

# Uproar Over Internet Shutdowns: Governments Cite Incitements to Violence, Exam Cheating and Hate Speech

by

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Nina Forgwe, who lives in Bamenda, in the northwest of Cameroon, missed the deadline to submit her doctoral application in March—one of many victims of an Internet shutdown in her town and in the other English-speaking parts of the country.

The Cameroonian government suspended services after Anglophone teachers, lawyers and students went on strike over alleged historical biases in favour of Francophones. The suspension started in January this year and ended in March, and at nearly one hundred days is the longest period of Internet disruption by an African government.

The impact of the Internet disruption was severe, recalled Ms. Forgwe, who is an activist.

“All personal services that required the Internet were put on hold. Many Internet-based businesses ground to a halt, especially tech start-ups. A lot of our activism is through online portals,” she told *Africa Renewal*.

Access Now, a New York-based international human rights organisation, put the financial cost of the shutdown at \$5 million in tax revenue, profits of Internet-related businesses, general operating expenses, bank transaction fees, and money transfer services, among others.

Communication minister and government spokesman Issa Tchiroma Bakary said the shutdown was triggered by the propagation of false information on social media capable of inciting hate and violence in the crisis-hit regions.

The shutdown was a particular blow for Cameroon’s “Silicon Mountain,” a cluster of tech start-ups in the region that had been flourishing. Deprived of the Internet, Silicon Mountain entrepreneurs were forced to drive to other parts of Cameroon whenever they wanted to go online. These long drives ate into work time.

“Money is being lost. Some of us can’t engage with our foreign clients because of the suspended Internet service. It’s disruptive to everyone,” said Churchill Mambe. Mr. Mambe is the owner of Njorku, an employment and hotel services company recently listed among the top 20 African start-ups by Forbes magazine.

Julie Owono, a lawyer and executive director of Internet without Borders, a Paris-based Internet rights organisation, told Africa Renewal that between January and June 2017, nine countries globally experienced Internet blockades, including three in Africa—Cameroon, Egypt and Ethiopia.

A few months after Cameroon’s Internet disruption, a nationwide blackout was imposed in Ethiopia over concerns about cheating at exams. Ethiopian government spokesperson Mohammed Seid explained that: “The shutdown is aimed at preventing a repeat of exam leaks that occurred last year.”

Since last May the Egyptian government has blocked 62 websites, including those of Qatar-based Al Jazeera television and prominent independent news site Mada Masr, accusing them of inciting terrorism and spreading false news. The organisations have since denied the claims.

The Collaboration on International ICT Policy for East and Southern Africa (CIPESA), a Ugandan information technology research and analysis centre, states that Internet shutdown is becoming a preferred tool of social control and censorship by some African governments.

Full Internet blockades are a marked shift from the short-message service filtering or website blocking that was hitherto more prevalent. Internet providers use filtering mainly to isolate spam or other unwanted messages, but it can also be used to remove texts that mention such terms as democracy, human rights or hunger strike.

Africa accounted for 11 of the 56 global Internet shutdowns recorded in 2016, according to Deji Olukotun, Access Now senior global advocacy manager. This represents a 50% increase over 2015.

Shutdowns occurred four times in Ethiopia, twice each in Gambia and Uganda, and once each in Chad, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Gabon, Mali, Zambia and Zimbabwe.

Open Internet promoters say the shutdowns highlight how Internet attacks and abuses, including the proliferation of Internet-regulating laws, surveillance and interceptions of communication are worsening on the continent, just as there is an increase in Internet diffusion.

States contend that Internet shutdowns are needed to quell public protests, violence and misinformation fuelled by social media or mobile phone messaging applications, citing the role of the Internet in the Arab Spring five years ago, when protests toppled regimes in Egypt and Tunisia.

Mr. Olukotun counters that governments fear the use of the Internet by grassroots groups to share information, organise and advocate for their rights, adding that these uses are more threatening to the established order than preventing examination malpractices or curtailing cyber fraud, child pornography, hate speech or terrorism.

The rise in Internet shutdowns comes as an increasing number of Africans are communicating via the Internet, observed Ms. Owono. “Governments that have been used to closed societies where information is centralized see connectivity as a threat rather than an opportunity,” she said.

The Brookings Institution, a Washington, DC–based think tank, analysed the costs to an economy from a shutdown of the Internet. In seven African countries surveyed in 2016 where the Internet was shut down, they lost an estimated \$320 million in revenue.

There is also the issue of digital rights. In July 2016 the United Nations Human Rights Council passed a resolution condemning countries that prevent or disrupt online access and information, and called for free speech protections. Governments hide under the cover of threat to national security to justify shutting down the Internet, says Ms. Owono. But so far, no government has allowed a judicial authority to determine if national security actually had been threatened, she says. On the contrary, shutdowns have happened during times of political tension, giving weight to arguments that the goal is to silence dissent.

Arsene Tungali, a Congolese activist and founder of Rudi International, a digital rights advocacy and security training company, said that in the past seven years, the DRC government has orchestrated an interruption of online communications on several occasions. In 2015 and 2016 the Congolese government blocked access to phone text messages (SMS) and the Internet after protests erupted in response to the extension of President Joseph Kabila’s time in power.

A similar blackout happened in the Republic of Congo as President Denis Sassou Nguesso moved to prolong his 32-year rule.

The growing number of shutdowns has mobilized Internet access advocacy groups and global campaigns, including the #KeepitOn campaign at RightsCon Silicon Valley 2016, an annual global summit on human rights and the Internet held in San Francisco, California.

#KeepItOn, a working group of RightsCon comprising 199 organisations, is working with governments, telecommunications companies, Internet companies, and civil society to tackle Internet shutdowns. The #BringBackOurInternet campaign is largely credited for ratcheting up the pressure that forced the Cameroonian government to restore the Internet. Although the campaign focuses on highlighting the economic costs of shutdowns, Natasha Musonza, founder of the Digital Society of Zimbabwe, observes that the economic argument cannot alone deter governments from blocking the Internet.

“We need to highlight other practical effects, such as the human impact. We are also better off suggesting useful alternative solutions to problems such as exam cheating or maintaining peace in the face of public protests,” she suggested.

The African Network Information Centre (AFRINIC), which assigns and manages Internet addresses in Africa, proposed deactivating delinquent governments’ online platforms for 12 months as punishment for shutting down the Internet. However, the proposal was shot down by AFRINIC members at the fifth African Internet Summit, held in Nairobi last June. The members said the proposal would be difficult to implement and could antagonise governments or even worsen the situation.

To skirt Internet blockages, many civil and digital rights organisations have now increasing their digital security knowledge, especially on encryption, mitigation against surveillance and tools for safe online communication. Also, many Internet consumers in Cameroon, the DRC, Uganda and Zimbabwe say the use of virtual private networks, which are used to avoid blockages, has increased.