

January 20, 2022

#KeepItOn: Open letter to keep the internet open and secure during upcoming elections in Senegal

Re: Internet access will ensure increased participation and transparency in the Republic of Senegal's local elections

Your Excellency Macky Sall, President of the Republic of Senegal

CC: Yankhoba Diatara, Ministre de l'Economie numérique et des Télécommunications; Abdoulaye Diop, Ministre de la Culture et de la Communication; Abdoul Ly, Directeur Autorité de Régulation des Télécommunications et des Postes (ARTP); Sékou Dramé, Chief Executive Officer (CEO), Sonatel; Mamadou Mbengue, CEO, Free Mobile; and Hani EL Hassan, CEO, Expresso.

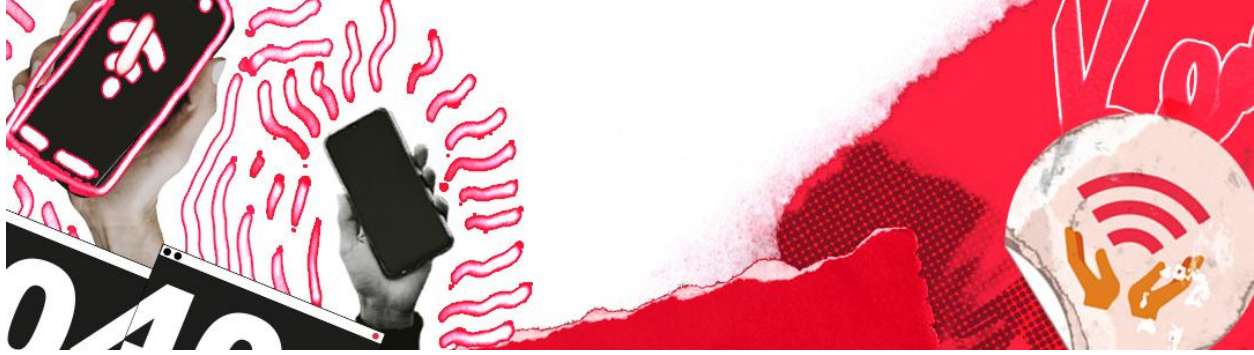
Nations across Africa, and the world, must ensure people can access open and free internet when they need it the most — during elections and important national events. This election, we urge the Republic of Senegal to continue your legacy of safeguarding internet access during elections, as the world witnessed in 2019, and #KeepItOn in 2022.

We, the undersigned organizations and members of the [#KeepItOn coalition](#) — a global network that unites over 250 organizations from 105 countries that work to end internet shutdowns¹ globally — write to urgently **appeal to you, President Macky Sall, to ensure that the internet, social media platforms, and all other communication channels are open, secure, and accessible during the upcoming local elections, scheduled for January 23, in the Republic of Senegal and thereafter.**

As the people of Senegal prepare to vote for local representatives across the country's 550 municipalities, it is essential for your government to adopt and prioritize measures to ensure that the election process is inclusive, free, and fair by providing them unfettered access to information and avenues to freely express themselves — both offline and online.

The internet, the world wide web and social media platforms play a critical role in enhancing participatory governance in democratic society. They provide space for communicating, 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

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>.



January 20, 2022

people. 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 and openness in the process. Internet shutdowns during critical events like elections may instigate violence, and spur the spread of misinformation, as reliable channels for fact-checking become inaccessible.

Senegal's history of shutdowns

Last year, there were reports of alleged disruptions to social media platforms that lasted several hours, and the suspension of two television stations during protests that followed the arrest of the main opposition leader. This interference was in violation of people's fundamental rights to freedom of expression and access to information.

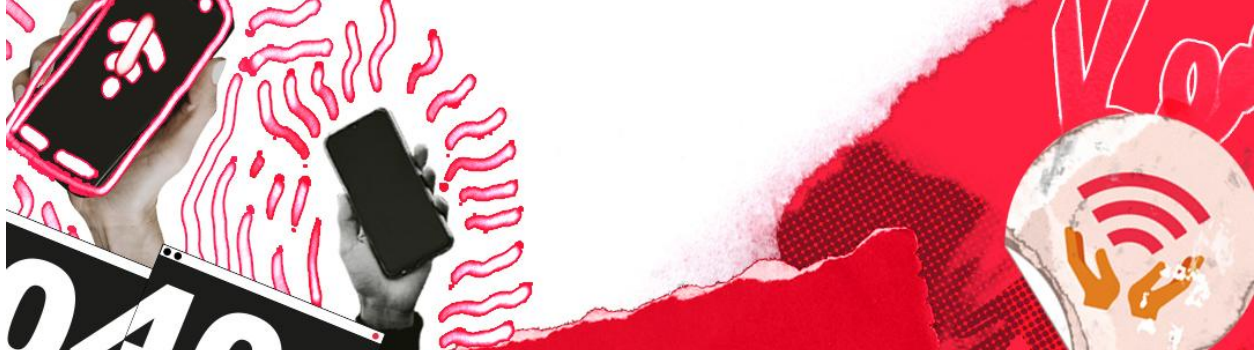
The #KeepItOn coalition, however, recognizes the government's commitment to upholding access to free, open and secure internet and digital platforms during the country's presidential elections that took place in February 2019. We again appeal to you, President Sall, to ensure **that access to the internet and all digital communication platforms remain open and secure for the people of Senegal** before, during, and after the 2021 elections.

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

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, freedom of the press, and freedom of peaceful assembly. 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 against people.

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. Shutdowns make it [extremely difficult](#) for journalists and the media to carry out their work thereby denying people in and outside the country access to credible information especially during crises.

Additionally, imposing internet shutdowns interfere with people's livelihoods and cost nations billions of dollars as businesses, companies, public and private institutions lose huge sums of money during shutdowns. Top10VPN in its 2021 report [estimates](#) that government-mandated internet shutdowns cost the world economy a colossal USD 5.5 billion during the global pandemic.



January 20, 2022

Internet shutdowns contravene international laws

The Republic of Senegal 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.” Moreover, [UN experts and high-level officials](#) — including the UN 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

Telecommunications 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.

Telcos operating in Senegal — including Orange/Sonatel, Free Mobile and Expresso — have a responsibility to provide quality, open, and secure access to the internet and digital communication tools throughout the elections and beyond. Internet shutdowns — whether in Senegal or other countries — must never be allowed to become the new normal, and we encourage Senegal enterprises to integrate these practices for responding to censorship and network disruption requests in all markets where they operate.



January 20, 2022

Recommendations:

As organizations that believe in the power of the internet and digital platforms as an enabler of many other human rights, we are confident that access to the internet, social media and mobile money platforms has the potential to foster transparency around the upcoming elections and ensure active citizen and other stakeholder participation during Senegal's local elections.

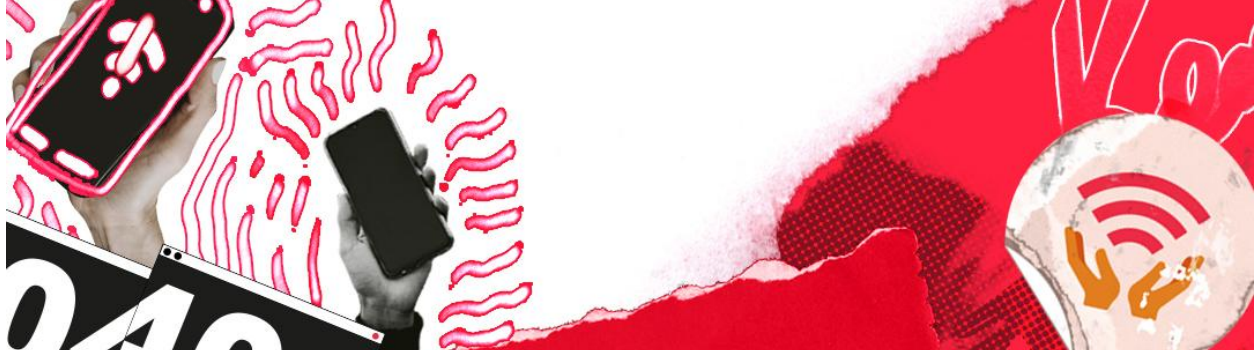
We respectfully request that you use the important positions of your offices to:

1. Publicly assure the people of the Republic of the Senegal that the internet, including social media and other digital communication platforms, will remain open, accessible, and secure across Senegal 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.

Kindly let us know in what way we can assist in ensuring the same.



January 20, 2022

Sincerely,

ORGANIZATIONS

Access Now

Advocacy Initiative for Development (AID)

African Freedom of Expression Exchange (AFEX)

Africa Freedom of Information Centre (AFIC)

Africa Open Data and Internet Research
Foundation (AODIRF)

AfricTivistes

Bareedo Platform Somalia

Business & Human Rights Resource Centre

Censored Planet

Center for Advancement of Rights and
Democracy (CARD Ethiopia)

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

Common Cause Zambia

Digital Rights Kashmir

Give1Project GAMBIA

Gambia Press Union

HOUSE OF AFRICA

Human Rights Activists in Iran (HRA)

International Bar Association's Human Rights
Institute (IBAHRI)

International Press Centre (IPC)

Internet Protection Society (Russia)

Internet Society Benin Chapter

KICTANet

Kijiji Yeetu , Kenya

Media Foundation for West Africa (MFWA)

Miaan Group

Namibia Media Trust

Native Africa

Open Media Centre

OpenNet Africa

Organization of the Justice Campaign

Paradigm Initiative (PIN)

PEN America

SFLC.in

The Nubian Rights Forum

The Tor Project

Ubunteam

Youths and Environmental Advocacy Centre
(YEAC) Nigeria

Wikimedia Community User Group Uganda

Wikimédia France

Women of Uganda Network (WOUGNET)

Women ICT Advocacy group (WIAG)

World Wide Web Foundation

Zaina Foundation

For More Information, please contact:

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