



# Our Democracy is on the Brink of Abyss

## How Blocking the Internet Impacts Elections' Integrity and Transparency

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## Contents

<b>Preamble</b> .....	<b>2</b>
<b>Executive Summary</b> .....	<b>4</b>
<b>Study Methodology</b> .....	<b>5</b>
<b>Introduction:</b> .....	<b>6</b>
<b>Legal Framework for the Right to Access Information during Elections</b> .....	<b>7</b>
<b>Overview: Impact of Internet Blocking on Elections' Integrity &amp; Transparency</b> .....	<b>9</b>
<b>Internet Shutdowns during Electoral Processes Worldwide</b> .....	<b>10</b>
<b>Recommendations</b> .....	<b>13</b>

## Preamble

The universal right to access information is fundamental to the democratic functioning of societies and the well-being of individuals. It is enshrined in Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which states that everyone has the right "to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers."

The right to access information is a key pillar of democratic societies and a guarantee of a free and fair electoral process. Through my work in promoting and supporting democracy, I have come to realize the vital role that the free flow of information plays in enabling elections to be truly free, fair, and credible. Access to information is crucial at every stage of the electoral process. Firstly, it allows citizens to make informed choices when selecting their representatives. Furthermore, it enhances the ability of candidates to conduct electoral campaigns and persuade voters to support them. Additionally, it empowers civil society and the media to monitor the electoral process, as transparency and accountability are essential for democratic elections. Without full access to information, it is impossible to hold genuine democratic elections.

However, as we commemorate the International Day for Universal Access to Information, I am deeply concerned about the growing threat to democracy worldwide. Since 2016, governments have increasingly resorted to blocking the internet during electoral processes, severely hampering the free flow of information. This deliberate obstruction erodes confidence in the electoral processes, as citizens are unable to make informed decisions regarding the leaders who will shape their future. Moreover, civil society organizations and the press are unable to fulfill their crucial roles in monitoring the integrity and transparency of elections. These actions pose a significant threat to democracy.

We must recognize the gravity of this situation and take action to address it. Countries must cease the practice of blocking the internet during elections. Our democracy is teetering on the edge of an abyss, facing unprecedented challenges. To prevent its loss, we must unite and work together.

To ensure that information on the internet is accessible to all groups without discrimination during elections, UN bodies, technology companies, civil society organizations, specialists, and experts need to cooperate and find clear solutions. The International Day for Universal Access to Information serves as a reminder of the link between information access and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Specifically, it aligns with SDG 2, which focuses on investing in rural infrastructure and technological development, as well as SDG 11, which aims to foster positive

economic, social, and environmental connections between urban, peri-urban, and rural areas. Goal 16 emphasizes the need for initiatives to establish and implement constitutional, regulatory, and/or political safeguards to ensure public access to information. UNESCO has been entrusted by the United Nations General Assembly with the responsibility of monitoring the global implementation of Target 16.10.2, which calls on all nations to ensure public access to information and protect fundamental freedoms in accordance with national legislation and international agreements.

**Ayman Okeil**

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## Executive Summary

Undoubtedly, the Internet has become an increasingly indispensable source for obtaining and exchanging information. It plays a pivotal role in ensuring the right to access information, and there is a direct correlation between having accurate, reliable, and comprehensive information and strengthening democracy. Citizens need access to information to make informed decisions when participating in electoral processes, such as understanding the qualifications and experiences of candidates and familiarizing themselves with their platforms. Access to accurate information supports democracy by enhancing the integrity and transparency of elections. Therefore, any attempts to block access to the Internet during electoral processes pose a significant threat to the credibility and transparency of elections, as it hinders access to essential information that helps voters make informed choices.

Between January 2016 and August 2023, Internet blockades affected the transparency of elections in 29 countries worldwide. Against this backdrop, the International Day for Universal Access to Information provides an excellent opportunity for Maat for Peace, Development, and Human Rights to address the impact of Internet blockades on the credibility of electoral processes. Through this research study, Maat aims to highlight the detrimental effects of such blockades on democracy, ultimately leading to its decline worldwide. The study also presents a range of recommendations to enhance access to and utilization of the Internet during electoral processes, to strengthen and sustain democracy.

***Keywords: Internet shutdown - elections - access to information***

## Study Methodology

The study employed a methodology based on monitoring, documenting, and analyzing news and factual evidence concerning instances of Internet shutdowns during electoral elections from **January 2016 to the end of August 2023**. The objective was to investigate the effects of these shutdowns on the integrity and transparency of elections. The study drew upon reports and studies conducted by international organizations that examined incidents of Internet shutdowns during elections. Additionally, it reviewed studies, research, and reports from civil society organizations, specialists, and experts, focusing on the impact of Internet shutdowns on electoral transparency. By analyzing news related to Internet shutdowns during elections, the study aimed to document the obstacles and restrictions that impede access to information via the Internet during the electoral process.

## Introduction:

Every year on September 28<sup>th</sup>, the world commemorates the International Day for Universal Access to Information. This year's theme focuses on recognizing the significance of the virtual space in facilitating access to information. Maat seizes this opportunity to shed light on the adverse effects of Internet shutdowns on information access during electoral elections. Since 2016, there has been a disturbing trend of countries cutting off Internet access during elections, which undermines the credibility, freedom, and integrity of the electoral process. People worldwide rely on the Internet to obtain information about candidates, polling stations, electoral procedures, and election results. Civil society organizations, media outlets, and candidates themselves also depend on the Internet to monitor elections, disseminate information, and engage with voters. Therefore, any attempt to disrupt or restrict Internet connections, or block social media platforms, directly impacts the transparency and integrity of elections.

In this study, Maat examines the prevalent patterns of Internet shutdowns during elections from 2016 to the end of August 2023. It has been observed that 29 countries across the globe implemented Internet shutdowns during 57 electoral processes. Based on these findings, Maat developed recommendations to enhance access to information via the Internet during electoral processes.

## Legal Framework for the Right to Access Information during Elections

Many international instruments and treaties stipulate the right to obtain information as a basic right for all without discrimination, as well as their recognition of the right to access the Internet, and the right to hold free, fair, and periodic elections as basic conditions for the consolidation and sustainability of democracy. Therefore, the right to obtain information during elections is considered a right. Divergent, including three basic rights.

In this regard, most international human rights bodies have officially recognized the basic and legal nature of the right to freedom of information. Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and related interpretations by UN bodies stipulate the right of citizens to seek, receive, and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers, this includes the means used to provide information, especially information and communications technology and the Internet<sup>1</sup>. In the same context, Article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights stipulates the right to seek, receive, and impart information to others on the condition of respecting the rights and reputations of others and protecting national security or public order, public health, or public morals<sup>2</sup>. Many reports issued by the Special Rapporteur on freedom of opinion and expression confirm that the right to access information is necessary to promote justice and redress harm, especially after transitional periods. National state legislation should also include laws to facilitate citizens' access to information<sup>3</sup>.

Declaration of Principles on Freedom of Expression and Access to Information in Africa, in Articles 26 to 36, refers to the right of citizens to obtain information, and this includes the necessity of not withholding information except in specific cases, such as when it could harm national security. Additionally, there should be national bodies that guarantee the free flow of information<sup>4</sup>. Several sustainable development goals (SDGs) emphasize the necessity of access to information for citizens, including enacting laws to enhance access to information, which is stated in goals 9 and 16 of SDGs<sup>5</sup>. However, there is a set of international standards that support the process of obtaining information in its introduction is necessary to make the largest amount of information available to the public and disseminate it by laws that regulate the process of obtaining that information, provided that this is at the lowest cost or free of charge<sup>6</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> اليوم العالمي لحرية الصحافة، الأمم المتحدة، <https://cutt.us/bYYKV>

<sup>2</sup> العهد الدولي للحقوق السياسية والمدنية، مكتب المفوضية السامية لحقوق الإنسان، <https://cutt.us/lkhzs>

<sup>3</sup> International standards Right to information.artical19. <https://cutt.us/Mjeha>

<sup>4</sup> Declaration of Principles on Freedom of Expression and Access to Information in Africa 2019. <https://cutt.us/lyllq>

<sup>5</sup> التنمية المستدامة وحرية التعبير ما هي الأصوات، تقرير المقررة الخاصة المعنية بتعزيز و حماية حرية الرأي والتعبير، A/HRC/53/25، <https://cutt.us/67YOW>

<sup>6</sup> المعايير الدولية للحق في الحصول على المعلومات، الجمعية اللبنانية لتعزيز الشفافية، <https://cutt.us/EIscV>



Free and fair elections are at the heart of the democratic process, and this is affirmed by many international agreements and conventions. Article 21 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights affirms the necessity of holding free and fair elections periodically, with universal suffrage and on an equal footing among voters, in a way that guarantees freedom of voting<sup>7</sup>. Article 25 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights stipulates the necessity of holding free and fair elections that guarantee the right of citizens to choose who represents them<sup>8</sup>. Several international and regional instruments also stipulate the same matter, such as the Charter of the Organization of American States and the African Charter on Human and People's Rights. The integrity and freedom of elections must include respect for other human rights such as the right to freedom of movement, the right to freedom of peaceful assembly, and the right to access information during elections<sup>9</sup>.

Due to the recent increase in citizens' reliance on the Internet, a global human rights trend has emerged that emphasizes that all citizens should be able to access the Internet. States must bear the responsibility of making the Internet widely available to all their citizens, including not restricting access to it. In July 2016, the Human Rights Council issued a resolution affirming that access to the Internet is a basic human right, it also condemns measures to deliberately obstruct information, which include blocking and interference<sup>10</sup>. SDG 9 emphasized the necessity of providing comprehensive and affordable access to the Internet in least-developed countries<sup>11</sup>. The United Nations report "Our Common Plan" indicates the need to enhance everyone's access to the Internet as a basic human right, with the conclusion of a global digital agreement that ensures that all citizens are connected to the Internet<sup>12</sup>.

In 2017, the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights released guidelines regarding access to information and elections in Africa. These guidelines emphasize the importance of providing voters with access to electoral information to promote democratic governance. For elections to be considered free, fair, and credible by international laws and standards, voters must have access to information at all stages of the electoral process. Without this access, citizens may be unable to effectively exercise their right to vote on a larger scale.

<sup>7</sup> الإعلان العالمي لحقوق الإنسان، مرجع سابق ذكره

<sup>8</sup> العهد الدولي الخاص بالحقوق السياسية و المدنية مرجع سابق ذكره

<sup>9</sup> دليل دراسي الحق في التصويت، جامعة مينسوتا لحقوق الإنسان ، <https://cutt.us/VN3T5>

<sup>10</sup> مجلس حقوق الانسان يقرر ان الوصول الى الانترنت حق من حقوق الإنسان، الأخبار الأوروبية، <https://cutt.us/oR6s6>

<sup>11</sup> أهداف التنمية المستدامة، الأمم المتحدة، <https://cutt.us/O7veb>

<sup>12</sup> خطتنا مشتركة تقرير الأمين العام، <https://cutt.us/0dcCn>

## Overview: Impact of Internet Blocking on Elections' Integrity & Transparency

Free flow of information during elections is a basic condition for strengthening democracy and ensuring an open space for politicians, journalists, civil society, citizens, and, all stakeholders to express their opinions and contribute to choosing those who represent them. However, many governments block access to the Internet and withhold information from the public during electoral processes. UN estimates emphasize that blocking the Internet takes place through the government's deliberate obstruction of access to information and communications systems and communication tools related to the Internet and its various uses completely by obstructing access to all Internet services, or partially such as blocking social media platforms or inability to access certain news sites or the inability to access internet-based messaging services, besides reducing the speed of the internet significantly, especially to second generation services, which limits the ability of users to benefit from the services of websites and internet services. Maat believes that any measures taken by governments to limit access to all services related to the internet act as content blocking, in whole or in part<sup>13</sup>.

Blocking and shutting down the internet during elections limits the ability of election candidates, especially opponents, to organize their election campaigns and share their ideas with citizens for their choice. In the absence of reliable and unhindered access to the internet, opposition candidates may be left with limited options to reach voters, which is discrimination and a violation of equality in reaching all citizens during election periods, which is considered a basic criterion for democratic elections, blocking operations also prevent the media from accessing information, which harms the freedom of the press, which is considered a basic and necessary pillar of the transparency and credibility of elections, and also prevents citizens from knowing the information necessary to make their decisions about choosing who represents them, and increases their doubts about elected democratic institutions<sup>14</sup>.

Cutting off the internet prevents civil society organizations and entities that monitor elections from fully monitoring the electoral process, uncovering the violations surrounding and communicating with each other, which challenges the democracy of the electoral process, and all of these factors contribute to eroding confidence in the democratic electoral process and the legitimacy of ruling regimes<sup>15</sup>.

<sup>13</sup> حجب الإنترنت الاتجاهات و الأسباب والتداعيات القانونية والتأثيرات التي تمس بمجموعة من حقوق الإنسان، تقرير المفوضية السامية لحقوق الإنسان رقم <https://cutt.us/EQG6w> ،A/HRC/50/55

<sup>14</sup> Internet shutdowns and elections handbook.access now. <https://cutt.us/KRYy1>

<sup>15</sup> Ibid

## Internet Shutdowns during Electoral Processes Worldwide

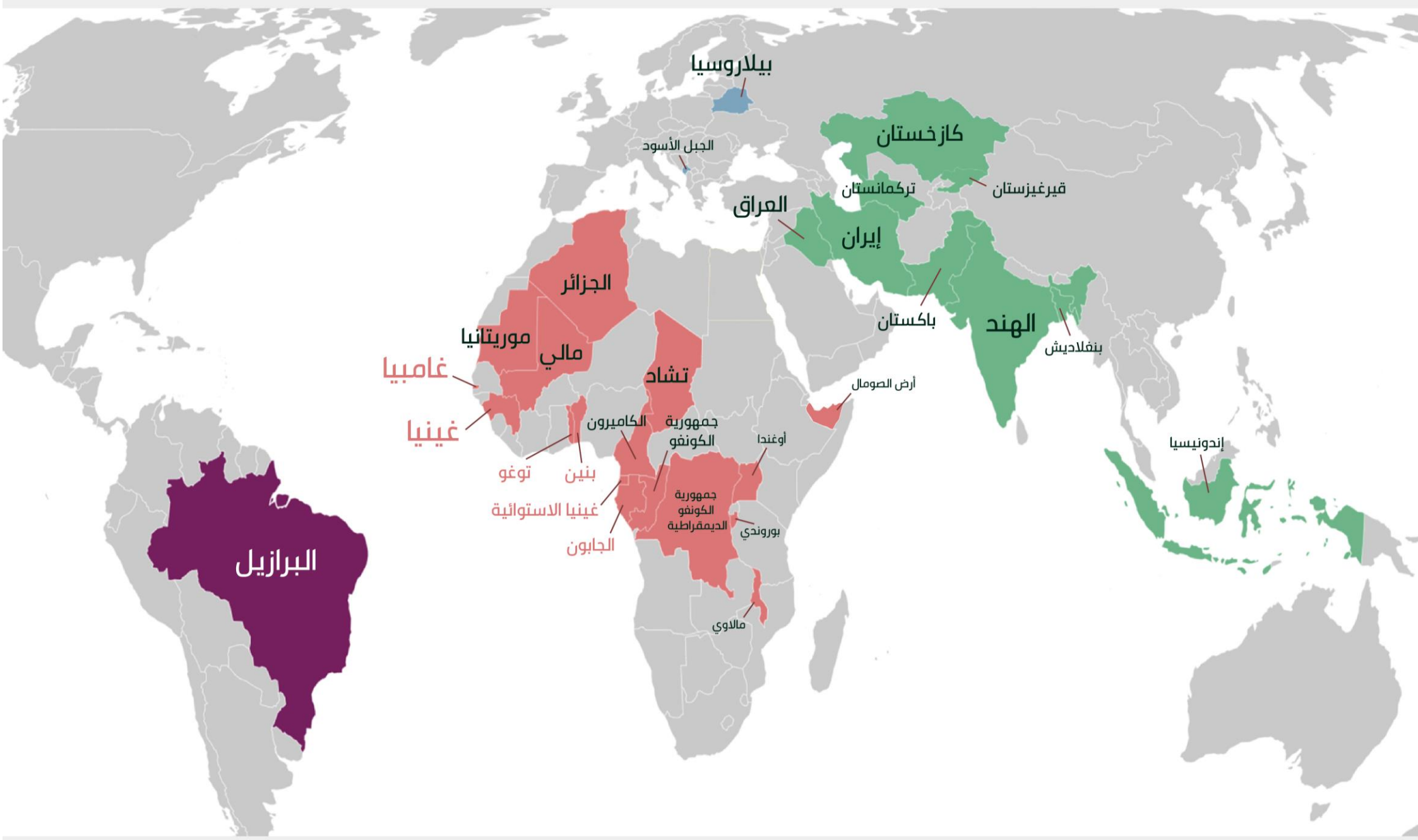
Maat's analysis in the context of electoral processes in the period from 2016 to the end of August 2023 indicates that internet-blocking operations affected 57 electoral processes in 29 countries all over the world, and some countries restricted access to the internet in more than one electoral process and different years. African countries are at the forefront of countries that block the internet during elections. During the study period, **17 African countries** cut off the internet partially or completely, **while 9 countries from Asia** cut off the internet during elections, besides **two countries from Europe**, and **a country from South America**.

The countries that cut off the internet during elections all over the world were India, Iran, Uganda, and Kazakhstan. In more than one election process, they resorted to cutting off the internet partially or completely more than once, and the year in which the internet was cut off most during elections was 2019, with 12 operations in 8 countries all over the world.

**Table Showing Internet Shutdowns all over the World from 2016 to the End of August 2023**

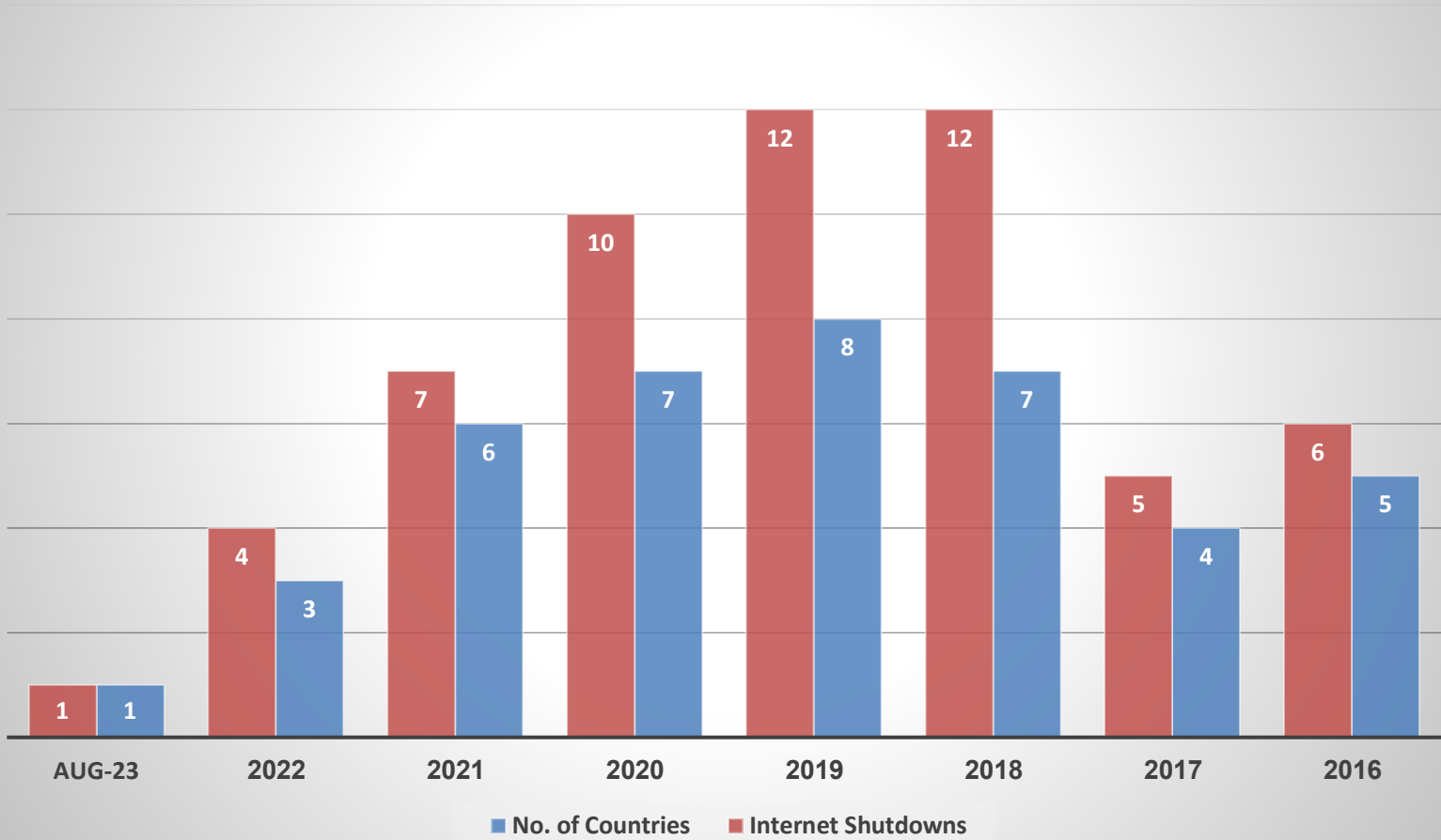
Year	No. of Countries	Names of Countries	Internet Shutdowns
<b>2016</b>	5	Uganda - Chad - Montenegro - Gambia - Gabon	<b>6</b>
<b>2017</b>	4	India - Iran - Equatorial Guinea - Somaliland	<b>5</b>
<b>2018</b>	7	Iraq - Mali - Pakistan - India - Cameroon - Democratic Republic of the Congo - Bangladesh	<b>12</b>
<b>2019</b>	8	Algeria - Benin - India - Democratic Republic of the Congo - Malawi - Mauritania - Indonesia - Kazakhstan	<b>12</b>
<b>2020</b>	7	India-Guinea - Belarus - Burundi - Kyrgyzstan - Tanzania - Togo	<b>10</b>
<b>2021</b>	6	Chad - Republic of the Congo - Iran - Niger - Uganda - Zambia	<b>7</b>
<b>2022</b>	3	Brazil - Kazakhstan - Turkmenistan	<b>4</b>
<b>August 2023</b>	1	Gabon	<b>1</b>

*Table by Maat*





## Table Showing Internet Shutdowns all over the World from 2016 to the End of August 2023



During 2023, with the closure of polling stations for the presidential and legislative elections in Gabon in August 2023, the government announced the suspension of internet service to reduce calls for the spread of violence and misleading information in light of an electoral process marred by many electoral violations<sup>16</sup>, this was followed by a military coup to object to the results of the elections and even cancel them<sup>17</sup>.

In 2022, three countries shut down the internet during the elections: Brazil, Kazakhstan, and Turkmenistan. In Brazil, the judicial authorities issued a decision to block access to the Telegram application before the elections due to publishing misleading information<sup>18</sup>. In Kazakhstan, during the presidential elections, access to social media and communications platforms was blocked before and after the elections, besides preventing access to certain websites before the opening of the polls. In Turkmenistan, the internet was shut down before the election results were announced, amid human rights criticism of many procedures related to the electoral process<sup>19</sup>.

<sup>16</sup> إعلان حظر التجول وقطع الإنترنت بعد إغلاق مراكز الاقتراع في الغابون، <https://cutt.us/DzzYD>

<sup>17</sup> انقلاب الغابون: لماذا تتسارع وتيرة الانقلابات في إفريقيا؟، <https://cutt.us/U73IQ>

<sup>18</sup> Brazilian supreme court bans messaging app Telegram ahead of presidential elections. <https://cutt.us/864ZO>

<sup>19</sup> Keep It On: 2022 elections and internet shutdowns watch <https://cutt.us/pvym6>

In 2021, 6 countries, Chad, the Republic of the Congo, Iran, Niger, Uganda and Zambia, blocked Internet access during elections. In January 2021, Uganda's government barred citizens from accessing the Internet during general elections to elect the president and members of parliament<sup>20</sup>. In Niger, the government responded to protests following elections in February 2021 by shutting down mobile internet<sup>21</sup>. In the Republic of the Congo, the government cut off the Internet and text messages during the presidential election in March 2021 to ensure the unconditional re-election of President Sassou Nguesso of the Republic of the Congo to another term<sup>22</sup>. General elections were held in Zambia in August 2021 to elect the President and the National Assembly without citizens' access to the Internet, which shut down on the pretext of maintaining national security.

Throughout 2020, 7 countries, India, Guinea, Belarus, Burundi, Kyrgyzstan, Tanzania, and Togo, were denied access to the Internet and social media in 10 electoral processes. In February 2020, during the presidential election in Togo, the government blocked access to instant messaging apps on Election Day<sup>23</sup>. In Guinea, the government shut down the Internet twice in March 2020 during the referendum on constitutional amendments, the second in October of the same year, and during the presidential election in which citizens refused to accept its results, and much violence broke out<sup>24</sup>. In August 2020, Belarus repeatedly shut down the Internet and social media platforms after the people rejected the presidential elections, and protested its results; so, the government committed numerous rights violations<sup>25</sup>.

2019 was the most recent year in which countries cut off the Internet during electoral processes. The Internet has been cut off 12 times in 8 countries: Benin, India, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Malawi, Mauritania, Indonesia, Kazakhstan and Algeria. Benin shut down Internet service during parliamentary elections, particularly on Election Day, on which it banned access to social media<sup>26</sup>. On the other side, from 11 April to 19 May 2020, India denied citizens in Rajasthan, West Bengal, and Kashmir access to mobile internet during the elections, justified by the Indian government to maintain national security<sup>27</sup>. In March 2019, Algeria cut off the Internet ahead of the presidential election scheduled for April of that year to control protests against Algerian President Abdelaziz Bouteflika's candidacy for a fifth term<sup>28</sup>.

<sup>20</sup> انتخابات أوغندا قطع الإنترنت قبيل ساعات من الاقتراع، الأهرام، يناير 2022، <https://bit.ly/3rmDd5k>

<sup>21</sup> Whats Happening In Niger: The internet shutdown in Niamey threatens Niger's democracy and its people's right to free speech. <https://cutt.us/A2y97>

<sup>22</sup> إعادة انتخاب رئيس جمهورية الكونغو ساسو نغيسو لولاية جديدة بـ 88,57 بالمئة من الأصوات، فرنسا 24، مارس 2021، <https://bit.ly/3HqGYwi>

<sup>23</sup> Togo: Instant messaging apps blocked amid 2020 presidential election. <https://cutt.us/ctrjI>

<sup>24</sup> Guinea elections: Alpha Condé wins third term amid violent protests. <https://cutt.us/VFkL5>

<sup>25</sup> بيلاروسيا تحجب أجزاء من الإنترنت رداً على الاحتجاجات، <https://cutt.us/ocv5X>

<sup>26</sup> Internet blocked in Benin on election day. <https://cutt.us/P56pM>

<sup>27</sup> India is cutting people off from the internet in the middle of its election .

<sup>28</sup> Algeria has blocked the internet days before its ailing president files to run for a fifth term. <https://cutt.us/zAuOn>

In 2018, 7 countries cut off the Internet during the elections; Bangladesh and the Democratic Republic of the Congo cut off the Internet during and after the elections, in addition to Iraq, Mali, Pakistan, Cameroon, and India. In Iraq, Internet service was cut off in May 2018, days before parliamentary elections. In August 2018, during Mali's presidential run-off<sup>29</sup>, some internet users in Bamako and Gao did not have access to it, and many journalists complained about their inability to use mobile networks<sup>30</sup>. In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, many rights estimates indicated that the Internet was cut off during and after the electoral process, affecting the credibility of the elections<sup>31</sup>.

In 2017, 4 countries discontinued the Internet during the elections: India, Iran, Equatorial Guinea, and Somaliland. Weeks before Iran's presidential election, the Iranian government imposed restrictions on the application of telegram social media<sup>32</sup>. Iran is considered one of the most disconnected countries on the Internet during the elections. Before the May 2017 legislative elections, the Iranian government blocked the Internet and imprisoned many rights activists who interacted with it to express their views on the elections<sup>33</sup>. In 2016, 5 States around the world, Chad, Gabon, Montenegro, Uganda, and Chad, cut off the Internet during the elections. Previous analysis shows that Internet outages have affected the transparency, integrity, and credibility of elections in many countries, particularly African countries.

<sup>29</sup> After several hours of sudden Internet shutdowns in Iraq. <https://cutt.us/RJsNR>

<sup>30</sup> Netizen Report: Elections in Mali marred by militant violence and internet shutdowns. <https://cutt.us/zle8g>

<sup>31</sup> خبير أممي الإغلاق الكامل لشبكة الإنترنت ينتهك القانون الدولي، الأمم المتحدة، <https://cutt.us/BbENQ>

<sup>32</sup> قبل انتخابات إيران حجب للمواقع وقمع للصحافيين، العربية، <https://cutt.us/NetER>

<sup>33</sup> إيران تحكم قبضتها على شبكة الإنترنت عشية الانتخابات التشريعية، <https://cutt.us/n4aHj>

## Recommendations

Overall, access to online information is a prerequisite for enhancing the transparency and integrity of elections, and Maat for Peace, Development and Human Rights on World Information Day recommends the following:

- The need for satellite or space Internet access in countries experiencing repeated Internet interruptions during elections to overcome the obstacles and challenges of Internet interruptions during elections, focusing on African countries where the issue of blocking the Internet during elections has been repeated;
- The need to develop a code of conduct that represents a set of guidelines that support Internet access during elections and invites international and international bodies, in particular the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), to take the initiative to develop the Charter with the participation of civil society organizations;
- Technology companies and Internet and telecommunications companies must take responsibility for protecting human rights and protecting access to the Internet and information during elections, avoiding Internet disruption.