General Assembly
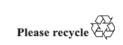
Human Rights Council
Forty-sixth session
22 February–19 March 2021
Agenda item 3
Promotion and protection of all human rights, civil,
political, economic, social and cultural rights,
including the right to development

Written statement* submitted by Liberal International, a non-governmental organization in general consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[1 February 2021]

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* Issued as received, in the language(s) of submission only.

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Liberal International calls for human rights to be respected online

Today, we see almost daily how the use and regulation of digital tools impact our societies and politics. Since several social media companies decided to ban outgoing the United States of America (US) President Donald Trump after his incitement of violence led to his supporters storming the US Capitol, discussions of the role of social media companies and regulation has been rife.

The past months has provided us with ample examples of how human rights are being violated online. During the parliamentary and presidential elections in Uganda in January 2021, the incumbent President Museveni ordered a complete shutdown of the internet in the country, a strategy increasingly used by governments in countries like Belarus, Guinea, India, and the United Republic of Tanzania to silence their critics. In countries like Cambodia and Hungary, governments are persecuting journalists and activists who criticize them, using legislation which targets the spread of disinformation and fake news. It has recently been revealed that Chinese companies have patented a series of facial recognition tools capable of identifying Uyghurs, which may have been used to intensify the oppression in Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region, China.

With digital tools and solutions taking on an increasingly large role in our lives, the importance of securing human rights online becomes ever more pressing. Lockdowns imposed to fight the coronavirus has sped up this development, and for a large part of the world digital tools are now used on a daily basis for taking part in fundamental societal functions such as education, work, health care, payments, and keeping in touch with friends and family.

As people and governments across the world become increasingly aware of the importance of digital rights, and legislations such as the European Union Digital Markets Act and Digital Services Act are being developed, Liberal International calls on all governments and policy-makers to respect these ten fundamental principles for human rights online:

- Any human rights respected in the physical world should be equally respected in digital form;

- Any legislation and technical tools put in place affecting human rights must be robust enough to be acceptable under any government, benevolent or not;

- Access to digital communications and the right to information should be inclusive, where no part of the world or group in society is left behind;

- Openly and persistently denounce the use of internet shutdowns as a hindrance for enjoyment of human rights such as access to information, freedom of expression, health, education, and work;

- Strengthen policies to combat cybercrime and breaches of privacy and personal data security, ensuring transparency and due process when fighting cybercrime;

- Restrict the introduction of any kind of legislation on data retention or undermining encryption, which risks infringing on the rights to privacy and data protection;

- Limit mass surveillance and develop alternative instruments to keep wrongdoers under surveillance without degrading the privacy and software security of the entire society and every human being;

- The transparency, accountability, and comprehensibility of technology companies and governments for their use of data must be increased, also ensuring that individuals know when their data is being collected and what it will be used for;

- Transparency, accountability, and comprehensibility in the use of artificial intelligence must be ensured, to clarify chains of responsibility and ensure traceability in decision-making, and to allow societal oversight of the algorithms that influence the lives of citizens;

- Legislation on content moderation, aimed at managing hate speech, disinformation, or other malicious content online, must not arbitrarily restrict the freedom of speech or encourage private companies to pre-emptively censor content.