

# Internet shutdowns in Myanmar: facilitating brutal human rights violations in 2022

In 2022, authorities across the globe shut down the internet to attack human rights across **35** countries at least **187** times. The junta shut down the internet at least **seven** times in Myanmar to crush resistance and provide cover for its ferocious acts of violence. The military deployed these shutdowns concurrently and erratically, making access an exception rather than the norm across the country.

Launching today, **February 28**, Access Now and the #KeepItOn coalition's new report, ***Weapons of control, shields of impunity: Internet shutdowns in 2022***, reveals and unpacks the global resurgence of internet shutdowns to pre-pandemic levels over the span of one catastrophic year for human rights, particularly in Myanmar. Read the **full report, global snapshot**, and **Asia Pacific deep dive**.

"Governments wield internet shutdowns as weapons of control and shields of impunity," said **Felicia Anthonio, #KeepItOn Campaign Manager at Access Now**. "In Myanmar, network disruptions are munitions of war, and the military's arsenal of tools is designed to entrench online dictatorship. Shutdowns facilitate and shroud serious human rights violations across the country, many of which could amount to war crimes."

**Key findings include:**

- **The scope:** all **330** townships were subjected to shutdowns at least once, and by March 2023, approximately **50** townships will have been cut off for more than a year;
- **The length:** the ongoing shutdown in Hpakant township has reportedly continued for more than **18** months;
- **The targeting:** the junta targeted areas where resistance is strongest — Sagaing, Magway, and Chin — to isolate and prevent documentation of its violence;
- **The impunity:** the military has consolidated control of all telecommunications providers, expanded surveillance infrastructure, and shut down mobile and internet connections, making it difficult to verify the duration and frequency of shutdowns — the total numbers are very likely higher;
- **The arsenal:** shutdowns are combined with the junta's control of people's phone data, expanded use of surveillance tools, and random phone checks; and
- **The positives:** increasingly, governments and global bodies are publicly condemning the weaponization of internet shutdowns, and the #KeepItOn coalition grew to over **300** members in **105** countries.

In 2022, governments and other actors shut down the internet across the Asia Pacific region in: Afghanistan, Bangladesh, China, India, Myanmar, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka.

“Internet shutdowns will not force people in Myanmar to give up,” said **Wai Phyo Myint, Asia Pacific Policy Analyst at Access Now**. “The junta’s system of methodical digital offensives will not crush people’s resistance. The international community must continue to support the people of Myanmar, and stand in solidarity with their fight to reclaim their country from the grip of the military.”

# Myanmar election will seal military's digital domination

Myanmar's military is tightening its hold of the internet, reinforcing its ability to track people's communications and locations

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Since 2021, the Myanmar military has waged parallel coups offline and online, as it implements tactics to surveil, target and deny people their digital agency. These have ranged from introducing significant price hikes on SIM cards and internet services - making it prohibitively expensive for many to access the internet - to regulatory attempts which will enshrine in law the death of online civic space in Myanmar.

Internet shutdowns and mobile communications blackouts have plunged whole communities into darkness, and the military now has complete dominance over the telecommunications sector, setting the stage for unfettered surveillance unprecedented in the country's history. And the deadline to complete its mission? The 2023 general election.

In September, the last internationally-owned telecom operator in Myanmar, Ooredoo, announced its sale to military-linked Nine Communications, likely going into effect next year. This outfit will join three operators, including military-owned Myanma Posts and Telecommunications and MyTel. The third, shrouded in controversy after picking up the contract from Norwegian-owned Telenor's disposal, is not only linked to the military, but reportedly partially owned by the daughter of junta leader General Min Aung Hlaing. This acquisition of online space, along with vicious control wielded over physical space, will solidify the military's power over every aspect of the lives of millions.

After Ooredoo announced its exit, the military-led Ministry of Transport and Communications' attack on SIM cards continued, and it announced it would deactivate all cards not registered with a Myanmar National Registration Card (NRC). The deadline is January 31, 2023, following which non-corresponding SIMs will be revoked and all monies linked to them confiscated. This followed a SIM re-registration drive only months earlier, which saw the military deactivate more than 34 million SIM cards for "improper" registration.

These moves, which the military alleged were to facilitate "smoother transactions" online achieved the opposite — abruptly shutting millions off from mobile and internet access, plunging them into an information and communications vacuum.

As the military heads into 2023 and its planned election, its control of all digital information relating to people in Myanmar will railroad subservient voting. SIM re-registration drives are crucial in this process, linking mobile devices to NRCs in a way that will consolidate excessive personal information in a database the military can oversee, and access. People's names and addresses are linked to their NRCs, which is



also connected to other information, such as familial relationships, property, and bank accounts.

This is supplemented by newer regulatory measures, including proposed mandatory registration of all International Mobile Equipment Identity (IMEI) numbers for mobile devices which will link physical phones — which hold information on a person's location and communications — with SIMs and NRC records. Meanwhile, the expansion of CCTV surveillance projects across the country and intercept spyware installed within telecom networks — now entirely owned by the military — will reinforce tracking of people's communications, networks, and locations.

As 2022 comes to an end, it may seem so do any fledgling hopes of an open, accessible internet, or digital rights in Myanmar. As long as the military battles economic disaster and raging resistance, there is leverage for the international community to act on ongoing human rights abuses. Governments, companies, and international bodies must condemn and impede the digital dictatorship in Myanmar, including by denouncing ongoing violations, cutting off financial flows to military leaders, and extending support for civil society, journalists, and activists.

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