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NO SIGNAL, NO VOICE

New Report Documents Election-Period Internet Shutdown in Uganda

Kampala-Uganda, 23 February 2026: *Unwanted Witness (UW)* and the *Women of Uganda Network (WOUGNET)* today release [No Signal, No Voice: How Internet Shutdowns Undermined Uganda's 2026 Elections](#), a comprehensive investigation into the deliberate, phased, and centrally coordinated internet disruptions imposed before, during, and after Uganda's *January 2026* General Elections.

Grounded in technical network measurements, regulatory monitoring, key informant interviews, and more than 200 documented public testimonies, the report finds that the *January 2026* disruptions were not isolated technical failures but structured interventions affecting Uganda's digital infrastructure at a decisive democratic moment.

What Happened

Public signaling of possible internet restrictions began in *September 2025*. By December, alternative connectivity channels were narrowed through restrictions on satellite internet equipment. In early *January 2026*, regulatory warnings intensified regarding VPN use and messaging platforms.

On *13 January 2026* at approximately *18:00 EAT*, internet service providers [suspended](#) public internet access nationwide. A total blackout lasted approximately four (4) days, spanning a day to polling and immediate post-election period. Partial restoration began on *18 January*, though major social media platforms remained blocked for an additional eight (8) days. Full general connectivity was restored on *26 January 2026*.

Technical monitoring confirmed uniform disruption patterns across networks nationwide, inconsistent with localized faults. The shutdown affected mobile broadband, fixed broadband, and satellite services across all 146 districts, impacting millions of users.

Democratic and Economic Consequences

The disruptions impaired democratic participation, independent media reporting, election observation, digital commerce, and everyday livelihoods. Real-time reporting was constrained, election observer coordination was disrupted, and the digital economy was frozen. During the four (4) day blackout alone, an estimated [UGX 1.4 trillion](#) in digital transaction flows were disrupted.

Internet access during elections is not discretionary. It enables political speech, voter education, transparency, accountability, and economic participation. As noted by Ms. Dorothy Mukasa, the Executive Director of *Unwanted Witness*, "*Elections conducted in digital darkness weaken public trust and undermine democratic participation. The evidence confirms that the January 2026 shutdown was deliberate, coordinated, and avoidable. Safeguards must now be strengthened to ensure this does not become a permanent feature of Uganda's electoral landscape.*"

The *January 2026* shutdown marks the third consecutive election cycle in which connectivity was disrupted, following similar blackouts in *2016* and *2021*. However, this cycle demonstrated escalation, including pre-emptive restriction of alternative connectivity and intensified deterrent messaging around circumvention tools.

Accountability and Legal Concerns

The report identifies significant accountability gaps, flouting national, regional and international democratic standards including the absence of prior judicial authorization, lack of a clear statutory basis for blanket shutdowns, limited transparency regarding regulatory directives, and weak parliamentary oversight. No publicly disclosed judicial review preceded the nationwide suspension, no state of emergency was declared, and criteria for defining “essential services” were not transparently articulated.

Uganda’s Constitution guarantees freedom of expression and access to information, protections reinforced by international human rights obligations. The report raises concerns regarding compliance with standards of legality, necessity, proportionality, and oversight.

As emphasized by Ms. Sandra Aceng, the Executive Director of WOUGNET, *“Internet access is not a privilege to be granted or withdrawn at discretion. It is essential to the realization of fundamental rights and democratic inclusion. We urge institutional reform that protects connectivity during elections and ensures transparency, oversight, and accountability.”*

Call for Reform

UW and *WOUGNET* call upon Parliament to establish clear legal safeguards requiring prior judicial authorization for internet shutdowns and to strengthen oversight of regulatory powers. Regulators should publish shutdown directives and legal justifications, while telecommunications operators should adopt transparency reporting and conduct human rights impact assessments when implementing government directives.

Uganda’s future elections must not be conducted under conditions of digital uncertainty. Internet access should be safeguarded as core democratic infrastructure, not treated as politically contingent.

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