Is the Internet a political or a public

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BY DEOGRATIUS WAMALA

Uganda is building a digital economy without the noise that surrounds Africa's larger technology hubs.

In a young and predominantly rural country, mobile phones; not fixed broadband, have become core economic infrastructure, underpinning market participation, service delivery and financial inclusion.

The economy, valued at about $64 billion (Shs219.7 trillion), has grown at a steady pace of roughly 5.3 percent a year, supported by agriculture, manufacturing, trade and tourism, according to financial data from Bank of Uganda.

With 73 percent of the population living in rural areas, mobile connectivity is the main channel through which households and firms access information, payments and markets. Network coverage is now close to universal: 3G reaches about 98 percent of the population and 4G around 82 percent, data from the Uganda Communications Commission (UCC) shows.

Internet use remains modest but rising. Unique subscribers reached about 15.2 million in 2025. Elsewhere, mobile money is far more entrenched, with roughly two-thirds of adults holding an account. For everyday transactions, from wages and school fees to farm sales and remittances, the phone has become the default platform.

This scale of adoption carries macroeconomic weight. By 2024, mobile-related activity accounted for about 7.6 percent of GDP, according to GSMA Intelligence, a hub of global mobile operator data, insights and forecasts. Direct contributions from mobile operators were relatively small, at around 1.4 percent of GDP. The wider ecosystem, including devices, distribution and digital services, added about 0.8 percent, with supply-chain effects contributing roughly 0.5 percent.

The largest impact—nearly five percent of GDP—came from productivity gains, reflecting lower transaction costs, better access to information, deeper financial inclusion and stronger linkages across agriculture, trade and services.

By mid-2025 Uganda had more than 44.3 million active mobile subscribers, 16.5 million mobile Internet users and 34.6 million mobile money accounts, official UCC data show.

The government estimates that ICT, which contributes about 9.0 percent of GDP, is growing at close to 15 percent a year and supports roughly 2.3 million jobs. Digitalisation now sits at the centre of national policy. Vision 2040, the Fourth National Development Plan and the Digital Uganda Vision frame technology as 'an economy-wide productivity tool'.

Targets include raising Internet usage from 16.5 percent of the population in 2023/2024 to 45 percent by 2030, expanding digital skills and doubling the commercialisation of locally developed digital products.

The broader objective is to formalise more economic activity, lift productivity and widen the tax base in a country where per-capita income remains about $970 (Shs3.3 million).

Is it accurate to conclude that the principal risk is political?

Yes. Periodic restrictions on Internet access during moments of tension undermine confidence in what has become a basic utility. Shutdowns do more than interrupt commerce: they raise risk premiums, hit small firms hardest and push activity back towards cash and informality, working against the state's own digital and fiscal ambitions.

Uganda's digital push is therefore fragile. The government has repeatedly imposed Internet and social media shutdowns during elections and unrest.

In the early hours of January 13, just 48 hours before the general election, the Uganda Communications Commission (UCC) ordered all licensed Internet service providers and mobile operators to suspend public Internet access nationwide.

The directive was comprehensive, covering mobile broadband, fibre, fixed wireless, leased lines, satellite connections and outbound data roaming. The regulator cited misinformation, electoral fraud, incitement to violence, public order and national security.

The effect was a nationwide digital blackout. It followed the same pattern seen in the 2016 and 2021 elections. The 2021 shutdown, which lasted almost five days, cost the economy an estimated $9 million (Shs30.8 billion), according to NetBlocks, a global Internet monitor on digital rights and Internet governance.

What made the 2026 disruption more damaging was timing: digital connectivity is no longer ancillary to Ugandan life. It is integral to economic participation, governance and survival.

As Alex Atwemereireho, a lawyer and governance analyst, has argued, the internet now functions as civic infrastructure.

"It is how commerce flows, health systems coordinate, education is delivered and political participation occurs. Cutting it during an election is not a neutral administrative act but a structural intervention with constitutional, moral and developmental consequences," he elaborated.

In economic terms, the blackout functioned as a silent tax imposed without parliamentary debate or public consent. Uganda's economy is deeply digitised.

Mobile money platforms process billions of shillings daily and serve as the main financial arteries of the informal sector, which employs more than 70 percent of the population. When connectivity failed, transactions stalled and activity reverted to cash.

Mobile money shops in Kabalagala Trading Centre, Kampala on Thursday. Mobile money platforms process billions of shillings daily and serve as the main financial arteries of the informal sector. PHOTO/GEOFREY MUTUMBA

Based on recent financial disclosures, Airtel and MTN together generate an estimated Shs5b to Shs6b a day in data revenue, shared almost equally. A four-day nationwide Internet shutdown, therefore, implies gross foregone revenues of between Shs20 billion and Shs24 billion.

Some of this demand, however, is likely to have been deferred rather than permanently lost, as a share of customers had pre-purchased data bundles and resumed usage once services partially returned.

On a conservative assumption that only half of the disrupted data consumption represents permanently lost usage, net unrealised data revenues would amount to roughly Shs10 to Shs12 billion over the period.

The eventual impact may be larger still. Access to major social media platforms remains restricted, even though such services account for a substantial share of data consumption in Uganda.

Small and medium-sized firms have been hit hardest: payments stalled, supply chains fractured, and customer engagement and marketing were abruptly disrupted. The shock rippled through the wider digital economy. App-based transport services such as SafeBoda were interrupted, while online traders were cut off from both suppliers and customers.

Freelancers, consultants, researchers, writers and designers, working to non-negotiable international deadlines missed submissions, calls and bookings, damaging contracts and reputations.

Digital advertisers lost peak-period revenues. None of these losses were compensated, nor were they formally acknowledged.

The gravest costs, however, lay beyond balance sheets. Modern healthcare increasingly depends on digital coordination. In emergencies, stroke, cardiac arrest, obstetric complications and trauma, minutes matter. Though official statistics rarely capture "missed digital interventions", public-health evidence links such breakdowns to preventable morbidity and mortality.

Are Internet shutdowns legal?

The legal footing is weak. Article 9 of the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights guarantees the right to receive and disseminate information. The African Commission's 2019 Declaration on Freedom of Expression and Access to Information requires that any Internet restrictions meet strict tests of legality, necessity and proportionality.

Uganda's Computer Misuse (Amendment) Act criminalises specific online harms but does not authorise blanket shutdowns. This all shows that the collective restrictions on connectivity fail the proportionality test under both the domestic and international human-rights law.

Between 2016 and 2024, 193 internet shutdowns were imposed across 41 countries, mostly during elections or protests, the United Nations data show.

Uganda alone lost an estimated $107 million (Shs367.3 billion) during the 2021 election shutdown, according to TOP10VPN. This works to about $3.8 million (Shs13 billion) per day over 692 hours.

Comparative research, including a new open-access book co-edited by Felicia Anthonio and Tony Roberts, shows shutdowns are becoming more frequent, more targeted and more politically instrumental.

Case studies from Senegal, Uganda, Ethiopia, Zimbabwe and Sudan show shutdowns are routinely timed to suppress dissent, disrupt Opposition organisation and prevent live reporting. Ethiopia alone has experienced around 30 shutdowns in the past decade.

Across Africa, shutdowns have doubled since 2016, even as economies become

SO WHAT NEXT?

The aforesaid powerlessness exposes the core weakness of the business-and-human-rights framework in coercive regulatory environments.

The UNGPs are non-binding.

A business in Uganda is unlikely to face consequences for non-compliance with them, while it faces immediate and existential consequences for disobeying the regulator.

Accountability therefore shifts back to the State.

Sunday Monitor understands that Muhindo and a colleague (unnamed) are taking the matter to court, grounding their case in Article 20(2) of the Constitution, which states that the rights and freedoms enshrined in the Bill of Rights "shall be respected, upheld and promoted by all organs and agencies of government and by all persons."

The argument is that even if companies are limited by government orders, the state cannot avoid responsibility for violating the Constitution by acting through private companies. Business and human rights principles can influence how companies and investors behave, but they cannot override strict government control through licensing.

When internet access is essential, real protection of digital rights depends more on courts enforcing constitutional limits on government power than on companies taking risks and that has not yet happened in Uganda.

service tool?

more digitally dependent.

There has been resistance. Activists use VPNs, satellite links and foreign SIM cards. Civil-society litigation has occasionally succeeded. Nigeria, where court challenges forced the lifting of unlawful shutdowns, stands out, reflecting stronger institutional checks.

What about business and human rights?

Private telecom firms sit at the centre of the shutdown system. While internet restrictions are ordered by the state, they are implemented by companies that also have obligations; at least in principle, to respect human rights.

The problem, however, is structural. In practice, no business is likely to reject a government directive purely on human rights grounds when its operating licence is at risk.

This structural imbalance sits at the heart of the debate over the responsibilities of telecommunications companies when complying with directives that have far-reaching implications for civic participation, economic activity and human rights.

The debate is increasingly shaped by international standards. In 2011, the UN Human Rights Council endorsed the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights (UNGPs), clarifying expectations for states and companies in commercial activity.

Since then, many global investors have aligned with the principles, reflecting growing attention to human-rights risk as a matter of corporate governance and sustainable investment.

The UNGPs rest on the "Protect, Respect and Remedy" framework. States have a duty to protect rights

15.2 million

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through regulation and adjudication. Businesses have a responsibility to respect human rights by avoiding harm and addressing adverse impacts linked to their operations, including through due diligence.

Victims should have access to effective judicial and non-judicial remedies. The principles do not create new rights; they interpret existing obligations and highlight where protections should be strengthened.

Telecommunications services sit at the centre of these concerns.

Connectivity enables access to information, economic participation and social interaction, and is widely recognised as essential to freedom of expression, transparency and public safety, particularly during elections.

In Uganda's election context, the internet shutdown raised concerns over rights to information, expression and association, as well as economic rights, given the dependence of digital businesses, platform workers and remote professionals on uninterrupted internet access.

Even where firms act under directive, implementation can be perceived as contributing to rights-restricting outcomes. Under the UNGPs, telecom companies, like other businesses, are expected to treat human-rights risks as core compliance and governance issues, including in environments where domestic law is unclear or in tension with international standards. Companies are expected to honour international principles to the fullest extent possible while remaining within the law.

Where measures appear unlawful or disproportionate, the UNGPs envisage steps to limit harm, such as seeking judicial clarification, proposing narrower alternatives, or engaging regulators, courts, civil society and, where appropriate, regional or international bodies.

The "remedy" pillar also has implications. While legal challenges will focus primarily on the State, operators may be required to cooperate with investigations and court proceedings, disclose relevant information where lawful, and participate in non-judicial remedies. Constructive engagement, rather than obstruction, may support accountability and preserve trust.

Beyond litigation, firms may consider complementary measures, including supporting independent research on shutdown impacts, engaging stakeholders to develop non-repetition protocols, and implementing time-bound mitigation for sectors most affected by disruptions. These steps do not replace state obligations but can reduce harm and signal good-faith governance.

Article 20(2) of the Constitution of Uganda states that everyone; not only the government, must respect, uphold, and promote the rights and freedoms contained in Chapter Four of the Constitution.

This means that individuals, companies, and other non-state actors also have a responsibility to respect constitutional rights such as freedom of expression, freedom of association, and access to information, including in the online environment where these rights apply.

Businesses that fail to comply with constitutional provisions, or laws derived from the Constitution, may face consequences ranging from administrative sanctions and heavy fines to civil liability and, in serious cases, criminal prosecution of company directors.

Because constitutional rights, such as privacy, equality, and property, are often implemented through specific national legislation, non-compliance can result in both legal and operational risks.

The difficulty, however, is that in many instances it is the State itself that directs companies to act in ways that affect these rights, making it unlikely for the same State to hold them accountable for complying with its own directives. This is why it becomes necessary to link human rights and business responsibilities to international law, which can provide an additional framework for accountability.

"When you combine state and business obligations under the UN Business and Human Rights Guidelines," Morgan Muhindo, a digital rights attorney says, "you would think companies would hold the fort against arbitrary and illegal directives like a nationwide shutdown. But in reality, this is not possible."

The licensing regime, he argues, "acts like a floating charge over the heads of internet service providers. It can be revoked at any time. So even if providers want to respect business and human-rights principles and avoid losing billions in unsold services, they cannot fight back."