



November 06, 2020

**#KeepItOn: We continue to call on the Republic of the Union of Myanmar to lift the internet shutdowns imposed in Rakhine and Chin States during elections and beyond**

**Re: Internet access will ensure increased participation and transparency in Myanmar general's elections**

Your Excellencies

Win Myint, President of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar  
Aung San Suu Kyi, State Counselor of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar  
Hla Thein, Chairman, Union Election Commission

CC:

M. Thant Sin Maung, Ministry of Transport and Communications;  
M. Sin Wein, Ministry of Defence  
U Hla Myint, Chairperson, Myanmar National Human Rights Commission

We, the undersigned organizations and members of the #KeepItOn coalition — a global network that unites over 220 organizations from 99 countries working to end internet shutdowns<sup>1</sup> — urgently appeal to the **Myanmar authorities and the Union Election Commission to lift the internet shutdowns imposed in Rakhine and Chin States and ensure stable and open internet access before, during, and after the general elections in the Republic of the Union of Myanmar, scheduled for November 8, 2020.**

The internet plays a crucial role in enabling people to access information and remain informed about the election process. Access to the internet and social media platforms provides people in Myanmar the potential to actively participate in the voting process, engage in public discourse, and hold their elected leaders accountable, which are all important tenets of a democratic society.

---

<sup>1</sup> An internet shutdown is defined as an intentional disruption of internet or electronic communications, rendering them inaccessible or effectively unusable, for a specific population or within a location, often to exert control over the flow of information. See more at: <https://accessnow.org/keepiton>.



Fighting Internet Shutdowns around the World

The 2020 elections in Myanmar are already tainted by [voter suspension](#) in select parts of the country, leading to allegations of state [manipulation and interference](#). By disrupting the free flow of information, shutdowns exacerbate any existing tensions in the society and increase the likelihood of protests, as well as the concealment of potential violence and human rights violations perpetrated by both state and non-state actors. Without access to communications tools, journalists and the media are unable to report on the election process and outcomes.

Myanmar has previously shut down, throttled, and targeted denial of telecom access to communities. The mobile internet was shut down in nine townships in Rakhine and Chin states in June 2019, and has been intermittently and inconsistently [reinstated](#), throttled, and cut off again, despite widespread concerns for human rights. Additionally, over 2020, the Myanmar Government has forced telecommunications companies to [impose a SIM-card registration mandate, resulting in nearly 34 million residents facing restrictions](#) on using telecom networks in the run up to the elections — particularly impacting those who may be stateless or unable to easily provide National Registration Card information, such as the Rohingya minorities.

### **Internet shutdowns impinge on the conduct of free and fair elections, harm human rights and disrupt emergency services**

Research shows that internet shutdowns and violence go hand in hand.<sup>2</sup> Shutting down the internet during a [deadly pandemic](#) adds fuel to the fire. Internet shutdowns violate fundamental human rights such as freedom of expression and opinion, access to information, press freedom, and freedom of assembly. Although governments attempt to justify network disruptions for various reasons, in reality, internet shutdowns deny people access to vital and life-saving information including information on COVID-19, and emergency services, plunging whole communities into fear and confusion.

### **Internet shutdowns contravene international laws**

Since 2016, the United Nations General Assembly and Human Rights Council, through several resolutions, has condemned intentional disruptions to internet access in violation of international law.<sup>3</sup> In 2018, the Human Rights Council reaffirmed that “the same rights people have offline must also

---

<sup>2</sup> Anita R. Gohdes, ‘Pulling the Plug: Network Disruptions and Violence in the Syrian Conflict’ (Journal of Peace Research: 31 January 2014) <[http://www.anitagohdes.net/uploads/2/7/2/3/27235401/gohdes\\_synetworkaug14.pdf](http://www.anitagohdes.net/uploads/2/7/2/3/27235401/gohdes_synetworkaug14.pdf)> accessed 24 March 2017.

<sup>3</sup> See UN Human Rights Council, (June 2016) “The promotion, protection and enjoyment of human rights on the Internet”, [http://ap.ohchr.org/documents/dpage\\_e.aspx?si=A/HRC/32/L.20](http://ap.ohchr.org/documents/dpage_e.aspx?si=A/HRC/32/L.20).

# #KeepItOn

Fighting Internet Shutdowns around the World

be protected online, in particular freedom of expression.”<sup>4</sup> Shutdowns, disproportionately impact all users, and unnecessarily restrict access to information and emergency services communications during crucial moments. Shutdowns are neither necessary, nor effective at achieving a “legitimate aim”, as they block the spread of information, contribute to confusion and disorder, and obstruct public safety.

As a coalition that believes in the internet as an enabler of all other human rights, we call on you to undertake the necessary measures to ensure that the internet service providers and relevant actors ensure an open, accessible, and secure internet across Myanmar throughout the elections and beyond. We respectfully request that Myanmar authorities:

- Lift the internet shutdowns imposed in Rakhine and Chin states and ensure the internet remains accessible in the rest of the Republic of Myanmar.
- Publicly assure the people of the Republic of Myanmar that the internet and all social media platforms will be on during and after the elections.
- Order the various internet service providers operating in the country to provide quality, secure, free and open internet — including 3G and 4G — across the country throughout the elections and inform internet users of any disruptions and work around the clock to fix any identified disruptions likely to impact the quality of service they receive.

We are happy to assist you in any of these matters.

Sincerely,

Access Now

Action Committee for Democracy Development (ACDD)

Advocacy Initiative for Development (AID)

Afrotribune

AfroLeadership

ARTICLE 19

Association for Progressive Communication

AzNetWatch

---

<sup>4</sup> See UN Human Rights Council, (July 2018) “The promotion, protection and enjoyment of human rights on the Internet”, <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/1639840>

# #KeepItOn

Fighting Internet Shutdowns around the World

Blueprint for Free Speech

Electronic Frontier Foundation

Free Expression Myanmar (FEM)

Freedom House

Internet Protection Society (Russia)

Internet Sans Frontieres (Without Borders)

International Federation of Journalists

Meedan

Myanmar ICT for Development Organization (MIDO)

Myanmar Centre for Responsible Business (MCRB)

Myanmar Digital Rights Forum Group

PEN America

PhandeeyarAfricTivistes

Reporters Without Borders (RSF)

SMEX

Southeast Asia Freedom of Expression Network (SAFEnet)

Sri Lanka Free Media Movement

Ubunteam

WITNESS

Individuals

Ei Myat Noe Khin (Digital Rights Activist)