

# THE WEAPONISATION OF THE INTERNET

DIGITAL RIGHTS AND PROTEST  
MOVEMENTS IN AFRICA



**AIRA**  
African Internet Rights Alliance



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In recent years, Africa has witnessed a surge in protest movements, significantly amplified by the use of digital technology. The #EndSARS protests in Nigeria in October 2020 and the ongoing #RejectFinanceBill2024 protests in Kenya starkly compare and show how our advocacy for digital rights directly intersects with citizens' ability to enjoy other rights offline.

### **The Role of Social Media in Mobilisation**

Social media platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram have become essential tools for organising protests and rallying support. In 2020, during the End SARS protests in Nigeria, hashtags like #EndSARS and #SARSMustEnd went viral, drawing global attention and support. Activists utilised these platforms to share real-time updates, document police brutality, and coordinate logistics.

Similarly and currently, in Kenya, social media has been pivotal in mobilising protestors, disseminating information, and maintaining the momentum of the movement. Citizens' access to the internet and to the use of social media has facilitated modern political activism as activists and ordinary citizens alike use the hashtag #RejectFinanceBill2024 to express their views, democratise information, provide real-time updates on protest locations, on police movements, to coordinate participants' actions.

Social Media and the internet have also helped lend credibility and visibility to the ongoing movement attracting global solidarity and support from international quarters. Equally, citizens are able to have civic conversations and debates on the content of the Bill thereby fostering citizen awareness and enlightenment.

## **Right to Peaceful Assembly: Technology-Facilitated Rights and Technology-Facilitated Repression**

While social media has empowered Africans across the continent to organise and participate in protests and civic assemblies, the continent is also witnessing States' weaponisation of the internet and technology to monitor and disrupt these movements and quell dissent.

In the ongoing Kenya protests, there have been credible reports of the State restricting/ disrupting access to the internet, although the Communication Authority insists that there has been no such disruption neither is there an intention to do so.

Advocates across the world, including AIRA members have called on the Kenyan government to refrain from enforcing any such shutdowns or information controls. Fears or concerns for a partial or complete internet shutdown in Kenya are not unfounded, especially given the favourable disposition of many African governments to online information control as a mechanism for citizen suppression. On the continent, internet disruption is a common retaliation mechanism employed by African governments to enforce pseudo-control over citizens participating in civic rights such as the right to protest or assembly peacefully.

In the lead-up to and following the 2021 presidential election in Uganda, the government shut down the internet as a measure to stifle the opposition and prevent the dissemination of information related to alleged electoral fraud and state violence against opposition supporters.

In 2020, following the assassination of popular musician and activist Hachalu Hundessa, Ethiopia experienced widespread protests, particularly in the Oromia region. In response, the Ethiopian government shut down the internet to curb the spread of unrest and limit the mobilisation of protesters.

In 2019, during protests triggered by a sharp increase in fuel prices, the Zimbabwean government ordered an internet shutdown to prevent protesters from using social media to organise demonstrations and share information about the violent crackdown by security forces.

Netblocks [reports](#) that there have been 119 internet disruptions in Africa since 2019, 57 of which have been connected to protests.

## **Consequences of the Weaponisation of the Internet**

The consequences of the government's weaponisation of the internet to retaliate against protesters is profound and many times, immeasurable.

### **The Erosion of Trust**

Trust is a fundamental pillar of every social, political, and economic system without which governance would be compromised. Internet shutdowns completely erode public trust in government institutions and in the country's Internet service providers. Censorship, internet shutdowns, and state-sponsored disinformation campaigns - especially about state-imposed disruptions, erode trust in government institutions. When governments restrict access to the internet, citizens become sceptical of official narratives and lose faith in the transparency and accountability of their leaders.

## **Exacerbation of Social and Political Tensions**

The weaponisation of the internet can exacerbate social and political tensions which is quite the opposite of what many African governments claim to be achieving when they issue shutdown orders.

First, because a free flow of information facilitates order, a disruption to that flow will facilitate chaos and deepen unrest across lines. Internet shutdowns hinder the ability of activists and protestors to communicate, coordinate, and mobilise and this lack of communication can lead to disorganisation and chaos.

African governments need to know that a coordinated protest will likely be more peaceful than a protest without clear communication among protesters. Shutdowns also disrupt personal communications, isolating individuals from their families and communities and leading to increased anxiety and potential overreactions to perceived threats.

## **The Spread of Misinformation**

In the absence of reliable information from the internet, rumours and misinformation can spread rapidly through alternative channels like word-of-mouth, SMS, or offline media.

This spread of unverified information can create confusion, fear, and panic, escalating tensions and potentially inciting violence.

## CONCLUSION

Internet shutdowns, rather than mitigating unrest, often exacerbate social and political instability, erode public trust, the spread of misinformation and even economic repercussions. By weaponising the internet to disrupt communication, shutdowns create a more volatile environment and get nothing done.

African state actors and governments must begin to embrace addressing the root causes of unrest through dialogue, transparency, and democratic processes rather than resorting to silencing and repression. To ensure this, States must establish clear standards and norms against the use of internet shutdowns backed by feasible enforcement mechanisms.

At the regional level, our human rights systems must continue to emphasise the responsibility of member-states and hold them to account in the event of infractions.

Finally, our advocacy for digital rights in Africa must continue to hold governments accountable. As we increase awareness about the negative impacts of internet shutdowns, engage stakeholders nationally and regionally, and push for robust legal frameworks that protect citizens, we must continue to demand accountability for governmental actions.

The African Internet Rights Alliance is a network of leading digital rights organisations across Africa working to promote Internet rights and ensure the inclusion of African perspectives in global internet rights decision-making.



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