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Digital crossroads

Continuity and change in Ethiopia's digital citizenship

Atnaf Brhane and Yohannes Eneyew

Introduction

Digital citizenship is a fluid concept. However, this chapter considers digital citizenship as the ability to participate in society online. When it comes to subjects of digital citizenship, we refer to digital citizens who are using the internet regularly and effectively (Mossberger, Tolbert and McNeal 2008). This chapter seeks to demonstrate how digital citizenship is framed in Ethiopia over a period of thirty years between 1991 and 2021. The scope of this chapter, however, is not simply limited to offering some analysis of digital citizenship in Ethiopia through a continuity and change approach; rather, it attempts to link it with ethnicity and to demonstrate how the web of ethnicity shapes digital citizenship in Ethiopia. Particularly, this chapter asks how Ethiopian digital citizenship has been shaped by its political history, ethnic divisions and legislative framework since 1991. This chapter draws on the work of Mamdani and Nyamnjoh, who argue that ethnicity is at least as important as nationality in African conceptions of (digital) citizenship.

Specifically, the chapter explores the evolving balance between state power and digital activism over the thirty-year period. It is structured along four critical epochs in the history of Ethiopia. The remainder of this chapter is organized into five sections. Consolidation of power by the EPRDF (1991–2005) section sketches the consolidation of power by the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) from 1991 to 2005. The 2005 elections and the rise of digital authoritarianism (2005–15) section charts the ensuing digital

authoritarianism in Ethiopia between 2005 and 2015 in the wake of the historic 2005 election. The Oromo/Amhara protests, mainly held between 2016 and 2018, will be examined in Oromo/Amhara protests and their repercussions (2015–18) section. Abiy's new experiment, between liberalization and control (2018–22) section interrogates how digital citizenship is conceived after the ascension of Abiy Ahmed in 2018, while Conclusion section summarizes the major findings and offers some recommendations on how to better protect the rights of digital citizens in Ethiopia.

Consolidation of power by the EPRDF (1991–2005)

Citizenship in general and digital citizenship in particular were given less emphasis during the early years of the EPRDF. The Ethiopian government, led by the EPRDF, introduced numerous pieces of legislation and policies that have shaped (digital) citizens' behaviour in the digital space and their participation in the country's affairs (Gagliardone 2014b).

The Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front overthrew the Derg military regime in a guerrilla fight and popular revolution in 1991. Upon assuming power, the EPRDF ushered a series of positive reforms extending fundamental human rights and citizens' democratic participation in governance. However, the realization of these freedoms was marred by authoritarian measures taken in practice. The 1991 Charter of the Transitional Government of Ethiopia (TGE) was the harbinger for the introduction of human rights and democratic freedoms. The charter fully recognized human rights as contained in the United Nations' 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). Specifically, Article 1 of the charter sets out freedom of conscience, expression, association and peaceful assembly, as well as engaging in unrestricted political activity and political parties on the condition that such rights do not infringe the right of others. In this era, there was relative freedom for the press, which led to the blossoming of private press until repressive measures were put in place in subsequent years (Abebe 2020). For instance, the first private newspaper called *Iyyita* started publishing in January 1992. It was a weekly paper published and circulated on Wednesdays focusing on general issues such as economic, social and political affairs. Following *Iyyita*, more than 630 newspapers and 130 magazines had been granted a press

licence, from which 401 newspapers and 130 magazines have been published and circulated in the period after the Press Proclamation up until February 2005. However, since the disputed election in 2005, the number of newspapers has been significantly reduced.

The transitional period has been regarded as an historic moment for press freedom in Ethiopia. This is mainly for three reasons. The first is that pre-publication censorship was officially outlawed by Article 3 of the 1992 Press Proclamation. As a result, the institutional procedure to get permission for publishing and circulating was cast-off and the institution executing such processes also ceased. Second, ownership of the press was permitted to private sector entities, unlike during the Derg regime, which had monopolized the country's press. The third reason is the rise of democratization in Africa, including Ethiopia (Huntington 1991). The transitional period was primarily aimed at writing up a new constitution and setting a foundation for Ethiopia.

In 1995, the EPRDF-led government adopted the constitution; one-third of its provisions found under chapter 3 are dedicated to human rights, including freedom of expression as well as the right of nation, nationalities and peoples (Federal Negarit Gazette 1995). While the constitution espoused a federal form of arrangement that favours Ethiopian people for self-government, others claim that the tribal-archetype of the federation is the 'original sin' responsible for the country's pandemonium, including the sprouting of divisive hate speech in the digital space (Fessha 2017). In this regard, Minasse Haile aptly articulated that 'the leaders of the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) (framers of the Constitution) applied the Soviet model of federation – based on ethnic self-determination to the nine tribal homelands they created' (Haile 2005). This would give rise to the over-politicization of ethnicity where ethnic groups tend to claim exclusive ownership of resources, privileges and entitlements in their respective regions. In this respect, Nyamnjoh (2006) argues that 'there is a hierarchy of citizenship fostered by political, economic, social and cultural inequalities, such that it makes some individuals and groups much more able to articulate their rights than others'.

In Ethiopia, some regional constitutions – like Article 2 of the Benishangul-Gumuz Constitution and Article 8 of the Harari Constitution – go as far as to incorporate clauses stating that some ethnic groups are 'native' while others are 'settler'. Mamdani (2020) famously argued that a 'native' versus 'settler' dichotomy is rooted in colonialism, where a white colonial elite were 'citizens'

while the colonized Black majority were devalued as 'subjects' through creating a hierarchy of citizenship; it places some groups as permanent minorities via the politicization of identity. Inevitably, these divisions lead to violence (Mamdani 1996).

The 1995 Constitution of Ethiopia is founded on the recognition of ethnicity, favouring group rights over individual rights (Gebeye 2019). For instance, Article 8 of the constitution places the nations, nationalities and peoples instead of citizens as the ultimate sovereign powerholders and guardians of the country. More worryingly, defaming a nation, nationalities and peoples was a sedition crime under Article 10 of the 1992 Press Proclamation – which in turn resulted in a chilling effect on media freedom and individuals' free speech. Over the years, the EPRDF leadership, using various narratives, has successfully drowned out dissenting voices and labelled them as 'anti-peace', 'unitarists' and 'anti-constitution'.

When it comes to the rights of digital citizens, the first internet service was introduced in Ethiopia in 1997. Shortly after this, the internet became a space in which to discuss Ethiopian politics mainly for political elites, and the conversations through online blogs were rapidly captured by the polarized conversations that had characterized the press (Gagliardone 2014b). While the media landscape before the 2005 election was predominantly radio, television and newspaper-based, digital platforms such as Ethiopian Review, Nazret and Ethiomedia owned by Ethiopians in the diaspora hosted articles (and short blogs) that might as easily have appeared in the newspapers printed in Addis Ababa (Roberts 2019). Like mainstream media, the emerging digital platforms were largely captured by offline political discourses.

Within the context of a telecommunications monopoly, Ethiopia had launched its most ambitious projects in the history of digital citizenship, e-government and digitization in Africa through Woredanet and Schoolnet systems (Gagliardone 2014a). However, the Ethiopian government has been using Woredanet and Schoolnet projects to advance political ends and narrative control. Put simply, the Woredanet, for example, stands for 'network of district (*woreda*) administrations' and employs the same protocol that the internet is based on, but rather than allowing individuals to independently seek information and express their opinion, it enables government officials (and mainly ministers and cadres) in Addis Ababa to videoconference with the regional and district offices and instruct them in the modus operandi

of governance through a top-down approach (Gagliardone and Golooba-Mutebi 2016). In its first roll-out, Woredanet was intended to link the federal government with the 11 regional and 550 district administrations. As such, using a 42-inch plasma TV screen installed in the Bureau of Capacity Building at the regional and *woreda* levels, local officials could receive training and instructions from other top-ranking ministers, including the prime minister, high-level civil servants and trainers in the capital (Gagliardone 2014a).

At the inception stage, Woredanet was initially designed to offer a variety of services on top of videoconferencing, such as enabling *woreda* officials to access the internet, to send and receive emails, and to use voice/video over internet protocols (IP) – the technology on which Skype is based – to communicate with each other. However, when the system started to be deployed and it became apparent that the bandwidth on the satellite was not enough to accommodate all these services, the government decided to switch off the channels allocated to all other services so as to free bandwidth to allow central and remote sites to be 'on screen'.

Since 2003, Schoolnet uses a comparable pattern to broadcast pre-recorded classes on a variety of subjects, from science to civics, to all secondary schools in the country while also offering political education to teachers and other government officials (Gagliardone 2014a). In the case of Schoolnet, 16,686 plasma TV screens were initially deployed to allow 775 secondary schools to receive broadcast lessons. Tellingly, Schoolnet was designed to reach targets in the peripheries in a more direct way. It mainly enables students living in rural areas to have access to the same quality of education as those in the major towns and cities, since students in remote areas no longer have to rely on poorly trained teachers for their education. Schoolnet was a powerful symbol of the EPRDF's commitment to guarantee (digital) citizens' equal opportunities; it was crucial in addressing the urban–rural education divide and was an overture for digitization in the country. Civic and ethical education was among the first subjects to be included in the Schoolnet programme. For instance, topics included human rights and democratic rights, digital citizenship, patriotism, industriousness and rule of law. However, both Woredanet and Schoolnet projects have been criticized for being a forum of narrative control tools and information-controlling channels (Gagliardone 2014a).

Between 1991 and 2005, the EPRDF-led government introduced ethnicity and ethnic federalism as governance frames and ideals whereby both Woredanet

and Schoolnet programmes were implemented along these lines. The idea of ethnic federalism was formally introduced under the 1995 Constitution. The concept was conceived and championed by the TPLF during the guerrilla war waged against the Derg regime. At the heart of ethnic federalism, ethnicity was to be the basis of politics (Young 1996). While ethnic federalism empowered ethnic groups for self-administration, identities of previously dominant groups were silenced in the name of ethnic diversity and the idea of pan-Ethiopian identity and digital citizenship was de-emphasized (Abbink 2011). Importantly, what is missing in Ethiopia's ethnic federal experiment is common citizenship – a sense of citizenship-based nationalism (Abbink 2011). This is because of the TPLF/EPRDF's over-reliance on ethnic nationalism during the guerrilla war in the 1970s. As a result, ethnicity has become a prime basis of people's identity and permeates all public and private life in Ethiopia. For example, facts depend on ethnicity in that individuals interpret facts based on their respective ethnic point of view; ethnicity is a sine qua non for election; for identifying oneself during criminal investigation, ethnicity has become an informal defence before a court of law. Consequently, between 1991 and 2005, (digital) citizenship was not given the attention it deserves due to overly ethnic-based engagements in Ethiopia.

On the eve of the 2005 election, engaging in digital politics through joining the blogosphere was mushrooming in Ethiopia. Nevertheless, the online space was bifurcated between supporters of government and opposition. For instance, there was an exchange of allegations and barbs on a daily basis between pro-EPRDF websites such as Aiga Forum and opposition sites such as the Ethiopian Review (Lyons 2007). Digital platforms such as Weichegud, Ethiopundit and Dagmawi provided regular, sometimes satirical, and often highly partisan analysis while AddisFerengi and Seminawork covered field reports from Ethiopia. Blogging collectives like Enset were influential commentators from the diaspora, while others like Ethio-Zagol were contributing to the online debate from home (Hafkin 2006).

To sum up, between 1991 and 2005, the Ethiopian government consolidated its power through an ethnic form of governance by introducing opaque concepts like revolutionary democracy. This is because ethnicity is as important as (digital) citizenship (Mamdami 1996; Nyamnjoh 2006). Attempts to inform or otherwise shape digital citizens were made through continued efforts of Woredanet and Schoolnet projects. Importantly, the

structures of ethnic federalism and media law established between 1991 and 2005 would have lasting repercussions that shaped digital citizenship in later periods. This is despite the fact that there was only minimal digital citizenship in Ethiopia prior to 2005 – a period in which levels of internet penetration in Ethiopia were extremely low and at a time before most social media companies had launched. From 2005 Ethiopia's unique Woredanet and Schoolnet are emblematic of centralized top-down imposed 'digital citizenship'.

The 2005 elections and the rise of digital authoritarianism (2005–15)

In the wake of the landmark 2005 election, digital citizenship was emerging and the digital space was the alternative venue for digital citizens to amplify their dissenting voices and claim their human rights. Specifically, Ethiopia had conducted two less competitive elections in 1995 and 2000 (Gudina 2011). However, such trends were reversed in 2005 when the EPRDF allowed the voting process to be free and fair. One of the most striking opportunities was the fact that opposition parties were given unprecedented access to state media and live broadcasting coverage, and numerous dissenting newspapers were able to circulate in Addis Ababa and throughout the country (Stremlau 2011).

Although internet penetration was limited (and less than 1 per cent), alternative and dissenting voices were heard through online platforms and offline media up until the EPRDF government blocked them. It should be noted that digital citizenship is an important tool for making rights claims, since Ethiopian activists in the diaspora and domestically have used the internet to call out rights abuses and hold the government accountable (Isin and Ruppert 2015).

The pursuit of information also led people to download and print news, commentaries and political manifestos, turning them into leaflets to be distributed to those without access to the internet. Most importantly, mobile phones, and especially SMS, were used to mobilize people in real time and to disseminate calls for action that had first emerged on other platforms. In the post-election days, when the EPRDF realized it had suffered greater losses than it was ready to accept and people started protesting over the delay in issuing the results, some of the channels used to mobilize protesters were

shut down (Gagliardone 2014b). In the aftermath of the first wave of a series of demonstrations, on 6 June 2005, the SMS service was suspended and was only restored some two years later (US State Department 2006). Following the closure of the SMS messaging service, the Ethiopian government went on to shut down other communication channels to prevent protesters disseminating alternative information and narratives. In early November 2005, some of the most critical Ethiopian journalists who challenged the results of the election and called for more democracy were arrested and their newspapers forced to close. This marks the consolidation of digital authoritarianism in Ethiopia via internet shutdowns, blocking websites, arrests of bloggers, internet censorship, SMS shutdown, digital surveillance and so on. In May 2006, one year after the contested election, the government began to block and censor access to online spaces such as Nazret and Ethiomedia, as well as a number of individual blogs (Poetranto 2012).

Internet shutdown and SMS shutdown measures had received pushbacks from the international community (US State Department 2006). While the government sought to justify these actions as being necessary to control violence, no official justification was given for shutting down the SMS service and the censoring of the internet. Instead, these moves were presented simply as technical glitches, rather than deliberate measures undertaken to defend national security (Gagliardone 2014b).

After closing possible avenues of popular protests, the EPRDF government consolidated its power and continued to shrink the digital space and the media landscape through adopting draconian and repressive laws. These include the enactment of the 2008 Media and Access to Information Proclamation, the 2009 Anti-Terrorism Proclamation, the 2009 Civil Societies Proclamation and the 2012 Telecom Fraud Offences Proclamation. The post-2005 election crises were bristled with brutal repression by the then EPRDF-led regime. Laws that were introduced to control the media and civil-society organizations have debilitated the civic space for more than ten years, as well as squashed dissenting voices, both online and offline (Brechenmacher 2017). Media houses and political groups find themselves at a crossroads after the introduction of draconian laws. Months after the anti-terrorism law was ratified, the major printed newspaper *Addis Neger* was forced to close down and its founder fled for fear of prosecution (VoA News 2009). The crackdown on media continued in subsequent years. Another weekly newspaper,

Awramba Times, was forced to cease publication and its editor fled (Abdul 2011).

The rearrests of Birtukan Medekssa, the then chair of the major opposition party Unity for Democracy and Justice (UDJ), before the 2010 general election signalled that the regime would not tolerate criticism of any kind, taking strong measures against independent institutions, political leaders and activists (Rice 2010). The EPRDF won the 2010 general election by a landslide, with 99.6 per cent of the vote, but this did not stop the regime chasing dissenting voices in the country. The anti-terrorism law effectively started to gag critical voices. The arrest of renowned journalists such as Eskiner Nega and Reeyot Alemu under the terrorism law in 2011, who had been using the online space to reach readers, sent a clear message to individuals who wanted to express themselves freely online. The harsh sentence given to Andualem Aragae, a political party leader, created an environment where fear reigned (Gebeyehu 2016). Years of repression in civic spaces in Ethiopia have led citizens to find alternative spaces to voice their concerns. The coming of social media made it easy, fast and cheap to communicate and to network (Roberts 2019).

The narrow political space and the draconian laws forced activists and printing media outlets to migrate to social media. Activist groups and writers started finding unregulated spaces that the government could not quash easily. In May 2012, a group of activists and bloggers who were familiar with each other due to their online activities, including the co-author of this chapter, decided to meet in-person and go to visit political prisoners in Kality Federal Prison, where journalists and political leaders had been imprisoned, under harsh sentences. One of the journalists was Reeyot Alemu, winner of the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) press freedom award in 2013. During that visit, Reeyot talked about prison conditions and how the prison superintendents separated prisoners from each other in eight different zones. The prison administration used these zones to separate prisoners based on the crimes they were accused of. Reeyot explained that prisoners inside Kality Federal Prison refer to the outside of the prison as 'Zone9', indicating that Ethiopia is a big prison and those of us who are not inside Kality are outside but with limited freedoms. After the visit, these activists and bloggers decided to form an informal group to act as an alternative voice in Ethiopia's socio-political sphere. They named the group Zone9 Activists and Blogging Collective (CPJ 2015). Later, Zone9 emerged as the first publicly known

politically active group within the country. Zone9 bloggers used social media, mainly Facebook and Twitter, to campaign for the release of political prisoners, constitutionalism and freedom of expression with the hashtags: #RespectTheConstitution, #FreeAllPoliticalPrisoners, #FreedomOfAssembly and #FreedomOfExpression.

Zone9's approach was very moderate relative to the very polarized conversations in online spaces. Despite being reasoning voices, Zone9 members fell victim to Ethiopia's draconian anti-terrorism law before the 2015 general election, which the ruling party won 100 per cent. Six members of the collective were arrested and charged with terrorism (CPJ 2015). The arrest of Zone9 bloggers engulfed an online protest, with a hashtag #FreeZone9Bloggers trending in Ethiopia, where there was low internet penetration (BBC Trending 2014). Zone9 bloggers were accused of undermining the constitutional order, working with outlawed organization Ginbot 7 and conducting digital security training for journalists and activists inside Ethiopia. After spending eighteen months in prison, all Zone9 bloggers were acquitted and released. One of the ways digital citizens can confront authoritarian governments is through the use of hashtags. For example, hashtags play out an instrumental role in ethnic politics in Nigeria (Egbunike 2018).

The use of hashtags such as #DimitsachinYisema and #Ethiomuslims in Ethiopia was continued in 2012, when Ethiopian Muslim leaders detained in a crackdown by the Ethiopian government formed a new movement called Dimitsachin Yisema, which means Let Our Voices Be Heard, in the online space. The movement became one of the most peaceful movements in the country demanding the government stop meddling in religious affairs and Muslim institutions and condemning the arrest of their leaders (Omar 2020). The Muslim community and digital citizens have used social media, particularly Facebook, to call nationwide protests after Friday prayer. The movement was active until the majority of Muslim leaders who were given lengthy sentences on terrorism charges (of up to twenty-two years) were recently released from prison in a political decision made in 2018 (Omar 2020).

Between 2005 and 2015, the government used another form of digital authoritarianism, that is, digital surveillance as a strategy to quell political dissidents and target digital citizens participating in politics (Roberts and Bosch 2021). In a report entitled *They Know Everything We Do*, Human Rights Watch (HRW) documented how the Ethiopian government uses its control

over the telecommunications system to restrict the right to privacy, freedom of expression, freedom of association and freedom of assembly (HRW 2014). These rights are entrenched under international law and in the Ethiopian Constitution but are routinely violated by the government. In practice, they are undercut by problematic national laws and practices by the authorities (e.g. warrantless interceptions and surveillance to counter-terrorism) that wholly disregard applicable human rights protections (Gebreegziabher 2018).

Overall, the shock of the 2005 election enabled the incumbent government to successfully eliminate formidable political foes, debilitate digital citizens, squeeze civic space and clamp down on the media (including online platforms). The government has introduced copious amounts of repressive legislation in the wake of the 2005 election in addition to the previously launched projects of Woredanet and Schoolnet. As a result of these measures, citizenship rights, including freedoms in the civic space, both offline and online, have been tightly squeezed. Remarkably, in this period, however, digital citizens were using hashtags to assert and amplify their rights, as observed in the case of Zone9 bloggers and the Muslim community's Let Our Voices Be Heard movement.

Oromo/Amhara protests and their repercussions (2015–18)

Between April 2014 and late 2015, a student protest erupted in Oromia region after the government announced a master plan to expand Addis Ababa to that neighbouring region. The protest, mainly by university students, started out of concern that the master plan would displace Oromo farmers surrounding the capital (Pinaud and Raleigh 2017). A large number of university students were arrested throughout Oromia region. According to an Amnesty International report, security forces were used to quash the protests, and a heavy security force presence was seen on university campuses. Amnesty International confirmed that more than sixty students were arrested by security forces to avoid further unrest (Amnesty International 2014). The Oromo University protests gave rise to a bigger popular movement, #OromoProtests.

In mid-November 2015, a second series of protests erupted across the Oromia region. The hashtag #OromoProtests was used to communicate the movement on social media. Oromo activists called these protests the Second Round of Protests opposing the 'Addis Ababa Integrated Development Plan

(the Master Plan)'. The online space was used to call a protest and a labour strike in the Oromia region (Center for Advancement of Rights and Democracy (CARD) 2016). Activist Jawar Mohammed, then director of the Oromo Media Network (OMN) and with over a million Facebook followers, used his online platform and network to disseminate information about the Oromo protests (Chala 2017).

In August 2016, the protests expanded to the second most populous region, Amhara. Following the protests, security forces responded violently, leading to the deaths of many protesters in the regional capital, Bahir Dar (BBC News 2016). The spread of the protest to Ethiopia's second-largest ethnic group concerned the regime, which imposed a nationwide internet shutdown for two days to halt the protest spreading to other regions. The hashtags #AmahraProtests/#AmharaResistance and #OromoProtests were used on social media to organize rallies, which subsequently forced the government to throttle (and slow down the speed of) the internet (Karanja, Xynou and Filastò 2016).

A stampede triggered by security forces using tear gas and discharging firearms among the large crowd at the Oromo Irreecha cultural festival on 2 October 2016 left hundreds of people dead (HRW 2017). Following the deadly protest, the government tightened its grip and imposed a state of emergency that restricted basic human rights. Mass arrests were conducted in Oromia, Amhara and Addis Ababa. According to the 2017 Human Rights Watch report *Fuel on the Fire*, 10,000 people were detained and sent to rehabilitation camps for 'reform' training. The directive that was introduced to implement the six-month-old state of emergency has articles that restrict freedom of expression and access to information. For example, writing or sharing content on the internet that may create misunderstanding among people was stated as a prohibited act. Accessing television channels of the Oromo Media Network and Ethiopian Satellite Television (ESAT) that are based abroad was also prohibited. Throughout the state of emergency, there were a series of internet shutdowns and other restrictions placed on mobile data (see Roberts and Anthonio, Chapter 4). The regime blamed social media for being a tool for 'anti-peace' elements (HRW 2016).

The Ethiopian government uses the anti-terror law, the media law and the civil-society proclamation to stifle citizens from expressing themselves online. Critics who use online space to express themselves become victims of the anti-terror law, and their social media posts are presented in court as evidence.

The case of activist Yonatan Tesfaye, who was a keen observer of Ethiopian politics at the time, is a clear example of how the Ethiopian government uses laws to silence critics (Freedom Now 2018). When protests flared across the country, the repression escalated and many activists were sent to prison. Yonatan Tesfaye was one of those activists who was charged under the terror law and found guilty over a Facebook post he wrote in 2015 (Public Prosecutor *v*. Yonatan Tesfaye case 2016).

Between 2016 and 2018, successive prime ministers in Ethiopia used internet shutdowns as a tool to muzzle freedom of expression (Ayalew 2019). Under the rule of the previous prime minister, Hailemariam, and particularly between 2016 and March 2018, the internet was shut down at least three times under the broader 'economic development narrative', to control cheating during exams, for national security and to quell civil disobedience (Ayalew 2019). Drawing on Mossberger et al.'s (2008) definition, which claims digital citizenship as the capacity to make daily use of the internet to seek information and to take action, the government should desist from using internet shutdowns as a strategy to undermine the rights of digital citizens.

Abiy's new experiment, between liberalization and control (2018–22)

Protests across the Oromia and Amhara regions between 2016 and 2018 forced the ruling party to reform itself. The resignation of Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn in 2018 led the country into a new era. In March 2018, the ruling party coalition EPRDF elected a new chairperson of the party, Abiy Ahmed Ali, who was sworn in as prime minister in April 2018 (Mohamed 2018). Prime Minister Abiy has moved away from dogmatic tenets of revolutionary democracy and started his political ideology of *Medemer* (synergy) as a political frame for post-2018 Ethiopia. Following this, the government created optimal conditions for enabling digital citizenship. As a result, restrictions on access to the internet were lifted and more than 200 websites (mainly opposition outlets, critics of the government and personal blogs) that had been blocked were unblocked (Taye 2018).

The government launched its national Digital Strategy (2020–25), which seeks to catalyse Ethiopia's digital transformation by the year 2025. In terms of

continuity, the Woredanet project will continue to be implemented in the years to come. Accordingly, the Digital Strategy seeks to modernize and overhaul the Woredanet system via creating a fibre network backbone able to provide high-speed connectivity to public offices and institutions. This is to be conducted under the supervision of the Ministry of Innovation and Technology (Digital Strategy 2020).

One of the reforms introduced during the early reign of Abiy's leadership was amending the laws that were used to narrow the civic space for the past ten years. The new administration formed a Legal and Justice Affairs Advisory Council to work on laws to help widen the political space (Ibrahim and Idris 2020). A legal reform working team – a combination of independent experts and lawyers – drafted a new anti-terror law, civil-society law and media law, which were later ratified by the Ethiopian Parliament. Abiy has been praised for initiating law reforms that aim to widen the political sphere (HRW 2019). While the practical enforcement of digital rights is far from perfect, these laws have helped digital citizens to enjoy their civil and political rights.

Citizens' internet access has grown exponentially over the past decade, from 1.1 per cent in 2011 to 21.1 per cent in 2022. As per the Ethio Telecom report in 2022, there are around 25.6 million internet subscribers in Ethiopia, comprising 21.1 per cent of the total population. This increasing internet penetration in Ethiopia has not been without challenges, however. Since Abiy Ahmed took office, digital citizens have found themselves in polarized camps. Ethnic-based media such as the Oromo Media Network, Tigray Media House (TMH) and Amhara-affiliated media outlet called 'Asrat' (but defunct since June 2020) have led to filter bubbles, eco chambers and the polarization of conversations on social media. Prominent activists and political leaders have used inflammatory and derogatory terms online, contributing to violence offline (Skjerdal and Moges 2021). In October 2019, a protest erupted in Oromia region after the prominent activist and politician Jawar Mohammed wrote on his personal Facebook page that he was surrounded by security forces. Following his post, youth from the Oromia region marched to his house in the capital to protect him (Negari and Paravicini 2019). This ethnic cleavage has been intensified and fuelled by hate speech, both online and offline, through creating 'us' and 'them' narratives, resulting in social fissure and resentment in the country (Ayalew 2021).

As a response to the growing amount of disinformation and usage of inflammatory terms, the government introduced a law that regulates online

media. In 2020, it passed the Hate Speech and Disinformation Prevention and Suppression Proclamation No.1185/2020. This law aimed to counter hate speech in Ethiopia, including ethnic vilification both offline and online. However, the law fails to define the main ingredient of hate speech, that is, 'hatred', which in turn impinges on the legality requirement under Ethiopian and international human rights law (Ayalew 2021).

When a conflict erupted between the Ethiopian National Defense Force (ENDF) and the TPLF in November 2020 after the TPLF attacked the ENDF's Northern Command, supporters of both parties used the online space to misinform and set contradictory narratives. Distorted images with false contexts were shared online (Mwai 2020). Since that time, the ongoing conflict has had a total communication blackout which involves shutdown of internet and telephone services in Tigray region and partial blackouts in the Afar and Amhara regions (Access Now 2021).

Although there was a supportive environment for online space in the early stages of Abiy's administration, the government has since imposed multiple internet shutdowns across the country, and shutdown is the government's response to any violence that is happening in the country. In June 2019, when high-level army and Amhara regional officials were assassinated, the government imposed a week-long total internet shutdown that left millions of people with no access to information (Meseret 2019). In June 2020, following the assassination of Oromo artist Hachalu Hundessa, a country-wide internet shutdown was imposed to control the violence that left hundreds killed in Oromia region (Bearak 2020; Feldstein 2021).

Thus, viewed from Mossberger et al.'s (2008) conception of digital citizenship as the capacity to make daily use of the internet to seek information and take action, internet shutdowns violate citizens' digital rights and prevent them from exercising digital citizenship in Ethiopia.

Conclusion

While successive governments seek to consolidate power and have tampered with the rights of digital citizens, the major legal and political reforms started in 2018 have helped Ethiopia traverse the roads of digital authoritarianism. This means that digital citizenship is at a crossroads in Ethiopia. This chapter

has demonstrated how successive governments have consolidated their powers through using techniques of digital authoritarianism to control the behaviour of digital citizens. It has charted how the Ethiopian government has implemented authoritarian techniques to trammel digital citizens' right to freedom of expression and other civil rights in the past thirty years. When it comes to continuity of digitization programmes, Woredanet (for example) – a project launched by the EPRDF to tame the behaviour of digital citizens – continues to be applied by the governing Prosperity Party.

Whereas the period from 1991 to 2018 had arguably been sensitive and required a careful engagement, Prime Minister Abiy's experiment through *Medemer* represents a new governing framework in the post-2018 period. It was initially characterized by greater relative freedoms for digital citizens' despite such efforts are being marred by recurrent internet shutdowns and other forms of digital authoritarianism.

In the pre-2018 period, the EPRDF-led government implemented ethnic federalism and ethnicity as governing frames whereby various laws, policies and strategies were funnelled through these concepts. As a result, there were conflict-sensitive and repression of freedom of expression in online and social media conversation. Those who speak truth to power have easily been targeted by the government. Digital citizens who use the internet, including human rights activists, journalists and political leaders, have been targeted because they used the online space to express themselves and communicate with their supporters. This chapter has discussed how digital citizenship has played an instrumental role for diaspora activists to organize a movement that demanded greater freedoms for citizens and the release of political prisoners in 2018. It should be noted that draconian laws and policies have been reformed since 2018. While legal reform is a step in the right direction, this should, however, be reflected in practice, through building robust independent institutions. Overall, the government's digital authoritarianism in the form of internet shutdowns and digital surveillance, as well as polarized social media engagement, means that digital citizens are at a crossroads when it comes to exercising their rights in the digital age in Ethiopia. Future research on digital citizenship in the country should focus on tackling the challenges that are yet to be addressed, including ethnification of the media, spread of disinformation, politicization of content moderation and radicalization of groups online. In addition, the affirmative roles of digital

citizenship and internet access have not received enough attention. As such, there should be more research into the contributions of (for example) the Let Our Voices Be Heard (the online movement of Muslims in Ethiopia), the Zone9 bloggers' digital struggle and Amhara/Oromo protests, as these help us to understand the positive roles of digital citizenship and digital rights in Ethiopia or beyond.

In conclusion, Ethiopia's political history and ethnic federalism experiment in the past thirty years had a mixed bag of results on digital citizenship. On the one hand, the opening of civic space helped digital citizens exercise their civil and political rights, off and online. On the other hand, government's authoritarian practices such as internet shutdown and digital surveillance continue to shackle citizens' rights in the digital ecosystem despite such practices having drawn fire from civil societies and the international community. As such, the government must take the human rights of digital citizens seriously. This requires establishing robust independent institutions and granting courts an active role in interpreting digital human rights. Ultimately, we argue that the government must initiate a constitutional amendment process to whittle down the impacts of negative ethnicity that was entrenched in public and private lives and expressly recognize the fundamental rights of (digital) citizens.

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