

Online freedom hit by pressure on social media, apps

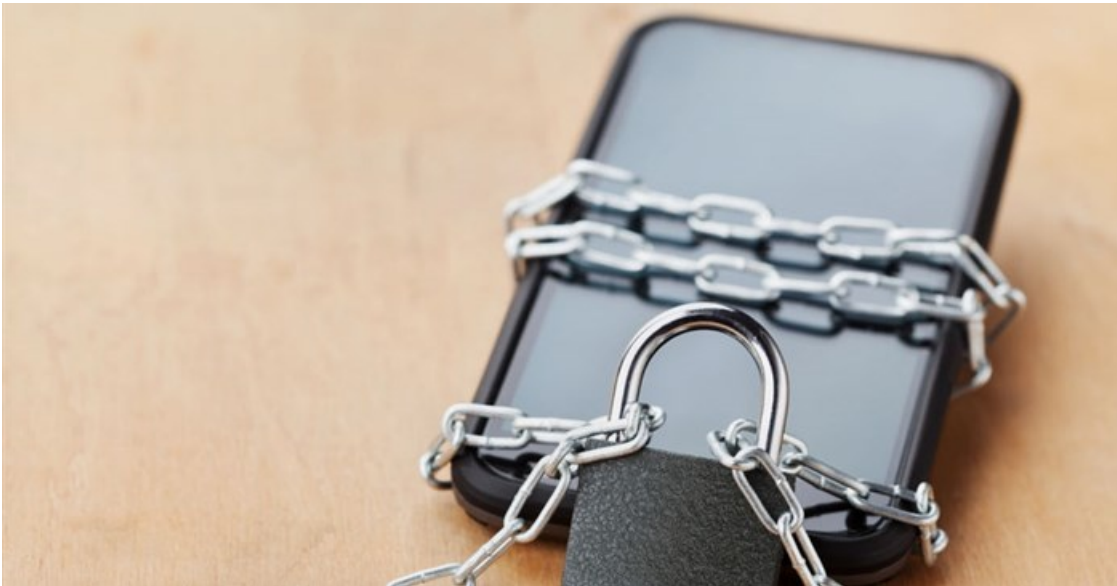
WASHINGTON: Internet freedom declined for a sixth consecutive year in 2016 as governments around the world cracked down on social media and messaging applications used to express dissent, a watchdog group said on Monday.

The Freedom on the Net report by the activist group Freedom House said a growing number of regimes are restricting or censoring messaging platforms such as WhatsApp in addition to popular 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 are able to spread information quickly and securely -- and some governments find this threatening."

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



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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 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.

Source: AFP

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