

UNGA

UNITED NATIONS GENERAL ASSEMBLY



Internet Blackouts and Censorship: Human Rights Violation or National Security?



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LETTER FROM CHAIR AND CO-CHAIR

Dear Delegates,

It is our immense pleasure to welcome you to our committee, UNGA. The agenda for this committee, '*Internet Blackouts and Censorship: Human Rights Violation or National Security?*', may seem rather peculiar and different to you. Yet, we have chosen it for a very well-thought-out reason. As young citizens and future leaders in a world where the importance of technology continues to grow, social media and the internet will always play a pivotal role in your lives. They will directly shape *your* involvement in this agenda. The internet has become one of our main sources of information (though its reliability can be debated), and the suppression and censorship of freedom of speech affect not only the involved parties but all of us as well, as we have the power to give a voice to the suppressed. In simpler words, this is an agenda that will constantly pop up in your lives, so this conference will give you the opportunity to navigate a very relevant, very concerning, and very pressing issue.

Model United Nations is a fantastic way to understand and respond to global politics, and this time we want you to break the notion of 6-8 committees being limited in dialogue and monotonous. Despite your ages, we expect immensely fierce debate, continuous dialogue, and most importantly, not even one moment of boredom and quiet. We would also like to remind delegates that even though your country's notions may not align with your interests, always dig deeper and research to answer the question of *why*. We hope to find a room full of enthusiastic, well-prepared and budding delegates who are as excited about this conference as we are and together let's make this an unforgettable MUN. To the experienced delegates who plan on raising their hand at every given opportunity, we hope you're ready with your thick binders and sharp tongues to both challenge the committee, as well as yourselves. And to the first timers, we hope that you lose every shred of fear and push yourselves to speak up with complete confidence, as this is a safe space where we'll be there to guide you throughout. Good luck to all of you!

Sincerely,

Simone Bindra (Chair) and Arianna Mehta (Co-chair).

INTRODUCTION TO THE COMMITTEE – UNGA

The UN General Assembly (UNGA), the only universally representative body of the United Nations, is the primary policy-making organ of the United Nations. Comprising all Member States, it provides a unique forum for multilateral discussion of the full spectrum of international issues covered by the Charter of the United Nations. Each of the 193 Member States of the United Nations has an equal vote.

Since its inception, UNGA has been a forum for lofty declarations, sometimes audacious rhetoric, and rigorous debate over the world's most vexing issues, including international peace and security, development, disarmament, human rights, international law, and the peaceful arbitration of disputes between nations

The Assembly meets in regular sessions from September to December each year, and thereafter as required. It discusses specific issues through dedicated agenda items or sub-items, which lead to the adoption of resolutions. It elects the non-permanent members of the Security Council and other UN bodies, such as the Human Rights Council (UNHRC), and appoints the secretary-general based on the Security Council's recommendation. It considers reports from the other four organs of the United Nations, assesses the financial situations of member states, and approves the UN budget, its most concrete role. The assembly works with the Security Council to elect the judges of the International Court of Justice.

INTRODUCTION TO THE AGENDA – *Internet Blackouts and Censorship: Human Rights Violation or National Security?*

In our increasingly interconnected world, the internet is a vital tool for communication. It is also crucial for advocacy and the defence of human rights. However, the growing phenomenon of internet blackouts—also known as **internet shutdowns**—poses a significant threat to these efforts. An internet blackout refers to a deliberate disruption of internet access, either partially or entirely, within a specific region or across an entire country. Governments typically order these shutdowns to control information flow, manage civil unrest, or prevent the spread of misinformation during times of crisis or political instability.

The first widely known blackout occurred in 2007, when Guinean President Lansana Conté mandated the shutdown of the fledgling internet industry in a nation where **less than 1 per cent** of the population had access at all. This was his response to protests demanding his resignation. While this first exercise of shutting down the internet had a limited impact on a population with little or no access to it, it undoubtedly introduced other autocrats to a readily available tool for control.

Internet blackouts can also be associated with **Internet censorship**, which is the practice of prohibiting or suppressing certain online content. When a type of content is censored, it generally becomes illegal and near impossible to access or view as long as you're within the jurisdiction of the censoring body. In some instances, publishing censored content is also illegal.

In 2024, there were **296 internet shutdowns across 54 countries**, with Myanmar experiencing the most (85) and India coming in second with 84, according to Access Now. These shutdowns were often linked to conflict, protests, exams, elections, and attempts to conceal human rights abuses.

Internet censorship and shutdowns are frequently carried out by governments, especially authoritarian or semi-authoritarian ones, during times of political turbulence, elections, protests, or civil disturbances. These actions show how internet management has evolved into a tactical

instrument for regimes to preserve political stability and security by limiting the narrative, stifling dissent, and halting its quick spread via social media and messaging platforms.

Internet censorship and blackouts are frequently defended by governments as being essential for maintaining public order, preventing disinformation, or ensuring national security. For example, officials claim that limiting access to social media before elections or violent protests helps stop the spread of hate speech and misleading information. Furthermore, one of the most sophisticated censorship systems in the world, **China's "Great Firewall,"** aids the Chinese Communist Party in limiting foreign influence and influencing internal discourse, both of which it sees as essential for ideological control and social cohesiveness. By controlling the digital space, governments can reduce panic, ensure a monopoly on public communication, and tightly manage how events are reported or perceived both domestically and internationally.

However, there have also been various arguments against Internet blackouts and censorship, which claim that governments use them as tools to restrict human rights and freedoms. These arguments highlight that **authoritarian regimes** increasingly use internet shutdowns to silence dissent, control information, and maintain power during periods of unrest. Furthermore, they argue that as authoritarian governments become more technologically advanced, internet shutdowns have become a highly effective means of suppressing political opposition. Often justified under the guise of preventing misinformation or maintaining order, these shutdowns suppress freedom of speech, disrupt democratic processes, and cut off communication among activists.

Moreover, according to sources, there has been limited evidence that internet shutdowns help quell violence, because rioters are organised and have other ways to communicate, so shutting down the Internet might delay the return to normalcy, as rioters go home when they think the government is back in control, and an information blackout is a strong signal that it is not.

Additionally, internet shutdowns and censorship have severe economic consequences worldwide. In 2022 alone, global losses from such disruptions exceeded \$24 billion, affecting sectors like finance, e-commerce, education, and healthcare. These blackouts halt digital transactions, disrupt supply chains, and cut access to essential services.

Countries like India, which lost nearly \$968 million in one year, highlight how damaging shutdowns can be, especially for small businesses, freelancers, and daily wage workers who rely on the internet for income. Beyond immediate financial loss, internet restrictions also reduce investor confidence, stall innovation, and slow overall economic development. In an increasingly digital world, consistent and open internet access is essential for sustained growth.

This argument has become increasingly relevant, especially in today's world, which is plagued by global conflicts and threats. Beyond political repression, internet shutdowns have significant social and economic consequences. They disrupt essential services such as education, healthcare, banking, and emergency response systems, especially in regions where digital infrastructure is a lifeline. Small businesses, freelancers, and gig workers suffer immediate income losses, while broader economies face millions in damage due to halted transactions and operational delays. Shutdowns also affect the global flow of information, isolating communities from the rest of the world and stalling innovation. In countries like Cuba and Iran, targeted disruptions to platforms like WhatsApp or Instagram limit not just expression but also access to vital resources and support networks. Over time, these blackouts erode digital trust and discourage technological growth, making them deeply damaging far beyond their intended political aims.

INVOLVEMENT OF THE UNITED NATIONS

The United Nations has been increasingly vocal about the dangers of internet shutdowns and censorship, recognising them as serious threats to human rights. In multiple reports, the UN has highlighted how such actions violate the rights to freedom of expression, access to information, and peaceful assembly. According to a **2022 report by the UN Human Rights Office**, internet blackouts can have a “dramatic impact” on people’s lives, especially during crises, by cutting off access to emergency services, education, health information, and economic activity.

In July 2021, the UN also supported the launch of initiatives to protect online civic space and ensure open, safe, and secure internet access for all. Through reports, advocacy, and partnerships, the UN continues to push for accountability and global standards to protect **digital freedoms** and fight back against censorship. However, it has limited direct power to prevent governments from imposing them.

Actions taken by the UN:

- **Recognizing Internet Access as a Human Right:**

In 2016, the UN declared internet access a human right, emphasising its importance for social and economic life.

- **Condemnation of Internet Shutdowns:**

The UN has repeatedly condemned internet shutdowns, recognising their detrimental impact on human rights, including freedom of expression and access to information.

- **Monitoring and Reporting:**

The UN Human Rights Office and other bodies monitor internet freedom and publish reports detailing the impact of shutdowns on individuals and communities.

- **Resolution on Promoting Human Rights on the Internet:**

The UN Human Rights Council has adopted resolutions that call for the promotion, protection, and enjoyment of human rights on the internet, condemning state efforts to disrupt access to information.

- **Special Rapporteurs:**

Special Rapporteurs on freedom of expression have issued statements and reports highlighting the negative consequences of internet shutdowns and calling for accountability.

- **Code of Conduct for Information Integrity:**

The UN Department of Global Communications is developing a code of conduct for information integrity, known as the UN Global Principles for Information Integrity, to combat misinformation and promote responsible online behaviour, according to UN News.

- **Focus on Electoral Processes:**

The UN is also examining the impact of digital technologies, including censorship and disinformation, on **electoral processes**, with a report expected to be presented to the Human Rights Council in June 2025, according to Internet Freedom Foundation.

Limitations:

- **Lack of Enforcement Power:**

Despite condemning shutdowns, the UN has limited ability to enforce its resolutions or prevent governments from imposing them.

- **Focus on Awareness and Advocacy:**

The UN's role is primarily focused on raising awareness about the issue, advocating for human rights, and encouraging dialogue between governments and civil society.

- **Challenges in Addressing Complex Situations:**

The UN faces challenges in addressing the complex political and security contexts in which internet shutdowns often occur.

- **Potential for Counter-Productive Measures:**

Blanket condemnation of shutdowns may not be effective and could even be counterproductive by restricting the space for nuanced discussions about proportional

responses to legitimate security concerns, according to the International Journal of Communication.

A timeline for reference:

- In 2016, the UNHRC expressed deep concern regarding “measures aiming to or that intentionally prevent or disrupt access to or dissemination of information online, in violation of international human rights law.”
- In 2017, the UNSR reported that “Internet and telecommunications shutdowns involve measures to intentionally prevent or disrupt access to or dissemination of information online in violation of human rights law,” explaining further that shutdowns “ordered covertly or without an obvious legal basis violate the requirement of Article 19(3) of the [ICCPR] that restrictions be ‘provided by law’.”
- In 2018, the UNHRC expressed its deep concern “at measures in violation of international human rights law that aim to or that intentionally prevent or disrupt access to or dissemination of information online.”
- In 2019, the UNSR reiterated that internet shutdowns are clearly inconsistent with article 19(3) of the ICCPR.
- In 2020, the UNHRC strongly condemned the use of internet shutdowns “to intentionally and arbitrarily prevent or disrupt access to or dissemination of information online.”
- In June 2022, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights presented a report to the UN General Assembly highlighting the severe human rights impacts of internet shutdowns, including the fact that they “very rarely meet the fundamental requirements of necessity and proportionality,” and providing a set of recommendations for ending shutdowns, including calling on states to refrain from the full range of internet shutdowns.
- In October 2022, the UNSR presented a report concerning the protection of freedom of expression during armed conflict, noting that internet shutdowns undermine human rights and are not legitimate warfare tactics.

- In 2023, UN experts raised alarm on internet shutdowns in Gaza that are disrupting essential communications and reporting on the conflict.
- In the 2023 Report to the UNHRC, the UNSR noted that internet shutdowns continue to occur with severe impacts on freedom of expression and peaceful assembly as well as on economic and social rights such as education, health, and essential online services like financial services. The report highlighted that the intentional disruption of access to the internet constitutes a disproportionate interference with the right to freedom of expression and has been considered by various UN human rights mechanisms and regional courts to be a violation of international human rights law.

EXAMPLES OF INTERNET SHUTDOWNS AND CENSORSHIP, AND THEIR NATIONAL AND GLOBAL IMPACTS

Now that you have a clear understanding of the basics of internet shutdowns and censorship, we can delve into greater detail by studying specific global events that have shaped this concept. Internet shutdowns have a history that stretches back to the early days of the Internet itself. One of the earliest recorded instances of a complete internet shutdown occurred in **Iraq in 2006** during a period of unrest. However, in today's time, we witness a period of greater civil unrest, which has led to some of the most drastic internet crackdowns ever recorded. For example, in 2024, there was a record number of internet shutdowns globally, with 296 instances recorded across 54 countries. India was among the countries with the highest number of shutdowns, second only to Myanmar.

Below is a list of relevant and recent events that have made a significant impact, both internationally and nationally, that you should refer to and study well. However, keep in mind that it is also important to go beyond the notes provided below and to conduct your own research as well.

The Gaza Conflict

The Gaza Conflict is a long-standing struggle between Israel and Palestinian groups, mainly Hamas, involving disputes over land, security, and governance. Israel enforces a blockade on Gaza, while Hamas launches attacks, resulting in repeated violence and humanitarian crises. The international community remains divided on solutions. In 2024, Israel imposed a **communications blackout** in Gaza to disrupt Hamas operations and protect its forces. Airstrikes and fuel shortages worsened the shutdown. It severely limited civilian access to aid and information. Human rights groups and the UN criticized it as a threat to transparency and civilian safety.

Russia-Ukraine Conflict

In 2022, Ukraine experienced at least 22 significant internet shutdowns and communication disruptions directly linked to Russian military actions. These disruptions included targeted cyberattacks and airstrikes against critical telecommunications infrastructure, severely impairing civilian access to vital information and communication services during active conflict. The shutdowns were concentrated in areas experiencing intense hostilities, such as Mariupol, Bucha, and Irpin, further exacerbating the humanitarian crisis by isolating affected populations. The deliberate destruction and disabling of communication networks not only violated principles of international humanitarian law but also obstructed efforts to document potential war crimes and deliver timely humanitarian assistance.

The Sudan Conflict

In 2024, Sudan experienced multiple internet shutdowns amid ongoing armed conflict, severely worsening the humanitarian situation. These shutdowns disrupted communication networks across the country, hindering civilians' ability to access emergency services, humanitarian aid, and vital information. The blackouts also intensified economic instability by contributing to a worsening cash shortage and impeding financial transactions. Conflicting parties frequently used Internet disruptions as a tactic to control information, suppress dissent, and limit independent reporting on the conflict. The shutdowns disproportionately affected vulnerable populations, isolating communities and obstructing efforts to coordinate aid and protection measures.

India - Kashmir Internet Shutdown (2019-2021)

The 2019–2021 Jammu and Kashmir lockdown was a lockdown and communications blackout imposed throughout Indian-administered Jammu and Kashmir following the revocation of Article 370 in August 2019. The lockdown lasted until February 2021, to pre-emptively curb unrest, violence and protests, and remove Jammu and Kashmir's special autonomous status. Anticipating unrest, authorities imposed an **unprecedented internet blackout** across the region. Lasting over 213 days, it became the longest-ever internet shutdown in a democracy. All mobile, broadband, and landline internet services were suspended, severely impacting hospitals, schools, businesses, and press freedom. The blackout isolated millions of Kashmiris from the rest of the country and

the world. Although the Indian government claimed the shutdown was for security reasons, it was widely criticized by human rights organizations and questioned in courts.

Iran – Mahsa Amini Protests (2022–2023)

After the death of Mahsa Amini in police custody for allegedly violating Iran’s strict hijab laws, a nationwide protest movement erupted. In response, the Iranian government imposed widespread internet shutdowns, particularly targeting mobile networks and blocking access to major social media platforms like Instagram and WhatsApp. These platforms were critical tools for protest coordination and documentation. The censorship was a deliberate attempt to suppress dissent, silence activists, and prevent the global community from witnessing the government’s violent crackdown. The shutdowns caused massive disruptions to communication, education, and online businesses, drawing condemnation from the UN and global tech companies.

Myanmar – Military Coup and Internet Blackouts (2021–ongoing)

Following a military coup in February 2021, Myanmar’s junta swiftly moved to silence opposition by shutting down the internet nationwide. Social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram were blocked, and overnight internet shutdowns became routine. These actions were designed to stifle protests, prevent the spread of information, and obstruct the work of journalists and activists. The regime also passed new cyber laws to legalize surveillance and censorship. The shutdowns seriously hampered humanitarian efforts and left citizens without access to essential services, all while the country descended into conflict and chaos.

China – Ongoing Internet Censorship and Xinjiang Surveillance

China has long been known for its sophisticated censorship system, often referred to as the **Great Firewall**, which blocks foreign websites like Google, Facebook, and YouTube. However, the situation in **Xinjiang** represents one of the most extreme examples of digital repression. The government uses advanced surveillance technologies — including facial recognition, phone monitoring, and AI — to track and control the Uyghur Muslim population. Social media is heavily censored, and citizens can be arrested for online comments or even for using banned apps or VPNs. The international community has repeatedly condemned China’s actions as violations of human rights.

KEY ROLES OF VARIOUS COUNTRIES

Iran

Iran has established one of the most centralised and sophisticated systems of internet control globally, using blackouts and censorship as key tools to suppress dissent and control public discourse. Overseen by the Supreme Council of Cyberspace (SCC), the government can impose **targeted shutdowns**—often during protests like the 2019 fuel demonstrations or the 2022–2023 Mahsa Amini movement—by cutting mobile data while maintaining access to a state-controlled intranet called the National Information Network (NIN). These disruptions, which totalled over 1,400 hours between 2019 and 2023, are reinforced by advanced filtering techniques that block VPNs and encrypted platforms, severely limiting free communication. While Iranian authorities claim such measures are essential for national security, the shutdowns have also inflicted major economic damage, with estimated losses exceeding \$1 billion as well as suppression of freedom of speech.

Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia has intensified its digital repression through widespread surveillance, strict cybercrime laws, and harsh prosecutions targeting online expression. The government enforces digital control through agencies like the General Authority of Media Regulation, which has expanded censorship powers and imposed new licensing regimes on digital content. Surveillance tools, including spyware and social media infiltration, are used to monitor and identify individuals critical of the government. Between 2020 and 2024, several people—including students, academics, and activists—were sentenced to decades in prison for peaceful online activity such as retweets, satire, or advocating for women’s rights. These include sentences ranging from 11 to 45 years under charges like “violating public morals” or “promoting public unrest.” Trials are often held in the Specialized Criminal Court, with vague charges and no transparency.

India

India leads the world in imposing internet shutdowns, using them frequently in response to communal violence, protests, elections, school exams, and public emergencies. Between 2016 and 2023, the country recorded over 770 shutdowns, with 116 in 2023 alone, accounting for a

significant portion of global disruptions. These blackouts range from short-term restrictions to prolonged outages, such as a 212-day mobile data shutdown in Manipur during ethnic violence and a 552-day shutdown in Jammu and Kashmir beginning in 2019. The government often justifies these actions under broad terms like “public safety,” but they are implemented with little transparency or judicial oversight.

Myanmar

Myanmar’s military regime has systematically used internet blackouts and online censorship as instruments of control since the February 2021 coup. Following the takeover, the junta imposed nationwide mobile internet shutdowns to suppress pro-democracy protests and disrupt civilian coordination. These blackouts were not limited to political unrest; in 2025, internet access was deliberately cut in earthquake-affected regions, obstructing emergency communication and aid delivery. The government employs advanced surveillance methods such as deep packet inspection and content filtering to block VPNs, social media platforms, and messaging services, making it extremely difficult for citizens to access independent information or communicate securely. These actions have drawn strong condemnation from international human rights bodies, with UN experts labelling the situation a “digital dictatorship.” Beyond silencing dissent, the shutdowns have severely impacted the economy, disrupted essential services, and fractured the public’s ability to organize or resist.

Russia

Russia has increasingly tightened its grip on digital spaces, transforming its internet into a highly controlled and isolated network under the guise of national security. The introduction of the Sovereign Internet Law in 2019 marked a turning point, granting the government power to reroute internet traffic through state-controlled infrastructure, deploy deep packet inspection, and manage its own national DNS system. These tools allow Russian authorities to monitor, throttle, or block online content at will. State regulator Roskomnadzor routinely censors platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and X, while also targeting VPNs and encrypted services to prevent citizens from bypassing restrictions. Internet shutdowns and disruptions are strategically timed around national events or regional unrest, such as military parades or protests. Simultaneously, a growing body of legislation criminalises online dissent, with vague laws against “fake news,” “disrespect,”

or “extremism” leading to severe penalties, including long prison sentences. Since the invasion of Ukraine, thousands of websites and online services have been blocked, further isolating Russian users from global information flows.

North Korea

North Korea operates the most isolated and tightly controlled digital system in the world, where the vast majority of citizens have no access to the global internet. Instead, they are restricted to a state-run domestic **intranet** called Kwang Myong, which offers only government-approved websites and content, such as official news, propaganda, limited educational resources, and heavily filtered media. This intranet is accessible only through state-issued devices, with no connection to international servers, and usage is monitored at all times. Access to the actual internet is granted to only a select group of elite government officials, military personnel, and researchers, all of whom are subject to intense surveillance. In 2025, a rare and widespread outage struck even this limited network, disrupting state communications and online government services, and further highlighting the fragility of the country’s digital infrastructure. North Korea’s domain space consists of only a few dozen tightly controlled websites, and any form of online communication with the outside world is considered illegal and punishable. All digital activity is surveilled in real-time, with users often watched directly by supervisors during permitted sessions.

China

China enforces one of the most sophisticated and multilayered systems of internet censorship in the world, combining nationwide controls with growing regional-level restrictions. The national **firewall**, known as the Great Firewall, blocks access to thousands of foreign websites, social media platforms, and news outlets. In recent years, local governments in provinces like Henan have started imposing even stricter internet controls, blocking millions of additional domains, particularly those related to business, finance, and technology. The government employs advanced surveillance technologies, including deep packet inspection and AI tools, to monitor online activity, block VPNs, and track communications on encrypted apps. Censorship targets not only content deemed politically sensitive but also users who interact with it, including followers of banned accounts. Campaigns have been launched against even minor forms of expression, such as puns, memes, and slang, as part of efforts to eliminate what the state deems “uncivilized” language.

United States of America

The United States maintains a complex balance between protecting free speech and enforcing digital regulations. Under the First Amendment, direct government censorship of online content is largely prohibited, with exceptions for obscenity, vulgar child video graphing, and copyright violations. Laws like the Communications Decency Act (CDA), and the Digital Millennium Copyright Act (DMCA) impose restrictions and empower private platforms to remove content deemed harmful or infringing. Content filtering is common in libraries and schools under the Children's Internet Protection Act (CIPA), reflecting community standards but often over blocking legitimate speech. Government agencies like DHS and CISA have collaborated with university-led initiatives to flag misinformation during elections and public health crises, sparking debates over whether these efforts cross into de facto censorship. The Computer Fraud and Abuse Act (CFAA) further complicate matters by criminalizing violations of terms of service. Meanwhile, platforms enjoy broad Section 230 immunity, allowing them to moderate content without liability.

PUBLIC RESPONSE TO THE AGENDA

Globally, public protests against internet shutdowns and censorship are rising as digital access is increasingly seen as a fundamental right. These protests often emerge during elections, demonstrations, or political unrest, highlighting demands for free expression, democracy, and transparency. Citizens respond through street protests, online campaigns, and legal challenges. Internet blackouts severely disrupt businesses, education, healthcare, and financial services, costing economies billions. They also damage trust in governments, deter investment, and strain international relations. As the internet becomes vital to global infrastructure, such shutdowns pose risks to economic stability and digital governance worldwide.

Public protests against internet shutdowns and censorship have reshaped digital control in countries like India, Iran, Myanmar, Russia, and China. In India, repeated blackouts during events like the Kashmir lockdown and 2021 farmers' protests led to a 2020 Supreme Court ruling against indefinite shutdowns, introducing some legal oversight.

Iran and Russia used heavy censorship during major protests—the 2022 Mahsa Amini movement and the anti-war protests in Russia—sparking backlash and digital resistance through VPNs and encrypted apps. In Myanmar, the 2021 military coup triggered internet blackouts, but public outrage led to underground activism and global pressure.

China faced growing digital defiance during protests in regions like Hong Kong and Xinjiang. Citizens used memes and code to bypass censorship, forcing the state to adopt more sophisticated, AI-driven controls. Across all five nations, protests haven't stopped repression but have pressured governments to adapt and face rising calls for digital rights.

A timeline of protests

2011 – Egypt: Arab Spring

- During the peak of the Arab Spring, Egypt experienced a full internet shutdown lasting five days, intended to suppress anti-government protests.

- The blackout only intensified public anger, and the movement eventually led to President Hosni Mubarak's resignation.
- This marked one of the first major global examples where an internet shutdown was directly challenged by mass mobilization.

2014 – Turkey: Twitter and YouTube Ban Protests

- The Turkish government blocked Twitter and YouTube amid corruption scandals.
- Citizens protested both online and, in the streets, using graffiti with DNS codes to bypass bans.
- Legal action followed, and the Constitutional Court ruled the bans violated freedom of expression, forcing the government to restore access.

2019 – Sudan: Anti-Military Protests

- Amid massive protests against military rule, the government cut internet access for nearly a month.
- Citizens protested in defiance, organizing offline networks and community assemblies.
- The disruption delayed humanitarian aid, and legal challenges led to a court ruling that forced telecom providers to restore access.

2020 – Belarus: Presidential Election Protests

- During the contested re-election of President Lukashenko, internet blackouts coincided with mass anti-government protests.
- People turned to offline methods like Bluetooth networks and mesh apps.
- The public backlash forced the regime to adopt more covert censorship techniques rather than complete blackouts and galvanized the digital rights movement in Eastern Europe.

2022 – Kazakhstan: Fuel Price Protests

- As protests over fuel prices escalated, the government imposed nationwide internet shutdowns.
- Protesters faced extreme violence, but the blackouts disrupted banking, emergency response, and international communications.
- The international backlash led the government to promise more transparency in digital regulation—though it remains under scrutiny.

2024 – Ethiopia: Regional Unrest and Digital Resistance

- Amid civil conflict, internet shutdowns in the Tigray and Amhara regions triggered protests from civil society groups and journalists.
- Activists developed workarounds and published offline newsletters to bypass the blackout.
- These efforts increased international scrutiny and pressure on Ethiopia’s telecom authority, influencing reform discussions.

In conclusion, global protests against internet shutdowns and censorship have become a powerful force against digital repression. From Egypt to Kazakhstan, they highlight the impact on free expression and economic stability, sometimes prompting legal or policy changes. Despite government crackdowns, growing resistance reflects a rising recognition of internet access as a basic human right and the need to protect digital freedom.

IMPORTANT TREATIES AND RESOLUTIONS

1. Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) – 1948

- **Article 19:**

"Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers."
- Though not legally binding, it is the foundation for international human rights law and applies to online expression.

2. International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) – 1966

- **Article 19:**

Guarantees the right to freedom of expression, including the right to seek, receive, and impart information and ideas **regardless of frontiers** and **through any media**—which includes the internet.
- **General Comment No. 34 (2011)** by the UN Human Rights Committee specifically clarifies that these protections extend to **digital communication** and warns against **network shutdowns**.

3. UN Human Rights Council Resolution 32/13 – 2016

- Title: "The promotion, protection and enjoyment of human rights on the Internet."
- Key points
 - **Condemns** internet shutdowns and access restrictions.
 - **Affirms** that "the same rights people have offline must also be protected online."
 - **Urges** states to promote digital inclusion, literacy, privacy, and security.
- Adopted by the UNHRC with support from over 70 countries.

4. UN General Assembly Resolution A/RES/68/167 – 2013

- Title: "The right to privacy in the digital age."
- Emphasizes the protection of **privacy and freedom of expression** in the context of modern digital surveillance and internet governance.
- Calls on states to respect international human rights obligations when monitoring or restricting digital communications.

5. UN General Assembly Resolution A/RES/69/166 – 2014

- Reaffirms the importance of freedom of expression and the press, including online platforms.
- Urges member states to **combat arbitrary censorship**, harassment of journalists, and online repression.

GLOSSARY

- 1) *Internet Shutdowns*: the intentional disruption of internet or electronic communication services, rendering them inaccessible or unusable, often for a specific location or population
- 2) *Internet Censorship*: the legal control or suppression of what can be accessed, published, or viewed on the Internet.
- 3) *Digital Freedom*: human rights and legal rights that allow individuals to access, use, create, and publish digital media
- 4) *Communications Blackout*: The cessation of communications or communications capability, caused by a lack of power to a communications facility or to communications equipment.
- 5) *Unprecedented internet blackout*: a complete or near-complete disruption of internet access that is considered to be on a scale or severity not previously experienced
- 6) *targeted shutdowns*: the deliberate, temporary disruption of network or communication services, often targeting specific geographic areas, user groups, or applications, rather than a complete blackout.
- 7) *VPNs (Virtual Private Network)*: an arrangement whereby a secure, apparently private network is achieved using encryption over a public network, typically the internet.
- 8) *Intranet*: A local or restricted communications network, especially a private network created using World Wide Web software.
- 9) *Firewall*: A network security system that monitors and controls incoming and outgoing network traffic based on configurable security rules
- 10) *Partial vs Complete internet shutdown*: A complete shutdown, also known as a "blanket shutdown" or "total blackout," involves the complete cessation of internet services for a

specific area. In contrast, a partial shutdown restricts access to certain websites, social media platforms, or specific types of networks.

REFERENCE LINKS

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