

Ethiopia to build local rival to Facebook and other platforms

Ethiopia has begun developing its own social media platform to rival Facebook, Twitter and WhatsApp, though it does not plan to block the global services, the state communications security agency said on Monday.



The Twitter and Facebook logo along with binary cyber codes are seen in this illustration taken on 26 November 2019. Reuters/Dado Ruvic/File Photo

Ethiopia has been engulfed in an armed conflict since last year, pitting the federal government against the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), which controls the Tigray region in the country's north.

Supporters of both sides have waged a parallel war of words on social media.

The government wants its local platform to "replace" Facebook, Twitter, Whatsapp and Zoom, the director-general of the Information Network Security Agency (Insa), Shumete Gizaw, said.

Gizaw accused Facebook of deleting posts and user accounts which he said were "disseminating the true reality about

Ethiopia".

International human rights groups have criticised the Ethiopian government for unexplained shutdowns to social media services including Facebook and WhatsApp in the past year. The government has not commented on those shutdowns.

Facebook's Africa spokesperson, Kezia Anim-Addo, declined to comment on Ethiopia's plans and did not respond immediately to a query about Gizaw's accusations.

A network of fake accounts in Ethiopia removed on Facebook

Ethiopia, a country of about 115 million, has about six million Facebook users according to Statista.

But in June, days before national elections, Facebook said it had removed a network of fake accounts in Ethiopia targeting domestic users, which the platform linked to individuals associated with Insa, which is responsible for monitoring telecommunications and the internet.

Twitter declined to comment. Zoom did not immediately reply to a comment request.

Gizaw declined to specify a timeline, budget and other details but told *Reuters*: "The rationale behind developing technology with local capacity is clear... Why do you think China is using WeChat?"

He said Ethiopia had the local expertise to develop the platforms and would not hire outsiders to help.

Social messaging app WeChat is owned by China-headquartered Tencent Holdings and is widely used in the country. It is also considered to be a strong tool by Chinese authorities for monitoring its population.

Gizaw also referred *Reuters* to comments he made on Friday to a local language media outlet in which he accused Facebook of blocking users who were "preaching national unity and peace".

He also told Al-Ain Amharic that authorities were working on the platform to replace Facebook and Twitter, while a trial has already been completed of a platform to replace WhatsApp and Zoom and that platform will soon be operational.

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