D5.1 Working Paper ET

Version 1 – 25 February 2026

→⊩ARM

Project Acronym: ARM

Project Full Title: ARM: The Long Arm of Authoritarian States

Call: HORIZON-CL2-2023-DEMOCRACY-01

Topic: Horizon-CL2-2023-DEMOCRACY-01-02

Type of Action: Horizon-RIA

Grant Number: 101132437

Project URL: https://cordis.europa.eu/project/id/101132437

DELIVERABLE 5.1	D5.1 WORKING PAPER ET
Related Work Package	WP5 – Ethiopia Case Study
Deliverable Lead	UH
Author(s)	Matti Pohjonen (UH) Amanuel Kebede (UH) Lovise Aalen (CMI)
Contact	media@arm-project.eu
Start date / Project Duration	1 Jan 2024 – 38 months
Type of Deliverable (R, DEM, DEC, Other)	R
Dissemination Level (PU, CO, CI)	PU
Date of Last Update	25 February 2026
Project Website	www.arm-project.eu

This deliverable has been submitted but not yet approved by the European Union.

Information Suppression in Ethiopia

1

Table of contents

Abstract

This working paper maps how the Ethiopian state has adapted different tactics of information suppression domestically and within the EU. Focusing on the post-2018 period under Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, it explains how the regime has adapted different tactics of information suppression inherited from previous regimes to meet the demands of a rapidly changing digital information environment. The paper explores the legal and institutional frameworks, maps the key actors and the patterns of authoritarian information suppression used, and focuses specifically on the practices of suppressing information at the level of production, dissemination and salience and among Ethiopia diaspora. This includes lawfare in the form of legal and institutional mechanisms, the use of internet shutdowns, as well as the recent use of a government-organised "media army", paid influencers, and AI-enabled propaganda. It explains the tactics and techniques used through empirical cases, such as the #NoMore campaign during the Tigray war (2020-22), crackdown of the media amid a growing insurgency in Amhara (2023-), and propaganda focusing on Ethiopia's right to access to the Red Sea. The paper argues that information suppression in Ethiopia, through a combination of censorship and propaganda, aims to secure the strategic objectives of regime survival and legitimation in a fragile context. The working paper particularly highlights the shift from traditional censorship and internet shutdowns to complementary strategies that shape information salience through flooding and agenda setting to control the narrative in the online environment. This, we argue, is an adaptation partly born of the experience of the Tigray war. The report thus outlines the tactics and techniques currently in use in Ethiopia, and its diaspora, and provides recommendations for the EU and civil society to defend and promote information freedom in especially fragile authoritarian contexts.

1. Introduction

This working paper maps how the Ethiopian state has adapted its tactics of information suppression to the new digital information environment. The proliferation of the use of disinformation, propaganda, and coordinated influence operations by authoritarian or semi-authoritarian states has sent alarm bells about the integrity of the information environment. This is particularly the case regarding information suppression by authoritarian states targeting democracies with the aim of undermining trust in democratic institutions and deepening divisions within society. This has resulted in efforts by policy makers and scholars to understand the phenomenon of digital authoritarianism or "the use of digital information technology by authoritarian regimes to carry out surveillance, repress, and manipulate domestic and foreign populations."[1]

The growing literature on digital authoritarianism has usually focused on the examples of China and Russia and their distinct approaches to the information environment. The Chinese model of digital authoritarianism is commonly used when referring to states with high-technological capabilities of surveillance and control of dissent on the internet, while the Russian model, in turn, has been historically used to emphasise states with more low-cost and hybrid approaches that use a repertoire of tactics from repressive legal regimes, intimidation and the use of disinformation and other forms of propaganda. While previous work on digital authoritarianism has focused on China and Russia, there is now an urgent need for research that would help better understand digital authoritarianism in its increasingly transnational and global dimensions. Other countries - both major global players such as India and Turkey as well as smaller and more peripheral actors - have also been developing their own unique approaches, often combining different approaches to suit their political needs and distinct media environments. To expand this kind of comparative and transnational understanding, this report undertakes the first of its kind systematic analysis of information suppression by the Ethiopian state.

Ethiopia provides a unique perspective to understand information suppression in global, regional and local contexts. As an authoritarian state experiencing violent conflict and a weakening central state power, Ethiopia provides a relevant counterpoint to debates on information manipulation and suppression, which have historically focused on strong and stable authoritarian states. The Ethiopian state has a long history of utilizing an array of digital authoritarian practices, including internet shutdowns, online censorship, digital surveillance, and offline information suppression, which have uniquely evolved in response to both changing technological developments and shifting political faultlines in the country. Additionally, Ethiopia has a large and politically active diaspora, including in the EU, which has always acted as an influential political actor both in Ethiopia and abroad. The

---

[1] Polyakova, A., & Meserole, C. (2019, August). Exporting digital authoritarianism: The Russian and Chinese models. Democracy and Disorder Series policy brief. 1–22.

example of Ethiopia thus allows us to closely examine and understand the transnational and comparative aspects of information suppression and its links to the EU's priorities from the perspective of an important regional player on which no prior systematic research exists. This report focuses on the post-2018 period in Ethiopia, following the ascendancy of Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed to power, to illustrate the dynamics and trajectories of information suppression as it has evolved under this regime. Based on the findings, it outlines recommendations for the EU and civil society to defend information freedom in especially fragile authoritarian contexts.
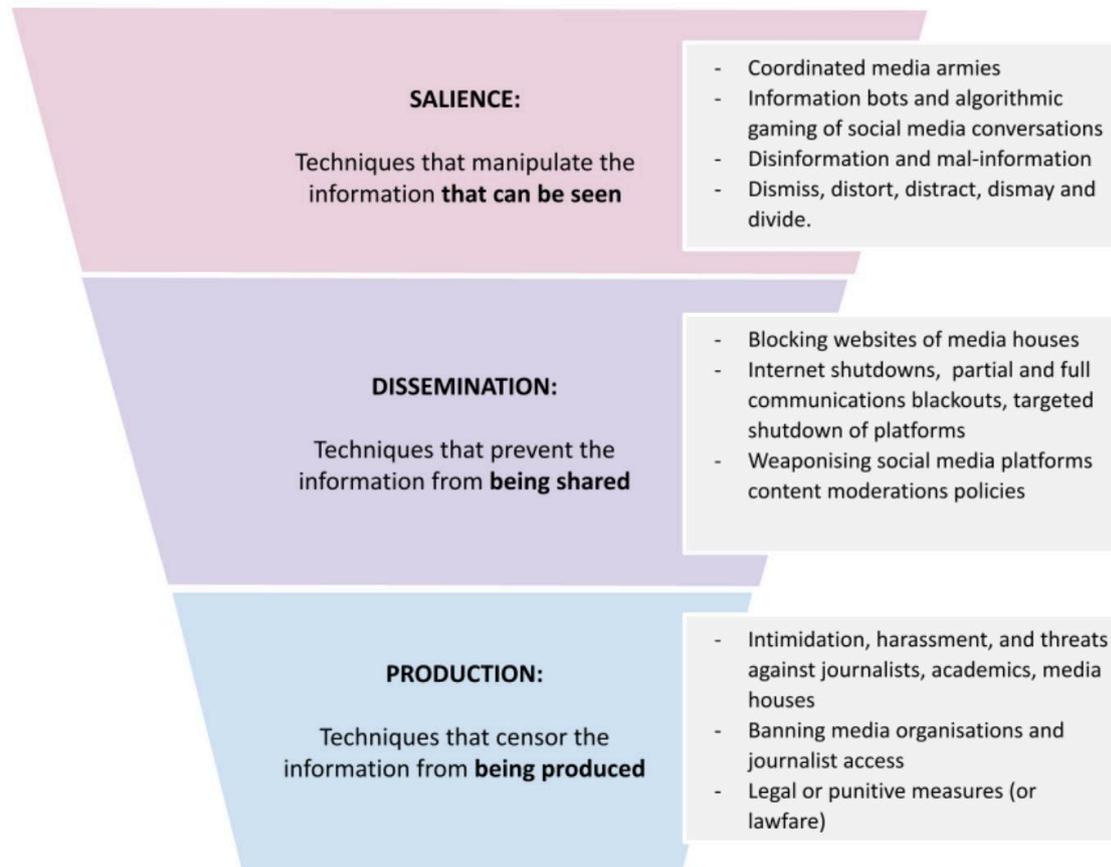
1.1 Defining information suppression

In this report, we conceptualise information suppression as a "set of actions to silence information with the purpose of muting dissenting voices or narratives within and outside a country's borders, serving the interest of strengthening a regime's grip on power."[2] We define information suppression as a specific subset of digital authoritarian practices that takes place on three levels. First, suppression of information at the **level of production** entails preventing the creation of information at its source by directly targeting professionals in the media, academia, and in civil society organisations (CSO). Second, suppression of information **at the level of dissemination** refers to blocking or restricting the spread and circulation of already-produced information through technical, legal, or other barriers. Thirdly, suppression of information at the **level of salience** entails manipulating and managing what types of information receives attention by domestic and global audiences without necessarily resorting to censorship and other such "harder" measures.

In simplified terms, these three levels of suppression - production, dissemination, and salience - can be seen as attempts by authoritarian governments to manage what *can be produced*, what *can be shared* and what *can be seen* in the contemporary networked hybrid media system.[3] **Figure 1** illustrates the similarities and differences between these three layers of information suppression that this report focuses on.

---

[2] Aalen, L., Lemaire, P. and de Seta, G. forthcoming.

[3] Chadwick, Andrew, 2017, *The Hybrid Media System: Politics and Power*, New York: Oxford Academic

Figure 1: Three interrelated levels of information suppression

These three levels also intersect with the transnational nature of information suppression. That is, such practices of information suppression also target the extensive diaspora communities of authoritarian countries with the aim of controlling narratives beyond the country's borders and to maintain political influence through transnational networks that often complement official political and diplomatic channels. Our starting point is that by examining the proliferating "disorders"[4] of the contemporary information environment from this perspective can help us both better understand

[4] Wardle, C., & Derakhshan, H. (2018). Information disorder: Toward an interdisciplinary framework for research and policy making (2nd rev. ed.). Council of Europe. https://rm.coe.int/information-disorder-report-version-august-2018/16808c9c77

the dynamic interactions between online disinformation and offline suppression inside authoritarian governments but also through their transnational effects globally and, more importantly, on the EU.

In addition to the three levels at which information suppression takes place, we also employ a heuristic framework adapted from the Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI) literature focusing on the **tactics** and **techniques** that authoritarian states use to suppress information.[5] Tactics help identify the operational goals of governments using FIMI, such as dismissing allegations, distorting the narrative, distracting public attention, dismaying the opposition and dividing groups and communities. Techniques, in turn, help identify the specific actions taken by governments (and other actors) to achieve these goals. These include mechanisms such as planning, preparation and execution of FIMI campaigns to achieve aims, such as flooding the information space with disinformation about political debates. [6]

The key takeaway from the report is creating a clearer understanding for researchers and policymaker of how fragile authoritarian states such as Ethiopia adapt their digital authoritarian toolbox in response to internal and external pressures. In Ethiopia, this adaptation has resulted in a shift from more traditional tactics of censorship and internet shutdowns to a more hybrid strategy of controlling the information space, with the aim of influencing the salience of the types of political narratives circulating in the social media space.

1.2   Information suppression as authoritarian adaptation

The use of information suppression by authoritarian governments can be seen as a form of adaptation to the internal and external political pressures a country faces. Based on an analysis of information suppression at the level of production, dissemination, and salience, including in its diaspora, this report shows how the aim of information suppression by the Ethiopian government is ultimately *to secure its strategic objectives of regime survival and legitimation in a fragile domestic and geopolitical context*. Particularly, there has been a marked shift from traditional tactics of direct censorship and internet shutdowns to complementary strategies that try to shape information salience using alternative measures such as flooding the online environment with government messaging and agenda setting to control the narrative. The core argument of the report is that these

---

[5]European External Action Service. (2023, February 7). *1st EEAS report on foreign information manipulation and interference threats.* https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/1st-eeas-report-foreign-information-manipulation-and-interference-threats_en/

[6] While the conventional cyber security approach to the exploration of information manipulation and interference include identifying Tactics, Techniques and Procedures (TTPs), we are not including Procedures in our analyses. This is in line with common practice in the information defence community using the DISARM frameworks, which avoids describing procedures - as these could easily be picked up by adversaries as explicit guidebooks for conducting such operations.

ongoing developments in Ethiopia should be seen as distinct forms of **authoritarian adaptation** that were born partly out of the experiences of the Tigray war as well as the operational necessities of adapting to a rapidly changing digital environment. The report will focus specifically on two distinct characteristics of information suppression in the Ethiopian case study.

First, information suppression in Ethiopia targets both domestic and international audiences, with differing strategic objectives in each case. Domestically, the aim of information suppression is to eliminate dissent and criticism, maintain elite and societal support (or at least acquiescence), mobilise domestic support and resources amid multiple insurgencies, control the narrative online, and delegitimise the government's challengers by painting them as a threat to the security, sovereignty and territorial integrity of the state. Externally, in turn, the aim of information suppression is to legitimise the regime internationally and obtain support in a turbulent geopolitical environment. The narratives employed by the Ethiopian state have also adapted to the context and nature of the crises the government faces. During the Tigray war (2020-22), the government framed international criticism as neo-colonial interference, with the goal of avoiding sanctions, and cultivating support from sympathetic state and non-state actors. The government also collaborated with the Ethiopian diaspora during this period to push back against criticism. In the post-Tigray war period, on the contrary, there have been efforts to repair relations with key Western partners, for instance by focusing on liberal economic reform. Regionally, the government's narratives have focused on advancing strategic agendas such as access to a sea outlet, as well as projecting strength in the Horn of Africa. Overall, the strategic objectives of information suppression identified in the report are directed towards regime survival and legitimation in a fragmented, conflict-prone, and fragile political context. These efforts have been often used as instruments to navigate immediate crises rather than pursuing a core, long term, and consistent narrative.

Second, we argue that the landscape of information suppression in Ethiopia demonstrates dynamism and evolution as the state adapts in response to various pressures and changes in the media environment in which it operates. In terms of mechanisms of information suppression, the Ethiopian government has historically relied on conventional information suppression mechanisms such as censorship, internet shutdowns, and media crackdowns to silence the opposition. While these practices are still in use, especially censorship and media crackdowns, shifting digital realities have made reliance on these "harder" tactics alone less viable. Increasing dependence of the economy on internet connectivity, the government's ambition of becoming a leader in digital technologies and AI in Africa, and high reputational costs of internet shutdowns have pushed the state towards a strategy of managing information salience rather than solely relying on suppression of its production and dissemination. This approach utilises new tactics catering to the networked digital environment such as flooding, distraction, and agenda-setting by state actors and its mobilised supporters to ensure that all conversations, even critical ones, remain tied to narratives and agendas set by the state.

The Tigray war was key in this shift of practices. The government's communication blackout in Tigray largely failed to stop information about the war from reaching the world, partly because of the mobilisation by the Tigrayan diaspora as well as efforts of international media and human rights organisations. However, the government's counter propaganda efforts - mobilising its base at home, and importantly, in the diaspora, through efforts like the #NoMore movement proved more effective in galvanising support and sympathy. Thus, this shift towards managing information salience, crystalised during and after the Tigray war, represents a strategic adaptation by an authoritarian state to the digital era, aimed less at persuasion than at controlling online discourse and drowning out dissent.

Image 1: Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed asking Ethiopians to defend the government on Twitter during the Tigray war

2. Methodology

The report used a mixed method approach using heterogeneous data sources to understand the contemporary dimensions of information suppression in Ethiopia. The following methods and data sources were used in the research:

Digital ethnography. Firstly, the research used long-term digital ethnography to explore different dimensions related to information suppression in Ethiopia and its diaspora. This included long-term observation of influential government officials and activists and monitoring relevant trends related to the changing digital media environment in Ethiopia, and its diaspora on Twitter/X, Tik-Tok, Facebook, Telegram and YouTube.
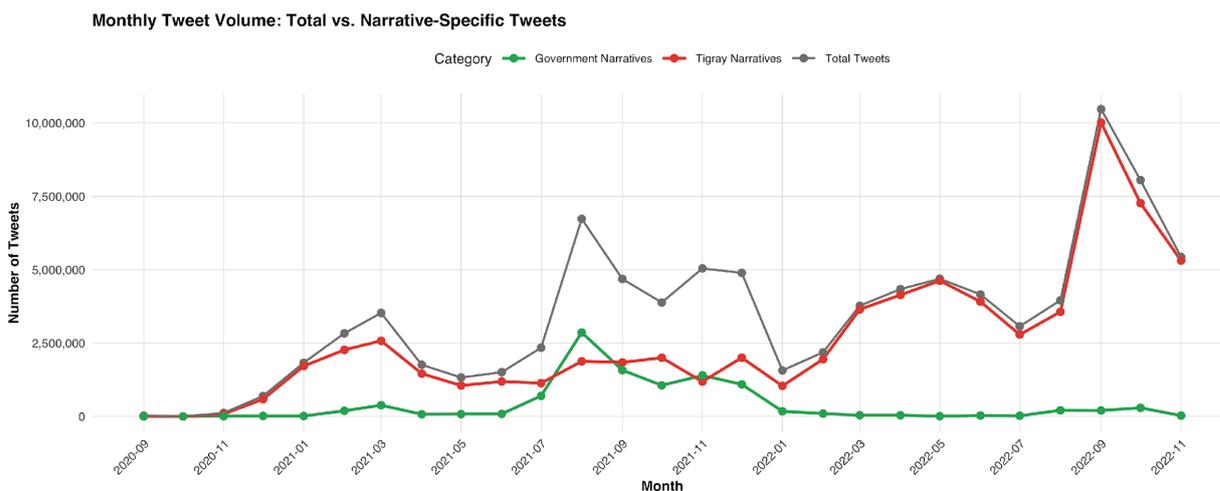
Literature review and grey literature. Secondly, this included an extensive search of civil society reports, news analyses and other grey literature.

Semi-structured interviews. Thirdly, the research also carried out in-depth semi-structured interviews with journalists, academics, officials and civil society actors in Ethiopia and in the EU. These interviews were used to gain a better understanding of the background factors, networks and actors involved in information suppression (production, dissemination and salience and diaspora). This consisted of 30 in-depth interviews giving insight into the different mechanisms of information suppression, with diaspora activists who were instrumental in organising pro-government campaigns during the Tigray war 2020-2022, and with journalists and academics affected or targeted in Europe.

The Tigray War Twitter dataset (2020-2022). Fourthly, the research also looked at the social media dimensions of information suppression during the Tigray War. The data used for this analysis included 92.9 million tweets and over 500k images collected between 1 September 2020 (a month before the eruption of the war) and 30 November 2022 (a month after the signing of the Pretoria peace agreement). This data was used to understand large-scale dynamics, trends and social media networks that were driving the online dimensions of the Tigray War and the government's use of various tactics and techniques to promote their war narrative.[7] **Figure 2** shows the overall distributions of the Tigray War dataset and pro-government and opposition narratives during the war.

---

[7] The data was collected using a combination of keywords and hashtags pertinent to the war's informational dimensions. These search terms and hashtags were carefully curated based, first, on initial exploratory research on the war when it began in November 2020 followed by more targeted queries later to fill in the gaps.

Monthly Tweet Volume: Total vs. Narrative-Specific Tweets

Category —●— Government Narratives —●— Tigray Narratives —●— Total Tweets

Figure 3: Daily distribution of tweets indicating pro-government and pro-TPLF hashtags

The research also explored other experimental methods to understand information suppression in the Ethiopian context. Conventionally, the suppression of information has looked at how authoritarian governments try to suppress information in either legacy media forms such as newspapers or on social media. Recently, however, researchers have also identified new tactics that governments are using, such as trying to influence the content available on Wikipedia or in Large-Language Model training data (LLM).

- **Information suppression on Wikipedia.** Governments try to suppress information on Wikipedia through mechanisms such as technical censorship, ranging from filtering specific articles in Iran or total platform bans in China and Turkey. States also try to manipulate content internally via "project capture" and disinformation using "sock-puppets," tactics employed, for instance, by Chinese state-linked editors and Russian actors regarding the Ukraine war.[8]

---

[8] Miller, C., Smith, M., Marsh, O., Balint, K., Inskip, C., & Visser, F. (2022). *Information warfare and Wikipedia*. Institute for Strategic Dialogue & CASM Technology.

- **Information suppression on LLMs.** Governments also try to influence the data used to train large language models (LLMs) to produce more favourable framings by key AI models by their activity. This usually refers to two types of tactics. The first are attempts to control or censor the types of knowledge that LLM's can process, for instance, by removing and blocking controversial events such as Tiananmen Square from Chinese LLM-models.[9] The second is called data poisoning, or data grooming, through which states try to potentially influence how LLMs frame important geopolitical events.[10]

As part of our research, we systematically tested whether these new modalities of information suppression applied to the Ethiopian case study. To evidence this, we carried out two pilot research projects. For Wikipedia, we created a custom workflow to identify possible Wikipedia edits[11] wars during the Tigray War. For LLMs, we created a custom research workflow to systematically probe blame attribution present in six different LLMs (OpenAI, Anthropic, Mistral, and DeepSeek and open-weight models like Gemma and Llama) in relation to key events during the Tigray War. Our research, however, found no conclusive evidence that the Ethiopian government, or its supporters, were systematically involved in trying to manipulate these platforms.

3. Patterns of authoritarian information suppression in Ethiopia and its diaspora

3.1. Political context

Authoritarian information suppression in Ethiopia needs to be placed into the country's unique political context. The focus on the post-2018 period was chosen for the research for two reasons. First, this represents a major rupture in Ethiopian politics that helps explain the dynamics today. Second, the escalating conflict in Ethiopia, including the Tigray War, in the post-2018 period, is central to understanding the current tactics of information suppression in Ethiopia, and its diaspora, today.

---

[9] Ahmed, M., Knockel, J., & Greenstadt, R. (2025). An analysis of Chinese censorship bias in LLMs. *Proceedings on Privacy Enhancing Technologies*, *2025*(4), 112–129. https://doi.org/10.56553/popets-2025-0122

[10] EUvsDisinfo. (2025, October 23). *Large language models: The new battlefield of Russian information warfare*. European External Action Service. https://euvsdisinfo.eu/large-language-models-the-new-battlefield-of-russian-information-warfare/

[11] Yasseri, T., Sumi, R., Rung, A., Kornai, A., & Kertész, J. (2012). Dynamics of conflicts in Wikipedia. PLOS ONE, 7(6), e38869. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0038869

Ethiopia went through a political transition in 2018 which brought Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed to power. First his administration initiated a series of reforms to address popular discontent by releasing political prisoners, welcoming exiled opposition back home, initiating a process to revise repressive laws, and even reapproaching the age-old enemy, neighbouring Eritrea, earning him a Nobel Peace Prize in 2019. While it initially appeared a smooth transition, confrontation between the new administration and the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) - the dominant party in the ruling coalition before the coming of Abiy Ahmed to power was bubbling under the surface. A major crack appeared when Abiy Ahmed transformed the ruling ethnic-based coalition - the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) - into a national, non-ethnic Prosperity Party in 2019 - a move the TPLF rejected and refused to join. The Prime Minister also removed key TPLF figures from important positions within the government.

Amid an alarming war of words and statements from the two sides, the escalation reached a tipping point when the TPLF decided to hold regional elections in September 2020 despite a federal decision to postpone the polls all over the country due to Covid-19. Eventually, armed confrontation erupted between TPLF forces and Federal forces in the Tigray region in November 2020, plunging the country into a two-year devastating civil war. The war, which was accompanied by pervasive violence against civilians, including mass atrocities and sexual violence, resulted in an estimated 300,000 to 800,000 casualties, before it was concluded through a Cessation of Hostilities Agreement in November 2022.[12]

While the guns were silenced in Tigray following this agreement, armed conflict continues to rage in the rest of the country, attesting to the inability of the Prosperity Party-led government to establish a stable political order. Particularly, the country's two largest regions are experiencing intransigent insurgencies. In Oromia, the Oromo Liberation Army (OLA) has been waging a low intensity insurgency since 2019 following a fallout with Abiy Ahmed's government. In Amhara, the Fano, a loose alliance of armed groups in the country, have been battling Federal and regional security forces since August 2023. These two insurgencies have challenged the territorial control and reach of the central government, as well as contributed to an overall atmosphere of insecurity and state fragility.

The internal dynamics are complicated by the sub-regional geopolitical dynamics of the Horn of Africa region, which is going through a radical reconfiguration. Relationships with neighbouring countries have become unpredictable and prone to conflict. Abiy Ahmed initially mended relationships with Eritrea, paving the way for a devastating Eritrean involvement in the Tigray war between 2020 and 2022 in support of Ethiopian forces against the TPLF. However, this temporary alliance between the Ethiopian and Eritrean governments has frayed since the signing of the Pretoria Agreement in 2022 between the Ethiopian government and the TPLF.

---

[12] University of Ghent, https://www.ethiopiatigraywar.com/incidents.php

This is further complicated by the Ethiopian government's desire for unimpeded access to the sea. In 2023, the Prime Minister announced that access to the sea is a matter of national survival and signalled the Red Sea as of paramount importance for its maritime ambitions. This has heightened tensions with Ethiopia's neighbours, particularly Eritrea and Somalia. As a result, military mobilisations are underway, and an armed confrontation is now a real possibility. These tensions have been accompanied by intense social media propaganda warfare, as both pro-Ethiopian and Pro-Eritrean social media actors mobilise to denounce and discredit the other.

While this working paper focuses primarily on the post-2018 period, legacies from previous regimes, especially the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF)-dominated Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) (1991-2018), still have enduring impacts that influence the current situation. **Table 1** below summarises the main elements of the political, media and legal environments that have influenced, and continue to influence, information suppression in Ethiopia in its various dimensions.

Period	Political Environment	Media Environment	Legal Environment
1991 – 2004	TPLF-led Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front takes power; ethnic federalism introduced	Limited private print media tolerated, but under pressure; self-censorship, state media dominant	Accession to UDHR & ICCPR; 1995 Constitution guarantees expression, press freedom, access to information
2005	Contested elections; opposition gains urban vote; repression intensifies	Crackdown on private media; arrests and closures, SMS closure	Turning point toward authoritarian lawfare
2005 – 2017	Authoritarian consolidation; stable but highly autocratic EPRDF rule	Journalists, bloggers, CSOs targeted. Diaspora & foreign media (BBC, DW, VOA, ESAT, OMN) crucial but jammed; Ethiopia ranks 150/180 on Reporters Without Borders index (2017)	Criminal Code (2004), Mass Media Law (2008), Anti-Terrorism Proclamation (2009), CSO Law (2009) enable repression ("repression through law")
2015 – 2018	Mass youth protests (Oromia & Amhara) weaken TPLF dominance	Media restrictions persist; protests covered mainly via diaspora & digital media	Existing repressive laws remain in force. Computer Crimes Proclamation (2016);

14

2018 – 2019	Abiy Ahmed becomes PM; political opening; peace with Eritrea; EPRDF replaced by Prosperity Party	Media liberalisation: exiled outlets return, sites unblocked, new TV channels; regional media gain autonomy	Reform wave begins; legal advisory council established.
2019 – 2020	Reform momentum slows; tensions rise	Early reversal: targeting of critical outlets	CSO Law (2019) liberalised; Media Law reform underway
2020 – 2022	Tigray War between the federal government and the TPLF	Severe media restrictions; arrests, intimidation, censorship	Hate Speech & Disinformation Proclamation (2020;
2023 – 2025	Ongoing insurgencies (OLA, Fano); regional instability; sea-access tensions	Ethiopia falls to 145/180 on RSF index (2025); YouTube-based outlets last space for dissent; highly fragmented ethnic media	Amendments to Media & CSO Laws (2025) roll back independence - shift to "repression despite the law"

3.2. Suppression of information production in Ethiopia

The suppression of information production in Ethiopia involves a wide range of tactics and techniques including legal frameworks, institutional actions, and direct measures against individuals and organisations. During the EPRDF, the government used both direct harassment, intimidation and imprisonment, and the introduction of new and repressive laws to target the free press, civil society and academia (repression through law). While there was initial improvement in the post-2018 period when it comes to legal and regulatory mechanisms, the laws have nonetheless been disregarded or misused (repression despite the law). Additionally, there is a wave of regressive legal revision that is making the laws more conducive to repression since 2024.

3.2.1. The legal environment

The Media Law of 2021, for instance, had several improvements that protected the free press, including loosening stringent defamation provisions and protecting the confidentiality of journalists' sources. It also provided safeguards against the pre-trial detention of journalists. However, an amendment to the law in 2025 undid most of the gains of the 2021 legislation. The revision enables the executive to have better control of the Ethiopian Media Authority (EMA) by shifting major responsibilities to the Prime Minister, including appointment of Director General. It also allows ruling party members to become members of the Media Board. These measures erode the independence of the EMA by making it dependent and partisan, which in turn is used to target independent

journalists. In addition, even standing safeguards that are still in place, like safeguards against pre-trial detention of journalists are often ignored.[13] As a result, despite a clear provision prohibiting pre-trial detention, Ethiopia consistently ranks among the top jailors of journalists.[14]

Laws and processes restricting information production in Ethiopia

- Media Law
- Anti-terrorism legislation
- Hate Speech and disinformation proclamation
- Tedious media and CSO license processes
- Bureaucratic restriction on access
- State of emergencies

The Anti-terrorism legislation - particularly its still vague and wide definitions of terrorism and incitement of violence[15] - is still another obstacle to independent journalism, with many recently detained journalists prosecuted under this legislation, particularly those connected to the recent conflict in the Amhara region. The recently adopted Hate Speech and Disinformation Proclamation is another threat to independent reporting and has already been used to target the private press and independent journalists. With the Tigray war, the intransigent insurgency in Oromia, and later the Fano insurgency in Amhara, several states of emergencies have been declared repeatedly, which set aside all other laws, making it even more straightforward for the government to accuse the media of endangering the country's peace and stability, intimidating and often imprisoning journalists. Many journalists covering the Tigray war and the Amhara conflict were imprisoned, forced into exile, or killed.[16]

3.2.2. Procedural and bureaucratic hurdles

In addition to legal instruments, the Ethiopian government also utilises institutional mechanisms and processes to suppress the production of information by media actors. Particularly, the annual renewal of media licenses is intentionally made a difficult process, creating anxiety for journalists and leverage for the regulatory body.[17] Delaying and denying accreditation is thus an important impediment. Additionally, bureaucratic obstacles and denial of access to information are a routine practice, where government offices create various obstacles - or outright refuse - to give

---

[13] E03 - Interview - Human Rights expert, EHRC, Ethiopia - 20-01-2025, Addis Ababa; J04 - Journalist, International Media. 16-01-2025. Addis Ababa

[14] Reporters without borders (2025) ' Ethiopia', accessed 20 January, 2026, https://rsf.org/en/country/ethiopia

[15] Nation Africa. (2023, February 1). *Ethiopia bans 15 foreign media outlets. Daily Monitor.* https://www.monitor.co.ug/uganda/news/ethiopia-bans-15-foreign-media-outlets--4107096

[16] Committee to Protect Journalists. (2022, August 1). *Journalists face growing hostility as Ethiopia's civil war persists*. Retrieved January 19, 2026, from https://cpj.org/2022/08/journalists-face-growing-hostility-as-ethiopias-civil-war-persists/

[17] J02- Interview, Freelance journalist based in Addis Ababa. 02-01-2025

information unless it contributes to a positive portrayal of their offices. Journalists have reported cases where government officials ask the purpose of information and even occasionally demand to see drafts before providing information.[18] Media houses also report undue financial distress because of heavy taxation, which journalists argue is intentionally designed to cripple their operations, especially considering news are not profitable to begin with.[19]

3.2.3. Direct suppression of journalists

Journalists also face direct suppression beyond legal and institutional frameworks. Preventing access to conflict zones for independent journalists is one mechanism through which the government restricts information production. Independent journalists have been restricted from access to the Tigray region during the war and continue being denied access to conflict areas in Amhara and Oromia, often under the pretext of local or national state of emergencies. Foreign media have also come under attack, with authorities suspending around 15 foreign TV channels covering the Somali region in 2023 and detained and/or expelled several foreign journalists from 2021 onwards.[20] Foreign journalists still based in the country are continuously taking measures to avoid state reactions, such as avoiding reporting on controversial issues or areas, or using pseudonyms or no names when reporting.[21] Intimidation and harassment of independent journalists is a routine practice, whereby they receive distressing phone calls, warnings, and threats usually delivered through third parties such as friends and acquaintances.[22] Physical harassment and beatings have been repeatedly reported during investigations. Forced disappearance of journalists have become commonplace, including established journalists and journalists from major publications like the Reporter.[23] This is accompanied by online harassment, often through coordinated government affiliated accounts.

Arrest and detentions, as outlined above are pervasive, especially for journalists reporting on conflicts, government projects, and other areas the government considers sensitive, often based on vague accusations. Forced exile has become a routine practice, where independent journalists go

---

[18]   J01- Interview, Journalist, worked for local publications including the Reporter. 29 December 2024, Addis Ababa

[19] J04 - Journalist, International Media. 16-01-2025. Addis Ababa

[20] Correspondents from New York Times (2021), the Economist (2022), and Africa Intelligence (2024) are among the foreign journalists expelled.

[21] Online interview with foreign journalist based in Addis Ababa, 02.09.2025.

[22] Multiple interviews with journalists in Addis Ababa.

[23] BBC Amharic (August 17, 2025). በተለያዩ አካላት ከተወሰዱ ቀናት ያለፋቸው ሁለት ጋዜጠኞች እስካሁን ያሉበት እንደማይታወቅ ባልደረቦቻቸው ተናገሩ. https://www.bbc.com/amharic/articles/cm2vxm8w1kvo; interview, A01 - Academic, researching Ethiopia's digital freedoms, internet shutdowns, and freedom of expression - 26-12-2024, Zoom.

into exile in response to severe threats, creating a shockwave of fear among those remaining.[24] Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) documented at least 54 journalists exiled since 2020 amid increased crackdown, contributing to a decline in independent reporting in the country.[25] The government has allegedly attempted to get exiled journalists extradited without success, including journalists operating from Europe.[26] In at least one occasion, security forces have arrested and brought back a journalist who fled to Djibouti for reporting on the Amhara region, illustrating the long arm of the state to silence reporting on conflict.[27] Kidnapping by unknown men, often touted to be masked government security agents, is becoming more common, as illustrated by the kidnapping of a renowned journalist working for The Reporter.[28]

In rare cases, these practices have been accompanied by office burglaries and vandalism of media houses, whereby specific items such as laptops and cameras have been stolen, contributing to loss of essential tools for reporting, but most importantly, causing distress and intimidation of journalists.[29] For instance, the offices of Ethiopia Insider, an independent media with incisive reporting, were burgled with the clear goal of crippling their digital capabilities by taking cameras, lenses, laptops, and smartphones.[30] These infringements on press freedom, together with the polarised and ethnicised media landscape, makes it difficult to get access to rigorous, and fact-based, information in Ethiopia, thereby suppressing the production of information.

---

[24] interview, A01 - Academic, researching Ethiopia's digital freedoms, internet shutdowns, and freedom of expression - 26-12-2024, Zoom.

[25] CPJ - June 18, 2024. Fleeing prolonged media crackdown, Ethiopian journalists struggle in exile. https://cpj.org/2024/06/fleeing-prolonged-media-crackdown-ethiopian-journalists-struggle-in-exile/

[26] Meseret media. Aug 13, 2025. https://substack.com/home/post/p-170836319

[27] CPJ (May 12, 2023). Journalist Gobeze Sisay facing terrorism investigation in Ethiopia after arrest in Djibouti https://cpj.org/2023/05/journalist-gobeze-sisay-facing-terrorism-investigation-in-ethiopia-after-arrest-in-djibouti/

[28] The Reporter (August 16 2025). Ethiopian Reporter's Yonas Amare Abducted by Masked Men https://www.thereporterethiopia.com/46502/

[29] Online interview with former Ethiopian media editor, now based in Europe, 12.09.2025

[30] The Reporter - July 22, 2023, "Targeted robberies" against press provoke anger, demands for investigation https://www.thereporterethiopia.com/35602/

Case 1: Amhara Media Crackdown and Information Suppression

The Ethiopian government's response to the Fano insurgency in Amhara[31] (April 2023-present) demonstrates systematic suppression of information production through coordinated legal, physical, and psychological tactics. Following initial protests and the August 2023 escalation of the insurgency, authorities targeted journalists, academics, and media outlets covering the conflict, often painting their reporting as linked to or supporting insurgency.

Legal Instruments: The state deployed a six-month State of Emergency (extended four months) alongside instrumentalizing existing legislation including the Anti-Terrorism Proclamation, Criminal Code, Computer Crime Act, and Hate Speech and Disinformation Prevention Act. These laws provide broad authority to prosecute journalists on charges ranging from terrorism to threatening national security, often based on vague allegations of aiding "anti-peace elements" or spreading false information about security forces[32].

Detention and Intimidation: Mass arrests of media personnel occurred in two major waves (April and August 2023), with continued routine detentions thereafter. Journalists were held without warrants, denied legal counsel, and detained in unofficial facilities, notably the Awash Arba military camp.[33] Courts face political pressure to maintain imprisonment. Beyond detention, journalists experienced surveillance, harassment, phone threats, office ransacking, and public vilification as traitors and mercenaries by state media. The government extended its reach extraterritorially, as evidenced by journalist Gobeze Sisay's extradition from Djibouti.[34]

The strategies employed in Amhara, for instance, have led to forced media suspensions, widespread self-censorship, and mass exile of journalists, demonstrating the severe impact on the production of information in this context. The conflict remains poorly documented internationally despite

[31] Necho, Atsraw & Debede, Yared (2024). *Understanding the Fano Insurgency in Ethiopia's Amhara Region.* Nairobi: Rift Valley Institute

[32] See for instance Reporters Without Borders (2023). *Ethiopia clamps down on reporting in Amhara region*. https://rsf.org/en/ethiopia-clamps-down-reporting-amhara-region

[33] Ethiopian Human Rights Commission 'Amhara Region: Concerning human rights violations in the context of the armed conflict' September 18, 2023, accessed January 20, 2026, https://ehrc.org/amhara-region-concerning-human-rights-violations-in-the-context-of-the-armed-conflict/

[34] Addis Standard 'Ethiopian security detain Gobeze Sisay from Djibouti' May 6, 2023, accessed January 20, 2026, https://addisstandard.com/news-ethiopia-security-detains-gobeze-sisay-from-djibouti/

significant escalations, including 52 reported drone strikes in one year alone. Cases like Bekalu Alamirew (arrested four times, tortured, exiled)[35] and Meskerem Abera (third detention, denied bail, still in prison)[36] illustrate the gravity of information suppression efforts. Even state-owned media are vulnerable, as shown by the arrest of Yeshihasab Abera, deputy editor of Bekur newspaper.[37] This represents comprehensive information suppression, eliminating the post-2018 press freedom gains.

3.2.4. Restricting Ethiopian and foreign academics

Similar to the media, academics at the country's universities are victims of self-censorship, hindering them from producing information on politically sensitive issues unfavourable to the regime. In 2023, the government enacted a bill to grant autonomy to public universities aimed at ensuring operational freedom and self-governance. But university leadership positions are still perceived to be reserved for ruling party loyalists, and lecturers report a tense classroom environment where academic freedom and freedom of expression is under threat.[38] Academics have also been targets of detentions and harassment alongside journalists. They were the main target of mass detentions in the Amhara region following the outbreak of insurgency in 2023, with many still in prison facing terrorism charges.[39] Critical foreign academics, including Europeans, have also faced the state's measures, including denial of access, labelled by state media as enemies, and online harassment by pro-government actors.[40] Other foreign experts have however been actively forwarding views aligned with the government during the Tigray war, and have been appreciated and recognised by

---

[35] Ethiopia Observer (2025) 'Journalist Bekalu Alamirew detained for the fourth time' August 7, 2023 , accessed January 20, 2026, https://www.ethiopiaobserver.com/2023/08/07/journalist-bekalu-alamirew-detained-for-the-fourth-time/

[36] Women Press Freedom, 'Ethiopia: Behind Bars for 20 Months, Meskerem Abera Sentenced for Inciting Unrest' 25 November 2024, accessed 20 January 2026, https://www.womeninjournalism.org/alerts/ethiopia-behind-bars-for-20-months-meskerem-abera-sentenced-for-inciting-unrest

[37] Committee to Protect Journalists, 'Ethiopian state media journalist detained at unknown location' October 4, 2024, accessed January 20, 2026, https://cpj.org/2024/10/ethiopian-state-media-journalist-detained-at-unknown-location/

[38] Endangered Scholars Worldwide 'Ethiopia' accessed January 20, 2026, https://www.endangeredscholarsworldwide.net/ethiopia

[39] Amnesty International, *"Ethiopia: End the month-long arbitrary detention of thousands in Amhara region,"* November 2024, accessed 9 January 2026, https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2024/11/ethiopia-end-the-month-long-arbitrary-detention-of-thousands-in-amhara-region/

[40] Online interview with European expert based in Europe, 12.08.2025. Other story reported in the Norwegian newspaper Aftenposten 'Norwegian professor threatened on his life: there is an active coordinated hate campaign against me' 09.02.2021, accessed 9 January 2026. https://www.aftenposten.no/verden/i/weK825/norsk-professor-trues-paa-livet-av-etiopiere-det-paagaar-en-aktiv-koordinert-hatkampanje-mot-meg

pro-government supporters and media outlets.[41] Together with the diaspora mobilisation and control (described in section 4), the combination of attacks and attempts of coopting foreign academics represents an important transnational aspect of Ethiopia's information suppression, with direct impact on European citizen's fundamental rights and freedoms.

3.2.5. Suppressing civil society

Finally, the independence of civil society organisations is also another prerequisite for free information production in a society. This is particularly the case for human rights and governance-oriented organisations, but also others whose activities are based on access to information within the areas they operate. While the restrictive NGO law of 2009 was replaced by a revised legislation in 2019, the main regulatory body for civil society, the Federal Authority for Civil Society Organizations, has retained broad powers to license and monitor NGOs. This has enabled the government to act upon CSOs perceived to draw attention to conflicts or the government's human rights violations.

While the 2019 legislation was relatively progressive, it is under revision again, with a draft law introduced in 2025 threatening to strip back the safeguards and protections for independent CSO operations. The proposed legislation enhances executive and state control over CSOs, as well as enhancing the power of the Ministry of Justice to suspend or dissolve organizations as it sees fit under the pretext of national security.[42] Practically speaking, crackdown against CSOs reporting on human rights, democracy, and conflict has intensified over the past five years. Ethiopian security and intelligence forces are frequently being accused of intimidation, harassment, and threats against prominent human rights organisations, such as the Ethiopian Human Rights Council (ERCHO), where founders and members have been detained.[43] Key organizations, such as Center for the Advancement of Rights and Democracy (CARD), have faced repeated suspensions which disrupt their

---

[41] Online interview with European freelance journalist and writer, sympathetic to the Ethiopian government during the Tigray war, 14.09.2024.

[42] Amnesty International, "Ethiopia: Authorities must drop proposed changes to the CSO law, halt restrictions on civic space" 18 August 2025, accessed 9 January 2026, https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/afr25/0185/2025/en/

[43] Frontline Defenders, "Concern at increasing crackdown on civil society in Ethiopia following threats against the Ethiopian Human Rights Council Organization (EHRCO)", May 23 2024, accessed January 9 2026, https://www.frontlinedefenders.org/en/statement-report/concern-increasing-crackdown-civil-society-ethiopia-following-threats-against

activity.[44] The regulatory agency Civil Society Organisations Agency (ACSO) acts as an enforcer and defender of government interests, suspending CSOs and defending those decisions publicly.[45]

Tactics and techniques of suppressing information production

Tactics	Techniques
- Legal or regulatory deterrence to prohibit the production of information on certain topics that can threaten the regime's survival - Extra-legal intimidation, to induce fear, to deter the production of certain types of information - Restricting access, making the collection of primary information difficult	- Legal and regulatory mechanisms including media, anti-terrorism, hate speech, and CSO legislations. - States of emergencies - Institutional mechanisms including bureaucratic hurdles, licensing requirements - Direct suppression of journalists, academics, human rights defenders through harassment, detentions, intimidation, and physical violence, vandalism of offices and equipment - Self-censorship - Restricted access to sensitive locations such as conflict zones for journalists, denial of visas to foreign academics and journalists.

3.3. Suppression of information dissemination

The Ethiopian government also deploys a range of tactics to suppress information at the **level of dissemination.** Traditionally, such efforts have included methods such as jamming of transnational radio and television signals, as well as non-technical measures such as maintaining prohibitively high data and telecommunication costs. Increasingly, however, this involves measures taken to prevent the *sharing of information* in the online environment, such as preventing access to the internet or

---

[44] The Reporter "Two more leading human rights bodies suspended in CSO crackdown" December 28, 2025, accessed January 9 2026, https://www.thereporterethiopia.com/43148/

[45] Ethiopian Human Rights Commission, "የሲቪል ማኅበረሰብ ድርጅቶች ላይ የተጣለውን እገዳ በተመለከተ" (Regarding the ban on civil society organizations), December 27 2024, accessed January 9 2026, የሲቪል ማኅበረሰብ ድርጅቶች ላይ የተጣለውን እገዳ በተመለከተ - Ethiopian Human Rights Commission - EHRC

using legal and punitive threats to social media platforms to remove content to prevent it from being seen.

3.3.1. Internet shutdowns

A common tactic used by authoritarian governments to suppress the dissemination of information is **internet shutdowns**. This refers to the "intentional disruption of Internet or electronic communications" … with the aim of "rendering them inaccessible or effectively unusable, for a specific population or within a location."[46] Internet shutdowns can also take many forms that move the focus of analysis beyond blocking access to include a broader repertoire of tactics that range from "brief social media shutdowns aimed at a small community of users all the way to nationwide shutdowns lasting many months.[47]

Types of Internet Shutdowns

- Internet blackouts
- Network shutdowns
- Platform blockages
- Internet slowdowns

This **spectrum of controls**[48] approach to internet shutdowns include four categories of tactics that are used to suppress the sharing of information in the online environment. *Internet blackouts* refer to tactics that involve the full suspension of all internet services, including mobile, broadband, and satellite networks, in the entire country. *Network shutdowns* include tactics that suspend a more limited part of the network, often focusing on a specific region or location. These are often deployed in response to real-world events, such as localised protests. *Platform blockages* are tactics that block targeted websites or restrict access to specific social media platforms such as Facebook or YouTube. Finally, *internet slowdowns* are tactics that aim to throttle the speed of internet connections so that the sharing of information becomes, in effect, impossible. This allows

---

[46] see https://www.accessnow.org/guide/internet-shutdowns-and-elections-handbook/. Also see Ayalew, Y. E. (2019). The Internet shutdown muzzle(s) freedom of expression in Ethiopia: competing narratives. Information & Communications Technology Law, 28(2), 208–224. https://doi.org/10.1080/13600834.2019.1619906 and Rydzak, J., Karanja, M., & Opiyo, N. (2020). Dissent Does Not Die in Darkness: Network Shutdowns and Collective Action in African Countries. International Journal of Communication, 14, 4264–4287.

[47] Marchant, E., & Stremlau, N. (2020). A spectrum of shutdowns: Reframing Internet shutdowns from Africa. *International Journal of Communication*, *14*, 18.

[48] Also see Marchant, E., & Stremlau, N. (2020). A spectrum of shutdowns: Reframing Internet shutdowns from Africa. International Journal of Communication, 14, 18. Collyer, M. (2023, May 25). An interdisciplinary exploration of Internet shutdowns. Open Technology Fund. https://www.opentech.fund/news/an-interdisciplinary-exploration-of-internet-shutdowns/

governments to circumvent the negative publicity and criticism caused by full internet shutdowns by blaming the problem on slow infrastructures or technical problems.

3.3.2 Changing tactics of information suppression in Ethiopia

These four tactics are also often used in different ways by authoritarian countries, depending on the strategic aims and the type of crises they respond to. In the context of Ethiopia, internet shutdowns have been similarly divided into three historical periods based on the types of techniques used and the levels of technological connectivity. These previous periods help understand the institutional knowledge and resources available in Ethiopia that continue to influence the tactics used today. [49]

The **first period** from about 2005-2011 was characterised by low levels of internet and mobile connectivity (hovering between 1-10% of the population). During this period, the EPDRF government restricted information dissemination on mobile networks and the internet through keeping overall internet access limited in the country and prices expensive. Facilitated by low levels of internet connectivity, the techniques used during this period mostly consisted of platform blockages of diaspora websites and news sites hosted outside Ethiopia associated with opposition groups. The government also deployed large-scale mobile and internet blackouts in response to instances of political violence. Following the 2005 elections, and the post-election violence that followed, the government shut down the entire SMS network in Ethiopia for two years to prevent the opposition from contesting the election results.[50]

The **second period** from about 2012-2018 was characterised by the growing use of the internet and social media. To respond to these developments, the EPDRF government expanded its digital surveillance and censorship capabilities through expanding their toolbox to include the targeted use of internet slowdowns and the development of more sophisticated technologies to monitor digital activity and selectively block social media sites such as Facebook, blogs and other internet sites. Following the escalation of youth protests in Ethiopia (2014-2018), the EPRDF government used a

---

[49] For a more extensive analysis of this see Chala, E. H., & Workneh, T. W. (2025). Internet shutdowns in Ethiopia: Discourses of digital sovereignty and information suppression amid political instability. New Media & Society, 0(0). https://doi.org/10.1177/14614448251378981 Their analysis provides a granular typology of different periods of unrest and protest in Ethiopia and the use of different types of internet shutdowns to manage these.

[50] Gagliardone, I., & Pohjonen, M. (2016). "Engaging in polarized society: social media and political discourse in Ethiopia." In Mutsavairo, B. (Ed.), Digital Activism in the Social Media Era. London: Palmgrave McMillan, 25–44.

mix of techniques such as full platform blockages, network shutdowns, internet blackouts, and continued internet shutdowns to quell the protests.[51]

The **current period** since roughly 2018 is, in turn, characterised by a rapid growth of online communication, the popular use of messaging services such as WhatsApp, Telegram and Signal) and an increasingly diverse social media platform ecosystem (X, Instagram, Tik-Tok, Facebook). This period is predominantly characterised by the political changes introduced by Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed to power in 2018. This resulted in the initial liberalisation of the telecommunication sector in Ethiopia followed by the return to more aggressive state techniques to control the information space in response to growing conflict in Ethiopia. Already as early as 2019, following the assassination of high-profile politicians in the Amhara region, the Prime Minister declared that the internet, while important for commerce, should not be seen a basic right:

> *Internet is not water, internet is not air. Internet is very important. However, if we use it as a revolution tool to incite others to kill and burn, it will be shut down not only for a week, but longer than that….For sake of national security, internet and social media could be blocked any time necessary….As long as it is deemed necessary to save lives and prevent property damages, the internet would be closed permanently, let alone for a week.[52]*

In response to escalating crises and growing conflict, the government has since implemented a repertoire of techniques from full internet blackout, long-term regional blackouts, and internet slowdowns. Some of the justifications for these tactics have included nationwide internet blackout to prevent cheating in national school exams, conflicts with various constituencies or regional violent conflicts and the different States of Emergency that have followed.

Most notably, during this period, the Tigray war, which began in November 2020, entrenched the practice of regional internet blockages as a key strategy of suppressing information dissemination in Ethiopia. To control the information being shared about the war, a full internet shutdown was implemented on the entire Tigray region for the two-year period of the war until the signing of a peace deal in 2022. This constituted one of the longest internet shutdowns globally in recent history, cutting off an entire region for a two-year period. These tactics have since been expanded to cover other regions such as Afar and Amhara affected by the war and violent conflicts that have persisted since.

---

[51] Workneh, T. W. (2021). Social media, protest, & outrage communication in Ethiopia: Toward fractured publics or pluralistic polity? Information, Communication & Society, 24(3), 309–328. https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2020.1811367

[52] Africanews, *"Twitter backlash after Ethiopia PM's 'internet not water or air' threat,"* 3 August 2019, accessed 9 January 2026, https://www.africanews.com/2019/08/03/twitter-backlash-after-ethiopia-pm-s-internet-not-water-or-air-threat

Examples of internet shutdowns in Ethiopia

Internet blackouts:
- 2001: Nationwide shutdown due to internal conflicts inside the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF).[53]
- 2016: The state of emergency imposed in response to widespread protests in the Oromia region, included a shutdown of telecommunications, media, and the Internet.[54]
- June 2020: A nationwide blackout was imposed following the assassination of Oromo singer Hachalu Hundessa to quell violent protests.[55]

Network shutdowns:
- June 2019: Network shutdowns occurred following an attempted coup in the Amhara region.[56]
- November 2020: The Tigray conflict led to extensive blackouts imposed in Tigray and subsequent localized disruptions in Amhara and Afar.
- Post-November 2022: After the peace agreement in Tigray (November 2022), internet shutdowns have continued in other conflict zones in Amhara and Oromo regions.[57]

Platform Blockages:
- 2005-2011: The Ethiopian government expanded its regulation of online political content by implementing platform blockages (PBs) on opposition websites, human rights organizations and international news organisations.[58]
- December 2017: A social media shutdown was imposed, primarily targeting the Amhara and Oromia regions amidst ethnic tensions.[59]

---

[53] Milkias P (2001) Ethiopia, The TPLF and roots of the 2001 political tremor. In: 2001. Available at: https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1051&context=africancenter_icad_archive

[54] Chala, E. H., & Workneh, T. W. (2025). Internet shutdowns in Ethiopia: Discourses of digital sovereignty and information suppression amid political instability. New Media & Society, 0(0). p. 12.

[55] Access Now. (2020, July 16). *Back in the dark: Ethiopia shuts down internet once again*. Access Now. https://www.accessnow.org/press-release/back-in-the-dark-ethiopia-shuts-down-internet-once-again/.

[56] Chala, E. H., & Workneh, T. W. (2025). Internet shutdowns in Ethiopia: Discourses of digital sovereignty and information suppression amid political instability. New Media & Society, 0(0). p. 12-13

[57] Access Now. (2022, November 4). *Two years of internet shutdowns: People in Tigray, Ethiopia, deserve better*. https://www.accessnow.org/press-release/two-years-internet-shutdowns-tigray/

[58] Chala, E. H., & Workneh, T. W. (2025). Internet shutdowns in Ethiopia: Discourses of digital sovereignty and in
formation suppression amid political instability. New Media & Society, 0(0). pp. 9-11

[59] According to Chala and Workneh (2025), Shutdown incidents surged, with 46 recorded in 2016, followed by 45 in 2017, and reaching 48 in 2018.

- 2023: The government imposed a five-month restriction on major social media platforms during the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church Crisis.[60]

Internet Slow-downs:
- 2012-2013: Widespread use of IS after the death of previous Prime Minister, Meles Zenawi
- 2016: Widespread use of IS reported during politically sensitive events and protests.
- Post-2019, researchers have argued the use of slowdowns have become increasingly prevalent, reflecting a preference for less overt digital suppression, a strategy used especially during politically sensitive periods like national elections.[61]

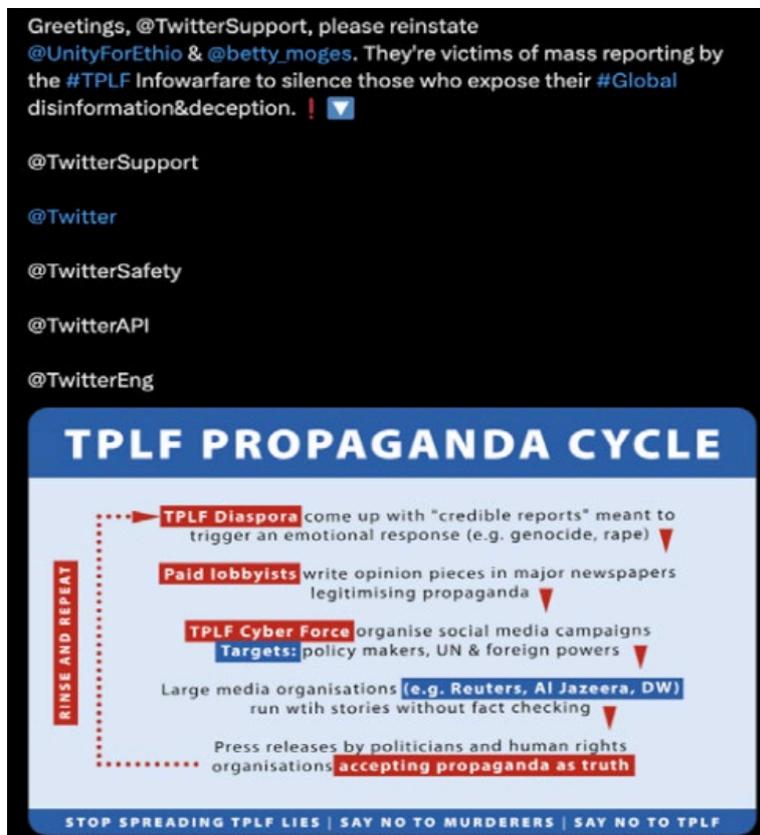### 3.3.3. The weaponisation of content moderation

There are also other reported mechanisms through which the government, or its supporters, try to influence the sharing of information online. One of these techniques is what scholars have called the **weaponisation of platform infrastructures**, that is, using techniques such as coordinated "mass reporting" of social media content to "trigger content takedowns and account bans."[62] Especially during the Tigray War, the use of such coordinated campaigns by both the government and the opposition were widely used. **Image 2** below shows an example of such campaigns that tried to weaponise the mechanics of social media content moderation in another effort to suppress the dissemination of information.

---

[60] Amnesty International. (2023, March 9). *Ethiopia: One month on, authorities must immediately lift blockade on selected social media access in the country*. https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2023/03/ethiopians-in-social-media-blackout-for-second-month/

[61] Internet slowdowns are very difficult to identify given that they do not disrupt the entire internet network and can seem similar to technological or bandwidth issues. These reported events here are from: Chala, E. H., & Workneh, T. W. (2025). Internet shutdowns in Ethiopia: Discourses of digital sovereignty and information suppression amid political instability. New Media & Society, 0(0). p. 12-13

[62] Meisner, C. (2023). *The weaponization of platform governance: Mass reporting and algorithmic punishments in the creator economy*. Policy & Internet, 15(4), 466–477. https://doi.org/10.1002/poi3.359

Image 2: An example of a Twitter campaign showing the weaponisation of content moderation system as a form of information suppression

These campaigns have not yet, however, been systematically studied in the context of Ethiopia. Our research,[63] however, strongly suggests that such coordinated campaigns can increasingly act, and have already successfully been used, as another mechanism for suppressing the dissemination of information by using the coordinated reporting of users and content as a way to provoke social media companies, or their automated content detection systems, to remove unfavourable content.[64]

---

[63] Pohjonen, M. (2024). *Political disinformation and content moderation "folklore" in the Global South: Comparative lessons for the 2024 Indonesia elections* (KISIP Paper). Safer Internet Lab. https://saferinternetlab.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/Matti-Pohjonen-KISIP-PAPER-2024-1.pdf

[64] Pohjonen, M., and Pantti, M. (2026, forthcoming). "Social media platforms as geopolitical actors: Global inequalities in social media content moderation". Media, War and Conflict.

Tactics and techniques of suppressing information dissemination

Tactics	Techniques
- Limit critical information from reaching society - Undermine/limit visibility of atrocities by government actors and their allies - Limit the spread of protests - Minimise critical (undesirable) information coming from outside the country - Enhance control over digital infrastructures - Influence social media platforms moderation policies	- Internet shutdowns in all its variations including internet blackouts, network shutdowns, platform blockages, and internet slowdowns - Blocking websites of media houses - Algorithmic manipulation and mass reporting of critical channels on social media - Blocking/jamming satellite television and radio from abroad

3.4. Managing Information Salience

The Ethiopian government historically relied on (and still engages in) classical suppression mechanisms including censorship and media crackdowns, as well as internet shutdowns. **Managing or shaping information salience**, in turn, involves techniques and tactics that aim to undermine the visibility, and thus the impact, of information that has already been produced and shared and cannot be restricted at prior levels. It includes hybrid techniques that aim to bury critical information or promote alternative topics to dominate public discourse. This can happen in many ways, such as flooding online conversations through coordinated campaigns and the use of participatory propaganda. It can take the form of producing distracting and contradictory messaging to counter the legitimacy of critical information circulating online.

In Ethiopia, these techniques of shaping salience have grown in popularity as an alternative for suppressing information at the level of production or dissemination for several reasons. Ethiopia's economy is increasingly connected to the grid, making it harder to employ extensive internet shutdowns without disrupting economic activity that relies on digital connectivity. Additionally, the government is now also strategically attempting to position itself as a technology leader in Africa,

with ambitions of digital transformation and AI adoption, which makes internet shutdowns less attractive.

The reputational costs of internet shutdowns in this changing economic climate, especially from human rights organisations, make it a less attractive option for managing information in the online sphere. In addition, as the Tigray War demonstrated, the old tactics of trying to prevent all information from reaching society, for instance through jamming satellite television and radio or blocking websites, is becoming futile in the age of hyperconnected social media publics and satellite internet.

3.4.1. The Tigray war as a critical juncture

The importance of the Tigray war of 2020-2022 cannot be overstated. The government's communication blackout was largely ineffective in preventing information about the conflict from reaching the world. The mobilisation of the Tigrayan diaspora and international human rights-based organisations challenged the government's information dominance.[65] The government was rather more successful in mobilising its base, including the diaspora, for counterpropaganda, through digital campaigns. The ruling party has taken this lesson to heart, and as such doubled down on its efforts to control narratives online. As a result, there has been a visible shift towards shaping the salience of information by attempting to control the narrative online.

3.4.2. How? Institutions, tactics, and techniques

The government attempts to do this through a sprawling digital apparatus. First and foremost is the so-called 'media army'.[66] The media army encompasses local officials, party members, and some civil servants, especially experts within communications bureaus at different levels of government. While the media army operates based on the needs of their respective woredas and departments, it can be

---

[65] For instance, our extensive analysis of the large-scale Twitter data clearly shows the dominance of the campaigns supporting the TPLF during the Tigray War and the often reactive nature of some of the government campaigns such as the #NoMore campaign to counter this support. See Kebede, A. T., & Pohjonen, M. (2025). 'Adwa, not AGOA': Digital propaganda and strategic narratives during the Ethiopian civil war of 2020 to 2022. *Media, War & Conflict*, *0*(0). https://doi.org/10.1177/17506352251403008 Also Orgeret, K. S., Mutsvairo, B., de Bruijn, M., Schroeder, D. T., Badji, S. D., & Moges, M. A. (2025). Hashtags, Hatetags and social media campaigns in Ethiopia's Tigray conflict. *Information, Communication & Society*, 1–19. https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2025.2533314

[66] የብልፅግና ፓርቲ 'የሚዲያ ሠራዊት' አባላት በሐሰተኛ መረጃ ሥርጭት እና አሳሳች የፌስቡክ ዘመቻዎች ላይ መሳተፋቸውን የቢቢሲ ምርመራ አረጋገጠ, BBC News Amharic, 19 ሚያዚያ 2024, accessed 9 January 2026, https://www.bbc.com/amharic/articles/cp6gnd20675o

pooled together and deployed whenever there is a need for coordinated messaging.[67] While the government initially dismissed claims of a digital media army, some levels of government have since embraced it openly. For instance, different local government (Woreda) communications offices openly post about the media army on their Facebook pages.[68] Media army reportedly has members run multiple accounts - both named and anonymous - on multiple platforms, predominantly on Facebook but also less political channels like Instagram.[69]

Case 2: Pro-Government Information Campaigning During the Tigray War

The Tigray War (2020-2022) in Ethiopia saw widespread information campaigning by all protagonists. Amid international pressure to open humanitarian access to the Tigray region and end the conflict through negotiated settlement, the Ethiopian government and its supporters resorted to online information operations, especially on Twitter, with two interrelated objectives[70].

First, the campaigns aimed to portray the adversary - the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) - as an existential threat to Ethiopia's sovereignty and territorial integrity, mobilising domestic constituencies for war. Second, they attempted to paint the West (broadly representing the US, EU/Europe, Western media, and human rights organisations) as interventionist and neo-colonial, seeking to influence global perceptions and reduce pressure and potential punitive measures like sanctions.

Several campaigns emerged during the two-year period, most notably #NoMore, which unified pro-government camps and briefly spilled onto the streets of Europe and North America through large rallies in November 2021. These campaigns instrumentalised pre-existing Pan-Ethiopian, Pan-African, anti-imperial, and non-interventionist discourses.

The campaigns employed multiple techniques to counter criticism and popularise the government's narrative, including dismissal of credible reporting, sowing suspicion

---

[67] የአቢይ ሚድያ ሠራዊትና የስለለ መዋቅር, Horn Conversation (YouTube) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oEnZxjW13L4&t=8261s April 30, 2025

[68] Check, for instance, the following Facebook stories: https://tinyurl.com/vtdsa6yc and https://tinyurl.com/4ez8nu2k.

[69] J04 - Interview – Journalist, international media, reporting on Ethiopia. 16, January, 2025, Addis Ababa.

[70] Also see the research here: Kebede, A. T., & Pohjonen, M. (2025). 'Adwa, not AGOA': Digital propaganda and strategic narratives during the Ethiopian civil war of 2020 to 2022. *Media, War & Conflict*, 17506352251403008.

> regarding information sources, distorting information, and outright denial and obfuscation. Techniques included creating hashtag campaigns, developing imagery, videos, and memes, designing click-to-tweet websites with ready-made messages, leveraging platforms like Clubhouse for coordinated messaging, coordinating across platforms, manipulating timing to trend topics, encouraging citizen participation to boost numbers, spamming targets through tagging, mass reporting opposition accounts, and bridging digital activism with physical rallies and protests. Critical to these efforts was coordination with diaspora-based supporters, who proved instrumental in facilitating online campaigns and organising ground-level mobilization.

Secondly, the government employs well-known paid activists,[71] who have been very vocal on YouTube but also mainstream media, and who are used by the government as mouthpieces to ward-off criticism, popularise a new government agenda, and gauge public sentiment around new issues. Some of these activists have become so influential and move in close government and army circles. The activist Seyoum Teshome, for instance, not only received a Medal of Honor from the Ethiopian National Defence forces (ENDF) but was also made its "honorary" member, during the ceremony of which the Chief of Staff tasked him and other activists to lead the digital war for the Army.[72] They also receive protection, as evidenced by the Federal Police's failure to produce the commentator for a court appearance, despite his public visibility, known location, and repeated requests by the Federal High Court.[73]

In addition to paid activists, the government has reportedly used everyday influencers (on platforms such as TikTok), who are not primarily political, but can be co-opted to popularise government projects and agenda. In particular, influencers have been deployed to popularise (and seek legitimacy from) urban renewal and corridor projects.[74]

---

[71] Yohannes Buayalew, a long serving government official arrested in connection with the conflict in Amhara, claimed in court that Seyoum is "a government activist, appointed by the state, paid a salary by the state, and provided with a vehicle and security" https://tinyurl.com/26chtt33. Elsewhere, prominent journalists have claimed that government activists earn as much as 240,000 birr per month (1900 USD). https://x.com/EliasMeseret/status/1915451711503622198

[72] See https://press.et/?p=112092. The list included Seyoum Teshome, Natnael Mekonnen, Abebe Tola (Abe Tokchaw).

[73] Meseret Media (@MeseretMedia), post on *X* (formerly Twitter), n.d., accessed 9 January 2026, https://x.com/MeseretMedia/status/190965401616795

[74] While the castles of Gonder were renewed, the government allegedly invited influencers to visit, in an attempt to claim that all is normal in Gonder, despite an insurgency in the Amhara region.

Thirdly, while hard to ascertain its extent, voluntary supporters of the party amplify pro-government online messaging. Fourthly, experts and professionals in government offices are also increasingly pressured to post pro-government messages on social media – especially on platforms like Facebook and Twitter. Experts and diplomats have thus become key actors in pro-government online campaigns. Finally, state media's digital arms have also become influential to amplify government messaging.[75] Institutionally, the Information Networks Security Agency (INSA) and the Ethiopian Artificial Intelligence Institute (EAII) engage in coordinated inauthentic behaviour to proliferate pro-government messaging in digital spaces.[76]

Managing information salience relies on several tactics and techniques. The government and its supporters routinely engage in dismissing allegations and denigrating sources. For instance, when Amnesty International released its highly influential report on the Axum massacre of November, 2021, pro-government actors campaigned against the organization, trending #FakeAxumMassacre on the then Twitter and targeting Amnesty for the reporting.[77] The government and its supporters also attempted to sow suspicion regarding the sources of information by portraying the refugees Amnesty interviewed for its report as unreliable.[78]

---

[75] Fana Broadcasting Corporation, for instance, has 4 million followers on Facebook, while Ethiopia Broadcasting Corporation has 4.1 million followers. They coordinate their broadcasting whenever key government programs, for instance an interview with the Prime Minister or a propaganda documentary, are broadcasted.

[76] See Meta (June 2021). Removing Coordinated Inauthentic Behavior from Ethiopia. https://about.fb.com/news/2021/06/removing-coordinated-inauthentic-behavior-from-ethiopia/ Also see የአቢይ ሚድያ ሠራዊትና የስለላ መዋቅር, Horn Conversation (YouTube) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oEnZxjW13L4&t=8261s April 30, 2025.

[77] Check Ethiopia Press Agency (state media) reporting on the effort to discredit Amnesty https://www.facebook.com/epaEnglish/photos/a.420894541816571/873099136596107/?type=3

[78] See, for instance, Ethiopian News Agency (ENA), *"Ministry Urges Amnesty Int'l to Use Appropriate Sources in Report to Uncover the Truth,"* n.d., accessed 9 January 2026, https://www.ena.et/web/eng/w/en_22027.

Case 3: Co-opting "fact-checking "as a way to manage information salience

In an environment marked by widespread disinformation and declining trust in the authenticity of online information, fact-checking has emerged as one possible mechanism to safeguard the credibility of information and news. At the same time, the epistemic authority attached to fact-checking can be appropriated by governments as a means of managing information salience in digital environments and to legitimise state narratives or discredit oppositional claims.

The Ethiopian government's use of the Twitter/X account @ETFactCheck during the Tigray war (2020–2022) provides a clear illustration of this emerging dynamic. Launched shortly after the outbreak of the conflict, @ETFactCheck rhetorically positioned itself as an impartial fact-checking initiative responding to proliferating disinformation in Ethiopia. In practice, however, the account functioned as an instrument within a broader state-led information campaign during the war. The account consistently reframed the conflict as a limited "law enforcement operation," dismissed or denied documented evidence of atrocities and humanitarian crises, and relied primarily on government and military official perspectives as authoritative sources. At the same time, it amplified state media and official government accounts while portraying international journalism and human rights reporting as biased, or part of coordinated attacks against Ethiopia.

Drawing on a large-scale dataset of Twitter activity during the Tigray war, our research thus highlights how, especially when detached from institutional independence, fact-checking can be mobilised to strategically target both domestic and international audiences in an effort to manage the salience of information online. The Ethiopian case reflects a broader global pattern, evident in contexts ranging from Russia and China to India and Western populist movements, including the United States, where the normalisation of politically instrumentalised fact-checking can risk eroding shared standards of truth, transforming what was meant as a democratic safeguard into a tool of political control.

Denial is routinely employed. When reports of Eritrean troops active in Ethiopia in support of the Ethiopian government emerged in early stages of the Tigray war, the Ethiopian government's online campaign resorted to a conspiracy that it is Tigrayan fighters disguising themselves in Eritrean army's

fatigue, based on a claim directly made by an Ethiopian army official.[79] Distracting from the story by shifting attention and blame to external actors is routinely used. On occasion, the government's online efforts have attempted to divide and deepen divisions to prevent consolidation of its opponents.

Agenda-setting is also key, designed to set the tone online conversations, deflect from substantive socio-economic discussions, and ensure that all conversations revolve around its own messaging. The conversations attempt to avoid any policy substance and conversations around substantive socio-economic discussions, rather focusing on nationalist and developmentalist rhetoric. In addition to issue framing and agenda setting, flooding to overwhelm the digital space with pro-government content is also visible. This is especially visible in efforts to dominate comment sections on Facebook, where the digital army members post coordinated and identical messages to control comment sections. We see traces of Steve Bannon's 'flooding the zone with shit'[80] and the Chinese Communist Party's practice of '50 cent army' in these efforts.[81]

The topical focuses of pro-government online efforts are varied and change according to need. Understandably, conflict has been at the forefront – especially during the Tigray war, where organized pro-government propaganda campaigns targeted both domestic and international audiences to dominate the narrative regarding the conflict. This has also been the case regarding the conflicts in the Amhara and Oromia regions, although to a lesser extent. The government's flagship projects, such as Addis Ababa Corridor Project, have also become an important source of visual propaganda. In this regard, there is a process of 'corridor-washing' as well as 'greenwashing' of the government's record. Recently, access to the Red Sea and a port have been an important part of pro-government propaganda. Importantly, all messaging also revolves around the Prime Minister - building a form of a personality cult around the leader and fortifying him against criticism by presenting such criticism as unpatriotic or treasonous.

---

[79] Ethiopia Current Issues Fact Check [@ETFactCheck], X (formerly Twitter),
Nov. 13, 2020. https://x.com/ETFactCheck/status/1326781302092296193 ; https://www.ameco.et/10758/

[80] "Flood the zone with shit": How misinformation overwhelmed our democracy https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2020/1/16/20991816/impeachment-trial-trump-bannon-misinformation

[81] Han, R. (2015). Manufacturing Consent in Cyberspace: China's "Fifty-Cent Army". Journal of Current Chinese Affairs, 44(2), 105-134. https://doi.org/10.1177/186810261504400205

Case 4: AI-Generated Propaganda and Ethiopia's Red Sea Ambitions

In September 2025, as Ethiopia celebrated the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) inauguration, AI-generated propaganda flooded social media promoting the country's ambitions to acquire Eritrea's Assab port. This case demonstrates how synthetic media is being weaponized to influence public opinion on sensitive geopolitical issues.

AI-generated videos circulating on TikTok and X, some shared by officials, depicted fictional GERD celebrations with synthetic voiceovers declaring "From the Nile to Assab, one people! one heart!" and announcing "See you all in Assab!" This campaign took place amid escalating tensions following Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed's 2023 declaration that sea access is survival for Ethiopia's population trapped in a "geographic prison." Military leaders have stated readiness to act, and Ahmed reportedly told business leaders that force would be used if peaceful means fail.

These productions feature colourful imagery of modern ports, Ethiopian naval vessels, nationalist symbolism, and AI-generated patriotic music. The AI content employs strategic visual tropes: Ethiopian flags adorning port facilities, naval ships with "no more landlocked" text, and captions like "The Red Sea is in our past, and it must be in our future." AI-generated songs croon "Assab, my bride...your landlockedness will soon be over!" These elements tap into emotions about Ethiopia's lost sea access - a rare unifying issue in a fragmented polity.
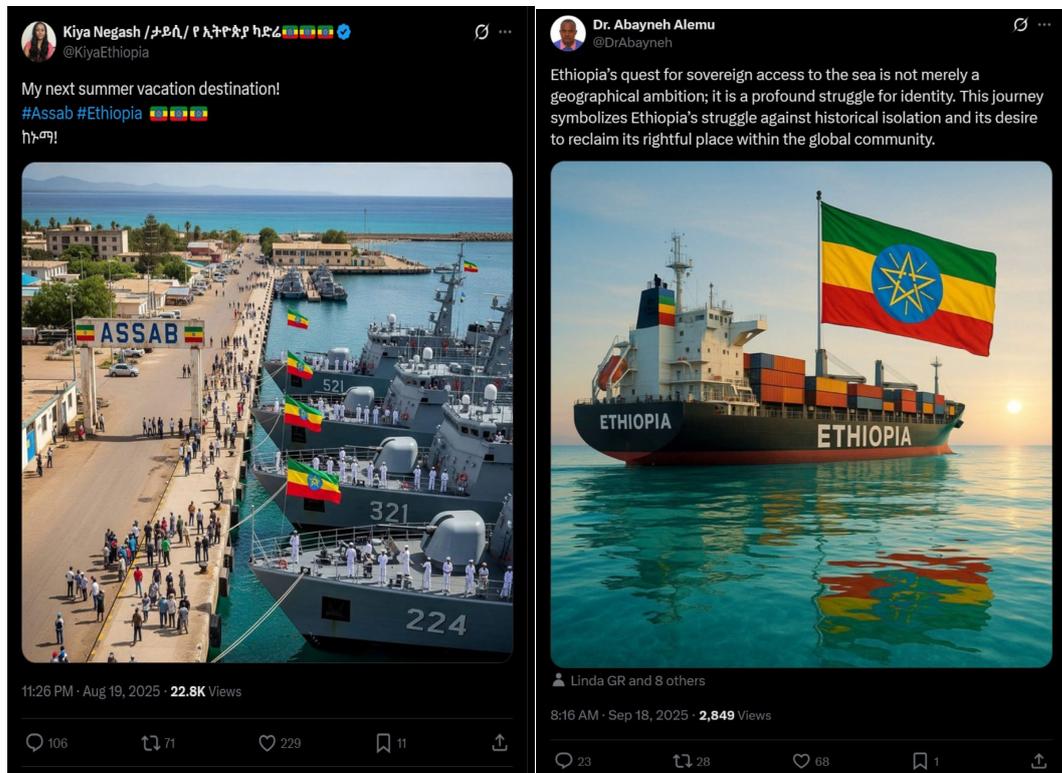
Image 4 and 5 – Examples of AI-generated images promoting Ethiopia's quest for sea access

This phenomenon illustrates how AI has dramatically lowered barriers to visual propaganda production. State actors exploit platform cultures dominated by short-form video, creating synthetic content prioritising emotional appeal over accuracy. This case highlights the evolution from text to visual propaganda, the strategic use of nationalist sentiment to manufacture consent for aggressive foreign policy, and generative AI's emerging role in contemporary influence campaigns within geopolitically sensitive contexts.

While the government has put substantial effort and resources to enhance its digital presence and manipulate information in its favour, its efforts have not been very conspicuous. The media army is not very efficient in terms of convincing citizens to support government initiatives. Citizens often recognise it, with identical messages posted by members of the media army becoming subjects of ridicule. This raises the question, why does the regime continue to do this even though they are not able to hide the accounts or messages, or influence public perceptions?

Two interrelated reasons can provide an explanation. On the one hand, even if it doesn't convince, such coordinated efforts overwhelm dissenting voices and dilute critical narratives, thereby choking the digital public sphere. It ensures that the opposition remains invisible and fragmented, it drowns the coalescing of alternative narratives and even makes all political discussion exhausting and futile.

37

Another associated explanation is the presence of a form of digital patronage. Participation in digital campaigns and supporting government positions online have been associated with job security and promotions. At the Woreda level, for instance, officials are evaluated based on their performance in the digital army.[82] Cadres and civil servants participating in these initiatives are simply performing what is expected of them to secure their positions and privileges.

Overall, the government's pivot to suppressing the salience of information represents a form of authoritarian adaptation. It represents an attempt to dominate society through digital presence, as well as undermine dissent and opposition by flooding, diverting, and exhausting political discourse. It allows the government to distract from tangible issues that need addressing, such as conflict and socio-economic crisis, and as such, can be seen as a form of strategic distraction.[83]

Tactics and techniques of managing information salience

Tactics	Techniques
- Undermine credibility of critics, opposition, and media - Dominate the topics of online conversations - Shift debates from substantive to emotionally charged (strategic distraction) - Discourage critical conversations - Keep society on a war-footing - Prevent collaboration between opposition groups - Undermine trust in Western/international media and human rights organisations - Justify action – including military response, in local conflicts	- Coordinated messaging from digital media army, paid activists and influencers - Coordinated attempts to control/dominate comment sections - Hashtag campaigns - AI-generated content including images and videos - Flooding through coordinated social media campaigns - State media monopoly and amplification - Mobilise diaspora communities - Co-opt anti-colonial narratives and discourses - Co-opting the language of fact checking

---

[82] J04 - Interview – Journalist, international media, reporting on Ethiopia. 16, January, 2025, Addis Ababa

[83] King, Pan, and Roberts, "How the Chinese Government Fabricates Social Media Posts for Strategic Distraction, Not Engaged Argument."

4. Information suppression and the Ethiopian Diaspora

4.1. Overview of the Ethiopian Diaspora

The Ethiopian diaspora has been growing steadily over the past few decades, with estimates varying anywhere between 1 and 3 million.[84] The largest concentration is in the United States, where the Ethiopian diaspora is estimated to be anywhere between 300,000 and one million. The Middle East also has a high Ethiopian migrant population, particularly Saudi Arabia, Jordan, UAE, Lebanon, Yemen. Europe is also an important destination, with the UK, Germany, Sweden, Netherlands, and Italy having particularly large Ethiopian populations. EU contains 13 percent of Ethiopians living abroad, making it third next to the US (27%) and Saudi Arabia (18%)[85] (this can be higher when the UK is included). The EU is also an important source of remittance. The National Bank of Ethiopia estimates for 2020 put remittance to Ethiopia from Europe at 592.9 million USD, putting Europe third following Asia/Middle East and North America. Three European countries were among the top ten sources of remittances – with the UK (86.2 million USD), Germany (61.5 million USD), and Italy (40.6 million USD).[86]

The Ethiopian diaspora is diverse in terms of ethnic origins, political affiliations, education and social backgrounds. Divisions are particularly visible along ethnic lines, as well as reflecting political divisions on a pan-Ethiopian - ethno-nationalist spectrum. There was a brief moment of unity following the coming of Abiy to power in 2018, although short lived.

In the face of authoritarian rule and repression at home, the Ethiopian diaspora has historically played an outsized role of opposition and advocacy. It pushed for change, promoting human rights, press freedom, and free elections. It also has also been a key source of political leadership – both in government and in opposition. The diaspora has been an amplifier of protest movements, through its satellite media, blogs, and social media activism. It plays a role as a source of support, including financial support, for insurgencies, and has at times made conflict resolution difficult by backing hardliner positions. The diaspora engages in lobbying campaigns in host countries, at times in support, but mostly against the Ethiopian government.

With the expansion of digital media – the diaspora's political influence expanded, contributing to facilitating and coordinating the protests which brought about a change of government in Ethiopia in

---

[84] Thubauville, Sophia, and Kim Glück. (2025) 'Home- and Future- Making in the Ethiopian Diaspora'. Addis Ababa: Centre français des études éthiopiennes

[85] RemitScope Africa, *Ethiopia: Country Diagnostic 2022* (RemitScope Africa, 2023), accessed 9 January 2026, https://remitscope.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/Ethiopia_Diagnostics_Remitscope_AFRICA_EN.pdf.

[86] RemitSCOPE Africa Ethiopia country diagnostic

2018.[87] Ethiopian diaspora lobbying and mobilisation in support of the Ethiopian government have had real political impacts on host countries. For instance, Ethiopian diaspora dissatisfied with the Biden Administration's response to Ethiopian conflict during the Tigray war mobilised and lobbied in Virginia, contributing to the victory of a Trump-endorsed republican candidate in a gubernatorial race.[88]

4.2. The State and the Ethiopian Diaspora

As a result of this, the Ethiopian government closely observes and engages the diaspora. The state views the diaspora as an asset that can be leveraged for remittances and diplomacy, but also as a threat that mobilises for opposition politics and broadcasts information that the state has little control over. The Ethiopian state has a dedicated agency (Ethiopia Diaspora Service (EDS) to facilitate engagement and mobilize the diaspora – for development, cultivating support, and image building. The EDS has a good overview of the number and composition of diasporas. In 31 out of 52 diplomatic missions, across Europe, the US, Middle East and Africa where there are large Ethiopian diaspora, specific diaspora diplomats are appointed from Ethiopia.[89] The fact that the state sees the diaspora as a key constituency is evidenced by the fact that one of the earliest foreign trips of Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed upon coming to power was to the US with an expressed purpose of engaging the diaspora[90] to bring them onboard his 'reformist' agenda.

Historically, the state has attempted to reduce opposition and information coming from the diaspora through the jamming of satellite media and blocking of websites of opposition based abroad. It has also labelled critics in the diaspora, as well as occasionally attempting to get them extradited.[91] Whenever possible, the state has extended an olive branch to members of the diaspora that are supportive of it by providing incentives like opportunities for investment and land, housing, and privileged banking opportunities. For instance, several diasporic members who were active in supporting the Ethiopian government's public diplomacy and information operations during the Tigray war were allegedly rewarded with material benefits.[92] There were also publicly held award

---

[87] For instance, the activist turned politician, Jawar Mohammed, based in the US during the 2015-2015 period, was influential in mobilizing youth, through his media Oromo Media Networks (OMN) and as a central hub on social media, particularly Facebook.

[88] uradusenge-McLeod, Claudine. "Democracy by the "Other": How Ethiopian Diaspora Communities in Virginia Engage in Political Participation." *Diaspora* aop (2024): e25120241115.

[89] Interview with Ethiopian Diaspora Service official, Addis Ababa, 03.11.2025.

[90] *"Ethiopia Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed's US Visit,"* **Voice of America**, July 27, 2018, accessed 9 January 2026, https://www.voanews.com/a/ethiopia-prime-minister-abiy-ahmed-us-visit/4500560.html

[91] A high-profile case involves the kidnapping of Andargachew Tsige, a high-profile opposition leader, who was kidnapped and handed over to authorities while transiting through Yemen in 2014.

[92] EU02 – Interview, member of Defend Ethiopia Task Force Steering Committee, Europe, June 18, 2025.

ceremonies. The state has used its embassies to try and infiltrate diasporic communities, as well as link pro-government efforts across borders. It attempts to use the diaspora to shape perceptions and extend its strategic narratives on key issues, especially in difficult times like the Tigray war, or diplomatic confrontations like Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD).

Recently, the state has also focused on second generation diaspora, through initiatives such as Second-Generation Homecoming, considering first generation Ethiopian diaspora members to be too politically inclined and attached to ethnic groups, and more likely to support opposition politics.[93] Seeking identity and belonging, second and third-generation are seen as more likely to buy into the narratives of transformation, delivered through visual media. The country has been inviting second generation diaspora members to visit and reconnect with their identity, with the third round of Second-Generation Homecoming Initiative undertaken in 2024 under the theme "back to your origins".[94] This has been coupled with visual narratives showcasing the transformation of the capital city, encouraging the visiting diaspora members to document and popularise the changes in the country.

4.3. The Ethiopian diaspora in Europe as a key target

The political changes in the country in 2018 resulted in a temporary transformation and realignment of relations between the Ethiopian diaspora and the Ethiopian government. Generally seen as a hotbed of political opposition, the diaspora embraced Prime Minister Abiy and supported his newly formed government. In his first official visit to Europe, the Prime Minister met with the Ethiopian diaspora in Frankfurt where he was welcomed with great fanfare.[95] The ten Ethiopian embassies in Europe[96] and its environs mobilised the Ethiopian community in their respective regions to travel to Frankfurt to meet with the Prime Minister.[97] Abiy called on the diaspora in Europe to actively participate in building a new Ethiopia instead of "pointing the finger and criticizing" from a distance.[98] The Nobel prize ceremony in 2019 strengthened these links as Ethiopians convened in

---

[93] E05 – Interview, Researcher, studying Ethiopian conflicts and foreign policy, Jan 25, 2025, Addis Ababa.

[94] Diaspora Homecoming Aims to Connect Ethiopians with Their Origins, Involve in Nat'l Affairs. https://www.ena.et/web/eng/w/eng_3825972

[95] The weight of the visit to the diaspora in Europe is evidenced by the entourage that accompanied him from Addis, including Daniel Kibret, Workneh Gebeyehu, Shimelis Abdissa, and Ahmed Shide Shide. MoFA https://www.facebook.com/MFAEthiopia/posts/2475049652522263/ (DW live video)

[96] Ireland, UK, Belgium, France, Netherlands, Sweden (Norway, Finland), Germany, Italy, Turkey, Russia

[97] DW (Oct 31, 2018). Calling all Ethiopians to return home https://www.dw.com/en/prime-minister-abiy-ahmed-on-tour-to-mobilize-ethiopians-abroad/a-46107833

[98] DW (Oct 31, 2018). Calling all Ethiopians to return home https://www.dw.com/en/prime-minister-abiy-ahmed-on-tour-to-mobilize-ethiopians-abroad/a-46107833

Oslo, Norway. Connections created during these events later became instrumental in the pro-government campaigns during the Tigray war (2020-2022).

These networks were mobilised during the Tigray war period to undertake pro-government digital campaigns and demonstrations in Europe, amid an increasing pressure on the Ethiopian government to resolve the conflict peacefully. The Ethiopian government used its embassies to co-ordinate pro-government diaspora initiatives, which eventually coalesced under the Defend Ethiopia Task Force in Europe. Defend Ethiopia EU's declared objectives included "confronting the disinformation and misinformation launched against our country" and "challenging the policies and actions of European Governments, the European Union (EU), the European Parliament (EP) and UN entities that might negatively influence Ethiopia's interests."[99]

Image 3. An example of pro-government mobilization on Twitter during the Tigray War asking Ethiopians, and especially the diaspora, to join the online war

---

[99] *"About Us,"* Defend Ethiopia, n.d., accessed 9 January 2026, https://defendethiopia.eu/about-us/

Defend Ethiopia EU took the messaging and narratives of the Ethiopian government global, through social media campaigns through click-to-tweet websites and letter and email writing campaigns to policy makers and parliamentarians in Europe. It also collaborated with the Ethiopian community to hold demonstrations in support of the Ethiopian government in European capitals. Defend Ethiopia was also an active participant of what became the #NoMore movement, coordinating closely with pro-government diaspora networks in North America to organise protests criticising 'Western intervention' in the Ethiopian conflict and condemning 'Western media bias'. The diaspora thus acted as intermediaries – transmitting (and translating) the narratives of the Ethiopian government regarding the war to a European audience.

The Ethiopian government also leveraged the diaspora for diplomacy regarding the Great Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD). The diaspora has organised hashtag campaigns in support of the Ethiopian state's position regarding the dam, especially at times when pressure from Egypt and its partners were high. This has been the case especially when confrontations regarding the GERD are heightened, such as during discussions at the UN Security Council, or the annual filling of the dam.

The relationship between the Ethiopian government and the diaspora, as well as the influence of the Ethiopian government over the diaspora in Europe, has waned following the end of the Tigray conflict. The relationship started to sour when the Ethiopian government released politicians like Sebhat Nega and Jawar Mohammed from prison. This was exacerbated with the signing of the Pretoria Peace Agreement. A significant portion were also disappointed with the exclusion of Amhara forces from the peace deal, despite their active role in the war. The start of insurgency in Amhara in 2023 further complicated the relationship between the diaspora and the state.

The Ethiopian government's mobilisation of diaspora networks, and their participation in pro-government messaging during the war, has left a mark on the Ethiopian community. The diaspora acted as intermediaries - transmitting (and translating) the narratives of the Ethiopian government regarding the war to a European audience. The Ethiopian government's narrative that Western countries and Western media are biased, and supported the TPLF against the Ethiopian state, was readily bought by diaspora activists. Some activists and organizers indicate they lost their trust in international media, especially Western media, because of their perception of its bias during the war.[100]

The Ethiopian government's mobilisation of its diaspora is an extension of its regime survival strategy. Facing an international legitimacy crisis during the Tigray war, it actively mobilised the diaspora into an advocacy network to counter condemnation and pressure for peaceful negotiations.

---

[100]Multiple interviews

The shift in the relationship, particularly the change of the diaspora's outlook towards the government following the signing of the Pretoria agreement, shows that the ability of the government to influence diasporic networks is limited and contingent upon alignment of positions.

Tactics and techniques of information suppression targeting the diaspora

Tactics	Techniques
- Utilise diaspora as part of information operations - Reduce the influence of diasporic media - Reduce the influence of diasporic political opposition	- Co-opting diaspora in pro-government campaigns - Co-opting diaspora voices through material incentives - Surveillance and intimidation of overseas activists, including efforts at extradition of exiled journalists - Co-option of diaspora organisations, including cultural and religious institutions of influence (especially during Tigray war) - Digital harassment of exiled politicians, activists, journalists

5. Conclusions and recommendations

The working paper outlined the changing nature of information suppression in Ethiopia across three dimensions - information production, dissemination, and salience, as well as its transnational aspects with a focus on Europe.

Suppression of information production in Ethiopia happens through a combination of legal and institutional mechanisms as well as direct suppression. Legislations designed to govern the media, terrorism, hate speech, and CSOs have been weaponised to target actors engaged in production of information and knowledge. State of emergencies are also routinely instrumentalised to target journalists and human rights defenders. Institutional mechanisms, including bureaucratic hurdles in licensing, are another tool. Direct suppression of journalists, academics, human rights defenders through harassment, detentions, intimidation, physical violence, vandalism of offices and equipment have also been instrumental in suppression of information production. Self-censorship because of the chilling effect of these measures adds to the phenomenon.

Suppression of information dissemination has primarily happened through Internet shutdowns in all its variations, including internet blackouts, network shutdowns, platform blockages, and internet slowdowns. This has happened on multiple occasions, especially whenever there is conflict and violence. A two-year communication blackout imposed on the Tigray region between 2020 and 2022 represents an extreme illustration of suppression of information dissemination.

While suppression of information production and dissemination has been a routine practice in the management of information by the Ethiopian government, there is a growing reliance on *managing and shaping information salience*. This has been precipitated by a combination of factors including the inadequacy of classical censorship in the face of technological advancements, and the reputational costs of large-scale internet shutdowns. As a result, there is a shift towards a more dynamic approach to managing information salience to control the narrative, set the agenda of online conversations, and shape the perceptions of audiences. Management of information involves a sprawling apparatus composed of state-controlled media, a digital media army, paid activists, and influencers.

Such efforts have targeted audiences both at home and abroad, particularly during the Tigray war period when the government faced intense international criticism and pressure because of human rights violations. Using its growing online propaganda apparatus, the government attempts to control the agenda of online discussions and drown out critical voices. In sensitive times like conflict, the government has also reached out to and collaborated with its diaspora supporters for its information operations, particularly during the Tigray war through initiatives like #NoMore, and institutions like Defend Ethiopia EU, with the goal of influencing international public opinion about the conflict.

In this paper, we argue that information suppression in Ethiopia – taking place at the three levels outlined above – is directed towards regime survival in the context of complex domestic and regional political and security challenges, along with legitimation at the international level. Internally, it aims at delegitimising rivals, including the TPLF, the Fano insurgency in Amhara, and the OLA in Oromia, while amplifying its success stories (such as reforestation and corridor project) as well as its strategic ambitions (such as the access to the Red Sea). Externally, it aspires to enhance its international legitimacy by justifying its actions in armed conflicts as well as presenting itself as the best alternative for a stable Ethiopia. Through these efforts, it aims to enhance its international standing and image, to gain diplomatic, material, and financial support from sympathetic external actors, as well as improve its reputation among the Western partners which have been critical of the conduct of the government and its allies during the Tigray war.

Information suppression in Ethiopia, while occasionally targeting diasporic actors, is still largely concerned with regime survival at home rather than influencing political processes abroad. As a regime presiding over a fragile state, the threat it poses to democratic processes abroad is minimal. Nonetheless, information suppression directly violates information freedom and democratic rights in Ethiopia, which does not bode well for long term stability of the country. As we outlined in this study, on some occasions, it also affects diasporic communities, including those in Europe, as the state occasionally engages in transnational legitimation efforts.

In the interaction with Ethiopia, actors such as the European Union should therefore implement policies that contribute to improving the conditions for information freedom in the country, each tied to the different levels in the information cycle.

To secure free information production, the independence of key media and civil society institutions should be supported. This includes:

- Pushing for the restoration of the Ethiopian Media Authority's independence, emphasising the importance of non-partisan regulation in protecting press freedom.
- Providing legal and technical support to Ethiopian civil society and media organisations, including those working on fact-checking and digital literacy.
- Providing protection for journalists, offering asylum pathways, legal aid, and capacity-building programs for exiled Ethiopian journalists, while condemning harassment and violence targeting media professionals.
- Strengthening academic and civil society collaboration, funding academic and civil society initiatives that promote independent research and reporting, while advocating against laws restricting CSO operations.

To secure free information dissemination, initiatives that contribute to transparent circulation of online and offline information should be supported. This includes:

- Pushing for clear rules for internet shutdowns and transparency in the decisions made.
- Tying support to the Ethiopian government, especially technology-related development support, to transparency about the government's use of technology and AI.
- Addressing online harassment: partner with Ethiopian stakeholders to combat digital harassment and disinformation, ensuring the safety of journalists and activists in online spaces.
- Negotiating humanitarian whitelists for critical organisations working in Ethiopia and providing technical help to implement these when internet disruptions occur.

To ensure that the management of information salience is not undermining freedom of information, initiatives that hinder digital manipulation should be supported. This includes:

- Pressing major social media platforms to add additional resources and language capacity (Amharic/Oromo/Tigrinya) for their content moderation mechanism, to prevent the misuse of platform reporting mechanisms for political purposes and to honour transparency commitments.
- Tightening international export controls for different surveillance tools.

To prevent diasporas from being co-opted as agents or becoming victims of information suppression in Europe, initiatives should acknowledge the fears that tie diaspora to authoritarian states. This includes:

- EU policy-makers should invest in understanding the country context (Ethiopia) so that EU/European countries do not take positions that are seen as paternalistic, undermining these countries.
- Building Ethiopia/Africa expertise: there is a need for more Ethiopia, and broadly, Africa expertise in Europe, to continually assess and understand their foreign policies and engagement with their large diaspora.
- Diversifying sources of information: as conflicts in fragile contexts are complex, polarised, and highly contested, there is a need to consult diverse constituencies before taking a position on such conflicts.
- Consulting the Ethiopian diaspora in decision making regarding countries like Ethiopia, to have a more nuanced perspective and avoid taking positions that sideline and alienate the diaspora.