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The Nature of Digital Rights Repression in Uganda

Digital rights are suppressed in Uganda through **Social Media Shutdowns and Internet Censorship**, rollout of **Surveillance Infrastructure**, including video surveillance systems with facial recognition capabilities, **Weaponisation of Laws** to target critics and opponents, and **Disinformation Campaigns**.



Towards Rights-Respecting Digital Laws in Uganda



The 2024 Freedom in the World report categorises Uganda as “Not Free” based on serious concerns about the state of political rights and civil liberties. The Economic Intelligence Unit’s 2023 Democracy Index classifies Uganda as a “hybrid regime” with a rank of 99th out of 167 countries assessed. A 2023 assessment by Freedom on the Net designated Uganda as Partly Free, scoring 51 out of 100.

Uganda’s laws governing the digital domain contribute to the suppression of digital rights. For instance, the Computer Misuse Act has severally been used to arrest and prosecute speech and expression in online spaces. The Anti-Terrorism Act 2002 and the Regulation of Interception of Communications Act (RICA) 2010 are utilised to monitor and intercept communications but lack sufficient safeguards against being misused.

These laws have ambiguities in some provisions and in the scope of application. They also put emphasis on regulation and control as opposed to protection and respect for rights. As a result, the laws have sometimes enabled the curtailment of civil liberties and digital rights.

Recommendations

Uganda’s laws must respect internationally recognised human rights standards and promote the use of a free, open, and safe internet.



Parliament

- Strengthen legal frameworks by amending or repealing regressive laws to ensure responsible use of surveillance technology and robust oversight over the conduct of surveillance by independent bodies such as the parliament and courts of law.
- Revise or repeal draconian or regressive laws that adversely affect the digital domain to ensure they are progressive and favourable for the enjoyment of rights and freedoms.
- Enact laws that protect journalists, whistle-blowers, human rights defenders, and activists from wanton threats, arrests, and prosecutions over legitimate online communications and activism.



Civil Society and Academia

- Identify problematic provisions in laws and gaps that facilitate the repression of digital rights and make proposals for reform to stakeholders, such as parliament.
- Engage in public interest litigation to challenge provisions in legislation that limit the exercise of digital rights.
- Conduct proactive advocacy with Parliament to push for the amendment of contentious provisions in laws governing digital rights.



Private Sector

- Key players, such as telecom companies and internet service providers, should develop human rights policies that strongly protect users and popularise those policies among their users.
- Adhere to the United Nations Guidelines on Business and Human Rights by, among others, ensuring that their actions do not violate individuals’ rights.
- Publish transparency reports on cases of cooperation with governments, including interception support and disclosure of users’ data and identities.

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