
International Affairs

Internet Censorship; Iran's Desperate Attempt to Gain Back Control

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Following the death of 22-year-old Mahsa Amini in Iran, the country has entered a period of internet censorship and blackout. Internet censorship is not a new occurrence; many governments have resorted to internet blackouts and censorship over the last few decades to handle uprisings, protests, and riots. Internet censorship is not only a violation of human rights; it is a desperate attempt by the ruling government to regain control. This piece will make the case that authoritarian regimes typically resort to internet censorship when protests are working. If the internet is censored, that means the dictators are scared.

On September 16th, the government of Iran imposed an internet blackout for at least sixteen hours on the same day that Mahsa Amini passed away (Newsroom, 2022). Following the death of Amini, many Iranian women used social media platforms to post videos and photos cutting their hair and taking off their headscarves to protest the actions of Iran's Morality police. As a response, the

government shut down all major cellular networks and access to social media, including Instagram and WhatsApp. These internet restrictions are a direct violation of human rights. When governments censor the internet, they are restricting freedom of the press, freedom of expression, and freedom of speech. They are silencing the voices of their citizens by preventing them from sharing their thoughts and feelings on public platforms.

Unfortunately, it is not surprising to see authoritarian regimes go to extreme measures to keep their power, as power is the only thing they have. When authoritarian governments lose control over the public, they fear that protestors will gain momentum, garner support, and receive media attention, which is exactly what happened after Amini's death. It is much easier to control protests without international backlash, pressure, and spotlight. For the Iranian regime, social media is a threat. It is a threat to their power and control. Leaked videos and pictures from the protest

have resulted in people across the globe showing their support to the women of Iran. It evolved from an 'Iran issue' to a women's rights issue. Ltfollah Sianhkali, an Iranian lawmaker, told the press, "social media are the biggest venue for the enemies to further their conspiracies, thus, restrictions will continue if the protests continue" (Newsroom, 2022, para 4). Many governments see the need to restrict the internet out of security interests. This occurred during the Arab Spring in Egypt when the government shut down the internet for five days, as well as in Libya for over one week. Both governments used security to justify their decisions. When security is used as a justification for internet censorship, it demonstrates that their real goal is to impose measures that save face, diminish the chances of their protestors obtaining more strength, and, ultimately, save themselves.

Internet shutdowns do not restore order, nor protect rights, nor ensure safety. Such shutdowns keep those inside and outside in the dark to death tolls and active developments in different regions. Internet censorship is a desperate strategy initiated by governments when uprisings threaten their power. It is an extreme measure that shows to the rest of the world the lengths to which a government is willing to go, no matter how unjust they may be. The government of Iran fears the power the

people hold, especially when that power is joined with the internet, which has already spread its message to millions around the world. I do not see an end to the use of internet censorship; we saw it being employed in Egypt and Libya during the Arab Spring. We are seeing it now in Iran, and unfortunately, we will most likely see it in the future. Regardless, it is clear to me that the Iranian leaders are scared, and in a frantic attempt to gain back control, they restrict the one thing they can: the internet.

References

Newsroom, I. I. (2022, September 29). *Iran will restrict internet access as long as protests go on*. Iran International. Retrieved October 17, 2022, from <https://www.iranintl.com/en/202209299337>