

World

India's habit of shutting down the internet

NEW DELHI

With protests on the rise, the nation tops the world in cutting off access

BY JEFFREY GETTLEMAN, VINDU GOEL AND MARIA ABI-HABIB

As the government of India pushes increasingly provocative policies, it is using a tactic to stifle dissent that is associated with authoritarian regimes, not democracies: It is shutting down the internet.

India tops the world — by far — in the number of internet shutdowns imposed by local, state and national governments. Last year, internet service was cut in India 134 times, and so far this year 93 shutdowns have occurred, according to SFLC.in, a legal digital rights advocacy group in New Delhi that has tracked India's internet shutdowns since 2012, using reports from journalists, other advocacy groups and citizens.

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The country's closest competitor is Pakistan, which had 12 shutdowns last year. Syria and Turkey — countries not especially known for their democratic spirit — each shut down the internet just once in 2018.

"Anytime there is a sign of disturbance, that is the first tool in the toolbox," said Mishi Choudhary, founder of SFLC.in. "When maintenance of law and order is your priority, you are not thinking about free speech."

Last week, citing a threat of violence and false rumors, the authorities in the states of Assam, Meghalaya and Tripura in northeast India severed connectivity in response to protests against a new citizenship law that critics say would marginalize India's 200 million Muslims. Much of West Bengal and parts of Uttar Pradesh, two of India's most populous

states, were also put under digital lockdown.

With the Kashmir region still languishing offline since August, at least 60 million people have been cut off — roughly the population of France.

These moves come as Prime Minister Narendra Modi tightens his grip on India. His administration and its allies have jailed hundreds of Kashmiris without charges, intimidated journalists, arrested intellectuals and suppressed gloomy economic reports. His critics say he is undermining India's deeply rooted traditions of democracy and secularism, and steadily stamping out dissent.

With half a billion Indians online, the authorities say they are simply trying to stop the spread of hateful and dangerous misinformation, which can move faster on Facebook, WhatsApp and other services than their ability to control it.

"A lot of hate and provocative stuff starts appearing on messaging services, particularly WhatsApp," said Harmeet Singh, a senior police official in Assam, which borders Bangladesh and has been one of the hot spots of protests against the citizenship law.

But as the internet becomes more integral to all aspects of life, the shutdowns affect far more than protesters or those involved in politics. The shutdowns can be devastating to people just trying to make a living.

In Kashmir, internet service was stopped on Aug. 5, when Mr. Modi's government suddenly revoked the area's autonomy, sent in thousands of troops and disabled all communication, stifling public dissent. The internet has now been off 135 days. Some people even take a short flight to the next state just to check their email.

"There is no work," said Sheikh Ashiq Ahmad, the president of the Kashmir Chamber of Commerce. He said thousands of entrepreneurs, especially those who make silk scarves and handicrafts, relied on social media to sell their products online.

"The dignity of these people has been taken away," he said.

While many of India's shutdowns have been intended to prevent the loss of life, some occurred for more mundane



A protest in Ahmadabad, India, against the government's new citizenship law. This year, over 90 internet shutdowns have occurred.

reasons, like to make it harder for students to cheat on exams.

The legality of India's internet shutdowns has not been tested in court. All shutdowns are supposed to be authorized by top state or national officials. In practice, most are ordered by the local authorities, sometimes with just a few phone calls to local service providers.

The effectiveness of these shutdowns isn't clear. Research by Jan Rydzak, a scholar at Stanford University in California, suggests that the information vacuum caused by an internet shutdown can actually encourage violent responses.

On Tuesday, protests broke out across the country once again over the citizen-

ship law. In Kolkata, protesters blocked highways, and in New Delhi, police officers clashed with demonstrators, firing tear gas and pulling away participants by the collars of their jackets.

In Tamil Nadu and Kerala, opposition politicians led rowdy rallies against the new citizenship law, the Citizenship Amendment Act, which favors non-Muslim immigrants seeking citizenship in India.

Many people are also upset about the National Register of Citizens, a citizenship review process that has already left nearly two million people in Assam potentially stateless. Amit Shah, India's home minister and Mr. Modi's right-hand man, has vowed to take the citizen-

ship reviews nationwide.

Many Indians, especially members of the Muslim minority, believe that with the new measures, the Modi government is plotting to strip away rights from Muslims.

They fear that the government could force citizenship reviews on all Indians and that Hindus without the proper papers would be allowed to stay in India while Muslims without the correct papers would be asked to leave.

Mr. Modi and his allies say that the fears are unfounded, noting that they are simply trying to address illegal migration and help persecuted minorities at the same time.

Mr. Modi and his Bharatiya Janata

Party have roots deep in a Hindu-centric worldview that believes India, which is 80 percent Hindu, should be a Hindu homeland. Some of their biggest moves, including the crackdown on Kashmir, which was India's only Muslim-majority state, have been widely seen as intentionally anti-Muslim.

In West Bengal, which is about 27 percent Muslim, violent protests around these policies erupted on Friday. Protesters ransacked more than a dozen train stations. By Sunday, the authorities shut down the internet for more than one-fourth of the state's 90 million people.

Sujauddin Sheikh, a college teacher in Murshidabad, said the shutdowns have left many people unable to know what's going on.

"People in this region are largely dependent on Facebook and WhatsApp for the news," he said.

There is no doubt that a lot of potentially dangerous information flows freely through India's cyberspace, especially during crises. Take the example of the five women filmed rescuing a friend from being beaten up by the police during a protest. Overnight, they became heroes — and targets.

On Sunday, videos went viral showing the five young women, students at a predominantly Muslim university in New Delhi, forming a protective circle around a young man as police officers beat him with wooden poles.

Several officials in Mr. Modi's party tried to sully their reputations; one wrote a tweet calling them "rabidly indoctrinated Islamists."

There is no evidence of extremism among them and in fact, one of the girls, 20-year-old Chanda Yadav, is a Hindu.

Ms. Yadav said the campaign to discredit her has been almost too much to bear.

Still, she wants to speak out. "This fight is about India as a secular nation, an India where we all belong," she said.

Jeffrey Gettleman and Maria Abi Habib reported from New Delhi, and Vindu Goel from Mumbai. Shaikh Azizur Rahman contributed reporting from Kolkata, Sameer Yasir from New Delhi and Suhasini Raj from Guwahati.

A clear uncertainty in the U.K.

LONDON

Voters gave a mandate on Brexit, but few agree on Boris Johnson's next step

the prime minister's plans for legislation that would ban Britain from extending the Brexit transition period beyond the end of 2020. That was proof, they said, that he was intent on breaking with the European Union, come what may.

The pound, which soared after the election on hopes of an end to the uncertainty, fell back on fears that Britain

Union will clearly require it.

Not getting drawn into the details of Brexit was a deliberate strategy that emerged after some internal debate, said Brett O'Donnell, a Republican political consultant who advised the Conservatives during the campaign.

"There was an instinct to relitigate the arguments on Brexit," said Mr.

