

The Great Indian Internet Shutdown Is the Troubling Future of Protest Control

As India experiences the longest-ever internet blockade for a democracy, more countries are pressing the internet kill switch to snub dissent

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Photo: Muzamil Mattoo/NurPhoto/Getty Images

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When the internet went dark in the northern Indian territory of Jammu and Kashmir on August 4 last year, photojournalist Junaid Bhat assumed it was just the result of another clampdown. Muslim-majority Kashmir has been in the midst of a three-decade-long armed revolt against the Indian government, and the 12.3 million residents of Jammu and Kashmir have experienced over 175 such shutdowns since 2012. But the following day, India stripped Kashmir of its semi-autonomous statehood, detaining mainstream politicians and sending the region into a state of turmoil. The internet shutdown is still ongoing, five months later.

As Bhat waited for services to be restored, he photographed the empty streets, the barricaded crossroads, the abandoned shops, and the vacant playgrounds of Srinagar, Kashmir's largest city, which was under paramilitary lockdown. Without internet access, he could not send reports back to his newsroom in Delhi, some 500 miles away. Eventually, he had no choice but to make the trip himself. He has been returning every week since, carrying his reportage on pen drives, all to circumvent the longest internet blackout ever seen in a democracy.

India has become the [internet shutdown capital](#) of the world, having imposed the blockade [373](#) times since 2012 and a [record-breaking 106](#) times in 2019 alone. The government routinely blocks online access, citing public safety and [national security](#) reasons, but critics allege that the blackouts are meant to thwart dissent. Human rights experts at the United Nations [immediately condemned](#) the shutdown in Kashmir as “a form of collective punishment on the people of Jammu and Kashmir, without even a pretext of a precipitating offense.”

Experts warn that the Kashmir shutdown is part of a trend of protest suppression that is rapidly gaining momentum across the world. According to a [report](#) published this month by [Top10VPN](#), a U.K.-based internet research firm focused on digital privacy, 122 major internet shutdowns were reported in 21 countries last year. There were more internet shutdowns in 2019 globally than ever before and at least a 10% increase in the number of shutdowns reported. That count doesn't even include instances of internet throttling — deliberate slowing or speeding of service by an internet service provider — through temporary blocks on social media and certain websites.

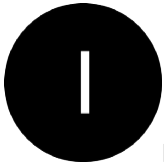
“The general trend is that shutdowns are typically imposed in response to popular protests and during important elections as governments try to forcibly quell civil unrest,” says Samuel Woodhams, co-author of the report and digital rights lead at Top10VPN. “Internet shutdowns are a simple, if ineffective, way to try to choke the flow of information whenever repressive governments are anxious about their grip on power.”



Journalists hold signs during a protest against the ongoing internet restrictions outside of the Kashmir Press Club during a lockdown in Srinagar on October 3, 2019. Photo: Tauseef Mustafa/AFP/Getty Images

The Indian government set up a media center in a Srinagar hotel two weeks after the blockade began, says Bhat. It comprised six laptops with slow internet and was shared by over 70 journalists.

“But I could not have used it,” he says. “There were security personnel all around, and journalists were filing reports under the prying eyes of intelligence officials. Since my reportage was against the state, I was worried I would be arrested. The cops had been calling me already, saying my pictures were fake.”



Internet shutdowns affect life in all quarters, including education, health care, and business. The economic impact is huge — and life does not always return to normal, even after shutdowns end.

The 18,225 hours of international blackout in 2019 alone cost the global economy \$8.05 billion in 2019 — a 235% increase in impact from 2015 to 2016, according to Top10VPN. A 2018 report by the Indian Council for Research on International Economic Relations, a nonprofit think tank, showed that internet shutdowns in India between 2012 and 2017 cost the nation [\\$3.04 billion](#).

In the months following the Kashmir shutdown, fashion designer Murcyleen Peerzada witnessed hundreds of Kashmiris waiting in the cold for trains at Srinagar railway station each morning. These trains, nicknamed the “internet express” by locals, took Kashmiris to the cities of Jammu and Banihal, where broadband and mobile data services are still available.

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“Many others come from the villages, and take a bus to Jammu,” says Peerzada. “They’re students, looking to fill out college forms or trying to ascertain their examination results published online. They’re entrepreneurs, looking to rebuild their businesses following the internet gag. Every day, I’d see these men, women, and youngsters, traveling for 10 to 12 hours each day — only for a few minutes of internet access.”

The internet ban has had a calamitous impact on businesses in Kashmir, says Saba Shafi, a Kashmiri makeup artist. “Thousands employed in the hospitality and tourism sectors have either been laid off or haven’t been paid since app-based platforms are inaccessible. Traders are unable to place orders with vendors outside Kashmir. They cannot perform financial transactions in the absence of internet and mobile banking,” she says. “The indefinite internet blackout has forced innumerable businesses in Kashmir to either scale down or shut shop.”

Citizens have been dealing with intermittent shutdowns since January 26, 2012, the first known blackout in the country, according to Sundar Krishnan, executive director of the [Software Freedom Law Center](#) (SFLC). The date is not coincidental — January 26 is India’s Republic Day, and mobile internet services were suspended in Kashmir in anticipation of unrest.

“Ever since, the shutdowns have only increased, varying in duration and extent,” says Krishnan. “In most shutdowns, mobile data services are suspended as more than 95% of Indians access the internet over mobile networks.”

SFLC collects data about internet shutdowns in India through newspaper reports, local sources, and a [website](#) on which citizens can report blackouts. Its requests to view internet suspension orders, filed

via India's [Right to Information Act](#), are often rejected, says Krishnan. Authorities say they cannot make these files public as they concern national security issues.

Woodhams of Top10VPN warns that internet shutdowns cause extensive disruption. Businesses cannot operate, hospitals cannot get medicine, and everything grinds to a halt. "The impact doesn't stop once the internet is restored," he says. "Blackouts can cause investor confidence to be undermined, development to falter, and tourism discouraged. Not only are internet shutdowns breaches of human rights, they are also significant acts of economic self-harm."



The alarming rise of internet shutdowns can be traced to an event that, initially at least, seemed to prove the power of the web in the face of authoritarian governments: the Arab Spring. In January 2011, Egyptians took to the web to organize their protests against President Hosni Mubarak's government. The 30-year-old regime responded by blocking internet access for approximately [88%](#) of the country, drawing international condemnation. Hillary Clinton, then U.S. Secretary of State, [urged](#) Egyptian authorities to allow peaceful protests and reverse "the unprecedented steps it has taken to cut off communications."

Similar blackouts followed in Libya and Syria as the Arab Spring spread. Since then, a number of states have followed suit, largely to quell dissent. Governments offer various justifications to disguise their real motive, aware that they're violating international human rights laws.

"Internet blackouts are ordered to shut out the lights when the government is doing what it wants to do against protestors."

The internet makes it easy for people to mobilize, coordinate, and act out against the state in times of civil unrest, says Nakul Nayak, a Google public policy fellow who authored a 2018 [paper](#) on India's shutdowns. "As governments feel pressured to find ways to counter the online mobilization, they use this very disproportionate, broad power as a form of collective punishment."

In June 2019, the government of Myanmar [ordered](#) all mobile operators to stop mobile internet traffic in the country's western region. The province of Rakhine had been in a state of turmoil since August 2017, when alleged militants from the Rohingya Muslim minority group [attacked](#) police posts. The Myanmar security forces [responded](#) with a violent crackdown, compelling [720,000](#) Rohingyas to flee to neighboring Bangladesh. The state [claimed](#) that the mobile internet shutdown was "for the sake of security and the public interest."

“The impression was that they were switching off the internet to hide their atrocities against the Rohingyas,” says Nayak. “Internet blackouts are ordered to shut out the lights when the government is doing what it wants to do against protestors.”

[Darrell M. West](#), founding director of the Center for Technology Innovation at the [Brookings Institution](#), says that governments think they can keep critics from organizing people if they slow or stop communications. “The first shutdown I found was in 1995 (the only blackout of the year), shortly after the internet was established, but shutdowns have spread rapidly since then,” says West, who has also [authored](#) a paper on internet shutdowns.

The international human rights and public policy advocacy group [Access Now](#) points out that governments normalize internet shutdowns with justifications like national security, public safety, fake news, and hate speech. “But far too often, the real motivation is to quell protests and democratic mobilization or organization among communities,” says Raman Jit Singh Chima, the group’s Asia Pacific policy director.



People holding signs and standing in solidarity with the people of Kashmir in Ahmedabad on October 17, 2019. Photo: Sam Panthaky/AFP/Getty Images

Though governments state that their intention for internet shutdowns is to prevent protests or insurgencies, doing so often has the opposite effect. After Egypt’s internet shutdown in 2011, the number of protesters “increased tremendously,” says Lisa Garbe, a research associate at the University of St. Gallen in Switzerland and author of a

2018 [paper](#) on authoritarianism in the digital age.

“Looking at all African presidential and parliamentary elections between 2015 and 2018 reveals that one-third of all African elections were accompanied by an internet shutdown,” she says. “Electoral fraud and electoral violence were significantly higher during the elections in which an internet shutdown occurred.”



In June 2016, the United Nations passed a resolution declaring internet access as a human right. Several countries, however, opposed the amendment, including India, Russia, China, South Africa, and Saudi Arabia.

In some of these countries, internet shutdowns persist because the legal framework regulating them is outdated and ambiguous. Others have passed legislation to exert greater internet controls in the wake of civil unrest and anti-government activity.

The Indian government, for instance, previously used “nebular, open-ended” legal provisions created before the internet age — like a [telegraph law](#) from 1885 — to impose internet shutdowns, says Nayak. But once it quietly passed a [new law](#) in August 2017, the state was allowed to suspend telecom services “due to public emergency or public safety.” Nayak argues that this law was passed as the Indian government realized that it would continue to impose internet shutdowns.

“They came up with the telecom suspension rules out of the blue with absolutely no consultation with the public,” says Nayak. “They abruptly notified [the public of] these rules one day, which expressly give powers to state as well as central government to turn off the internet — an express, direct source of power.”

These shutdown-enabling legal frameworks are now present in at least [27 countries or regions](#), including Egypt, Hong Kong, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, according to Chima of Access Now.

“States have started realizing that it is important to regulate shutdowns since pushback from the civil society is increasing,” says Nayak. “Internet blackouts are increasing not only in places that have traditionally reported shutdowns, but other states and other countries as well. Governments have started realizing that this is an effective way to curb dissent and more and more of them have started using it as a tactic.”

Woodhams finds it particularly “disturbing” to see new nations like Liberia, which [imposed](#) its first-ever shutdown in 2019, follow the lead of countries that have ordered multiple blackouts in recent years.

India aside, shutdowns are clearly more prevalent in non-democratic countries, but the trend is present in semi-authoritarian regimes too, says Garbe of the University of St. Gallen. “In these regimes, incumbent rulers run a higher risk of being overturned as there is an institutionalized political opposition,” she says. “Hence, governments may take more drastic measures in order to stay in power.”



As governments try to create new laws or exploit existing powers to impose internet blackouts, more citizens, journalists, and public interest groups across the world are approaching courts of law against the shutdowns, says Chima. In Pakistan, for example, four citizens took the government to the Islamabad High Court in 2016, arguing that intermittent mobile network shutdowns were unconstitutional. The court [ruled](#) that the country’s telecom authority could not order shutdowns. Similarly, in West Africa, citizens have moved domestic as well as regional human rights courts to challenge internet shutdowns.

Sudan experienced weeks of internet blackout in June 2019, after the military council that overthrew Omar al-Bashir’s regime in April [opened fire on protestors](#) in Khartoum during a sit-in, killing at least

30. That month, Abdel-Adheem Hassan, a Sudanese lawyer, took the telecom company Zain to court over the internet blackout and [won](#) — but the court only restored access to his personal devices, arguing that Hassan had filed the appeal in a personal capacity.

Unsatisfied with the relief, Hassan challenged two more companies behind the shutdown, [MTN and Sudani by Sudatel](#). With the subsequent verdict, internet services were revived in Sudan after five weeks of blackout.

“Even in cases where the internet is disrupted during a turbulent period, relying on the rule of law and persistence in the courts can be effective,” [says](#) Access Now.

A week after the internet shutdown in Jammu and Kashmir, Anuradha Bhasin, executive editor of [Kashmir Times](#), the largest circulated English daily in the region, [filed](#) a writ petition in India’s Supreme Court. Bhasin sought immediate relaxation of restrictions on internet and telecommunication services, asking the court to enable an environment where journalists can practice their profession without hindrances. On January 10, the Supreme Court [ordered](#) the state to review the ongoing internet shutdown in Kashmir, which has now crossed over 150 days of blockade.

“We declare that the freedom of speech and expression and the freedom to practice any profession or carry on any trade, business, or occupation over the medium of internet enjoys constitutional protection,” the court stated. “Any order suspending internet issued under the Suspension Rules, must adhere to the principle of proportionality and must not extend beyond necessary duration.”

The ruling did not immediately direct the government to restore services in Kashmir, but it was widely celebrated. Bhasin says she feels vindicated because the Supreme Court has acknowledged that fundamental rights of Kashmiris are being violated.

“The blanket internet ban is unprecedented and alarming. It has fueled fear, anxiety, and panic among the residents of Kashmir,” says Bhasin. “But with the Supreme Court ruling, there is hope for an end to this virtual siege.”