



2/26/2022 Russia

1/3/2022 India

11/4/2020 Ethiopia

9/4/2021 Myanmar

10/22/2022 Bangladesh

Turkmenistan

WEAPONS OF CONTROL, SHIELDS OF IMPUNITY

1/10/2022 Belarus

11/13/2022

Internet shutdowns in 2022

#KeptOn

#KeptOn

The #KeptOn campaign unites and organizes global organizations and efforts to end internet shutdowns. The campaign was launched by a coalition of about 70 organizations in 2016 at RightsCon in Silicon Valley. Membership of the coalition has since increased rapidly to more than 300 members from 105 countries around the world ranging from civil society, rights, and advocacy groups to research centers, detection networks, foundations, and media organizations.

This report is a publication of Access Now for the #KeptOn coalition and was written by Zach Rosson, Felicia Anthonio, and Carolyn Tackett in collaboration with the Access Now team.

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Design and data visualization by Sage Cheng.

A note on our data

This #KeptOn report looks at incidents of internet shutdowns documented by Access Now and the #KeptOn coalition in 2022. While we try to build a comprehensive database, our data relies on technical measurement as well as contextual information, such as news reports or personal accounts. The constraints of our methodology mean that there may be cases of internet shutdowns that have gone unreported, and numbers are likely to change if and when new information becomes available after publication. For further reading, please visit <https://accessnow.org/keepiton-data-methodology>.

February 2023



Table of contents

I. Internet shutdowns in 2022: a global overview 2

Overview of 2022 data 6

II. Triggers for internet shutdowns in 2022 6

Shutdowns during protests 6

Shutdowns during active conflict 6

Shutdowns during examinations 6

Shutdowns during elections 7

III. New and continuing trends in 2022 7

Grave human rights abuses and violence shrouded by shutdowns on the rise 7

Countries entrenched in repeat offenses and prolonged shutdowns 8

Targeted shutdowns and their immeasurable harms 9

IV. Internet shutdowns by region 11

Africa 12

Shutdowns during protest and unrest 12

Shutdowns during elections 13

Sustained platform blocks 14

Ethiopia 15

Asia Pacific 16

Myanmar 16

India 18

Shutdowns during protest and unrest 19

Eastern Europe and Central Asia 20

Central asia 20

Russia's invasion of Ukraine 21

Armenia-Azerbaijan territorial dispute 22

Latin America and the Caribbean 23

Cuba 24

Brazil 24

Middle East and North Africa 25

Platform blocks 26

Exam-related shutdowns 27

Iran 27

Sudan 29

V. Fighting back: the movement is growing 30

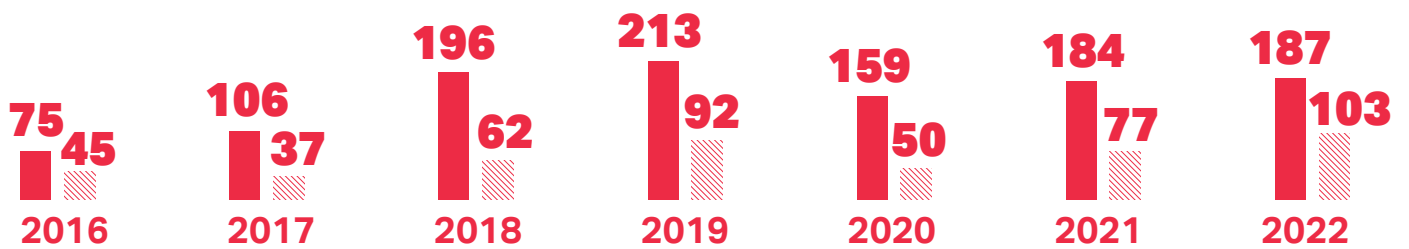
VI. What's next 32

I. Internet shutdowns in 2022: a global overview

Overview of 2022 data

Documented internet shutdowns by year *

■ Total number of shutdowns
□ Total number of shutdowns, not including India



* These numbers reflect the latest data available as of publication of this report and include updates to previously published totals for past years.

Number of countries where shutdowns occurred



India: 84

Ukraine: 22**

Iran: 18

Myanmar: 7

Bangladesh: 6

Jordan: 4

Libya: 4

Sudan: 4

Turkmenistan: 4

**Afghanistan: 2 Burkina Faso: 2 Cuba: 2
Kazakhstan: 2 Russia: 2 Sierra Leone: 2
Tajikistan: 2 Uzbekistan: 2**

**Algeria: 1 Armenia: 1 Azerbaijan: 1 Brazil: 1
China: 1 Ethiopia: 1 Iraq: 1 Nigeria: 1
Oman: 1 Pakistan: 1 Somaliland: 1
Sri Lanka: 1 Syria: 1 Tunisia: 1 Turkey: 1
Uganda: 1 Yemen: 1** Zimbabwe: 1**

** Shutdowns were imposed by external forces during armed conflict in Ukraine and Yemen.

Shutdown triggers in 2022

Protests	62 shutdowns in 16 countries during protests	Active conflicts	33 shutdowns during active conflicts
Exams	8 shutdowns in 6 countries "to prevent exam cheating"	Elections	5 shutdowns in 5 countries tied to elections

Shutdown trends in 2022

1. Grave human rights abuses*** and violence shrouded by shutdowns on the rise

→ **48 shutdowns in 14 countries coinciding with documented human rights abuses:**

Bangladesh, Ethiopia, Iran, Jordan, Kazakhstan, Myanmar, Russia, Sierra Leone, Somaliland, Sudan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and active conflict zones in Ukraine and Yemen

*** Human rights abuses include cases where there is evidence of violence, including murder, torture, rape, or apparent war crimes by governments, militaries, and police or security forces.

2. Countries entrenched in repeat offenses and prolonged shutdowns

→ **787+ days**

By the end of 2022, people in Tigray, Ethiopia had endured **2+** years of full communications blackout, and many remain disconnected

→ **33 of the 35 countries that imposed shutdowns are repeat offenders since 2016**

→ **500+ days**

People in many regions across Myanmar had been in the dark for 500+ days by March 2023

→ **16 shutdowns worldwide lasted from 2021 to 2022 and 16 are now ongoing from 2022 to 2023, compared to 8 between 2020 and 2021**

3. Targeted shutdowns and their immeasurable harms

→ **23 countries had 28 service-based shutdowns in 2022:**

Afghanistan, Algeria, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Bangladesh, Brazil, Burkina Faso, China, India, Iran, Jordan, Kazakhstan, Nigeria, Oman, Russia, Sri Lanka, Tunisia, Turkey, Turkmenistan, Uganda, Ukraine (imposed by Russian military), Uzbekistan, and Zimbabwe

→ **Layered tactics of shutdown + censorship + surveillance:**

Iran: Nationwide platform blocks + curfew-style mobile blocks in regional hotspots

Myanmar: Disrupting mobile networks, VPN access, encrypted messaging + forcing people onto heavily surveilled, military-operated ISP networks

Ukraine: Cyberattacks impacting Ukrainian ISPs + attempts to force occupied territories onto highly censored and surveilled Russian networks

Governments around the world are imposing internet shutdowns¹ at alarming rates, reaching milestones that seemed unlikely in 2016 when the #KeepItOn campaign was launched.

In 2022, Access Now and the #KeepItOn coalition documented at least **187** shutdowns across **35** countries — breaking our record for the number of countries to hit the kill switch in a single year. If we set aside the figures from India, a unique case, 2022 was also the year with the highest total number of shutdowns in the rest of the world to date. While we observed a downturn in shutdown rates at the height of COVID-19 in 2020,² with an increase in 2021,³ internet shutdowns spiked in 2022, exceeding even pre-pandemic levels. This resurgence also drove the total number of shutdowns recorded since 2016 well above **1,000**.

Shutdowns continued to be triggered by protests, active conflict, examinations, elections, political instability, and other high-profile national events.

Authorities ordered shutdowns for many of the same reasons they have for years, some using the same tired justifications. In the midst of unrest and conflict, or just during yearly school examinations, governments, militaries, and police forces kept people in the dark as a desperate means of control. For prolonged periods of time, those in power used shutdowns to silence people, often targeting specific communities through complete blackouts, mobile shutdowns, and platform blocking.

India implemented at least **84** shutdowns in 2022, the most of any country for the fifth consecutive year. Ukraine suffered through **22** shutdowns imposed by the Russian military during its full-scale

invasion and occupation,⁴ the second highest total globally. Iran followed with **18** shutdowns, breaking its own annual shutdown record with layers of shutdowns during massive protests around the country.⁵ **Nine** countries imposed at least **four** shutdowns each, repeatedly reaching for this tool for control. Perpetrators continued **16** shutdowns from 2021 into 2022, and another **16** shutdowns from 2022 into 2023, with **12** spanning the length of the entire year or longer. Ongoing shutdowns in Tigray, Ethiopia since 2020, and in regions across Myanmar since 2021, highlight the cruelty of singular prolonged blackouts in exacerbating humanitarian crises. These shutdowns demonstrate a **pattern of entrenchment** in the use of shutdowns, where countries repeatedly use this tactic — both over time and within the annual reporting period — or persist in keeping people in the dark for extended periods.

Internet shutdowns, of any form, always violate fundamental human rights and cause incalculable and persistent damage to people's lives. Although shutdowns vary significantly in their technical implementation⁶ and effect on people's ability to use the global internet, we rely on total numbers of shutdowns to show the global scale of the problem. However, since we started documenting shutdowns in 2016, India has accounted for approximately **58%** of all shutdowns documented in Access Now's Shutdown Tracker Optimization Project (STOP) database.⁷ The responsibility of Indian states for the majority of shutdowns globally is impossible to ignore and a deep problem on its own. If we examine the number of shutdowns without India in 2022, we reach another grim milestone. Of the **187** shutdowns across the world, **103** occurred outside of India, across **34** countries, passing a record last set in 2019, when there were **92** shutdowns outside India across **32** countries. We recorded **50** shutdowns

¹ An internet shutdown has been defined as “an intentional disruption of internet or electronic communications, rendering them inaccessible or effectively unusable, for a specific population or within a location, often to exert control over the flow of information.” An internet shutdown happens when someone — usually a government — intentionally disrupts the internet or mobile apps to control what people say or do. See Access Now (2020). *No more internet shutdowns! let's #KeepItOn*. Retrieved February 22, 2023, from <https://www.accessnow.org/no-internet-shutdowns-lets-keepiton/>.

² Access Now (2021). *Shattered dreams and lost opportunities: A year in the fight to #KeepItOn*. Retrieved February 22, 2023, from <https://www.accessnow.org/keepiton-2020-report/>.

³ Access Now (2022). *Internet shutdowns in 2021: the return of digital authoritarianism*. Retrieved February 22, 2023, from <https://www.accessnow.org/keepiton-2021-report/>.

⁴ Access Now (2022). *Russia's Invasion of Ukraine*. Retrieved February 22, 2023, from <https://www.accessnow.org/spotlight/russia-ukraine/>.

⁵ The New York Times (2022). *Protests Intensify in Iran Over Woman Who Died in Custody*. Retrieved February 22, 2023, from <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/09/21/world/middleeast/iran-protests-mahsa-amini.html/>.

⁶ Access Now (2022). *Taxonomy of a shutdown: 8 ways governments restrict access to the internet, and how to #KeepItOn*. Retrieved February 17, 2023, from <https://www.accessnow.org/internet-shutdown-types/>.

⁷ Access Now (2022). *The Shutdown Tracker Optimization Project (STOP) database*. Retrieved February 28, 2023, from <https://www.accessnow.org/keepiton-2016-2022-data/>.

across **28** countries outside of India in 2020, half the amount in 2022. The rise in shutdowns outside India represents a meteoric increase in the global spread of shutdowns over the past two years, but also reflects the increased capacity of civil society to verify and document shutdowns in repressive environments.

The human impacts of shutdowns remained visceral in 2022, as authorities hit the kill switch most often in times of existing chaos and violence. Perpetrators imposed **48** shutdowns across **14** countries to shroud violence and serious human rights abuses, such as murder, torture, rape, or apparent war crimes. Whether in conflict zones or during mass protests, authorities used shutdowns to try to hide serious rights violations and sever communications between individuals and communities, which also impacted human rights monitoring, including shutdown tracking and provision of humanitarian aid.

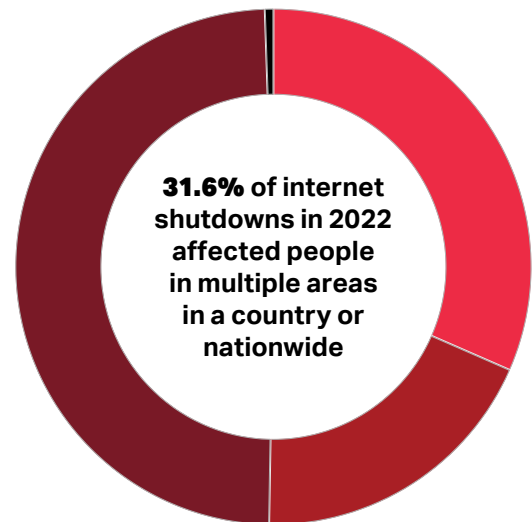
Mobile shutdowns continued to target marginalized groups, including ethnic and religious minorities and other vulnerable groups. Shutdowns deepen⁸ the gender digital divide, disrupting the ability of women to conduct business or access information on reproductive healthcare. Lack of access to resources, inability to communicate with loved ones, and difficulty sending or receiving news are just a few of the impacts that each shutdown has on countless people.

Despite these troubling findings, we have seen progress in the battle to end shutdowns and encouraging signs of solidarity in the international community. The #KeptOn coalition has grown to over **300** members from **105** countries, taking the fight to new places and bigger stages. Together, we successfully mobilized against election-related shutdowns globally,⁹ including during Kenya’s general elections,¹⁰ while sustaining momentum¹¹ in urging relevant authorities¹² to push for an end to the over two-years-long blackout in Ethiopia’s Tigray region. Another milestone was the resounding message of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner

for Human Rights (OHCHR) in their landmark report,¹³ which described the “dramatic real-life effects of shutdowns on the lives and human rights of millions of people,” and echoed the refrains of civil society that shutdowns cause “incalculable damage” with costs exceeding “any hoped for benefit.”

As people around the world grapple with economic insecurity, humanitarian crises, and repression by authoritarian states, internet shutdowns are unwelcome intrusions, demonstrably harmful, and clear violations of human rights. Global attention on shutdowns is reaching a critical juncture, and civil society is meeting the challenge by **shining a light on the darkness of internet shutdowns**.

Geo-scopes of internet shutdowns in 2022 ▾



- **49.2% of shutdowns only affected one city, county, or village (92)**
- **31.6% of shutdowns affected locations in more than one state, province, or region (59)**
- **18.7% of shutdowns affected more than one city in the same state, province, or region (35)**
- **0.5% Unknown (1)**

⁸ Access Now (2022). *Why internet shutdowns are even worse for women*. Retrieved February 17, 2023, from <https://www.accessnow.org/internet-shutdowns-international-womens-day/>.

⁹ Access Now (2022). *#KeptOn: 2022 elections and internet shutdowns watch*. Retrieved February 17, 2023, from <https://www.accessnow.org/elections-internet-shutdowns-watch-2022/>.

¹⁰ Access Now (2022). *Warning: blocking online platforms in Kenya will spread election disinformation*. Retrieved February 8, 2022, from <https://www.accessnow.org/kenya-online-platforms-social-media-blocking-internet-shutdown-election/>.

¹¹ Access Now (2023). *After years in the dark, Tigray is slowly coming back online*. Retrieved February 17, 2023, from <https://www.accessnow.org/tigray-shutdown-slowly-coming-back-online/>.

¹² Access Now (2022). *Petition: AU must take urgent steps to help reconnect Tigray to the internet*. Retrieved February 22, 2023, from <https://www.accessnow.org/petition-au-reconnect-tigray/>.

¹³ OHCHR (2022). *Internet shutdowns: UN report details 'dramatic' impact on people's lives and human rights*. Retrieved February 17, 2023, from <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2022/06/internet-shutdowns-un-report-details-dramatic-impact-peoples-lives-and-human/>.

II. Triggers for internet shutdowns in 2022

Using seven years of internet shutdown data compiled through our Shutdown Tracker Optimization Project (STOP) with the crucial support of the #KeepItOn coalition, we have tracked the myriad ways internet access is weaponized by those in power to assert control and silence voices. Authorities or aggressors in **35** countries imposed shutdowns during protests, active conflict, school examinations, elections, periods of political instability, or high-profile events like religious holidays or visits by government officials.

Shutdowns during protests

In 2022, protests erupted worldwide in the wake of resurging authoritarianism, worsening economic inequality, and deepening repression of marginalized groups. Authorities in Bangladesh, Cuba, India, Iran, Jordan, Kazakhstan, Libya, Myanmar, Pakistan, Sierra Leone, Somaliland, Sri Lanka, Sudan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Zimbabwe imposed **62** shutdowns during protests in 2022, approaching the pre-pandemic watermark of **65** shutdowns recorded during protests in 2019. Of these protest-related shutdowns in 2022, **19** disproportionately impacted entire countries. However, the majority were imposed at either the regional (**17**) or local (**25**) levels, representing targeted, aggressive attempts to conceal human rights abuses and dismantle protest movements.

Shutdowns during active conflict

Perpetrators imposed shutdowns in the context of conflict in 2022 using a variety of methods, such as leveraging prolonged blackouts in Myanmar and Ethiopia, repeated airstrikes targeting civilian infrastructure in Ukraine and Yemen, or platform blocks in Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Russia. Aggressors carried out **33** shutdowns during active conflicts, deepening the alarming pattern of recent years where internet shutdowns

function as deliberate military strategy. Whether internet access is severed through the deliberate destruction of infrastructure by invading forces, or through the targeted suspension of service by a government in power, people are cut off from the world for weeks, to months, to years.

The human toll of conflict-related shutdowns is immense. International humanitarian efforts are hampered, life-saving information about troop movements and humanitarian corridors is difficult or impossible to obtain, and documentation of war crimes and atrocities is restricted.¹⁴ The insecurity and desperation for people experiencing a lack of reliable food, water, and electricity in humanitarian crises is only exacerbated during internet and telecommunications blackouts, as the lack of contact with loved ones or the outside world only amplifies the uncertainty and severs many avenues for seeking help. Lastly, even if attacks cease, recovering destroyed infrastructure can take months to years, adding on to the misery of extended shutdowns in places like Tigray¹⁵ and liberated cities across Ukraine.¹⁶

Shutdowns during examinations

Governments continued to brazenly impose shutdowns during student and public exams throughout 2022. Authorities implemented **eight** shutdown orders for exams, in **four** cases disproportionately cutting internet access across entire countries (Algeria, Jordan, Sudan, Syria), and in **four** cases targeting shutdowns to the region with exam locations (Iraqi Kurdistan and India's Assam and West Bengal). These orders often encompassed multiple planned disruptions across the exam season. With **11** exam-related shutdowns in 2021 and **eight** in 2020, it's clear exam shutdowns are a persistent problem disrupting the lives of millions and violating the rights of everyone impacted, not just students.

¹⁴ See *supra* note 13.

¹⁵ See *supra* note 11.

¹⁶ Associated Press (2022). *Ukraine's utilities threatened by Russia in war's new phase*. Retrieved February 22, 2023, from <https://apnews.com/article/russia-ukraine-kyiv-europe-business-government-and-politics-3ac4497f5d86526bb03ae505c60c2eb/>.

Given these impacts¹⁷ and the failure of shutdowns to curb student cheating, authorities must make good on past promises¹⁸ to cease imposing them.

Shutdowns during elections

Elections also continue to be a trigger for authorities to shut down the internet or block platforms, with **five** shutdowns in 2022 tied to elections in Brazil, India, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Uganda. Authorities try to control information or quell dissent throughout election cycles, sometimes in the months leading up to elections, as we saw in Brazil, during inaugurations or protests surrounding contested elections, as we saw in Kazakhstan, or even months or years after an election, as we saw in Uganda, where authorities persisted in blocking social media once the election was over.

In 2022 we saw a slight decrease in the number of election-related shutdowns from previous years (**12** in 2019, **10** in 2020, **seven** in 2021). In 2023 Access

Now and the #KeepItOn coalition are once again monitoring elections through our #KeepItOn Election Watch campaign,¹⁹ with the aim of preventing further election shutdowns. We are watching 17 elections in 2023, focusing in particular on countries that have previously cut internet access or blocked communications platforms. There are some encouraging signs that civil society mobilization is an effective tool for preventing shutdowns surrounding elections. In 2022, two countries that were on our watchlist, Kenya and The Gambia, each maintained internet access throughout their elections. That said, we also saw elections postponed or effectively canceled. Given the rise of anti-democratic norms around the world,²⁰ this instability suggests the risk of election shutdowns will remain high. The year ahead will therefore prove to be a significant test of government commitments to #KeepItOn during elections, as well as the capacity of civil society to prepare for, prevent, circumvent, document, or otherwise mitigate the impact of any such shutdowns.

III. New and continuing trends in 2022

Grave human rights abuses and violence shrouded by shutdowns on the rise

All internet shutdowns violate human rights. The impacts are especially profound in contexts where people are most at risk of violence. In 2022, we saw a spike in the use of shutdowns to shroud violence and serious human rights abuses, with **48** shutdowns linked to this kind of abuse in diverse contexts.

For example, in some contexts, authorities responded to protests with brutal crackdowns and internet shutdowns, even though research shows network disruptions can exacerbate polarization and contribute to moving protests toward violent confrontations.²¹ In other contexts, such as during conflicts and war, governments, warring parties, or military regimes deployed shutdowns in apparent attempts to hide human rights and humanitarian law violations such as murder, torture, rape, and other war crimes. Finally, perpetrators used internet shutdowns

¹⁷ Internet Society (2022). *Internet Shutdowns to Prevent Cheating During Exams is a Disproportionate Measure*. Retrieved February 17, 2023, from <https://pulse.internetsociety.org/blog/internet-shutdowns-to-prevent-cheating-during-exams-is-a-disproportionate-measure/>.

¹⁸ Access Now (2022). *Empty promises: more internet shutdowns during exams in MENA*. Retrieved February 17, 2023, from <https://www.accessnow.org/empty-promises-shutdowns-exams/>.

¹⁹ Access Now (2022). *2023 elections and internet shutdowns watch*. Retrieved February 17, 2023, from <https://www.accessnow.org/2023-elections-and-internet-shutdowns-watch/>.

²⁰ Freedom House (2022). *The Global Expansion of Authoritarian Rule*. Retrieved February 22, 2023, from <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2022/global-expansion-authoritarian-rule/>.

²¹ Jan Rydzak (2019). *Of Blackouts and Bandhs: The Strategy and Structure of Disconnected Protest in India*. Retrieved February 22, 2023, from https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3330413/.

as a tool of warfare, not only to cover apparent war crimes, but to inflict further harm on the civilian population. Missile strikes, specifically, led to **15** shutdowns in 2022 — **14** launched by the Russian military on cities across Ukraine and **one** launched by Saudi-led coalition forces on a telecommunications facility in Hudaydah, Yemen.²²

Over the span of a year, there was evidence of violence and serious human rights violations cloaked by shutdowns in **14** countries. This cloaking exacerbates the harm to people and communities, exacting a severe human toll. Humanitarian and human rights organizations project that in areas impacted by shutdowns, it delays or prevents casualty counts,²³ affects the capacity of communities to identify victims, and interferes with the ability of news media to report accurately on the scale of the attacks. All of this impedes humanitarian assistance.²⁴

The association of violence with internet shutdowns merits further investigation. Across a variety of contexts, it appears that violence directly associated with shutdowns is on the rise. In 2022, **133** of the **187** total shutdowns occurred alongside some form of violence, compared to **110** in 2021, **99** in 2020, and **75** in 2019. In some of these cases, authorities have cited violence as part of the rationale for shutting down the internet. However, there is no evidence to show internet shutdowns reduce violence — quite the opposite.²⁵ And when authorities order shutdowns during conflicts, or use them as a form of attack, they serve to exacerbate, not relieve, human suffering.

It is notable that authorities often cite concerns about the spread of misinformation and incitement to violence as a rationale to order shutdowns and platform blocks. In 2022, authorities in **five** countries (Azerbaijan, Brazil, India, Jordan, and Uganda) cited the need to restrict misinformation, incitement to violence, or other forms of harmful content online as

a primary justification for rights-harming disruptions or blocking. The proliferation of hateful content and dangerous misinformation does require active policy and legal interventions. However, the spread of misinformation and hate speech is not an excuse for internet shutdowns, which are often used in politicized and arbitrary ways that are “incompatible with international human rights law,” especially as their impact on human rights extends beyond the areas or periods of their implementation.²⁶ Rather, it highlights the vital role that responsible government interventions and rights-respecting tech companies play in moderating content on their platforms, especially in times of crisis.²⁷

Countries entrenched in repeat offenses and prolonged shutdowns

As the COVID-19 pandemic continued to recede in many parts of the world in 2022, shutdowns outstripped pre-pandemic levels and reached grim milestones. The number of shutdowns in countries other than India topped 100 for the first time, and **nine** countries — Bangladesh, India, Iran, Jordan, Libya, Myanmar, Sudan, Turkmenistan, Ukraine (imposed by Russia) — had at least **four** shutdowns in 2022, compared with **seven** countries with at least **four** shutdowns in 2019. In the context of political upheaval, protest movements, violence, and active conflict, millions of people across these nine countries experienced frequent and severe shutdowns with disturbing regularity. These recurring shutdowns, whether implemented as a knee-jerk reaction to protests, through internet curfews, or through deliberate attacks on infrastructure during conflict,²⁸ exacerbate the well-documented harms of internet shutdowns and amount to thousands of total hours without connectivity.

²² Doug Madory (@DougMadory). Twitter Post. 6:51 AM. January 25, 2022. Retrieved February 22, 2023, from <https://twitter.com/DougMadory/status/1485958471233200128/>.

²³ See Amnesty International (2022). *A web of impunity: the killings Iran's internet shutdown hid*. Retrieved February 19, 2023, from <https://iran-shutdown.amnesty.org/>.

²⁴ See Reuters (2022). *Six million silenced: A two-year internet outage in Ethiopia*. Retrieved February 22, 2022, from <https://www.reuters.com/article/ethiopia-internet-shutdown-idAFL8N2ZM09X/>.

²⁵ See *supra* note 21.

²⁶ See *supra* note 13.

²⁷ Access Now (2022). *Content governance in times of crisis: how platforms can protect human rights*. Retrieved February 17, 2023, from <https://www.accessnow.org/new-content-governance-in-crises-declaration/>.

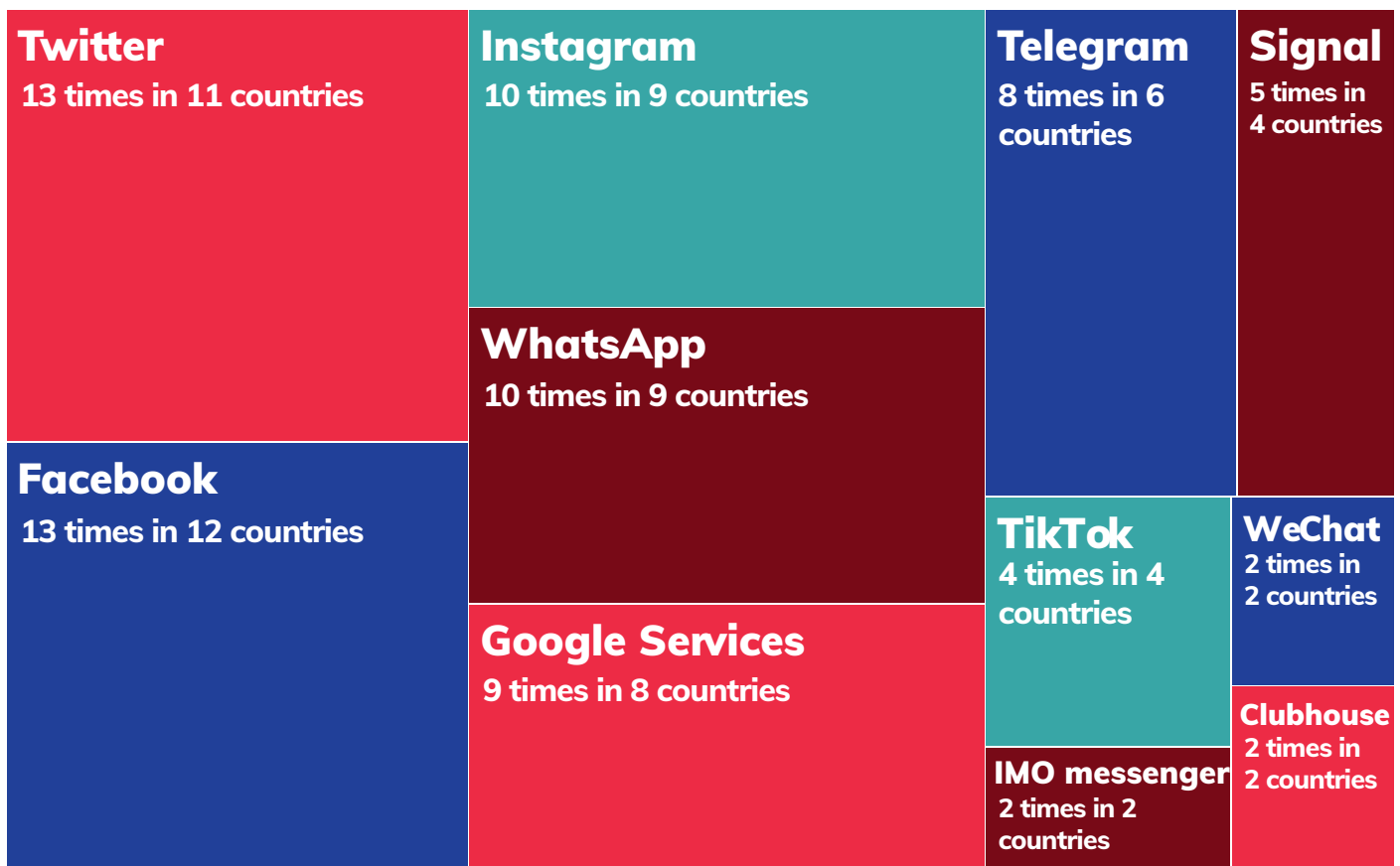
²⁸ Access Now (2022). *#KeptOn: Who is shutting down the internet in Ukraine?* Retrieved February 22, 2023, from <https://www.accessnow.org/who-is-shutting-down-the-internet-in-ukraine/>.

We also saw prolonged shutdowns continue in full force, affecting entire regions and countries. In 2022, a record **16** shutdowns carried over from 2021, including a protracted shutdown in Tigray, Ethiopia, a blanket shutdown in regions across Myanmar, and **nine** continuous platform blocks. As 2022 rolls into 2023, another set of **16** shutdowns are still in place in many of the same countries, with **12** of these having lasted at least one year. The justifications authorities offer are flimsy and insufficient²⁹ as time passes and we continue to see the violation of a broad spectrum of human rights. By the end of 2022, the people of Tigray had endured **787** days of a full communications blackout, and today it is the longest shutdown currently in effect. Also by the end of 2022, many regions across Myanmar had been in the dark for more than **460** days, and disruptions continue to escalate.

Targeted shutdowns and their immeasurable harms

As we’ve documented in recent years,³⁰ some governments are becoming more sophisticated and intentional about how they implement shutdowns, evidently to more directly target certain groups, as well as to minimize economic repercussions.³¹ In 2022, **23** countries implemented or maintained **28** communications platform blocks, similar to the **22** countries with **29** platform shutdowns in 2021. Authorities and other actors, such as military aggressors, continued to impose targeted mobile network shutdowns. This was a popular tactic during protests (**26** times), as a means of silencing people while allowing wealthy elites, government officials, and certain businesses to operate on broadband, fixed-cable internet.

Communications platform blocking in 2022 ▾



²⁹ See *supra* note 7.

³⁰ See *supra* note 3.

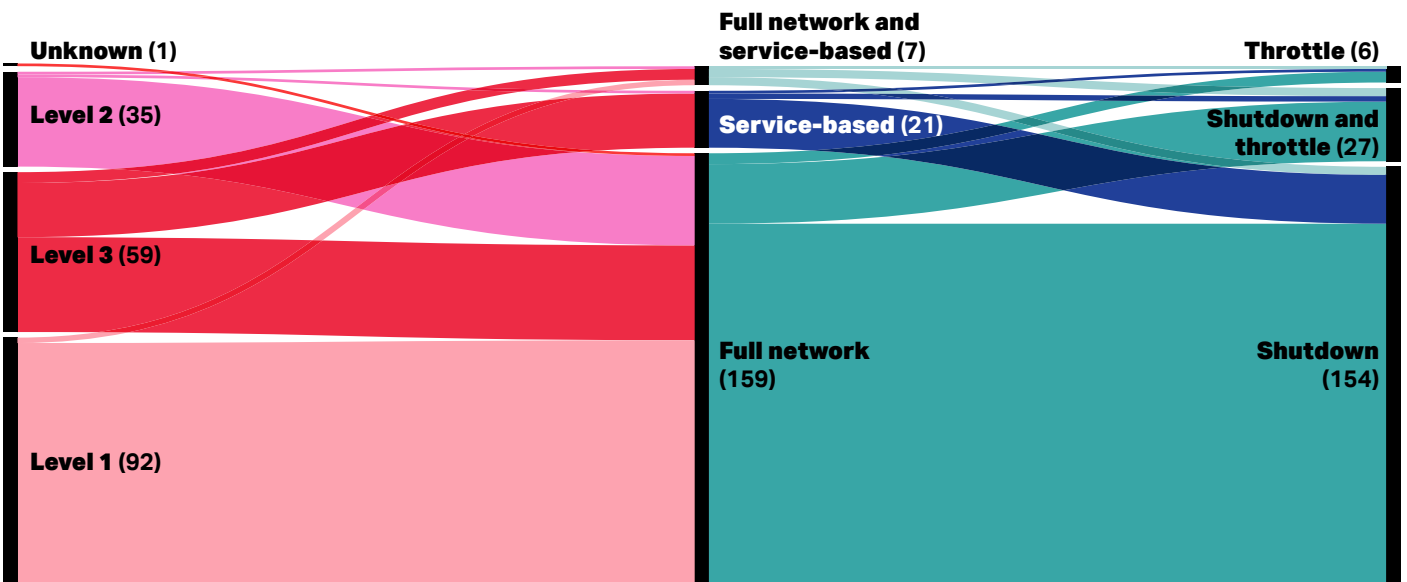
³¹ MIT Technology Review (2021). *Why you should be more concerned about internet shutdowns*. Retrieved February 19, 2023, from <https://www.technologyreview.com/2021/09/09/1035237/internet-shutdowns-censorship-exponential-jigsaw-google/>.

Given the increasing technical expertise of state actors in censoring,³² surveilling,³³ and shutting down access to the global internet, authorities or other actors began to institute multi-layered shutdowns in places like Iran, Jordan, Turkmenistan, Ukraine, and Uzbekistan. While Iranian authorities imposed broad app blocking, they also targeted regional hotspots with curfew-style mobile shutdowns.³⁴ The Russian military used missile strikes to attack communications infrastructure in multiple cities in Ukraine, while also reportedly launching cyber attacks against Ukrainian internet providers.³⁵

Perpetrators also used shutdowns in evident attempts to force people onto alternative platforms

and infrastructure where surveillance and censorship is easier to implement. After imposing two shutdowns weeks apart in occupied Kherson, Russia reportedly re-routed connections from Ukrainian ISP Khersontelecom to Russian-controlled internet providers and infrastructure, using a fiber optic cable connected via Crimea.³⁶ Similarly, in May 2022 in Iran, it appears authorities blocked access to the global internet, but maintained access to the National Information Network (NIN).³⁷ Turkmenistan, which implemented **four** shutdowns in 2022, is reportedly developing a centralized, national intranet,³⁸ suggesting that internet shutdowns may serve as a warning sign that a government will take additional technical measures to assert more control over digital spaces.

Communications platform blocking in 2022 ▾



Level 1: It only affected one city, county, or village.

Level 2: It affected more than one city in the same state, province, or region.

Level 3: It affected locations in more than one state, province, or region.

Unknown: It is unclear which areas in the country were affected.

³² Access Now (2022). *Digital dictatorship: authoritarian tactics and resistance in Eastern Europe and Central Asia*. Retrieved February 19, 2023, from <https://www.accessnow.org/digital-dictatorship-and-resistance-in-eastern-europe-and-central-asia/>.

³³ Athan - Freedom of Expression Activist Organization (2022). *Internet Access Amid Darkness and Lives Amid Threats*. Retrieved February 18, 2023, from <https://progressivevoicemyanmar.org/2022/05/30/internet-access-amid-darkness-and-lives-amid-threats/>.

³⁴ WIRED (2022). *Turn on, turn off: Understanding Iran's digital blackout*. Retrieved February 18, 2023, from <https://wired.me/culture/turn-on-turn-off-understanding-irans-digital-blackout/>.

³⁵ See *supra* note 28.

³⁶ Time (2022). *The Battle for Control Over Ukraine's Internet*. Retrieved February 22, 2023, from <https://time.com/6222111/ukraine-internet-russia-reclaimed-territory/>.

³⁷ Iran International (2022). *Frustrated Over Controlling Internet, Iran May Cut It Altogether*. Retrieved February 22, 2023, from <https://www.iranintl.com/en/202212186338/>.

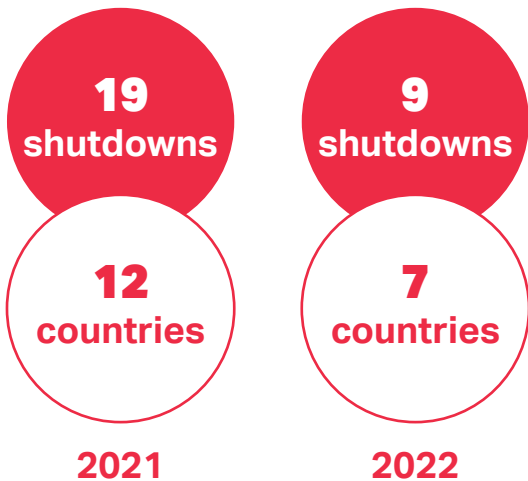
³⁸ Orient (2022). *Turkmenistan will create a national network not connected to the Internet*. Retrieved February 22, 2023, from <https://orient.tm/en/post/43107/turkmenistan-will-create-national-network-not-connected-internet/>.

IV. Internet shutdowns by region



Africa

Regional overview in 2022



Ethiopia: 1

Ongoing Tigray shutdown reached 787 days at end of 2022

Uganda: 1

Ongoing Facebook block reached 719 days at end of 2022

Burkina Faso: 2 Sierra Leone: 2 Nigeria: 1 Somaliland: 1 Zimbabwe: 1

44.5% of shutdowns related to protests

Sierra Leone: 2 Somaliland: 1 Zimbabwe: 1

33.3% of shutdowns targeted platforms

Burkina Faso: 1 Nigeria: 1 Uganda: 1

Although 2022 marked a record low for the annual number of shutdowns in the region since we started tracking in 2016, Africa is still home to the world's longest currently active shutdown globally in Tigray, Ethiopia. At least **four** of the region's nine shutdowns took place alongside reported human rights abuses, both in the context of violent crackdowns on protests and active conflict. Elections have historically been a significant trigger for shutdowns across Africa, but there were relatively fewer elections in the region in 2022, and we documented **one** ongoing election-related platform shutdown in Uganda that had been in place since 2021.³⁹ Since there will be more elections in 2023, Access Now and #KeepItOn coalition will continue to closely monitor the situation.⁴⁰

Shutdowns during protest and unrest

Authorities in Burkina Faso, Sierra Leone, Somaliland, and Zimbabwe all responded to protests and major political events with internet shutdowns.

After joining the shame list of countries imposing internet shutdowns in November 2021, the government of Burkina Faso began the new year by responding to anti-government protests on January 10 with a country-wide mobile internet shutdown, providing no explanation for its actions.⁴¹ Although authorities restored access the following day, the government persisted in blocking Facebook, citing

³⁹ Monitor (2022). *Facebook to remain shut as govt talks with tech giant stall*. Retrieved February 22, 2023, from <https://www.monitor.co.ug/uganda/news/national/facebook-to-remain-shut-as-govt-talks-with-tech-giant-stall-3912172/>.

⁴⁰ See *supra* note 19.

⁴¹ Desobeissance Civile. Facebook Post. January 10, 2022. Retrieved February 17, 2023, from <https://www.facebook.com/Desobeissancecivileburkina/posts/4817989371573475/>.

“national security” as a justification.⁴² A few weeks later on January 23, following reports of a coup attempt, the government once again cut off mobile connections across the country,⁴³ restoring access two days later.⁴⁴

When anti-government protests escalated in Sierra Leone over the rising cost of living, authorities flipped the kill switch to quell the protests.⁴⁵ The last time the government of Sierra Leone imposed internet shutdowns was in 2018, during elections.⁴⁶

Similarly, authorities in Somaliland, a self-declared state within the internationally recognized boundaries of Somalia, shut down internet access in a knee-jerk reaction to protests which erupted in August 2022 following the postponement of presidential elections.⁴⁷ The shutdowns, which affected the Woqooyi Galbeed region as well as parts of Southern and Central Somalia, lasted about 10 hours.⁴⁸ In 2017, Somaliland authorities shut down access to social media during elections.⁴⁹

Finally, Zimbabwean authorities intermittently disrupted internet service in an attempt to interfere with the “Yellow Sunday” rally held by the opposition party Citizens’ Coalition for Change. As supporters gathered for the rally, people began to report difficulty accessing social media platforms.⁵⁰ Zimbabwe has previously imposed internet shutdowns to quash protests.⁵¹

Shutdowns during elections

Elections, often linked with protests and unrest, have long been a consistent trigger for internet shutdowns in Africa. As we have noted, the record-low number of election-related shutdowns in 2022 (**one** ongoing shutdown in Uganda from 2021) is likely due to the relatively small number of elections that took place. It’s also possible that civil society advocacy played a role in dissuading authorities from interference.

The Gambia was on our elections watchlist,⁵² and in April 2022, the country maintained access to the internet throughout its legislative elections, despite a history of imposing elections-related shutdowns dating back to 2016.⁵³

Kenya, meanwhile, made and kept its commitment to #KeepItOn during the August 2022 general election, standing out as a leader among its neighbors in East Africa. That includes Uganda, which had blocked Facebook ahead of the January 2021 general elections and to date has not lifted the block.⁵⁴

Kenya’s government does not have a history of shutdowns, but it was on our elections watchlist due to increasing political tensions and the rampant spread of misinformation online. To prevent an election shutdown, Access Now and our coalition partners hosted trainings for journalists, human rights

⁴² Anadolu Agency (2022). *Burkina Faso restricts Facebook after internet outages*. Retrieved February 17, 2023, from <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/africa/burkina-faso-restricts-facebook-after-internet-outages/2480343/>.

⁴³ Faso7 (2022). *Burkina Faso: La connexion Internet mobile à nouveau coupée*. Retrieved February 17, 2023, from <https://faso7.com/2022/01/23/burkina-faso-la-connexion-internet-mobile-a-nouveau-coupee/>.

⁴⁴ Access Now (2022). *Burkina Faso must immediately end its internet shutdown, not extend it*. Retrieved February 17, 2023, from <https://www.accessnow.org/burkina-faso-internet-shutdown/>.

⁴⁵ Access Now (2022). *#KeepItOn in Sierra Leone: the government must stop wielding internet shutdowns for political control*. Retrieved February 17, 2023, from <https://www.accessnow.org/keepiton-in-sierra-leone/>.

⁴⁶ African Freedom of Expression Exchange (2018). *Sierra Leone Joins Global Trend: Shuts Down Internet and Mobile Services during Elections*. Retrieved February 17, 2023, from https://www.africafex.org/digital-rights/sierra-leone-joins-global-trend-shuts-down-internet-and-mobile-services-during-elections_trashed/.

⁴⁷ Access Now (2022). *#KeepItOn in Somaliland: authorities cannot quash public protest and access to information*. Retrieved February 22, 2023, from <https://www.accessnow.org/keepiton-in-somaliland/>.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ Africa News (2017). *Somaliland to shut down social networks during election period*. Retrieved February 17, 2023, from <https://www.africanews.com/2017/11/11/somaliland-to-shut-down-social-networks-during-election-period/>.

⁵⁰ Zimbabwe Independent (2022). *Cyberspace the new Zim political battlefield*. Retrieved February 17, 2023, from <https://www.newsday.co.zw/theindependent/amp/slider/article/4091/cyberspace-the-new-zim-political-battlefield/>.

⁵¹ Al Jazeera (2019). *Zimbabwe imposes internet shutdown amid crackdown on protests*. Retrieved February 17, 2023, from <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/1/18/zimbabwe-imposes-internet-shutdown-amid-crackdown-on-protests/>.

⁵² See *supra* note 9.

⁵³ Africa News (2016). *Gambia’s Jammeh slams request to stabilize internet on election day*. Retrieved February 22, 2023, from <https://www.africanews.com/2016/12/01/gambia-s-jammeh-slams-request-to-stabilize-internet-on-election-day/>.

⁵⁴ The New York Times (2021). *Uganda Blocks Facebook Ahead of Contentious Election*. Retrieved February 17, 2023, from <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/13/world/africa/uganda-facebook-ban-elections.html/>.

defenders, and election observers, and maintained steady pressure on the Kenyan government and telecom executives to #KeepItOn throughout the 2022 general election period.⁵⁵

Ahead of the Kenya election, then Interior Cabinet Secretary, Fred Matiang'i, indicated the government had no intention of shutting down the internet.⁵⁶ He did, however, make it clear the government intended to take the spread of misinformation and hate speech seriously.⁵⁷ After research by the human rights organization Global Witness revealed that Meta's Facebook approved ads with hate speech,⁵⁸ the National Cohesion and Integration Commission (NCIC) threatened to block the platform in Kenya unless Meta took measures to curtail the spread of hateful content. The agency gave Meta seven days to meet its demands.⁵⁹ Several civil society organizations and a number of government officials condemned this threat out of concern for free expression surrounding the elections. Ultimately the government confirmed that neither the internet nor social media platforms would be blocked.⁶⁰

Since election shutdowns remain a threat, Access Now and the #KeepItOn coalition will track elections in **11** countries in Africa in 2023, all of which have previously imposed shutdowns.⁶¹ **This is an important opportunity for the democracies of Africa to**

chart a new course, with strong commitments to #KeepItOn throughout their election periods.

Sustained platform blocks

In 2021, the governments of Nigeria⁶² and Uganda⁶³ each took action in evident retaliation against social media platforms that removed posts by government leaders or their followers. After the platforms removed these posts because they failed to meet the terms of service, government authorities blocked the platforms entirely.

Nigeria's government blocked access to Twitter for a full seven months, sparking widespread public outcry.⁶⁴ Authorities only lifted the block in January 2022 following extensive negotiations with the company.⁶⁵ Civil society groups sued over the legality of this Twitter ban, and in 2022, they secured an important victory with the Community Court of Justice of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS Court) declaring the blocking unlawful.⁶⁶

The Ugandan government, meanwhile, has persisted in blocking Facebook for more than two years, and as of February 2023, Ugandans can only access it by using VPNs.⁶⁷

⁵⁵ Access Now (2022). *Eyes on Kenya: government must uphold commitment to connectivity during elections*. Retrieved February 17, 2023, from <https://www.accessnow.org/kenya-government-internet-connectivity-elections/>; Access Now (2022). *Warning: blocking online platforms in Kenya will spread election disinformation*. Retrieved February 17, 2023, from <https://www.accessnow.org/kenya-online-platforms-social-media-blocking-internet-shutdown-election/>.

⁵⁶ The Star (2022). *We won't shut down internet during elections - Matiang'i*. Retrieved February 17, 2023, from <https://www.the-star.co.ke/news/2022-06-09-we-wont-shut-down-internet-during-elections-matiangi/>.

⁵⁷ The People Daily (2021). *Matiang'i: State won't switch off Internet but we're watching you*. Retrieved February 17, 2023, from <https://www.pd.co.ke/news/matiangi-state-wont-switch-off-internet-but-were-watching-you-83867/>.

⁵⁸ Global Witness (2022). *Facebook approves ads calling for ethnic violence in the lead up to a tense Kenyan election*. Retrieved February 22, 2023, from <https://www.globalwitness.org/en/press-releases/facebook-approves-ads-calling-ethnic-violence-lead-tense-kenyan-election/>.

⁵⁹ The East African (2022). *Kenya threatens ban on Facebook over hate speech*. Retrieved February 17, 2023, from <https://www.theeastafrican.co.ke/tea/news/east-africa/kenya-threatens-ban-on-facebook-over-hate-speech-3896380/>.

⁶⁰ Joe Mucheru EGH (@mucheru). Twitter Post. 1:48 AM. July 30, 2022. Retrieved February 22, 2023, from <https://twitter.com/mucheru/status/1553271302005334016/>.

⁶¹ See *supra* note 19.

⁶² Access Now (2022). *Blocking access to Twitter in Nigeria is a flagrant violation of fundamental rights*. Retrieved February 22, 2023, from <https://www.accessnow.org/nigeria-blocks-twitter-keepiton/>.

⁶³ See *supra* note 54.

⁶⁴ The New York Times (2022). *Nigeria Lifts 7-Month Ban on Twitter*. Retrieved February 22, 2023, from <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/13/world/africa/nigeria-lifts-twitter-ban.html/>.

⁶⁵ Access Now (2022). *Blocking access to Twitter in Nigeria is a flagrant violation of fundamental rights*. Retrieved February 17, 2023, from <https://www.accessnow.org/nigeria-blocks-twitter-keepiton/>.

⁶⁶ Access Now (2022). *ECOWAS Court victory: Twitter ban in Nigeria declared unlawful*. Retrieved February 17, 2023, from <https://www.accessnow.org/ecowas-court-nigeria-unlawful-twitter-ban/>.

⁶⁷ See *supra* note 39.

// Ethiopia

Ethiopia's Tigray region has been shut off from telecommunications services since the beginning of the civil war on November 4, 2020.⁶⁸ A peace agreement between Ethiopia's federal government and the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) — which includes government commitments to restore access to essential services across the region — began to take hold in November 2022.⁶⁹ But we have only started to see limited connectivity since December 2022, when Ethio Telecom began infrastructure repairs. As of February 2023 the majority of people in the region remain disconnected, and those who have regained some access are largely struggling with slow speeds and limited 2G services.⁷⁰

The years-long internet shutdown in Tigray and affected neighboring communities paints a vivid picture of how devastating and dangerous these acts of disconnection can be. Aside from the immediate impact of cutting off the region's six million people from the rest of the world, the ongoing communication blackout has resulted in multifaceted threats to Tigrayans' fundamental rights.⁷¹ Since it is one of the longest uninterrupted internet shutdowns to have taken place during active conflict, it has also had a harrowing impact on people's lives.⁷² The shutdown provided a cover for warring parties to commit heinous crimes, including systematic and widespread murder, rape, and sexual violence against vulnerable groups.⁷³ It also prevented delivery of humanitarian aid to affected communities suffering from famine and other privations. No one could rely on basic services such as healthcare, banking, employment, and education.

Despite the horrors of the civil conflict and Tigray shutdown, digital rights activists and human rights

Shutdown impact story: Tigray

"I remember the days I woke up and tried calling different numbers every single day hoping that one of my family members would be able to pick up. It is the worst situation that a human being can be in, [not knowing] if your family members are alive or not. Hearing [reports of] all the drone strikes on civilians used to make me lose my mind. I was not able to focus on my school & work. I used to see my siblings in my dreams and eagerly wanted to talk to them but I was not able to for 2+ years. Even now I am still not able to reach out to a few family members because internet access is not restored in all cities of Tigray region."

A young Tigrayan woman based in the U.S.

defenders demonstrated enormous resilience, persisting in drawing the world's attention to the rights violations happening in their communities.⁷⁴ In solidarity, Access Now and the #KeepItOn coalition worked with local partners and members of the Ethiopian diaspora to amplify Tigrayan voices and demand accountability for the shutdown. We brought together more than 100 civil society organizations and individuals from more than 102 countries to urge the African Union to take action to end the shutdown.⁷⁵ When Ethiopia hosted the annual Internet Governance Forum in November 2022, our coalition worked to move the situation in Tigray to the top of the global agenda.⁷⁶

See the Middle East & North Africa (MENA) chapter for information on shutdowns in Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, and Sudan.

⁶⁸ See *supra* note 11.

⁶⁹ United Nations News (2022). *Ethiopia: Peace agreement between Government and Tigray 'a critical first step'*: Guterres. Retrieved February 17, 2023, from <https://news.un.org/en/story/2022/11/1130137/>.

⁷⁰ See *supra* note 11.

⁷¹ Access Now (2022). *Stranded, suffocated, and in pain: 15 stories from Tigray's internet siege*. Retrieved February 17, 2023, from <https://www.accessnow.org/15-stories-from-tigrays-internet-siege/>.

⁷² Tghat (2022). *Impact of the Internet Shutdown in Tigray*. Retrieved February 17, 2023, from <https://www.tghat.com/2022/02/24/impact-of-the-internet-shutdown-in-tigray/>.

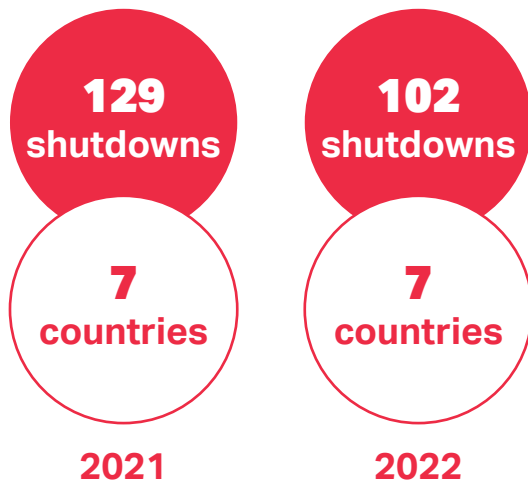
⁷³ Global Voices (2021). *Vicious mass rape of women has become a weapon against the Tigray in Ethiopian war*. Retrieved February 22, 2023, from <https://globalvoices.org/2021/07/05/vicious-mass-rape-of-women-has-become-a-weapon-against-the-tigray-in-ethiopian-war/>.

⁷⁴ Tghat (2022). *Open letter to the Internet Governance Forum*. Retrieved February 17, 2023, from <https://www.tghat.com/2022/09/11/open-letter-to-the-internet-governance-forum/>.

⁷⁵ See *supra* note 12.

⁷⁶ Internet Governance Forum (2022). *Seventeenth Meeting of Internet Governance Forum*. Retrieved February 6, 2022, from https://mail.intgovforum.org/IGF2022_summaryreport_final.pdf/.

Asia Pacific Regional overview in 2022



Myanmar: 7

Longest ongoing shutdown exceeded 540 days as of March 2023

India: 84

Most shutdowns recorded in the world for five consecutive years

Bangladesh: 6 Afghanistan: 2 China: 1
Pakistan: 1 Sri Lanka: 1

Mobile vs. broadband shutdowns in the region



1.2 billion mobile internet users in the region
(source: Global System for Mobile Communications Association)

Despite the apparent reduction in total shutdowns in the region from 2021 to 2022, these shifts are largely reflective of increasingly entrenched shutdowns, as well as erratic and hyperlocal disruptions, severe obstacles to documenting recurring disruptions in communities under attack, and the introduction of alternative censorship strategies layered on top of shutdowns. The Asia Pacific region remains a global leader in internet shutdowns, reflected in the case studies of India and Myanmar, where people continue to experience staggering levels of targeted disruptions. Regardless of the total number of shutdowns documented, people in India's Jammu and Kashmir and Myanmar's Sagaing and Magway regions and Chin state lived through much of 2022 with near-continuous disruptions and poor quality of service in the rare intervening moments of connectivity.

// Myanmar

In Myanmar, the military crackdown on those resisting the regime after the coup d'etat two years ago⁷⁷ has included the use of internet shutdowns to facilitate and shroud serious human rights violations and sever communications between individuals and communities. At present, we can verify at least **seven** shutdowns in 2022; however, this number underplays the full range and nature of connection disruptions across the country. In reality, through 2022, the military consolidated control⁷⁸ of all telecommunications providers in Myanmar, expanded surveillance infrastructure⁷⁹ across the country, and shut down mobile and internet connections both consecutively and erratically across regions. This has posed a severe challenge for local partners as they work to verify the frequency and duration of shutdowns. Nevertheless,

⁷⁷ Access Now (2022). *Two years of dangerous occupation: international community must protect rights in Myanmar*. Retrieved February 18, 2023, from <https://www.accessnow.org/myanmar-coup-two-years/>.

⁷⁸ Access Now (2022). *Ooredoo's plans to leave Myanmar hands military full control of nation's telco sector — it must mitigate the human rights risks*. Retrieved February 18, 2023, from <https://www.accessnow.org/ooredoo-myanmar-sale/>.

⁷⁹ Access Now (2022). *Track and target: FAQ on Myanmar CCTV cameras and facial recognition*. Retrieved February 18, 2023, from <https://www.accessnow.org/myanmar-cctv-cameras/>.

our coalition continues to document additional discrete instances of shutdowns, particularly those targeted at specific communities, and we will continue to update Access Now's STOP database⁸⁰ as new information becomes available.

Regardless of the final total, emerging information coming from trusted #KeepItOn coalition partners and people on the ground highlight the breadth and severity of shutdowns in the country. According to our partners, as of March 2023, the longest ongoing shutdown in Myanmar had been in place in Hpakant township in Kachin state for more than **18** months, and approximately **50** townships had been cut off for more than **one** year. Of these, more than **20** townships faced shutdowns for the entirety of 2022 and for more than **500** days, and at least **25** townships faced shutdowns for **10** months of 2022. Partners also reported shutdowns across the Sagaing, Magway, and Mandalay regions, and Shan, Chin, Kachin, and Kayah states, with the most affected areas being Sagaing, Magway, and Chin, where resistance to the military is strongest. Meanwhile, across the country, all **330** townships have been subjected to shutdowns at least once in 2022, with many experiencing daily mobile and broadband shutdowns on top of other communications blackouts. Since there is ongoing armed conflict, some of these shutdowns were likely the result of damage to network infrastructure. People in remote areas have also been suffering from temporary outages due to lack of electricity or petrol, particularly in Kayah state.

These shutdowns are strategic. The Myanmar junta continues to actively and regularly impose disruptions prior to and during military attacks on villages, to shroud its "scorched earth" strategy⁸¹ of killings, torture, ill-treatment, and arrests,⁸² as well as widespread arson of property.⁸³ Even when there are no military attacks, people in these villages have suffered from ongoing connectivity challenges, as significant price hikes for internet access⁸⁴ and expanded regulations for IMEI and

Shutdown impact story: Myanmar

"We have been facing significant challenges trying to confirm where there is connectivity and where it has been cut off in Myanmar. After the coup, with every passing month, more activists are forced to leave Myanmar for security reasons, while still trying to connect with and support people within. We know what the 'right' or 'secure' ways to communicate are, but we simply cannot use them. VPNs do not work in some regions, nor do calls on encrypted apps like Signal. In some places, we can only communicate over military-owned telecom operators' networks, even when we know it is very risky. Many times, we have to communicate with intermediaries for people's safety, so we struggle to get direct information. Everything we do is being monitored — the military is conducting house raids, freezing our bank accounts and mobile banking apps, monitoring financial transactions, tracking SIM cards and phone IMEIs, stopping the issuance of passports to control people flying in and out... All while burning villages, looting homes, and our family and friends have to keep moving to avoid capture. Their aim is to kill the resistance, and they will stop at nothing."

—————
A human rights defender

SIM card registration⁸⁵ supplement shutdowns to make connectivity an exception rather than the norm. In regions where mobile connectivity continues, individuals are forced to use networks run by military-owned telecommunications providers, such as Myanma Posts and Telecommunications (MPT) and

⁸⁰ See *supra* note 7.

⁸¹ Access Now (2022). *Open call to all international actors: do more to stop internet shutdowns shrouding torchings and killings in Myanmar*. Retrieved February 18, 2023, from <https://www.accessnow.org/statement-against-myanmar-shutdowns/>.

⁸² See *supra* note 33.

⁸³ The Irrawaddy (2022). *Myanmar Junta Torches 10 Villages in Two Days in Sagaing*. Retrieved February 18, 2023, from <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/myanmar-junta-torches-10-villages-in-two-days-in-sagaing.html/>.

⁸⁴ Access Now (2022). *Resist Myanmar's digital coup: stop the military consolidating digital control*. Retrieved February 18, 2023, from <https://www.accessnow.org/myanmars-digital-coup-statement/>.

⁸⁵ Access Now (2022). *Myanmar IMEI FAQ: how the junta could disconnect the resistance*. Retrieved February 18, 2023, from <https://www.accessnow.org/myanmar-imei/>.

Mytel, as those networks are the only remaining means of communication.⁸⁶ While some telcos have recorded occasional temporary restoration of connectivity or 2G access in affected areas, there have also been increasing reports of highly targeted restrictions on mobile and phone lines.

Shutdowns documented in Myanmar, August 2021 to March 2023 (verified as of February 2023) ▾

540+ days

Hpakant township in Kachin

500+ days

20+ townships across Sagaing, Magway, Mandalay, Chin, and Kachin

365+ days

Approx. 50 townships across Sagaing, Magway, Mandalay, Chin, Kachin, and Kayah

// India

India, which was responsible for **84** shutdowns in 2022, remains the country with the highest number of recorded shutdowns in the world — for the fifth consecutive year. Authorities disrupted internet access at least **49** times in Jammu and Kashmir due to political instability and violence, including a string of **16** back-to-back orders for three-day-long curfew-style shutdowns in January and February 2022. Though brief, rare spells of uninterrupted internet

access in the region delivered clear benefits for women and small-business owners,⁸⁷ further proof that internet access is vital for realizing economic security and closing the gender digital divide.

In 2021, around **80%** of all shutdowns in India were in Jammu and Kashmir, compared to **58%** in 2022. Authorities in regions across the country are increasingly resorting to this repressive measure, inflicting shutdowns on more people in more places. Setting aside Jammu and Kashmir, authorities in West Bengal (**7**) and Rajasthan (**12**) imposed more shutdowns than authorities in other regions in India, responding to protests, communal violence, and exams with disruptions that impacted the daily lives of millions of people for hundreds of hours in 2022.

Although we counted fewer than 100 shutdowns in India for the first time since 2017, we're not convinced Indian authorities have embarked on the path toward positive, sustained change with regard to digital rights. Legal challenges against shutdowns,⁸⁸ fewer mass protests in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the sustained and increasing crackdown on dissent may have increased administrative friction or reduced the incentives for authorities to impose shutdowns. At the same time, the government's persistent failure to publicly release shutdown orders⁸⁹ in violation of the Supreme Court's judgment,⁹⁰ and the technical challenges in monitoring, tracking, and recording shutdowns — in particular in communities where shutdowns are an emerging issue — likely mean we have not yet recorded all disruptions. In addition, the proposed Draft Indian Telecommunication Bill,⁹¹ which would empower central and state governments with unrestricted powers to impose shutdowns when "necessary and expedient," signals the government's intention to continue down this troublesome path,

⁸⁶ Thomson Reuters Foundation News (2022). *A year after Myanmar coup, growing surveillance threatens lives*. Retrieved February 18, 2023, from <https://news.trust.org/item/20220131095532-a8q70/>.

⁸⁷ Deccan Herald (2022). *Women, startups thrive after Kashmir eases internet shutdowns*. Retrieved February 18, 2023, from <https://www.deccanherald.com/national/north-and-central/women-startups-thrive-after-kashmir-eases-internet-shutdowns-1173055.html/>.

⁸⁸ See, e.g., The Register (2022). *India's Supreme Court demands government detail internet shutdown rules*. Retrieved February 18, 2023, from https://www.theregister.com/2022/09/13/india_internet_shutdowns_challenged/; Internet Freedom Foundation (2022). *#KeepItOn: Calcutta HC disposes of Ashlesh Biradar's writ petition against internet shutdowns by directing that state authorities are bound to follow law*. Retrieved February 18, 2023, from <https://internetfreedom.in/keepiton-calcutta-hc-disposes-of-writ-petition-against-internet-shutdowns-directing-state-authorities-bound-to-follow-law/>.

⁸⁹ Internet Freedom Foundation (2020). *Amendment to the Telecom Suspension Rules offers little protection against arbitrary and prolonged internet shutdowns #KeepUsOnline*. Retrieved February 22, 2023, from <https://internetfreedom.in/telecom-suspension-rules-amendment-15-day-time-limit/>.

⁹⁰ Columbia University, Global Freedom of Expression (n.d.). *Bhasin v. Union of India*. Retrieved February 22, 2023, from <https://globalfreedomofexpression.columbia.edu/cases/bhasin-v-union-of-india/>.

⁹¹ Access Now (2022). *India's Draft Teleco Bill empowers governments to impose internet shutdowns*. Retrieved February 18, 2023, from <https://www.accessnow.org/india-telecommunications-bill-shutdowns/>.

Shutdown impact story: Meghalaya, India

"I saved myself enough money to buy a smartphone and then wanted to use it to my advantage. Therefore I got engaged with [a food ordering app] and started delivering. The money I earn is on a daily basis. It depends on the number of deliveries I make in a day, but with mobile internet not working, I have nothing to do and have not made a penny for the last five days."

A food delivery worker

"Our primary mode of transaction is Google Pay. Customers are not able to pay us neither are we able to pay for the stuff we buy for the shop. It is a problem."

A small business owner

These two stories were reported by Abha Anindita in the article *Pain of living without mobile internet* on The Meghalayan. For the full story, visit <https://themeghalayan.com/pain-of-living-without-mobile-internet/>.

violating fundamental rights of expression and assembly and providing opportunities to cover up human rights abuses. In addition to shutdowns, Indian authorities have honed their playbook by increasing censorship, blocking websites, and issuing takedown orders to social media platforms.

92 Software Freedom Law Center (2023). *Finding 404: A Report on Website Blocking in India*. Retrieved February 18, 2023, from <https://sflc.in/finding-404-report-website-blocking-india/>.

93 Government of India Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology (2023). *Rajya Sabha Unstarred Question No. 1047: Censorship on Social Media*. Retrieved February 18, 2023, from <https://pqars.nic.in/annex/259/AU1047.pdf/>.

94 *Ibid.*

95 Cloudflare Radar (@CloudflareRadar). Twitter Post. 6:15 pm. May 25, 2022. Retrieved February 18, 2023, from <https://twitter.com/CloudflareRadar/status/1529481339472429062/>.

96 Access Now (2022). *Internet throttling in Bangladesh: government, telcos must #KeepItOn*. Retrieved February 18, 2023, from <https://www.accessnow.org/keepiton-internet-throttling-bangladesh/>.

97 Tech Radar (2021). *China blocks Signal - here's what you need to know*. Retrieved February 18, 2023, from <https://www.techradar.com/news/china-blocks-signal-heres-what-you-need-to-know>. We are also continuing to investigate reports indicating the use of signal jammers during protests against COVID-19 lockdowns in Chengdu and other cities across China. See, e.g., Vice (2022). *Why China's COVID Protests Aren't Like Anything Before Them*. Retrieved February 18, 2023, from <https://www.vice.com/en/article/qjkaz5/china-covid-protests-xi-jinping>.

98 WIRED (2023). *The Taliban Can't Stop TikTok*. Retrieved February 18, 2023, from <https://www.wired.com/story/the-taliban-cant-stop-tiktok/>.

99 Access Now (2022). *Authorities, telcos in Sri Lanka must ensure internet access throughout crisis*. Retrieved February 18, 2023, from <https://www.accessnow.org/sri-lanka-internet-access-crisis/>.

100 Access Now (2022). *The government must commit to ensuring access to an open internet and free social media in crisis-hit Sri Lanka*. Retrieved February 18, 2023, from <https://www.accessnow.org/sri-lanka-ensure-access-to-open-internet/>.

India's expanding censorship toolkit

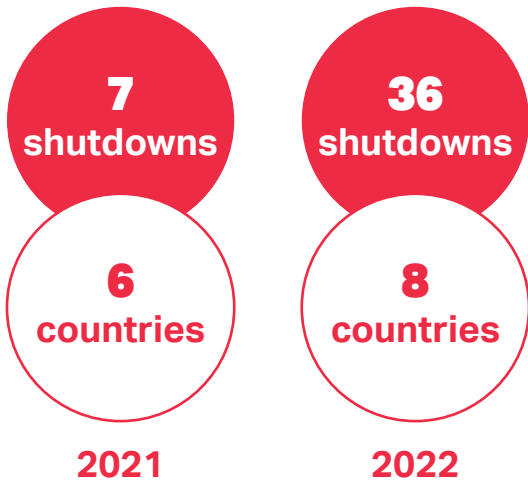
From 2015 to 2022, Indian authorities blocked at least 55,607 websites, URLs, applications, social media posts, and accounts.⁹² These censorship acts have been steadily on the rise, with the government blocking 2.4 times, or 142%, more social media posts in 2022 than 2018.⁹³

	Shutdowns	Takedown orders (social media posts and accounts) ⁹⁴
2022	84 (21% ↓)	6775 (11% ↑)
2021	107	6096

Shutdowns during protest and unrest

Elsewhere in the Asia Pacific region, Pakistan⁹⁵ and Bangladesh⁹⁶ ordered shutdowns during protests, and China,⁹⁷ Afghanistan,⁹⁸ and Sri Lanka⁹⁹ blocked social media services. On April 3, 2022, in an attempt to quell widespread protests against the president's declaration of a state of emergency, the Sri Lankan Telecommunications Regulatory Commission banned all social media services across Sri Lanka.¹⁰⁰ The shutdown accompanied a recent spike in censorship, information regulation, and isolation from the outside world — all markers of a government's descent into digital authoritarianism.

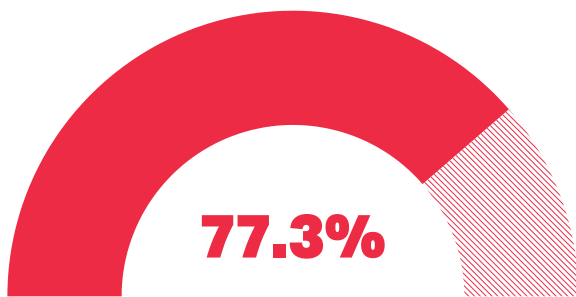
Eastern Europe and Central Asia Regional overview in 2022



Ukraine: 22
All shutdowns imposed by Russia during its invasion

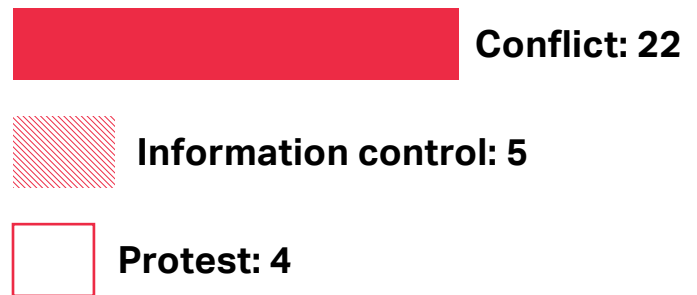
Armenia: 1
First internet shutdown on record

Turkmenistan: 4 Kazakhstan: 2 Russia: 2 Tajikistan: 2 Uzbekistan: 2 Azerbaijan: 1



of shutdowns in Ukraine were directly targeting the communications infrastructure. That's **17** shutdowns.

Top 3 triggers of shutdowns in the region



As countries in Eastern Europe and Central Asia (EECA) sink deeper into authoritarianism, internet shutdowns and censorship have become increasingly prevalent during protests and elections.¹⁰¹ In the context of conflict and crisis across the region, from Russia's attacks on Ukraine to governments' violent crackdowns on protests across Central Asia, authorities have weaponized internet shutdowns to keep people in the dark and to carry out human rights abuses with impunity.

Central Asia

Across Central Asia, authorities imposed shutdowns with regularity during protests, denying people's rights to freedom of expression and access to information

in attempts to silence dissent and cover up abuses of power.¹⁰² The impacts have been devastating, disrupting people's access to food, healthcare, education, and life-saving information.¹⁰³

In January 2022, the Kazakhstani people were subjected to a week of nearly constant shutdowns as protests escalated over the price of gas. The violent and disproportionate crackdown on protesters by police and security services resulted in the deaths of hundreds of people and detention of thousands. Shutdowns implemented by the Kazakhstan government left millions in the dark, causing cash and food shortages as mobile payment services were disrupted and debit card machines malfunctioned.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰¹ See *supra* note 32.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*

¹⁰³ Access Now (2022). *In Central Asia, internet shutdowns are harming all kinds of rights*. Retrieved February 18, 2023, from <https://www.accessnow.org/central-asia-internet-shutdowns-harm-rights/>.

¹⁰⁴ Access Now (2022). *Timeline: Kazakhstan internet shutdowns aim to crush protests, hide state violence*. Retrieved February 18, 2023, from <https://www.accessnow.org/kazakhstan-internet-shutdowns-protests-almaty-timeline-whats-happening/>.

Shutdown impact story: Tajikistan



"I owned two pharmacies in Khorog, where I come from. We provided medications and medical supplies to hospitals and individuals. The internet played a key role in this business, since all transfers, settlements with suppliers, filing taxes, basically, all business control was carried out remotely via the internet.

But everything changed for me and my business when authorities in Tajikistan imposed a four months-long internet shutdown to quell protests in Khorog. My business was undoubtedly hit hard as we couldn't operate efficiently anymore. I was forced to let go of my staff and eventually closed down the business. I lost over [USD] \$15,000."

A businessman in Khorog

Photo: [Kondephy](#)

Uzbek and Tajik authorities also met protests with violent crackdowns and internet blackouts in the autonomous region of Karakalpakstan¹⁰⁵ and the Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Region (GBAO),¹⁰⁶ respectively — highlighting the disproportionate impact shutdowns often have on marginalized communities like the Karakalpak and Pamiri ethnic groups.

Authorities in Turkmenistan¹⁰⁷ and Uzbekistan¹⁰⁸ both implemented communications platform shutdowns, a tactic they have increasingly deployed in the past few years alongside censorship of websites and blocking of VPNs in an effort to control information and squash dissent.

// Russia's invasion of Ukraine

In 2022, during the course of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine beginning in February, the Russian military imposed **22** shutdowns on Ukrainian cities

and oblasts through a combination of cyber attacks, targeted air strikes, and deliberate dismantling of telecommunications infrastructure.¹⁰⁹

Russia has systematically targeted civilian infrastructure across Ukraine, attempting to break down popular resistance to the invasion, restrict the flow of information, and inflict damage to communities in retaliation when Ukraine has successfully forced Russian troops out of occupied cities. These tactics have inflicted devastating harms, and at least **12** of the **22** shutdowns that occurred in Ukraine took place in parallel to documented human rights abuses. Lack of electricity, water, and food, combined with indiscriminate and brutal killings of civilians¹¹⁰ have been common throughout the invasion, often alongside disrupted communications and internet blackouts. In response, Ukraine has set up 4,000 "invincibility centers" where people can get warm, eat, charge devices, and connect to the

¹⁰⁵ Access Now (2022). *Uzbekistan region in information vacuum, authorities must #KeepItOn*. Retrieved February 18, 2023, from <https://www.accessnow.org/uzbekistan-information-vacuum-keepiton/>.

¹⁰⁶ The Diplomat (2022). *Tajikistan Lifts Internet Block on GBAO. What's Next?* Retrieved February 18, 2023, from <https://thediplomat.com/2022/06/tajikistan-lifts-internet-block-on-gbao-whats-next/>.

¹⁰⁷ Access Now (2021). *What Turkmenistan internet shutdowns tell us about digital repression in Central Asia*. Retrieved February 18, 2023, from <https://www.accessnow.org/turkmenistan-internet-shutdowns/>.

¹⁰⁸ The Diplomat (2022). *Uzbekistan Unblocks Twitter, TikTok Still Restricted*. Retrieved February 18, 2023, from <https://thediplomat.com/2022/08/uzbekistan-unblocks-twitter-tiktok-still-restricted/>.

¹⁰⁹ See *supra* note 28.

¹¹⁰ Human Rights Watch (2022). *Ukraine: Mariupol Residents Trapped by Russian Assault*. Retrieved February 18, 2023, from <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/03/07/ukraine-mariupol-residents-trapped-russian-assault>.

internet.¹¹¹ The government is also requiring ISPs to stock enough batteries, generators, and solar panels to stay online for at least three days in the case of blackouts.¹¹²

In formerly occupied Kherson, one of the areas Russia attempted to use as a foothold to serve as a base for its incursions deeper into Ukrainian territory, Russian forces systematically worked to displace Ukrainian telecommunications services with Russian ones, going so far as to reroute traffic and even lay new fiber optic cables from Crimea.¹¹³ These efforts resulted in significant lapses in connectivity for Ukrainians, and where Russia restored connection, it forced people onto the heavily censored and surveilled Russian internet.¹¹⁴ Ukraine fought back against Russia's efforts, with Ukrainian service providers implementing blocks where Russia had gained access to their equipment, and Ukrainian intelligence services destabilizing the newly run fiber optic cable.¹¹⁵ While important acts of resistance, the battle for control over telecommunications infrastructure further exacerbated disruptions in service for the people of Ukraine.

The Russian government also implemented **two** shutdowns at home — blocking access to Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram — as part of its crackdown on dissent and persistent efforts to enforce its own propaganda as the prevailing

narrative surrounding the invasion.¹¹⁶ As a response to Russia's pressure on platforms, TikTok took its own measures to severely limit access to its services in the country.¹¹⁷ At the same time, countries around the world rallying in support of Ukraine imposed a series of heightening sanctions against Russia, some explicitly targeting tech services, and other more general restrictions that created uncertainty about how they applied to services supporting access to the global internet inside Russia. Both U.S. and U.K. authorities took swift action responding to civil society's calls for exemptions, to ensure that human rights defenders, journalists, and millions of others inside Russia could stay connected with the international community, access reliable information, and continue their resistance.¹¹⁸

// Armenia-Azerbaijan territorial dispute

As the military conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan over disputed territory has heightened since 2021, so too has both countries' use of internet shutdowns and other tactics for information control. In the days following Azerbaijan's military offensive in the disputed territory on September 14, 2022, authorities in both countries blocked TikTok, **marking the first time on record Armenia deliberately blocked platform access.**¹¹⁹

¹¹¹ The Kyiv Independent (2022). *People seek relief at 'invincibility centers' amid long power outages*. Retrieved February 18, 2023, from <https://kyivindependent.com/news-feed/people-come-to-invincibility-centers-in-kyiv-amid-long-power-outages>.

¹¹² *Ibid.*

¹¹³ The New York Times (2022). *How Russia Took Over Ukraine's Internet in Occupied Territories*. Retrieved February 18, 2023, from <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2022/08/09/technology/ukraine-internet-russia-censorship.html>.

¹¹⁴ See *supra* note 28.

¹¹⁵ Liga.net (2022). *Інтерв'ю | Росія – законна ціль. Голова Держспецзв'язку Юрій Щиголь про санкції та невдалі кібератаки РФ [Interview | Russia is a legitimate target. Head of the State Special Forces Yuriy Shchygol on sanctions and failed cyberattacks of the Russian Federation]*. Retrieved February 18, 2023, from <https://tech.liga.net/ua/ukraine/interview/glava-gosspetssvyazi-yuriy-schigol-o-svyazi-v-hersone-tehnosanktsiyah-i-starlink-v-poezdah>.

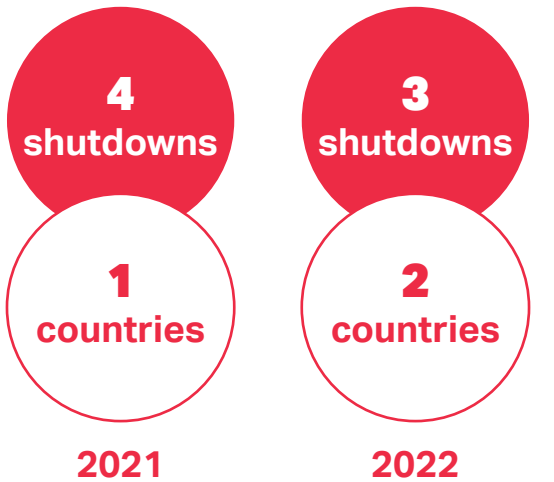
¹¹⁶ Access Now (2022). *Updates: Digital rights in the Russia-Ukraine conflict*. Retrieved February 18, 2023, from <https://www.accessnow.org/digital-rights-ukraine-russia-conflict/>.

¹¹⁷ Coda Story (2022). *A Russian user looks inside TikTok's propaganda-filled digital bubble*. Retrieved February 18, 2023, from <https://www.codastory.com/newsletters/russia-tiktok-propaganda/>.

¹¹⁸ Access Now (2022). *UK protects free flow of information amidst Russia sanctions*. Retrieved February 22, 2023, from <https://www.accessnow.org/uk-information-russia-sanctions/>; Access Now (2022). *U.S. moves to keep the Russian people connected despite sanctions*. Retrieved February 22, 2023, from <https://www.accessnow.org/u-s-treasury-russia-sanctions-internet/>.

¹¹⁹ Access Now (2022). *Turn TikTok on: authorities in Azerbaijan and Armenia must not restrict access*. Retrieved February 18, 2023, from <https://www.accessnow.org/tiktok-azerbaijan-armenia/>.

Latin America and the Caribbean Regional overview in 2022



Cuba: 2

3 consecutive years of shutdowns

Brazil: 1

Return to court-ordered platform shutdowns



Brazilian courts have ordered blocks of **Facebook (2016)** and **Telegram (2022)** in a disproportionate response to content governance issues

Shutdown impact story: Cuba

"Internet shutdowns affect communication with sources, and the ability to know or verify what is happening at that moment, since the Cuban regime cuts the service mostly when there are protests and mass arrests. As a result there is a state of total isolation that prevents me not only from reporting on social networks, but also from communicating with my family, and given the harassment of independent journalists in Cuba, it is normal that my family is worried about these situations."

Cynthia de la Cantera Toranzo, Cuban independent journalist



Photo: [Tim Stahmer](#)

Though the Latin America and Caribbean region has seen fewer instances of internet shutdowns in 2022 relative to other regions, a number of repeat offenders have relied on shutdowns to quell dissent, restrict the flow of information, and apply pressure on social media companies to comply with government orders. Shutdowns undermine people's ability to make their voices heard, participate in democratic processes, and to stay safe and connected during periods of unrest, and are a fundamental threat to human rights.

// Cuba

Since mobile internet first became available in Cuba in December 2018, it has become a vital resource for activists and journalists. But Cuba has also quickly risen to the top of the list of the region's most persistent perpetrators of internet shutdowns.¹²⁰ In July 2022, Cubans protested in Los Palacios and Pinar del Rio, and in September, engaged in nationwide protests. Each time, they were subjected to complete blanket shutdowns for hours. The motivation for both protests was anger over persistent power outages, including in the aftermath of Hurricane Ian, when electricity was slow to return to many regions of the country.¹²¹ The island is particularly vulnerable to complete shutdowns, since there is just one telco run by the government, ETECSA, and only one fiber optic submarine cable connection to the global internet.¹²² In late 2022, the U.S. moved to reject an application to build a second submarine cable to Cuba, citing ill-founded national security concerns.¹²³ With the government's mounting track record of resorting to internet shutdowns in the face of public dissent, we are closely monitoring Cuba as its parliamentary election approaches in March 2023.¹²⁴

¹²⁰ France24 (2021). *Mobile internet: Cuba's new revolution*. Retrieved February 18, 2023, from <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20210114-mobile-internet-cuba-s-new-revolution>.

¹²¹ Amnesty International (2021). *Cuba: Tactics of repression must not be repeated*. Retrieved February 18, 2023, from <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2022/10/cuba-repression-must-not-be-repeated/>.

¹²² Kentik (2023). *Cuba and the Geopolitics of Submarine Cables*. Retrieved February 18, 2023, from <https://www.kentik.com/blog/cuba-and-the-geopolitics-of-submarine-cables/>.

¹²³ Reuters (2022). *U.S. urges rejection of undersea cable connection to Cuba*. Retrieved February 22, 2023, from <https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/us-urges-rejection-undersea-cable-connection-cuba-2022-11-30/>.

¹²⁴ See *supra* note 19.

¹²⁵ DW (2022). *Brazil blocks messaging app Telegram*. Retrieved February 18, 2023, from <https://www.dw.com/en/brazil-telegram-messaging-app-blocked-by-top-court/a-61183805>.

¹²⁶ Access Now (2016). *Judge orders block of Facebook throughout Brazil over parody account*. Retrieved February 22, 2023, from <https://www.accessnow.org/judge-orders-block-facebook-throughout-brazil-parody-account/>.

¹²⁷ Access Now (2016). *On eve of Olympics, judge orders blocking of WhatsApp in Brazil*. Retrieved February 22, 2023, from <https://www.accessnow.org/eve-olympics-judge-orders-blocking-whatsapp-brazil/>.

¹²⁸ See, e.g., WIRED (2022). *Telegram Has a Serious Doxing Problem*. Retrieved February 22, 2023, from <https://www.wired.com/story/telegrams-doxing-problem/>.

¹²⁹ Access Now (2021). *Access Now to Telegram: protect the rights of 500 million people*. Retrieved February 18, 2023, from <https://www.accessnow.org/telegram-protect-the-rights-of-500-million-people/>.

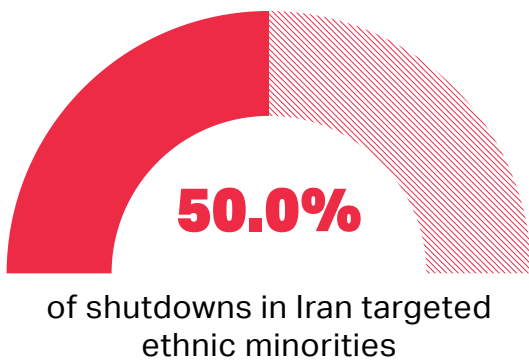
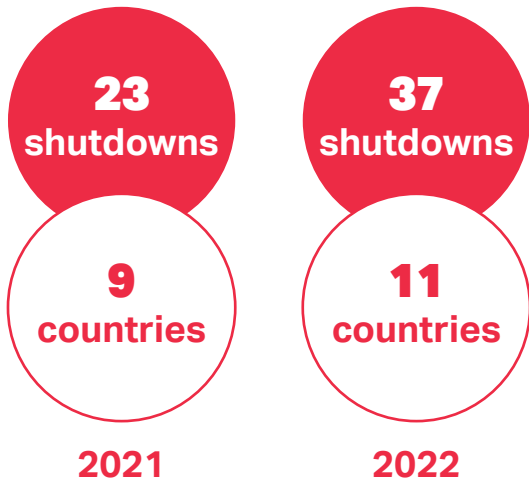
// Brazil

In Brazil, the Supreme Court ordered a block of Telegram in March 2022 after the company failed to comply with previous orders by police and judicial authorities to remove disinformation in the lead-up to the presidential election.¹²⁵ The block lasted two days, and was lifted once the court was satisfied with Telegram's content moderation changes.

Blocking entire platforms is always a disproportionate response and cannot be justified as a mechanism for dealing with content governance issues. Yet Brazil's courts have a history of blocking popular social media platforms across the country, including an order to block Facebook in 2016 when it failed to take down a parody account,¹²⁶ and a series of orders to block WhatsApp as punishment for failing to comply with requests for user data.¹²⁷

As Telegram's services have become both more vital for human rights defenders and communities at risk and a more dangerous forum for the spread of harmful content,¹²⁸ civil society has repeatedly called on the company to increase its engagement and to adopt stronger policies in defense of human rights.¹²⁹ Telegram and similar platforms have a responsibility to ensure their services do not perpetuate human rights harms, and to make the investments and design choices necessary for them to be able to respond in real time as threats emerge. Their failure to do so has increasingly incentivized governments to take extreme measures in responding to misinformation, hate speech, and incitement to violence online, and likewise provided an easy excuse for governments seeking to disrupt access to information.

Middle East and North Africa Regional overview in 2022



Iran: 18

15 of 18 shutdowns in Iran happened during the nationwide protests for women’s rights and regime change in Iran

Sudan: 4

Repeated shutdowns by the military regime during protests across the country

Jordan: 4 Libya: 4 Algeria: 1 Iraq: 1 Oman: 1 Syria: 1 Tunisia: 1 Turkey: 1 Yemen: 1

24.3% of shutdowns in the region were service-based, usually blocking access to messaging and social media platforms

Jordan: 3 Iran: 2 Algeria: 1 Oman: 1 Tunisia: 1 Turkey: 1

Across the MENA region, authorities have increasingly relied on internet shutdowns to suppress dissent, undermine political participation, and shield perpetrators of human rights abuses from accountability. The region saw both an emergence of new shutdowns and the continuation of disruptions communities have endured for years — including ongoing airstrikes in Yemen¹³⁰ impacting telecommunications infrastructure and social media platform blocking in Oman continuing from 2021.¹³¹ Authorities took aim at both social media platforms and mobile data services, targeting specific communities in moments of heightened risk.

For example, in Libya — where people have grown increasingly frustrated with the feuds of political elites, neglect of public services, and government failure to schedule elections amid political deadlock — protesters stormed the parliament building on July 1, and authorities responded by shutting down internet and telecommunication services across the city of Tobruk.¹³² Authorities also imposed disruptions in the cities of Darna, Tobruk,¹³³ and Benghazi¹³⁴ coinciding with visits from Khalifa Haftar, the Commander-in-Chief of the Tobruk-based Libyan National Army. While shutdowns are becoming more entrenched, affected communities

¹³⁰ Access Now (2022). *Internet shutdowns in Yemen: telecommunications infrastructure is not a military target*. Retrieved February 18, 2023, from <https://www.accessnow.org/yemen-internet-shutdown-statement/>.

¹³¹ Access Now (2021). *Omani authorities block Clubhouse app*. Retrieved February 18, 2023, from <https://www.accessnow.org/clubhouse/>.

¹³² Reuters (2022). *Libyan protest movement says it will step up its campaign*. Retrieved February 18, 2023, from <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/libyan-protest-group-says-rallies-should-go-until-goals-achieved-2022-07-02/>.

¹³³ Doug Madory (@DougMadory). Twitter Post. 4:57 pm August 9, 2022. Retrieved February 18, 2023, from <https://twitter.com/DougMadory/status/1557003075465928705>.

¹³⁴ ليبيا أونلاين - The Libya Observer (@lyobserver_ar). Twitter Post. 7:03 pm December 24, 2022. Retrieved February 18, 2023, from https://twitter.com/lyobserver_ar/status/1606681943202054150.

are also becoming more resilient, continuously devising new tactics for staying connected, raising their voices, and holding the powerful to account.

Platform blocks

In Jordan, authorities returned to a familiar tactic of blocking social media platforms in the face of protests and unrest. While truck drivers led protests against rising fuel prices in mid-December 2022, and authorities were already imposing daily mobile shutdowns in the southern cities of Maan and Karak, the government also separately ordered a ban of TikTok, which was being used to livestream the ongoing protests.¹³⁵ Jordan's Public Security Directorate stated that the ban was a result of TikTok's misuse and its failure to deal with content that "incites to violence and chaos."¹³⁶ While the Jordanian Minister of Telecommunications stated in a media interview¹³⁷ that TikTok would be blocked until it agrees to their conditions to "control content," there are reports that TikTok has been in negotiations¹³⁸ with the government to lift the ban. Jordanian authorities previously blocked Facebook Live during 2021 protests regarding COVID-19 restrictions.¹³⁹ They also blocked Clubhouse, the social media audio chat platform, the same year, and it remains blocked to this day. Jordanian authorities have also intensified VPN blocking in the last few years, and many popular VPN services and servers remain inaccessible.¹⁴⁰ Turkish authorities responded to deadly explosions in

Istanbul in November 2022 by restricting broadcast media and throttling social media platforms, restricting the flow of information in a moment of danger and uncertainty.¹⁴¹

Tunisia implemented a shutdown for the first time since the 2011 revolution, blocking access to Zoom and Microsoft Teams in an attempt to prevent the Assembly of People's Representatives (ARP) from convening virtually, after the president dissolved the legislative body.¹⁴² President Kais Saied had already moved to suspend the parliament on July 25, 2021, and the political crisis escalated further on March 30, 2022, when 123 Tunisian MPs attempted to take part in an online plenary session. After the two platforms were blocked, MPs moved to another online platform, GoToMeeting.¹⁴³ President Saied responded by announcing a state of emergency in accordance with the provisions of Article 80 of the Tunisian Constitution, dismissing the Prime Minister, dissolving the ARP entirely, and lifting the immunity of its members.¹⁴⁴

Video platforms like these are necessary communication tools used by Tunisian citizens on a daily basis for professional purposes and to defend human rights, and cutting or disrupting access, even if temporary, is incompatible with international human rights law and Article 38¹⁴⁵ of the 2022 Tunisian constitution.¹⁴⁶

¹³⁵ Associated Press (2022). *Jordan bans TikTok after police officer killed in protests*. Retrieved February 22, 2023, from <https://apnews.com/article/jordan-amman-dfee2613c4f45e12faf5874b0c473628>.

¹³⁶ The Medialine (2022). *Jordan Bans TikTok in Wake of Violent Protests Supporting National Truckers' Strike*. Retrieved February 18, 2023, from <https://themedialine.org/mideast-daily-news/jordan-bans-tiktok-in-wake-of-violent-protests-supporting-national-truckers-strike/>.

¹³⁷ Amman Net (2023). *هذه شروط عودة التيك توك: [These are the conditions for the return of TikTok]*. Retrieved February 22, 2023, from <https://ammannet.net/أخبار/الشببول-هذه-شروط-عودة-التيك-توك/>.

¹³⁸ ET Telecom (2023). *TikTok in talks with Jordan to lift month-long ban*. Retrieved February 18, 2023, from <https://telecom.economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/tiktok-in-talks-with-jordan-to-lift-month-long-ban/97043550>.

¹³⁹ Access Now (2021). *#KeepItOn: Open letter urging Jordan to end internet throttling during protests*. Retrieved February 18, 2023, from <https://www.accessnow.org/jordanprotests/>.

¹⁴⁰ Jordan Open Source Innovation (2021). *Public Panel | Socioeconomic Effects of VPN Blocking in Jordan*. Retrieved February 18, 2023, from <https://josa.ngo/events/83/public-panel--socioeconomic-effects-of-vpn-blocking-in-jordan>.

¹⁴¹ Global Voices (2022). *Turkey throttles internet access following deadly explosion in Istanbul*. Retrieved February 18, 2023, from <https://globalvoices.org/2022/11/13/turkey-throttles-internet-access-following-deadly-explosion-in-istanbul/>.

¹⁴² Reuters (2022). *Tunisian crisis escalates as president dissolves parliament*. Retrieved February 18, 2023, from <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/tunisian-parliament-defy-president-with-full-session-2022-03-30/>.

¹⁴³ Access Now (2022). *Tunisia: Access to online conferencing platforms and networks is a constitutional right*. Retrieved February 18, 2023, from <https://www.accessnow.org/tunisia-online-conferencing-platforms/>.

¹⁴⁴ Al Jazeera (2022). *Tunisia's president dissolves parliament, extending power grab*. Retrieved February 18, 2023, from <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/3/30/tunisia-president-saied-dissolves-parliament>.

¹⁴⁵ DCAF Tunisie (2022). *Décret Présidentiel n° 2022-691 du 17 août 2022, portant promulgation de la Constitution de la République tunisienne [Presidential Decree No. 2022-691 of August 17, 2022, promulgating the Constitution of the Republic of Tunisia]*. Retrieved February 18, 2023, from <https://legislation-securite.tn/law/105339>.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

Exam-related shutdowns

School exams continued to be a primary driver of shutdowns in Sudan, Algeria, Syria, Jordan, and Iraqi Kurdistan, as authorities try — and fail — to curb cheating and the leaking of exam questions.¹⁴⁷ This disproportionate practice violates the human rights of millions of people in addition to students, disrupts daily life, and impedes the population from exercising social, economic, and cultural rights. Despite the demonstrated failure of this practice as a cautionary measure, governments continue to implement internet shutdowns during national exams.¹⁴⁸ For instance, and for the first time in its long history of shutdowns during exams, Iraq has already blocked social media and messaging platforms at an early stage in the year, during the midterm exam session that took place in February 2023.¹⁴⁹ We will continue to watch closely in 2023 to see if authorities in these countries will follow the same script during yearly exams or make good on their promises to address cheating without draconian shutdowns.¹⁵⁰

// Iran

Iran has a long history of brutal repression, and the government is known for imposing increasingly sophisticated internet shutdowns to crack down on protests.¹⁵¹ In 2022, Iranian authorities imposed an unprecedented **18** shutdowns across the country, part of an escalating wave of digital repression responding to protests sparked by the death of 22-year old Mahsa (Jina) Amini on September 16, 2022, while she was in the custody of Iran's "morality police."¹⁵²

After the news broke, dozens of people gathered in the streets of Amini's hometown, Saqqez, in the Kurdistan Province, to mourn her death. Authorities quickly shut down the internet in Kurdistan and disrupted access to Instagram and WhatsApp nationwide.¹⁵³ Protests spread rapidly across the country, with women and girls at the forefront chanting "woman, life, freedom," and denouncing the morality police, or Guidance Patrol, a special unit tasked with enforcing Islamic dress code, including mandatory hijab for women. Women protesters cut their hair, burned hijabs, and defaced pictures of Ali Hosseini Khamenei, Iran's Supreme Leader.¹⁵⁴ As support grew, the movement evolved into a broader indictment of the government and an uprising for regime change.¹⁵⁵ Authorities responded with excessive force, bringing their full toolkit of oppression to bear.

As protests persisted and grew, authorities proceeded to block access to the global internet and repeatedly shut down mobile networks, both nationally and in targeted areas, while also continuing to block Instagram and WhatsApp — cutting off access to two of the only social media platforms that have remained accessible in Iran in recent years.¹⁵⁶ This layering of shutdown tactics was a clear attempt to hide atrocities and human rights violations. The government relied heavily on persistent social media blocks to prevent protesters from organizing and to keep news of atrocities and human rights violations from spreading. While they typically kept mobile networks online during work hours, an effort to minimize the economic impact of the disruptions,

¹⁴⁷ Cloudflare Radar (@CloudflareRadar). Twitter Post. 4:02 PM. June 22, 2022. Retrieved February 18, 2023, from <https://twitter.com/CloudflareRadar/status/1539594610640560128>; The Jordan Times (2022). *Social media suspension during Tawjih hours draws flak*. Retrieved February 18, 2023, from <https://www.jordantimes.com/news/local/social-media-suspension-during-tawjih-hours-draws-flak>; Kurdistan24 (2022). *KRG will implement short internet blackouts to prevent exam cheating*. Retrieved February 18, 2023, from <https://www.kurdistan24.net/en/story/28797-KRG-will-implement-short-internet-blackouts-to-prevent-exam-cheating>.

¹⁴⁸ Internet Society (2022). *New Report on the Impact of Internet Shutdowns to Prevent Cheating on Exams Launched*. Retrieved February 18, 2023, from <https://pulse.internetsociety.org/blog/new-report-on-the-impact-of-internet-shutdowns-to-prevent-cheating-in-exams-launched>.

¹⁴⁹ Access Now (2022). *People need the internet during emergencies: #KeepItOn in Iraq*. Retrieved February 18, 2023, from <https://www.accessnow.org/internet-keepiton-iraq/>.

¹⁵⁰ See *supra* note 18.

¹⁵¹ Filterwatch (2021). *Internet Shutdown Trends in Iran: November 2019 to July 2021*. Retrieved February 18, 2023, from <https://filter.watch/en/2021/09/03/internet-shutdown-trends-in-iran-from-november-2019-to-july-2021/>.

¹⁵² VOA (2022). *Timeline: Month of Anger in Iran Over Woman's Death*. Retrieved February 18, 2023, from <https://www.voanews.com/a/timeline-month-of-anger-in-iran-over-woman-s-death-/6791838.html>.

¹⁵³ Access Now (2022). *Joint statement: authorities in Iran must ensure internet access during protests in Saqqez*. Retrieved February 18, 2023, from <https://www.accessnow.org/iran-keep-internet-accessible/>.

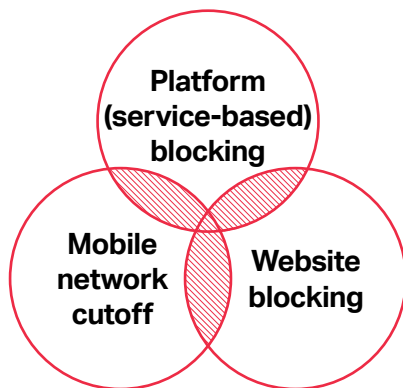
¹⁵⁴ BBC News (2022). *Iran police battle protesters in Tehran as unrest over woman's death spirals*. Retrieved February 18, 2023, from <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-62994003>.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁶ WIRED (2022). *Iran's Internet Shutdown Hides a Deadly Crackdown*. Retrieved February 18, 2023, from <https://www.wired.co.uk/article/iran-protests-2022-internet-shutdown-whatsapp>.

authorities imposed curfew-style mobile shutdowns in the evenings to prevent coordination and documentation of protests.¹⁵⁷ The Iranian regime clamped down particularly hard on dissent in regions with marginalized groups, with **50%** of all shutdowns in 2022 targeting ethnic minorities from the Kurdistan, Baluchestan, and Ahvaz regions through blanket, regional shutdowns.

Iran's internet blocking tactics ▼



The people of Iran have been developing strategies for resilience in the face of shutdowns for years, and likewise the government has continuously worked to counter their tactics. In 2022, to make it extremely difficult, if not impossible, for Iran's tech-savvy youth to bypass social media blocks, the government began blocking access¹⁵⁸ to VPNs and took steps to criminalize their sale.¹⁵⁹ Recent reports have also revealed Iran's use of a suite of tools known as "SIAM," which, among other concerns, can target an individual's mobile device to only allow access to 2G networks rather than 3G or 4G, both limiting data speeds to near-unusable levels and making communication on the device much more vulnerable to surveillance.¹⁶⁰ In addition, authorities cracked down on technologists and network administrators who either expressed public solidarity with the protests or

Shutdown impact story: Iran

"The slow flow of internet and dysfunctional VPNs have made communications with other provinces and with people outside Iran extremely strenuous while we have been trying to document the list of unknown detained protesters and those on death row with no media coverage."

Anonymous family member of a human rights defender

criticized the authorities' digital repression, preventing them from acting as a resource for people trying to get back online or secure their communications.¹⁶¹

For months, internet shutdowns provided a cover for the Iranian authorities to brutally repress protesters with full impunity. As of December 2022, this had resulted in the death of more than 500 protesters and the arrest of more than 19,000 others.¹⁶² Despite international outcry,¹⁶³ reports indicate 100 or more detained individuals are currently facing the death penalty,¹⁶⁴ as the government uses public execution as a form of intimidation and control.¹⁶⁵

The crackdown and censorship in Iran drew international condemnation, with the U.S. lifting sanctions to increase internet freedom and access to information in Iran. For instance, the U.S. Department of the Treasury issued **Iran General License (GL) D-2** to increase support for internet freedom in Iran by bringing U.S. sanctions guidance in line with the changes in modern technology since the issuance of the 2014 license, Iran GL D-1. Ultimately, this means U.S.-based companies can offer tools and services like video conferencing, e-gaming,

¹⁵⁷ See *supra* note 34.

¹⁵⁸ Le Monde (2022). *Iranian regime targets VPNs to limit internet access*. Retrieved February 18, 2023, from https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2022/10/08/iranian-regime-targets-vpns-to-limit-internet-access_5999586_4.html.

¹⁵⁹ ET Telecom (2022). *Iran to criminalise sale of VPNs: Minister*. Retrieved February 18, 2023, from <https://telecom.economicstimes.indiatimes.com/news/iran-to-criminalise-sale-of-vpns-minister/94975787>.

¹⁶⁰ The Intercept (2022). *Hacked documents: How Iran can Track and control protestors' phones*. Retrieved February 18, 2023, from <https://theintercept.com/2022/10/28/iran-protests-phone-surveillance/>.

¹⁶¹ Access Now (2022). *Stop the persecution: Iranian authorities must immediately release technologists and digital rights defenders*. Retrieved February 18, 2023, from <https://www.accessnow.org/release-technologists-iran/>.

¹⁶² HRANA English (@HRANA_English). Twitter Post. 2:05 AM. December 31, 2022. Retrieved February 18, 2023, from https://twitter.com/HRANA_English/status/1608962432067682307.

¹⁶³ OHCHR (2022). *Iran: Stop sentencing peaceful protesters to death, say UN experts*. Retrieved February 18, 2023, from <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2022/11/iran-stop-sentencing-peaceful-protesters-death-say-un-experts>.

¹⁶⁴ CNN (2023). *Executions aren't new in Iran, but this time they're different*. Retrieved February 18, 2023, from <https://edition.cnn.com/2023/01/11/middleeast/iran-executions-weapon-mime-intl/index.html>.

¹⁶⁵ Amnesty International (2022). *Iran: Horrifying execution of young protester exposes authorities' cruelty and risk of further bloodshed*. Retrieved February 18, 2023, from <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2022/12/iran-horrifying-execution-of-young-protester-exposes-authorities-cruelty-and-risk-of-further-bloodshed/>.

e-learning platforms, automated translation, web maps, user authentication services, and cloud services to people in Iran with confidence they are not breaking U.S. law. Still, work remains to combat corporate overcompliance with sanctions, and to ensure that tech companies and financial intermediaries allow the free flow of all data, hardware, software, services, and transactions possible under the newly expanded license.¹⁶⁶ Other actors like the European Union and the Freedom Online Coalition (FOC) — a network of 36 governments advancing internet freedom globally — issued statements to denounce the internet blackout and crackdown on protesters in Iran.¹⁶⁷

// Sudan

For years, the people of Sudan have been fighting for democracy and respect for human rights in their country, but their movement has been repeatedly met with weaponized internet shutdowns and social media blocks designed to suppress dissent.¹⁶⁸ Since forcibly taking power in October 2021, the military government has increasingly taken action against those who raise their voices to resist their military rule, including **four** internet shutdowns in 2022.

Mass protests and intermittent shutdowns gripped Sudan in the months following the October 2021

military coup.¹⁶⁹ Authorities disrupted the internet for 12 hours on January 2, 2022,¹⁷⁰ as thousands of people resumed their protests to demand the return of civilian rule, prompting Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok to resign on January 3.¹⁷¹

When people took to the streets across the country once again on June 30 in the “March of the Millions,” marking the third anniversary of the 2019 uprising and ousting of former Sudanese President Omar Al-Bashir, eight protesters¹⁷² were reportedly shot dead by the military amidst an internet blackout.¹⁷³ Authorities similarly took mobile networks offline nationwide amid protests on the one-year anniversary of the military coup on October 25.¹⁷⁴

The military government has also taken aim at civil society organizations challenging the use of shutdowns in the country, including by revoking accreditation from the Sudanese Consumers Protection Society (SCPS), which has been a leader in challenging internet shutdowns through litigation.¹⁷⁵ In 2021, SCPS helped get millions back online after a court ruled in its favor and ordered telecommunications companies to fully restore internet connectivity across the country.¹⁷⁶

¹⁶⁶ OHCHR (2022). *Iran: Unilateral sanctions and overcompliance constitute serious threat to human rights and dignity — UN expert*. Retrieved February 18, 2023, from <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2022/05/iran-unilateral-sanctions-and-overcompliance-constitute-serious-threat-human>.

¹⁶⁷ Freedom Online Coalition (2022). *FOC Joint Statement on Internet Shutdowns in Iran*. Retrieved February 17, 2023, from <https://freedomonlinecoalition.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/FOC-Joint-Statement-on-Internet-Shutdowns-in-Iran-October-2022.pdf>; Council of the EU (2022). *Iran: Declaration by the High Representative on behalf of the EU*. Retrieved February 22, 2023, from <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2022/09/25/iran-declaration-by-the-high-representative-on-behalf-of-the-eu/>.

¹⁶⁸ Access Now (2019). *#IAmTheSudanRevolution: There's a direct link between internet shutdowns and human rights violations in Sudan*. Retrieved February 18, 2023, from <https://www.accessnow.org/iamthesudanrevolution-theres-a-direct-link-between-internet-shutdowns-and-human-rights-violations-in-sudan/>.

¹⁶⁹ Access Now (2021). *Internet shutdowns and blockings continue to hide atrocities of military coup in Sudan*. Retrieved February 18, 2023, from <https://www.accessnow.org/update-internet-shutdown-sudan/>.

¹⁷⁰ Doug Madory (@DougMadory) Twitter Post. 10:01 PM. January 4, 2022. Retrieved February 18, 2023, from <https://twitter.com/DougMadory/status/1478441370721337349>.

¹⁷¹ Al Jazeera (2022). *Sudan's Hamdok resigns as prime minister amid political deadlock*. Retrieved February 17, 2023, from <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/1/2/sudan-pm-abdalla-hamdok-resigns-after-deadly-protest>.

¹⁷² Reuters (2022). *Eight killed in Sudan as protesters rally on uprising anniversary*. Retrieved February 17, 2023, from <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/internet-cut-sudans-capital-ahead-pro-democracy-protests-2022-06-30/>.

¹⁷³ Cloudflare Radar (@CloudflareRadar) Twitter Post. 11:34 AM. June 30, 2022. Retrieved February 18, 2023, from <https://twitter.com/CloudflareRadar/status/1542426430625161216>.

¹⁷⁴ Doug Madory (@DougMadory) Twitter Post. 9:04 PM. October 25, 2022. Retrieved February 18, 2023, from <https://twitter.com/DougMadory/status/1584969055399596032>.

¹⁷⁵ Alarabiya News (2022). *Sudan suspends NGO that took government to court over internet access*. Retrieved February 18, 2023, from <https://english.alarabiya.net/News/middle-east/2022/10/23/Sudan-suspends-NGO-that-took-government-to-court-over-internet-access>.

¹⁷⁶ Bloomberg (2021). *Sudan Ordered to Restore Internet Cut Off Since October's Coup*. Retrieved February 18, 2023, from <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-11-11/sudan-ordered-to-restore-internet-cut-off-since-october-s-coup>.

V. Fighting back: the movement is growing

The complexity and severity of internet shutdowns have continued to intensify in recent years, becoming a go-to weapon for perpetrators to crush dissent and exert control the world over. The disastrous impact of these acts of digital authoritarianism motivates Access Now and the #KeepItOn coalition to keep going, and the network of partners working to end internet shutdowns has, in turn, grown stronger and more diverse.

The coalition

The coalition has grown to over **300** organizations in **105** countries committed to fight against internet shutdowns globally. Our community is rooted in collaboration and solidarity, with experts from across fields coming together to learn from each other and advance shared advocacy goals. In particular, coalition members and other grassroots partners on the ground work tirelessly to identify, report, and verify internet shutdowns, and to guide strategies for resistance and resilience. These efforts are aimed at safeguarding fundamental rights guaranteed under international human rights law.

The measurement community is also growing and building up its capabilities to track and monitor internet shutdowns effectively as shutdowns become more sophisticated, continuing to align on standards and best practices that make us all more effective and keep each other safe. New partners, including DT Institute, Haki Na Sheria, West African ICT Action Network, Core23Lab, and Libya Crimes Watch have joined our movement in 2022, and we look forward to collaborating with them further. Technologists and activists have also continued coming together to devise new strategies for circumventing, navigating, or mitigating the impact of unlawful censorship and disproportionate restrictions on free expression and other human rights, as well as to map the evolving face of shutdowns.¹⁷⁷ And communities that have been most directly impacted by shutdowns have shown incredible resourcefulness and resolve in advancing

efforts to document shutdowns, as well as human rights violations taking place alongside them.¹⁷⁸

Together, the #KeepItOn coalition is investing in building up our collective capacity and delivering those resources to others who are willing to join us in our cause. In particular, we are strengthening our playbook around elections that are vulnerable to internet shutdowns, organizing trainings for journalists, civil society, and election observers, and pressing governments to make strong commitments to #KeepItOn throughout election periods.¹⁷⁹

The international community

Additionally, we continue to galvanize overwhelming support from the international community in the fight to #KeepItOn. Last year, Access Now and the #KeepItOn community felt solidarity from the national, regional, and international community in the fight against internet shutdowns. The UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) issued its first dedicated report on internet shutdowns, *Internet shutdowns: trends, causes, legal implications and impacts on a range of human rights*, shining a spotlight on the devastating impact they have on human lives.¹⁸⁰ This high-level report builds on years of civil society action elevating the human rights impacts of internet shutdowns globally. The report underscored that shutdowns run directly counter to efforts to close digital divides, and the promise of the accelerated economic and social development that universal connectivity would bring, threatening the realization of the Sustainable Development Goals. The High Commissioner further highlighted a number of recommendations directed to key stakeholders including states, companies, and development agencies to take urgent measures and commitments to bring an end to internet shutdowns. Access Now and other members of the #KeepItOn coalition made written submissions informed by, and with data from,

¹⁷⁷ See *supra* note 6.

¹⁷⁸ Advocacy Assembly (2022). *Documenting human rights violations during internet shutdowns*. Retrieved February 22, 2023, from <https://advocacyassembly.org/en/courses/62/#/chapter/1/lesson/1>.

¹⁷⁹ Access Now (2021). *Advocating to #KeepItOn during elections: what you can do*. Retrieved February 22, 2023, from <https://infogram.com/advocating-to-keepiton-during-elections-1h7k230351vkv2x>.

¹⁸⁰ See *supra* note 13.

the campaign, to educate and provide relevant information to the OHCHR.¹⁸¹

Following the release of the report, the European Union joined the OHCHR to launch a global campaign to raise awareness¹⁸² about the findings of the report as well as provide a spotlight on the challenges and threats¹⁸³ activists face in the fight to #KeepItOn. They also organized virtual public events on internet shutdowns and continue to engage with the #KeepItOn community. In 2021, the Freedom Online Coalition (FOC) launched the Task Force on Internet Shutdowns (TFIS), which has strengthened its collaborations with civil society and other actors on internet shutdowns through periodic briefings on urgent country situations, coordinating joint actions, and compiling best practices and trend monitoring for dissemination through submissions, webinars, and meetings.

Moreover, the #KeepItOn coalition saw an increased number of public statements issued or actions taken by governments and global bodies to condemn internet shutdowns. For instance, as Iranian authorities brutally descended on anti-government protests in 2022, several actions were undertaken by the U.S.,¹⁸⁴ FOC,¹⁸⁵ the OHCHR,¹⁸⁶ and the E.U.,¹⁸⁷ among others, to provide support or denounce the weaponization of shutdowns in the country. In another encouraging development, the E.U. imposed sanctions on various Myanmar authorities who “restricted freedom of assembly and of expression

by blocking internet access,” among other violations of human rights.¹⁸⁸ Also, as the impact of internet shutdowns has become widespread, more and more people are speaking up against them, including the director of the World Health Organization (WHO).¹⁸⁹

In addition, the impact of internet shutdowns is a key focus of the Technology for Democracy Cohort of the U.S. Summit for Democracy.¹⁹⁰ The Tech for Democracy Cohort is co-led by Access Now, the U.K., and Estonia, bringing together stakeholders across civil society, the private sector, and government to develop resources that advance shared goals in the fight against shutdowns and elevate the voices of people sharing how shutdowns have impacted their lives.¹⁹¹

The courts

The #KeepItOn coalition and its partners have relied on strategic litigation in various countries to bring an end to ongoing shutdowns or condemnation and accountability for past disruptions. In July 2022, the Community Court of Justice of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS Court) passed a landmark ruling denouncing the Twitter blocking the Nigerian government had imposed for over seven months. The court ruled that the shutdown was unlawful and an affront to the rights of the people of Nigeria.¹⁹² This is the second time the ECOWAS Court has ruled against internet shutdowns

¹⁸¹ Access Now (2022). *United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights Call for Input: U.N. Human Rights Council 50th Session report on Internet Shutdowns and Human Rights*. Retrieved February 17, 2023, from https://www.accessnow.org/cms/assets/uploads/2022/06/HRC50_Submission_UN_OHCHR_Internet_Shutdowns.pdf.

¹⁸² European External Action Service (2022). *What are Internet Shutdowns?* Retrieved February 17, 2023, from https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/what-are-internet-shutdowns_en.

¹⁸³ European External Action Service (EEAS) (2022). *Internet Shutdowns | #2 Felicia Anthonio (Keep it On) [Video]*. YouTube. Retrieved February 17, 2023, from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XclHnlEo4L4>.

¹⁸⁴ Access Now (2022). *The world must support people in Iran: sanctions relief helps connect the nation*. Retrieved February 17, 2023, from <https://www.accessnow.org/iran-sanctions-internet/>.

¹⁸⁵ Freedom Online Coalition (2022).

¹⁸⁶ OHCHR (2022). *Concern grows over violence, internet restrictions in Iran*. Retrieved February 17, 2023 from <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-briefing-notes/2022/09/concern-grows-over-violence-internet-restrictions-iran>.

¹⁸⁷ Council of the EU (2022).

¹⁸⁸ Council of the EU (2022). *Council Implementing Regulation (EU) 2022/239 of 21 February 2022 implementing Regulation (EU) No 401/2013 concerning restrictive measures in view of the situation in Myanmar/Burma*. Retrieved February 2022, 2023, from https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=uriserv:OJ.L_.2022.040.01.0010.01.ENG.

¹⁸⁹ Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus (@DrTedros) Twitter Post. 1:11 AM. March 17, 2022. Retrieved February 17, 2023, from <https://twitter.com/DrTedros/status/1504218881669410819>.

¹⁹⁰ Access Now (2022). *New generation of changemakers: Technology Cohort of U.S. Summit for Democracy launches*. Retrieved February 22, 2023, from <https://www.accessnow.org/technology-cohort-summit-for-democracy/>.

¹⁹¹ Jennifer Brody (@brodygoes) Twitter Post. 12:33 AM. October 11, 2022. Retrieved February 17, 2023, from <https://twitter.com/brodygoes/status/1579585974090489856>.

¹⁹² See *supra* note 66.

in the space of two years.¹⁹³ In another positive development, in August 2022, the Constitutional Court of Colombia invited Access Now to provide an expert opinion in a case involving the potential use of signal jammers during protests that took place in Colombia in May 2021, a new opportunity to help achieve accountability.¹⁹⁴ Legal advocates have also achieved several major developments across India. In a landmark decision in March 2022, the High Court of Calcutta ordered the state of West Bengal to lift an ongoing shutdown, finding, among other reasons, the order failed to satisfy the test of proportionality.¹⁹⁵ After Software Freedom Law Centre India filed a petition challenging “arbitrary internet shutdowns,” citing in particular shutdowns to prevent “cheating in public examinations,” the Indian Supreme Court asked the central government for a written response to determine whether a standard protocol exists to address the issue, and if so, to what extent and how such protocol is implemented.¹⁹⁶ And most recently, the Supreme Court is hearing challenges to repeat orders to throttle mobile internet access in Jammu and Kashmir.¹⁹⁷

VI. What's next

While we made important strides in 2022, it is clear that the fight against internet shutdowns will continue, and waging that fight will require continued investments in the strength, diversity, and solidarity of our movement. We call on all stakeholders to do their part in advancing our cause to uphold free expression and keep people connected.

¹⁹³ Access Now (2022). *ECOWAS Court upholds digital rights, rules 2017 internet shutdowns in Togo illegal*. Retrieved February 17, 2023, from <https://www.accessnow.org/internet-shutdowns-in-togo-illegal/>.

¹⁹⁴ Access Now (2022). *Colombia: Avanza investigación por interrupciones de internet en el marco de las protestas de 2021 [Colombia: Advancing the investigation into internet disruptions during the 2021 protests]*. Retrieved February 17, 2023, from <https://www.accessnow.org/colombia-investigacion-interrupciones-internet-protestas-2021/>.

¹⁹⁵ Columbia University, Global Freedom of Expression (2022). *Ashlesh Biradar v. State of West Bengal*. Retrieved February 22, 2023, from <https://globalfreedomofexpression.columbia.edu/cases/ashlesh-biradar-v-state-of-west-bengal/>.

¹⁹⁶ SFLC.in (2022). *SFLC.in's writ petition challenging arbitrary internet shutdowns during examinations in the Supreme Court of India*. Retrieved February 22, 2023, from <https://sflc.in/sflcins-writ-petition-challenging-arbitrary-internet-shutdowns-during-examinations-supreme-court>; The Wire (2022). *On Challenge to Internet Shutdowns During Exams, SC Asks Centre: 'What Is the Protocol?'*. Retrieved February 22, 2023, from <https://thewire.in/law/internet-shutdowns-exams-petition-supreme-court-protocol>.

¹⁹⁷ Internet Freedom Foundation (2022). *Supreme Court agrees to hear a challenge against internet shutdown orders in J&K, in a petition by the Private School Association of J&K*. Retrieved February 22, 2023, from <https://internetfreedom.in/sc-decides-to-hear-challenge-against-internet-shutdown-orders-in-j-k-in-a-petition-by-private-school-association-of-j-k/>.

To governments:

Commit in law, policy, and practice to #KeepItOn at all times, and encourage other states to do the same.

To tech companies:

Collaborate with civil society to share details about how and when shutdowns impacting your services occur, and take the steps necessary to make your platforms and services resistant to shutdowns wherever possible. In particular, for social media platforms, make the appropriate investments in high-quality, human-led content moderation, reducing incentives and excuses for internet shutdowns, particularly in moments of crisis.

To civil society:

Join us! The #KeepItOn coalition is growing, and we welcome you among our ranks.

To journalists, technologists, lawyers, and others:

We welcome the opportunity to partner with you in documenting, circumventing, and pushing back against internet shutdowns wherever they occur.

INTERNET SHUTDOWNS IN 2022

CONTACT

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<https://www.accessnow.org/keepiton/>

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WEAPONS OF CONTROL, SHIELDS OF IMPUNITY

Internet shutdowns in 2022

#KeepItOn

