

Kazakhstan's internet shutdown is the latest episode in an ominous trend: digital authoritarianism | The Conversation

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January 25, 2022

The Kazakhstan government shut off the internet nationwide on Jan. 5, 2022, in response to widespread civil unrest in the country. The unrest started on Jan. 2, after the government lifted the price cap on liquid natural gas, which Kazakhs use to fuel their cars. The Kazakhstan town of Zhanaozen, an oil and gas hub, erupted with a protest against sharply rising fuel prices.

Immediately, there were reports of internet dark zones. As the demonstrations grew, so did the internet service disruptions. Mass internet shutdowns and mobile blocking were reported on Jan. 4, with only intermittent connectivity. By Jan. 5, approximately 95% of internet users were reportedly blocked.

The outage was decried as a human rights violation intended to suppress political dissent. The deployment of a “kill switch” to temporarily shut down the internet on a national scale renewed questions of how to curb the global threat of digital authoritarianism.

As a researcher who studies national security, cybersurveillance and civil rights, I have observed how information technology has been increasingly weaponized against civilian populations, including by cutting off the essential service of internet access. It's part of an ominous trend of governments taking control of internet access and content to assert authoritarian control over what citizens see and hear.

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