines, including Google, Yahoo, MSN, and others, were available in Ethiopia, and no e-mail sites have been blocked. Though VoIP has been banned within the country, sites offering that service, such as Skype, were not filtered. The ETC did not block censorship circumvention tools such as www.anonymizer.com, and Internet users within Ethiopia appear to have found alternative means of accessing banned sites.⁵¹

In March 2009 the Committee to Protect Journalists reported that their web site, which had previously been blocked in Ethiopia, was suddenly accessible.⁵² Sites and blogs supporting democratic reform were also unblocked, possibly in reaction to the 2008 United States Department of State report on human rights in Ethiopia, which had just been released.⁵³

Conclusion

Ethiopia's current approach to filtering can be somewhat spotty, with the exception of the blanket block on two major blog hosts. Much of the banned political and human rights-related content is available at sites

that are not blocked. The authors of the blocked blogs have in many cases continued to write for an international audience, apparently without sanction. However, Ethiopia is increasingly jailing journalists, and the government has shown a growing propensity toward repressive behavior both off- and online. It seems likely that censorship will become more extensive as Internet access expands across the country.

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