



19 December 2025

#KeepItOn: Government of Uganda must commit to ensure unrestricted internet access ahead of elections

ATTN:

Commissioner Topsy-Sonoo
Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Expression and Access to Information
African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights (ACHPR)

CC: African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights (ACHPR), African Union Election Observation Mission (AUEOM); East African Community (EAC); United Nations and Freedom Online Coalition (FOC)

Around the world, governments use internet shutdowns to disrupt elections and undermine democratic participation. Your institutions have consistently condemned these tactics and urged governments to refrain from normalising them. As Uganda heads to the polls on January 15, 2026, we call on you to take a stand and publicly pressure the government of Uganda to #KeepItOn.

We, the undersigned organizations and members of the [#KeepItOn coalition](#) — a global network of over 345 organizations from 106 countries working to end internet shutdowns — **appeal to you, Commissioner Topsy-Sonoo, to publicly call on the government of Uganda to ensure that people in the country have unfettered access to the internet, digital platforms, and all other communication channels throughout the upcoming elections on January 15, 2026.**

We urge your office to issue a public statement calling on the government of Uganda and its various Ministries, Departments and Agencies (MDAs) to assure both the people of Uganda and the international community that it will refrain from disrupting the internet and digital platforms during the electoral cycle and beyond.

The #KeepItOn coalition is deeply alarmed [by reports](#) of an escalating crackdown on opposition voices and the media ahead of next month's elections. Authorities are reportedly engaging in arbitrary arrests, torture, enforced disappearance, and the heavy deployment of armed security forces to harass and intimidate members and supporters of opposition entities, as well as journalists and activists. In October, journalists working with *NTV Uganda* and *The Daily Monitor* newspaper had their accreditations to cover parliamentary and presidential proceedings [revoked, apparently](#) in retaliation



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for critical reporting. Earlier this year, during a parliamentary by-election in Kawempe North constituency, several [journalists and media workers](#) were assaulted, while others had their equipment confiscated or destroyed by security operatives. These repressive actions set a dangerous and deeply troubling precedent for the conduct of the upcoming elections in Uganda.

As the people of Uganda prepare to vote, we underscore the critical importance of access to information and freedom of expression. These rights are essential to inclusive participation, and are the cornerstone of free, fair and credible elections. In times of elections, access to the free flow of information is a lifeline that must be protected to enable scrutiny of the entire process. The internet has given people [unprecedented access](#) to election information and helped them to express their opinions, interact with candidates, and actively engage in electoral campaigns. Journalists, human rights defenders, and election observers also rely on the internet and digital platforms to carry out their critical role of monitoring, documenting, and reporting on election processes.

We have also noted with concern comments made after the Uganda Communications Commission (UCC) [committed](#) not to shut down the internet. The Commission [threatened people using Virtual Private Networks \(VPNs\)](#) to access Facebook, which remains blocked in the country since the 2021 elections. The Electoral Commission's Acting Secretary-Commissioner [has also made comments](#) that authorities are left with no choice but to shut down the internet due to the 'uncontrollable nature' of election misinformation.

Uganda's history of internet shutdowns

Since 2011, authorities in Uganda have periodically tightened control over the country's digital space, particularly during elections by partially or completely restricting access to the internet or digital communication platforms.

In 2016, the government of Uganda [ordered](#) telecommunications companies to block social media, cut voters off from vital resources, and block mobile money transactions, which millions of citizens rely on daily. Civil society and other stakeholders have [sued the Ugandan government](#) and telecom companies involved in both national and regional courts. Unfortunately, court delays, lack of transparency, and [ultimately dismissals](#) have led to missed opportunities to set a precedent and prevent further disruptions.



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During the 2021 general elections, the government of Uganda imposed a four-day internet blackout, disrupting access to digital communication platforms including Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram, and the Play Store, and [blocking access](#) to more than 100 VPNs, cutting millions of people off from each other and the world. The Ugandan government later restored access to the internet and digital platforms after the election results were announced, except for Facebook, which remains blocked in the country.

The implications of these developments on human rights and democracy are profound. They not only challenge the foundational principles of democracy and civil liberties but also highlight the urgent need for comprehensive policies that protect fundamental rights and promote an open and secure internet for all. As Uganda heads to the elections, it is crucial for your office to actively engage with the UCC, Minister of Information, Communications Technology and National Guidance (MoICTNG), Internet Service Providers (ISPs), civil society, and the media to advance the rights to freedom of expression and access to information, fostering a truly inclusive democratic process.

Internet shutdowns harm human rights, worsen crises, and disrupt democratic processes

Internet shutdowns violate fundamental human rights, including freedom of opinion and expression, access to information, freedom of assembly, the right to vote, and the right to participate in democratic processes such as elections. Cutting off internet access during elections limits the flow of crucial, timely information, silences dissent and opposition voices, and hinders scrutiny and transparency of the electoral process. Shutdowns also create information vacuums, further fueling the spread of hateful and inciting speech, misinformation, and disinformation.

Moreover, shutdowns during elections make it [extremely difficult](#) for journalists to report on the ground and verify information with their sources, leaving people inside and outside Uganda without access to trustworthy, credible information. Shutdowns also make it onerous for journalists and human rights defenders to document and verify atrocities committed, thereby enabling perpetrators to [evade accountability](#). Shutdowns also hinder vital election-monitoring work undertaken by election observers, including Uganda's Electoral Commission, local and international election observer groups, political parties, media outlets, and civil society.



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In recent years, more governments have resorted to shutting down the internet and restricting access to digital platforms around elections. Monitoring by the [#KeptItOn coalition's Election Watch initiative](#) reveals a troubling truth: **internet shutdowns are a recipe for disrupting elections and entrenching the incumbents**. Reports from regional and sub-regional election observers underscore the severe impact of these shutdowns on election monitoring, raising [questions about the integrity](#) of the election outcomes. For instance, the African Union Election Observation Mission's preliminary report [highlights](#) that Tanzania's five-day internet blackout during the October 2025 elections blocked citizens' access to information and severely limited election observers' ability to monitor critical aspects of the process, including voting, polling station closures, and vote counting.

Internet shutdowns contravene national and international laws

Internet shutdowns contravene national and international human rights law. The Constitution of Uganda, as well as regional and international frameworks, such as the [International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights](#) (ICCPR) and the [African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights](#), to which Uganda is a signatory, protect and promote the rights of freedom of opinion and expression, assembly, and access to information — both online and offline. The [Declaration of Principles on Freedom of Expression and Access to Information in Africa 2019](#) also calls on States not to “engage in or condone any disruption of access to the internet and other digital technologies for segments of the public or an entire population.”

The [African Declaration on Digital Freedom and Democracy](#) notes that internet shutdowns should never be implemented as tools of control. Meanwhile, the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights (ACHPR) has repeatedly underscored the importance of internet connectivity. In 2024, through [Resolution 580](#), the ACHPR called on state parties to ensure open and secure internet access before, during, and after elections. The Commission recently raised concerns about the nationwide internet shutdown in Tanzania during the October elections. It [reiterated the importance](#) of the internet in advancing human and peoples' rights in Africa, particularly with regard to the reality that for elections to be free, fair and credible, the electorate must have access to information at all stages of the electoral process.



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Moreover, in 2023, the Freedom Online Coalition (FOC) [condemned](#) election-related shutdowns and underscored that “protecting, respecting, and promoting human rights is essential to foster free and fair elections.” It added that by “obstructing the free flow of information, opinions, and expression [...] internet shutdowns threaten the legitimacy of the electoral process” and ultimately undermine public trust. [The UN Secretary General and other experts](#) have also affirmed that “blanket internet shutdowns and generic blocking and filtering of services are considered by United Nations human rights mechanisms to violate international human rights law.” The ECOWAS Community Court of Justice has issued four separate judgments against the use of internet shutdowns as a violation of human rights, including freedom of expression, in [Togo](#), [Nigeria](#), [Senegal](#) and [Guinea](#). In countries such as Sudan and Zimbabwe, the High Court has ruled that internet shutdowns are unconstitutional.

Telcos must respect human rights

Under the [UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights](#) and the [OECD Guidelines for Multinational Enterprises](#), telecommunications companies are responsible for preventing or mitigating potential human rights harms they may cause or contribute to, and for providing remedies when and if such harms occur. Telecommunications companies and ISPs operating in Uganda — including MTN Uganda, Airtel Uganda, Liquid Telecoms, UTel, and all other ISPs — must resist any shutdown orders from the government and provide quality, open, and secure access to the internet and digital communication tools throughout the elections and beyond.

Internet shutdowns should never become the norm, whether in Uganda or elsewhere. We encourage businesses in Uganda to integrate the UN Principles and the OECD Guidelines when responding to censorship and network-disruption requests in any market where they operate.

Recommendations

We call on you, Commissioner Topsy-Sonoo, to:

- Publicly call on the Ugandan government and authorities to ensure the people in the country have unhindered access to the internet, including social media and other digital communication and payment platforms, during and after the election.



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- Call upon the various Ministries, Departments and Agencies (MDAs) to refrain from ordering any disruption of telecommunications services, social media platforms, or other digital communication platforms throughout the elections.

Please let us know how the [#KeepItOn coalition](#) can support you in upholding an open, secure, inclusive, and accessible internet for all in Uganda.

Sincerely,

Access Now and the #KeepItOn coalition