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www.afgazad.com

afgazad@gmail.com

European Languages

زبانهای اروپایی

Andre Damon

28.12.2019

Desperate to stem protests, dozens of governments shut down internet access in 2019

Amid a global upsurge of political protests and strikes, governments all over the world are shutting down the internet in desperate bids to stem the tide of popular opposition.

According to preliminary data from Access Now, 2019 likely saw more deliberate internet shutdowns than any other previous year. More than a quarter of the world's countries have shut down the internet over in past four years.

At least 29 countries carried out deliberate internet shutdowns in 2019, including India, Sri Lanka, Russia, Sudan, Indonesia and Iraq.



Indian workers shout slogans in front of a police barricade during a protest against the Citizenship Amendment Act in New Delhi [Credit: AP Photo/Altaf Qadri]

Since the 2011 uprising in Tunisia, dubbed a “WikiLeaks revolution” after the organization released information on the corruption of the country’s ruling class, governments have increasingly seen the internet as a threat, used by masses of people to organize strikes, protests and demonstrations. In recent months, workers and young people have used social media to organize mass demonstrations in Chile, Lebanon, Iran, Iraq, Ecuador, Honduras, Haiti, Egypt and Algeria.

Last week, police authorities in India shut down internet access in sections of New Delhi in response to a wave of popular protests against the Modi government’s Hindu supremacist citizenship law.

The Modi government has responded to the demonstrations, which have mobilized broad sections of the population across ethnic and sectarian lines, with a crackdown that has taken the lives of dozens of people and the imposition of effective martial law in broad sections of the country.

India has shut down the internet more than 104 times this year, up from six times in 2014. The most notorious of these actions is the ongoing internet shutdown in Jammu and Kashmir, which has now lasted 135 days, the longest ever in any country officially called a “democracy.”

The ongoing internet shutdown in the Kashmir Valley now affects over seven million people, making the most routine aspects of life—from communicating with distant family to applying for a job—next to impossible.

The Kashmir shutdown was aimed at quelling opposition to the illegal abrogation of the semi-autonomous status of India’s lone Muslim-majority state. This constitutional coup has been enforced by the deployment of tens of thousands of additional security forces and the detention without charge of thousands.

In its latest annual report, Access Now pointed out that governments routinely lie about their motives in carrying out internet shutdowns. “[W]hen 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.”

It adds, “When authorities cite ‘fake news,’ rumors, or hate speech,” they are in fact most often seeking to curtail protests and control elections. “Using these threats as scapegoats, it

appears that governments are leveraging shutdowns to shape the political narrative and control the flow of information.”

While outright internet shutoffs have remained rare in the major capitalist powers, many of the same false arguments—like protecting “public safety” and suppressing “fake news”—have been used to establish an apparatus of mass censorship by major corporations acting on behalf of state intelligence agencies.

In 2017, Google announced a series of changes to its search algorithm, internally dubbed “Project Owl,” that drastically reduced search traffic to left-wing, antiwar and progressive websites, in the guise of fighting “fake news.”

An investigation by the *Wall Street Journal* this year confirmed the allegations made by the *World Socialist Web Site* that Google operated internal blacklists of websites that it sought to keep users from accessing in search results. Facebook and Twitter followed Google’s actions, removing left-wing political accounts and pages with millions of followers on the grounds that they were “inauthentic.”

The Trump administration’s Federal Communications Commission has moved ahead with the gutting of net neutrality, giving private corporations a legal cover to censor and tamper with political speech at will.

Last year, Germany passed the so-called NetzDG law, which threatens to fine internet companies that fail to remove “illegal content,” turning, as Human Rights Watch wrote, “private companies into overzealous censors.”

The Spanish government is pushing through a law that allows the state to shut down at will digital communications, internet infrastructure and apps without a court order. The law follows a similar measure passed in France last year, spelling out massive fines for disseminating “any allegation or implying of a fact without providing verifiable information.”

The efforts to curtail the distribution of critical political viewpoints go beyond even these draconian censorship measures.

The British government has, at the direction of the Trump administration and with the full support of the Democratic Party, detained and isolated WikiLeaks publisher Julian Assange, under conditions that UN human rights expert Nils Melzer has called tantamount to torture.

The US has also imprisoned whistleblower Chelsea Manning without charge. Both of these courageous individuals are being persecuted for nothing other than telling the truth about criminal wrongdoing by the US government.

All these measures represent the vindictive actions of vastly unpopular capitalist governments that feel besieged by a global upsurge of political opposition. This year, this latent opposition has erupted in a series of mass demonstrations, which the Center for Strategic & International Studies (CSIS) think tank dubbed an “Age of Leaderless Revolution.”

CSIS analyst Samuel Brannen wrote: “This awakening has been amplified by the digital information age with more than half of the planet—4 billion people—now connected to the internet. Facebook alone counts 2.4 billion active users. And among the most popular topics for users is politics.... And the ways in which people can connect locally and globally and draw comparisons and inspiration from events elsewhere is unmatched. The ability for individuals to connect, to inspire and coordinate millions onto the streets is without precedent.”

Capitalist governments all over the world see this communications revolution, which holds immeasurable promise for human society, as an existential threat. One recent survey observed, “There is now a geopolitical operating premise that the ills of the internet are potentially more consequential than its benefits.”

While the cliques of corrupt capitalist oligarchs that dominate society all over the world, from Washington to New Delhi to Madrid, recoil in fear at the growing interconnectedness of society, the freedom of speech, including internet communication, is vital to workers and young people seeking to express their grievances and organize politically.

As workers and young people enter into social struggle all over the world, they must take up the defense of the freedom of expression and the freedom of political prisoners like Assange and Manning as inseparable from the fight to defend their social rights, abolish inequality, and overthrow the capitalist system.

27 December 2019