Social Media Lockdown and Elections in Uganda

With the increasingly popularity of the internet for political communication and mobilisation, Donnas Ojok examines the factors behind the social media lockdown during the 2016 general elections in Uganda.

"Your inability to use social media for political mobilisation in Uganda today is at your own peril" a senior Uganda government communications advisor warned politicians and civil society activists during a recent launch of a flagship publication on social media and political communication in Uganda.

But what if this online political mobilisation tool is suddenly censored at the height of a political process like elections day? This is exactly what happened in the recentelections in Uganda. Twelve hours before 18 Feb, all social media platforms – Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, LinkedIn and even more interestingly, mobile money was completely locked down. Many Ugandans thought this would last just for one day – the day of the general elections – but to their dismay,it would continue for the next 72 hours. Thanks to the VPN applications whose downloads in Uganda clocked one million in just 12 hours – a small segment of the technologically savvy population bypassed this digital blockade. Generally, it can be argued that to a very large extent, the government digital blockade was significantly effective in demobilising political participation which is a significant blow to democratic consolidation processes.

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Why was social media locked down by the government in the first place? According to the President, also a Presidential candidate, social media posed a security threat to the peace and stability of the country. Another follow-up question would be: Why and how did it pose a national security threat? There are many caveats to this question but a more significant narrative can be found in this line of thinking: the fear of the voice of the ordinary citizen. A 2011 Brookings brief *The Dictators' Digital Dilemma: When Do States Disconnect their Digital Networks?* answers this question more succinctly: ''in times of political uncertainty, rigged elections, or military incursions, ruling elites are sometimes willing to interfere with information infrastructure as a way of managing crises.''

The British-US internet critic, Andrew Keen in his latest work, *The Internet is not the Answer*, criticises social media for leading to an uncontrolled explosion of information and the fact that those who shout loudest attract the most attention. But Christian Echle, the Director of Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung's Africa Media Programme refutes this argument as relevant only in the West, not in Africa, where political systems are less stable and media is weaker. His proposition is that social media can indeed further democratic development because the digital space provides a platform for young bloggers, social media activists and the ordinary citizens to make their voices heard and influence change.

At no time in Uganda's history has new media induced a dynamic and fluid political participation like during the 2016 general elections. Social media intensified the electoral participation as citizens – mostly in urban and peri-urban centres – took to Twitter and Facebook to campaign for and against their political candidates. These platforms were also used for mobilisation and sharing recent political updates and events.

On the flip side however, social media seemed to have posed a significant threat to President Museveni's thirty-year reign and hold on power. This was hastened by what seemed like a crisis situation in Kampala in the last few days of the elections. The arrest of Dr Kizza Besigye, the leading opposition candidate, and increasing complaints of police brutality against the opposition supporters are a few examples. This was followed by widespread social media condemnation especially by the opposition stalwarts. Again, Besigye's party using a defiant campaign philosophy formed local structures – popularly known as Power10 (P10) – to monitor 'their votes' and relay voting data to the party's tally centre using social media and other communications platforms. This, they say, was to protect their votes and counter the voting data from the government's Electoral Commission which is widely known in Uganda as an appendage of the ruling NRM government and thus neither impartial nor fair.

All in all, Uganda's nascent multiparty democratic space is still limited but promising. Even though red lights continue flashing to discourage this democratic promise, most signs show that there will be a green light at the end of the tunnel. This will take the unbridled efforts of young bloggers and social media activists who continue to ensure that the government is accountable to their citizenry. Similarly, several initiatives by organisations like the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung promoting social media engagement is just the beginning of efforts to make citizens constructive users of these platforms.

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