

18<sup>th</sup> December 2020

## **An Open Letter to Alphabet**

Dear Mr. Pichai,

We the undersigned organizations recognize that various Google platforms, in particular YouTube, have been a critical gateway for the exercise of freedom of expression online, enabling people to seek and impart information on a broad range of issues.

At the same time, we understand that Google finds itself under constant pressure from governments and public bodies to remove content deemed harmful or illegal under the respective national laws. These requests are often based on vague and overbroad legislation, which does not comply with international freedom of expression standards, placing human rights at great risk.

We are extremely concerned about a recent [request](#), sent to you on 9 December 2020 by the Government of Uganda through the country's telecommunication regulator, the Uganda Communications Commission (UCC). It requested that YouTube blocks over 14 YouTube channels, mainly targeting opposition political members and citizen journalists, for allegedly mobilizing riots. This is of great concern to human rights groups, individual internet users, and the general public.

We find that the Ugandan Government request for blocking access to YouTube channels goes contrary to a number of its human rights commitments and violates rights and freedoms of conscience, expression, association, and access to information, guaranteed under **Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 9 of the African Charter on Human and Peoples Rights** and under **Article 20 (1), 27 (2), 29 (1) and 43 (1) of the 1995 Constitution of the Republic of Uganda as amended.**

We also note that under international freedom of expression standards, insofar as blocking may already be permitted by law, this measure should only be imposed by the courts or other independent and impartial adjudicatory bodies. This is not the case with the present order. We believe that if YouTube does not contest this request, it will participate in a direct attack on freedom of expression and democracy ahead of the country's 2021 general elections.

YouTube serves as a critical platform for online campaigning and interaction with the voting public for all political parties in Uganda. Restricting the ability of those critical of the current government of Uganda to use Youtube channels in this period will violate their right to freedom of expression and deprive people of access to important information on issues of public interest.

Alphabet Inc. has an obligation and a corporate responsibility to respect human rights as guided by the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights. This responsibility to respect human rights is a global standard of expected conduct for all business enterprises wherever they operate.

We, further, urge you to challenge the government of Uganda's request for blocking the 14 channels through legal means available to your company.

Yours sincerely,

Unwanted Witness Uganda

ARTICLE 19

Africa Cybersecurity and Digital Rights Organization (ACDRO)

Women of Uganda Network (WOUGNET)

Centre for Multilateral Affairs (CfMA)

Afrotribune

AfroLeadership

The African Declaration on Internet Rights and Freedoms Coalition

Media Rights Agenda

Cyber Law Initiative

The Open Forum Initiative

Women Human Rights Defenders Network Uganda

Center for Media Literacy and Community Development

Collaboration on International ICT Policy in East and Southern Africa (CIPESA)

Center for Constitutional Governance CCG

African Freedom of Expression Exchange (AFEX)

Media Foundation for West Africa (MFWA)

Advocacy Initiative for Development (AID)

Réseau des Journalistes Burundais pour la CPI (Network of Burundian Journalists for the ICC), RJB-CPI

AfricTivistes

Paradigm Initiative (PIN)

Africa Freedom of Information Centre (AFIC)

Human Rights Network for Journalists - Uganda

[Bareedo Platform](#) - Somalia

Access Now

National Coalition of Human Rights Defenders-Uganda

Securing Organizations with Automated Policy-building (SOAP)

Blueprint for Free Speech

Association for Progressive Communications (APC)

Centre for Information Technology and Development

Free Media Movement Sri Lanka