

July 23, 2021

#KeepItOn open letter: the Federal Government of Somalia must keep the internet open and secure during presidential and parliament elections

Your Excellency Mohamed Hussein Roble,
Prime Minister of Federal Government of Somalia,

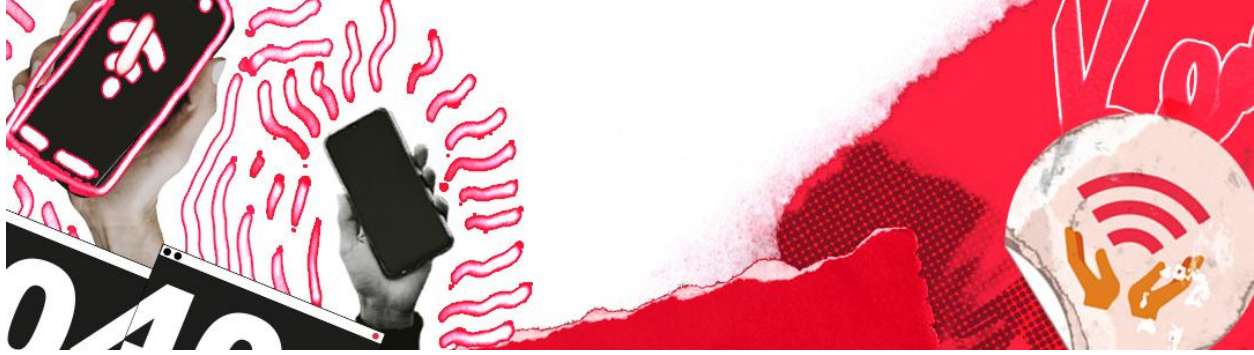
CC: Ministry of Posts, Telecom and Communications and Information Technology, Ministry of Interior, National Communications Authority, The Federal Member States of Puntland, Hirshabelle, Galmudug, South West and Jubaland, Hormuud Telecom, SOMNET, Somtel, Golis Telecom, Amtel.

Nations across Africa, and the world, are intentionally shutting down the internet when people need it the most – during elections and important national events. This election, we urge the Federal Government of Somalia to #KeepItOn

We, the undersigned organizations and members of the [#KeepItOn coalition](#) — a global network that unites over 240 organizations to end internet shutdowns globally — urgently appeal to you, Prime Minister Mohamed Hussein Roble, to ensure that the internet, social media platforms, and all other communication channels are open, secure, and accessible throughout the upcoming election period. The people of Somalia will vote for their representatives in the Federal Upper House and Lower House elections scheduled for July 25, 2021 and August 10 to September 10 respectively. Parliamentarians will vote for the President on October 10.

To safeguard democracy, your office must prioritise and protect fundamental rights such as freedom of opinion and expression, access to information, and the right to peaceful assembly throughout the elections and thereafter. Journalists in Somalia have long faced threats and attacks from state and non-state actors including government officials, and the Islamist armed group, Al-Shabaab. In 2020, [Amnesty International](#) reported an increase in violent attacks against journalists, describing Somalia as one of the most dangerous places in the world to practice journalism. These attacks have forced journalists and media workers into [self-censorship](#). Freedom of the press is the cornerstone of fair and open elections, and these incidents must not repeat. Therefore, we appeal to you, Prime Minister Mohamed Hussein Roble, to ensure that access to the internet and all digital communication platforms remain open and secure.

The internet, social media platforms, and messaging apps play a critical role in providing a space for expression, deliberation, protest, and activism in any society, especially in contexts like Somalia, where the media and free flow of information is repressed. These outlets provide space for communicating, public debate, seeking information on electoral processes and candidates, advocating against and documenting human rights violations, [reporting and documenting election](#)



[events and outcomes](#), and holding governments accountable for their actions — including their promises to the people. Journalists, human rights defenders, election observers, civil society actors, and other relevant stakeholders, require accessible internet to fulfil their crucial roles.

Somalia on the #KeepItOn coalition’s radar

Although there is no record of government-mandated internet shutdowns in Somalia to date, the country is on the #KeepItOn coalition’s radar due to the heavy restrictions on the media, and the [murky details](#) of a 2020 internet blackout that took place after the Somali parliament voted to remove Prime Minister Hassan Ali Khaire from his post, for which authorities cited technical problems as a cause of the disruption. In 2019, the government also [threatened](#) to shut down social media during school exams after examination papers were reportedly leaked and being circulated online.

Internet shutdowns contravene international human rights laws and standards

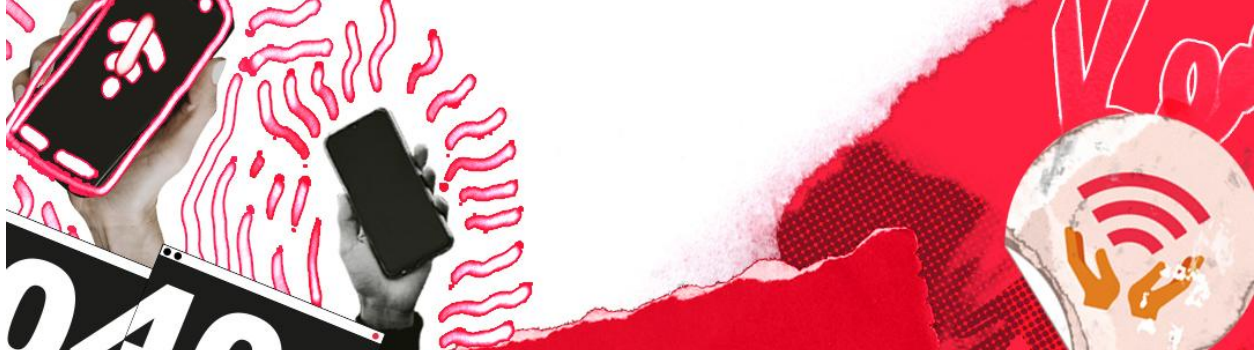
The Federal Government of Somalia has ratified regional and international frameworks such as the legally-binding [International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights](#) (ICCPR), and the *African Charter on Human and People’s Rights*, which provide for the protection and promotion of the rights of freedom of opinion and expression, assembly, and access to information, both offline and online.

The African Commission on Human and Peoples’ Rights (ACHPR) Resolution from 2016 recognizes the “importance of the internet in advancing human and people’s rights in Africa, particularly the right to freedom of information and expression.” The [ACHPR/Res. 362 \(LIX\) 2016](#) also condemns the “emerging practice of State Parties interrupting or limiting access to telecommunication services such as the internet, social media, and messaging services.” [U.N. experts and high-level officials](#) — including the U.N. Secretary-General — formally affirm that blanket Internet shutdowns and generic blocking and filtering of services are considered by United Nations human rights mechanisms to never be justified under international human rights law.

Telecom companies must respect human rights

Telecom companies and businesses have a responsibility under the [UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights](#) and the *OECD Guidelines for Multinational Enterprises* to respect human rights, prevent or mitigate potential harms, and provide remedy for harms they cause or contribute to. It outlines, “states should take additional steps to protect against human rights abuses by business enterprises that are owned or controlled by the state.”

Moreover, telecom service providers operating in Somalia including Hormuud Telecom, SOMNET, Golis Telecom, and Somtel have a responsibility to uphold and respect human rights by providing high-quality, open, and secure access to the internet and digital communication tools throughout the elections and beyond. Internet shutdowns — whether in Somalia or other countries — must never be



allowed to become the new normal, and we encourage Somalia enterprises to integrate these practices for responding to censorship and network disruption requests in all markets where you operate.

Recommendations

As organizations that believe in the power of the internet as an enabler of many other human rights, we assert that unhindered access to the internet, social media, and messaging apps during the election period in Somalia are vital to people exercising their right to freely express their views in a peaceful manner of their choosing, to engage in free exchange of information, and to advocate for transparency.

We respectfully request that you use the important positions of your offices to:

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- 1. Publicly assure the people, media organizations, and journalists of the Federal Government of Somalia that the internet, including social media and other digital communication platforms, will remain open, accessible, inclusive, and secure across Somalia throughout the election and thereafter;**

 - 2. Order internet service providers operating in the country to provide everyone with high-quality, secure, and unrestricted internet access throughout the election period and thereafter; and**

 - 3. Order internet service providers operating in the country to inform internet users of any potential disruptions and to take all reasonable steps to fix any identified disruptions likely to impact the quality of service they receive.**
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Sincerely,



ORGANIZATIONS

Access Now	Open Net Africa
Advocacy Initiative for Development (AID)	Open Observatory of Network Interference (OONI)
African Freedom of Expression Exchange (AFEX)	Organization of the Justice Campaign
Africa Interactive Media	Paradigm Initiative (PIN)
Africa Open Data and Internet Research Foundation (AODIRF)	PEN America
Bareedo Platform Somalia	Ranking Digital Rights
Centre for Multilateral Affairs (CfMA)	Somali Click
Change Tanzania Movement	Somalia Internet Governance Forum
Common Cause Zambia	Technology Innovation Agency (TIA)
DefendDefenders	The Tor Project
International Press Centre (IPC)	Togolese Civil League
Internet Protection Society (Russia)	Unwanted Witness
Iraqi Network for Social Media - INSM	Wikimedia France
Liberia Information Technology Student Union	Women of Uganda Network (WOUGNET)
Media Foundation for West Africa (MFWA)	Women ICT Advocacy Group (WIAG)
Media Institute for Southern Africa (MISA Zimbabwe)	Wikimedia Community User Group Uganda
Namibia Media Trust (NMT)	Youths and Environmental Advocacy Centre (YEAC), Nigeria
National Union of Somali Journalists (NUSOJ)	Zambian Bloggers Network

For More Information, please contact:

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