



Human Rights Committee

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From Crisis to Cooperation:
Navigating Instability in a Globalized World

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Topic: Examining the use of internet shutdowns as tools of political repression in authoritarian regimes.

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Introduction

Internet shutdowns refer to the deliberate cut off of the internet by authoritarian regimes to silence dissent, control information, and repress political opposition, especially in moments of crisis such as protests, elections, or armed conflict. In these shutdowns, governments order telecommunication companies and service providers to cut or severely restrict access to the internet or specific platforms, often without transparency, due process, or judicial oversight. The use of shutdowns directly interferes with fundamental human rights, including the freedom of expression and access to information as protected in Article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). It also undermines rights to peaceful assembly (ICCPR Article 21), participation in public affairs (ICCPR Article 25).

Internet shutdowns became highly visible to the international community during and after the Arab Spring, when several governments attempted to cut out digital communications to disrupt protest movements and prevent documentation of abuses. Since then, shutdowns have shifted from extraordinary measures to repeated tools of repression, with hundreds documented annually across multiple regions and political systems. Shutdowns are increasingly used during elections, large-scale demonstrations, and periods of political instability, often targeting marginalized communities and areas of unrest. Internet shutdowns are not just technical or security measures, but forms of collective punishment that restrict human rights for entire populations.

Definition of Key Terms

Internet shutdown

A deliberate disruption of internet or mobile data services ordered by a government or other power holder, which restricts and or completely disconnects access to the internet for a specific population, area or time

period. Shutdowns can be nationwide, regional, or targeted at specific services such as social media platforms or messaging apps.

Authoritarian regime

A political system in which power is concentrated in a small group, single leader, or a ruling party. These regimes put heavy restraints on political pluralism, restrict civil liberties, and maintain control through censorship, propaganda, and the suppression of dissent rather than the democratic accountability.

Freedom of Expression and Access to Information

A fundamental right that protects a person's ability to seek, receive, and share ideas and information of all kinds that is protected under Article 19 of both the ICCPR and the UDHR.

Political Repression

Political repression is when a government uses fear, force, or legal restrictions to control its population and stop political opposition or public dissent. The main goal of this tactic is to protect those in power by silencing people who would challenge the ruling government or social order.

Background Information

Historical Background Information

The deliberate shutdowns of digital communications by states is a recent phenomenon that has escalated simultaneously as the access of digital communication escalates. Early shutdowns were technically simple and relatively limited in scope because internet access was concentrated among small, urban populations. In 2005, Nepal became an early example of this when the government cut international internet connections during a period of political unrest. At the time, controlling a small number of international gateways could effectively isolate the country from the wider internet. The impact of shutdowns was therefore the loss of international communication and access to external information. This was followed by Myanmar's military junta in September 2007, which shut down the country's internet gateways during the Saffron Revolution to blind citizen journalists and prevent footage of a violent crackdown from reaching the outside world. The 2011 Egyptian shutdown marked a further development as internet and mobile phone access had become much more widespread. A nationwide blackout could now affect a much larger proportion of the population and significantly disrupt political organization, communication, and access to information. As smartphone penetration expanded rapidly across Asia, Africa, and the Middle East through the 2010s, so did the frequency of shutdowns. Access Now documented 75 shutdowns worldwide in 2016, 106 in 2017, and 196 in 2018, meaning that the recorded number had increased 161% in just two years. The Human Rights council responded in 2016 with its first resolution

solely condemning the practice as incompatible with states' obligations under international human rights law.

Current Situation in the World

Internet shutdowns have moved from an emergency measure to a routine instrument of governance.

According to the #KeepItOn coalition's 2025 annual report, at least 313 shutdowns were recorded across 52 countries in 2025, the highest figure ever documented. This followed 304 shutdowns in 2024 and 289 in 2023, displaying how rapid the practice has expanded globally. Armed conflict was the single largest trigger for the third year consecutive, being followed by protests and political instability.

This practice is particularly concentrated in Asia and Africa, which consistently account for a large proportion of recorded shutdowns. Countries such as India, Myanmar, Iran, Pakistan, and Russia have been among the most frequent perpetrators in recent years, demonstrating that internet shutdowns are used across different political systems and regions rather than being limited to a single type of government. For example, Iraqi authorities imposed internet shutdowns during exams in 2025, claiming the restrictions were to prevent students from cheating. Governments almost always list the same justifications for these measures: protecting national security, curbing the spread of disinformation, or even preventing students from cheating on exams. However, critics say the timing says something different. The overwhelming majority of shutdowns begin within days of an election, protest, or military operation rather than any demonstrated security threat.

Internet shutdowns also take several different forms. Governments can impose complete national blackouts, regional shutdowns, mobile network disruptions, bandwidth throttling, or restrictions on specific websites and social media platforms. These methods allow governments to control access to information to different degrees, with targeted restrictions sometimes being used to affect particular regions or groups while leaving other parts of the country connected.

The economic consequences of shutdowns can be significant. Disruptions prevent businesses from processing online transactions, communicating with customers, accessing digital services, and operating normally. As Economies become increasingly dependent on digital connectivity, shutdowns can therefore result in financial losses while also disrupting education, healthcare, transportation, and other essential services.

The social and humanitarian impacts are equally significant. Analysts state shutdowns can prevent people from contacting family members, accessing emergency information, receiving humanitarian assistance or reporting abuses. These effects are particularly severe during armed conflicts and political crises when reliable communications are often most necessary.

The evidence also challenges the security rationale governments give. Statistical research on Indian and African shutdowns has found that network disruptions are associated with more violent unrest, not less,

since they remove the non-violent, coordinated channels citizens would otherwise use to organize and communicate grievances. The 2025 #The KeepItOn report identified at least 70 shutdowns that directly coincided with grave human rights abuses, including war crimes and extrajudicial killings, with shutdowns used to conceal evidence of these abuses from journalists and international courts. These practices raise serious concerns under international human rights law particularly regarding freedom of expression, access to information, peaceful assembly and the right to participate in public life. As internet access has become essential to exercising these rights, the government's ability to deliberately disrupt connectivity has increasingly become a significant human rights concern. Overall, the current situation demonstrates that internet shutdowns have become a global form of digital repression with political, economic, social, humanitarian and human rights consequences. Their increasing frequency and variety of methods used show that governments are increasingly treating control over digital connectivity as a tool for controlling information and political activity .

Major Countries and Organisations Involved

Iran

Iran is one of the most sophisticated and prominent users of internet shutdowns as a representative tool, having deployed the tactic repeatedly since the 2019 Bloody November protests, when a nine-day nationwide shutdown prevented activists from organizing or documenting a violent crackdown. The 2026 blackout came in two distinct waves and became the longest state-imposed national internet blackout ever recorded. The first wave began on the 8th of January during nationwide protests over economic conditions and then eased for about 20 days. Following the January wave, a more severe second wave began on the 28th of February, when US and Israeli strikes hit Iranian territory, cutting the connectivity to as little as one to two percent of ordinary levels for roughly 90 million Iranians affected. These shutdowns have severely restricted Iranian's access to information, disrupted communications and emergency services, and made it more difficult for citizens and journalists to document government repression.

Myanmar

Since the military coup of February 2021, Myanmar's junta has found itself amongst the world's most prolific perpetrators of internet shutdowns, ordering at least 459 disruptions between 2021 and 2024 alone and recording the highest number of shutdowns globally in both 2024 and 2025. UN human rights experts have characterized this as a systematic denial of the population's rights to expression, assembly, and access to information. The Junta has used shutdowns as a strategy for its military campaign by cutting communications in resistance-held townships in Sagaing, Magway, and Kachin State immediately before launching airstrikes and isolating civilians from both humanitarian aid and the international monitoring needed to document potential war crimes. As a result, shutdowns have isolated civilians from

humanitarian assistance and prevented the timely documentation of human rights abuses and potential war crimes

India

Analysts state India's government defends its use of shutdowns on three grounds: maintaining public order by stopping the spread of hate speech and rumors during communal unrest, protecting national security by disrupting coordination among armed groups in conflict-prone regions, and preventing organized cheating and question-paper leaks during competitive exams. India recorded 65 government-ordered internet shutdowns in 2025, the lowest figure since 2017 but still the highest number among the world's democracies and the second-highest in the world overall. There were roughly two dozen internet shutdowns in 2026, showing no slowing down. Critics believe, the continued use of shutdowns has disrupted education, businesses, healthcare, and access to information, while disproportionately affecting civilians in conflict-affected and politically sensitive regions.

Russia

Russia has dramatically escalated its use of throttling and platform-specific blocking. Recording the highest number of shutdowns of any country in a 2025 economic-cost analysis, with 57 separate incidents driven substantially by a major wave of disruptions beginning in May 2025 that primarily targeted access to independent information and foreign platforms used by civil society and journalists. These restrictions have weekend access to independent information, limited the ability of journalists and civil society to communicate, and increased the government's control over the domestic information environment.

Access Now and the #KeepItOn Coalition

Access Now is the international human rights organization that founded the #KeepItOn coalition in 2016, now comprising more than 244 civil society organizations that systematically document, verify, and publicize internet shutdowns worldwide as human rights violations. Its annual reports have become the primary global dataset used by the United Nations, Special Procedures mandate holders, and researchers to track the scale of the practice, and the coalition has played a central role in advocating for stronger Human Rights Council resolutions and General Comments condemning shutdowns. Its work has made the scale and human costs of internet shutdowns more visible, strengthening international efforts to hold governments accountable.

Amnesty International

Amnesty International, a #KeepItOn coalition member, has produced some of the most concrete documented evidence linking shutdowns to concealed atrocities. A Web of Impunity, published in 2020, verified that Iranian security forces killed 323 people during the November 2019 Bloody November protests, and found that more than 237 of those deaths occurred within 48 hours of the government shutting down the internet on November 16. Amnesty International has continued this documentation work into 2026. The organization has been investigating reports that Iranian security forces intensified the use of unlawful lethal force after imposing a new blackout during the protests that began in December 2025, and has separately campaigned against shutdowns in Pakistan's Balochistan province, where a 2025 mobile internet suspension cut off more than 14 million people. Its investigations have helped establish the connection between internet shutdowns, restrictions on information, and the ability of governments to carry out abuses with reduced public scrutiny.

Timeline of Events

Date	Description of Event
1 February 2005	Nepal's declaration of martial law: King Gyanendra declares martial law and severs all international internet links, the first fully documented national-level shutdowns, aimed at suppressing a pro-democracy
29 September 2007	Myanmar's military junta shutdown: During the monk-led Saffron Revolution, the ruling military junta shuts down the country's internet gateways entirely, cutting off citizen journalists and preventing footage of a violent crackdown from reaching the outside world.
28 January- 2 February 2011	Egypt's response to the Arab Spring Uprising: President Hosni Mubarak ordered telecommunication companies to shut down the internet and mobile networks during the Arab Spring Uprising. The five-day shutdown fails to stop the protest and Mubarak resigns on the 11th

of February, becoming a widely studied case for both authoritarian regimes and pro-democracy movements.

1 July 2016, 5 July 2018, 13 July 2021

UN Human Rights Council Adopts a series of resolutions (32/13, 38/7, and 47/16) On “The Promotion, Protection and Enjoyment of Human Rights on the Internet”, progressively strengthening explicit condemnation of Internet shutdowns despite opposition from States including Russia and China.

16-23 November 2019

Iran’s Bloody November shutdown: Following fuel press protests the government imposes a nationwide shutdown lasting seven days called the Bloody November one of the most severe blackouts recorded at the time and a major turning point in Global awareness of shutdowns as tools of mass repression

1 February 2021- present

Myanmar’s : Hours before the military coup, the junta shut down internet and mobile access Nationwide and begins a sustained Campaign of shutdowns recording at least 459 separate incidents between 2021 and 2024 the highest GlobalToll for two consecutive years (2024-2025), frequently timed to proceed airstrikes on civilian areas

8 January- 26 May 2026

Iran: A first blackout wave begins on the 8th of January amid Nationwide protests over economic conditions and eases on 28th of January. A far more severe second wave begins 28th of February amid U.S and Israeli strikes, cutting connectivity to 1 to 2% of no or more levels for roughly 90

million people and becoming the longest state imposed national blackout ever recorded before restoration begins on 26th of May .

31 March 2026

Access now in the hashtag keep it on Coalition Released Rising Repression Meets Global Resistance: Internet shutdowns in 2025, documenting a record 313 shutdowns across 52 countries and confirming conflict as the leading Global trigger for the third consecutive year.

Relevant UN Treaties and Resolutions

Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), Article 19: Establishes the foundational right to freedom of opinion and expression, including the right “to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers,” the primary normative basis for treating shutdowns as a human rights violation.

International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1966), Articles 19 and 21: Article 19 legally binds ratifying states to protect freedom of expression and information, subject only to restrictions that are provided by law, necessary and proportionate. Article 21 protects the right of peace

UN Human Rights Council Resolution 32/13 The Promotion, Protection and Enjoyment of Human Rights on the Internet (2016): The first UN resolution to explicitly reference internet shutdowns, affirming that the same rights people have offline, particularly freedom of expression, must be protected online, and condemning measures that intentionally disrupt internet access as a violation of international human rights law.

Previous Attempts to solve the Issue

Since 2016, the UN Human Rights Council has adopted four resolutions addressing internet shutdowns and the protection of human rights online. Although these resolutions carry significant political and normative weight, they are not legally binding.

The first resolution, adopted in 2016, Resolution 32/13: “The Promotion, Protection and Enjoyment of Human Rights on the Internet” affirmed that the same human rights people obtain offline must also be

protected online. This resolution also condemned measures that intentionally prevent or disrupt access to information.

The second resolution from 2018, Resolution 38/7: “The Promotion, Protection and Enjoyment of Human Rights on the Internet”, reaffirmed the importance of protecting human rights online and emphasized that restrictions on access to information must comply with international human rights obligations.

The third resolution, adopted in 2020, Resolution 44/12: “Freedom of Opinion and Expression”, strengthened protections for freedom of expression in the digital environment and addressed the arbitrary restrictions on access to information, including internet shutdowns. The fourth resolution from 2021, Resolution 47/16: “The Promotion, Protection and Enjoyment of Human Rights on the Internet”, clearly condemned internet shutdowns and called for further examination of their causes, legal consequences and effects on human rights.

Despite these resolutions, many states that voted in favor have continued to order shutdowns domestically. These nations do this to control and suppress their citizens from the flow of information, the right to speak on political opposition, and prevent citizens from organizing or reporting human rights abuses. National and regional courts have occasionally ruled shutdowns unlawful. For example, India’s Supreme Court ruled in *Anuadha Bhasin vs. Union of India* that indefinite internet suspensions were unlawful and that restrictions had to satisfy requirements of necessity and proportionality. Similarly, the ECOWAS Community Court of Justice’s 2022 ruling against Nigeria’s seven-month Twitter ban violated freedom of expression and access to information. However, the continued use of internet shutdowns demonstrates the limited effectiveness of judicial solutions when governments are unwilling to agree with legal or judicial constraints. The Universal Periodic Review and civil society-led initiatives, such as VPN distribution and Starlink connectivity during the Russia-Ukraine war, have offered partial relief, but none of these tools have slowed the yearly increasing growth in shutdowns.

Possible Solutions

Binding legal action:

UN Special Rapporteur Clément Voule recommended in his 2021 *Report Ending internet shutdowns: a path forward*, that states adopt domestic legislation explicitly prohibiting internet shutdowns. Under this recommendation, shutdowns should only be permitted in exceptional circumstances where they reach the requirements of legality, necessity, and proportionality under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). Despite this recommendation, no major state responsible for implementing

internet shutdowns has adopted such legislation that matches these standards. India's 2023 Telecommunications Act still permits shutdowns through administrative approval alone with no independent judicial pre-reviewed required, while analysts believe Myanmar and Iran have no domestic shutdown law at all.

Coordinated diplomatic pressure:

The Freedom Online Coalition, a group of 38 member states chaired by Estonia in 2025, has used joint statements and embassy-level coordination to pressure specific governments. This includes a 2023 statement condemning election-period shutdowns and a 2025 statement condemning shutdowns during armed conflict. This approach has some reach, but the Coalition's 38 members represent less than a fifth of the UN's 193 member states. None of the world's most frequent offenders, including China, Russia, Iran and Myanmar, are members of this coalition, meaning the diplomatic pressure currently only reaches governments that are already inclined to listen.

Formal Recognition of Civil Society Monitoring:

Access Now and the Hashtag Keep It On Coalition, which now documents shutdowns across more than 50 countries a year, have proposed that the United Nations Human Rights Council formally recognize their monitoring work on civil society shutdowns and data tracking as official evidentiary sources. This would allow information collected by civil society organizations to be used in UNHRC reports and during the Universal Periodic Review of Countries. This data is already widely used informally but it has never been given formal Evidentiary status, meaning findings can be cited in advocacy but carrying no formal way in our outcomes or treaty body reviews.

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