

November 30, 2021

Open letter to President Adama Barrow of The Gambia — keep the internet open and secure throughout the upcoming elections and thereafter.

The President of the Republic of The Gambia, H.E. President Adama Barrow

CC: Ebrima Sillah, Minister of Information and Communication Infrastructure; Dawda Jallow, Minister of Justice and Attorney General of The Gambia, Amie Njie- Director of Information at Ministry of Information and communications infrastructure, Amie Bojang- Director of Press and Public Relations, Office of The President Yusupha Jobe, Director-General of the Gambian Public Utility and Regulatory Authority (PURA); Lamin A. Tunkara, Managing Director for Gambia Telecom (GAMTEL); Ousman Sowe, Director General of State Intelligence Service (SIS); Yankuba Drammeh, Chief of Defence Staff, Gambia National Army; Yankuba Sonko, Minister of Interior; Abdoulie Sanyang, Inspector General of Police; Muhammed Jah, Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of QCELL; Sulayman Susso, Managing Director of Gamcel; Hussain Diab Ghanem-SINE, CEO of Africell; Papa Yusufa Njie, CEO of Unique Solutions; Lamin Jabbie Esq, Managing Director of ACE Consortium The Gambia.

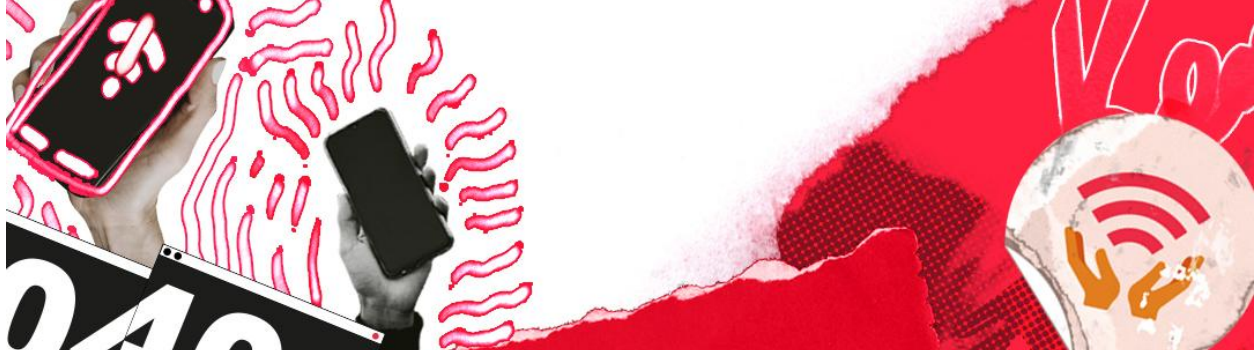
Nations across Africa, and the world, must ensure people can access open and free internet when they need it the most — during elections and important national events. This election, we urge the Republic of The Gambia to #KeepItOn.

We, the undersigned organizations and members of the [#KeepItOn coalition](#) — a network that unites over 250 organizations from 105 countries working to end internet shutdowns¹ globally — write to urgently **appeal to you, President Adama Barrow, to ensure that the internet, social media platforms, and all other communication channels remain open, secure, and accessible throughout the election period and thereafter, scheduled for December 4, in the Republic of The Gambia.**

The Gambia has [previously shut down](#) the internet during presidential elections, and therefore claims a place on the #KeepItOn coalition's radar. This year, the world is watching to ensure that the rights of the people are upheld this time around during the upcoming elections and at all times.

The internet and social media platforms play a critical role in enhancing participatory governance in a democratic society. They provide space for communication, public debate, seeking information on election processes and candidates, [reporting and documenting events and outcomes](#), and holding governments accountable for their actions — including their promises to the people.

¹ 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>.



November 30, 2021

The Gambia's history of shutdowns

Authorities in The Gambia joined the list of governments that weaponize internet shutdowns against their people in 2016, when former President Yahya Jammeh [plunged the whole nation into darkness](#) on the eve of the presidential elections, just as journalists had speculated he would.

Even though your administration has not deliberately disrupted the internet, we would like to bring to your attention the frequent [network disruptions](#) attributed to undersea cable cuts that continue to [affect access](#) in the country.

In 2021 alone, The Gambia experienced approximately four internet blackouts lasting several hours. The official response from the national telecoms operator Gamtel and two other telcos, Africell and Qcell, cited ongoing maintenance or construction works on the Africa Coast to Europe (ACE) cable as the reason for disturbance.

Internet shutdowns harm human rights, disrupt emergency services, and cripple economies

Disrupting the internet goes beyond interfering with the democratic process. Research shows that [internet shutdowns and violence](#) go hand in hand. Shutting down the internet during a [deadly pandemic](#) would add 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 peaceful assembly. By disrupting the free flow of information, shutdowns exacerbate existing tensions, and create space to conceal potential violence and human rights violations perpetrated by both state and non-state actors.

Internet shutdowns cut off access to vital, timely, and life-saving information, as well as to emergency services, plunging whole communities into fear and confusion. Internet shutdowns could spur a sense of insecurity, particularly among more vulnerable groups, and may instigate violence, and facilitate the spread of both misinformation and disinformation.

Journalists, human rights defenders, election observers, civil society actors, and other relevant stakeholders count on the internet to monitor and report on elections, facilitating transparency, inclusiveness, and openness in the process.



November 30, 2021

Internet shutdowns contravene international human rights laws and standards

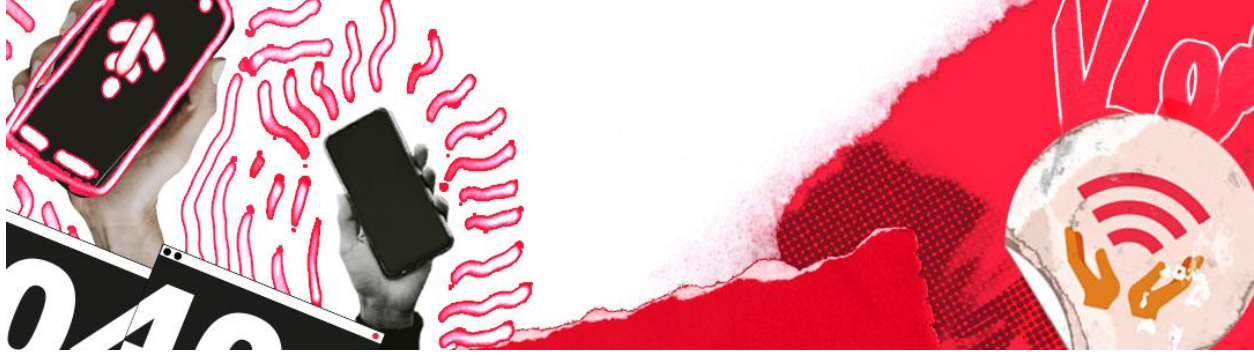
The Government of The Gambia has ratified regional and international frameworks such as the legally binding [International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights \(ICCPR\)](#) and the [African Charter on Human and People's Rights](#), which provide for the protection and promotion of the rights of freedom 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." Additionally, [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 be in violation of international human rights law."

Telecom companies must respect human rights

Telecom companies and businesses have a responsibility under the [U.N. 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."

Furthermore, Gamtel, Africell, Qcell, and Gamcel, which are the main telecom and internet service providers operating in The Gambia, have a responsibility to uphold and respect human rights by providing quality, open, and secure access to the internet and digital communication tools throughout the elections and beyond. Internet shutdowns — whether in The Gambia or other countries — must never be allowed to become the new normal, and we encourage Gambian enterprises to integrate these practices for responding to censorship and network disruptions.



November 30, 2021

Recommendations

As organizations that believe in the power of the internet as an enabler of all other human rights, we are confident that access to the internet, social media, news websites and mobile money platforms during the elections in The Gambia has the potential to foster transparency and inclusivity in the upcoming elections, and ensure active citizen and other stakeholder participation.

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

- 1. Ensure full internet access nationwide, and refrain from arbitrarily blocking access to social media platforms such as Twitter, WhatsApp, Telegram, and Facebook, and websites of media outlets throughout the election period and thereafter;**
- 2. Publicly assure the people of The Gambia that the internet and all other digital communication platforms, will remain open, accessible, inclusive, and secure across The Gambia throughout the election and thereafter;**
- 3. Order all internet service providers in The Gambia to provide everyone with high-quality, secure, inclusive, and unrestricted internet access throughout the election period and thereafter; and**
- 4. Order all internet service providers to inform internet users of any potential disruptions, and to take all reasonable steps to promptly fix any identified disruptions likely to impact the quality of service they receive.**

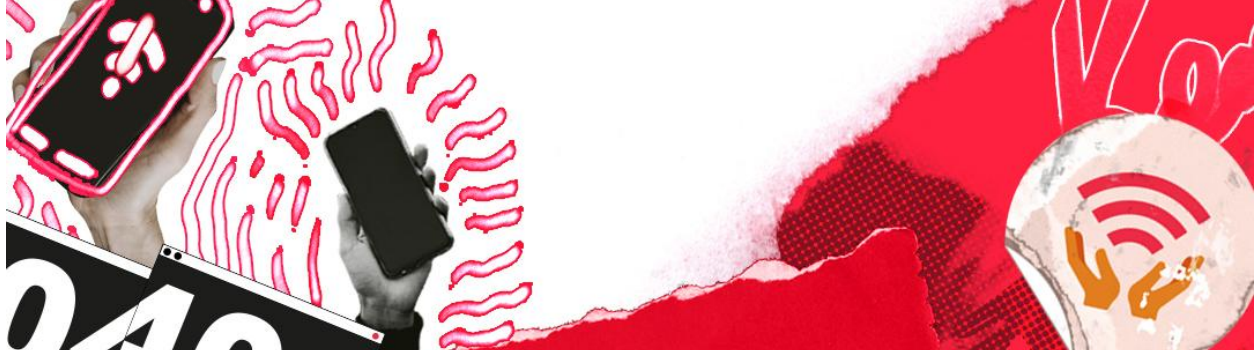
Kindly let us know in what ways we can assist.

Sincerely,

ORGANIZATIONS

Access Now
Advocacy Initiative for Development (AID)
African Declaration on Internet Rights and
Freedoms Coalition
African Freedom of Expression Exchange (AFEX)
Africa Freedom of Information Centre (AFIC)

Africa Open Data and Internet Research
Foundation (AODIRF)
AfricTivistes
ARTICLE 19
ARTICLE 19 WEST AFRICA
Bareedo Platform Somalia



November 30, 2021

Body & Data

Business & Human Rights Resource Centre
Centre for Human Rights and Rehabilitation
(CHRR)

Centre for Media Studies and Peacebuilding
(CEMESP)

Collaboration on International ICT Policy for
East and Southern Africa (CIPESA)

Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ)

Common Cause Zambia

Digital Rights Kashmir

Front Line Defenders

GAMBIA Cyber Security Alliances

Gambia Press Union

Give1Project Gambia

Global Voices

International Press Centre (IPC)

Internet Protection Society (Russia)

Kijiji Yeetu, Kenya

Manushya Foundation

Media Foundation for West Africa (MFWA)

Miaan Group

OpenNet Africa

Open Observatory of Network Interference
(OONI)

Open Media Centre

Organization of the Justice Campaign

Paradigm Initiative (PIN)

PEN America

Robert F. Kennedy Human Rights

Sassoufit collective

SMEX

SOAP

The Gambia Community Library Project

The Tor Project

Ubunteam

Wikimedia France

Zaina Foundation

For More Information, please contact:

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