

# The prolonged internet shutdown sets a dangerous precedent



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The recent nationwide internet blackout in Bangladesh, beginning on July 18 and lasting over 150 hours, represents a grave threat to democracy and human rights that demands urgent attention. This unprecedented act of digital repression not only violated the fundamental rights of 170 million Bangladeshis but also set a dangerous precedent for authoritarian control in the digital age.

The shutdown occurred against a backdrop of mounting student protests, though the government initially attempted to obfuscate its role in the blackout. Officials, including ICT Minister Zunaid Ahmed Palak, first attributed the outage to security concerns, then to an arson attack on the cables in Mohakhali at nearby data centres by miscreants. Palak even suggested that broadband internet would be restored within a day. However, this explanation, or rather excuse, quickly crumbled under scrutiny. The truth, as confirmed by international observers like Cloudflare and Telenor, was that it was a deliberate, government-ordered shutdown.

Cloudflare, one of the world's largest cloud service companies, used global internet traffic monitoring tools to confirm that the blackout was indeed government-ordered. Telenor, the parent company of Grameenphone, corroborated this assessment, stating

**This calculated move to sever digital communications coincided with student protests, revealing the shutdown's true intent. By denying citizens access to social media platforms, messaging apps, and news websites, the government effectively silenced the nation and prevented the outside world from witnessing what was happening inside Bangladesh.**



VISUAL: ANWAR SOHEL

that local authorities had mandated the shutdown of 3G and 4G networks. The extent of the blackout is particularly troubling given Bangladesh's multiple internet connectivity options. The country has access to submarine cables through Bangladesh Submarine Cable Limited, land fibre connections through India, IIG VSAT connectivity for limited data links, and 3G/4G mobile networks. Put simply, the diverse infrastructure makes it implausible that a single localised issue could cause such widespread disruption, further supporting the assertion that this was a calculated move by authorities.

As internet access slowly returned after more than 150 hours, it came with draconian restrictions. Reportedly, the

shutdown's true intent. By denying citizens access to social media platforms, messaging apps, and news websites, the government effectively silenced the nation and prevented the outside world from witnessing what was happening inside Bangladesh.

When governments impose internet shutdowns and restrictions, particularly during protests, they hinder the flow of vital information to citizens. This includes preventing people from contacting emergency services like fire departments and healthcare providers. Moreover, these shutdowns impede international and local media outlets, as well as human rights organisations, from documenting potential human rights violations. Such

access. This selective availability raises questions about the government's priorities and potential preferential treatment of certain entities.

The shutdown, however, is part of a disturbing global trend. In 2022, there were over 180 internet shutdowns across 35 countries worldwide. Governments increasingly deploy this tactic to cover up grave human rights violations, including state violence against peaceful protesters, electoral interference, extrajudicial killings of political dissidents, and arbitrary arrests and detentions.

The UN Human Rights Council, via establishing the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), has unequivocally

stated that internet shutdowns have "indiscriminate and disproportionate impacts on human rights." In today's interconnected world, internet access is essential for the realisation of numerous fundamental rights, including freedom of expression and access to information, the right to education, the right to health, the right to work, and freedom of assembly and association. By imposing this blackout, the Bangladesh government has effectively violated these rights for its entire population, contravening its obligations under international human rights law.

The shutdown's impact extends beyond civil liberties. In an increasingly digital economy, such disruptions can have severe economic consequences. Businesses relying on online transactions, e-commerce platforms, and digital communication tools suffer significant losses. The global nonprofit organisation NetBlocks estimates that the 150-hour shutdown could have cost Bangladesh's economy over USD 500 million, further burdening a nation already grappling with economic challenges.

Moreover, the blackout jeopardised public safety and health. During times of crisis, access to timely information can be a matter of life and death. Recounting my personal experience, doctors were not available to see outdoor patients at Birdem Hospital due to the ongoing nationwide curfew. However, online consultation and public health information also became inaccessible due to the internet shutdown. By cutting off internet access, the government potentially hindered emergency services, disrupted healthcare communications, and prevented citizens from accessing crucial public health information.

We and the world must respond accordingly to this flagrant violation of digital rights. The United Nations should launch an investigation into the shutdown and its human rights implications. International and development partners should insist on respect for digital rights and internet freedom. Tech companies and telecom providers operating in Bangladesh should publicly disclose any requests for government orders to shut down services. Civil society organisations should document the impact of the shutdown on human rights, the economy, and public services to build a case for accountability.

And lastly, the Bangladesh government must provide a full, transparent explanation for the shutdown, and implement legal safeguards to prevent future arbitrary internet restrictions.

The fight for internet freedom is synonymous with the struggle for human rights and democracy.

## WOMEN'S ASIA CUP 2024

# Bangladesh's semifinal defeat warrants some self-reflection



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The Bangladesh women's cricket team made its debut in 2007 and gained One Day International (ODI) status in 2011. Their most impressive achievement came in 2018 when they won the Women's Asia Cup and remain the only team to have lifted the trophy other than India. On Friday, Bangladesh faced India in the semifinal of this year's Asia Cup looking to recreate some of that same magic but failed by a large margin. This does not however come as a surprise, since their only wins in their last 13 games came against Thailand and Malaysia in this Asia Cup.

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**While Bangladesh seemed to be going through a rough patch, they had established themselves as a regularly competitive side before this current phase. The semifinal match against India was an opportunity for them to carry the momentum from their previous two wins and reinforce the fact that they are still a side to be taken seriously. They failed to capitalise on their existing strengths and the manner in which they lost the match may warrant some self-reflection.**

before this current phase. The semifinal match against India was an opportunity for them to carry the momentum from their previous two wins and reinforce the fact that they are still a side to be taken seriously. They failed to capitalise on their existing strengths and the manner in which they lost the match may warrant some self-reflection. The team will want to turn things around so that they can regain their self-confidence and emerge as a resilient team capable of going through

difficult phases and overcoming them.

Bangladesh started the tournament by losing to the hosts, Sri Lanka. They were able to score only 111-8 in 20 overs which was not nearly a competitive score on the Dambulla ground and Sri Lanka cruised to a victory by seven wickets with 17 deliveries to spare. After that however, Bangladesh turned things around and ended their 10-match losing streak in T20Is (five of which came as recently as in April and May 2024 against India) against Thailand. It was a combined effort from the bowlers and the top order which led to a convincing victory for Bangladesh. They restricted Thailand to a total of 96/9 which Bangladesh chased down by scoring 100/3

in 17.3 overs. Bangladesh benefited from the leg spinner Rabeya Khan's 4-wicket haul and a half-century from the left-hand batting opener Murshida Khatun.

The Bangladesh women's cricket team played to their strengths in the match against Malaysia where they displayed their most impressive performance in the tournament, securing a spot in the semifinal. In their biggest victory in the 2024 Women's Asia Cup, the Bangladeshi batters exhibited their capabilities

in making the most of a batting friendly ground. Batting first, they posted their second highest T20I total of 191-2. Murshida Khatun and Nigar Sultana combined their firepower to score half-centuries with a high strike rate. This was particularly notable because Sultana has been criticised in the past for not increasing the run rate. But in this match, she remained not out with an impressive strike rate of above 167. In the second innings, a cohesive team

Since the Bangladesh team was not in its best form before the tournament, the fact they had qualified for the semifinals should have come as a welcome validation of their competitive abilities. However, it must be mentioned that there seems to exist a significant gap in the quality of cricket played by the top four teams—India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh—versus the rest of the teams. While India established their



The Bangladesh women's cricket team failed to capitalise on their existing strengths against India in the Asia Cup semifinal match.

PHOTO: FIROZ AHMED

performance saw six Bangladeshi bowlers chipping in to restrict Malaysia to 77/8 and completing a 114-run victory. Nahida Akter stood out as the star performer who took two wickets at an economy rate of 3.25. The two wickets brought Akter's tally of T20I wickets to 99. She would have looked to complete the historic achievement of the first woman to get 100 wickets in T20Is in the semifinal but is still yet to do so due to the crushing defeat that saw India winning the match with all 10 wickets to spare.

dominance in the game with a consistency that's awe-inspiring, Bangladesh should have backed themselves with their own strengths. They failed to make the most of their right-arm spinners (Rabeya Khan, Shorna Akter and Rumana Ahmed), as one of the only teams in the world to regularly play three such bowlers who are known to be some of the most attacking wicket takers globally. If they were to be a match for India, all players would have had to come together to amplify their strengths. Instead, the performance we saw

in the semifinal conveyed a complete absence of conviction that the team considered themselves worthy of a spot in the final.

Batting first, Bangladesh managed to post a total of only 80/8 in 20 overs. Renuka Singh—whose form had come in question ahead of the tournament and had been left out in two of the three T20Is in the series against South Africa—took three wickets in three overs, leaving the Bangladesh batting lineup in shambles. Bangladesh's opener Dilara Akter was a player, who many would have hoped would give the Indian bowlers a run for their money. She scored a six off Renuka but succumbed to a fielder off deep square in the very next delivery. Some of the other batters' shot selections were also questionable. Only two Bangladeshi batters got to double digits which is a disappointing display of the team's batting abilities in a knock-out game. One of those two batters was the captain Nigar Sultana who scored 32 off 51 deliveries and is bound to once again raise questions about her scoring rate. Though she needed to build a partnership when Bangladesh fell to 21-3, 19 dot balls in the overs between six and nine simply did not seem justified. At that point, one wonders what is the objective with which the batters are playing, since to beat India a much fiercer brand of cricket needed to be played.

Ultimately, it seemed as though the memories of the previous crushing defeats to India earlier in the year still gnawed in the Bangladeshi players' minds and that they had already lost half the battle before they appeared on the field. In 2018, when Bangladesh lifted the Asia Cup, they did so after beating India twice—once in the group stages and again in the final. It is only likely that the team would have changed since then but the Bangladeshi fans will hope that the team can rebuild and position themselves once again as the top Asian team. After all, the most commendable teams in the world are not only those who remain at the top consistently but also the teams who climb up from the depths of challenges. Bangladesh will hope to chart a similar story for themselves.