



February 6, 2024

#KeepItOn: Pakistan’s caretaker government and election commission must protect open and secure internet and social media platforms throughout the 2024 elections

For the attention of Honourable Mr. Anwaar-ul-Haq Kakar, Caretaker Prime Minister of Pakistan and Honourable Mr. Sikandar Sultan Raja, Chief Election Commissioner of Pakistan

CC : Major General (R) Hafeezur Rehman, Chairman Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (PTA); Dr. Umar Saif, Caretaker Minister of IT and Telecom; Capt. (Retd.) Muhammad Khurram Agha, Secretary to the Prime Minister; Dr Syed Asif Hussain, Secretary, ECP Secretariat; Mr. Shahid Farooq Alvi, President, Pakistan Telecommunication Access Provider Association (PTAPA)

Public institutions have a duty to ensure that people can access open, secure, and free internet when they need it the most — including during important national events. During the 2024 general election, we urge authorities in Pakistan to #KeepItOn.

We, the undersigned organisations and members of the [#KeepItOn coalition](#) — a global network of over 300 organisations from 105 countries working to end internet shutdowns¹ — appeal to you, Prime Minister Mr. Anwaar-ul-Haq Kakar and Chief Election Commissioner Mr. Sikandar Sultan Raja, to publicly commit to ensuring that the people of Pakistan have unfettered access to the internet, social media platforms, and all other communication channels throughout the upcoming general election on February 8, 2024.

As the people of Pakistan prepare to vote, authorities in Pakistan must adopt and prioritise measures that advance human rights, by enabling unrestricted access to information and avenues for freedom of expression, assembly, and association — both offline and online. This will also contribute to an inclusive, free, and fair election process.

The internet and social media platforms play a critical role in enhancing participatory governance, advancing inclusiveness and transparency, and enabling the enjoyment of fundamental human rights in a democratic society. These platforms enable public discourse about election processes and political candidates, and allow voters to hold governments accountable for their actions. Access to the internet and digital platforms also facilitates effective election reporting, monitoring, and coverage by journalists, human rights defenders, and election observers.

¹ An internet shutdown is 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. See more at: <https://accessnow.org/keepiton>.



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History of shutdowns in Pakistan

General elections were last held in Pakistan in [2018](#), a year during which people in Pakistan suffered at least 11 internet shutdowns, with three separate instances in the span of just one week.

Authorities in Pakistan have a history of imposing internet shutdowns, and there have already been multiple shutdowns around [opposition activities](#) in this election cycle. In May 2023, authorities [shut down](#) the internet targeting mobile and social media platforms amidst protests following the arrest of opposition leader and former prime minister Imran Khan. Social media access was [blocked](#) in December 2023, and on two [separate occasions](#) in January 2024, which interfered with the online election campaign by opposition parties. Given this background, the Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (PTA)'s [justifications](#), attributing a recent blackout to ongoing system upgrades which will continue for the next "two to three months" raises alarm.

Internet shutdowns harm human rights, exacerbate crises, and stop the free flow of information

Research shows that [internet shutdowns and violence](#) go hand-in-hand. Shutting down the internet during times of conflict, protests, or public health emergencies restricts the availability of vital, timely, and potentially life-saving information, as well as limiting access to emergency services. By disrupting the flow of information, shutdowns can exacerbate existing tensions, potentially instigate or conceal violence and human rights violations perpetrated by state and non-state actors, impede the work of human rights defenders, and spur the spread of misinformation.

Shutdowns also make it [extremely difficult](#) for journalists to report from the ground, thereby denying people both in and out of Pakistan access to credible information. Shutting down the internet would also make it hard for key stakeholders including Election Commission of Pakistan, national and international election observers, political party candidates, and civil society actors to closely monitor the electoral process.

Imposing internet shutdowns also interferes with people's livelihoods and has a negative effect on entire economies. Shutdowns can cost nations [billions of dollars](#), with businesses, public organisations, and private institutions that rely on the digital economy losing huge sums of money when they occur.

Internet shutdowns contravene domestic and international laws

Slowing or shutting down internet connection to suppress speech and assembly violates commitments under Article 19, Article 16, Article 17, and Article 19A of Pakistan's Constitution to



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freedom of speech, assembly and association, and information. It also undermines the state's responsibility towards ensuring freedom of trade, business, and profession and the right to education.

Further, as per the Sindh High Court's [recent directive](#), the PTA and the caretaker government must ensure smooth and uninterrupted access to mobile internet and broadband services till election day and that pre-poll rigging attempts on election day are reported through social media.

On the global scale, Pakistan is bound by international frameworks like the [Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#) (UDHR) and the [International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights](#) (ICCPR), which provide for the protection and promotion of the rights of freedom of opinion and expression, assembly, and access to information.

Internet shutdowns are strongly condemned in international convenings including the [UN Human Rights Council Resolution 47/16](#), which denounces 'the use of Internet shutdowns to intentionally and arbitrarily prevent or disrupt access to or dissemination of information'. The [UN Secretary General and other experts](#) have also affirmed that, "blanket Internet shutdowns and generic blocking and filtering of services are considered by United Nations human rights mechanisms to be in violation of international human rights law."

Telecom companies must respect human rights

Under the [UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights](#) and the [OECD Guidelines for Multinational Enterprises](#), telecommunications companies have a responsibility to respect human rights, prevent or mitigate potential harms, and provide remedy for any harms they cause or contribute to. Telecommunications and internet service providers operating in Pakistan have a responsibility to provide quality, open, and secure access to the internet and digital communication tools.

Internet shutdowns — whether in Pakistan or elsewhere — jeopardise human rights and must never become a norm. We encourage businesses in Pakistan to integrate the UN Principles and OECD Guidelines when responding to censorship and network disruption requests in any market where they operate.

Recommendations

As organisations championing the internet and digital platforms as enablers of human rights, we call on you to:

- Publicly assure the people of Pakistan that the internet, including social media and other digital communication platforms, will remain open, accessible, inclusive, and secure before,



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during and after the election;

- Refrain from ordering the disruption of telecommunications services, social media platforms, or other digital communication platforms throughout the elections;
- Ensure that telecommunications and internet service providers (ISPs) implement all necessary measures to provide high-quality, secure, unrestricted, and uninterrupted internet access throughout the election period and thereafter; and
- Ensure that telecommunication and ISPs inform the people of Pakistan of any potential disruptions, and take all reasonable steps to remedy any identified disruptions likely to impact their quality of service.

Please let us know how the #KeptOn coalition can support you in upholding a free, open, secure, inclusive, and accessible internet for all in Pakistan.

Yours sincerely,

Signatories

- Access Now
- Africa Open Data and Internet Research Foundation
- African Freedom of Expression Exchange (AFEX)
- AfroLeadership
- Amnesty International
- ARTICLE 19
- Balkan Investigative Reporting Network (BIRN Hub)
- Balkan Investigative Reporting Network Albania (BIRN Albania)
- Bloggers Association of Kenya (BAKE)
- Center for Democracy & Technology
- Committee to Protect Journalists
- Digital Rights Kashmir
- Digital Rights Nepal (DRN)
- Equidem
- Forumvert Senegal
- Freedom House
- Frontline Defenders
- Global Digital Inclusion Partnership (GDIP)
- Global Network Initiative



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- Hashtag Generation
- Human Rights Journalists Network Nigeria
- Human Rights Watch
- INSM for digital rights in Iraq
- JCA-NET(Japan)
- Kijiji Yeetu
- LastMile4D
- Life campaign to abolish the death sentence in Kurdistan
- Media Foundation for West Africa
- Miaan Group
- Nubian Rights Forum
- Office of Civil Freedoms
- Open Observatory of Network Interference (OONI)
- Organization of the Justice Campaign
- Paradigm Initiative (PIN)
- PEN America
- Reporters Without Borders (RSF)
- Rudi International
- Single Mothers Association of Kenya (SMAK)
- SMEX
- Southeast Asia Freedom of Expression Network (SAFEnet)
- Tech Global Institute
- The Tor Project
- Ubunteam
- Unwanted Witness
- Voices for Interactive Choice and Empowerment (VOICE)
- Women of Uganda Network (WOUGNET)
- Youths and Environmental Advocacy Centre (YEAC-Nigeria)
- Zaina Foundation