CIVIL RIGHTS

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DIGITALIZATION IN AFRICA: BETWEEN PROMOTING CIVIL RIGHTS AND STATE CENSORSHIP

Abstract:	*The spread of digital technologies in Africa has reshaped civic engagement, enabling citizens to mobilize and hold authorities accountable through online platforms. Social media platforms have become avenues for voter education and sensitization, political participation, and communication, as attested to by the recent spate of technology-based social movements. However, despite its indubitable role in promoting civil rights, digitization in Africa is caught in the web of digital authoritarianism, exemplified by state censorship. Because of its penchant for granting citizens a voice to speak to power, this empowerment has been met by significant government resistance, leading to widespread censorship and repression. This study examines the dual role of digital platforms in Africa as enablers of civic activism and instruments of state control, addressing the tension between the promotion and undermining of civil liberties through digital technology.*
	This study was guided by Digital Citizenship and Panopticism and employs a qualitative approach by analyzing secondary data from policy reports, government briefs, journal articles, newspaper articles, and internet sources on digital platforms, state surveillance, and freedom of expression across sub-Saharan Africa. This study shows that while digital platforms have supported social movements and citizen rights, governments have responded with Internet shutdowns, surveillance technologies, and restrictive legislation to silence opposition.
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Introduction

Africa has in the last decades witnessed remarkable growth in the adoption of technological tools in communication, education, medicine, commerce and politics. Economically, digitalization in Africa has created opportunities for economic growth by increasing opportunities for startups, entrepreneurship, and employment. For instance, an increase in mobile broadband penetration in sub-Saharan Africa has led to a 2.5% increase in Gross Domestic Product (GDP)[1]. Despite recording the lowest performance score (50.3 among the regions surveyed, 40.1 per cent of the population using the Internet and 67.0 per cent owning a mobile phone in Africa recorded a 7.8 per cent improvement in performance compared to 2023[2]. This indicates that Africa continues to make giant strides in digital transformation, while the penetration of digital tools

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[1] European Investment Bank, *The Rise of Africa's Digital Economy*, European Investment Bank, Luxembourg, 2021, https://www.eib.org/attachments/thematic/study_the_rise_of_africa_s_digital_economy_en.pdf (1.10.2024)

[2] International Telecommunication Union, *The ICT Development Index 2024*, ITU, Switzerland, 2024, https://www.itu.int/hub/publication/D-IND-ICT_MDD-2024-3/ (07.09.2024)

remains steady. Digitalization helps governments improve transparency and accountability by adopting e-government platforms for the deployment of basic and public delivery services[1].

The use of digital technology has been recorded in various countries' political and constitutional processes. It has enabled citizen participation in decision-making and civic engagement and has improved the quality of political participation across the board. There have been remarkable instances of the adoption of digital tools to promote civil rights in Africa. Beginning with the Arab Spring in Tunisia in 2010 and moving to the #EndSARS protests in Nigeria in 2020[2], the use of digital tools to empower social movements and demonstrations cannot be overemphasized. Digitalization creates opportunities for citizens to become deeply involved with the political system and governance through the enablement of various platforms[3]. Citizens have become better informed and empowered to express their opinions, criticize the government openly yet anonymously, vote in an election, canvass for votes, and monitor the electoral process. Digitalization has become a tool of political empowerment and an index for measuring citizen freedom, while social media platforms have become indispensable in promoting voter education, campaigns, and political indoctrination.

In addition to challenges such as the digital divide, high cost of digital access, an overwhelming illiterate population, and gender gap[4], digitalization is susceptible to perversion by authoritarian rulers for control, surveillance, and repression. The Collaboration on International ICT Policy for East and Southern Africa (CIPESA) decries the growing decline in democratic governance, deepening the digital divide, and growing digital authoritarianism in Africa[5]. Concerning the latter, authoritarian governments often adopt technology to perpetuate illegality and extend their stay in office. Governments in countries such as Mali, Chad, Burkina Faso, Algeria, Rwanda, South Sudan, Ethiopia, and Gabon have embarked on the extensive use of digital tools to limit citizen rights and freedom through media control, censorship, and internet shutdowns to spread state-centric narratives. It requires little emphasis that these disruptions limit citizen rights and undermine governance, while increasing the tendencies of despotic and authoritarian rule. However, the essence of state surveillance of its citizens is to limit opposition and enable the government to maintain a stranglehold on the state. These actions point to the larger challenge that digitalization poses to civil rights. In other words, while digitalization promotes civic activism and engagement, it also increases the risk of restricting civil rights and promoting state censorship, especially when controlled by states with authoritarian tendencies.

The above is alluded to in the Freedom in the World report 2024 which shows that 46 percent of the countries in Africa are categorized as not free 37 percent are partially free while only 17 percent are designated as free, indicating the pervasiveness of the limitations to political rights and civil liberties on the continent. Placed in context, the report further shows that 7 African countries (Niger -7; Tunisia -5; Sudan -4; Burkina Faso -3; Madagascar -3; Mali -3; and Sierra Leone -3) are among the 17 where the most significant deteriorations in political rights and civil liberties for the year 2023 were recorded[6]. This, again points to the prevailing challenge of a lack of freedom on the continent.

Social media and Internet blackouts have become trademarks of authoritarian governments such as Cameroon, Togo, and Chad in asserting control. While this is often done under the guise of sovereignty concerns and the need to preserve national security, it gives impetus to one-party authoritarian regimes to maintain their notoriety[7]. This trend is worrisome because the increase in state censorship in Africa is out of

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[1] European Investment Bank, *Op. cit.,* p. 13

[2] Tope Shola Akinyetun, Victor Chukwugekwu Ebonine, *The Challenge of Democratization in Africa: From Digital Democracy to Digital Authoritarianism*, in Emilia Alaverdov, Muhammad Bari (Eds.), *Regulating Human Rights, Social Security, and Socio-Economic Structures in a Global Perspective*, IGI Global, USA, 2022, p. 260

[3] Victor Ojakorotu, *Digitalization, Politics, and Governance in Africa*, "E-Journal of Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences", Vol. 1–2, 2023, p. 4

[4] Kashema Bahago, Adedeji Adeniran, Uchenna Efobi, *The Role of Digitalisation in Inclusive Governance: A Case Study of Sub-Saharan Africa (Occasional Paper No. 79)*, "Southern Voice", 2023, http://southernvoice.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/Digitalisation-sub-Saharan-Africa-Bahago-Adeniran-Efobi-2023.pdf (1.10.2024)

[5] CIPESA, *State of Internet Freedom in Africa 2024: Africa's Electoral Democracy and Technology*, 2024, https://cipesa.org/wp-content/files/reports/State_of_Internet_Freedom_in_Africa_Report_2024.pdf (1.10.2024)

[6] Freedom House, *The Mounting Damage of Flawed Elections and Armed Conflict*, Freedom House, Washington DC, 2024, https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2024-02/FIW_2024_DigitalBooklet.pdf (1.10.2024)

[7] Amodani Gariba, *Enter the Dragon: The Impact of China's Digital Authoritarianism on Democracy in Africa*, "The Africa Governance Papers", Vol. 1, No. 4, 2023, p. 41, https://tagp.gga.org/index.php/system/article/view/53 (07.09.2024)

the playbook of China. China remains one of the largest economic partners of African countries and has systematically exported surveillance and censorship technologies to encourage states with authoritarian ambitions. This not only emphasizes the role of external countries in promoting digital abuse and censorship in Africa, but also raises a bigger question of Africa's digital sovereignty and overall Internet freedom. This is particularly worrying for a continent like Africa, which depends on foreign countries for the development of its digital infrastructure. Further, in context, data from the Ibrahim Index of African Governance show that digital freedom in Africa between 2014 and 2023 experienced significant decline. A comparison of the regions in Africa shows that each region recorded a decline in digital freedom, especially Northern Africa, where a decline of -9.2 was recorded, followed by Western Africa with a -9.0 decline (see Figure 1). Concerning West Africa, aside from Gambia, other states in the region recorded a downward trend in digital freedom between 2014 and 2023 with Senegal being the most challenged, having recorded -27.3 over the period of review (see Figure 2). The figures show the extent of decline in digital freedom in Africa.
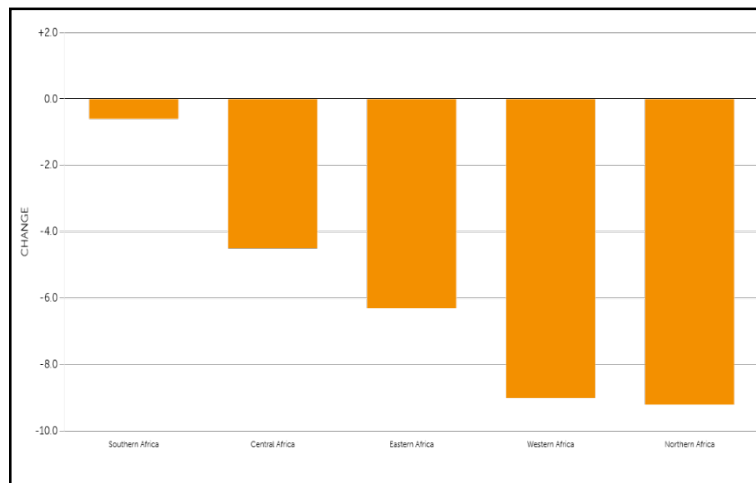

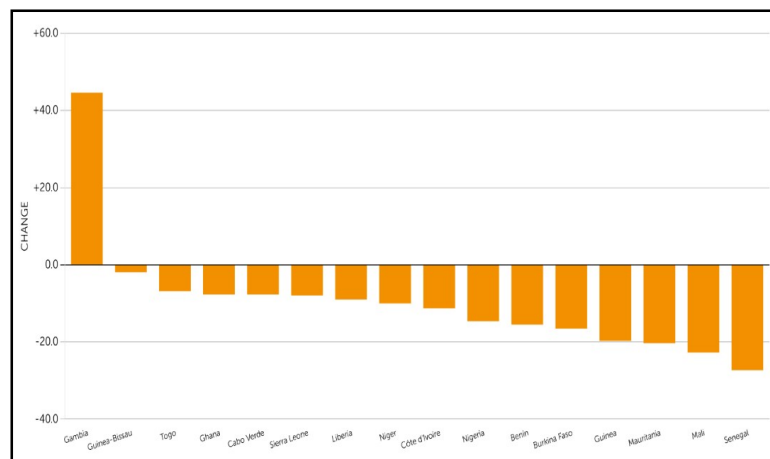**Figure 1. Digital Freedom for Africa (2014-2023)**[1]

Figure 2. Digital Freedom for West Africa (2014-2023)[2]

Theoretical perspectives
   Digital citizenship
      Citizenship has evolved in contemporary times from the traditional notion of having duties and responsibilities to the state to promoting a virtual community where individuals are empowered to contribute to

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[1] IIAG, *Digital Freedom in Africa*, 2024, https://iiag.online/data (1.10.2024)
[2] *Idem*

political life, participate in democracy and influence decision making outside the norm[1]. The concept of citizenship allows an individual to lay claims for social, political, and civil rights. Social rights include economic welfare, security, and education, while political rights include membership in a political authority and the ability to participate in political and democratic systems, including the electoral process. Civil rights include those that guarantee freedom of speech, right to own property, and right to justice. Given that citizens require unfettered information to make decisions and participate in politics, Internet access thus becomes a social, political, and civil right[2]. Viewed as a right, Internet access enables citizenship and affords citizens the opportunity to use various platforms to gain and disseminate information, thus conferring on them the status of digital citizenship. Digital citizenship hinges on three ideas: involvement in the digital space, making use of opportunities to develop the digital space, upholding civic rights, and holding government accountable through digital technologies. Digital citizenship is crucial for collective resilience, security, and mobilization[3].

Digital citizenship refers to the ability of citizens to gain access to the Internet and participate effectively in society. This emphasizes how the Internet and digital technological tools empower citizens, enhance their civil rights, and enable them to function adequately. At its core, the idea underscores access to the Internet as a precondition for full citizenship, social justice, equality of opportunities, and as a notable requisite for effective democracy and civic participation[4]. The concept is hinged on three components: "constant questioning of the policies of all nations, active interest in the affairs of other countries, and an interest in creating a just global order"[5]. Digital citizenship refers to the adoption of mobile and digital tools to participate in political and civic life online. It is acquired by using technology tools in social and political interactions without necessarily partaking in formal politics[6]. This makes participation possible for citizens through access to information on political matters. With this, citizens are empowered to evaluate government actions and demand transparency while maintaining the responsibility of improved communication[7].

The study of digital citizenship witnessed a pivotal moment with the Cambridge Analytica scandal and Snowden revelations, which revealed how private corporations and state governments used social media platforms such as Facebook for the surveillance of citizens and manipulated voting behavior. As the Snowden revelation showed, liberal and authoritarian governments engaged in mass surveillance of citizens to manipulate the electoral process and impinge on citizen civil rights[8]. A digital citizen possesses cognitive, affective, and psychomotor skills to use technological tools to communicate, create information, and influence policy. That is, digital citizens are technologically literate, embedded in the prevalent global digital culture, possess a deep understanding of the Internet, are aware of digital communication laws, possess moral obligation to communicate using digital tools, are active social media users, are aware of debates on digital privacy, and support participatory democracy[9]. Generally, digital citizens engage in multifaceted

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[1] Şevki Işıklı, *Digital Citizenship: An Actual Contribution to Theory of Participatory Democracy*, "AJIT-e: Online Academic Journal of Information Technology", Vol. 6, 2015, pp. 21-37, https://doi.org/10.5824/1309-1581.2015.1.002.x (07.09.2024)

[2] Toks Dele Oyedemi, *Internet Access as Citizen's Right? Citizenship in the Digital Age*, "Citizenship Studies", Vol. 19, No. 3–4, 2015, pp. 450-464, http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13621025.2014.970441, (10.08.2024)

[3] Ayobami Ojebode, Babatunde Ojebuyi, Oyewole Oladapo, Marjoke Oosterom, *Ethno-Religious Citizenship in Nigeria: Ethno-Religious Fault Lines and the Truncation of Collective Resilience of Digital Citizens: The Cases of #ENDSARS and #PantamiMustGo in Nigeria*, in Tony Roberts, Tanja Bosch (Eds.), *Digital Citizenship in Africa: Technologies of Agency and Repression*, Zed Books, New York, 2023, p. 112, https://library.oapen.org/handle/20.500.12657/63749 (17.11.2024)

[4] Toks Dele Oyedemi, *The Theory of Digital Citizenship*, in Jan Servaes (Ed.), *Handbook of Communication for Development and Social Change*, Springer, Singapore, 2020, p.15, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-10-7035-8_124-1 (17.11.2024)

[5] Cristina Hennig Manzuoli, Ana Vargas Sánchez, Erika Duque Bedoya, *Digital Citizenship: A Theoretical Review of the Concept and Trends*, "Turkish Online Journal of Educational Technology", Vol. 18, 2019, pp. 13-14

[6] Tony Roberts, Tanja Bosch, *Spaces of Digital Citizenship in Africa*, in Tony Roberts, Tanja Bosch (Eds.), Digital Citizenship in Africa: Technologies of Agency and Repression, Zed Books, New York, 2023, p. 7, https://library.oapen.org/handle/20.500.12657/63749 (17.11.2024)

[7] Cristina Hennig Manzuoli, Ana Vargas Sánchez, Erika Duque Bedoya, *Op. cit.,* p. 16

[8] Tony Roberts, Tanja Bosch, *Op. cit.,* p. 10

[9] Işıklı, Şevki, *Digital Citizenship: An Actual Contribution to Theory of Participatory Democracy*, "AJIT-e: Online Academic Journal of Information Technology", Vol. 6, 2015, p. 22, https://doi.org/10.5824/1309-1581.2015.1.002.X, (10.08.2024)

communication, gathering and dispersing information rapidly, acting as critiques of government policies, engaging in social media gossip, and striving for digital equality[1]. Despite its strengths, the idea has been criticized as entrenching inequality, as it widens the digital divide between technologically savvy and those who are not, and between urban and rural areas, especially in economically disadvantaged countries[2].

Panopticism

The concept of Panopticon traces its origin to Jeremy Bentham and was popularized by Michel Foucault in his book Discipline and Punish. The idea was conceived as a prison architectural design to watch prisoners without knowing that they were being watched. This is a way of internalizing control, such that the prisoner is his own guard. This refers to the change in behavior occasioned by surveillance[3,4]. Bentham's panopticon which symbolizes a prison that allows for an all-seeing entity to act as an inspector over inmates without being seen forces inmates to adjust their behavior considering the possibility that they may be watched. The prison is aimed at producing self-discipline and restraint as inmates are forced to be cautious knowing that they may be under surveillance[5]. Manokha identifies three assumptions of the concept: an omnipresent and invisible inspector; visible objects of surveillance; and the assumption of being watched[6]. Wrobel asserts that "there are five levels of surveillance inside Bentham's project: the prisoners are watched by the authorities, the governor watches the wards, the wards watch the governor, the inmates watch each other, and the whole structure is open to the public"[7]. The use of panopticons in surveillance studies refers to the idea that states and business corporations act as watchers to acquire power over and control the watched. This describes the improved capability of watchers to invade the privacy of citizens and maintain domination through surveillance technology. It is seen as an efficient form of power and structure of domination imposed to control individuals who lack the power to resist[8]. Surveillance is defined as a systematic process of vigilance to collect personal details to influence the subject[9]. The metaphor of panopticon interacts closely with modern surveillance, where individuals become conscious of the data they put out, knowing that such data may be gathered and stored by the government to exercise control over them[10]. This, no doubt, has grave implications for individual rights, as their privacy is not only subject to external interference, but they must constantly watch over their shoulders to ensure that they are subjects of surveillance or censorship.

This is more troubling considering the proliferation of digital technology and its adoption in everyday use. The implication is that citizens' civil rights, freedom of expression, and social mobilization suffer from double jeopardy, self-censorship, and state or corporate surveillance[11]. This undermines participatory democracy, increases the risk of state repression, and continues authoritarianism. With the increase in breaches of privacy on social media evidenced in the Facebook/Cambridge Analytica scandal, the susceptibility of digital technology and social space to surveillance, and the risk it poses to its users[12]. The resulting digital traces from the digital actions undertaken over the Internet, such as tweets and mobile calls, enable authoritarian states to engage in state censorship, surveillance, manipulation, and control of citizens, thus limiting civic engagement[13].

Foucault's culture of surveillance has become a culture among big corporations that are often locked in a race of control and are moved by economic benefits, as well as by state governments with authoritarian

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[1] *Idem*

[2] Cristina Hennig Manzuoli, Ana Vargas Sánchez, Erika Duque Bedoya, *Op. Cit.,* p. 17

[3] Mark Rathbone, *Panopticism, Impartial Spectator and Digital Technology*, "The Indo-Pacific Journal of Phenomenology", Vol. 22, No. 1, 2022, p. 1

[4] Claire Wrobel, *Introduction: Literary and Critical Approaches to Panopticism*, "Revue d'études Benthamiennes", Vol. 22, 2022, p.1

[5] Ivan Manokha, *Surveillance, Panopticism, and Self-Discipline in the Digital Age*, "Surveillance & Society", Vol. 16, No. 2, 2018, pp. 219–237, https://doi.org/10.24908/ss.v16i2.8346 (01.09.2024)

[6] *Idem*

[7] Claire Wrobel, *Op. cit*., pp. 2-4

[8] Ivan Manokha, *Op. cit*, p. 221

[9] David Lyon, *Surveillance*, "Internet Policy Review", Vol. 11, No. 4, 2022, p. 14

[10] Ivan Manokha, *Op. cit*., p. 226

[11] *Ibidem*, p. 232

[12] Mark Rathbone, *Op. cit.,* p. 1

[13] Tony Roberts, *Op. cit.,* p. 12

orientation[1]. Meanwhile, surveillance itself has become a capitalist venture that big corporations embark upon to guarantee a surplus. Surveillance capitalism "is a new form of capitalism that uses advances in digital technology to survey personal and relationship spaces under the guise of 'deep support,' to be turned into cash"[2]. Foucault's notion of a panoptic gaze – dominant forms of mental control that state exercises on citizens – explains the gatekeeper state prevalent in Africa where the state engages in intrusive and unobtrusive surveillance and social control[3]. While the use of digital technology has afforded its users the ability of inverse gaze by using mobile phones and social media platforms to monitor government actions, their digital footprints in cyberspace often give away too much information about them. That is, while citizens have organized themselves as digital dissidents to engage in political conversations and liberation struggles, their vulnerability to state surveillance increases the chances of intimidation and harassment[4].

Digital platforms and civil rights

The use of digital technologies for the interaction and sharing of texts, images, and videos has become popular among African citizens. This has enhanced their ability to organize themselves in support of or against the government[5]. The use of social media platforms and hashtags is essential for driving critical discourse. They constitute avenues for critiquing government policy, demanding justice, and campaigning for good governance. Viral hashtags have been used in Nigeria to address specific governance and socio-political issues. These include #BringbackOurGirls, #SaveNigeriaGroup (SNG), #OccupyNigeria, #ArewaMeToo, #OccupyNASS, #EndSARS, and #OurMumuDonDo. The #EndSARS remains one of the most pivotal avenues of the Nigerian populace to criticize police brutality and demand for good governance. The protests, which lasted for several days began as online expressions and quickly spread into demonstrations. This demonstrates the power of digital space and its role in solidifying interests[6]. Digital tools have evolved as tools for youth activism, civic engagement, and social movements around Africa. Popular among these are #FreeSenegal, #Zimbabweanlivesmatter, #Shutitalldown, #FeesMustFall, #EndSARS, #Congoisbleeding. This growing Internet freedom has attracted opposition from the government, leading to the latter responding through censorship, surveillance, Internet tax, Internet shutdown, and social media bans[7].

Hashtag	Description and Focus	Source
#FreeSenegal	Protests following the government's limiting access to the Internet and restricting access to social media platforms on June 1, 2023. The government sought to implement a daily curfew on Internet shutdowns. The government claimed that this was necessary to prevent the spread of hateful and subversive messages that constituted public disturbance. People resorting to using virtual private networks (VPN) to circumvent the blockage and raise awareness of issues on Twitter.	Government Technology
#Zimbabweanlivesmatter	This campaign was against President Emmerson Mnangagwa's human rights abuse and violations. The Zimbabwean president arrested over 60 protesters against government corruption and human rights abuse on July 31, 2020. The government was also accused of suppressing political opposition, journalists, and ordinary citizens as well as abducting activists, including Josphat Mzaca Ngulube. As a result, citizens took social media to tweet the abuse. This gained momentum when celebrities such as Ice Cube retweeted the messages.	France 24
#Shutitalldown	This was promoted by demonstrators, predominantly women, against gender-	Civicus

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[1] Mark Rathbone, *Op. cit.,* p. 1

[2] *Ibidem,* p. 7

[3] Farooq Kperogi, *Introduction*, in *Digital Dissidence and Social Media Censorship in Africa*, Routledge, New York, 2022, p. 8

[4] *Ibidem*, p. 10

[5] Tony Roberts, Tanja Bosch, *Op. cit.,* p. 14

[6] Victoria Ibezim-Ohaeri, Joshua Olufemi, Lotanna Nwodo, Oluseyi Olufemi, Ngozi Juba-Nwosu, *Security Playbook of Digital Authoritarianism in Nigeria*, "Action Group on Free Civic Space", 2021, https://closingspaces.org/download/7808/?tmstv=1730893658 (01.10.2024)

[7] Tope Shola Akinyetun, *State of Democracy in Africa: Democratic Decline or Autocracy?*, "Političke Perspektive", Vol. 12, No. 2, 2022, pp. 89–115, https://doi.org/10.20901/pp.12.2.04 (10.08.2024)

	based violence, rape culture, and protection of the rights of the vulnerable in Namibia. This was necessitated by the search for a 22-year-old girl Shannon Wasserfall, whose body was found by the police in a shallow grave. As a result, protesters called on the president to declare a state of emergency against rising femicide and gender-based violence in the country, prompting #shutitalldown. The protestors were attacked by the security agents and subsequently dispersed	
#FeesMustFall	This captures South African students' protests the costs of tertiary education in the country on October 14, 2016. The protests began after the University of Witwatersrand announced a 10.5% increase in tuition fees. The protests quickly spread to other institutions as students in Cape Town joined. This led to disruptions in the school program, while the protests turned violent on October 21, attracting force from security agencies.	Global Citizen
#EndSARS	The Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS) was an investigative arm of the Nigerian Police saddled with combatting armed robbery and such other vices. Due to its success in the southern part of the country, squad operations were introduced in other parts of the country. However, given limited oversight and operational deficiencies, the squad deviated from its mandate and began to engage in extra-judicial activities, such as harassment, rape, extortion, unlawful arrest, intimidation, and other vices. It was also accused of engaging in abduction and disappearance, while uncharacteristically profiling young men and lebelling them fraudsters and cybercriminals. After years of accusations and the inability of the Nigerian government to curtail squad activities, Segun Awosanya raised a call for its disbandment in 2017. However, the squad continued its extra-legal activities unperturbed until a video showing members of the squad killing a young man went viral on th e social media. As a result, Nigerian youth mobilized on social media platforms and took to the streets to demonstrate against the squad and the government. These nationwide protests that took place in 2021 began to gain serious momentum from within and outside the country and from notable celebrities, forcing the government to clamp down on the protesters leading the death and injury of many.	Akinyetun (2021)
#Congoisbleeding	This campaign was used to decrease the level of resource exploitation and genocidal killing in the DR Congo. It is believed that the exploitation of the country's natural resources, such as cobalt used in producing batteries from mobile phones, has not translated to development; rather, it has increased the incidence of economic exploitation and wanton killings; hence, the saying Congo is bleeding. In addition to the exploitation and brutal killings from years of colonial rule, the country has recorded killings of over six million people since 1996. As a result, citizens have taken social media platforms to call attention to the situation in the country by 2023.	Tan Tv Studios
#FixTheCountry	This captures the demands of Ghana youth for improved living conditions. Social media users in 2021 used this movement to campaign for education and jobs, reduce taxes, and discourage corruption. In response, a member of parliament sponsored the #FixYourSelf campaign asking the youth to fix themselves before asking the same from the government.	DW

Table 1. Hashtags for Promoting Civil Rights in Africa[1]

The campaigns captured above point to the use of social media platforms and digital technologies to advocate human rights and civil liberties. As shown above, the tools have been used to draw attention to various matters, including Internet shutdown, human rights violations, civil rights abuses by the government, demand for gender equality, demand for student rights, protests police brutality, protests exploitation, and demands for improvement in living conditions. This underscores the notion that there is no limit to the extent to which digital technologies promote civil rights and liberties. However, despite its merits, these tools have also become instruments of repression by governments of the world, including Africa. For instance, the government in Nigeria has engaged in different tactics to criminalize and silence digital rights, tagging it a threat to national security. For instance, activists have been arrested and jailed to criticize the government on

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Twitter (now X) and Facebook[1]. A case in point is the arrest of an anonymous whistleblower referred to as PIDOM known for posting materials critical of the government on X. PIDOM, allegedly named Bristol Isaac Tamunobiefiri, who was accused by the Nigerian government of leaking classified documents, undermining the government, unlawful possession, and cybercrime-related offences, was arrested on August 5 in Rivers State by the Nigeria Police Force National Cybercrime Center[2]. His arrest not only represents a significant threat to digital rights and civil liberties but also increases the chances of self-censorship[3].

Digital authoritarianism and state censorship in Africa

Owing to the popularity of the Internet and its adoption in communication and knowledge sharing, it has evolved as an efficient tool in policy and decision-making. As a result, digital tools have come under attack and are hijacked by illiberal regimes to control their citizens. This is done using a specific or combination of tactics, such as Internet shutdown, surveillance and monitoring, and censorship. This section discusses the incidence of these strategies in Africa. However, to understand this phenomenon, it is essential to conceptualize digital authoritarianism (DA). Akinyetun and Ebonine described DA as a perversion of the Internet and digital tools by authoritarian leaders to suppress civil liberty and entrench political control. In addition to being anti-democratic, this practice reduces citizens' trust in the use of digital technologies for fear of privacy invasion and repression[4]. In other words, DA emphasizes the negative uses of digital tools and how they have risen to become tools of state censorship to promote civil rights. To buttress, we analyze data from the Ibrahim Index of African Governance, which shows the level of change in digital freedom in Africa from 2014 to 2023 (see Figure 3). The data confirms that while digital freedom has experienced both positive (13 countries) and negative (41 countries) changes within the time frame, a majority of the countries in Africa have recorded a decline in digital freedom, particularly in Senegal (-27.3), Mali (22.7), Tanzania (-22.5), Mauritius (-21.7), Mauritania (-20.3), Guinea (-19.7), Gabon (-19.5), Djibouti (-17.0) and Burkina Faso (-16.5). Digital freedom here refers to sub-indicators such as freedom of expression online, absence of Internet and social media shutdowns, unrestricted access to Internet content, and Internet users' privacy protection[5]. The tools of digital authoritarianism include surveillance, social and electoral manipulation, censorship and cyberattacks, and espionage[6].

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[1] Socio-Economic Rights and Accountability Project (SERAP), *Crackdown on Media Freedom and Civic Space in Nigeria*, SERAP, Lagos, 2024, pp. 32, https://serap-nigeria.org/2024/04/06/download-crackdown-on-media-freedom-and-civic-space-in-nigeria/ (07.09.2024)

[2] Solomon Odeniyi, *Anonymous Whistleblower, PIDOMNigeria, Arrested for Leaking Classified Documents, Others – Police*, "Punch", August 24, 2024, https://punchng.com/anonymous-whistleblower-pidomnigeria-arrested-for-leaking-classified-documents-others-police/ (01.10.2024)

[3] Victoria Ibezim-Ohaeri, Joshua Olufemi, *Op. cit.,* p. 52

[4] Tope Shola Akinyetun, Victor Chukwugekwu Ebonine, *Op. cit.*, p. 254

[5] IIAG, *Op. cit.*, p. 1

[6] Tope Shola Akinyetun, *Democratic Backsliding in Africa: Understanding the Current Challenges*, "Kujenga Amani", Social Science Research Council, Brooklyn, 2022, p. 2, https://kujenga-amani.ssrc.org/2022/09/20/democratic-backsliding-in-africa-understanding-the-current-challenges/ (07.09.2024)
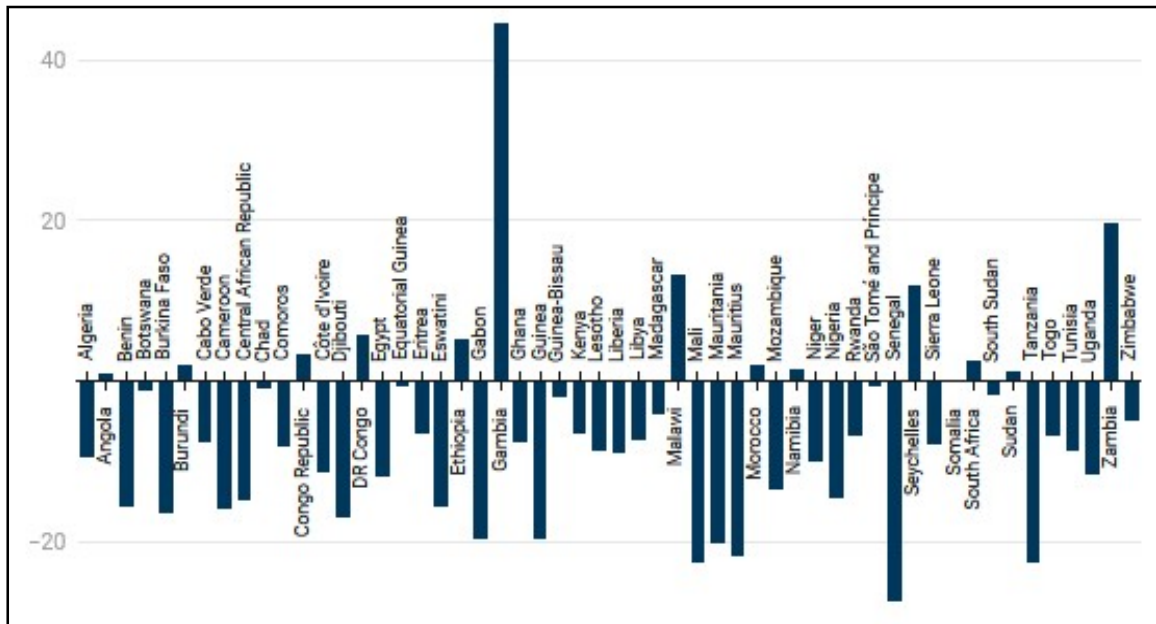
Figure 3. Digital Freedom in Africa: 2014 – 2023[1]

One of the most popular methods of restricting digital rights in Africa is through internet shutdown. Internet shutdown refers to a break in communication owing to the intentional disruption of connectivity networks. It is often carried out by Internet companies for maintenance purposes and by governments to restrict citizen information flow in flagrant violations of citizen freedom of expression. Internet shutdown places severe strains on digital citizenship, as citizens are denied the right to use mobile phones and social media platforms to express themselves and join associations of choice[2]. Meanwhile, Internet shutdowns are not unique to Africa. Available data shows that Africa is one of the least affected regions with respect to this phenomenon. The data show that Internet shutdown is more prevalent in the Asia Pacific, Middle East, North Africa, and Eastern European regions compared to Africa (see Figure 4).

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[1] IIAG, *Op.Cit.*., p. 1

[2] Felicia Anthonio, Tony Roberts, *Internet Shutdowns and Digital Citizenship*, in Tony Roberts, Tanja Bosch (Eds.), *Digital Citizenship in Africa: Technologies of Agency and Repression*, Zed Books, New York, 2023, p. 211, https://library.oapen.org/handle/20.500.12657/63749 (07.09.2024)
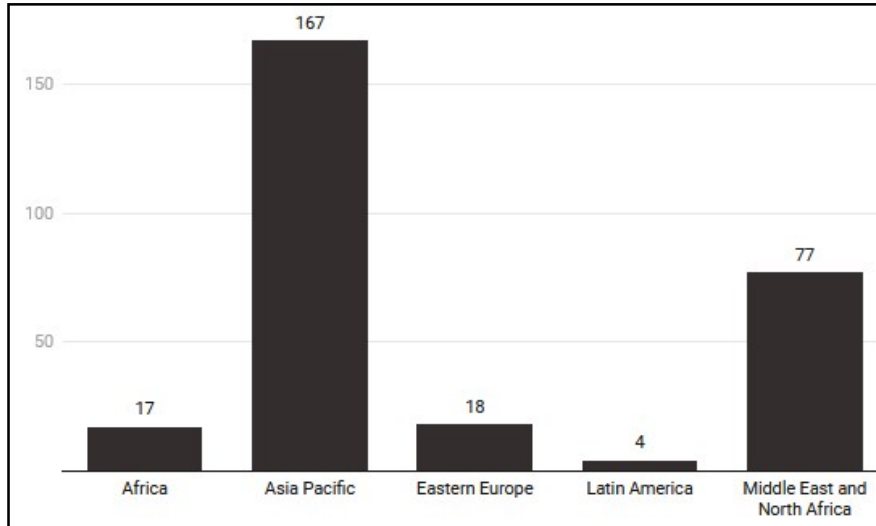
Figure 4. Internet Shutdown by Region[1]

Internet shutdowns have been recorded in various parts of the world over the past few years. Available data show that since 2016, there have been documented cases of Internet shutdowns with incidence ranging from as low as 23 to as high as 40 in a year (see Figure 5). This is further evidence that the phenomenon is not an African problem, and neither was it generated from the continent. However, it has become prevalent in Africa in recent times, as authoritarian regimes seek to elongate their stay in office and guarantee sit-tightism. For instance, between 2021 and 2023, 45 cases of internet shutdown were recorded in 28 countries (see Figure 6).
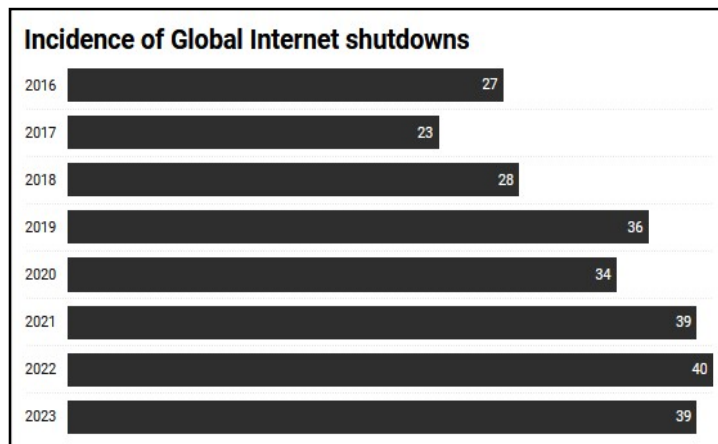

Figure 5. Incidence of Global Internet Shutdown, 2016-2023[2]

[1] Zach Rosson, Felicia Anthonio, Carolyn Tackett, *Shrinking Democracy, Growing Violence*, "Access Now", 2024, https://www.accessnow.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/2023-KIO-Report.pdf, (01.10.2024)
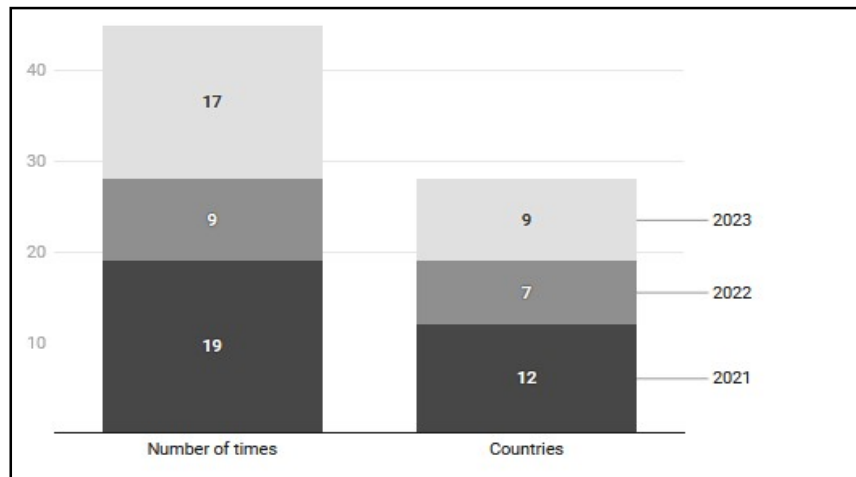[2] *Idem*

Figure 6. Internet Shutdown in Africa, 2021-2023[1]

Internet shutdown in Africa was traceable to the Arab Spring in the 2010s, when digital services were interrupted in Egypt, Tunisia, and Libya to curtail the spread of protests. Meanwhile, the DR Congo disrupted its Internet services ahead of the elections in 2011. Given the success of Internet shutdown and digital services disruption in these countries, the phenomenon has become frequent in Africa, where governments disrupt services at will for electoral purposes or to clamp down on opposition and dissidents[2]. Internet shutdowns are often severe during election periods. This trend has been recorded in Zimbabwe, Sierra Leone, Libya, South Sudan, Gabon, and Sudan. It is often aimed at restricting civic activities by limiting access to digital platforms. For instance, Ethiopia experienced the longest shutdown, spanning over 1,153 days, on November 4, 2020[3]. The Zimbabwean government shut down the Internet between January 2019 and July 2020 to curtail citizen agitation against an increase in fuel prices. Meanwhile, the Nigerian government under President Buhari placed a ban on Twitter (X) in 2022 because the president's tweet about the Nigerian Civil War, which took place between 1967 and 1970, was deleted. However, in Sudan, the government shut down the Internet in October 2021 and June 2022 following military putschism in the country[4]. Internet shutdowns were recorded in Sudan in December 2019, February 2019, June 3 – July 9, 2019, May 14 – May 16, 2020, September 13, 2020 – September 24, 2020, June 19, 2021 – June 30, 2021, and October 25, 2021 – November 18, 2021[5].

Data from Net Blocks show that the military regime in Sudan employs a variety of techniques such as telecommunications blackouts, social media, and network restrictions[6]. Internet shutdowns have political and economic effects. In addition to negating its commitment to the digital sector, Internet shutdown has cost African countries $3.9 billion (USD). While 22 countries have experienced Internet shutdowns between 2020 and 2024, the largest offenders and economic losers in the continent include Nigeria ($1,500 million), Ethiopia ($1,020 million), Algeria ($762 million), Sudan ($257 million), and Senegal ($120 million)[7]. In addition, shutdowns limit the operation of charitable activities in the region, escalating humanitarian needs in the respective countries, and undermining citizen rights. For instance, in Sudane, limited access to Internet services increased the incidence of hunger, scarcity, and poverty. While this is partly attributable to the

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[1] *Idem*

[2] Tope Shola Akinyetun, Victor Chukwugekwu Ebonine, *Digital Democracy and Democratic Decline: Unpacking the Role of Digitalization in Undermining Democracy in Africa*, "African Journal of Democracy and Election Research", Vol. 3, No. 1, 2023, p. 161

[3] Gbenga Sesan, *How Africans Can Prepare for Internet Shutdowns*, "Carnegie Endowment", April 25, 2023, https://carnegieendowment.org/posts/2023/04/how-africans-can-prepare-for-internet-shutdowns?lang=en (07.09.2024)

[4] Zach Rosson, Felicia Anthonio, Carolyn Tackett, *Op. cit.,* p. 1

[5] CIPESA, *Sudan's Bad Laws, Internet Censorship and Repressed Civil Liberties*, 2021, https://cipesa.org/wp-content/files/briefs/Sudans_Bad_Laws_Internet_Censorship_and_Repressed_Civil_Liberties_2021.pdf (01.10.2024)

[6] Net Blocks, *Internet Disrupted in Sudan Amid Protests Against Military Junta*, June 30, 2022, https://netblocks.org/reports/internet-disrupted-in-sudan-amid-protests-against-military-junta-QAdPrkAl, (07.09.2024)

[7] Jasmine Ikorougo, Ujunwa Umeokeke, *Digital Self-Sabotage: The Cost of Internet Shutdowns in Africa*, "Africa Practice", 2023, https://africapractice.com/digital-self-sabotage-the-cost-of-internet-shutdowns-in-africa/ (01.10.2024)

ongoing civil war in the country, the lack of communication between humanitarian volunteers due to Internet shutdown stalled the delivery of goods and services to the affected regions and made it impossible to report atrocities in conflict-prone zones[1].

State surveillance is pervasive in Africa, especially in countries such as Gabon, Malawi, Equatorial Guinea, Senegal, Chad, Zimbabwe, Ghana, South Africa, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Nigeria, Cameroon, and Congo[2]. Surveillance refers to the observation and monitoring of individuals over a certain period. Once this is carried out by state agencies, it becomes state surveillance. African governments have expended much on surveillance technologies[3]. The governments of Ghana, Zambia, Malawi, Morocco, and Nigeria collectively spend an estimated US$1 billion a year to procure tools from Israel, China, the UK, and the EU. Despite this humongous cost, these countries have focused on different aspects of surveillance. Expanding hundreds of millions of dollars on surveillance tools, Nigeria spends the most patronizing various companies on acquiring car number plates and facial recognition. Morocco focuses on acquiring CCTV cameras from Chinese companies, Morocco favors mobile phone interception, Ghana spends heavily on mobile phone spyware, and Zambia invests in safe city surveillance.

These countries have jointly tracked and arrested regular citizens, activists, and journalists[4]. According to the International Press Institute, journalists are one of the victims of surveillance and censorship in Africa, especially in Burkina Faso, Kenya, Sudan, and DR Congo[5]. Available data shows that journalists are some of the most obvious victims of media repression in Africa. Incidents of arbitrary arrests, censorship, attacks, and restrictions on information involving journalists have been recorded in various African countries, including Burkina Faso, Kenya, Sudan, and DR Congo (see Figures 7 and 8). This is primarily sponsored by state actors, particularly state security, regulatory bodies, and government officials. With respect to Sudan, four journalists including Allaaddin Ali Mohamed, Muawiya Abdel Razek, Ibrahim Abdullah and Makawi Mohamed Ahmed were killed in Sudan.
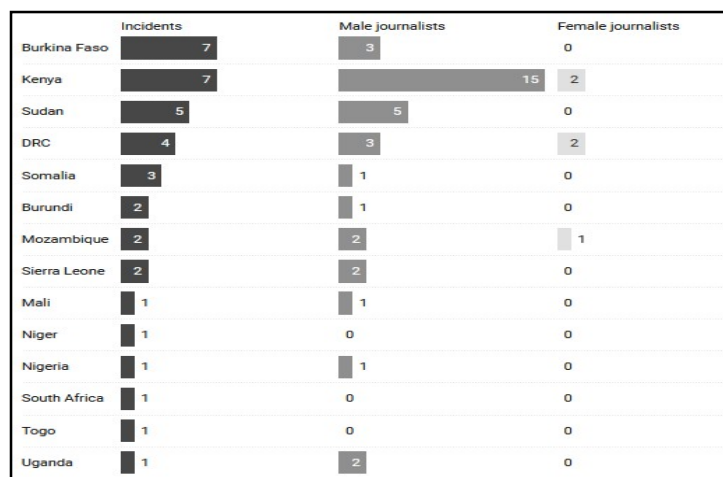
6

	Incidents	Male journalists	Female journalists
Burkina Faso	7	3	0
Kenya	7	15	2
Sudan	5	5	0
DRC	4	3	2
Somalia	3	1	0
Burundi	2	1	0
Mozambique	2	2	1
Sierra Leone	2	2	0
Mali	1	1	0
Niger	1	0	0
Nigeria	1	1	0
South Africa	1	0	0
Togo	1	0	0
Uganda	1	2	0

Figure 7. Media Repression involving Journalists

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[1] Khanyi Mlaba, *Africa's Internet Shutdowns: Where, Why, and How Do They Happen?*, "Global Citizen", May 9, 2024, https://www.globalcitizen.org/en/content/africa-internet-shutdowns-impact-human-rights/ (01.10.2024)

[2] Mugambi Laibuta, Kuda Hove, Ridwan Oloyede, Aishat Salami, *The State of Deployment of Surveillance Technologies in Africa*, "Paradigm Initiative", 2024, https://paradigmhq.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/The-state-of-Digital-Surveilance-1.pdf (07.09.2024)

[3] *Idem*

[4] Tony Roberts, *Op. Cit.,* p. 12

[5] International Press Institute, *Press Freedom Violations in Africa*, IPI, 2024, https://ipi.media/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/africa-factsheet-june-2024.pdf (01.10.2024)
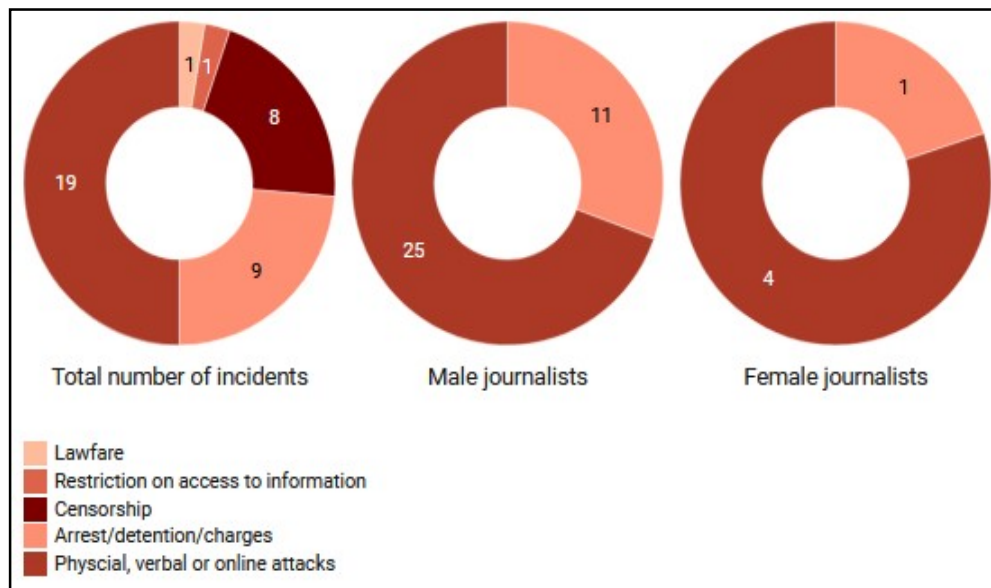
[6] *Idem*

Figure 8. Forms of Attack on Journalists[1]

Governments also engage in website blocking, censorship, and the use of legislation to repress citizens. These are either couched as cybercrime laws or counterterrorism laws designed to arrest dissidents and opposition. This is evident in Bahrain, where questionable tweets attract jail sentences. Meanwhile, authoritarian regimes, such as those in the Arab world, continue to invest in surveillance technologies to spy on citizens and maintain control over them[2]. Using Egypt, Palestine, Bahrain, and Lebanon as case studies, AccessNow shows how countries adopt cybercrime laws to regulate media and state apparatus. While these laws are framed as targeting issues threatening national security, they are aimed at repressing civil rights activities, journalists, and bloggers speaking against state repression[3]. Digital repression in Nigeria is enabled by legal provisions such as the Terrorism Prevention Act and the Cybercrimes Act of 2015, global terrorism efforts such as the Financial Action Task Force Standards, and external influence from countries such as Israel and the United States. It is believed that Nigeria is trying to keep up with countries such as Russia, China, Turkey, and the United States that engage in invasive surveillance, as evidenced by increasing investments in surveillance technologies[4].

Case studies

Sudan

Sudan ranks 28–100 among free countries. By implication, a country is categorized as not free due to its experience with obstacles to access, limits on content, and violation of user rights. Internet freedom in the country is impaired by Internet disruptions due to nationwide cuts to Internet access in February. The frequent disruptions experienced in cities such as the Dafur, Khartoum, and Kordofan regions, lasting several months, have limited reliable communication and led to the repression of activists[5]. Sudan is characterized by attacks on journalists and activists, which have become incessant since the military coup of October 2021, which

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[1] *Idem*

[2] Marwa Fatafta, *From Free Space to a Tool of Oppression: What Happened to the Internet Since the Arab Spring?*, "The Tahrir Institute", December 17, 2020, https://timep.org/2020/12/17/from-free-space-to-a-tool-of-oppression-what-happened-to-the-internet-since-the-arab-spring/ (09.09.2024)

[3] AccessNow, *When "Cybercrime" Laws Gag Free Expression: Stopping the Dangerous Trend Across MENA*, September 12, 2018, https://www.accessnow.org/when-cybercrime-laws-gag-free-expression-stopping-the-dangerous-trend-across-mena/ (09.09.2024)

[4] Victoria Ibezim-Ohaeri, *Enabling Digital Authoritarianism in the Name of Counterterrorism: Lessons from Nigeria*, "VerfBlog", May 21, 2022, https://verfassungsblog.de/os6-nigeria/, DOI: 10.17176/20220521-182224-0

[5] Freedom House, *Sudan*, 2024, https://freedomhouse.org/country/sudan/freedom-net/2024 (09.09.2024)

deeply polarized the media. The military has overseen media-sponsoring propaganda messages, as under Omar al-Bashir's government. Since taking over through a military coup in 2021, Gen. al-Burhan, and experiencing a civil war in 2023, journalists in the country have been exposed to censorship and intimidation. They have been restricted from organizing demonstrations, arrested, and tortured to criticize the government[1]. Over 79 journalists were arrested in Sudan in 2019. This was on the heels of their engagement in anti-government protests, while some were arrested for covering protests. Government censorship increases the incidence of censorship and state surveillance[2]. Amnesty International documents extreme cases of censorship and harassment by journalists in Sudan. The National Intelligence and Security Agency (NISS) published 15 journals in 2018 and confiscated publications from print media houses. For instance, the arrest and sentencing of journalists such as Zine El Abeen Al-A'jab for allegedly disseminating false information, and the summoning of Shamel Al Nour, Ashraf Abdel Aziz, Osman Merghanie, Lina Ygoub and Maha Al Telib for holding meetings with foreign countries[3]. In addition, there are cases of newspaper confiscation and banning of television shows for interviewing militia members. The fight between the Sudan Armed Forces and paramilitary Rapid Support Forces has intensified the predicament of journalists in the country. In addition to attacking media houses, such as the General Authority for Radio and Television, they have been exposed to repeated abuse during fieldwork. Report shows that about 40 journalists have fled the country to Egypt to escape incessant abuse in the country[4].

Ethiopia

Ethiopia scores 27 over 100 on the Freedom on the Net 2024 report with obstacles to access, limits on content, and violations of user rights. As a result, the country was classified as not free in the report. Internet freedom in Ethiopia is under threat as the hostility between the federal government and rebel militias in the Amhara region escalates. This has led to the restriction of Internet services in conflict-prone areas, increasing the chances of misinformation and human rights violations. Social media platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, TikTok and Telegram were restricted while freedom of expression on the cyber space was curtailed in the Amhara region[5]. Amnesty International observes that the use of the state of emergency in Ethiopia allows the state to embark on the arbitrary arrest of dissidents, politicians, and journalists, imposing curfews, banning public assemblies, and restricting freedom of movement. For instance, journalists such as Abay Zewdu, Belay Manaye and Bekalu Alamrew were arrested and detained in 2023[6]. Media freedom in Ethiopia was threatened when the Ethiopian Media Report was politicized, leading to the promulgation of a statute that prohibits members of political parties from serving on EMA boards[7]. The data show that while Ethiopians own mobile phones, there is a lack of data connectivity. The civic space in Ethiopia is precarious, following the arrest and detaining of civil society activists, journalists, and members of the opposition. With the promulgation of emergency rule, members of the opposition, including Yohannes Buayelew, Kassa Teshager, and Christian Tadele, were detained, while staff of the Ethiopian Human Rights Council (EHRCO) were arrested in January 2023. Meanwhile, in April 2023, the Ethiopian government arrested eight journalists, including three in August, while in September, opposition leaders were beaten and arrested[8]. In these cases, due processes were not followed, whereas judicial processes were often flouted. After the outbreak of protests

[1] Reporters Without Borders, *Sudan*, 2018, https://rsf.org/en/country/sudan (01.10.2024)

[2] Reporters Without Borders, *At Least 79 Journalists Arrested in Two Months of Protests in Sudan*, 2019, https://rsf.org/en/least-79-journalists-arrested-two-months-protests-sudan (01.10.2024)

[3] Amnesty International, *Sudan: Relentless Harassment, Intimidation, and Censorship of Journalists Must End*, November 2, 2018, https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/press-release/2018/11/sudan-relentless-harassment-intimidation-and-censorship-of-journalists-must-end/ (09.09.2024)

[4] Reporters Without Borders, *Sudan's Belligerents Are Targeting Journalists*, 2023, https://rsf.org/en/sudan-s-belligerents-are-targeting-journalists (09.09.2024)

[5] Freedom House, *Ethiopia*, 2024, https://freedomhouse.org/country/ethiopia/freedom-net/2024, (09.09.2024)

[6] Amnesty International, *Ethiopia: Authorities Must Stop Using State of Emergency Law to Silence Peaceful Dissent*, February 19, 2024, https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2024/02/ethiopia-authorities-must-stop-using-state-of-emergency-law-to-silence-peaceful-dissent/ (09.09.2024)

[7] Mulu Teka, Daniel Iberi, *Ethiopians Support Free Media Holding Government Accountable*, "Afrobarometer Dispatch" No. 801, 2024, https://www.afrobarometer.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/AD801-Ethiopians-support-free-media-holding-government-accountable-Afrobarometer-1may24.pdf (09.09.2024)

[8] Human Rights Watch, *Ethiopia: Events of 2023*, 2024, https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2024/country-chapters/ethiopia#0a5928 (07.09.2024)

in the Oromia region of Ethiopia, the government restricted access to social media platforms, particularly Facebook, Telegram, TikTok, and Messenger. This was initially done in 2020, when the government restricted access due to the death of a popular singer from the Oromia region[1].

Nigeria

In addition to the media clampdown, press gagging, and media censorship that pervade Nigeria's Fourth Republic, there is an increasing shrinkage of the civic space whereby activists, bloggers, and journalists have increasingly become victims of state censorship. Despite sections 22 and 39 of the country's constitution guaranteeing freedom of the press and expression as essential to good governance, cases of repression, violations, and abuse resulting in arrests, detention, threats, and torture remain unabated. The report shows that 24 journalists and media workers were killed between 1993 and 2022[2]. The use of legislation has enabled the government to crack down on media workers. Such laws include the Criminal Code Act and Cybercrimes Act of 2015. These Acts criminalize defamation and prevent cyberstalking; they have been used by the government to haunt critics and silence opposition both online and offline. Journalists such as Rotimi Jolayemi, Oluwatoyin Bolakale, Agba Jalingo, Jones Abiri, Oliver Fejiro, Luka Binniyat and Alfred Olufemi have been victims of government repression of the online media (Socio-Economic Rights and Accountability Project[3].

The Nigerian government can carry out clandestine censorship due to its unfettered access to citizen data curated from various sources, such as the Nigerian Communications Commission, responsible for licensing customers and operators, the National Identity Management Commission – in charge of the citizen database, and IMEI Policy 2021 – collating International Mobile Equipment Identity (IMEI) numbers to a Centralized Equipment Identity Register (CEIR)[4]. Governments engage in censorship through mandatory biometric data collection. In Nigeria, the government mandates that citizens register their biometric data for several services. These include: National Identity Management Commission (NIMC), Joint Admissions Matriculation Board (JAMB), West Africa Examinations Council (WAEC), National Examination Council (NECO), Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), Federal Road Safety Commission (FRSC), Nigerian Immigration Service, TELCOS: Telecommunication operator, Banks, Nigeria Centre for Disease Control (NCDC), Foreign embassies and Integrated Payroll and Personnel information system (IPPIS) for NIN registration, exams, voter's registration, driver's license, international passport, opening of bank account, health testing, processing visas and processing payment of salaries, respectively[5]. Backed by law, these duplicate biometric collections provide the government with a complete profile of its citizens, which increases the chances of intrusion and invasion of privacy for repressive actions. The NCC is mandated to release subscribers' information and records into a central database, which can embark on the interception for communications.

The retention and interception of communication details is empowered by the Cybercrime Act 2015, which is authorized to disclose registered identity information to third parties, spyware companies, and content moderation platforms that can pull down posts suspecting spreading disinformation while the NCC can engage in network shutdown upon request from security agencies. For instance, the Nigerian military requested a network shutdown in Sokoto, Katsina, and Zamfara in September 2021 in an operation against banditry in the northwest region[6]. The rise in insecurity in Nigeria drives digital authoritarianism, as state actors are compelled to acquire digital technologies capable of identifying and tracing individuals, while occasionally engaging in surveillance and interception of private communication that undermines civil liberty and human rights[7]. While some of these sophisticated gadgets are acquired to combat terrorism and banditry, they are occasionally used to restrict online civic spaces, track activists, and restrict freedom of assembly. For instance, tactics such as Internet shutdown, social media bans, spying on opposition and activists, and biometric data collection are popular methods of engaging in state censorship. Social media bans are one of the most obvious methods for

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[1] Al Jazeera, *Social Media Restricted in Ethiopia as Church Rift Turns Violent*, February 10, 2023, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/2/10/social-media-restricted-in-ethiopia-after-church-rift-turns-violent (07.09.2024)
[2] SERAP, *Op. cit.*, p. 21
[3] *Ibidem*, p. 24
[4] Victoria Ibezim-Ohaeri, Joshua Olufemi, Lotanna Nwodo, Oluseyi Olufemi, Ngozi Juba-Nwosu, *Op. cit.,* p. 46
[5] *Idem*
[6] *Idem*
[7] Victoria Ibezim-Ohaeri, *Op. cit.,* p. 54

restricting citizen access and controlling the spread of information. This method has been adopted in 83 countries where popular platforms, such as Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), WhatsApp, YouTube, and Instagram, have come under attack (see Figure 9).
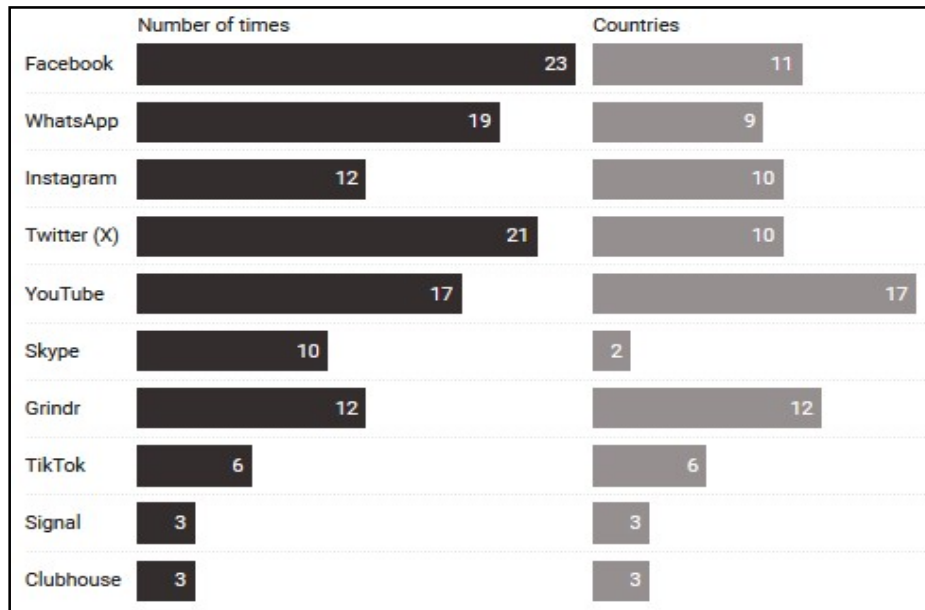

	Number of times	Countries
Facebook	23	11
WhatsApp	19	9
Instagram	12	10
Twitter (X)	21	10
YouTube	17	17
Skype	10	2
Grindr	12	12
TikTok	6	6
Signal	3	3
Clubhouse	3	3

Figure 9. Incidence of Social Media Ban[1]

However, the government could not have been successful in its censorship acts without the support of private corporations such as Internet service providers, telecommunication companies, and foreign surveillance regulators such as China, Russia, and Israel[2].

Conclusions

The advent of digital technologies and their spread into Africa heralded an era of citizen empowerment and informed decision-making capabilities. With digital technologies, citizens are better equipped to take a decisive part in knowledge sharing and information production. This cascaded into politics as citizens became social critics armed with enough knowledge and information to engender social change while maintaining anonymity. The growth of digital technology and social media platforms has automatically translated into a growth in political participation, civic engagement, and enforcement of rights. With these tools, citizens are better positioned to protect their civil liberties and seek redress when such rights are truncated. However, since these tools provide citizens with avenues to hold their governments accountable, it became a double-edged sword that governments could also manipulate for their interests.

Consequently, governments, especially illiberal and authoritarian regimes, continue to seek means to adopt digital technologies to undermine citizen rights in a manner described as digital authoritarianism. While various tactics are noticeable, the use of Internet shutdowns, social media bans, Internet tax, censorship, surveillance, calls interception, and vindictive legislation are dominant. These forms of censorship not only undermine citizen rights, but also provide authoritarian governments with information to manipulate election processes, suppress opposition, and victimize dissidents.

To this end, digitalization in Africa is both a means of promoting civil rights and entrenching state censorship. Given the findings of this study, it is recommended that social media companies create a failsafe method to shield citizens from arbitrary bans, which is a clear violation of individual Internet rights. In the same manner, it is imperative that governments monitor digital companies closely to ensure that the data they collect from citizens is treated confidentially. In addition, African governments must prioritize cybersecurity through legislation and investment in digital infrastructure.

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[1] International Press Institute, *Op. cit.,* p. 6
[2] Victoria Ibezim-Ohaeri, *Op. cit.,* p. 54

As a corollary, it is essential that the utmost priority is given to digital sovereignty to ensure that the digital ecosystem is protected from external interference and that citizen data is kept safe. Furthermore, civil society organizations, in conjunction with relevant stakeholders and the private sector, should invest in digital literacy to ensure that citizens are made aware of their digital rights. Finally, the role of digital rights or Internet freedom as essential to functioning and citizenship must be continuously highlighted to ensure that citizens can seek redress in the case of encroachment.

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