

Online freedom hit by pressure on social media, apps

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A recent report released by watchdog group Freedom House says 34 of the 65 countries assessed saw internet freedom deteriorate since June 2015

Governments around the world have stepped up efforts to block or censor social media and messaging applications, in a new blow to internet freedom, a watchdog group said Monday.

The Freedom on the Net report by the activist group Freedom House

said online freedom declined in 2016 for a sixth consecutive year amid new restrictions on messaging platforms such as WhatsApp in addition to social networks.

"Popular social media sites like Facebook and Twitter have been subject to growing censorship for several years, but governments are now increasingly going after messaging apps like WhatsApp and Telegram," said Sanja Kelly, director of the study.

Messaging apps have become increasingly popular tools for activists, and many of them can offer encrypted communications which make it more difficult for the users to be monitored, the report noted.

"The key reason for the block of these apps is preventing users from disseminating news during periods of unrest," Kelly said.

The report said 34 of the 65 countries assessed in the report have seen internet freedom deteriorate since June 2015.

Some of the notable declines were in Uganda, Bangladesh, Cambodia, Ecuador and Libya, while online freedom improved in Sri Lanka and Zambia and in the United States, due to the passage of a law limiting collection of telecommunications metadata.

Freedom House said 67 percent of internet users live in countries where criticism of the government, military, or ruling family is subject to censorship.

Governments in 24 countries limited or blocked access to social media and communication tools, up from 15 in the previous year.

Even some democratic governments have been targeting applications that use encryption features seen as a threat to national security.

WhatsApp faced restrictions in 12 of the 65 countries analyzed, more than any other app.

"Although the blocking of these tools affects everyone, it has an especially harmful impact on human rights defenders, journalists, and marginalized communities who often depend on these apps to bypass government surveillance," said Kelly.

China labeled worst

China was the world's worst offender for a second year, according to the report, followed by Syria and Iran.

Freedom House criticized a new Chinese law that allows for seven-year prison terms for spreading rumors on social media, a charge often used to imprison political activists.

It said some users in China belonging to minority religious groups were imprisoned for watching religious videos on mobile phones.

The report said authorities in 38 countries made arrests based on social media posts over the past year, an increase of more than 50 percent since 2013. Prison sentences imposed in some countries exceeded ten years. Some have been jailed for merely sharing or "liking" content on Facebook.

"When authorities sentence users to long prison terms for simply criticizing government policies online, almost everyone becomes much more reluctant to post anything that could get them in similar trouble," Kelly said.

At least 15 countries temporarily shut down internet or mobile networks as another way of limiting online activism, the report said.

Some governments broadened the range of censorship to include images, caricatures and even emojis deemed offensive by regimes, Freedom House said.

In Egypt, for example, a student who posted a photo depicting President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi with Mickey Mouse ears got a three-year prison term.

"When faced with humorous memes and cartoons of themselves, some world leaders are thin-skinned and lash out," said Kelly.

"Instead of enjoying a good laugh, they try to remove the images and imprison anyone posting them online."

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