Despots and Disruptions:
Five Dimensions of Internet Shutdowns in Africa

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CIPESA

#InternetFreedomAfrica

In regards to internet freedom, Africa got off to an awful start in 2019. Internet disruptions were registered in five countries (Chad, Democratic Republic of Congo, Gabon, Sudan and Zimbabwe) within the first three weeks of the year. The disruptions were related to elections, protests against government policies, and, what seemed like a coup attempt. With several nations set to conduct elections during the course of 2019, many more shutdowns could be witnessed.

An Internet disruption, often referred to as an internet shutdown, is the intentional blockage of access to the internet or sections of the internet such as social media platforms. Internet disruptions are mostly ordered by governments eager to disrupt communications and curtail citizens' access to information in order to limit what the citizens can see, do, or communicate.

In the following, we present observations on the shutdowns experienced to-date and to pointers that the year could top the number of state-initiated internet disruptions in Africa. We sketch a link between the level of authoritarianism in a country and how long a president has been in power, and the likelihood of experiencing a network shutdown. Further, we look at the economic and social impacts of these disruptions.

Recap:
The Internet Disruptions Experienced in January 2019

Gabon experienced a total, government-ordered internet shutdown after a handful of soldiers stormed the national radio station and, in a live broadcast, urged citizens to overthrow a sickly president who has been out of the country recuperating from an October 2018 stroke. Internet connectivity was restored 28 hours later, after the coup attempt had been contained. A two-hour network disruption had earlier been reported on December 11, 2018 but it remains unclear whether it was state-initiated.

In DR Congo, social media access disruptions were reported on December 31, 2018, as the country went to the polls in fractious elections to replace out going president Joseph Kabila. Netblocks, a network monitoring organisation, reported major outages affecting mobile and fixed-line connections, and a full blackout in Lubumbashi and parts of the capital Kinshasa, as well as mobile connectivity in Goma and other regions.

Meanwhile, on December 20, 2018, the Sudan government shut down social media access on mobile networks across the country following marches calling for the resignation of president Omar al-Bashir, who has ruled over the nation for almost three decades. The communications disruption continued to remain in place at the end of January 2019.

Similarly, as the year started, network measurements confirmed that Chad was still blocking access to social media. As at January 23, 2019, citizens in the West African country had had little or no access to various social media platforms for 300 days. The disruption was initiated following protests against constitutional amendments that could enable president Idriss Déby to rule until 2033 in what the opposition referred to as creation of a monarchy. Derby has ruled the country for over 28 years.

Zimbabwe's internet access was disrupted on January 15, 2019 following public protests against a 150% increase in fuel prices. The protests reportedly resulted in the death of 12 people and arrest of up to 200 citizens. Those arrested include the Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions (ZCTU) Secretary General Japhet Moyo who had appeared on a video clip posted on the union's Twitter account urging workers to stay away from their jobs to protest the fuel hike. Also arrested was Evan Mawarire, a political activist and pastor who was accused of inciting public violence after he supported the stay-away call.

Five Notable Observations

1 Internet Disruptions Are The Preserve of Africa's Most Authoritarian States

The network disruptions experienced this year, and those experienced in the previous three years, all show that the less democratic credentials a government possesses, the higher the likelihood that it will order internet disruptions. All the African countries that have disrupted internet access this year are categorised as authoritarian under the Democracy Index published by the Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU).[1] In fact, of the 22 African countries where internet disruptions were recorded over the last five years, 77% are authoritarian, while 23% are categorised as hybrid regimes. 'Authoritarian' is the worst category of the Democracy Index, followed by 'hybrid' - which refers to countries which manifest some elements of democracy and strong doses of authoritarianism.[2]

The authoritarian countries which have ordered disruptions include Algeria, Burundi, the Central African Republic (CAR),[3] Cameroon, Chad, DR Congo, Congo (Brazzaville), Egypt, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, Ethiopia, Libya, Niger, Togo, and Zimbabwe. On the other hand, the hybrid regimes include Uganda, Mali, Morocco, the Gambia and Sierra Leone. The Democracy Index does not cover Somalia (which has ordered multiple internet disruptions), or South Sudan.

None of the African countries that are categorised as 'flawed democracies' (Botswana, Cape Verde, Ghana, Lesotho, Namibia, and Senegal) or as a 'full democracy' (Mauritius), have ever ordered a network disruption.[4]

> Of the 22 African countries where internet disruptions were ordered in the last five years, 77% are authoritarian and the rest are hybrid or semi-authoritarian regimes

1 The Democracy Index is based on five categories: electoral process and pluralism; civil liberties; the functioning of government; political participation; and political culture.

2 The Democracy Index defines authoritarian regimes as those where state political pluralism is absent or heavily circumscribed; formal institutions of democracy have little substance; and elections are not free and fair. In addition, there is disregard for abuses and infringements of civil liberties, and criticism of the government is repressed.

3 The CAR initiated a nationwide SMS blockage and not internet or social media disruptions.
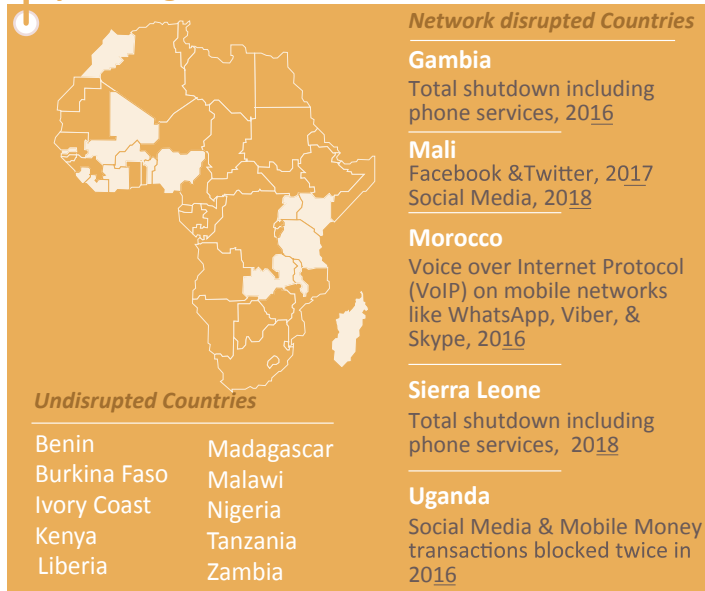
4 According to the Democracy Index, flawed democracies have free and fair elections and respect basic civil liberties even if there are problems such as infringements on media freedom),. However, they have significant weaknesses in other aspects of democracy, including problems in governance, an underdeveloped political culture and low levels of political participation.

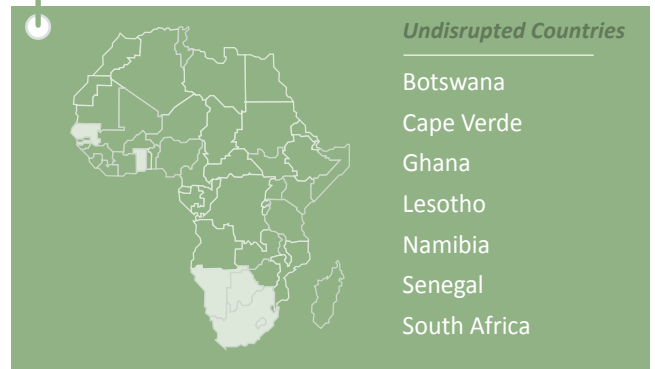*Categorisation of African countries on the Democracy Index (2018) and history of network disruptions*
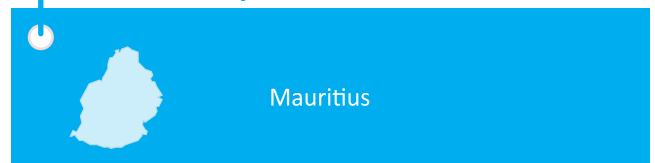
Authoritarian Regimes

Network disrupted Countries

Algeria
Total shutdown for 3 hours a day during national exam week, 2018

Burundi
Social Media shutdown, 2015

Central African Republic
SMS services blocked, 2014

Cameroon
Regional total shutdown, 2017 & 2018

Chad
Social Media, 2018-2019

Congo (Brazzaville)
Total shutdown including of SMS, 2015

Democratic Republic of Congo
Total shutdown including SMS, 2015 & 2018
Total shutdown including phone services, 2017
Total shutdown, 2019

Egypt
Access to Free Basics Facebook blocked, 2016,& at least 405 websites blocked by the state, 2017

Equatorial Guinea
Social media shutdown, 2017

Ethiopia
Social Media shutdown, 2016, 3 total internet shutdowns in 2017 & social media shutdowns in the middle and at the end of the same year as well as severally in 2018.

Gabon
Total shutdown followed by a Social Media shutdown and 6pm to 6am curfew, 2016 shutdown including of broadcast services, 2019

Libya
Facebook temporarily blocked in Tripoli & other cities, Sept 2018;Internet shutdown in parts of east & central Libya, June 2018[5]

Mauritania
Total shutdown, 2018

Niger
Social Media shutdown plus SMS, 2015

Sudan
Social media on mobile networks, 2018

Togo
Total shutdown, 2017

Zimbabwe
Whatsapp disrupted (2016)
Full internet shutdown (2019)
Social media shutdown (2019)

Undisrupted Countries

Angola
Comoros
Djibouti
Eritrea
Guinea
Guinea- Bissau
Mozambique
Rwanda
Swaziland

Hybrid Regimes

Network disrupted Countries

Gambia
Total shutdown including phone services, 2016

Mali
Facebook &Twitter, 2017
Social Media, 2018

Morocco
Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) on mobile networks like WhatsApp, Viber, & Skype, 2016

Sierra Leone
Total shutdown including phone services, 2018

Uganda
Social Media & Mobile Money transactions blocked twice in 2016

Undisrupted Countries

Benin   Madagascar
Burkina Faso   Malawi
Ivory Coast   Nigeria
Kenya   Tanzania
Liberia   Zambia

Flawed Democracies

Undisrupted Countries

Botswana
Cape Verde
Ghana
Lesotho
Namibia
Senegal
South Africa

Full democracy

Mauritius

While it is evident that authoritarian states have had the preserve of ordering internet disruptions in Africa, it is noteworthy that not all those classified as authoritarian have ordered such disruptions. The reasons for this are varied and have not been fully researched. However, it is likely that in some countries, the authoritarian state is so brutal or commanding that civil society or opposition organising and protests - online and offline - are unfathomable. In other countries, such as Djibouti, Eritrea and Rwanda, high-handed internet control measures in place, render ordering overt internet disruptions unnecessary.

5 *Tobruk-based government reported that damage to a fiber-optic cable had contributed to an internet shutdown in parts of eastern and central Libya that lasted 16 hours. However, it was unclear by what means the cable was damaged, https://www.refworld.org/docid/5be16b08a.html*

2 Longevity in Power = High Propensity to Order Shutdowns

There is more that the countries that have experienced disruptions in 2019 share in common - the many years current presidents (or the presidents and their fathers whom they succeeded as heads of state) have spent in power.

In DR Congo, Joseph Kabila took over the presidency in 2001 following the assassination of his father, Laurent Desire Kabila. (Since the most recent shutdown in DR Congo, Kabila junior has handed over power to a new president, Felix Tshisekedi).

Gabon has been governed by the Bongo family for over half a century. Ali Bongo, in power since 2009, took over the country's presidency following the death of his father, who was president for 42 years. The country has seen citizens calling for a change in power and dissenting voices are regularly arrested.

Sudan's Omar al-Bashir has clocked 30 years in power, after toppling a democratically elected government through a military coup in 1989. Since then, he has held questionable elections and cracked down on press freedom and critical voices.

In Chad, incumbent Idriss Deby came to power in 1990. Some 29 years into his rule, his government ordered shutdowns of social media platforms when citizens staged widespread public protests against constitutional changes that could see him rule until 2033.

Next door in Cameroon, 86-year-old Paul Biya has been president for 36 years, and was prime minister for six years before that. In October 2018, he got re-elected for another term. Cameroon also holds the record for the longest network disruption in Africa, which was in place between January 2017 and April 2018.

In Zimbabwe, the now-unseated Robert Mugabe had ruled the country for 37 years and as the public pressure for him to step down increased, including through social media campaigns, Whatsapp was reportedly blocked for four hours – with suspicions that the disruption had been orchestrated by the state. His successor, Emmerson Mnangagwa, who was vice president under Mugabe and continues the ruling party's 38-year uninterrupted reign, has harshly handled dissent, shown little reform, and called in a shutdown too.

Other long-serving African presidents who have ordered shutdowns include Uganda's Yoweri Museveni, in power for 33 years, who has ordered communication disruptions on at least three occasions – first in 2011 during post-election protests and twice during the 2016 election year. There is also Teodoro Obiang Nguema (39 years in power), Denis Sassou Nguesso (34 years), and Abdelaziz Bouteflika (19 years).

Before his ouster in 2016, Yahya Jammeh had been president of Gambia since 1996. He ordered an internet shutdown, and banned international calls, on the eve of the country's 2016 elections while facing what political analysts described as the biggest political challenge of his 22 years in power. Jammeh declined to hand over power despite losing the election, before a regional intervention forced him out of the power and into exile in neighbouring Equatorial Guinea.

Wall of Shame

Teodoro Obiang Nguema
Equatorial Guinea
Years in Office
39

Paul Biya
Cameroon
Years in Office
36

Denis Sassou Nguesso
Congo-Brazzaville
Years in Office
34[6]

Yoweri Museveni
Uganda
Years in Office
33

Omar al Bashir
Sudan
Years in Office
30

Idris Deby
Chad
Years in Office
29

Isaias Afwerki
Eritrea
Years in Office
25

Abdelaziz Bouteflika
Algeria
Years in Office
19

Ismaïl Omar Guelleh
Djibouti
Years in Office
19

Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz
Mauritania,
Years in Office
19

Paul Kagame
Rwanda
Years in Office
18

Joseph Kabila
DR Congo
Years in Office
17

Faure Gnassingbé
Togo
Years in Office
15

Pierre Nkurunziza
Burundi
Years in Office
13

● Ordered an internet shutdown ● Has not ordered a shutdown

As of January 2019, of the 14 African leaders who had been in power for 13 years and above, 79% have ordered shutdowns, mostly during election periods and public protests against government policies.[7]

3 The High Cost of Internet Disruptions Persists Long After Access is Restored

Network disruptions lead to direct lost earnings in terms of the ICT sector's contribution to Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and the quantitative effects of loss of confidence in the digital economy stemming from government-perpetuated disruptions and the resultant loss of cost savings by businesses that are deprived of internet access. As argued in the Framework for Calculating the Economic Impact of Internet Disruptions in Sub-Saharan Africa, internet disruptions, however short-lived, affect many facets of the national economy and tend to persist far beyond the period in which access is disrupted. They undermine investor confidence, raise reputational risk and are detrimental to foreign direct investments (FDI).
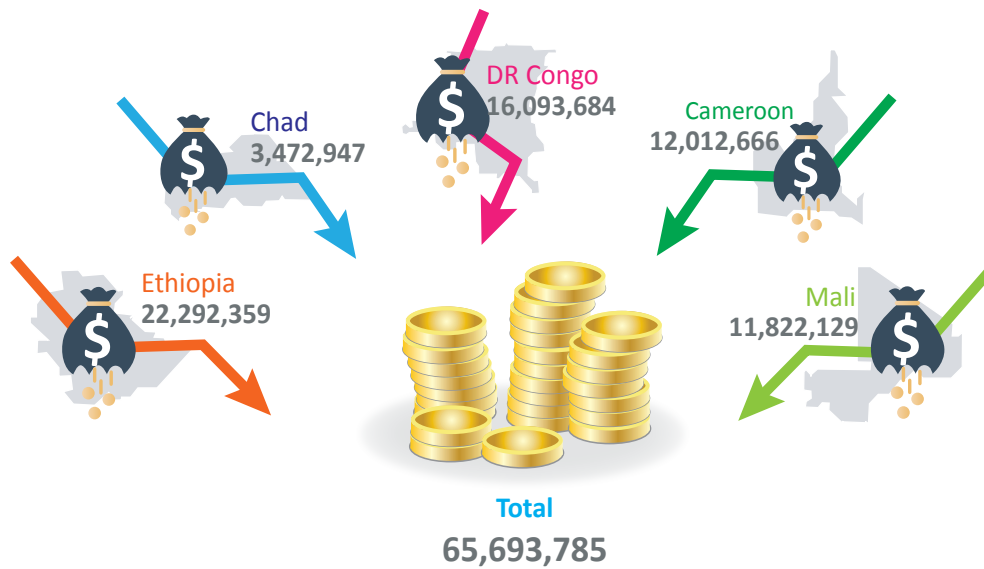
If just five of the countries that have previously disrupted internet access and who are going to the polls this year disrupted access to internet including apps such as Twitter, Facebook and Whatsapp at a nationwide level for five days each, the estimated economic cost would be more than USD 65.6 million.[8] Indeed, the countries that have ordered shutdowns also dominate the top-risk ranks on many country risk assessment indices, including those on political risk, as well as on economic and investment risk.

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6 Denis Sassou Nguesso's presidency has run in two chunks: from 1979 to 1992, and then again from 1997 to the present. In 2015, he orchestrated the removal of presidential term limits from the constitution and got re-elected the following year

7 King Mswati II, Africa's last absolute monarch who rules Eswatini (previously known as Swaziland), has been excluded from the list. He has been king for 32 years

8 Calculations based on the Framework for Calculating the Economic Impact of Internet Disruptions in Sub-Saharan Africa and the COST tool..

Estimated Economic loss (USD) of a 5 day total shutdown

Chad
3,472,947

DR Congo
16,093,684

Cameroon
12,012,666

Ethiopia
22,292,359

Mali
11,822,129

Total
65,693,785

This means that disruptions expose both the state and telcos, who generate income for the state and enable efficiency for businesses, are exposed to high levels of economic loss. But network disruptions also undermine internet uptake mostly in regions of Africa where access and affordability are still big challenges. They thus hinder the meaningful use of the internet as a tool for innovation, business competitiveness, and civic engagement.

The countries that disrupt internet access have some of the lowest internet usage figures (percentage of individuals using the internet in the country) – and highest data prices – in Africa. The CAR (4.3%), Burundi (5.5%), Chad (6.5%), DR Congo (8.6%), Cameroon (23%), Congo Brazzaville (9%), Ethiopia (18.6%), Gambia (19.8%), Mali (12.7%), Niger (10%), Sierra Leone (13.2%),[9] Somalia (2%),Togo (12%), Uganda (23.7%), all fall below Africa's average usage rate of 24.4%. Nonetheless, some countries with higher usage rates - Algeria (71.8%), Egypt (44.9%), Equatorial Guinea (26%), Gabon (50%), Morocco (61.7%), Sudan (30.8%), and

Zimbabwe (27%),– have also ordered internet disruptions.

Indeed, it has previously been noted by CIPIT that countries with an internet penetration rate of less than 20% are more likely to disrupt the internet during protests than those with higher rates – but also that, as of early 2018, in all countries where an internet disruption was ordered, the ruling party had been in power for 18.9 years on average. Conventional wisdom might suggest that low-internet usage countries would be the last to disrupt internet access as they might consider the population online too small to threaten "public order" or "national security" or to threaten the regime's hold on power. On the contrary, it appears that African governments with democracy deficits, regardless of the numbers of their citizens that use the internet, recognise - and fear - the power of the internet in strengthening citizen organising and empowering ordinary people to speak truth to power.

9 Internet Usage by country according to International Telecommunications Union data (2017), released December 2018

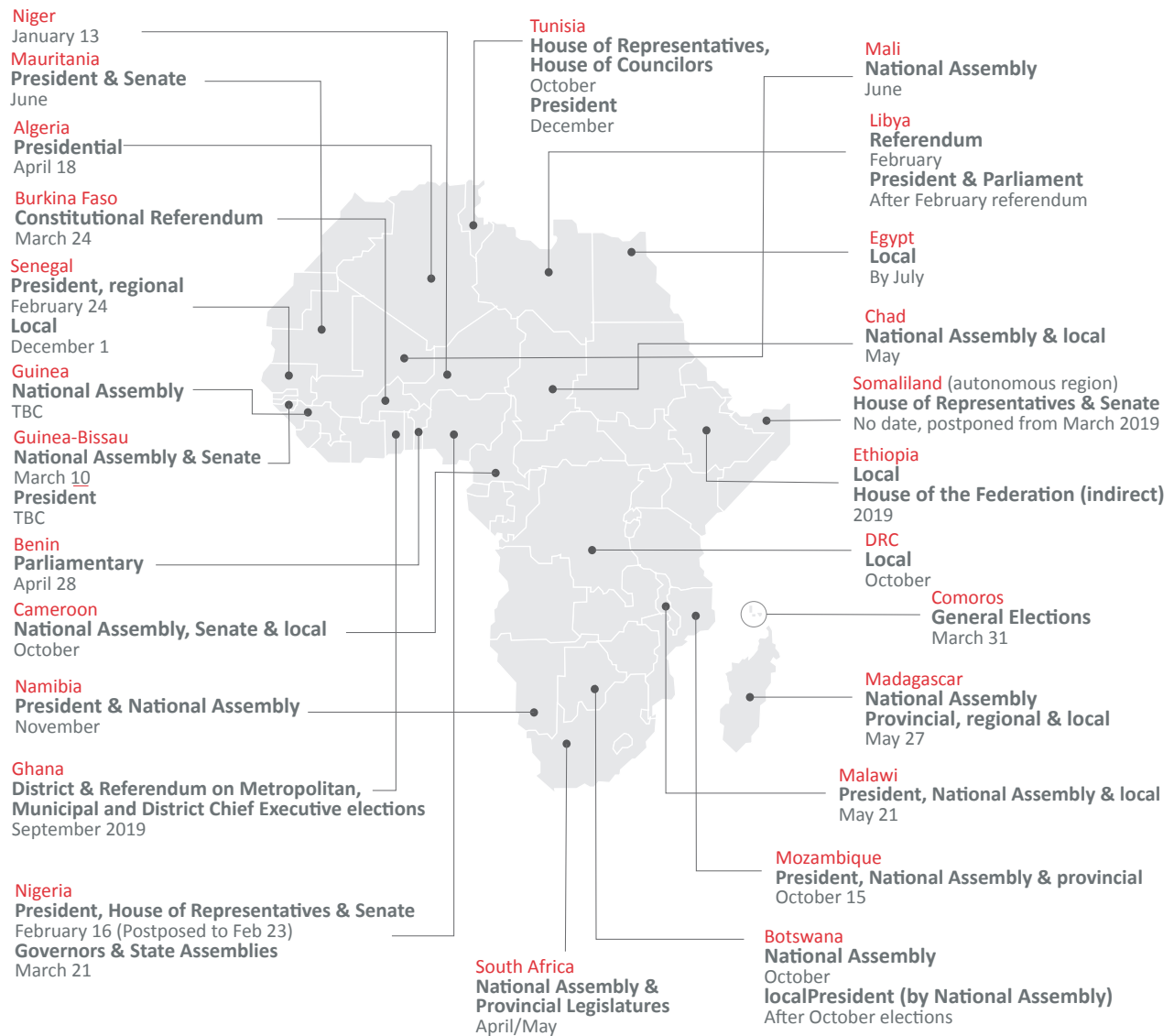# 4 Could 2019 Be The Year of Most Internet Shutdowns in Africa?

Network disruptions often occur in autocratic African countries around election times, and among the states scheduled to conduct polls this year are those which have previously initiated various forms of shutdowns during elections periods, public protests, and national school exams.

During 2019, at least 20 African states will hold elections (local, legislative, general or presidential). They include Algeria, which has previously blocked internet access to prevent cheating during exams; Equatorial Guinea which in November 2016 blocked access to the internet and to opposition websites ahead of a nationwide election; and Togo which last year interrupted communication following public protests against President Gnassingbe, whose family has ruled the country for over half a century.

Among the other authoritarian countries with upcoming elections to watch are:

- Guinea-Bissau, which has postponed elections on more than two occasions since last year. The elections aim to end a political standoff after the president sacked his prime minister in 2015.
- Cameroon, which is still recovering from the effects of the extended regional internet shutdown, is another one to watch as it remains caught in an impasse with calls for secession in some Anglophone regions.
- Somaliland, where parliamentary elections have been postponed for a fifth time since 2005. In 2017, the Electoral Commission of Somaliland called for the internet to be shut down during the elections – however, the elections were subsequently postposed.
- Guinea, which experienced what was probably Sub-Saharan Africa's first internet shutdown in February 2007 when president Lansana Conté blocked print and broadcast media and ordered the country's four internet service providers to block all internet access following widespread protests calling for his resignation.
- Malawi, a hybrid regime, has presented mixed signals on its stance on maintaining access during elections. In May, the country goes to the polls and the government has warned against "misuse" of social media, and has been reported to be working with the service provider Telekom Networks Malawi (TNM) on growing the capacity to trace social media users. The incumbent, who has lately been known to take to autocratic tendencies, will face a stiff challenge from a coalition involving his predecessor and his vice president.
- Tunisia, eight years after the Arab Spring which gained global recognition through social media, some argue gained democracy. However, high unemployment levels and vast economic inequalities persist, leading to high rates of discontent. Despite this, there is no indication that the state will disrupt communications during elections.

2019 African election calendar as of December 2018

Niger
January 13

Mauritania
President & Senate
June

Algeria
Presidential
April 18

Burkina Faso
Constitutional Referendum
March 24

Senegal
President, regional
February 24
Local
December 1

Guinea
National Assembly
TBC

Guinea-Bissau
National Assembly & Senate
March 10
President
TBC

Benin
Parliamentary
April 28

Cameroon
National Assembly, Senate & local
October

Namibia
President & National Assembly
November

Ghana
**District & Referendum on Metropolitan,
Municipal and District Chief Executive elections**
September 2019

Nigeria
President, House of Representatives & Senate
February 16 (Postposed to Feb 23)
Governors & State Assemblies
March 21

South Africa
**National Assembly &
Provincial Legislatures**
April/May

Tunisia
**House of Representatives,
House of Councilors**
October
President
December

Mali
National Assembly
June

Libya
Referendum
February
President & Parliament
After February referendum

Egypt
Local
By July

Chad
National Assembly & local
May

Somaliland (autonomous region)
House of Representatives & Senate
No date, postponed from March 2019

Ethiopia
**Local
House of the Federation (indirect)**
2019

DRC
Local
October

Comoros
General Elections
March 31

Madagascar
**National Assembly
Provincial, regional & local**
May 27

Malawi
President, National Assembly & local
May 21

Mozambique
President, National Assembly & provincial
October 15

Botswana
National Assembly
October
localPresident (by National Assembly)
After October elections

Sources: Electoral Institute for Sustainable Democracy in Africa, African Union International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES), Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (FES) and the National Democratic Institute (NDI).

Senegal has never experienced an internet shutdown. However, the government appears to be tightening its grip on online communications and justifying the move as necessary to stem the spread of misinformation.

Hybrid regimes and flawed democracies holding elections this year, such as Namibia, Nigeria and South Africa, have never initiated internet shutdowns and are highly unlikely to disrupt communications. In Nigeria, the Office of the National Security Adviser (ONSA) released a statement to dismiss fears the internet could be shut down, stating that "shutting down the internet is akin to shutting down national development and security." The elections were postponed and took place a week later on February 23, President Muhammadu Buhari was re-elected. In 2016, ahead of the December presidential elections in Ghana (a flawed democracy), incumbent John Dramani Mahama assured voters that the government would not disrupt online communications.

Digital communications have been disrupted during national exam periods in Algeria, Ethiopia and Mauritania. It is possible that during 2019, these and other countries will disrupt communications during national exams. But there could also be scenarios under which even the more democratic African countries could order shutdowns. Many parts of the continent have experienced terrorist activity in recent years and a terrorist attack could conceivably prompt an order to disrupt internet access even in countries that are not authoritarian. Such disruptions could be regional or national.

5 There's More Open Acknowledgement of Disruptions by ISPs and Governments

Increasingly, governments that order disruptions and the Internet Service Providers (ISPs) that implement them have more openly acknowledged the disruptions. That is a good thing. We are able to see what reasons governments give to justify the shutdowns and the reactions of the service providers to the shutdown directives. These can be the basis for litigation, advocacy against network shutdowns, and for challenging the necessity and proportionality of the shutdowns. Governments often cite digital technologies' increasing usage to spread disinformation, propagate hate speech, and fan public disorder and undermine national security.[10]

Although openness about directives to disrupt communications has elements of a positive step, it could also represent the normalisation of shutdowns, which could imply more governments feel no shame implementing and openly talking about shutdowns. The 'normalisation' of disruptions in a growing number of countries could embolden even those that would otherwise have been very reluctant to disrupt digital communications to join the bandwagon.

Meanwhile, even though ISPs implement shutdown directives as part of licensing requirements to oblige to practically all orders from government, including disrupting their services, a number of telcos such as Millicom, Vodafone, and Orange – as well as platform operators such as Facebook, Google and Twitter - are increasingly releasing transparency reports on government shutdown orders, demand for users' data, and requests for interception of communications support. Unfortunately, most telecom operators in Africa do not issue transparency reports, and those that do often publish heavily redacted versions that make it impossible to see how they are protecting the privacy of their users and promoting freedom of expression online.

- In DR Congo, a senior presidential adviser said internet and SMS services were cut to preserve public order after "fictitious results" started circulating on social media. He added that the disruptions would remain in place until the publication of official results. Internet operator Global confirmed internet access had been restricted for an indefinite period on government orders, while Vodacom said mobile phone texting had also been restricted.

- In Sudan, the head of the National Intelligence and Security Service, was quoted during a December 2018 press conference as stating that, "There was a discussion in the government about blocking social media sites and in the end it was decided to block them."

- Meanwhile, in Zimbabwe, a presidential spokesperson justified a shutdown as "standard practice" the world over when there are serious disturbances. He said in Zimbabwe it was necessary to shut down the internet since government "discovered that the internet was being used to coordinate demonstrations."

- In various countries including Uganda, DR Congo, Cameroon, ISPs issued warnings to customers about upcoming or effected disruptions

10   Whereas some restrictions may be permissible on grounds of public order and national security, limitations must be in line with the rule of law, permissible purpose and necessary for a permitted purpose. See Article 9 (3) of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/ccpr.aspx

Other progressive developments that could discourage disruptions include states taking a more public stance against initiating them and utilising social media platforms to engage citizens and disseminate public information. For instance, ahead of December 2016 elections in Ghana, then president John Dramani Mahama, said social media would not be shut down. Instead, state entities including the elections commission, police services, and the presidential account actively adopted social media during the elections to release information and give updates and responses to allegations. Similarly, in August 2017, Kenya followed suit in announcing that the internet would remain accessible during the elections and government bodies used social media channels to discourage misinformation and hate speech.

Meanwhile, litigation against shutdowns in countries such as Cameroon, Chad, Togo, Uganda, and Zimbabwe is gaining prominence. A recent highlight of this was the January 21, 2019 court ruling that the Zimbabwe shutdown was illegal. This was after the judge determined that the minister of state for national security lacked the authority to issue any directives under the Interception of Communications Act, under which he had ordered the shutdown.

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