



WORKING PAPER

SHUT DOWN AND SILENCED

IMPACTS OF THE RECENT
INTERNET SHUTDOWNS
IN BANGLADESH

ABM SHAMSUD DOZA

WORKING PAPER

SHUT DOWN AND SILENCED

**IMPACTS OF THE RECENT
INTERNET SHUTDOWNS
IN BANGLADESH**

ABM SHAMSUD DOZA

Shut Down and Silenced

Impacts of the Recent Internet Shutdowns in Bangladesh

November 2024

ABM Shamsud Doza is the Chief Archivist at Bangladesh on Record and a journalist at The Daily Star. His research interests span digital humanities, media studies, print history, and the history of Bangladesh. He holds a degree in International Relations from the University of Dhaka.



The Centre for Governance Studies (CGS) was established in 2004 as a non-profit autonomous think tank to work on improving the quality of governance in Bangladesh through facilitation of collaborative efforts among the academic community, government, private sector, civil society, and development partners. CGS contributes to research, media advocacy, and dialogue in democratic governance and sustainable economic development. Based in Dhaka, CGS' clients include multinational firms, multilateral agencies, diplomatic missions, government departments, private sector organizations, and civil society actors. CGS has current partnerships with the National Endowment for Democracy, National Democratic Institute, United Nation's Development Program, Centre for International Private Enterprise, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, and Foreign and Commonwealth Development Office and has built relationships with the private sector and the media as a trusted source of independent research and analysis.

INTRODUCTION

On August 5, 2024, the autocratic government of Sheikh Hasina collapsed in the face of a massive public uprising, ushering in a rare opportunity to reform governance and safeguard democratic freedoms. This turning point has spurred critical reflection on the undemocratic practices that marked her administration, particularly the restrictive internet shutdown imposed just weeks before her fall. The internet blackout, enforced as student protests intensified, stripped millions of Bangladeshis of their digital rights under the pretext of national security. However, the real intention behind the shutdown was to silence dissent, block access to critical information, and obscure violent incidents from public scrutiny.

This paper examines the human rights implications of the internet blackout, exploring both its immediate disruptions and the lasting impact on digital rights and civil liberties. It also assesses the economic costs of the shutdown, given that disruptions to economic life pose serious threats to fundamental rights. By critically analysing the mechanisms used to enforce the shutdown and its wide-ranging effects, this study underscores the urgent need for protections that uphold digital freedoms and prevent the misuse of connectivity as a tool for political repression.

UNDERSTANDING THE RECENT INTERNET SHUTDOWNS IN BANGLADESH

DEFINING INTERNET SHUTDOWN

Internet shutdowns are measures implemented by governments or on their behalf to intentionally disrupt access to information and communication systems online. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights report titled "Internet Shutdowns: Trends, Causes, Legal Implications and Impacts on a Range of Human Rights," (2022) these actions can include complete blocks of internet connectivity or limitations on specific online services necessary for communication, such as social media and messaging applications.¹

Shutdowns may also involve throttling bandwidth or restricting mobile service to 2G, rendering the internet virtually unusable while still appearing to maintain access. This affects users engaged in legitimate activities, leading to significant collateral damage beyond the intended purpose. In some instances, entire telephone networks may be shut down alongside internet services, eliminating direct electronic communication channels.

THE RECENT EVENTS OF INTERNET SHUTDOWN IN BANGLADESH

The student protests in Bangladesh began on July 1, 2024, ignited by the government's controversial decision to reinstate a quota system for public sector jobs. As demonstrations spread across the country, tensions escalated sharply on July 15. Inflammatory remarks from then-Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina provoked violent clashes, with the ruling party student organization Chattra League launching attacks against peaceful protesters. Law enforcement agencies intervened, reportedly siding with the ruling party cadres and resorting to excessive measures, including the use of live ammunition against unarmed individuals.

Amid rising unrest, the government ordered a nationwide shutdown of mobile internet services on the night of July 17. At around 11:30 p.m. that night, the National Telecommunication Monitoring Center (NTMC), an agency under the Ministry of Home Affairs, instructed mobile operators to shut down Facebook and YouTube from midnight, as these platforms fell outside the reach of their content 'blocking' and 'filtering' systems. Approximately two hours later, the NTMC issued an order for a full mobile internet shutdown.

However, a targeted disruption had already taken place. Around 12:30 a.m. on Monday, July 15, shortly after a major midnight protest, the Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulatory Commission's (BTRC) Engineering and Operations Division issued a directive via WhatsApp to cut mobile internet in the Shahbagh area and near the Raju Memorial Sculpture at Dhaka University.

¹ United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. (2022). Internet shutdowns: Trends, causes, legal implications and impacts on a range of human rights. <https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/gen/g22/341/55/pdf/g2234155.pdf>

Within about half an hour, another directive was issued to shut down the internet at Dhaka University, Jahangirnagar University, Chittagong University, Rajshahi University, and Shahjalal University of Science and Technology in Sylhet.

On July 16, around midday, the same division of the BTRC issued orders to shut down mobile internet at 59 universities nationwide. The directive noted that it had received approval from the Ministry of Posts, Telecommunications, and Information Technology, under which the BTRC functions. Despite these measures, protests continued to spread, sparking further government action.

On July 18, broadband internet access was suspended, resulting in a complete internet blackout across the country. In the evening of that day, the BTRC instructed the shutdown of bandwidth. When the International Terrestrial Cable (ITC) companies requested a written order, they were sent a message via WhatsApp. The BTRC continued to monitor the situation until the entire country was disconnected from the internet by 9 p.m. That evening, the then Minister of State for Posts, Telecommunications, and Information Technology, Zunaid Ahmed Palak, personally called the submarine cable companies to instruct them to shut down the internet.²

It should be noted that international internet bandwidth enters Bangladesh through submarine cable companies and ITC companies, which provide the bandwidth to International Internet Gateway (IIG) entities. These IIGs then supply the bandwidth to Internet Service Providers (ISPs), who deliver services to customers.

The sweeping restrictions on mobile internet and broadband effectively cut off millions of citizens from digital communication, deepening their isolation as the government sought to regain control.

According to the BTRC, in July 2024, Bangladesh had a total of 141.05 million internet users, of which 127.52 million were mobile internet users, while the remaining users were ISP and PSTN subscribers.³

Next day, a nationwide curfew was imposed, and the military was deployed to restore order. Military personnel were given shoot-on-sight orders to quash any signs of resistance, escalating the government's response.

This internet blackout lasted for five consecutive days. Limited restoration of broadband services occurred on July 23, but mobile internet remained unavailable for ten days.

On July 28, around 1:30 p.m., the NTMC instructed mobile operators via email that the internet would be restored. However, before that, operators were required to shut down Facebook, Messenger, WhatsApp, Telegram, Viber, Imo, YouTube, BIP, Signal, Skype, and Botim. These platforms were blocked for another three days, extending the total duration of restricted access to 13 days.

² Prothom Alo. (2024, August 13). ইন্টারনেট বন্ধ করেছিল বিটিআরসি ও এনটিএমসি, ফোন করেছিলেন পলকও. Retrieved from <https://www.prothomalo.com/bangladesh/4aqsedjkh3>

³ Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulatory Commission. (n.d.). ইন্টারনেট গ্রাহক [Internet users]. Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulatory Commission. https://btrc.gov.bd/site/page/347df7fe-409f-451e-a415-65b109a207f5/ইন্টারনেট_গ্রাহক

Throughout this period, government agencies denied responsibility for the internet shutdown, attributing it instead to purported arson attacks on infrastructure.

The situation worsened when, on August 2, access to Facebook and Telegram was again curtailed for nearly seven hours.

Finally, on August 5, around 11 a.m., broadband internet was suspended once again, with mobile internet having been cut the previous day. Later that afternoon, following Sheikh Hasina's fleeing the country, both broadband and mobile services were restored.

IS THERE ANY LEGAL BASIS?

The government's primary justification for the recent internet shutdown in Bangladesh was framed as a necessary measure to maintain public order amid the escalating student protests. Officials argued that the blackout was vital to prevent the spread of misinformation and protect national security.

On July 18, a day after the nationwide shutdown of mobile internet services, State Minister Zunaid Ahmed Palak stated, "A vested quarter is attempting to destabilize the law and order situation by spreading rumors on social media. That is why we have disconnected internet services without prior notice. The services will be restored once the situation improves."

However, on July 27, the minister changed his stance, claiming that the government had not initiated the shutdown. Instead, he suggested that the internet disruption was caused by the burning of three data centers and cables. Yet, on August 2, Palak issued an apology, accepting responsibility for the internet disruption and acknowledging the failure to prevent the spread of rumors on social media.⁴

These contradictory statements conceal a more troubling agenda aimed at suppressing dissent and controlling the narrative surrounding the student protests.

The Awami League government had a history of imposing internet shutdowns, having enacted three in 2023 alone, following six in 2022. These actions appeared to be part of a broader strategy to stifle political opposition, particularly during protests and rallies. This pattern was once again evident during the July-August protests.

Often operating under the guise of maintaining public order, the Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulatory Commission (BTRC) and the National Telecommunication Monitoring Centre (NTMC) routinely issued orders to disrupt or suspend internet services. These directives extended to telecom operators, compelling them restrict access to mobile services, alongside curbs on access to various applications and websites.

In a joint communication, three UN special rapporteurs sought clarification from the Bangladeshi government regarding the legal and factual grounds for these internet disruptions.

⁴ The Business Standard. (2024, August 6). *Bizarre claims and apologies: The statements of Palak during internet blackouts*. The Business Standard. <https://www.tbsnews.net/features/panorama/bizarre-claims-and-apologies-statements-palak-during-internet-blackouts-910616>

In its response on August 13, BTRC acknowledged that the shutdowns were politically motivated, stating that it was compelled to act under pressure from government officials to serve their political interests.⁵

BTRC's rationale, referencing Section 97 of the Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulatory Act 2001, asserts the government is permitted to instruct mobile operators and internet service providers to suspend services partially or completely if a state of emergency is declared or if deemed necessary for "state security or public order."

While the original law restricted such actions to emergencies, an amendment in February 2006 broadened the scope, allowing the government to shut down the internet at its discretion under the pretext of state security or public order. This loophole has been exploited by the Sheikh Hasina regime on numerous occasions to justify politically motivated internet blackouts.

However, legal experts have raised concerns about this interpretation. A prominent telecom lawyer, who requested anonymity in speaking to *The Daily Star*, pointed out the ambiguity surrounding the definition of 'government' in decisions of this nature. He stressed that such critical actions should be guided by a collective cabinet decision rather than solely by the telecom minister. Additionally, he emphasized the need for objective, written records to substantiate claims of necessity—records that were reportedly lacking in this case.

A probe report by the Ministry of Posts and Telecommunications revealed that no formal approval was sought before the directive to shut down internet services. The verbal instructions given by former State Minister for Posts, Telecommunications, and Information Technology, Zunaid Ahmed Palak, along with BTRC Chairman Engineer Md Mohiuddin Ahmed, led to the suspension and restoration of mobile internet services between July 15 and 16, broadband internet services from July 18 to 23, and again on August 5, all without administrative approval.⁶ As a result, the legality of these actions has been called into serious question.

Supreme Court advocate Fatema Anwar argued that government agencies cannot use a situation they exacerbated to justify actions that contravene legal norms. She emphasized that there was no legitimate basis for invoking the telecommunications act under the circumstances of the student protest, as there was neither a state of emergency declared nor a legitimate threat to national security.⁷

⁵ The Daily Star. (2024, August 20). Internet blackout had no legal basis. *The Daily Star*. <https://www.thedailystar.net/news/bangladesh/news/internet-blackout-had-no-legal-basis-3681416>

⁶ BSS News. (2024, August 13). *Palak, NTMC responsible for internet shutdown: Probe report*. BSS News. <https://www.bssnews.net/news-flash/203730>

⁷ The Daily Star. (2024, August 20). *Internet blackout had no legal basis*. *The Daily Star*. <https://www.thedailystar.net/news/bangladesh/news/internet-blackout-had-no-legal-basis-3681416>

TRENDS IN INTERNET SHUTDOWNS IN BANGLADESH

1. *Normalization of internet blackout*

Internet shutdowns in Bangladesh frequently coincide with periods of civil unrest, particularly during protests against government policies. The recent shutdowns during the quota reform movement are part of this established pattern. In August 2018, during the widespread student protests demanding safer roads, authorities cut internet access to curb the movement's momentum and limit public mobilization. Later that year, in December, internet blackouts were imposed during the national parliamentary elections, likely to restrict information flow and suppress potential dissent.

A similar approach was taken in March 2021, when protests erupted against Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit, prompting authorities to restrict internet services to contain the demonstrations.

In October 2023, as opposition party movements gained strength, the government once again resorted to mobile internet blackouts to disrupt protestor coordination and control the spread of information. However, the internet and mobile networks were fully operational in a nearby location where the ruling party held their gathering.⁸

Normalization of these shutdowns sets a troubling precedent, framing such measures as acceptable responses to political dissent. It poses serious challenges to Bangladesh's political landscape, signaling a troubling shift away from democratic engagement and toward authoritarian governance.

When the new government, led by Nobel Laureate Dr. Yunus and student leaders who spearheaded the mass uprising against Sheikh Hasina's authoritarian regime, came into power, many hoped such practices would end. Yet, following the arson attack in Dighinala upazila of Khagrachari on September 21—where over 200 homes and businesses, largely owned by Buddhist ethnic minorities, were burned in response to the mob-lynching of a Bengali youth—similar measures were taken.

Mobile and broadband internet users in Khagrachari and Rangamati districts experienced disruptions for two consecutive days, with both broadband and mobile services being restricted at various intervals.⁹

2. *The geographic scope of shutdowns is broadening*

Internet shutdowns in Bangladesh, once limited to areas directly affected by unrest, are now increasingly imposed on a larger scale, impacting entire cities or even the entire nation. The government used to restrict internet access specifically in locations where opposition parties were holding processions or political gatherings. During the recent quota reform movement,

⁸ Prothom Alo. (2023, October 28). *বিএনপির সমাবেশস্থলে ইন্টারনেট নেই, আওয়ামী লীগের সমাবেশস্থলে পুরোপুরি সচল*. Prothom Alo. <https://www.prothomalo.com/bangladesh/bq5whypgrc>

⁹ New Age. (2024, September 21). *Internet users in Khagrachari, Rangamati face disruption for several hours*. New Age. <https://www.newagebd.net/post/country/245812/internet-users-in-khagrachari-rangamati-face-disruption-for-several-hours>

this pattern continued with the initial shutdown at Dhaka University, followed by similar disruptions at other universities to contain the student-led protests. However, the government went further, enacting an unprecedented nationwide mobile and broadband internet shutdown.

This shift reflects a strategic move to preemptively suppress dissent on a national scale, effectively silencing not only active protestors but also citizens in regions not directly involved in the unrest. It also highlights the state's increasing willingness to weaponize internet blackouts as a tool for control, signaling the potential rise of a more extensive surveillance state.

3. *No one ever admits responsibility*

A troubling trend emerges in Bangladesh where the government consistently refuses to take responsibility for internet shutdowns, instead attempting to deflect blame onto accidents or external causes that indirectly shift the burden onto the victims of these disruptions.

During the quota protest movement, despite clear evidence linking the government to the shutdowns—including the targeted blocking of social media and internet services—State Minister for ICT, Zunaid Ahmed Palak, repeatedly denied the government's involvement. His explanations were a shifting maze of justifications, ranging from blaming infrastructure damage to suggesting that "vested quarters" were responsible for spreading misinformation. Even after issuing an apology on August 2, Palak continued to minimize the government's role, presenting convoluted defenses that failed to take responsibility for the sweeping restrictions on communication.¹⁰

A similar pattern unfolded in Khagrachhari, where internet disruptions were attributed to fiber cables being cut and network infrastructure damaged in clashes. BTRC issued a statement claiming there was no official order to shut down internet services, despite the widespread disruptions in mobile and broadband connectivity.¹¹

This persistent refusal to admit responsibility for internet shutdowns and their consequences highlights a disturbing shift toward a government that operates without accountability. By denying their role, the authorities leave citizens in the dark—both literally and figuratively—while curbing their fundamental right to access information and express themselves freely.

¹⁰ The Business Standard. (2024, August 6). *Bizarre claims and apologies: The statements of Palak during internet blackouts*. The Business Standard. <https://www.tbsnews.net/features/panorama/bizarre-claims-and-apologies-statements-palak-during-internet-blackouts-910616>

¹¹ New Age. (2024, September 21). *Internet users in Khagrachari, Rangamati face disruption for several hours*. New Age. <https://www.newagebd.net/post/country/245812/internet-users-in-khagrachari-rangamati-face-disruption-for-several-hours>

HUMAN RIGHTS IMPACTS OF THE INTERNET SHUTDOWNS

The UN Human Rights Council has unequivocally stated that internet shutdowns have "indiscriminate and disproportionate impacts on human rights."¹² The most immediate effect of internet shutdowns is on freedom of expression and access to information—cornerstones for all other rights enshrined in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and other human rights frameworks.¹³

By cutting digital connectivity, the Bangladesh government not only violated rights to free expression and access to information but also attempted to conceal human rights abuses and violence.

SUPPRESSION OF FREE EXPRESSION

During the recent student protests, the government's use of internet shutdowns became a significant tool for suppressing freedom of expression, with the most prominent example being its efforts to restrict access to social media platforms.

In recent years, social media has become an essential platform for free expression in Bangladesh, especially as mainstream media in the country faces increasing restrictions and self-censorship. Many outlets are now owned by individuals with close ties to the ruling party or rely heavily on government advertising, creating incentives to avoid stories critical of those in power.¹⁴ Traditional media outlets are often forced to sidestep critical issues or present information in ways that align with government narratives, leaving little room for dissent or genuine public debate. In this environment, social media has become the last accessible platform where citizens can openly voice their concerns, hold leaders accountable, and rally around shared causes.

During the recent student protests, this role became especially pronounced. As students took to the streets to demand their rights, a broad spectrum of citizens turned to social media to support their cause. Platforms like Facebook, Twitter and YouTube became gathering points for solidarity, as people shared posts condemning the government's harsh response to the protests and drawing attention to human rights abuses. Additionally, social media provided a platform for airing longstanding grievances against the Sheikh Hasina government, which, over its more than 15-year tenure, has faced widespread criticism for corruption, political repression, and democratic backsliding.

¹² United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. (2022). *Internet shutdowns: Trends, causes, legal implications and impacts on a range of human rights*. <https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/gen/g22/341/55/pdf/g2234155.pdf>

¹³ Human Rights Committee, general comment No. 34 (2011), para. 2; and Human Rights Council resolution 44/12. <https://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/hrc/docs/gc34.pdf>

¹⁴ Riaz, A., & Rahman, M. S. (2021). *Who owns the media in Bangladesh? Centre for Governance Studies*. https://bdmediaowners.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Full-Report_Who-Owns-the-Media-in-Bangladesh.pdf

During the recent student protests in Bangladesh, the government took drastic measures to restrict access to social media platforms as part of a broader effort to curtail freedom of expression. When the protests gained significant momentum, particularly after violent attacks on students by the Awami League's student wing, the government intensified its crackdown on digital spaces. Authorities repeatedly targeted social media platforms, accusing them of spreading rumors and misinformation, and even threatened to shut down their operations in the country.

On July 16, one day after the protests had spread to universities nationwide, State Minister for ICT Zunaid Ahmed Palak announced that the government would take "stringent measures" against social media platforms like Facebook and YouTube unless they cooperated in curbing alleged misinformation. The following day, as the government imposed a countrywide mobile internet shutdown, Palak defended the action, blaming "vested quarters" for trying to destabilize the law and order situation by spreading rumors on social media. He also stated, "We won't spare the social media companies if lives are lost due to their questionable rules and regulations," adding that companies wishing to operate in Bangladesh would need to set up data centers in the country.

On July 24, after restoring limited broadband services, Palak announced that while broadband internet would be reactivated on a trial basis, mobile internet would remain shut down. He also confirmed that social media platforms, including Facebook, would face restrictions, stating, "There will be no mobile internet for now, but access to social media sites, including Facebook, will be restricted."

On July 28, as mobile internet services were restored, Palak revealed that letters had been sent to Facebook, TikTok, and other platforms, urging them to comply with government demands to remove specific content. The platforms were given until July 31 to respond and were instructed to attend a meeting at the Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulatory Commission (BTRC). Palak further claimed that while some pages were removed, "extremist pages" remained active, and that the social media companies had only taken down a fraction of the content the government had requested.¹⁵

Meanwhile, on July 28, the National Telecommunications Monitoring Centre (NTMC) instructed mobile operators via email to restore internet services, but only after blocking a range of platforms, including Facebook, WhatsApp, YouTube, Telegram, and others. These restrictions lasted for another three days, bringing the total duration of blocked access to social media platforms to 13 days.

Finally, on July 31, the government temporarily lifted restrictions on Facebook, TikTok, and YouTube after these platforms agreed to "comply with Bangladesh's laws." However, on August 2, access to Facebook and Telegram was once again curtailed for nearly seven hours.

The government's internet shutdown, especially the blocking of social media platforms, not only suppressed freedom of expression but also obstructed the right to peaceful assembly.

¹⁵ The Business Standard. (2024, August 6). *Bizarre claims and apologies: The statements of Palak during internet blackouts*. The Business Standard. <https://www.tbsnews.net/features/panorama/bizarre-claims-and-apologies-statements-palak-during-internet-blackouts-910616>

During the student protests, social media platforms played a vital role in organising demonstrations, enabling students and citizens to coordinate, mobilise, and amplify their message. By restricting access to platforms such as Facebook, Telegram, and YouTube, the government effectively stifled mobilisation, isolating protestors and limiting their capacity to build public support and draw attention to their cause.

BARRIERS TO ACCESSING CRITICAL INFORMATION

The recent internet shutdowns in Bangladesh underscored the profound impact such restrictions have on access to critical information, a fundamental human right protected by international human rights frameworks. When the internet was cut off, citizens were deprived of vital information, leading to an information vacuum that exacerbated the uncertainty and confusion during the student protests. The media, regarded as the most important and reliable source of information in any democratic society, was particularly affected by these shutdowns.

In today's media environment, news outlets depend on continuous internet access not only to distribute content but also to gather, verify, and process news. Therefore, the broadband and mobile internet shutdowns during the protest, significantly hindered news coverage and restricted access to vital information.¹⁶ This interference compromised the media's essential role in informing society, obstructing the flow of accurate and timely information at a moment when it was most critical.

The Editors' Council, a forum representing the country's leading newspaper editors, issued statements on July 19¹⁷ and July 23¹⁸, urging the government to restore internet access. They expressed concern over how the shutdowns stifled the quick exchange and verification of information, warning that such measures could lead to an information blackout. In their statement, they underscored the risks posed by the spread of rumours and false information, which surged during the internet shutdown, fostering confusion and insecurity among the public.

Further complicating the situation, the blackout heightened risks for journalists. In its July 23's statement, the Editors' Council, along with the Newspapers Owners' Association of Bangladesh (NOAB), called attention to the dangers journalists face in performing their duties without reliable communication.

According to the Human Rights Supports Society, six journalists were killed during the protests, with others reporting injuries and threats.¹⁹

¹⁶ United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights. (2024, July 25). Bangladesh: *UN experts call for immediate end to violent crackdown and full accountability for human rights violations*. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2024/07/bangladesh-un-experts-call-immediate-end-violent-crackdown-and-full>

¹⁷ The Daily Star. (2024, July 21). Restore internet now. The Daily Star. <https://www.thedailystar.net/news/bangladesh/news/restore-internet-now-3661211>

¹⁸ The Daily Star. (2024, July 27). End crackdown, restore full access to internet. The Daily Star. <https://www.thedailystar.net/news/bangladesh/news/carry-out-fair-probe-punish-those-responsible-3660186>

¹⁹ Prothom Alo. (2024, October 24). গণঅভ্যুত্থান ঘিরে সহিংসতায় ৯৮৬ জনের মৃত্যু. Prothom Alo. <https://www.prothomalo.com/bangladesh/ha9u66e50p>

While print media continued to serve readers through their physical editions, online media platforms faced a total blackout, unable to report on the unfolding protests or government actions.

SHROUDING GRAVE HUMAN RIGHTS ABUSES AND VIOLENCE

Internet disruptions often serve as a powerful shield for the state to conceal serious human rights abuses and stifle documentation of violent crackdowns. During the latest protests, the government of Sheikh Hasina also used these shutdowns strategically to obscure incidents of police brutality and prevent the dissemination of evidence.

Following nationwide mobile internet restrictions on July 17, authorities imposed a broadband shutdown the next night. This blackout was accompanied by a curfew and shoot-on-sight orders aimed at suppressing any form of resistance. With communication severely hindered, the conditions enabled widespread violence and heightened humanitarian crises, with casualties rising significantly during the blackout.

For nearly a week, violent clashes and fatalities mounted under the cover of the internet shutdown:

Date	Number of casualties	Comment
July 16	6	x
July 17	-	A nationwide mobile internet shutdown that night
July 18	41	Broadband internet access was suspended that night, causing a total internet blackout.
July 19	84	Total internet blackout continued
July 20	38	Total internet blackout continued
July 21	21	Total internet blackout continued. Student coordinators of the movement issued a two-day ultimatum for the acceptance of their four-point demands, with lifting the internet shutdown as their top priority.
July 22	5	Total internet blackout continued.
July 23	3	Broadband internet connection was partially restored in Dhaka city at about 9:00 pm

* On July 22 and 23, protests diminished, resulting in fewer casualties, as demonstrators gave the government time to address their demands before the ultimatum deadline passed.

Tragically, the shutdown also hindered efforts to identify casualties. Without internet, authorities were unable to access the national database to match fingerprints, leaving bodies unidentified for days. In one instance, police at Chattogram Medical College struggled for three days to identify three bodies due to a lack of internet access.²⁰

International human rights organizations, including Amnesty International, raised alarm over the restricted flow of information, which impaired their ability to monitor human rights abuses. On July 25, Amnesty stated, "Limited information coming out of the country has impeded human rights monitoring."²¹ However, their analysis of available evidence confirmed the use of unlawful, lethal, and less-lethal weapons against protesters during the blackout period.

Such suppression illustrates how the government weaponised internet shutdowns—not only to silence dissent but also to hide state actions from both domestic and international scrutiny, undermining transparency and allowing violence to escalate without accountability.

ECONOMIC COSTS

The recent internet shutdown in Bangladesh has had devastating economic repercussions across multiple sectors. This extensive disruption not only hampered daily operations but also led to significant financial losses, undermining the overall economic landscape of the country.

1. Revenue Losses for Businesses

The immediate financial fallout from the internet shutdown was felt across various industries, with many businesses reporting substantial revenue losses:

- **E-commerce Sector:** E-commerce has become an essential part of the Bangladeshi economy, with millions relying on online platforms for their livelihoods. The shutdown caused a dramatic decline in sales, as businesses could not operate their online storefronts. According to the E-commerce Association of Bangladesh (e-CAB), the online business sector faced a loss exceeding Tk 1,750 crore within just 13 days of the shutdown.²² Specifically, f-commerce (Facebook commerce) suffered losses of Tk 600 crore in the first ten days alone, significantly impacting the livelihoods of many small-scale entrepreneurs.
- **Impact on Freelancers:** The IT sector, which includes around 600,000 to 1 million freelancers, was severely affected by the shutdown. Freelancers depend on internet connectivity for project delivery, client communication, and accessing international job platforms. During the blackout, many were unable to meet deadlines or maintain client

²⁰ Prothom Alo, July 21

²¹ Amnesty International. (2024, July 25). Bangladesh: Further video and photographic analysis confirm police unlawfully used lethal and less-lethal weapons against protesters. Amnesty International. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2024/07/bangladesh-further-video-and-photographic-analysis-confirm-police-unlawfully-used-lethal-and-less-lethal-weapons-against-protesters/>

²² The Daily Star. (2024, August 1). E-commerce sector lost Tk 1,700 crore for internet shutdown, violence: e-CAB. The Daily Star. <https://www.thedailystar.net/business/news/e-commerce-sector-lost-tk-1700-crore-internet-shutdown-violence-e-cab-3667231>

relationships, leading to a loss of trust and future work opportunities. Industry experts estimate that the IT sector lost about Tk 500 crore during the five-day internet blackout²³ a significant hit to a sector that is pivotal to Bangladesh's economic growth.

2. *Disruptions in Export-Oriented Industries*

Export-oriented sectors, particularly the ready-made garment (RMG) industry, faced significant disruptions:

- **Apparel Exporters:** Bangladesh's economy heavily relies on the garment sector, which contributes significantly to export earnings. During the internet shutdown, local suppliers struggled to communicate with international retailers, jeopardizing their ability to secure work orders during crucial booking seasons. July, August, and September are peak months for placing orders for the next summer and spring seasons, and the inability to communicate with buyers resulted in missed opportunities and financial losses.
- **Trade Operations:** The shutdown also disrupted customs operations at major ports like Chattogram, Mongla, and Benapole. The inability to transmit customs documentation electronically halted import and export activities, leading to delays in shipping and increased costs. While some limited local networking continued, the overall volume of goods delivery was severely impacted. As a result, many businesses faced significant setbacks in fulfilling orders and maintaining their supply chains.

3. *Financial Sector Disruptions*

The banking and financial sectors experienced considerable setbacks due to the internet blackout:

- **Transaction Delays:** The shutdown halted numerous financial transactions, including payments for imports and remittances. Many banks were unable to process payments on time, leading to additional fees and penalties imposed by foreign suppliers. This disruption affected not only the banks but also businesses relying on timely financial transactions to maintain operations.
- **Remittance Flow:** Remittances are a crucial component of Bangladesh's economy, with expatriates sending approximately \$80 million to \$100 million daily. The internet shutdown disrupted remittance collection, leading to a decline in income for many families. Mobile financial service (MFS) providers reported a dramatic drop in remittance mobilization during the blackout, causing financial strain for households that depend on these funds for their day-to-day expenses.

4. *Long-Term Economic Consequences*

The long-term economic implications of the internet shutdown could have far-reaching effects:

²³ The Daily Star. (2024, August 10). Ledger of losses. The Daily Star. <https://www.thedailystar.net/business/news/ledger-losses-3673416>

- **Erosion of Investor Confidence:** The internet shutdown has the potential to erode investor confidence in Bangladesh as a viable destination for technology-driven businesses. As clients and investors assess the reliability of digital infrastructure, they may reconsider partnerships and investments in light of the disruptions caused by such shutdowns.
- **Damage to the ICT Sector's Image:** The reputation of Bangladesh's ICT sector has suffered due to the shutdown, impacting its standing on the global stage. The long-term consequences of this damage may lead to fewer international collaborations and projects, hindering the sector's growth potential.



LIMITATIONS

Internet shutdowns extend beyond human rights and economic costs, severely impacting essential services like education, healthcare, and social support, which now heavily rely on digital access. Such disruptions undermine the delivery of these critical services, impeding individuals' rights to education, health, and social security. This not only hampers immediate access to vital resources but also has long-term implications for economic, social, and cultural rights. However, this paper focused on the primary impacts on human rights and economic costs, leaving the effects on essential services for future exploration.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) has long recognized the importance of safeguarding online freedoms, declaring in a 2012 resolution that “the same rights people have offline must also be protected online.” This includes the fundamental right to freedom of expression. In 2016, the UNHRC took a strong stance against internet shutdowns, condemning them as violations of human rights.

The recent internet shutdowns in Bangladesh underscore the growing tension between state control and the protection of human rights, particularly in relation to digital freedoms. These events not only disrupted daily life but also stifled access to information, suppressed freedom of expression, and undermined citizens' ability to hold the government accountable. As the political landscape shifts in the aftermath of the Sheikh Hasina government's fall, there is a unique opportunity to break away from the reliance on internet shutdowns as a tool of political control. To prevent future abuses and safeguard digital rights, reforms are essential. Below are several key recommendations to address these issues:

- 1. Establish Legal Frameworks:** The Bangladeshi government must introduce comprehensive legal frameworks that explicitly protect internet access while clearly defining the circumstances in which shutdowns may be implemented. These laws should incorporate robust checks and balances to prevent arbitrary actions and ensure transparency and accountability.

A necessary step toward this goal would be the amendment of the Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulatory Act of 2001 and the revision of relevant licensing policies.

A valuable precedent for these reforms can be found in the 2020 ruling by India's Supreme Court in the *Anuradha Bhasin vs. Union of India* case. The court recognized the internet as a vital tool for free expression and economic activity, deserving constitutional protection. It also emphasized that any internet shutdown must meet the criteria of proportionality and necessity.

Additionally, the court mandated that each shutdown order be publicly disclosed with a clear explanation and be subject to judicial review, allowing citizens to challenge such measures in court. This ruling underscores the importance of judicial oversight and legal clarity, both of which are essential for protecting digital rights and preventing the arbitrary use of internet shutdowns.

The UN report titled *"Internet Shutdowns: Trends, Causes, Legal Implications, and Impacts on a Range of Human Rights"* (2022)²⁴ suggests that if states consider or decide to implement shutdowns, they must always comply with six essential requirements. The government of Bangladesh must ensure compliance with these standards.

²⁴ United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. (2022). Internet shutdowns: Trends, causes, legal implications and impacts on a range of human rights. <https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/gen/g22/341/55/pdf-f/g2234155.pdf>

Any internet shutdowns must be:

- (a) Clearly grounded in unambiguous, publicly available law;
- (b) Necessary to achieve a legitimate aim, as defined in human rights law;
- (c) Proportional to the legitimate aim and the least intrusive means to achieving that end; accordingly, they should be as narrow as possible, in terms of duration, geographical scope and the networks and services affected;
- (d) Subject to prior authorization by a court or another independent adjudicatory body, to avoid any political, commercial or other unwarranted influence;
- (e) Communicated in advance to the public and telecommunications or Internet service providers, with a clear explanation of the legal basis for the shutdown and details regarding its scope and duration;
- (f) Subject to meaningful redress mechanisms accessible to those whose rights have been affected by the shutdowns, including through judicial proceedings in independent and impartial courts; court proceedings should be carried out in a timely fashion and provide the possibility to obtain a declaration of unlawfulness of shutdowns carried out in violation of applicable law, even after the end of the shutdown in question.

2. **Transparency and Access in Internet Controls:** States should ensure timely public disclosure of any internet shutdown measures, including throttling, platform restrictions, or VPN blocking. Furthermore, they should avoid criminalizing or blocking encryption and circumvention tools, supporting open access to these channels instead.
3. **Responsible ISP Actions:** Internet service providers should take all possible lawful steps to resist implementing shutdown requests and, if a shutdown proceeds, minimise its impact on human rights. They should exhaust domestic remedies to challenge shutdown orders, aim to keep communication channels open, and work to ensure full transparency about any service disruptions.
4. **Connectivity Safeguards in Partnerships:** Development partners should integrate safeguards against internet shutdowns when planning and executing cooperation programmes related to internet connectivity with the Government of Bangladesh.
5. **Enhance Public Awareness:** Civil society organizations should work to raise awareness about the importance of internet freedom and its relationship to human rights and democracy. Increased public understanding can mobilize support for digital rights.
6. **Investment in Technology:** The government and private sector should invest in technology that promotes internet access in remote areas, ensuring that all citizens can connect to essential services and information.
7. **Authorities Must Refrain from Normalizing Platform Blocks:** Authorities must recognize that restricting access to social media and messaging applications undermines freedom of expression and access to information. Instead of resorting to censorship, the government should prioritize dialogue and engagement to foster a more open and democratic society.



45/1 New Eskaton (2nd Floor), Dhaka 1000, Bangladesh
Phone: +880258310217, +880248317902, +880222223109
Email: ed@cgs-bd.com
Website: www.cgs-bd.com