



## PRESS BRIEFING

### The fight to #KeepItOn during elections: the role of stakeholders

**When: November 30, 2020, 12:00 UTC**

**Where: Access Now YouTube Live** (<https://www.youtube.com/c/AccessnowOrg/live>)

**Host: Access Now**

#### Speakers:

- **Peggy Hicks**, Director Thematic Engagement, Special Procedures and Right to Development Division at the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights
- **Maung Saungkha**, Poet, Activist & Executive Director at Athan (Myanmar)
- **Maria Sarungi-Tsehai**, Activist & Founder of Change Tanzania (Tanzania)
- **Alexey Kozliuk**, Co-Founder of Human Constanta (Belarus)
- **Yana Goncharova**, Chief Communication Officer at Human Constanta (Belarus)
- **Felicia Anthonio**, Campaigner and #KeepItOn Lead at Access Now
- **Natalia Krapiva**, Tech Legal Counsel at Access Now

#### How do internet shutdowns affect elections?

The internet plays a key role in democracy in 2020. Access to the internet, social media platforms, and messaging services enables people to access information, actively participate in the voting process, engage in public discourse, and hold elected leaders to account — all key tenets of a democratic society. Yet, governments around the world are increasingly denying their citizens access to these platforms during elections and other important national events. In 2020 alone, the governments of **Togo, Burundi, Guinea, Belarus, Tanzania, and Myanmar** all held elections, and all hit the internet kill switch, plunging millions into darkness, denying people their right to fully participate in the democratic process.

Internet shutdowns and violence go hand in hand. Shutting down the internet during elections has the potential to lead to chaos and crisis, exacerbate existing tensions, and can serve to conceal violence and human rights violations perpetrated by state or non-state actors alike. Without access to communication tools, journalists and media workers are unable to report on the election process.

# #KeepItOn

Fighting Internet Shutdowns around the World

The #KeepItOn coalition has found evidence of human rights abuses reported by the media in a majority of countries that shut down access to the internet and digital communications platforms during elections: authorities in Belarus [cracked down on protesters](#), opposition politicians, human rights defenders and journalists; and [reports from Guinea](#) indicate at least 21 people were killed.

***The fight to #KeepItOn during elections: the role of stakeholders*** is bringing together regional and international experts from the United Nations, the African Union, and civil society to delve into the incidents of internet shutdowns documented in 2020 during elections, and explore how stakeholders can work together to raise awareness about these acts of repression, and hold governments accountable. **Journalists** and members of the **media** are invited to actively participate, and use this unique opportunity to ask the pressing questions.

## Focus countries

### Myanmar

Myanmar's history of implementing internet shutdowns, slowdowns, and throttling began in June 2019, targeting predominantly Rohingya communities in Chin and Rakhine states. Those who speak up against these acts of repression are being persecuted, including Maung Saungkha, a prominent poet and activist, who was sentenced to prison and a fine for raising a banner in a peaceful act of protest against the year-long internet shutdowns imposed in the region.

In the lead-up to the country's election on November 8, 2020, authorities deactivated more than 34 million SIM cards, after people failed to re register them with National Registration Card (NRC) numbers. Many Rohingya people in Myanmar are stateless, and do not have NRC numbers. There were also several reports of Rohingya Muslims being denied the right to vote. Many polling stations in these areas were closed as a result of fighting between government troops and ethnic insurgents.

### Tanzania

The 2020 presidential elections were tainted with internet censorship and intimidation of dissidents. Prior to election day on October 28, 2020, the Tanzania Communication Regulatory Authority ordered telco service providers to suspend access to bulk short messaging services (SMS) and bulk voice services from October 24 until November 11, 2020, and reportedly censored individual messages that included election keywords, leaving millions without effective communication tools. A day before the elections, reports of government censorship in Tanzania escalated. Media reports and evidence gathered by the Open Observatory of Network Interference (OONI) suggests that Twitter, WhatsApp, and, potentially, Telegram have been blocked today. There were reports of an internet shutdown in the country on the day of election.

### Belarus

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On August 9, 2020, as Belarusians waited in long lines to cast their ballot for the next president, residents reported complete and partial internet blackouts affecting both landline and mobile services, within and outside of the country. State authorities blocked social media platforms, including Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Vkontakte — a major Russian online social media and social networking service.

Amidst protests disputing the victory announcement for sitting President Aleksandr Lukashenko, the government implemented a complete internet shutdown. Hundreds of heavily armed riot police and security agents attacked protesters with water cannons, stun grenades, and rubber bullets, in order to disperse the multitude of demonstrators gathered in Minsk. The government of Belarus continued to disrupt internet access following subsequent protests. It was later revealed that a U.S.-owned company with Canadian connections called Sandvine was responsible for selling the infrastructure that enabled the government to shut down the internet. Sandvine pulled out of the deal following immense backlash. A1 Telekom Austria Group, through its subsidiary A1 Belarus, hit the kill switch.

## Resources

- [Targeted, Cut Off, and Left in the Dark: The #KeepItOn Report on Internet Shutdowns in 2019](#) (Access Now)
- [Have questions about internet shutdowns? Kill Switch has answers](#) (Access Now)
- [#KeepItOn: ensure democracy during elections](#) (Access Now)
- [Myanmar court convicts Maung Saungkha for protesting internet shutdowns; all charges must be rescinded](#) (Access Now)
- [Francisco Partners-owned Sandvine profits from shutdowns and oppression in Belarus](#) (Access Now)
- [Shutdowns in Belarus: Austrian telco must denounce actions and commit to accountability](#) (Access Now)
- [Africa internet: Where and how are governments blocking it?](#) (BBC)
- [Why Did Ethiopia's Leader Just Launch Airstrikes on the Tigray Region?](#) (New York Times)
- [#KeepItOn: Organizing the global efforts to end internet shutdowns](#) (Solidarity Action Network)