



SUDAN

	2012	2013
INTERNET FREEDOM STATUS	N/A	NOT FREE
Obstacles to Access (0-25)	n/a	17
Limits on Content (0-35)	n/a	19
Violations of User Rights (0-40)	n/a	27
Total (0-100)	n/a	63

POPULATION: 33.5 million
INTERNET PENETRATION 2012: 21 percent
SOCIAL MEDIA/ICT APPS BLOCKED: Yes
POLITICAL/SOCIAL CONTENT BLOCKED: Yes
BLOGGERS/ICT USERS ARRESTED: Yes
PRESS FREEDOM 2013 STATUS: Not Free

* 0=most free, 100=least free

KEY DEVELOPMENTS: MAY 2012 – APRIL 2013

- Large-scale antigovernment protests known as “Sudan Revolts” erupted in Khartoum in June 2012 and spread throughout the country. The protests led to the government’s first crackdown on internet users (see **LIMITS ON CONTENT**).
- The intelligence service’s Cyber Jihadist Unit ramped up its efforts to censor antigovernment content, target cyber-dissidents, and manipulate online information during and following the protests (see **LIMITS ON CONTENT**).
- Numerous bloggers and online journalists were arrested or harassed for their involvement with the June 2012 protests (see **VIOLATIONS OF USER RIGHTS**).
- In December 2012, a new draft press law was presented to the national assembly that is likely to include provisions regulating online media (see **VIOLATIONS OF USER RIGHTS**).

EDITOR'S NOTE ON RECENT DEVELOPMENTS

On September 25, 2013, Sudan experienced a complete internet blackout following the outbreak of antigovernment protests in Khartoum over the suspension of fuel subsidies.¹ According to research conducted by the internet intelligence company, Renesys, no networks were available in Sudan around 1:00pm local time as a result of either a catastrophic technical problem or a centrally coordinated effort to disable all access to the internet.² While the government's hand behind the shutdown could not be confirmed at the time of writing, its timing strongly supports suspicions of government involvement, particularly since Renesys reported a similar—albeit a smaller-scale and shorter—outage on the Sudatel network in June 2013 ahead of another large protest.³

INTRODUCTION

Much of Sudan's history since 1955 has been preoccupied by civil war and persistent conflict, resulting in the displacement of millions of Sudanese and a situation of economic disfranchisement for the majority of the country. As a result, 46.5 percent of the population lives below the official United Nations poverty line as of the end of 2012.⁴ Nevertheless, the discovery of oil in South Sudan prior to the region's independence from the north in July 2011 has led to an economic boom for the country's elite and ruling party over the last 10 years, which has in turn translated into gains for a number of sectors, particularly the telecommunications sector.⁵

Increasingly affordable and reliable internet service has enabled Sudanese citizens to use digital media tools to share information, communicate with the international community, document news not covered in the heavily censored traditional media, and organize protest movements against government repression. This online engagement and activism, however, has led the Sudanese government under President Omar al-Bashir to increasingly crackdown against internet freedom through various tactics that include: growing censorship of opposition news outlets and forums online; the deployment of a Cyber Jihadist Unit to monitor social media websites and hack into activists' accounts;⁶ and the harassment and arrest of digital media activists and online journalists; among other tactics.

¹ "At least seven killed in Sudan as anti-government violence flares," *Al Arabiya*, September 26, 2013, <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/middle-east/2013/09/25/Internet-access-shut-down-in-Sudan-amid-Khartoum-riots.html>.

² Andrea Peterson, "Sudan loses Internet access – and it looks like the government is behind it," *Washington Post*, September 25, 2013, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/the-switch/wp/2013/09/25/sudan-loses-internet-access-and-it-looks-like-the-government-is-behind-it/>.

³ Renesys Corporation, Twitter post, June 29, 2013, 4:33pm, <https://twitter.com/renesys/status/351060825722736640/photo/1>.

⁴ United Nations Development Programme, "Status of MDGs in Sudan in 2012," http://www.sd.undp.org/mdg_fact.htm.

⁵ "Economic Impact of Mobile Communications in Sudan," Zain Group and Telefonaktiebolaget LM Ericsson, June 5, 2009, http://www.ericsson.com/res/thecompany/docs/sudan_economic_report.pdf.

⁶ Interview with a press freedom advocate and journalist in Khartoum, Sudan, January 16, 2012.

Internet restrictions and government repression against online users intensified during and following widespread antigovernment protests known as “Sudan Revolts” that erupted in June 2012 and were fueled in large part by digital media tools. In a country where traditional media journalists have for decades faced routine censorship, detention, and violence, the events in 2012 led the government to target bloggers and cyber-dissidents for the first time, with some facing detentions for up to two months and one case of torture reported. Others fled Sudan for fear of their lives after being subjected to threats, sexual assault, or torture.

OBSTACLES TO ACCESS

The internet in Sudan is affordable and widely accessible in big cities and towns. According to the International Telecommunications Union (ITU), internet penetration grew from 19 percent in 2011 to 21 percent in 2012, representing 7.5 million users in a country of 34.2 million.⁷ However, the number of users could be somewhat higher as internet-enabled mobile phones have become widespread and cheaper in recent years. The National Telecommunications Corporation (NTC),⁸ the government regulatory body, reported over 27 million cell phone subscriptions in Sudan as of December 2012,⁹ in addition to a telecom network coverage of 88 percent of the population that extends to at least 800 cities and towns,¹⁰ including remote parts of the war-torn region of Darfur.¹¹ The ITU noted a mobile phone penetration of over 60 percent at the end of 2012.¹²

Following the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) signed between the government of Sudan and the South Sudanese rebels, the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM), the telecommunications industry expanded at an unprecedented rate as thousands of Sudanese expatriates returned from the diaspora. During this time, prices for pre- and post-paid services were cut in half, and companies began offering wireless connections to serve the growing number of cafes and hotels.¹³

By regional and international standards, Sudan's telecommunications infrastructure is among the most developed and affordable, with Sudan recording the lowest average post-paid rate per minute in the Middle East and North Africa in 2012.¹⁴ There are four licensed telecommunications operators in Sudan: Zain, MTN, Sudatel—which provide both internet and mobile phone

⁷ International Telecommunication Union, “Percentage of Individuals Using the Internet, 2000-2012,” <http://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Statistics/Pages/stat/default.aspx>.

⁸ Founded in 1996, the NTC regulates the telecommunications industry in Sudan, give licenses to telecommunications operators as well as protects the national security of the state, among other duties.

⁹ “Mobile cellular subscriptions 2012,” *Statistics data, National Telecommunications Corporation, last modified May 6, 2013*, http://www.ntc.gov.sd/images/stories/docs/English/mobile_cellular_subscription.pdf.

¹⁰ “Economic Impact of Mobile Communications in Sudan.”

¹¹ “Telecom Networks Coverage,” *Statistics data, National Telecommunications Corporation, last modified May 6, 2013*, <http://www.ntc.gov.sd/images/stories/docs/English/coverage.pdf>.

¹² International Telecommunication Union, “Mobile-Cellular Telephone Subscriptions, 2000-2012.”

¹³ Interview with individuals in the telecommunications industry in Khartoum, Sudan, January 7-25, 2012.

¹⁴ Mohamed Salam, “Sudan Tops MENA Region on Mobile Services Sales Tax,” *IT News Africa*, October 3, 2012, <http://www.itnewsafrika.com/2012/10/sudan-tops-mena-region-on-mobile-services-sales-tax>.

services—and Canar, which provides fixed phone lines and home internet.¹⁵ MTN and Sudatel both offer broadband internet, with Sudatel being the first to introduce 3.75G technology.¹⁶ Zain also offers fast internet through its USB and mobile phone internet services, though along with MTN, it leases its access to the international internet from Sudatel and Canar. Zain, MTN, and Canar are foreign-owned companies,¹⁷ while Sudatel has 22 percent of its shares owned by the government.¹⁸

Telecommunication companies began providing affordable mobile phone internet services in 2010, which allowed a growing number of citizens, especially students, to browse the internet from their mobile devices and led to a marked increase in the use of social media websites such as Facebook. As of January 2013, a monthly subscription on the Sudani network costs SDG 9 (\$1.50) for 1 GB, while unlimited monthly internet costs SDG 15 (\$2.50) and SDG 21 (\$3.50) on MTN and Zain, respectively.¹⁹ The three companies also offer daily unlimited internet for rates that do not exceed SDG 1 (\$0.16).²⁰

Aside from mobile internet, users also access the internet from personal desktops that cost between \$71 and \$100, or from laptop computers that start at \$110 for a brand-new device. Second-hand laptops and computers are widely available, and users can make payments towards a computer in weekly or monthly installments. Internet access is enabled through a high-speed internet USB modem, which costs \$11 on the Zain network, while 5 GB of data per month costs \$4.50. The Sudani network gives its subscribers free internet USB sticks upon the purchase of internet packages ranging from three months (at \$21) to one year (at \$78).²¹ Nevertheless, there were less than 25,000 fixed broadband subscriptions at the end of 2012, representing 0.05 percent of the population, according to the ITU.²² Cybercafes, which are concentrated in market areas, charge an average of \$0.30 per hour,²³ though the number of cybercafes in Khartoum state has decreased noticeably since the early 2000s as the internet has become cheaper and more accessible to the public.

The availability of fast internet in Sudan is largely a result of competition between the four main telecommunications companies. Under normal circumstances, the internet is relatively fast, operating at advertised speeds of up to 21Mbps on the Zain network in Khartoum and at 7.2Mbps in other areas. However, during the antigovernment protests in June and July 2012, there were reports of extremely slow internet speeds before it became completely inaccessible to users on the Zain and Sudani networks for a number of hours before the June 29th protests, according to some

¹⁵ Interview with an expert from the telecommunications industry in Khartoum, Sudan, January 17, 2013.

¹⁶ “Background,” Sudani Company, accessed January 2013, <http://sudani.sd/PublicOne/Content/Sudani/Background>.

¹⁷ The majority shareholders are Kuwaiti for Zain, South African for MTN, and Emirates for Canar. See: “Economic Impact of Mobile Communications in Sudan.”

¹⁸ OpenNet Initiative, “Internet Filtering in Sudan,” August 7, 2009, https://opennet.net/sites/opennet.net/files/ONI_Sudan_2009.pdf.

¹⁹ Based on calls made to customer care centers for the three telecommunications networks in Khartoum, Sudan, January 7-10, 2013.

²⁰ Calls made to customer care centers.

²¹ Calls made to customer care centers.

²² International Telecommunication Union, “Fixed (Wired)-Broadband Subscriptions, 2000-2012.”

²³ Research conducted in January 2013.

independent reports.²⁴ It remains unconfirmed whether the service disruptions were due to intentional government interference or technical issues, though the disruptions prompted immediate fears among activists that the authorities would follow Mubarak's lead in Egypt and shut down the internet altogether.²⁵ Most recently in June 2013, and again in September 2013 (after this report's coverage period), the internet intelligence corporation Renesys confirmed two separate internet blackouts that were reportedly directed by the government in advance of large protests (see "Editor's Note on Recent Developments").²⁶

While access to the internet is gradually expanding in Sudan, comprehensive economic sanctions imposed by the U.S. government against the al-Bashir regime since 1997 have been a hindrance to the free access of various ICTs and new media tools.²⁷ In 2010, the sanctions were amended to authorize the export of certain communications technologies to boost the free-flow of information,²⁸ though as of 2013, the amended sanctions remain ineffective for most Sudanese in many respects. For example, important software such as anti-virus suites, e-document readers, and rich-content multimedia applications are blocked and inaccessible for users to download. Additionally, software security updates are unavailable, forcing users to rely on outdated versions that make their computers and devices vulnerable to malware and other technical attacks. Smartphones and tablets are also affected, as online stores where users can download and update applications are inaccessible in Sudan. Savvy users use circumvention tools such as proxies and virtual private networks (VPNs) to access these blocked services, but ordinary users likely miss out on these key ICT tools. This problem of accessibility poses a serious security threat to activists and human rights defenders, making them unable to use these technologies in their work and potentially exposing them to state surveillance and censorship (see "Violations of User Rights").

The NTC regulates the ICT sector in Sudan. Founded in 1996 and housed under the Ministry of Telecommunications, the government body produces telecommunications statistics, monitors the use of the internet, introduces new technology into the country, and seeks to develop the country's telecommunications and IT industry. Although it is a state body, the NTC receives grants from international organizations such as the Intergovernmental Authority on Development and the World Bank, and its website describes the body as "self-financing."²⁹

²⁴ Personal experience of a Freedom House consultant based in Khartoum. See also: Amira Al Hussaini, "Sudan: Netizens Verify Internet Blackout Rumours," *Global Voices*, June 22, 2012, <http://globalvoicesonline.org/2012/06/22/sudan-netizens-verify-internet-blackout-rumours/>.

²⁵ Melody Zhang, "Internet Blackout in Sudan?" OpenNet Initiative (blog), June 27, 2012, <https://opennet.net/blog/2012/06/internet-blackout-sudan>.

²⁶ Andrea Peterson, "Sudan loses Internet access – and it look like the government is behind it," *Washington Post*, September 25, 2013, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/the-switch/wp/2013/09/25/sudan-loses-internet-access-and-it-looks-like-the-government-is-behind-it/>.

²⁷ "What you Need to Know About U.S. Sanctions—Sudan," U.S. Department of the Treasury, June 25, 2008, <http://www.treasury.gov/resource-center/sanctions/Programs/Documents/sudan.pdf>.

²⁸ "Treasury Department Issues New General License to Boost Internet-Based Communication, Free Flow of Information in Iran, Sudan and Cuba," U.S. Department of the Treasury, press release, March 8, 2010, <http://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/tg577.aspx>.

²⁹ "Annual Budgets," The National Telecommunications Council, October 16, 2010, <http://www.ntc.gov.sd/index.php?n=b3B0aW9uPWNvbV9jb250ZW50JnZpZxc9YXJ0aWNsZSZpZD04Jkl0ZW1pZD0xNjYmbGFuZz11aw>.

LIMITS ON CONTENT

In response to the nationwide “Sudan Revolts” protests in June 2012, the government blocked three news websites and amped up its use of the Cyber Jihadist Unit to target key protest participants and manipulate the online information landscape. YouTube was unilaterally blocked for a period following the viral spread of an offensive anti-Islam video in September 2012.

The 2001 National Strategy for Building the Information Industry explicitly acknowledges the blocking and filtering of internet content considered “immoral” and “blasphemous.” The NTC is relatively transparent about the content it blocks, reporting that 95 percent of blocked material is related to pornography.³⁰ Tests last conducted by the OpenNet Initiative in 2009 confirmed that websites with “sexually explicit” content were blocked, in addition to some dating and hacking websites and those that facilitated anonymous browsing or circumvention.³¹

Social media websites such as Facebook and Twitter are not blocked, though Sudan has blocked YouTube and the popular Sudanese forum and news website *Sudanese Online* for various periods since 2008 in response to content deemed too sensitive by the regime, such as articles on the war in Darfur.³² The blocks typically range from a few days to a few weeks, and when a website becomes accessible again, it can take some time for content to be fully restored. The most sustained and long-term blocking of websites followed the June-July 2012 “Sudan Revolts” protest movement. On June 25, 2012, the NTC blocked the online newspapers *Sudanese Online*, *Al-Rakoba*, and *Hurriyat*,³³ the latter two of which are known to be anti-government. *Hurriyat* is based in Kampala, Uganda and its editorial staff is comprised of prominent journalists who left Sudan after enduring numerous court trials for their writings. *Al-Rakoba*, on the other hand, has a number of anonymous journalists inside Sudan but is managed by a group based in the Gulf region.³⁴ As of April 2013, only *Al-Rakoba* has been unblocked, while *Hurriyat* and *Sudanese Online* remain blocked and accessible only through anonymous browsing programs such as Tor. From some connections, adding an “s” to the “http” component of a blocked URL to access it via the secure https protocol can open the website.

In mid-September 2012, the NTC blocked the entire YouTube platform following the viral spread of the “Innocence of Muslims” video that instigated protests in Sudan and across the Muslim world,³⁵ though the website was still accessible using https. Two days before YouTube was banned, protests against the film took place in front of the U.S. and German embassies in Khartoum,

³⁰ “Blocking Or Unblock Websites,” National Telecommunications Corporation, last modified May 6, 2013, <http://www.ntc.gov.sd/index.php?n=b3B0aW9uPWNvbV9ja2ZvcmlzJnZpZxc9Y2tmb3JtcyZpZD0xJkI0ZW1pZD0xMjkmbGFuZz11aw%3D%3D>.

³¹ OpenNet Initiative, “Internet Filtering in Sudan.”

³² OpenNet Initiative, “Internet Filtering in Sudan.”

³³ Eva Galperin, “Sudan Revolts, Government Cracks Down on Dissent,” Electronic Frontier Foundation, July 10, 2012, <https://www.eff.org/deeplinks/2012/07/sudan-revolts-government-cracks-down-dissent>.

³⁴ Interview with journalist affiliated with *Al-Rakoba* in Khartoum, Sudan, January 20, 2013.

³⁵ “Sudan Blocks YouTube Over Anti-Islam Film – Sources,” *Sudan Tribune*, September 17, 2012, <http://www.sudantribune.com/spip.php?article43916>.

leading to the deaths of two protesters following clashes with the police.³⁶ The platform was unblocked in November 2012 and remains so as of May 2013.

The Internet Service Control Unit within the NTC manages the filtering of online content, and users can submit requests through the NTC website to either block or unblock websites “that are deemed not containing pornography.”³⁷ Nevertheless, the NTC does not specify whether the requests to block or unblock extend to political websites. Users attempting to access a blocked site are met with a black page that explicitly states, “This site has been blocked,” by the NTC and includes a contact e-mail address at filtering@ntc.gov.sd.³⁸

As a result of growing online censorship, some opposition news outlets have begun to move their servers outside the country to avoid blocking. For example, *Sudanese Online* currently operates from the United States, while *Sudan Tribune* is based out of France and *Al Taghyeer* (“Change”), a new online newspaper launched on May 3, 2013 on World Press Freedom Day, is based in the United Kingdom.³⁹ This trend will likely continue if a draft media law with implications for digital news is passed (see “Violations of User Rights”).

Despite increasing instances of internet censorship in 2012, online newspapers have had more freedom than traditional media outlets, which are frequently subject to pre-publication censorship, confiscations of entire press runs of newspapers, and warnings from National Intelligence and Security Service (NISS) agents against reporting on certain taboo topics.⁴⁰ Restrictions on traditional news outlets increased following the National Security Act of 2010, which gives the NISS permission to arrest journalists and censor newspapers under the pretext of “national security.”⁴¹ As such, many print newspapers have begun to circulate censored or banned material on their websites and social media pages. For example, *Al-Midan* newspaper, the mouthpiece of the communist party, has used Facebook and its website to publish articles since May 2012. *Al-Jareeda* also uses its Facebook page to publish censored material. Nevertheless, the authorities have begun to crackdown against such forms of online journalism. At the end of 2012, one *Al-Jareeda* journalist reported that he was threatened by the NISS to prevent him from publishing an interview with a young politician on the newspaper’s Facebook page after it was censored from the print version.⁴²

In response to the Arab Spring events and the proliferation of anti-government protest movements organized on social media sites in early 2011, the ruling National Congress Party launched a Cyber

³⁶ “Sudan Protesters Storm German Embassy, Raise Islamic Flag,” Reuters, September 14, 2012, <https://www.nydailynews.com/news/world/sudan-protesters-storm-german-embassy-raise-islamic-flag-article-1.1159566>.

³⁷ “Blocking Or Unblock Websites.”

³⁸ Image of a blocked site: <https://docs.google.com/file/d/0B6mgwvpJ6ladERXT3RTZW1jSkk/edit>.

³⁹ Reem Abbas, “Sudan’s Shift from Print to Online Newspapers,” Doha Centre for Media Freedom, May 16, 2013, <http://www.dc4mf.org/en/node/3740>.

⁴⁰ Interview with an editor-in-chief in Khartoum, Sudan, August 2012.

⁴¹ The NISS carries out arbitrary arrests, may detain an individual for up to 45 days without charges and can renew the detention period after the end of the 45-day period. NISS officers have total immunity from the law. “Sudanese Security Service Carries out Brutal Campaign Against Opponents,” Amnesty International, July 19, 2010, <http://www.amnesty.org/en/news-and-updates/report/sudanese-security-service-carries-out-brutal-campaign-against-opponents-2010>.

⁴² Interview with an activist, October 2012, Khartoum, Sudan.

Jihadist Unit to conduct “online defense operations” and “crush online dissent.”⁴³ While the cyber jihadists existed on a smaller scale before 2011, the government began expanding the unit when it realized the powerful capacity of social media and online journalism to disseminate information, communicate events to the international community, and mobilize protests.

In 2011, a leaked document revealed that the Cyber Jihadist Unit employed over 200 individuals divided across different locations and who worked three shifts to ensure around the clock coverage, particularly during timeframes when internet traffic is highest, such as late at night and during the weekend.⁴⁴ More recent research found that the number of recruits increased in 2012, with the NISS recruiting heavily at government universities, especially at the police-owned Al-Ribat University.⁴⁵ The Unit seems to have adequate funding for training, and stipends are given to the young recruits who are mostly students or unemployed youth. According to private interviews, the cyber-jihadists have also received training courses in hacking and online monitoring in India and Malaysia, among other countries.

Based at the NISS, the Cyber Jihadist Unit proactively monitors content posted on blogs, social media websites, and online newspaper forums. The Unit also infiltrates online discussions in an effort to ascertain information about cyber-dissidents as well as spread misinformation. This strategy has been employed most prominently on the news forum, *Sudanese Online*, which is known for its popularity among antigovernment intellectuals, journalists, politicians and activists. When the government took notice of the website’s influence in the mid-2000s, it planted contributors to spread misinformation, instigate problems between users, and discredit information written by members of the forum.⁴⁶

In August 2012, a few weeks after a massive security crackdown subdued the wave of protests across the country, an exiled activist started a thread on *Sudanese Online* titled, “Accounts Targeted and Monitored by the Cyber-Jihad Unit,” that included a list of 274 names, Facebook pages and groups and described the expanded technical capacities of the unit. Leaked to the exiled activist by “a trusted source,”⁴⁷ the list made evident that the unit’s primary targets were online activists, particularly young people, whose social media accounts publish timely information about the protests and news about human rights violations.⁴⁸ Also included on the list were Facebook groups of university protest and social movements, such as the “University is Free and the Soldiers should Leave” group, and of youth movements such as Girifna (“We are fed up”), Sharara, and Sudan Change Now. One of the individuals targeted was Mohamed Hassan Alem (known as Boshi), who became popular after a video of him mocking a ruling party official went viral on YouTube in late

⁴³ E-mail interview with editors from *Hurriyat* and *Al-Rakoba*, January 2013; “Sudan to Unleash Cyber Jihadists,” BBC News, March 23, 2011, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/technology-12829808>.

⁴⁴ “With the NCP’s Documents: Operation Electronic Defense to Bring Down the Sudanese Revolution” [in Arabic], *Sudan Motion*, April 14, 2012, <http://sudanmotion.com/index.php/news/3-sudan-news/4143-2012-04-14-10-30-28>.

⁴⁵ Interview with telecommunications expert in Khartoum, Sudan, January 15, 2013.

⁴⁶ Interview with a press freedom advocate and journalist in Khartoum, Sudan, January 16, 2012.

⁴⁷ Bukhari Osman, “Accounts Targeted by Cyber Jihad Unit” [in Arabic], August 23, 2012, *Sudanese Online*, <http://www.sudaneseonline.com/cgi-bin/sdb/2bb.cgi?seq=print&board=400&msg=1345716699&rn=1>

⁴⁸ For example, the first name mentioned in the list was Amani Al-Agab, a well-known online activist who is very active on Sudanese forums as well as Facebook. There is little information available on Amani Al-Agab; however, it is known that she is outside Sudan. <http://www.change.org/users/7806131>

2011, leading to his arrest.⁴⁹ Najla Al-Sheikh, a popular Sudanese video-blogger and human rights documentarian whose YouTube page has nearly one million views,⁵⁰ and Wail Taha, a former editor of the online newspaper, *Hurriyat*, were also listed.

In 2012, the authorities began to employ social media tools to discredit and spread misinformation about the opposition, launching smear campaigns against activists such as Rudwan Dawod, a Darfurian humanitarian aid worker who was arrested in July 2012 during a non-violent demonstration. Two days after his arrest, a Facebook page was created accusing Dawod of being a part of a terrorist circle that was preparing to bomb Khartoum.⁵¹

With the growing popularity of forums such as *Sudanese Online* in the mid-2000s, citizens, especially young people, began creating their own blogs to voice their opinions, leading to considerable growth of the blogosphere over the past couple of years. The more active Sudanese bloggers write in the English language. As of early 2013, there were about 300 Sudanese blogs registered in the newly established Sudanese Bloggers Network,⁵² compared to approximately 70 blogs in October 2011.⁵³

Blogging has also become an important platform for journalists and writers who use it to publish commentary that is free from the restrictions leveled on newspapers, and to publicize their books. For example, the well-known Sudanese writer Abdul-Aziz Baraka Sakin uses his blog to publish sections of his books for preview by the public and to distribute his books that are currently banned.⁵⁴

Blogs have also given ethnic, gender, and religious minorities a venue to express themselves. In 2007, a blogger known as “Black-Gay-Arab” appeared in the Sudanese blogosphere, taking many by surprise in a country where homosexuality is punished by the death penalty.⁵⁵ Documenting his life as a gay man in a conservative society and chronicling his family’s attitude toward his sexuality, the blog eventually enabled its author and other Sudanese LGBT people to establish a website that became an association for the Sudanese LGBT community called Freedom Sudan.⁵⁶ Another blogger, Osman Naway from the Nuba minority ethnic group, uses his blog to spread awareness

⁴⁹ “Sudanese Activist Arrested Days After Heckling Ruling Party Official,” *Sudan Tribune*, January 1, 2012, <http://www.sudantribune.com/Sudanese-activist-arrested-days.41152>.

⁵⁰ Nagla Elshakh’s YouTube page, accessed May 24, 2013, <http://www.youtube.com/user/naglaseed>.

⁵¹ Timeline photo on Facebook page of “Sudan.E.Army, posted July 4, 2012, https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=340853672655563&set=a.194049490669316.46463.194019520672313&type=1&relevant_count=1; John Zogby, “Sudanese Activist Charged With Terrorism,” *On the Ground* (blog), *New York Times*, July 11, 2012, <http://kristof.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/07/11/sudanese-activist-charged-with-terrorism/>.

⁵² Interview with the Sudanese Bloggers Network, January 23, 2013, <http://sdunlimitedbloggers.blogspot.com/>.

⁵³ Amir Ahmad Nasr, “Sudanese Bloggers,” *Sudanese Thinker* (blog), March 26, 2009, <http://www.sudanese thinker.com/sudanese-bloggers/>.

⁵⁴ Abdul-Aziz Baraka Sakin is one of Sudan’s most prolific writers. He is a novelist and short story writer who has published over six books and is also a campaigner for children’s rights. He blogs at <http://barakasakin.blogspot.com>. See, Reem Abbas, “Comment is Free,” *Guardian*, October 26, 2012, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2012/oct/26/secret-reading-sudan-banning-books>.

⁵⁵ *Blackgayarab - Gay and Proud* (blog): <http://black-gay-arab.blogspot.com/>

⁵⁶ Freedom Sudan: The Sudanese LGBT Association: <http://freedomsudan.webs.com/>

about the persecution of citizens from the Nuba Mountains and to document the recently reignited war in the region.⁵⁷

During the summer 2012 student protests against the government's harsh economic austerity plan, social media and e-mail became the primary tools used to mobilize, share information, and communicate as mobile phones became increasingly unsafe to use. According to youth activists, most communications between the protesters during that time were conducted through WhatsApp, a free mobile messaging application that can be accessed via mobile internet. The mobile app was considered a much safer mode of communication than phone calls or text messages, which the authorities could tap or track.⁵⁸ Nevertheless, an overwhelming number of activists interviewed for this report revealed a low awareness of digital security and limited knowledge of ways to stay digitally safe, such as how to delete a Skype conversation.

Meanwhile, digital media activism enabled the protests to spread from its starting point in Khartoum to numerous cities around the country,⁵⁹ gathering between hundreds and thousands of demonstrators to voice opposition against growing economic hardships in Sudan. Despite the effective use of digital media tools in mobilizing the widespread demonstrations, the government was ultimately successful in suppressing the movement through its violent crackdown against the protesters, journalists, and online activists. Consequently, the protest movement resulted in no concrete changes to the government's austerity plans.

Nevertheless, the internet continues to grow as a powerful tool for activists to fight for social, political, and economic change. In one prominent case, an online campaign helped lead to the eventual release of Jalila Khamis, an activist who spent nine months in detention without charge until December 13, 2012, when an online campaign mobilized a silent protest in front of the Women's Prison in Omdurman where she was being held, and she was produced in court. The campaign also informed many individuals, both inside and outside Sudan, of Khamis' case and made her trials a public event, with dozens of attendees waiting outside the courtroom at each trial and posting real-time updates of the trial proceedings on social media.⁶⁰ Khamis was finally released and acquitted of all charges on January 20, 2013 (see "Violations of User Rights").⁶¹

Another significant case of digital media activism erupted in early 2011 and continued through 2012 following the arrest and sexual assault of Girifna activist, Safia Ishaq, in January 2011. After her release, Girifna circulated a YouTube video in which Ishaq detailed the gang-rape she endured at the hands of three NISS agents while in detention, making her the first Sudanese woman to speak

⁵⁷ Osman Naway is a human rights activist and blogger from the Nuba Mountains in Southern Kordofan state. He is affiliated with Arry Organization for Human rights (<http://arry.org/>), which was closed by the Sudanese government in December 2012.

⁵⁸ Interviews with youth activists.

⁵⁹ Isma'il Kushkush, "Protesters and the Police Clash in Sudan," *New York Times*, July 6, 2012, https://www.nytimes.com/2012/07/07/world/africa/in-sudan-protesters-clash-with-the-riot-police.html?_r=0.

⁶⁰ Interview with cyber-activist in Khartoum, Sudan, January 20, 2013.

⁶¹ Amnesty International, "Sudan Releases Prisoner of Conscience," press release, January 20, 2013, <http://www.amnesty.org/en/for-media/press-releases/sudan-releases-prisoner-conscience-2013-01-20>.

publicly about sexual assault perpetrated by the authorities.⁶² Her YouTube testimony led to a viral online campaign that helped the coalition, “No to Women’s Oppression,” mobilize public protests against the frequent cases of sexual assault experienced by Sudanese women, especially those who have voiced public opinion against the government.⁶³

Nevertheless, the NISS took numerous journalists to trial for writing about the Ishaq case in local newspapers under charges of “publishing false information” and “jeopardizing the trust between the public and security forces.”⁶⁴ The trials of those journalists also received significant public attention, and activists used Facebook and Twitter to mobilize a public presence at the court hearings. As of April 2013, Ishaq’s case is still being heard at a regional African court,⁶⁵ though the government maintains its denial of the incident. Ishaq eventually fled Sudan due to increasing harassment.

VIOLATIONS OF USER RIGHTS

A draft media law was proposed in December 2012 that aims to further restrict media freedom in Sudan; it is also likely to include provisions to regulate online media. Numerous bloggers and online journalists were arrested or harassed for their involvement with the June 2012 protests, while a number of activists were prosecuted for their coverage of the conflict areas in Southern Kordofan and the Nuba Mountains. An online journalist was also tortured in 2012 for her social activism.

Freedom of speech, expression and association are nominally protected under the 2005 Interim National Constitution that was adopted as part of the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) between the government of Sudan and the Southern rebel group, though the constitution officially expired following the independence of South Sudan in July 2011. A permanent constitution is currently being drafted as of May 2013.

In 2007, Sudan enacted the Informatic Offences (Combating) Act (known as the IT Crime Act),⁶⁶ which does not guarantee free speech and criminalizes the establishment of websites that criticize the government, in addition to websites that publish defamatory material and content that disturbs public morality or public order.⁶⁷ Violations of the IT Crime Act involve fines and prison sentences between two to five years. While only one case of defamation has been filed under the IT Crime

⁶² Maha El-Sanosi, “The Violation of Women’s Rights in Sudan: In the Name of the Law?” *Afrika*, April 6, 2012, <http://www.afrika.no/Detailed/21360.html>.

⁶³ Amel Gorani, “Rape as a Tool of War,” *Geopolitical Monitor*, December 29, 2011, <http://www.geopoliticalmonitor.com/rape-as-a-weapon-of-war-4568/>; “Safia Ishaq Talks,” *Girifna*, February, 24, 2011, <http://www.girifna.com/2602>.

⁶⁴ Nahid Mohamed Al-Hassan, trial report by Girifna (not published), October 6, 2011, Khartoum, Sudan.

⁶⁵ The People’s Court in the Gambia.

⁶⁶ “The Informatic Offences (Combating) Act, 2007,” National Telecommunications Corporation, http://www.ntc.gov.sd/images/stories/docs/English/Informatics_offences_Act_2007.pdf.

⁶⁷ Abdelgadir Mohammed Abdelgadir, “Fences of Silence: Systematic Repression of Freedom of the Press, Opinion and Expression in Sudan,” International Press Institute, 2012, http://www.freemedia.at/fileadmin/media/Fences_of_Silence-AbdelgadirMAbdelgadir-3.pdf.

Act since its enactment in 2007,⁶⁸ the Act inherently contradicts Sudan's constitutional protection of freedom of expression and fundamentally undermines internet freedom in the country.

For bloggers and online activists, the press and criminal laws have been more dangerous. In 2009, the government revised the highly restrictive 2004 Press and Printed Press Materials Law, which continued to allow for restrictions on the press in the interests of national security and public order and holds editors-in-chief liable for all content published in their newspapers.⁶⁹ There is no specific reference to online media, though the press law's broad wording allows for its application to online content. In December 2012, a new draft press law was presented to the national assembly that aims to further restrict media freedom in Sudan. While the draft law has yet to be publicly released, a member of the Sudanese National Council revealed in an interview with the Doha Centre for Media Freedom in April 2013 that the new law would include regulations on online media.⁷⁰ Meanwhile, the authorities also restrict media freedom through the 2010 National Security Act, which gives the NISS immunity from persecution and the permission to arrest, detain and censor newspapers under the pretext of national security.⁷¹ Furthermore, Sudan's judiciary is not independent and has taken peremptory actions in cases of freedom of expression.

Since the Arab Spring events in 2011, journalists in Sudan have faced increasing harassment and repression,⁷² with at least 20 journalists and editors subjected to fines, interrogations, detentions, jail sentences, or trials for charges ranging from defamation, publishing false information, or undermining the constitution in 2012.⁷³ According to the Sudanese Bloggers Network, bloggers and citizen journalists have also been increasingly harassed or detained in recent years, particularly during times of protest.

In one notable case, the popular blogger and Twitter-user Usamah Mohamed was arrested on June 22, 2012 while covering protests in the Burri neighborhood of Khartoum.⁷⁴ As one of the most prominent bloggers using the Twitter hashtag #SudanRevolts to live-tweet the events of the protest, Usamah was detained along with his brother for documenting the arrest of other protestors on Twitter and for posting a video on Al-Jazeera of himself explaining his reasons for taking part in

⁶⁸ Interview with a press freedom advocate in Khartoum, Sudan, January 16, 2012.

⁶⁹ Committee to Protect Journalists, "Repressive press law passed in Sudan," press release, June 11, 2009, <http://www.cpj.org/2009/06/repressive-press-law-passed-in-sudan.php>.

⁷⁰ Reem Abbas, "Proposed Sudan Media Law Targets Press Freedom," *Al-Monitor*, January 17, 2013, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/01/sudan-press-freedom.html#ixzz2OY2WyeL3>; Ahmed Vall, "New Law Will Grant Greater Media Freedom in Sudan," Doha Centre for Media Freedom, April 7, 2013, <http://www.dc4mf.org/en/content/new-law-will-grant-greater-media-freedom-sudan>.

⁷¹ "Sudanese Security Service Carries Out Brutal Campaign Against Opponents," Amnesty International, July 19, 2010, <http://www.amnesty.org/en/news-and-updates/report/sudanese-security-service-carries-out-brutal-campaign-against-opponents-2010>.

⁷² "Journalists Face Increasing Harassment in Sudan," Amnesty International, May 3, 2012, <http://www.amnesty.org/en/news/journalists-face-increasing-harassment-sudan-2012-05-02>.

⁷³ Journalists are Amel Habbani, Nahid Al-Hassan, Faisal Mohamed Salih, Omer Al-Garrai, Saad Al-Deen Ibrahim, Fatima Ghazzali, Faiz Al-Seleik, Abdullah Al-Sheikh, Mohamed Lateif, Zeinab Mohamed Salih, Gafaar Al-Subki and Hassan Ishaq, among others.

⁷⁴ Interview with Sudanese Bloggers Network, January 23, 2013.

the demonstrations.⁷⁵ His brother, Asaad Mohamed, who is also popular on Twitter, was released a few hours after his arrest, while Usamah was transported to NISS offices where he was beaten for five hours after he refused to unlock his iPhone. Described by an NISS officer to other detainees as “the first to speak about the protests to the international community,”⁷⁶ Usamah was held for two months, during which he was subjected to long interrogations about his e-mail, Facebook, and other accounts on the opposition forums, *Al-Rakoba* and *Sudanese Online*.⁷⁷ NISS officers further accused Usamah of posting his video as part of a coordinated effort to take the Sudanese government to the International Criminal Court. He was released in early August 2012 without charges, along with scores of other detainees arrested during the protests.

The same allegation about the International Criminal Court was leveled against the prominent video-blogger Nagla Sid-Ahmed for her documentary work on Southern Kordofan—where rebels have fought against the government since June 2011 following rigged local elections—and the humanitarian situation in the Nuba Mountains. In the past few years, Sid-Ahmed had recorded over 5,000 videos on human rights abuses, detentions, and political events, leading her to become a target of NISS harassment and attack throughout 2012.⁷⁸ In January, NISS agents raided Sid-Ahmed’s home and confiscated her laptop and cameras. In the following months, she was summoned for interrogation numerous times, particularly during the protests in June, and was often forced to stay in the NISS office for over 12 hours without food. Her home was also monitored, and she received messages on Facebook that threatened to harm her children. After months of harassment amid the deteriorating state of her health, Sid-Ahmed and her family left Sudan in July 2012.⁷⁹ In October, the NISS lodged a formal case against her in absentia, charging her with conspiracy against the state and inciting hatred, among other charges, under the Sudanese criminal law of 1991, which prescribe a minimum of three years in jail and a maximum of the death penalty if she returns to Sudan.⁸⁰

In March 2012, teacher and activist Jalila Khamis was arrested from her home in the middle of the night after appearing in a YouTube video filmed by Nagla Sid-Ahmed in which she discussed the humanitarian situation in Southern Kordofan.⁸¹ In May 2012, Sid-Ahmed was summoned for interrogation about Khamis’s video and accused of spreading false information.⁸² Meanwhile, Khamis remained in detention without charge until December 2012, when she was formally charged under six different articles of the 1991 criminal law, including Article 21 for “participation in the execution of a criminal conspiracy,” Article 51 for “waging war against the state,” and Article

⁷⁵ Interview with Usama Mohammed in Khartoum, Sudan, January 24, 2013; Reem Abbas, “Media and Bloggers Censored as Protests Spread Across Sudan,” *UNCUT* (blog), Index on Censorship, July 2, 2012, <http://uncut.indexoncensorship.org/2012/07/protests-sudan-intafada-censorship/>.

⁷⁶ Reem Abbas, “Media and Bloggers Censored as Protests Spread Across Sudan.”

⁷⁷ Reem Abbas, “Media and Bloggers Censored as Protests Spread Across Sudan.”

⁷⁸ Interview with Girifna in Khartoum, Sudan, May, June 2012.

⁷⁹ “A Citizen Journalist and Activist in Forced Exile,” Girifna, October, 7, 2012, <http://www.girifna.com/6901>.

⁸⁰ Interview with Girifna in Khartoum, Sudan, June 2012; “A Citizen Journalist and Activist in Forced Exile,” *Sudanese Online*, October 5, 2012, <http://www.sudaneseonline.com/news/6233-a-citizen-journalist-and-activist-in-forced-exile.html>.

⁸¹ Nagla AlSheikh’s YouTube video, “Jalila Khamis Koko Tells the Suffering of the Nuba People” [in Arabic], June 15, 2011, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m9EPmxqMLfo>; “Nuba Mountains Female Activist Arrested,” Girifna, March 18, 2012, <http://www.girifna.com/5080>.

⁸² Interview in Khartoum, Sudan, June 2012.

64 for “inciting hatred against sects or between them,” among others.⁸³ The YouTube video was used as the main evidence against Khamis.

Following a month-long trial, international pressure, and a local campaign calling for her freedom, Khamis was finally released on January 20, 2013 after the prosecutor dropped five of the six charges due to insufficient evidence. While she was ultimately charged under Article 66 for the “publication of false news,” which carries a maximum sentence of six months,⁸⁴ the ten months that Khamis had already spent in prison was deemed sufficient for her punishment. Nevertheless, Khamis’ case sets a dangerous precedent for digital activism and will likely lead to increasing self-censorship and the disempowerment of bloggers and netizens who use social media to advocate for human rights in Sudan.

During the antigovernment demonstrations of 2012, hundreds of activists, journalists, and bloggers were arrested for their participation and coverage of the protest events, including the prominent blogger, Maha El-Sanosi. Although El-Sanosi was released the same day of her arrest on June 21, she was detained again a few days later during a house raid by 12 NISS officers in the middle of the night. She was later released on bail.⁸⁵ In a private interview, El-Sanosi expressed concern over the NISS’s ability to find her home given the precautions she had taken to keep her whereabouts hidden.⁸⁶

The government actively monitors internet communications, and the NISS regularly intercepts private e-mail messages.⁸⁷ The Sudan Police Department also monitors internet cafes to make sure that users do not access websites deemed immoral by the authorities.⁸⁸ Government monitoring and surveillance of online activists and journalists became particularly pronounced in 2012 during the “Sudan Revolts” protests. Mobile phones became an especially dangerous tool for activists, with one youth activist describing how the authorities “have the technology not only to tap your phone calls, but to figure out your location if you use your phone.”⁸⁹ In one notable instance, the activist Mohamed Ahmed switched off his phone for a few days in early July 2012 to avoid arrest while in hiding from the NISS.⁹⁰ When he turned his phone back on as he was walking home to see his family, NISS officials roaming his neighborhood managed to track his location based on the nearest telecommunications tower and arrested him later that night.⁹¹

Mobile phone tapping and tracking was made more feasible in 2008 when a law was enacted requiring subscribers to register their SIM cards. MTN was ordered to disconnect prepaid subscribers who did not register their personal information by the deadline, resulting in the

⁸³ “Today Jalila Enters her 9th Month!” Girifna, December 15, 2012, <http://www.girifna.com/7327>. The other charges were under Article 50, undermining the constitutional system, Article 53, espionage against the country and Article 66, publication of false news.

⁸⁴ “Video: Jalila Khamis is Free!” Girifna, January 21, 2013, <http://www.girifna.com/7724>.

⁸⁵ “Sudan Arrests Activists as UN Calls for Calm,” *al-Akhbar*, June 28, 2012, <http://english.al-akhbar.com/node/9009>.

⁸⁶ Interview in Khartoum, Sudan, June-July 2012.

⁸⁷ U.S. Department of State, “Sudan 2012 Human Rights Report,” <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/204383.pdf>.

⁸⁸ OpenNet Initiative, “Internet Filtering in Sudan.”

⁸⁹ Interview in Khartoum, Sudan, August 1, 2012.

⁹⁰ A pseudonym was used here to protect the privacy and identity of this activist.

⁹¹ Interview in Khartoum, Sudan, August 1, 2012.

telecom losing 1.1 million of its 2.2 million subscribers.⁹² Nevertheless, it was still relatively easy to purchase a SIM card without providing personal information for activation until the June 2012 protests when the policy became more strictly enforced, particularly within the partially government-owned telecom, Sudani.⁹³

Facebook has become increasingly monitored and used to track and incriminate activists for arrest.⁹⁴ During the June 2012 protests, the social media website was the first account detainees were asked to open while in detention, and private messages as well as the pages that activists “like” were checked to see if they were affiliated with a certain political party or social movement. Consequently, many young people stopped posting personal pictures on their profiles and began changing their Facebook names to pseudonyms to avoid being tracked. Detained activists were also pressured to provide the passwords to their e-mail accounts, leading the friends and family members of detainees to change passwords or delete accounts for activists while they were in detention.⁹⁵

Despite the pervasive efforts to monitor and intercept internet and mobile communications, the government’s technological capacity and expertise is seemingly low. Testimonies from released detainees reveal that security agents still document information manually and that security offices seem to lack computer technology. Testimonies also noted that NISS agents and the Cyber Jihadist Unit have very low levels of English-language competency.⁹⁶ This allows citizen journalists working in English to have slightly more freedom, since the authorities have thus far focused mainly on monitoring Arabic-language online content. As such, incidents of arrest and harassment of online journalists and bloggers writing in English have been uncommon.

Nevertheless, telecommunications providers are required to comply with government demands to proactively monitor communications and hand over user information. In 2009, for example, a leaked letter from the ruling party’s secretary of political affairs to National Congress Party leaders was published on *Sudanese Online*, detailing a directive made to the four telecom operators in Sudan to “monitor and follow up on any call that harms the interests of the homeland” and to gather the phone numbers of SPLM leaders so they could be placed under surveillance.⁹⁷

Journalists and activists in Sudan often face harassment, extralegal intimidation, and even torture at the hands of security agents. One egregious case of torture occurred in October 2012, when the online journalist and activist, Somia Hundusa, was kidnapped from the street as she left her house to buy food for her sick son.⁹⁸ While in detention, she was interrogated about her Facebook activity

⁹² “Connecting Sudan,” ITP, January 21, 2009, <http://www.itp.net/544237-connecting-sudan#.UZ-nALXvtg0>.

⁹³ Based on author’s research.

⁹⁴ Bukhari Osman, “Accounts Targeted by Cyber Jihad Unit” [in Arabic], August 23, 2012, *Sudanese Online*, <http://www.sudaneseonline.com/cgi-bin/sdb/2bb.cgi?seq=print&board=400&msg=1345716699&rn=1>.

⁹⁵ Interviews, Khartoum, Sudan, June-September 2012.

⁹⁶ Interview with a released detainee, August 2012, Khartoum, Sudan.

⁹⁷ Abdelgadir Mohammed Abdelgadir, “Fences of Silence: Systematic Repression of Freedom of the Press, Opinion and Expression in Sudan,” International Press Institute, 2012, http://www.freemedia.at/fileadmin/media/Fences_of_Silence-AbdelgadirMAbelgadir-3.pdf: 53.

⁹⁸ Interview in Khartoum, Sudan, November 2, 2012.

and shown printed copies of her articles.⁹⁹ Hundusa's family found her on November 2, 2012 in the suburbs of Khartoum North in terrible physical condition with a shaved head and burned and bruised body.¹⁰⁰

Another strategy employed by the Sudanese government to repress internet freedom is through technical attacks against opposition websites. For example, the websites *Al-Rakoba*, *SudaneseOnline*, *Sudanile*, and *Hurriyat* have all been frequently hacked between 2010 and 2012, likely by the Cyber-Jihad Unit.¹⁰¹ Websites such as *Sudanese Online* have struggled to retrieve archives after the numerous technical attacks throughout the years. The e-mail and social media accounts of activists have also been subject to widespread hacking.¹⁰²

⁹⁹ Interview in Khartoum, Sudan, November 2, 2012.

¹⁰⁰ "NISS Tortures Journalist Somia Hundosa," Girifna, November 3, 2012, <http://www.girifna.com/7006>.

¹⁰¹ E-mail interview with editors from *Hurriyat* and *Al-Rakoba*, January 2013.

¹⁰² Interview with a press freedom advocate and journalist, Khartoum, Sudan, January 16, 2012.