Uganda Demonstrates the Growing Influence of Social Media on Politics in Africa

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In Africa, the frequency of politically fuelled internet blockages is increasing. This strengthens authoritarian tendencies and threatens business, for example, in Uganda, where the authorities switched off online access before January's election. This undermined the election's credibility and caused financial losses. Just as much controversy was sparked by Facebook's attempts to restrict content supporting the candidacy of the incumbent, Yoweri Museveni, by shutting down government accounts.

Social Media in African Politics. In the last few years, the influence of new media on African public debate has increased. They have made it easier to organise anti-government protests, for example, through Twitter, which was the main channel for coordinating the demonstrations in Sudan in 2019 that led to the fall of President Omar al-Bashir. Their use also leads to distortions in users' ability to objectively assess reality. Diplomatic tensions between South Africa and Nigeria in 2017 were largely fuelled by videos posted on WhatsApp falsely portraying amateur footage of earlier wars as recent attacks on Nigerians living in South Africa. It has become a standard for election staff to hire covert teams that spread fake news about a competitor. For example, during the 2018 elections in Zimbabwe, at the request of political parties, the so-called "Varakashi" ("Destroyers"), a group of IT specialists promoting the ruling ZANU-PF, clashed with anti-government "Nerrorists" (from "Nero", the pseudonym of the leader of the opposition MDC). The cyberspace of African countries is also subject to interference by foreign entities. For example, Russia uses fake accounts, local influencers, and trolls, actively fuels anti-French sentiment, and helps politicians in supports in elections (e.g., President Filipe Nyusi in Mozambique).

Silicon Valley internet companies have reacted differently to the information chaos generated through their platforms. Twitter has repeatedly disabled the profiles of the Somali terrorist Al-Shabaab group. Facebook, until recently, carried out two major waves of account deletions. In December 2019, it removed about 200 profiles, groups, and sites associated with the Russian oligarch Yevgeny Prigozhin, whose trolls influenced public opinion in Libya, Sudan, Central African Republic (CAR), Côte d'Ivoire, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Madagascar, Mozambique, and Cameroon. A year later, it likewise deleted French and Russian bots influencing pre-election moods in the CAR—in this case, they had entered into dialogue with each other and accused the other of being fake accounts. Against this background, Facebook's decision in January this year to delete pro-government channels before the elections in Uganda went the furthest. The precedent of blocking U.S. President Donald Trump's accounts a few days earlier probably made the decision easier.

The Importance of the Elections in Uganda. In the 14 January elections, President Museveni, in power since 1986, was challenged by popular singer Robert Kyagulanyi, better known as Bobi Wine. The 38-year-old singer-politician gained wide support among young voters, referring to issues such as unemployment, corruption, and the experience of police brutality. He built his support on generational and pop-culture ties with young Ugandans, especially city residents, whom he called the "Facebook generation". They were contrasted with the gerontocracy of Museveni, one of the longest-serving authoritarian leaders, who changed the constitution in 2017 to extend his rule beyond the age of 75. This was of particular significance in the second-youngest society in the world (after Niger)—77% of Ugandans are under 30 and the median age is 15-16 years old. Wine's clash with Museveni

aroused interest throughout Africa as symptomatic of the structural problems of many countries of the continent and heralding generational changes in their politics.

Due to the pandemic, the campaign has largely moved to the internet. On the eve of the election, Facebook removed 450 profiles (also from Instagram), groups, and pages in Uganda, most of them pro-government, which it identified as generating *coordinated inauthentic behaviour*, for example, by duplicating content supporting the president. They included accounts linked to the Ministry of Information. Museveni's spokesman and popular opinion leaders supporting the president also lost access to profiles on social media, which was difficult to justify. This provided the authorities with an excuse to disable access to social media and then to the entire internet during the vote, a move long-planned anyway. Although Museveni was declared the winner of the elections (58.6% to 34.8%), neither the EU nor the U.S. considers them fair. After reporting the results, the military surrounded Wine's house for 11 days, cutting him off from contact with supporters.

Authorities Shut Down Internet Access. The election internet blockade in Uganda was the most notable recent example of how state authorities in Africa restrict the space of debate online to counter real or exaggerated threats to stability. For example, Tanzania in 2018 imposed an expensive ($900) blogging license, which weakened the previously vibrant blogosphere. In Uganda in 2018, the authorities introduced a social media tax that increased the cost of the use of smartphones with WhatsApp, Facebook, or Twitter apps. Côte d'Ivoire was one of the first in the world to criminalise the spreading of fake news, although clearly with the intention of harassing the opposition; for example, in January 2018, the son of the former president and the head of the influential Koaci.com portal, which interviewed him, were convicted under this law. Before the election in Uganda, the authorities filed, unsuccessfully, a request to Google to remove Wine's election clips and music videos from YouTube, which they described as promoting terrorism and anarchy.

In Africa, governments often demand domestic providers temporarily block access to social media or to the network altogether. There are about 20-30 such situations every year on the continent. According to the Mo Ibrahim Foundation, which maintains the most reliable index of governance quality in Africa, this contributes to regression in this area on a continental scale, the first time in a decade. In 2020, in Sub-Saharan Africa, the shutdowns affected about 50 million people with losses estimated at nearly $240 million. Most often, the blockages cover the entire country and in other times, only one part (e.g., Tigray province in Ethiopia during the war in November 2020). Disabling access to social media becomes routine during elections. In 2020, Burundi, Guinea, and Tanzania enacted blocks. Such restrictions usually last for a few days, although, others, such as Chad's continuous 16-month blockade (March 2018 to July 2019), initiated during the public debate on constitutional reforms strengthening the president's power, set a world record. Complete internet blockades are the costliest, especially in countries where mobile payments have largely replaced cash. In Sudan where the losses resulting from several blockades in 2019 (including the 37-day one, including VPN) is estimated to have cost as much as $1.8 billion, partly due to the paralysis of service points. Uganda, during the six-day electoral blockade this year, lost about $11 million.

Perspectives. The authorities of African countries are more and more willing to resort to internet restrictions for political gain. The trend will continue, although VPN access tends to remain available (e.g., in order not to interfere with the work of diplomats). In parallel, activists will increase their ability to circumvent the blockades, which will reduce the effectiveness of the restrictions in time. Routine disconnections to the internet makes it difficult for local entrepreneurs and foreign investors to do business. It also strengthens authoritarian tendencies and, as in Uganda, widens the generation gap between the elite and young societies for whom access to the internet is a cornerstone of their lifestyle. The ground installations or infrastructure of supranational suppliers, such as SpaceX, which plans to popularise high-speed internet in Africa, will also be pulled into the political struggle.

After the elections in Uganda, the process of building up local African staff by the world's largest social media providers will accelerate. This is to help avoid controversy in content management, for example, in decisions to delete accounts. At the same time, many African countries are planning to establish institutions to supervise and maintain balance online during elections. The level of these agencies' impartiality should be an important criterion for the EU in assessing the state of democracy or the conduct of elections in individual countries. The EU should also be monitoring the flow of foreign internet-control technologies: at least seven African countries have obtained online surveillance software from Israel, and Nigeria, for example, has declared interest in Chinese experience in network control.