

African governments learn to block the internet, but at cost

March 14 2017, by Rodney Muhumuza



In this Saturday, Feb. 20, 2016 file photo, a man walks past listening to news on a portable radio as military police deploy, shortly after the election result was announced, and social media had been blocked, in downtown Kampala, Uganda. Since 2015 there have been wide-ranging internet shutdowns in about a dozen African countries, often during elections, and the trend worries rights defenders who say such blackouts are conducive to carrying out serious abuses against civilians. (AP Photo/Ben Curtis, File)

The mysterious Facebook blogger kept dishing up alleged government

secrets. One day it was a shadowy faction looting cash from Uganda's presidential palace with impunity. The next was a claim that the president was suffering from a debilitating illness.

For authorities in a country that has seen just one president since 1986, the critic who goes by Tom Voltaire Okwalinga is an example of the threat some African governments see in the exploding reach of the internet—bringing growing attempts to throttle it.

Since 2015 about a dozen African countries have had wide-ranging internet shutdowns, often during elections. Rights defenders say the blackouts are conducive to carrying out serious abuses.

The internet outages also can inflict serious damage on the economies of African countries that desperately seek growth, according to research by the Brookings Institution think tank.

Uganda learned that lesson. In February 2016, amid a tight election, authorities shut down access to Facebook and Twitter as anger swelled over delayed delivery of ballots in opposition strongholds. During the blackout, the police arrested the president's main challenger. Over \$2 million was shed from the country's GDP in just five days of internet restrictions, the Brookings Institution said.

The shutdowns also have "potential devastating consequences" for education and health, says the Mo Ibrahim Foundation, an organization founded by a mobile phone magnate that monitors trends in African governance.



In this Monday, Feb. 15, 2016 file photo, residents hide behind a metal shop security grille and take photos using a mobile phone as outside riot police chase angry supporters of opposition leader Kizza Besigye after he was prevented by police from reaching one of his campaign rallies near the Makerere University in Kampala, Uganda. Since 2015 there have been wide-ranging internet shutdowns in about a dozen African countries, often during elections, and the trend worries rights defenders who say such blackouts are conducive to carrying out serious abuses against civilians. (AP Photo/Ben Curtis, File)

As more countries gain the technology to impose restrictions, rights observers see an urgent threat to democracy.

"The worrying trend of disrupting access to social media around polling time puts the possibility of a free and fair electoral process into serious jeopardy," said Maria Burnett, associate director for the Africa division of Human Rights Watch.

In the past year, internet shutdowns during elections have been reported in Gabon, Republic of Congo and Gambia, where a long-time dictator cut off the internet on the eve of a vote he ultimately lost.

In Uganda, where the opposition finds it hard to organize because of a law barring public meetings without the police chief's authorization, the mysterious blogger Okwalinga is widely seen as satisfying a hunger for information that the state would like to keep secret. His allegations, however, often are not backed up with evidence.

It is widely believed that Uganda's government has spent millions trying to unmask Okwalinga. In January an Irish court rejected the efforts of a Ugandan lawyer who wanted Facebook to reveal the blogger's identity over defamation charges.

"What Tom Voltaire Okwalinga publishes is believable because the government has created a fertile ground to not be trusted," said Robert Shaka, a Ugandan information technology specialist. "In fact, if we had an open society where transparency is a key pillar of our democracy there would be no reason for people like Tom Voltaire Okwalinga."



In this Monday, Oct. 10, 2016 file photo, Ethiopian men read newspapers and drink coffee at a cafe during a declared state of emergency in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. Since 2015 there have been wide-ranging internet shutdowns in about a dozen African countries, often during elections, and the trend worries rights defenders who say such blackouts are conducive to carrying out serious abuses against civilians. (AP Photo/Mulugeta Ayene, File)

In 2015, Shaka himself was arrested on suspicion of being the blogger and charged with violating the privacy of President Yoweri Museveni, allegations he denied. While Shaka was in custody, the mystery blogger kept publishing.

"Who is the editor of Facebook? Who is the editor of all these things they post on social media? Sometimes you have no option, if something is at stake, to interfere with access," said Col. Shaban Bantariza, a spokesman for the Ugandan government.

Although the government doesn't like to impose restrictions, the internet can be shut down if the objective is to preserve national security, Bantariza said.

In some English-speaking territories of Cameroon where the locals have accused the central government of marginalizing their language in favor of French, the government has shut down the internet for several weeks.

Internet advocacy group Access Now earlier estimated that the restrictions in Cameroon have cost local businesses more than \$1.39 million.

"Internet shutdowns—with governments ordering the suspension or throttling of entire networks, often during elections or public protests—must never be allowed to become the new normal," Access Now said in an open letter to internet companies in Cameroon, saying the shutdowns cut off access to vital information, e-financing and emergency services.



In this Sunday, Oct. 2, 2016 file photo, Ethiopian soldiers try to stop protesters during a declared state of emergency in Bishoftu in the Oromia region of Ethiopia. Since 2015 there have been wide-ranging internet shutdowns in about a dozen African countries, often during elections, and the trend worries rights defenders who say such blackouts are conducive to carrying out serious abuses against civilians. (AP Photo/File)

In Zimbabwe, social media is a relatively new concern for the government following online protests launched by a pastor last year. Aside from blocking social media at times, the government has increased internet fees by nearly 300 percent.

In Ethiopia, where a government-controlled company has a monopoly over all telecom services, internet restrictions have been deeply felt for months. The country remains under a state of emergency imposed in October after sometimes deadly anti-government protests. Restrictions have ranged from shutting down the internet completely to blocking

access to social media sites.

Just 30 days of internet restrictions between July 2015 and July 2016 cost Ethiopia's economy over \$8 million, according to figures by the Brookings Institution. The country has been one of Africa's fastest-growing economies.

Ethiopia's government insists social media is being used to incite violence, but many citizens are suspicious of that stance.

"What we are experiencing here in Ethiopia is a situation in which the flow of information on social media dismantled the traditional propaganda machine of the government and people begin creating their own media platforms. This is what the government dislikes," said Seyoum Teshome, a lecturer at Ethiopia's Ambo University who was jailed for 82 days last year on charges of inciting violence related to his Facebook posts.

"The government doesn't want the spread of information that's out of its control, and this bears all the hallmarks of dictatorship," Seyoum said.

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