Internet Shutdowns and Disruptions Are a Pain for Electoral Democracy In Africa :

The Key Issues, Trends, Practices and Consequences

November, 2025

DIGITAL RIGHTS ALLIANCE AFRICA

CIPESA

ICNL

Contents

List of Abbreviations 3

Introduction 4

Methodology and Scope 6
International and Regional Perspectives of Technology and Elections 6
United Nations Instruments 6
African Union Instruments on Technology and Elections 7
Perspectives from African Regional Blocs 8
Relevance of the Internet to Electoral Democracy 9
Providing Information 9
Voter Education and Campaigning 10
Tool for Expression 11
Medium of Improved Accountability and Transparency 12
Common Justifications for Internet Shutdowns and Disruptions 14
Responses from Civil Society and other Stakeholders 18

Conclusion 19
Recommendations 20

List of Abbreviations

ACHPR	African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights
ACDEG	African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance
ANC	African National Congress
APC	All Progressives Congress (Nigeria)
BVAS	Bimodal Voter Accreditation System
CCC	Citizens' Coalition for Change (Zimbabwe)
CSO	Civil Society Organisation
DA	Democratic Alliance (South Africa)
DRAA	Digital Rights Alliance Africa
DRC	Democratic Republic of Congo
EACJ	East African Court of Justice (EACJ)
EALS	East African Law Society (EALS)
EC	Electoral Commission
ECOWAS	Economic Community of West African States
EFF	Economic Freedom Fighters (South Africa)
ICC	International Criminal Court
ICCPR	International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights
IEC	Independent Electoral Commission
INEC	Independent National Electoral Commission (Nigeria)
IReV	INEC Result Viewing Portal (Nigeria)
ISP	Internet Service Provider
MISA	Media Institute of Southern Africa
NUP	National Unity Platform (Uganda)
NRM	National Resistance Movement (Uganda)
OAS	Organisation of American States
OAU	Organisation of African Unity
OSCE	Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe
PF	Patriotic Front (Zambia)
PDP	Peoples Democratic Party (Nigeria)
SADC	Southern African Development Community
SEOM	SADC Electoral Observation Mission
SOPs	Standard Operating Procedures
UDHR	Universal Declaration of Human Rights
UCC	Uganda Communications Commission
UN	United Nations
UPND	United Party for National Development (Zambia)
VPN	Virtual Private Network

Introduction

Internet shutdowns and disruptions have increasingly become a tool employed by African governments during elections to control the flow of information, limit voter engagement, and suppress dissent. Such disruptions involve the complete or partial disruption of access to the internet and digital communication channels, which significantly impacts on electoral processes.[1] Several countries, including Chad (2016 and 2024), Burundi (2020), Cameroon (2018), Comoros (2024), Democratic Republic of Congo (2016), Ethiopia (2021), Guinea (2020), Nigeria, Mali (2020), Mauritania (2019), Republic of the Congo (2016 and 2021), Senegal, Tanzania (2020 and 2025), Togo, Uganda (2016 and 2021) and Zimbabwe (2018 & 2019), have instituted internet shutdowns and disruptions in the period leading up to and in the aftermath of elections contrary to regional and international human rights standards protecting rights during elections.[2]

26 Ethiopia

15 Sudan

13 Algeria

7 Chad

6 DRC, Uganda

5 Cameroon, Egypt, Libya, Mali, Togo

4 Nigeria

3 Burkina Faso, Gabon, Guinea, Sierra Leone
Somalia(Somaliland), Zimbabwe

2 Benin, Equatorial Guinea, Eswatini, Kenya, Mauritania
Morocco, Senegal, Tanzania

1 Burundi, Cote d'Ivoire, Eritrea, The Gambia, Liberia, Malawi,
Niger, Rep. Congo, South Sudan, Tunisia, Zambia

Frequency of Internet Shutdowns (2016-2023) vs. Countries

1 *See for instance, CIPESA, State of Internet Freedom in Africa – 2024, Africa's Electoral Democracy and Technology: Pitfalls and Promises, https://cipesa.org/wp-content/files/reports/State_of_Internet_Freedom_in_Africa_Report_2024.pdf accessed 23 October 2024*

2 *Ibid.*

As noted above, internet shutdowns vary in scope. They may feature blockage of specific social media platforms, regional cutoffs within countries, such as in Ethiopia in the Amhara, Tigray and Oromia regions[3] and nationwide internet blackouts. The common players are Internet Service Providers (ISPs) and telecommunication service providers (telecos) who often act on instructions of governments to halt services or throttle internet speeds and restrict access. In 2019 alone, 14 African countries (Burundi, Uganda, Congo, Togo, Cameroon, Mali, Zimbabwe, Ethiopia, Kenya, Tanzania, Egypt among others) disrupted access to the Internet, suspended social media platforms and other communications services, or throttled connections. This is the highest number of shutdowns documented in Africa between 2015 to 2021. According to Access Now, 2023 was the worst year of internet shutdowns ever recorded with 17 shutdowns in 9 countries.[4]

According to Access Now, 2023 was the worst year of internet shutdowns

17

shutdowns in

9 countries.

Internet shutdowns during elections have become common and disrupt the use of technology in electoral processes, leading to delays, irregularities, and a lack of transparency.[5] In recent years, internet shutdowns have become a common feature in African electoral processes. Countries like Uganda, Ethiopia, and the Democratic Republic of Congo have imposed internet shutdowns during critical moments of electoral processes.[6] Governments often justify internet disruptions under the guise of maintaining national security, preventing misinformation, and ensuring public order.

Shutdowns raise several concerns and have a profound impact on electoral democracy. During elections, access to information is critical for voters to make informed decisions, monitor election proceedings, and hold governments accountable. By shutting down the internet, governments suppress the free flow of information, prevent civil society organizations (CSOs) from monitoring the election, and disrupt voter engagement.

This study was compiled by the Digital Rights Alliance Africa (DRAA), a network of civil society organisations championing digital civic space, to spotlight emerging threats to online freedoms and emphasize the importance of ensuring a free and open internet during elections to foster government transparency and accountability. It examines how internet shutdowns in Africa impact political participation and democracy by limiting voter education, information flow, freedom of expression, transparency and accountability of the electoral processes. Additionally, the study highlights some of the various justifications fronted by governments to shut down the Internet and offers recommendations for policy and advocacy strategies to counteract internet disruptions and their associated negative impacts.

3 *Human Rights Watch, 'Ethiopia: Communications Blackout in Tigray' (12 November 2020) https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/11/12/ethiopia-communications-blackout-tigray accessed 27 August 2025; see also, Access Now, 'Internet Shutdowns in 2023' (Access Now, 2023) https://www.accessnow.org/internet-shutdowns2023/#:~:text=In%202023%2C%20Access%20Now%20and,began%20our%20monitoring%20in%202016 accessed 18 September 2024, https://www.accessnow.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/2023-KIO-Report.pdf*

4 *AccessNow, "Shrinking democracy, Growing violence: Internet shutdowns in 2023," https://www.accessnow.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/2023-KIO-Report.pdf accessed 27 August, 2025, p.24*

5 *Nic Cheeseman, 'How and Why Internet Shutdowns Threaten Democracy in Africa' (Democracy in Africa, 4 November 2020) https://democracyinafrica.org/how-and-why-internet-shutdowns-threaten-democracy-in-africa/ accessed 17 September 2024*

6 *'Gbenga Sesan, 'How Africans Can Prepare for Internet Shutdowns' (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 25 April 2023) https://carnegieendowment.org/posts/2023/04/how-africans-can-prepare-for-internet-shutdowns?lang=enaccessed 14 October 2024.*

Methodology and Scope

This study sought to understand the impact of internet shutdowns and disruptions on electoral democracy on the African continent. A qualitative approach was employed in efforts to understand the nature, trends, justifications and effects of internet shutdowns and disruptions. In the compilation of the report, researchers reviewed a wide spectrum of literature on internet shutdowns and disruptions in Africa, including reports, journal articles, and other online resources and articles.

International and Regional Perspectives of Technology and Elections

Technology plays a transformative role in modern elections, particularly in enhancing transparency, increasing voter participation, and enabling the real-time transmission of results. However, the increasing reliance on digital platforms and the internet also makes electoral processes vulnerable to disruptions such as internet shutdowns. This section highlights the international and regional legal frameworks that govern internet access during elections.

United Nations Instruments

The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), to which African States are parties,[7] guarantees the right to freedom of expression in Article 19 which includes the right to information. Article 19 of the ICCPR is similar to Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR).[8] The United Nations Human Rights Council has condemned internet shutdowns, recognising them as a violation of international human rights law.[9] Shutdowns during elections undermine not only freedom of expression but also the integrity of the electoral process.

In 2011, the United Nations (UN) Special Rapporteur on freedom of opinion and expression, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) Representative on freedom of the media, the Organization of American States (OAS) Special Rapporteur on freedom of expression, and the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights (ACHPR) Special Rapporteur on freedom of expression and access to Information condemned internet shutdowns through a joint declaration, stating that "cutting off access to the internet can never be justified, including on public order or national security grounds".[10]

The African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights (ACHPR) Special Rapporteur on freedom of expression and access to Information

"cutting off access to the internet can never be justified, including on public order or national security grounds"

7 *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR): United Nations General Assembly, 'International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights' (adopted 16 December 1966, entered into force 23 March 1976) 999 UNTS 171.*

8 *Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/2021/03/udhr.pdf*

9 *United Nations Human Rights Council (condemnation of internet shutdowns): United Nations Human Rights Council, 'The Promotion, Protection and Enjoyment of Human Rights on the Internet' (UNHRC Resolution 32/13, 2016) UN Doc A/HRC/RES/32/13.*

10 *UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Opinion and Expression, OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media, OAS Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Expression, and ACHPR Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Expression and Access to Information, 'Joint Declaration on Freedom of Expression and the Internet' (2011) https://www.osce.org/fom/78309accessed 18 September 2024*

Similarly, a 2016 UN resolution on the promotion, protection and enjoyment of human rights on the Internet condemns internet shutdowns and urges States to refrain from ordering them.[11] This resolution was further maintained in 2018.[12]

African Union Instruments on Technology and Elections

The African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights (ACHPR), adopted by the Organization of African Unity (OAU) in 1981 and ratified by all African countries except Morocco, is the fundamental legal framework for the promotion and protection of human rights on the continent, including freedom of expression. It commits Member States to respect the civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights of the peoples of Africa. This instrument together with the African Charter on Democracy, Elections, and Governance emphasise the importance of maintaining internet access during elections.

Article 9 of the ACHPR,[13] and Principles 37(2), 38(1) and 38(2) of the Declaration of Principles on Freedom of Expression and Access to Information in Africa,[14] recognize and emphasise the value of freedom of expression and access to information, including through the use of digital technologies. Similarly, Article 26 of the Guidelines on Access to Information and Elections in Africa[15] calls on telecommunications and broadcasting media regulators and national security agencies in both the public and private spheres to refrain from acts that seek to block the internet during electoral processes.

Adopted on 30 January 2007, the Protocol to the African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance also known as the African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance (ACDEG), was put in place to strengthen democratic governance and prevent electoral crises in Africa. Member states are required to ensure transparent, free, and fair elections, including by prohibiting the excessive use of force against protesters or internet shutdowns to repress political dissidents during elections.[16] Article 4(1) of the ACDEG calls on State Parties to promote democracy, the rule of law and human rights.[17]

The Resolution on Internet Shutdowns and Elections in Africa adopted by the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights in 2024, calls on African countries to take the necessary legislative and other measures to ensure unrestricted and uninterrupted access to the internet in the period leading up to, during and after elections.[18] In addition, the resolution calls on states to refrain from ordering internet and telecommunications service providers from shutting down or disrupting internet access and other digital communication platforms. It also requires these service providers to inform users of potential disruptions and to exercise due diligence to expeditiously resolve any disruptions.

Additionally, the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights (ACHPR) has affirmed that "States shall recognise that universal, equitable, affordable and meaningful access to the internet is necessary for the realisation of freedom of expression, access to information and the exercise of other human rights".[19]

"States shall recognise that universal, equitable, affordable and meaningful access to the internet is necessary for the realisation of freedom of expression, access to information and the exercise of other human rights"

ACHPR
African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights

11 United Nations Human Rights Council, 'The Promotion, Protection and Enjoyment of Human Rights on the Internet' (UNHRC Resolution 32/13, 2016) UN Doc A/HRC/RES/32/13.
12 United Nations Human Rights Council, 'The Promotion, Protection and Enjoyment of Human Rights on the Internet' (UNHRC Resolution 38/7, 2018) UN Doc A/HRC/RES/38/7.
13 African Union, 'African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights' (African Union, 1981) https://au.int/sites/default/files/treaties/36390-treaty-0011_-_african_charter_on_human_and_peoples_rights_e.pdfaccessed 18 September 2024.
14 African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights, 'Declaration of Principles on Freedom of Expression and Access to Information in Africa' (ACHPR, 2019) https://www.chr.up.ac.za/images/researchunits/dgdr/documents/ati/Declaration_of_Principles_on_Freedom_of_Expression_ENG_2019.pdfaccessed 18 September 2024.
15 African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights, 'Guidelines on Access to Information and Elections in Africa' (ACHPR, 2017) art 26 https://www.achpr.org/legalinstruments/detail?id=49 accessed 18 September 2024.
16 African Union: "African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance", https://au.int/fr/treaties/charte-africaine-de-la-democratie-des-elections-et-de-la-gouvernance
17 African Union, 'African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance' (adopted 30 January 2007, entered into force 15 February 2012) art 4(1). https://au.int/en/treaties/african-charter-democracy-elections-and-governance accessed 18 September 2024.
18 African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights, 'Resolution on Internet Shutdowns and Elections in Africa' (ACHPR/Res. 473(LXVII) 2020) https://achpr.au.int/en/adopted-resolutions/473-resolution-internet-shutdowns-and-elections-africa accessed 18 September 2024.
19 African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights, 'Declaration of Principles on Freedom of Expression and Access to Information in Africa' (ACHPR, 2019) https://achpr.au.int/en/node/902 accessed 18 September 2024.

Perspectives from African Regional Blocs

The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance imposes strict standards on West African countries to promote transparency in electoral processes and good governance. The protocol prohibits undemocratic changes to national constitutions, especially before elections, and encourages popular participation and international election observation.[20] It provides for voter registration transparency under Article 5 and the announcement of results in a transparent manner in Article 6 to avoid disputes and strengthen legitimacy.

In the lead up to elections in Nigeria in 2023, CSOs invoked Article 3 of the ECOWAS Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance on independence and neutrality of bodies responsible for organising elections to demand audits and the testing of the Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS) and the Independent National Electoral Commission(INEC) Result Viewing Portal (IReV) so as to build trust amongst the public.[21] However, INEC's attempt to test the portal failed and, on the polling day, there was a technological failure which further undermined public trust.[22]

In the Southern African Development Community (SADC), the Principles and Guidelines Governing Democratic Elections are instructive in guiding the SADC Electoral Observation Missions (SEOMs) to assess the level of member states compliance with democracy standards in elections.[23] While there is no specific mention of technological application, provisions including principle 4.12 on citizens' full participation in political processes, principle 4.1.5 on transparency and accountability of electoral processes,[24] and principle 7.4 governing interaction of the SADC Electoral Advisory Council with electoral stakeholders require the application of technology to eliminate barriers to participation and engagements and elections.

These continent-wide and regional-based instruments provide a guiding framework for the effective conduct and management of elections. They recognise and call for accountability and transparency of electoral stakeholders including electoral commissions, observer missions, political parties and electorates. These principles potentially facilitate political democracy despite the emerging legal challenges and growing violation of democratic rights and freedoms by states.

These continent-wide and regional-based instruments provide a guiding framework for the effective conduct and management of elections.

20 *UNDP: "CSO Forum on Deepening Democracy, Good Governance and Inclusive Political Transitions in West and Central Africa", 1 July 2024, https://www.undp.org/fr/africa/waca/evenements/forum-des-osc-sur-lapprofondissement-de-la-democratie-de-la-bonne-gouvernance-et-des-transitions-politiques-inclusives-en*

21 *Yiaga Africa, Final Report on the 2023 Nigerian Presidential Election (Yiaga Africa 2023) https://www.yiaga.org/category/publications/ accessed 3 July 2025*

22 *Fidel Abowei, 'Why did digital technology fail in Nigeria's 2023 elections?' Democracy in Africa (Democracy in Africa, 2025) https://democracyinafrica.org/why-did-digital-technology-fail-in-nigerias-2023-elections/ accessed 10 September 2025.*

23 *Southern African Development Community, SADC Principles and Guidelines Governing Democratic Elections (Revised 2015) https://www.sadc.int/sites/default/files/2021-08/SADC_PRINCIPLES_AND_GUIDELINES_GOVERNING_DEMOCRATIC_ELECTIONS_REVISED_2015.pdf accessed 3 July 2025*

24 *Electoral Institute for Sustainable Democracy in Africa (EISA), EISA Election Observation Mission Report: Republic of Malawi, 21 May 2019 Tripartite Elections (EISA 2019) https://www.eisa.org/pdf/mal2019eom.pdf accessed 3 July 2025*

Relevance of the Internet to Electoral Democracy

The integration of technology in elections can potentially improve the management and transparency of electoral processes. Voter registration, managing databases, election monitoring, and the transmission of results through various platforms can become more effective and efficient. For example, several African countries have adopted biometric voter registration and electronic voting systems.[25]

several African countries have adopted biometric voter registration and electronic voting systems

Internet availability and access is critical for most technologies to function well. For example, electoral bodies rely on the internet to transmit results to national tally centres.[26] In countries like Uganda, following the outbreak of COVID-19, the government banned public gatherings, including political rallies, and the Electoral Commission urged the actors to rely on technology and comply with COVID-19 Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) which pushed through the conduct of the general election.[27] Despite the atmosphere, Uganda proceeded to hold its general election in January 2021 under strict COVID-19 guidelines.[28] Internet shutdowns fundamentally affect the due electoral process and undermine transparency and credibility of elections. In the following discussion are some of the key considerations on how internet shutdowns interfere with the elections.

Providing Information

Social media and digital platforms such as Meta (Facebook), X (Twitter), TikTok, LinkedIn, Instagram, Viber, and Signal among others provide information to the public. The information channelled through these platforms is from both public and private institutions and individuals. Governments communicate through Facebook and X on several issues such as public health updates, disaster response, education campaigns, taxation policies, electoral processes, security alerts, and other socio-economic and political governance matters. For instance, during elections, electoral commissions share voter registration guidelines, polling station information, and election results through these channels.

Similarly, individuals, activists, media practitioners, electoral monitors, and political parties and organisations use these platforms to relay information, engage in political discourses, conduct advocacy, mobilise supporters, and monitor electoral processes. This form of communication beyond the one-way information sharing, allows for real-time interaction, enabling feedback, public debate and citizen participation in governance and decision-making.

Information received on these platforms facilitates the right of access to information to citizens as enshrined in national country constitutions and legislative acts, and in Articles 19 of the ICCPR, UDHR and Article 9 of the African Charter on Human and Peoples Rights. Once the population has the correct information, they can make informed decisions that allow them to participate in the affairs of their government.[29] It also allows them to rightly make choices of preferred candidates in the elections.

---

25 *Robinson Tombari Sibe and Christian Kaunert, 'Technology, Cyber Security and the 2023 Elections in Nigeria: Prospects, Challenges and Opportunities' (2023) 22(2) Journal of African Elections https://www.eisa.org/storage/2023/11/2023-journal-of-african-elections-v22n2-technology-cyber-security-elections-eisa.pdf.pdf?x78477 accessed 17 September 2024; Association for Progressive Communications, Uganda: A Digital Rights View of the January 2021 General Elections(2021) https://www.apc.org/sites/default/files/Uganda-A-Digital-Rights-View-of-the-January-2021-General-Elections.pdfaccessed 19 September 2024*

26 *ACE Project, 'Electoral Integrity' (ACE Project) https://aceproject.org/main/english/et/et.htm accessed 18 September 2024*

27 *Derrick Wandera, 'Ban on Campaigns Sparks Public Rage' Daily Monitor (Uganda, 26 December 2020) https://www.monitor.co.ug/uganda/news/national/ban-on-campaigns-sparks-public-rage--3241240 accessed 19 September 2024*

28 *Sarah Bireete, "Reflections on COVID-19 Politics in Uganda, Life without Freedom is Lifeless: COVID-19 Pandemic and Uganda's 2021 Elections, 2020," https://www.glissafrica.org/storage/transitions/June2020/GaYx33jhEyu1J9UfzVkx.pdf*

29 *African Union, African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights (adopted 27 June 1981, entered into force 21 October 1986) OAU Doc CAB/LEG/67/3 rev 5 https://au.int/sites/default/files/treaties/36390-treaty-0011_-_african_charter_on_human_and_peoples_rights_e.pdf accessed 19 September 2024.*

Internet shutdowns are a tool for suppression[30] and severely inhibit the ability of citizens to access information about candidates, voter registration, polling stations, and other crucial electoral information. By cutting off access to online platforms, the government effectively stifles access to important information critical for challenging the status quo or exposure of electoral malpractices, and undermines individual information related freedoms which in turn diminish the overall accountability of electoral processes.

Internet shutdowns are a tool for suppression

Voter Education and Campaigning

Political parties, individuals and the Electoral Management bodies use online media platforms to provide relevant information on voting to the electorates. For example, the Independent Electoral Commission of Uganda continues to use social media, X, @UgandaEC to carry out voter sensitization.[31] Similarly, the Independent Electoral Commission of South Africa used the X[32] platform under username @IECSouthAfrica to inform South Africans on matters pertaining to elections and public offices in a bid to increase citizen awareness on the electoral process in the 2024 elections. South Africa has further developed Principles and Guidelines for the Use of Digital and Social Media in Elections in Africa with a major aim of enhancing the capacities of Election Management Bodies (EMBs) and other relevant electoral stakeholders.[33] The principles and guidelines potentially harness the advantages of social media and tackle the adverse effects of new and emerging digital technologies.[34]

Political Parties such as the National Unity Platform (NUP) in Uganda use X[35] in communicating their agenda and accountability to the people of Uganda. Similarly, the ruling party, the National Resistance Movement (NRM), has a social media presence on X and continues to communicate its ideology to the masses.[36] In Zambia, the United Party for National Development (UPND) in 2021 ran a campaign that enhanced the understanding of political democracy for youths under the leadership of Hakainde Hichilema in comparison to the traditional approaches by the Patriotic Front's (PF).[37] In South Africa, the African National Congress (ANC), the Democratic Alliance (DA), and the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) have a history of using social media campaigns to solicit for support.[38] Similar developments have occurred in Nigeria with the All Progressives Congress (APC) and the People's Democratic Party (PDP) taking their political battles online.[39]

30 *Al Jazeera, 'Rising Internet Shutdowns Aimed at Silencing Dissent' (Al Jazeera, 29 January 2018) https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/1/29/rising-internet-shutdowns-aimed-at-silencing-dissent accessed 18 September 2024.*

31 *Uganda Electoral Commission, 'UgandaEC on the Electoral Process' (X.com, 19 April 2023) https://x.com/UgandaEC/status/1821951900951949443 accessed 19 September 2024.*

32 *Independent Electoral Commission of South Africa, 'IEC South Africa' (X.com, n.d.) https://x.com/IECSouthAfrica, accessed 19 September 2024.*

33 *Principles and Guidelines for the Use of Digital and Social Media in Elections in Africa, https://www.elections.org.za/pw/Elections-And-Results/Principles-and-Guidelines-for-the-use-of-the-Digital-and-Social-Media-in-Elections-in-Africa, accessed 23 October 2025.*

34 *Ibid.*

35 *National Unity Platform, 'NUP Uganda' (X.com, n.d.) https://x.com/NUP_Ug accessed 19 September 2024.*

36 *National Resistance Movement, 'NRM Online' (X.com, n.d.) https://x.com/NRMOnline accessed 19 September 2024.*

37 *Freedom House, 'Zambia: Freedom in the World 2022 Country Report' https://freedomhouse.org/country/zambia/freedom-world/2022 accessed 1 July 2024.*

38 *Purity Mwambia, "South African far-left party reacts to US elections with falsehoods," VoA November 7, 2024, https://www.voanews.com/a/south-african-far-left-party-reacts-to-us-elections-with-falsehoods/7855850.html accessed 1 July, 2025; Mogomotsi Magome, "South Africa's ANC launches election manifesto as president highlights party's achievements," AP, https://apnews.com/article/south-africa-elections-anc-manifesto-jobs-646a45300a06f720fae842f5c1cad56b accessed 1 July, 2025.*

39 *Oyewole, John Ayodele and Toyin Adinlewa. 2025. "Use of Social Media Campaign in Shaping Akure Residents' Opinions on Major Political Parties in 2023 Nigeria's Polls". East African Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies 8 (1), 408-422. https://doi.org/10.37284/eajis.8.1.3129*

Given the instantaneous nature of information through tech platforms, information reaches millions more effectively. The information received by the voter helps them to (a) know what is taking place within these institutions and (b) make informed choices. Internet shutdowns keep people in the dark of information and therefore cannot make informed decisions or hold responsible parties accountable.

Tool for Expression

Social media is an important digital civic space where citizens express their opinions and participate in the affairs of their government.[40] Civic space allows citizens to speak freely, and to assemble and associate in order to demand from their leaders/governments. When citizens are able to freely speak out, then the democracy of the country is on the right path. According to Articles 19 of the ICCPR and the UDHR and Article 9 of the African Charter on Human and Peoples Rights, freedom of expression includes the freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media of his choice. While there are specified limitations subject to justification to the rights including the respect of the rights or reputations of others and the protection of national security or of public order, or of public health or morals, it should never be wantonly limited.

Social media is an important digital civic space where citizens express their opinions

It is worth noting that while these rights can be subject to certain limitations, any restriction must pass the three-part test of legality, legitimate aim, and necessity and proportionality to be considered justifiable.

The internet provides opportunity to politicians and political candidates to effectively engage with the electorates.[41] Moreover, it allows for ease of access to information which is a bedrock for healthy democracy since it fosters open and critical engagement by the citizens.[42]

Internet shutdowns cut off individuals' rights to express themselves and to impart information and ideas, which equally limits their capacities to engage in democratic processes including elections.[43] Internet shutdowns and disruptions violate the basic right to freedom of expression, which is crucial during elections. Voters, political parties, and the media are all restricted in their ability to communicate, debate, and share information freely. Internet shutdowns have a direct impact on free speech by preventing citizens from expressing their views and accessing information. Social media platforms, news websites, and communication apps become inaccessible, hampering citizens' ability to engage in political discourse. This lack of access undermines the public's ability to make informed decisions and participate in democratic processes. As such, internet shutdowns prevent people from receiving or sharing ideas, which restricts access to knowledge. This means that no one can obtain any vital information that is required for making decisions or holding leaders responsible.

40 *UN Human Rights Committee, General Comment No 34: Article 19: Freedoms of Opinion and Expression (12 September 2011) UN Doc CCPR/C/GC/34.*

41 *Sunčica Čuljak, "How Social Media is Transforming Political Communication," Determ, October 19, 2023, https://determ.com/blog/how-social-media-is-transforming-political-communication/ accessed 1 July, 2025.*

42 *Priyanka, "Why Are Forums Important? The Benefits of Online Discussion Forums," Productlogz, October 7, 2024, https://www.productlogz.com/blog/why-are-forums-important-the-benefits-of-online-discussion-forums accessed 1 July 2024*

43 *Howard N, 'The Role of the Internet in Political Campaigns' (Oxford Internet Institute, 2005) https://www.oii.ox.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/2005-09-The-Role-of-the-Internet-in-Political-Campaigns-Howard.pdf accessed 1 July 2024*

Medium of Improved Accountability and Transparency

Access to the internet makes it easier and faster for people to get information. It breaks down bureaucratic barriers and delays that often limit access to important information. Because it is open and widely accessible, the internet creates spaces for public discussion and engagement, allowing citizens to question and scrutinize information that might otherwise be hidden or difficult to obtain. This openness helps promote transparency and accountability in governance and other sectors.

Social media and other digital platforms have enhanced accountability when citizens speak out and demand accountability. In recent times, citizens have used the X platform to run campaigns using hashtags (#) such as #FeesMustFall #BlackLivesMatter #ParliamentExhibition #HealthExhibition (in Uganda exposing inefficiency and corruption) #EndSARs (in Nigeria demanding for the end of police brutality) #500 demanding for the investigations into the Killing of Activist and Advocate Thulani Maseko in Eswatini. Digital platforms facilitate accountability since they empower citizens and give them opportunities to engage with the governments, leaders and other stakeholders in several discourses regarding decisions, actions and omissions that affect them.

In 2015, CSOs in Nigeria utilised online platforms to demand for transparency in elections by crowdsourcing information on activities taking place at polling stations. Using the same platforms, citizens would report election irregularities including fraud and violence. This led to a more credible electoral process.[44] Real-time reporting helped electoral bodies, observers, and security agencies to quickly identify and respond to issues, reduced opportunities for malpractice to go unnoticed, and increased public trust in the process, thereby contributing to a more credible electoral outcome.

Similarly, Ghana's 2026 and 2020 general elections were characterised by wide usage of social media platforms including Facebook and Twitter by CSOs to fact-check promises by political candidates.[45] Platforms were also used to monitor activities of the Electoral Commission and to disseminate information on civic education including voter education on electoral procedures.[46]

Access to the internet makes it easier and faster for people to get information

44 *Adejumoke Adebayo, 'Social Media, Citizen Journalism and Democratic Governance in Nigeria' (2018) 10(2) Covenant University Journal of Politics and International Affairs 1.*
45 *Dzisah, Wilberforce S. "Social media and elections in Ghana: Enhancing democratic participation." African Journalism Studies 39, no. 1 (2018): 27-47.*
46 *Ibid.*

However, where internet shutdowns have been implemented in Ethiopia, Sudan, Tanzania, Uganda, and Zimbabwe, the credibility of elections has been doubted since the internet disruptions undermined transparency of the electoral processes.[47] Election monitors including individuals and organizations rely heavily on internet access to report irregularities, disseminate real-time data, and ensure that the process remains transparent. Internet disruptions prevent these monitors from doing their work effectively. For instance, shutdown of internet services makes it difficult for political actors and election observers to monitor the election process in real-time.[48] During the Uganda 2021 elections, when the internet was shut down, it was a dark day as the only information to rely on was through the Electoral Commission (EC)'s continuous updates. Such a practice does not promote a free and fair election as it increases the opportunities for electoral fraud and manipulation. Worse still, the EC's website was non-functional, and results were only published after the final declaration of the winner.

Notably, internet shutdowns erode trust in the electoral process and government institutions. Citizens end up questioning the legitimacy of elections conducted in the dark, fuelling post-election violence and unrest. The use of internet shutdowns increases suspicion and creates mistrust with the Electoral Commission and the populace. Some of the unsettled questions during the shutdowns include, why would the internet be switched off when we are casting and counting the votes? What could they be doing in the dark where people cannot see? This erodes integrity and kills the spirit of participation in the elections. Moreover, internet shutdowns do not allow for the documentation and exposure of electoral violations such as political violence, arbitrary arrest and vote rigging among others. Internet shutdowns encourage these practices with impunity to the dismay of electoral democracy. Likewise, national human rights institutions, media and human rights monitors cannot document and report incidents since access and information flows are completely cut off. This is problematic since it kills almost every avenue for holding the responsible parties accountable.

why would the internet be switched off when we are casting and counting the votes?

47 *Keep It On: The Global Movement to End Internet Shutdowns' (Access Now) https://www.accessnow.org/keepiton/ accessed 2 July 2025; Council on Foreign Relations, "Technologies of Freedom Enabling Democracy in Africa," https://www.cfr.org/blog/technologies-freedom-enabling-democracy-africa accessed 2 July, 2025; Natalie Donback & Naomi Mihara, "How 3 African activists are combating internet shutdowns," https://devex.shorthandstories.com/how-3-african-activists-are-combating-internet-shutdowns/index.html accessed 2 July, 2025.*

48 *What Happens If You Can't Get Online during Election Time? https://www.internetsociety.org/resources/internet-fragmentation/internet-shutdowns-during-elections/ accessed 3 July, 2025.*

Common Justifications for Internet Shutdowns and Disruptions

Internet shutdowns during elections are very controversial and undesirable since they can have significant impacts on the electoral process and the socio-economic aspects of society. However, governments and authorities often ignore the adverse effects of disrupting the internet and front several justifications for their actions.[49] The following discussion highlights some of the commonly raised justifications fronted for disruptions during electoral periods.

National Security Concerns

Governments claim that internet shutdowns are necessary to prevent violence, terrorism, and cyber threats. In politically tense environments, governments such as DRC, Ethiopia, Gabon, Senegal, Togo and Uganda, argue that curbing online communication can stop the coordination of violent protests or prevent the spread of extremism.[50] Authorities may view certain online content, particularly that which criticises the government or its policies, as a threat to political stability. For instance, Cameroon saw several shutdowns as the people in the Anglophone region erupted in protests against the imposition of the French language, which is spoken by the majority of the population.[51] In 2018, the DRC shut down the internet because of national security concerns for over 20 days.[52]

Governments claim that internet shutdowns are necessary to prevent violence, terrorism, and cyber threats.

In 2021, Uganda shut down the internet on the pretext of maintaining national security and public order.[53] Worryingly, most of these restrictions did not meet the three part test.

In 2020, the Zimbabwe government deliberately slowed internet speeds on the state-owned network, TelOne, to hinder the organization and dissemination of information related to political demonstrations.[54] In 2022, during the yellow Sunday rally where the new political party, the Citizens' Coalition for Change (CCC) was launched, multiple internet providers in Zimbabwe experienced significant service slowdowns with reachability rates plummeting to as low as 50-60 percent. According to NetBlocks, a cybersecurity and internet governance watchdog, the incident was likely to disrupt live streaming and access to online content concerning the rally.[55] In 2023 MISA Zimbabwe also reported that there had been internet service throttling prior to the 2023 August presidential elections.[56] Netblocks data indicated that during that election period internet service providers in Zimbabwe, such as Netone and Econet, experienced connectivity issues with popular social media platforms like Instagram, Twitter, YouTube, and Facebook. Users also reported intermittent access and degraded service, particularly on WhatsApp, affecting their ability to use these platforms. All this had some effects on the elections.[57]

---

49 *Beyond elections, conduct of examinations is increasingly becoming a justification for shutting down the internet on the continent. This has been seen in Algeria (since 2016), Ethiopia, Kenya and Sudan. The common justification is to prevent examination malpractice but the normalisation of such curtailment of expression and information flow and stifling dissent make it easier for authorities to justify similar shutdowns during elections.*

50 *Steven Feldstein, 'Government Internet Shutdowns Are Changing. How Should Citizens and Democracies Respond?' (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2 March 2022) https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2022/03/government-internet-shutdowns-are-changing-how-should-citizens-and-democracies-respond?lang=en accessed 18 September 2024.*

51 *As above.*

52 *Cipesa.org: "The Evolution of Internet Shutdowns in DR Congo", March 31, 2017, https://cipesa.org/2017/03/the-evolution-of-internet-shutdowns-in-dr-congo/*

53 *Ronald Lwere Kato, "Uganda cuts internet hours before election," Africa News, January 13, 2021, https://www.africanews.com/2021/01/13/uganda-cuts-internet-hours-before-election//; Nita Bhalla, Alice McCool "100 hours in the dark: How an election internet blackout hit poor Ugandans," Reuters, January 20, 2021, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-uganda-internet-rights-trfn-idUSKBN29P1V8*

54 *Freedom House, 'Zimbabwe: Freedom on the Net 2021' (Freedom House, 2021) https://freedomhouse.org/country/zimbabwe/freedom-net/2021 accessed 18 September 2024.*

55 *Netblocks, "Internet slowdown limits coverage of Zimbabwe opposition rally," February 20, 2022, https://netblocks.org/reports/internet-slowdown-limits-coverage-of-zimbabwe-opposition-rally-oy9Ykoy3 (accessed 5 September 2025); see also, G Butler, 'Zimbabwe Experiences Significant Internet Service Slowdown During Major Political Rally' (Data Center Dynamics, 2022) https://www.datacenterdynamics.com/en/news/zimbabwe-experiences-significant-internet-service-slowdown-during-major-political-rally/ accessed 18 September 2024.*

56 *Anon, 'Internet Degrade on the Eve of Elections' (MISA Zimbabwe, 2023) https://zimbabwe.misa.org/2023/08/22/internet-degrade-on-the-eve-of-elections/ accessed 18 September 2024.*

57 *E Modise, 'Ahead of Wednesday's General Elections, Zimbabweans Are Experiencing Internet Disruption' (TechCabal, 22 August 2023) https://techcabal.com/2023/08/22/zimbabwe-internet-disruption/ accessed 18 September 2024.*

Togo experienced waves of Internet shutdowns between September 5 and September 10, 2017, as well as September 19 of the same year with blocking of social networks and mobile messaging in response to the citizens' protests demanding a profound democratic change in the country, after several decades of control of the political apparatus by the same family.[58] During the 2020 elections, the government ordered internet shutdowns over security reasons. The shutdowns restricted dissemination of content on social media, blocking access to sensitive information during periods of high political tension. The transparency of electoral processes was called into question, since the shutdown undermined democratic participation, freedom of expression and access to information. Accusations of electoral fraud were not isolated,[59] and the actions taken by the Togolese government during the elections raised concerns. Authorities cut off access to messaging services on election day, and election officials prevented a group of independent civil society observers from monitoring the elections.[60]

In 2023 the Senegalese government enforced multiple mobile internet shutdowns, often linked to political unrest. The government accused "the dissemination of several hateful and subversive messages relayed on social networks of being at the origin of the closure", following the same approach as previous closures. Protests erupted on Sunday after President Macky Sall announced on Saturday that presidential elections would be postponed for six months.[61]

While the national security justification continues to be used, CSOs have challenged it in courts to protect civil liberties in online spaces. In a landmark ruling, the ECOWAS Community Court of Justice declared in June 2020 that Togo's internet shutdowns during protests in 2017 were illegal and a violation of the right to freedom of expression. A similar finding was reached in the 2025 ruling against the government of Senegal in a case filed by the Association of Information and Communication Technology Users (ASUTIC) and Ndiaga Gueye against the Republic of Senegal.[62] Both rulings found the two government's actions to be in breach of citizens' rights to access information and freedom of expression, as enshrined in the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights and other international human rights instruments. The court also ordered Togo to take necessary measures to ensure that such shutdowns do not occur again in the future and awarded damages to the plaintiffs.[63]

While the national security justification continues to be used, CSOs have challenged it in courts to protect civil liberties in online spaces.

This victory was a significant precedent in the struggle against internet shutdowns across the African continent. It underscored the role of regional courts in upholding digital rights and highlighted the need for governments to be held accountable for internet disruptions that undermine democracy and human rights. The ruling further demonstrated the importance of civil society activism and legal challenges in defending the right to information and communication during crucial political moments, such as elections and protests.

58 *Paradim Initiative: "Togo: Is the 2020 election without Internet shutdown possible?", February 2020, https://paradigmhq.org/togo-lelection-2020-sans-coupure-dinternet-est-elle-possible/*

59 *Venturesafrica.com: "Gnassingbé re-elected despite speculation on electoral fraud in Togo", 25 February 2020, https://venturesafrica.com/gnassingbe-wins-re-election-amidst-electoral-fraud-speculations-in-togo/*

60 *OONI: "Togo: instant messaging applications blocked in the middle of the 2020 presidential election", 25 February 2020, https://ooni.org/post/2020-togo-blocks-instant-messaging-apps/*

61 *Jeune Afrique: "Presidential election in Senegal: Macky Sall acts the postponement of the election", 3 February 2024, https://www.jeuneafrique.com/1533059/politique/presidentielle-au-senegal-macky-sall-acte-le-report-de-lelection/*

62 *L'association Des Utilisateurs Des Technologies De L'informa Tion Et De La Communication & Monsieur Ndiaga Gueye v Republic of Senegal (ECW/CCJ/APP/37/23; ECW/CCJ/JUD/29/25) [2025] ECOWASCJ 24 (14 May 2025), https://africanlii.org/akn/aa/judgment/ecowascj/2025/24/eng@2025-05-14/source*

63 *ECOWAS Court upholds digital rights, rules 2017 internet shutdowns in Togo illegal 25 June 2020 https://www.accessnow.org/press-release/internet-shutdowns-in-togo-illegal/ 2024.*

In contrast, following the 2016 internet disruptions in Uganda, the Unwanted Witness challenged the shutdown of the internet in 2016. Unfortunately, the Constitutional Court agreed with the government's argument that the shutdown was necessary for national security and that it was for a short time.[64] In 2021, Unwanted Witness filed another application before the High Court challenging the internet shutdown in 2021 and the Court dismissed the application because it affected a few people and there was no evidence that a bigger public suffered the same.[65]

The court potentially misdirected itself on this issue as it failed to use the human rights lens to adjudicate this matter. The East African Law Society (EALS) also filed a case in the East African Court of Justice (EACJ) challenging the 2021 internet shutdown in Uganda,[66] but to date, the case is still pending even as the next elections scheduled to be held in early 2026. In a similar development, Facebook was closed[67] in 2021 over political disagreement and accused of being arrogant. It is still blocked to date.[68] These developments highlight the importance of ensuring timely access to justice in the protection of internet freedoms during elections.

Containing Disinformation and Misinformation

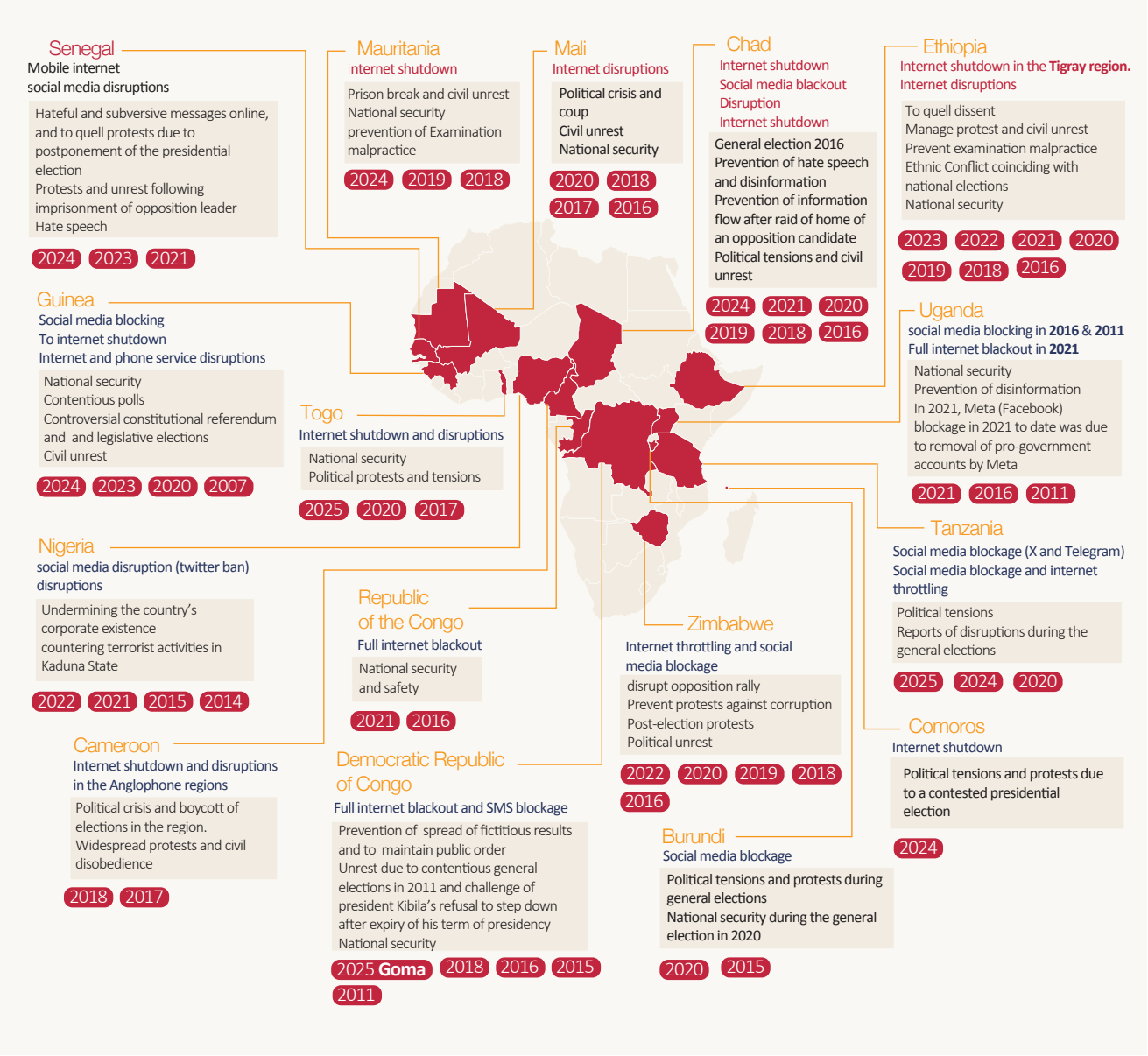
Disinformation and misinformation have become key justifications for internet disruptions. The reasoning for countries including DRC, Togo and Uganda is that shutdowns are implemented as a measure against the spread of disinformation or "fake news." Governments argue that such actions prevent the dissemination of misleading or inflammatory content, which can disrupt the peace or influence election outcomes. For instance, the DRC government justified the shutdown on the pretext of preventing the spread of "false results".[69] In 2023, Gabon fronted the need to curb the spread of false information and prevent violence during the tense election period.[70]

shutdowns are implemented as a measure against the spread of disinformation or **"fake news."**

It is true that sometimes the internet can be used to spread disinformation and fake news. For example, in Kenya during the 2022 general elections, a video containing a fake image of one of the political candidates with their shirt covered in blood, and holding a knife to indicate that he was a murderer was posted on TikTok.[71] This video garnered over 505,000 views on the platform.[72] An appropriate, less-restrictive response to this threat is for the Government to handle such on case-by-case basis using the available legal frameworks such as spreading false news to prosecute specific individuals in a competent Court but not to shut down the internet of an entire population

64 https://ulii.org/akn/ug/judgment/ugcc/2021/40/eng@2021-04-27
65 https://ulii.org/akn/ug/judgment/ughccd/2022/228/eng@2022-10-24
66 Carmel Rickard, Uganda's Internet closure during elections challenged at East African Court of Justice, African Lii, 19 March 2021, https://africanlii.org/articles/2021-03-19/carmel-rickard/ugandas-internet-closure-during-elections-challenged-at-east-african-court-of-justice accessed 28 August 2025.
67 Arthur Arnold Wadero, "Facebook to remain shut as govt talks with tech giant stall" The Monitor, August 12, 2022, https://www.monitor.co.ug/uganda/news/national/facebook-to-remain-shut-as-govt-talks-with-tech-giant-stall-3912172, accessed 3 July, 2025
68 Uganda's president bans Facebook for being 'arrogant,' https://www.aa.com.tr/en/africa/uganda-s-president-bans-facebook-for-being-arrogant-/2107913
69 Jeune Afrique: "Elections in the DRC: Internet cut off, the day after the December 30 election", December 31, 2018, https://www.jeuneafrique.com/697269/politique/elections-en-rdc-internet-coupe-au-lendemain-du-scrutin-du-30-decembre/
70 DW.com: "Gabon cuts internet, imposes curfew after elections", August 26, 2023, https://www.dw.com/en/gabon-cuts-internet-imposes-curfew-after-elections/a-66637558
71 From Dance App to Political Mercenary: How disinformation on TikTok gaslights political tensions in Kenya, https://assets.mofoprod.net/network/documents/From_Dance_App_to_Political_Mercenary.pdf
72 Duncan Omanga, 'Disinformation Was Rife in Kenya's 2022 Election' (Africa at LSE, 5 January 2023) https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/africaatlse/2023/01/05/disinformation-was-rife-in-kenyas-2022-election/ accessed 18 September 2024.

The Table below highlights patterns and justifications that various governments have provided for enforcing internet shutdowns.



Responses from Civil Society and other Stakeholders

While national governments continue to invoke national security as justification for shutdowns, civil society organizations have been at the forefront of taking actions including through advocacy, strategic litigation and other policy engagements to check the increasing repression. They have increasingly turned to regional courts for redress and leveraged other collaborative efforts such as the provision of circumvention tools including Virtual Private Networks (VPNs) and awareness raising to capacitate the citizens to challenge government actions.

civil society organizations have been at the forefront of taking actions including through advocacy, strategic litigation and other policy engagements to check the increasing repression.

Landmark ECOWAS rulings against Togo (2020) and Senegal (2025) declared shutdowns illegal and affirmed that they violate the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights. However, progress is uneven: Ugandan courts have upheld government actions, and a case before the East African Court of Justice challenging Uganda's 2020 shutdown remains unresolved as of 2025.

There have been similar actions by international human rights protecting organisations such as the United Nations Human Rights Council that have for years condemned internet shutdowns.[73]

The African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights has also noted with great concern, the impact of internet shutdowns on elections in Africa and adopted the Resolution on Internet Shutdowns and Elections in Africa.[74] And the African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance.[75] These African instruments call on states to ensure free and fair elections by calling for internet access during elections and other democracy engagements. The struggle is on to ensure meaningful democracy in Africa's online democratic spaces

73 *United Nations Human Rights Council, Resolution 32/13, "The promotion, protection and enjoyment of human rights on the Internet," (18 July 2016) UN Doc A/HRC/RES/32/13.*

74 *African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights, Resolution on Internet Shutdowns and Elections in Africa, ACHPR.Res.580 (LXXVIII)2024 (20 March 2024), https://achpr.au.int/en/adopted-resolutions/580-internet-shutdowns-elections-africa-achprres580-lxxvii*

75 *African Union, African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance (30 January 2007), https://au.int/sites/default/files/treaties/36384-treaty-african-charter-on-democracy-and-governance.pdf*

Conclusion

Internet shutdowns and disruptions during elections are common across the continent. The national constitutions of the countries including DRC (Article 24), Ethiopia (Article 29), Gabon (Article 1), Senegal (Article 10), Togo (Article 25) and Uganda (Article 29) guarantee freedom of expression. However, they quickly follow with limitations over public order, national security, and public morals and other justifications. These are for instance reflected in DRC (Article 61), Ethiopia (Article 93), Gabon (Article 1), Senegal (Articles 8, 10, 12 and 25), Togo (Article 25), Uganda (Article 43). The use of these provisions is widely criticised because they are vaguely and broadly interpreted making their implementation overreach and abusive especially during elections and political unrest.

Across Africa, internet shutdowns have emerged as a formidable tool for governments to stifle dissent, limit voter participation, and obscure the transparency of elections. While governments justify these actions with concerns over national security and public order, the reality is that internet shutdowns inflict greater harm by undermining democratic principles, silencing freedom of expression, and reducing public trust in electoral processes. This has affected open and transparent democracy in Africa causing suspicions, anxiety and fear as to what the future of democracy in Africa is. Thus, all stakeholders including among others, CSOs, media, political organisations, and election observer missions should engage in advocacy, strategic litigation and other policy engagements to check the increasing repression.

Recommendations

To ensure meaningful democracy in Africa, joint efforts by the different players could strengthen the transparency and acceptability of elections by taking actions that seek to promote an open internet free from unwanted closures and disruptions. Governments, civil society organisations, the tech sector and the legal and academic professionals have a role to play. Below are some of the key strategies to undertake.

Governments|Parliament

- Enact laws that prohibit internet shutdowns during elections. The laws should align with international human rights standards and provide clear and transparent guidelines on the actions to undertake before implementing shutdowns for the various government players including the judiciary and the telecommunication regulators.
- Repeal all regressive provisions in several laws that facilitate internet shutdowns during elections and other periods of political instabilities such as demonstrations
- Promote and enhance digital literacy for citizens on internet rights and freedoms during critical times such as in elections. This will equip them with knowledge to deal with common issues such as disinformation and hate speech which are often weaponised to destabilise the internet.
- Jointly with other stakeholders including CSOs, the tech sector, telecommunication companies and internet service providers, develop policies and protocols for managing online content while prioritising actions that seek to lessen internet shutdowns in elections.

Civil society organisations

- Through evidence-based research and collaborations with partners like the academia and media monitor and document internet shutdowns during elections, and take actions that encourage states not to interfere with the space for internet freedoms in electoral periods. The reports can also be presented to regional and international human rights monitoring mechanisms such as the universal periodic review.
- Develop and disseminate technologies that aid the navigation internet disruptions such as Virtual Private Networks (VPNs) and offline messaging apps to support interested parties such as election observers in times of elections.
- Engage in strategic litigation in partnership with legal professionals to challenge internet shutdowns during elections before courts at national, regional and international levels.

Tech sector

- Increase transparency by publishing transparency reports on requests made by the government in respect of internet shutdowns including in election periods.
- Develop policies that resist onerous demands from governments, yet potentially violate regional and international human rights standards.
- Work in collaboration with civil society, media and academia on developing strategies for actions that promote accountable business practices that not only observe but enhance and promote respect for human rights during election periods.

Media

- Report all cases of internet shutdowns and the dangers including the economic costs, information cuts and undermining credibility of elections that they pose to electoral democracy. The reports will be employed in furthering demands for open internet during election periods.
- Media houses should build the capacity of journalists on how to effectively operate in periods of internet shutdowns during elections and democratic engagements including through the use of Virtual Private Networks (VPNs).
- Work hand in hand with the tech sector, civil society in tracking trends and effects of internet shutdowns on democracy and elections and reporting them in various affronts including in print and audio, and audio-visual media platforms.

Legal and academic professionals

- Collaboratively engage in strategic litigation with CSOs, media and other players by supporting the processes including through the provision of the necessary expertise in challenging restrictions on internet access during elections.
- Proactively engage in and participate in policy and law-making processes that seek to regulate the digital civic sector in order to align them with regional and international best practices. This can be appropriately applied during electoral periods.

Regional and International Institution and Election Observer Missions

- Adopt protective measures against internet shutdowns by implementing robust strategies such as developing tools and alternative communication technologies that potentially counter internet shutdowns. Follow-up trainings on how to use these tools should be conducted way before elections are held.
- Deliberately engage with governments and telecommunication companies and internet service providers intending to hold elections on their planned activities including making assessment of elections-based internet access and potential shutdowns and disruptions.
- Work hand in hand with other players including civil society organisations and media (both local and international) in developing efforts and strategies to monitor, track and document internet shutdowns and disruptions to gather evidence for holding the responsible parties including the government, telecommunication companies and internet service providers accountable.
- Condemn all forms of internet shutdowns and disruptions using the national, regional and international legal and policy frameworks by making open public condemnation and declarations.

This publication has been made possible with financial support from Norway through the International Center for Not-for-Profit Law (ICNL). The contents of this publication are the sole responsibility of the authors and can in no way be taken to reflect the views of the Government of Norway.