

INTERNET IS ~~NOT~~ ~~FREE~~ IN THAILAND

#StopDigitalDictatorship



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Freedom on the Net **2021**

Joint Press Release

New Report: Internet Freedom Remained Under Threat in Thailand

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Freedom on the Net 2021 finds that the internet is severely restricted in Thailand. Global findings include that while some democratic governments have made good-faith attempts to regulate the technology industry, state intervention in the digital sphere worldwide has contributed to the 11th consecutive year of global decline in internet freedom.

Governments around the world are increasingly asserting their authority over technology platforms, forcing businesses to comply with censorship and surveillance and contributing to an 11th consecutive year of global decline in internet freedom, according to *Freedom on the Net 2021*, the annual country-by-country assessment of internet freedom released on September 21 by Freedom House. The report also found that internet freedom in Thailand remained under threat.

Global norms shifted dramatically toward greater state intervention in the digital sphere over the past year. Of the 70 states covered by *Freedom on the Net 2021*, 48 pursued legal or administrative action against technology companies. Some measures reflected legitimate attempts to mitigate online harms, rein in misuse of data, or end manipulative market practices. Many governments, however, proposed new policies that obliged businesses to remove content and share personal data with authorities, at great cost to free expression, privacy, and public accountability.

This change in the balance of power between companies and states has come amid a historic crackdown on freedom of expression online. In 56 countries, officials arrested or convicted people for their online speech. Governments suspended internet access in at least 20 countries, and 21 states blocked access to social media platforms, most often during times of political turmoil such as protests and elections. Authorities in at least 45 countries are suspected of obtaining sophisticated spyware or data-extraction technology from private vendors.

“In these high-stakes battles between governments and tech companies, human rights risk becoming the main casualties,” said Allie Funk, Senior Research Analyst for Technology and Democracy at Freedom House and co-author of [Freedom on the Net 2021](#). ***“Governments everywhere are invoking a vague need to retake control of the internet—whether from foreign powers, multinational corporations, or even civil society. The laissez-faire approach to the tech industry spurred some forms of innovation, but it has also created opportunities for authoritarian manipulation, data exploitation, and widespread malfeasance. Democratic governments should pursue well-crafted regulations that tackle these problems while protecting people’s rights to express themselves, share information across borders, and hold the powerful to account.”***

Internet freedom plummeted by 14 points in [Myanmar](#)—the largest annual decline ever recorded on *Freedom on the Net*’s 100-point scale—after the military refused to accept the results of the November 2020 general elections and launched a deadly coup in February 2021. Electoral disputes also led to major internet freedom declines in [Belarus](#), where authoritarian incumbent Alyaksandr Lukashenka claimed victory in a fraudulent presidential election in August 2020, and [Uganda](#), where authorities shut off the internet and blocked social media platforms during marred general elections in January 2021. In addition, officials in both Myanmar and Belarus sought to silence independent online media by shutting down news outlets and harassing, assaulting, and torturing online journalists.

The internet is severely restricted in Thailand. Authorities responded to youth-led anti-government protests — which started in July 2020 and continued throughout the coverage period—by arresting and harassing internet users and pro-democracy leaders who criticized the monarchy. In one of the most draconian cases, a former public servant was sentenced to 43 years in prison. The government also continued to enforce a repressive emergency declaration issued in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, which imposed further constraints on freedom of expression.

“Our Online Democracy is under attack. Exposing the truth behind #WhatsHappeningInThailand and holding the government accountable for their actions are not - and shall never be - a crime.” said Emilie Pradichit, Founder and Executive Director of [Manushya Foundation](#), report author of [Freedom on the Net: Thailand Country Report](#). ***“The digital dictatorship imposed by Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha continues to crack down on dissenting voices through the weaponization of COVID-19 and cyber laws, while pressuring tech companies to follow its censorship demands under the guise of so-called ‘fake news’ and vaguely defined ‘national security’ and ‘public emergency’.”***

In a positive development, Thai courts, on several occasions, rejected government requests to restrict content and shut down platforms, and ruled in favor of individuals who faced criminal charges in relation to their online content. **Still, intimidation and harassment by authorities targeting individuals for their online activities continued.**

“By curbing free speech online, the Thai military-backed government silences the voice of anyone dissatisfied. The clampdown on freedom of expression is part of a larger crackdown on Youth, civil society, and activists fighting for true democracy. Now more than ever, we are committed to #StopDigitalDictatorship and securing internet freedom for everyone,” Emilie concluded.

KEY GLOBAL FINDINGS

- Global internet freedom declined for the 11th consecutive year. The greatest deteriorations were documented in Myanmar, Belarus, and Uganda, where state forces cracked down amid electoral and constitutional crises.
- Governments clashed with technology companies on users’ rights. Authorities in at least 48 countries pursued new rules for tech companies on content, data, and competition over the past year. With a few positive exceptions, the push to regulate the tech industry, which stems in some cases from genuine problems like online harassment and manipulative market practices, is being exploited to subdue free expression and gain greater access to private data.
- Free expression online is under unprecedented strain. More governments arrested users for nonviolent political, social, or religious speech than ever before. Officials suspended internet access in at least 20 countries, and 21 states blocked access to social media platforms. Authorities in at least 45 countries are suspected of obtaining sophisticated spyware or data-extraction technology from private vendors.
- State intervention must protect human rights online and preserve an open internet. The emancipatory power of the internet depends on its egalitarian nature. To counter digital authoritarianism, democracies should ensure that regulations enable users to express themselves freely, share information across borders, and hold the powerful to account.

KEY COUNTRY FINDINGS

- In October 2020, amid youth-led anti-government demonstrations, the government ordered the blocking of Change.org after the site hosted a petition calling for the king to be declared a persona non grata in Germany, where he frequently vacationed. Leaked documents also revealed the government’s unrealized plan to block Telegram, a platform widely used by activists to organize protests and mobilize supporters.
- Also in October 2020, the Criminal Court rejected the government’s request to shut down four online news platforms—Voice TV, the Standard, the Reporters, and Prachatai— and the online accounts of Free Youth, a youth-led pro-democracy group, for violating the Emergency Decree on Public Administration in Emergency Situations, and the Computer Crime Act (CCA). In February 2021, the court had rejected a government request to block a video clip in which the former leader of the now disbanded Future Forward Party criticized the government’s COVID-19 vaccination policy.
- Internet users were arrested, criminally charged, or subjected to targeted harassment for sharing a range of content, including unverified information about the pandemic and criticism of the government’s response. In one of the most draconian sentences imposed in Thailand in recent memory, a former revenue officer received a reduced sentence of 43 and a half years in prison for uploading to YouTube radio clips that were critical of the monarchy.
- There were no reported cases within Thailand of enforced disappearances of and physical violence against users in retaliation for their online activities, though a Thai activist was forcibly disappeared in Cambodia. Extralegal intimidation of pro-democracy activists and critics of the monarchy continued.

Freedom on the Net 2021 assesses internet freedom in 70 countries, accounting for 88 percent of internet users worldwide. The report focused on developments that occurred between June 2020 and May 2021. *Global findings, detailed country reports, data on 21 internet freedom indicators, policy recommendations, and report contributors can be found at freedomonthenet.org. The Thailand country report can be found [here](#).*

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