Government Internet shutdowns on the rise internationally

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Several recent media reports have pointed to the rise of government Internet shutdowns internationally as a mechanism of censorship, repression and control in response to growing political turmoil and mass protests. Based largely on data maintained by Access Now—an organization that "defends and extends the digital rights of users at risk around the world"—these reports show a trend of dramatically accelerating Internet shutdowns over the past three years.

Through its Shutdowns Tracker Optimization Project (STOP), Access Now and the #KeepItOn coalition have been documenting and collecting data on Internet shutdowns since 2016. In early July of this year, the group issued a report called "The State of Internet Shutdowns Around the World."

The report says, "In 2018, the global #KeepItOn coalition documented more than 196 internet shutdowns around the world. … 67% of the world's documented shutdowns took place in India in 2018, with 134 incidents. The remaining 33% took place in a diverse range of countries: Algeria, Bangladesh, Cameroon, Chad, Co?te d'Ivoire, Democratic Republic of Congo, Ethiopia, Indonesia, Iraq, Kazakhstan, Mali, Nicaragua, Nigeria, Pakistan, Philippines, and Russia."

Illustrating the rising trend, the report says that there were 75 shutdowns in 2016 and 106 shutdowns in 2017. According to Access Now, Internet shutdowns can be defined as "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." This can also include blocking specific social media platforms.

The official rationale for government Internet shutdowns rarely, if ever, matches what is obviously the real reason. In some cases, governments provide no explanation and never publicly acknowledge that they are responsible for the shutdown.

Among the most common justifications that are given include "fake news" or disinformation, hate speech and related violence, securing public safety and national security, precautionary measures, and preventing cheating during exams. As analyzed in the #KeepItOn report, the real reasons for the shutdowns are political instability, mass protests, communal violence, elections and information control.

Of the 196 shutdowns in 2018, more than 80 percent were officially justified for public safety (91), national security (40) and fake news/hate speech (33) reasons. In rare instances, the official reasons match the real reasons. The report explains, "when governments shut down the internet citing 'public safety,' it is often evident to observers that, in reality, authorities may fear protests and cut off access to the internet to limit people's ability to organize and express themselves, whether online or off."

When citing "fake news," rumors, or hate speech, governments "are often responding to a range of issues including protests, elections, communal violence, and militant activity, among others. Using these threats as scapegoats, it appears that governments are leveraging shutdowns to shape the political narrative and control the flow of information."

The order to shut down the Internet can come from national, regional or local authorities in the executive, legislative or judicial branch of government. As the report explains, "The entity that orders a shutdown can impact the scope and effect of the shutdown. The geographic reach of a shutdown could extend beyond a country's borders or be as localized as a few cellular towers on a protest route. Some countries have legislation that facilitates and legitimizes shutdowns,

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while others issue arbitrary orders that are not necessarily grounded in or supported by law."

The techniques used to implement the shutdown range from "bandwidth throttling" that slows down Internet access to shutting down mobile Internet access or cutting off all broadband Internet. In some instances, the shutdown takes the form of blocking specific apps or services such as social media platforms and text messaging.

The Access Now report provides several case study summaries of instances of Internet shutdowns. In one episode, Indian government authorities shut down Internet services twice in two Northeast regions "in an attempt to stop the rumors of child-lifting gangs that led to a series of lynchings, with more than 30 deaths."

The report explains that studies have shown that shutting down the Internet in such situations makes matters "highly volatile, violent, and chaotic" and "often leaves vulnerable people without access to information that shutting could potentially save their lives."

In the case of the Democratic Republic of Congo, both the Internet and SMS texting were shut down after the completion of voting in an election on December 30, 2018. The shutdown lasted for more than 20 days, and "the media reported election fraud that went almost unnoticed." While it appeared that opposition leader Martin Fayulu had won the election by decisive margins, authorities awarded victory to Flexi Tshisekedi, the candidate approved by the former president, Joseph Kabila.

With the growth of the class struggle internationally and the coordination of mass movements of workers and young people through Internet and social media technologies, the ruling elite in every country is seeking methods to simultaneously control the flow of online information and also monitor the activity of the public.

As the mass protests in Hong Kong have continued and gotten stronger, the subject of shutting down the Internet and access to social media has been openly discussed by Carrie Lam, chief executive of the special administrative region. In response, the protesters have begun to develop their own "mesh network" infrastructure using Bluetooth communications that allow users to connect with each other independently of the Internet.

While publications like the *New York Times* have presented the growing trend of government Internet shutdowns as something entirely "over there," it is significant that many of the justifications—such as hate speech and "fake news"—used by the regimes in Asia and Africa are the same as those advanced by the tech corporations and governments in the US and Europe for their own forms of censorship.

As analyzed by the *World Socialist Web Site*, beginning in early 2017 a censorship effort was initiated by Google to suppress left-wing and socialist political web sites in search results. To this was added the drive by Facebook to shut down oppositional content and accounts on the grounds of "inauthentic behavior" and "foreign disinformation campaigns."

The right to freedom of speech, access to news and information and the ability to use the Internet and social media to organize is a fundamental question facing the working class in every country. These basic democratic rights can only be defended on the basis of an international program that unifies workers and young people across borders and global industries in a common fight against the capitalist system and for socialism.

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