

JOINT NEWS RELEASE

Free Expression in THAILAND is Under Attack

#StopDigitalDictatorship

Report:
**FREEDOM ON
THE NET 2023**

#DigitalRights

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JOINT NEWS RELEASE

NEW REPORT: INTERNET FREEDOM REMAINED UNDER THREAT IN THAILAND

Global internet freedom declined for the 13th consecutive year as conditions deteriorated in 29 countries and improved in 20 others, according to [Freedom on the Net 2023: The Repressive Power of Artificial Intelligence](#). The report released on October 4, 2023 by Freedom House found that internet freedom in **Thailand remained under threat, ranking the country 'NOT FREE'**. The report also found that Iran suffered the year's worst score decline as authorities shut down internet services and blocked social media to stifle anti-government protests. In two record highs, people in at least 55 countries faced legal repercussions for expressing themselves online, and governments in 41 countries blocked websites hosting political, social, and religious speech. Both practices persisted in China, which retained its title as the world's worst environment for internet freedom for the ninth consecutive year.

Internet freedom is severely restricted in Thailand. Ahead of the 2023 general election, opposition members were discredited through state-sponsored disinformation campaigns, while pro-democracy activists faced arrest, surveillance, and extralegal harassment in retaliation for their online content. Authorities blocked websites and removed content that violated provisions of the restrictive Computer-related Crimes Act (CCA). Internet users continued to be charged with lèse-majesté (112), with some receiving heavy prison sentences for defaming the monarchy online. Although the repressive emergency decree issued in response to the COVID-19 pandemic lapsed in September 2022, cases continued for individuals previously charged under its provisions.

"Thailand's digital democracy is under siege, with alarming weaponization of digital platforms against political opponents and youth democracy activists. The continued abuse of COVID-19 and cyber laws to stifle dissent is distressing," commented Emilie Palamy Pradichit, Founder of Manushya Foundation and co-author of the Freedom on the Net: Thailand Country Report. "This year, we were deeply disturbed by the transnational repression and abduction of a Vietnamese blogger on Thai soil. Now, more than ever, it's time for governments and companies to heed the call to #StopDigitalDictatorship, safeguard internet freedom for all, and cease the unjust persecution of those who dare to voice their opinions. Speaking truth to power should never be a crime".

In the wake of the 2020 pro-democracy movement, the May 2023 polls marked a critical juncture for Thailand's democratic aspirations. Over 14 million passionate Thai people cast their ballots in a resounding show of support for pro-democracy parties. The clear mandate was evident as the Move Forward Party emerged victorious, fueled by a fervent desire to reform the contentious lèse-majesté law and champion a comprehensive agenda aimed at restoring true democracy. However, Thailand's democratic hopes were dashed when, on August 22, 2023, Srettha Thavisin from the Pheu Thai party, was elected Thailand's 30th Prime Minister, backed by military-affiliated senators. This unsettling turn of events now leaves Thailand at a crossroads, its democratic future hanging in the balance as the struggle for true democracy persists.

The report also found that while advances in artificial intelligence (AI) offer benefits for society, they have been used to increase the scale and efficiency of digital repression. **"Advances in artificial intelligence are a double-edged sword, offering promising benefits while also exacerbating the crisis for human rights online,"** pointed out Allie Funk, Research Director for Technology and Democracy and co-author of **Freedom on the Net 2023: The Repressive Power of Artificial Intelligence**. **"Governments are leveraging automated systems to strengthen their information controls and hone forms of online censorship"**. Simultaneously, distributors of disinformation have turned to AI tools to fabricate images, audio, and text, further blurring the lines between reality and deception.

In Thailand, spyware technology was also utilized for targeted surveillance of democracy activists. In July 2022, civil society groups uncovered Pegasus spyware infections in the mobile phones of at least 30 Thai human rights defenders, pro-democracy activists, and monarchy-reform advocates. Following this, the MDES (Ministry of Digital Economy and Society) minister admitted that the government has been using surveillance technology for "national security" and to combat drug trafficking. In November 2022, eight Thai citizens filed a groundbreaking lawsuit against NSO Group, the Israeli developer of Pegasus spyware. Regrettably, the Bangkok civil court dismissed the case due to its inability to combine the claims. Yingcheep Atchanon, an original plaintiff from iLaw group, is gearing up to sue the government over its alleged use of the spyware.

"Our right to privacy and security is under grave threat. In Thailand, the malevolent exploitation of AI and pervasive surveillance cast an ominous shadow over the country", affirmed Darika Bamrungchok, Digital Security Trainer and Digital Rights Advocate at Thai Netizen Network. **"But let it be known that in the face of this digital onslaught, we stand unwavering in our commitment to safeguarding our liberties, and we will not bow to intimidation or surveillance. We will persist in holding companies and governments accountable, asserting our rights until justice and freedom prevail"**.

KEY THAILAND FINDINGS

- A new decree that entered into force in December 2022 imposed stringent requirements on service providers, which are now required to comply with content-takedown requests within 24 hours.
- State-sponsored disinformation proliferated ahead of the 2023 general election, with most of this content aimed at discrediting opposition parties and prominent political figures.
- In January 2023, a pro-democracy activist was sentenced to 42 years in prison, which was later reduced to 28 years, for Facebook posts "defaming" the monarchy.
- A July 2022 report by Citizen Lab, iLaw, and Digital Reach found that the Thai government has likely deployed Pegasus spyware against pro-democracy advocates, researchers, and politicians.

- A Vietnamese blogger and YouTuber well known for his online activism was forcibly disappeared in Thailand during the coverage period. Vietnamese state media reported that he had been apprehended while trying to cross the border into Vietnam, from which he had fled years earlier due to political persecution over his anti-government stances.

The [Thailand's country report](#), co-authored by Manushya Foundation, can be found here.

KEY GLOBAL REPORT FINDINGS

- Global internet freedom declined for the 13th consecutive year. The environment for human rights online deteriorated in 29 countries, while only 20 countries registered net gains. The largest decline occurred in Iran, followed by the Philippines, and then Belarus, Costa Rica, and Nicaragua. For the ninth consecutive year, China was found to have the worst conditions for internet freedom, a title that Myanmar came close to capturing in this year's report.
- Attacks on free expression grew more common around the world. In a record 55 of the 70 countries covered by Freedom on the Net, people were imprisoned or otherwise persecuted for expressing their political, social, or religious viewpoints, while people were physically assaulted or killed for their online commentary in 41 countries. The most egregious cases occurred in Myanmar and Iran, whose authoritarian regimes carried out death sentences against people convicted of crimes related to online expression.
- Generative AI threatens to supercharge online disinformation campaigns. Governments in at least 47 countries deployed commentators to manipulate online discussions in their favor during the coverage period, double the number from a decade ago. Meanwhile, AI-based tools that can fabricate text, audio, and imagery have quickly grown more sophisticated, accessible, and easy to use, spurring a concerning escalation of the associated disinformation tactics. Over the past year, the new technology was utilized in at least 16 countries to sow doubt, smear opponents, or influence public debate.
- AI has allowed governments to enhance and refine their online censorship. The world's most technically advanced authoritarian governments have responded to innovations in AI chatbot technology, attempting to ensure that the applications comply with or strengthen their censorship systems. Legal frameworks in at least 22 countries mandate that digital platforms deploy machine learning to remove disfavored political, social, and religious speech.

- To protect internet freedom, democracy’s supporters must adapt the lessons learned from past internet policy challenges and apply them to AI. Democracies’ overreliance on self-regulation by private companies has left people’s rights exposed to a variety of threats in the digital age, and a shrinking of resources in the tech sector could exacerbate the deficiency. To protect the free and open internet, democratic policymakers—working side by side with civil society experts from around the world—should establish strong, human rights-based standards for both state and nonstate actors that develop or deploy AI tools, including robust transparency and independent oversight.

The global report calls on policymakers and their civic and private-sector partners to gain momentum in protecting overall internet freedom, especially as AI technology augments the forces driving the multiyear decline. An effective defense of internet freedom requires not just developing AI governance systems, but also addressing long-standing threats to privacy, free expression, and access to information that have corroded the broader digital environment. Click here to access the global report findings and policy recommendations.

Freedom on the Net is an annual study of human rights in the digital sphere. The project assesses internet freedom in 70 countries, accounting for 88 percent of the world’s internet users. This report, the 13th in its series, covered developments between June 2022 and May 2023. More than 85 analysts and advisers contributed to this year’s edition, using a standard methodology to determine each country’s internet freedom score on a 100-point scale, with 21 separate indicators pertaining to obstacles to access, limits on content, and violations of user rights. The Thailand report can be found here.

For media enquiries, please contact:

- *Emilie Pradichit, Founder & Executive Director of Manushya Foundation and report co-author of Freedom on the Net: Thailand Country Report, on Twitter @EmiliePradichit or emilie@manushyafoundation.org*
- *Allie Funk, Research Director for Technology and Democracy at Freedom House and co-author of Freedom on the Net 2023, on Twitter @alfunk or Funk@freedomhouse.org*



About Freedom House

Freedom House is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization that works to create a world where all are free. We inform the world about threats to freedom, mobilize global action, and support democracy's defenders.



About Manushya Foundation

Manushya Foundation was founded in 2017 with the vision to build a movement of Equal Human Beings #WeAreManushyan. Manushya (meaning 'Human Being' in Sanskrit) is an intersectional feminist human rights organization working at the intersection of women's rights, democracy & digital rights, corporate accountability & climate justice, protection & access to justice, with the overall aim to reinforcing the power of humans, in particular feminists, human rights defenders, indigenous peoples, forest-dependent communities, environmental defenders, LGBTI groups, and Youth, to be at the heart of decision-making processes that concern them and to speak truth to power at the forefront of their fight for Human Rights, Equality, Social Justice and Peace.

For further information on the work of Manushya Foundation, visit:

<https://www.manushyafoundation.org/>