

# Silenced nation: the unprecedented Facebook shutdown in PNG

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Facebook error on mobile phone

Photo Credit: [Unsplash](#)

On 25 March 2025, the Papua New Guinea government **shut down Facebook** for a day without notice, leaving the roughly 1.4 to 1.6 million users in the country offline, according to Facebook analytics. Since independence in 1975, no government has ever shut down any form of media in PNG. Now on the eve of the anniversary of 50 years of independence, the government has taken this unprecedented action.

Figure 1 shows that Port Moresby, the capital, bore the brunt of the shutdown with 44% of the country’s users. Figure 2 shows the **young adult demographic** aged 18 to 38 years were the majority of users silenced. So it is no surprise that the government action triggered **student-led forums** which opposed the shutdown and three of parliament’s recently passed bills. The bills were the amendment to the Constitution to extend the grace period for a prime minister not to face a Motion of No Confidence, which Michael Kabuni [explained in a recent blog](#), the *National Executive Council Amendment Act* and the *Counter-Terrorism Act 2024*.

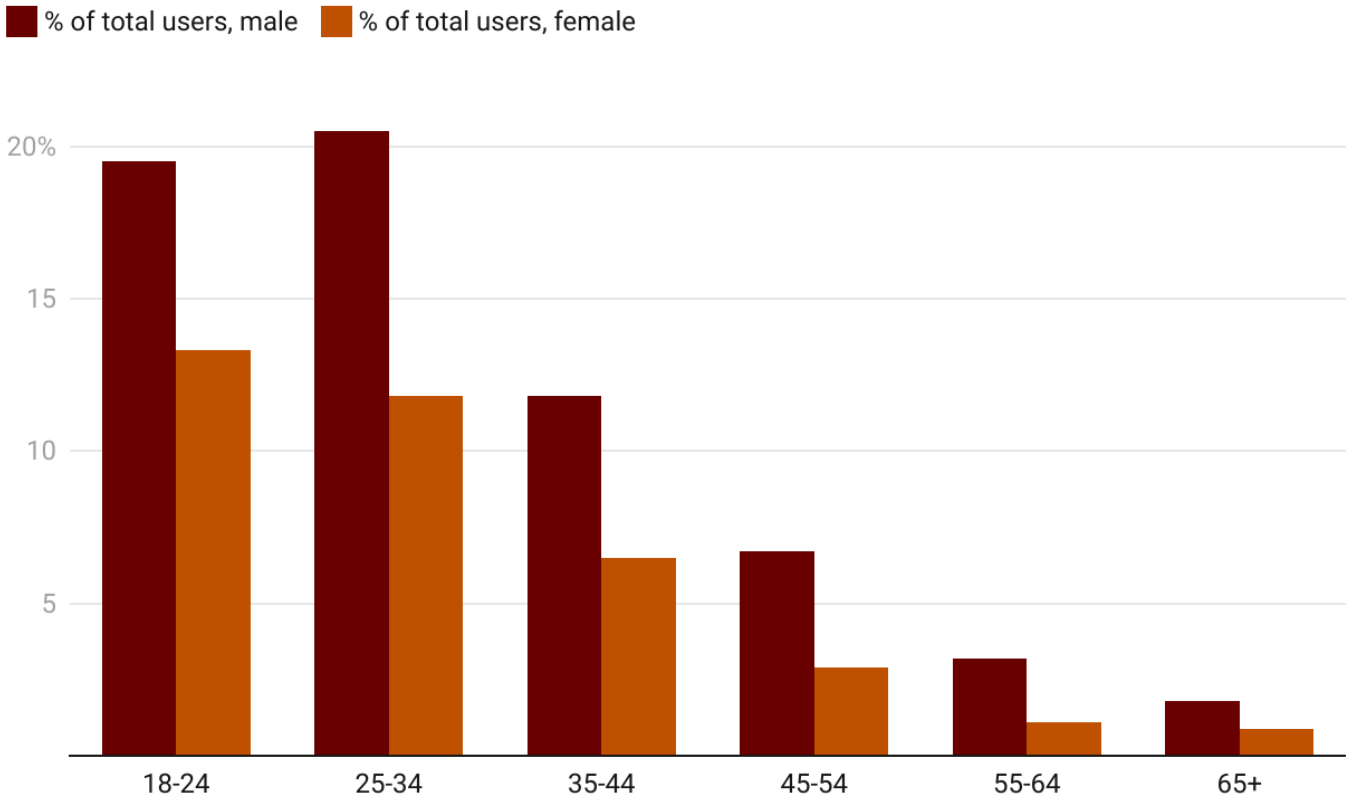
## Figure 1: PNG Facebook users by location, top four cities

Percentage of total Facebook users in Papua New Guinea



Source: Facebook audience analytics • Created with Datawrapper

**Figure 2: Age and gender of Facebook users in PNG**



Source: Facebook audience analytics • Created with Datawrapper

The decision to shut down Facebook was shrouded in controversy, with conflicting narratives from high-ranking officials and the police minister who referenced the new *Counter-Terrorism Act 2024*. The police commissioner claims the shutdown was in response to **terrorist elements** conspiring on Facebook to destroy critical infrastructure — but no arrests have been made yet. In contrast, the police minister applauded the shutdown as part of a **successful “test”** of a new technology intended to combat the misuse of social media.

While the definition of terrorism in the Act is broadly consistent with definitions used in security studies, its potential application is concerning. The police commissioner is given excessive power and the members of the Counter-Terrorism Joint Security Taskforce are immune from criminal or civil liabilities (**Section 9**).

Despite the emphasis by authorities on the *Counter-Terrorism Act 2024*, an online survey conducted by the authors showed that 89% of the 145 participants had neither seen the Act nor understood what constitutes a terrorist offence in PNG. For those who had access to the law, there were varying interpretations of what constitutes terrorism. Nevertheless, the participants shared common concerns that the police could use the law to justify brutality against the people and arbitrarily designate dissent against unpopular governments as acts of terrorism.

There was a significant breakdown in inter-agency coordination during the shutdown. While the police minister insists the shutdown was a collaboration between the police, the National Information and Communications Technology Authority (NICTA) and telecommunication companies, NICTA **denies being consulted**. NICTA is responsible for licensing information technology services, including ensuring compliance with laws and regulations.

Approximately 85% of the respondents were dissatisfied with the explanations provided by the authorities for the shutdown. As one respondent said:

...it was not properly explained and communicated to the users as to why the app [Facebook] had to be shut down. There were many reasons circulating however none was backed by credible evidence.

Looking toward the future, 50% of respondents contended that there should not be any situation in PNG warranting a complete shutdown of Facebook, compared to 15% who say otherwise. Conflicting statements from the authorities and a lack of transparency resulted in various interpretations as to the true intention of the shutdown — which coincided with Prime Minister James Marape's attendance in court to **give evidence** on illegal payments made to a law firm by the state when he was finance minister. Some respondents said the shutdown was not a coincidence. As one argues:

This test [of the new technology] could have been done any time but they chose to test during a crucial time in the National Court involving the prime minister? I don't think it's a coincidence. They [the government] didn't want public scrutiny.

However, there were some who expressed concerns over how social media, especially Facebook, is used in PNG. One respondent said:

There's a lot of garbage on PNG social media that needs a strong government response, BUT violating the public's rights to access social media apps is NOT the way to do that.

Others advocate for more targeted interventions. One respondent suggests:

They [the government] can use this "new advanced technology" they have, to shut down sites [Facebook accounts] that are detrimental such as porn sites and others that do harm to the people...

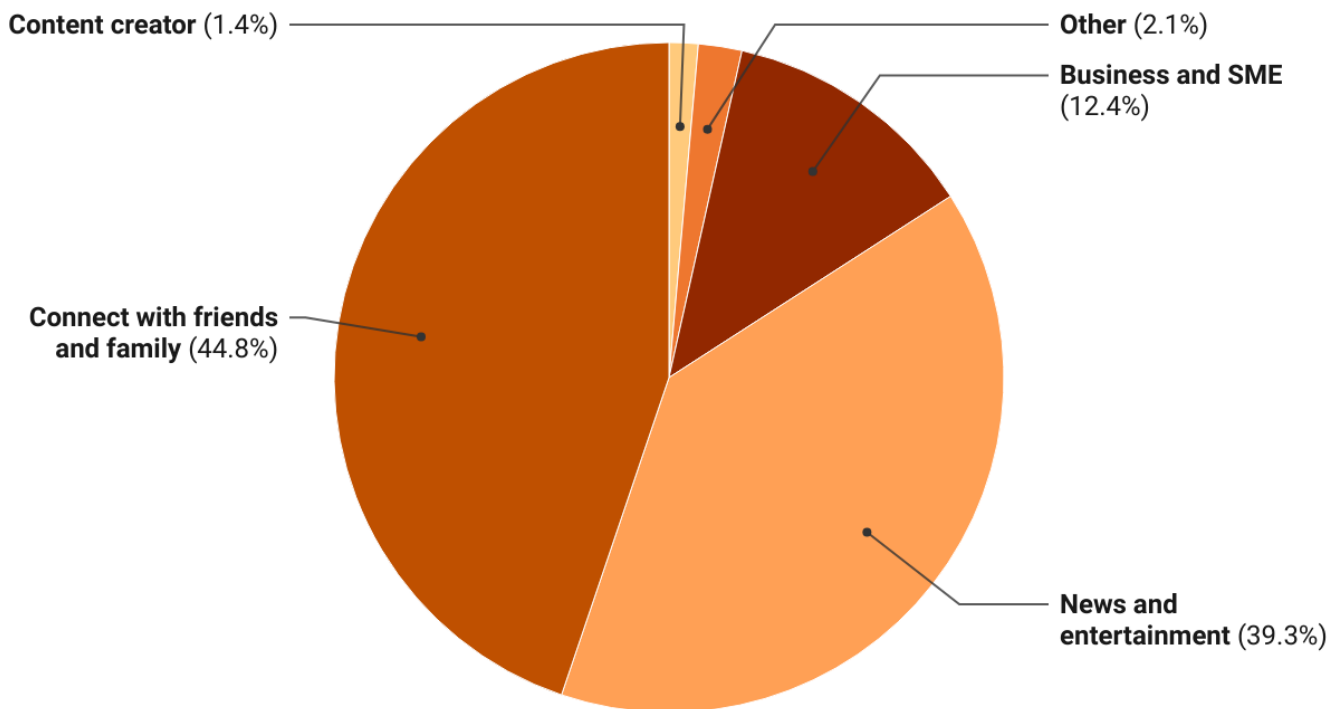
Ironically, the *Counter-Terrorism Act 2024*, rather than achieving its intended purpose of protecting the people, has created fear, as seen in this statement from one respondent:

For the first time in my entire life, last night [the night of the shutdown] I literally felt scared of the government. These are experiences associated with authoritarian regimes. This is what we read about in college. Not a good experience.

Beyond concerns over rights, Facebook is essential for other purposes. Figure 3 shows that for many people its main purpose is to access news and entertainment, as well as to connect with friends and family. About 13% of the participants use it for business, and the shutdown had a **negative impact** on small businesses that rely on it for marketing and sales.

**Figure 3: Purpose of Facebook use by survey participants**

n=145



Source: Survey by authors • Created with Datawrapper

This whole saga has several implications. First, the government demonstrated that it has the capability to enforce a nation-wide shutdown of social media platforms without warning, based on perceived or asserted threats. This raises the following question: will the state shut down social media every time there's a perceived threat? Will the many small and medium enterprises **who rely solely on Facebook** be compensated for the loss of business during shutdowns? What about the right to freedom of speech and expression?

Second, there is a disconnect between state agencies like the police force and

NICTA, and a tendency to work in silos and make *ad hoc* decisions. Public confidence in these agencies will only erode if this trend continues.

Third, there is a severe lack of public awareness about the *Counter Terrorism Act 2024* despite its profound implications for constitutional and human rights.

It is imperative to ensure that all actions affecting citizens' rights are understood, transparent and legally sound. Otherwise, the erosion of trust in state institutions and political leaders will worsen. We conclude with this quote from one of the respondents:

A free and independent media is the cornerstone of any thriving democracy. It holds leaders accountable, informs citizens, and promotes transparency. When media freedom is restricted, flow of information controlled... and silencing dissent... it paves the way for authoritarianism...

*Data note: The online survey was conducted using Google forms. The survey form was shared with student and professional networks through email and WhatsApp, and with the public via Facebook groups once access was restored. Facebook data analytics were extracted online by one of the authors.*

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Link:

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