

CIVIC FREEDOM DIGEST: TRENDS IN THE DIGITAL AGE



OCTOBER 2019

Restrictions on the online exercise of civic freedoms are a serious problem across the globe. ICNL's monitoring of the rights of freedom of assembly, association, and expression has revealed an array of laws and government actions that limit the exercise of these fundamental freedoms on the internet. ICNL's findings reinforce those of the UN Special Rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association, whose recent report addresses the opportunities and challenges brought by digital technologies to the exercise of these rights. Read the full UNSR report here: <http://bit.ly/2IDvwkN>.

ICNL's [Civic Freedom Monitor](#) details the state of civic freedoms, including their exercise online, in 54 countries. In this inaugural publication of the Civic Freedom Digest, ICNL highlights some of the key challenges that digital technologies pose to civic freedom, as well as successful civil society efforts to combat these threats.

CHALLENGES



Laws that limit civic freedoms online: In places where the right to assembly is already severely constrained, online restrictions can eliminate one of the last spaces for individuals to gather and express dissent. With street protests all but banned in [Egypt](#), the government's ability to block websites it deems a threat to national security or the economy, as permitted in the 2018 cybercrime law, empowers the government to curtail settings for online assembly as well. A law prohibiting using the internet to organize assemblies was enacted in [Russia](#), allowing the government to block websites that are used to promote mass public events "held in violation of the established order."



Internet shutdowns: Internet shutdowns prevent organizers and participants from communicating about assemblies and inhibit online gatherings, as in [Belarus](#) on a day of human rights protests and marches in March 2017, in [Zimbabwe](#) in response to widespread protests in early 2019, and in [Ethiopia](#) in both Addis Ababa and the eastern part of the country in response to protests in the second half of 2018.



Social media fees: Bloggers in [Tanzania](#) must register with the government, pay a fee of more than \$900, and disclose financial sponsors. Failure to comply could result in imprisonment or a fine of over \$2,000. Tax laws in [Uganda](#) now require social media users to pay 200 Ugandan shillings per day to use any of dozens of applications, including Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp.



Fake news laws: Several countries have considered or enacted laws prohibiting "fake news," thereby placing the government in the role of determining what news is legitimate and what news is "fake." [Malaysia](#) passed an Anti-Fake News Law in April 2018, defining "fake news" to include "any news, information, data and reports" that are "wholly or partly false." The government of [Cambodia](#) is reportedly reviewing an anti-fake news law that builds on an April 2018 regulation prohibiting certain content. A new law in [Egypt](#) prohibits press, media, and websites, including personal websites, blogs, and social media accounts with 5,000 subscribers, from publishing or broadcasting false news and allows the censorship of content found to violate of this prohibition.



Criminalization of online activities: Numerous countries have proposed or adopted cybercrime laws, which, while they may contain legitimate provisions targeting dangerous online activity, also criminalize protected expression. For instance, laws in [Palestine](#) and [Bangladesh](#) criminalize online behavior using broad or vague language that can be used to stifle freedom of speech.

LOOKING FORWARD

As the Special Rapporteur recommends in his report, “All civil society groups, not just digital rights organizations, should be supportive and engaged in the process of understanding digital threats to civic space and developing effective responses to threats.” ICNL will continue to support the efforts of civil society organizations around the globe to understand and navigate digital threats and to develop effective responses to laws and practices that infringe civic freedoms both online and offline. These examples demonstrate that progress is possible:

- In 2019, protests broke out after the government in **Lebanon** proposed a \$0.20 per day fee for voice over internet protocol usage, the technology that enables voice calling through WhatsApp and other apps. The government withdrew the proposal just hours after thousands of protesters took to the streets.
- In 2018, the Government of **Jordan** proposed controversial amendments to the Cybercrimes Law. Following a civil society-led advocacy campaign, the government withdrew the amendments and replaced them with a new draft that, while still problematic, removes some of the most troubling provisions.
- In 2017, civil society advocacy in **South Africa** led the National Assembly to amend its Cybercrimes Bill to remove restrictive provisions.
- Also in 2017, following opposition led by civil society, the parliament in **Moldova** announced that the “Big Brother Amendments” – which would have enabled government to block websites and censor the internet for vague, arbitrary reasons – were removed from the legislative agenda.

The Civic Freedom Digest outlines key challenges and opportunities that emerging trends may pose to civic freedoms, using the information in the ICNL [Civic Freedom Monitor](#) as a lens. This brief overview is not intended to be an exhaustive review of all issues facing civic space, but rather a snapshot of some of the most significant recent developments; similarly, the countries we’ve chosen to highlight are illustrative only.

Explore the full Civic Freedom Monitor here:
<http://bit.ly/ICNL-CFM>

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International
law protects
assembly and
association
rights,
whether
exercised
in person,
through
technologies
of today,
or through
technologies
of the future.”

*UN Special Rapporteur Clement Voule,
2019 Assembly and Association in the
Digital Age Report*

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