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Status: Partly Free
Total Score: 41/100 (0 = Best, 100 = Worst)
Population: 42,862,958
Internet Penetration: 21.9%
Social Media/ICT Apps Blocked: Yes
Political/Social Content Blocked: No
Bloggers/ICT Users Arrested: Yes
Freedom in the World Status: Partly Free

Key Developments, June 1, 2017 – May 31, 2018

- The telecoms regulator instituted new licensing and registration requirements for online publishers in March 2018 and threatened to block sites that failed to comply (see Blocking and Filtering). The requirements compromise the anonymity of content producers, leading to growing self-censorship (see Diversity, Media, and Content Manipulation).
- In September 2017, the communications regulator banned media outlets from broadcasting live parliamentary proceedings and debates on a constitutional amendment bill, which sought to lift the presidential age limit. Some outlets bypassed the ban by live streaming the proceedings on Twitter's Periscope (see Diversity, Media, and Content Manipulation).
- Journalists for the *Red Pepper* news tabloid were arrested for "offensive communication" under the Computer Misuse Act in November 2017 but were later pardoned by the president (see Prosecutions and Arrests for Online Activities).
- The government announced in June 2017 plans for a social media monitoring center and reportedly sought technical assistance from the Chinese government on "preventing social media abuse" (see Surveillance, Privacy, and Anonymity).

Introduction:

Internet freedom in Uganda remained middling during the coverage period, with improvements in internet access offset by new registration requirements for online publishers, which strips the anonymity of content producers and has led to increasing online self-censorship.

In general, the Ugandan government under President Yoweri Museveni has incrementally cracked down on political rights, civil liberties, and internet freedom over the past few years, sliding further into authoritarianism. In December 2017, Parliament passed and the president signed an amendment that removed the presidential age limit of 75 from the Ugandan constitution, effectively allowing Museveni, 73, to run for a sixth term in 2021.^[1] Critics view the amendment as a path for Museveni, who has been in power since 1986, to be president for life. Term limits were previously removed in 2005, and during the last elections in 2016, the government blocked access to popular social media and communications platforms to prevent the spread of "lies."

While similar blocks on social media have not occurred since, the government has employed other tactics to control critical online commentary. During parliamentary proceedings of the constitution amendment bill debate in September 2017, the communications regulator banned media outlets from live broadcasting the proceedings, though no platforms were blocked during the ban and some outlets still used live streaming services on Twitter's Periscope.

Later in June 2018 (after this report's coverage period), the government passed the so-called "social media tax," which imposes a tax of UGX 200 (about USD \$0.05) a day on the use of popular social media and communications apps, including Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and WhatsApp. The apps are blocked until the daily tax is paid. The president justified the law as a measure to curb "gossip" online and improve the country's tax base.^[2] Many Ugandans turned to virtual private networks (VPNs) to bypass the blocks and avoid paying the tax,^[3] leading to one confirmed block of a VPN on MTN-Uganda networks.^[4] Activists have widely protested the social media tax and sued the government for stifling citizens' online rights.^[5]

The government also cracked down on local content producers over the past year, issuing a directive in March 2018 that requires online publishers – including news platforms and blogs – to obtain a license from the communications regulator to operate.^[6] The regulator subsequently ordered ISPs to block unregistered sites, though there have been no reports of sites getting blocked for failing to comply with the new requirements. Observers noted that the directive strengthened the regulator's powers to limit online speech, the effects of which remain to be seen.

Obstacles to Access:

A new social media tax instituted in July 2018 (after this report's coverage period) increased the cost of access for Ugandans and disproportionately affected poorer citizens.

Availability and Ease of Access

Internet access increased incrementally in the past year, up from 22 percent in 2016 to an estimated 44 percent in 2017,^[7] while mobile phone penetration rose to 58 percent, according to the latest data from the International Telecommunication Union (ITU). The most recent government data from the Uganda Communications Commission (UCC), the communications regulatory body, estimated an internet penetration rate of approximately 48.2 internet users per 100 inhabitants as of September 2017, which included mobile data alongside fixed-line internet subscriptions.^[8] The steady growth in internet users can be attributed to the increasing use of mobile broadband for browsing as a result of growing 4G and 3G coverage, which has decreased bandwidth, smartphone, and modem prices.^[9] All major telecoms have now expanded their 4G services to cover upcountry areas. Nevertheless, internet speeds are still very slow, averaging 2.4 Mbps (compared to a global average of 7.0 Mbps), according to the latest data from Akamai's "State of the Internet" 2017 report.

While internet access has become more affordable, particularly on mobile phones, costs are still expensive for many Ugandans. The introduction of a daily UGX 200 (USD \$0.05) tax on social media use in July 2018 (see "Blocking and Filtering") exacerbates the expense of access and may effectively "push basic connectivity out of reach for millions," according to the Alliance for Affordable Internet.^[10] The organization also reported that the new social media tax has been disproportionately affecting the poor, increasing the cost to connect for this group by 10 percent.^[11]

Limited access to electricity is mostly concentrated in urban areas and further impedes access to ICTs. Meanwhile, only 18 percent of Ugandans live in urban areas,^[12] resulting in a significant urban-rural divide in access.^[13]

New investments in Uganda's ICT infrastructure aim to close the digital divide, with some assistance coming from global technology companies. In February 2017, Facebook partnered with Airtel Uganda and Bandwidth & Cloud Service (BCS) to announce a plan to build a 770km fiber backhaul network in the northwestern part of Uganda as part of its Telecom Infra Project.^[14] Google launched its first Wi-Fi network in Kampala as part of "Project Link" in December 2015.^[15]

Additionally, Uganda's ICT ministry through the National Information Technology Authority – Uganda (NITA-U) has been developing the National Data Transmission Backbone Infrastructure since 2007, which aims to ensure the availability of high bandwidth data connections in all major towns at reasonable prices.^[16] In October 2016, the government began offering a free trial of wireless internet access in Kampala Central Business District and parts of Entebbe.^[17]

Restrictions on Connectivity

There were no reports of deliberate government interference with mobile phone or internet networks during the coverage period, though the government has placed restrictions on connectivity in the past. The last known incident occurred on February 17, 2016 – the eve of the 2016 elections – when the government ordered the shutdown of Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, and mobile money services for four days. Platforms were blocked again in the lead-up to incumbent President Museveni's inauguration on May 11, 2016 (see "Blocking and Filtering").

ICT Market

Uganda's backbone connection to the international internet is privately owned in a competitive market.^[18] The country's national fiber backbone is connected to the EASSy international submarine fiber-optic cable system that runs along the eastern and southern coasts of Africa.^[19] Telecommunications providers are also hooked to TEAMS (The East African Marine System) and SEACOM marine fibers through Kenya. As of May 2018, 28 ISPs are connected to the Uganda Internet Exchange Point (UIXP).^[20]

The number of industry players has grown over the years, and many now offer comparable prices and technologies. There are no known obstacles or licensing restrictions placed by the government on entry into the ICT sector, and new players have entered the market with ease in recent years.

Currently, there are 26 telecommunications service providers that offer both voice and data services, including MTN Uganda, Airtel Uganda, Uganda Telecom Limited (UTL), Africell Uganda (formerly Orange Uganda), Vodafone, Smart Telecom, and Afrimax, among others,^[21] which all offer 4G LTE network speeds. All service providers are privately owned except for state-owned Uganda Electricity Transmission Company Limited, which is a licensed public

infrastructure provider, and UTL, which the government took full ownership over in March 2017 following other shareholders' withdrawal of 69 percent of the shares in the company.^[22]

Regulatory Bodies

Uganda's telecommunications sector is regulated by the Uganda Communications Commission (UCC), which is mandated to independently coordinate, facilitate, and promote the sustainable growth and development of ICTs in the country. The UCC also provides information about the regulatory process and quality of service, and issues licenses for ICT infrastructure and service providers.^[23] The commission's funds come mainly from operator license fees and a two percent annual levy on operator profits.^[24]

There is a general perception, however, that comprehensive and coherent information about the commission's operations is not always accessible, and that the body is not entirely independent from the executive branch of the government.^[25] For example, the ICT minister has the authority to approve the regulator's budget and appoint members of its board with approval from the cabinet. There are no independent mechanisms in place to hold the regulator accountable to the public.

In April 2017, Parliament passed the much-criticized Uganda Communications (Amendment) Bill, 2016,^[26] which amended Section 93(1) of the Uganda Communications Act, 2013 to eliminate the system of checks and balances on the minister's supervision of the communications sector.^[27] The strengthened power of the minister was observed when he ignored Parliament's motion to extend SIM card reregistration and instead directed the UCC to switch off all unverified cards in May 2017.^[28]

Limits on Content:

The regulator instituted new licensing and registration requirements for online publishers in March 2018 and threatened to block sites that failed to comply. The requirements risk compromising the anonymity of content producers and may lead to growing self-censorship. The government also threatened to block VPNs to mitigate users trying to bypass the new tax on social media platforms implemented in July 2018 (after this report's coverage period); one VPN was confirmed blocked. In September 2017, the communications regulator banned media outlets from live broadcasting parliamentary proceedings and debates on the constitutional amendment bill, which sought to lift the age limit of the president. Some outlets bypassed the ban by live streaming the proceedings on Twitter's Periscope.

Blocking and Filtering

Websites are not systematically filtered or blocked in Uganda, though the government has made aggressive moves in recent years to curtail freedom of expression online and censor web content.

In March 2018, the Uganda Communications Commission (UCC) issued a directive requiring "all online data communication service providers, including online publishers, online news platforms, online radio and television operators" to obtain the UCC's authorization to operate.^[29] As part of the registration requirements, online publishers are required to pay \$20 per annum.^[30] Observers noted that the directive strengthened the regulator's powers to limit online speech, though it remains unclear how the registration requirements will apply to content hosted outside Uganda. Communications service providers were given the deadline of April 2nd to register or face blocking. Only 14 local blogs and news sites had registered by the deadline, prompting the UCC to issue another directive on April 19th, ordering ISPs to block access to unregistered sites.^[31]

There were no updates on the number of websites registered or the number blocked for failing to register under the new directive as of mid-2018.

In June 2018 (after this report's coverage period), the government passed the Excise Amendment Duty (2018) – known colloquially as the "social media tax" – which imposes a tax of UGX 200 (about USD \$0.05) a day on the use of popular social media and communications apps, including Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and WhatsApp. The law came into effect on July 1st, denying users access to a list of 58 apps and platforms if they do not pay the daily tax.^[32] The president justified the tax as a measure to curb "gossip" online and improve the country's tax base.^[33] Following public uproar, many Ugandans turned to the use of VPNs to bypass the blocks and avoid paying the tax.^[34] In response, the UCC executive director instructed ISPs to either tax or block access to the use of VPNs.^[35] As of July 2018, the telecom MTN – Uganda has reportedly blocked the Opera web browser VPN.^[36] Activists have widely protested the social media tax and sued the government for stifling citizen's online rights.^[37]

The government has a history of blocking access to social media and communications platforms altogether during politically sensitive times. During the last elections in February 2016, Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, Instagram, and mobile money services were ordered blocked.^[38] President Museveni, the incumbent candidate in the elections, declared the blocks a necessary measure to stop people from using the platforms to "tell lies."^[39] Access to the platforms was restored on February 21, 2016, four days after the block, but was obstructed again for a day on May 11, 2016, the day before Museveni's inauguration to another contested five-year term in office, for security reasons.^[40]

In March 2017, the digital rights and free expression groups Unwanted Witness Uganda and Article 19 sued the Ugandan government and service providers for the social media blocks during the 2016 elections period, contending that the blocks violated citizens' fundamental rights.^[41] The case was still outstanding as of May 2018.^[42]

Pornography is illegal in Uganda and is a regular target for online censorship. The 2014 Anti-Pornography Law threatens to hold service providers criminally liable for uploading or downloading vaguely defined pornographic material on their systems,^[43] with penalties of up to five years in prison and fines of US\$4,000. In August 2017, the government created a Pornography Control Committee and reportedly allocated UGX two billion toward new technologies that could reportedly monitor and intercept pornographic material.^[44] There have been no updates on the status of the new technology as of mid-2018. In July 2018, the communications regulator directed ISPs to block a list of 27 websites for "streaming pornographic content" in the country; the list reportedly came from the new Pornography Control Committee.^[45]

Content Removal

While content removals are not systematic in Uganda, users are sometimes compelled to remove content from their social media pages, though the practice is likely underreported. One local blogger shared during an anonymous interview in May 2018 that he had been approached by security operatives and offered a bribe to remove certain content from his blog that was deemed "defamatory" to the government.^[46] Although he did not take the bribe or remove the said content, he expressed fear for his life, forcing him to stop writing about allegedly sensitive topics.

Other known cases include that of journalist Joy Doreen Biira, who was reportedly forced to delete certain social media posts by security officers after she was arrested on trumped-up terrorism charges in November 2016.^[47] TV news anchor Gertrude Uwitware was also made to

delete critical Twitter and Facebook posts when she was abducted by unknown assailants in April 2017 (see "Intimidation and Violence").

Media, Diversity, and Content Manipulation

The Ugandan government continued curtailing press and online freedoms over the past year, resulting in increasing self-censorship among both online journalists and ordinary users.

Viewing social media as an increasing threat, the Ugandan Communications Commission (UCC) published a public notice in September 2017 advising the "general public against irresponsible and/or illegal use of all communication platforms." The notice also called for users, administrators, and account managers to restrain themselves "against authoring, posting, receiving and sharing or forwarding any forms of communication containing and or referring to illegal and/or offensive content to avoid the risk of being investigated and/or prosecuted for aiding and abetting the commission of any resultant offences."^[48]

Also in September 2017, the communications regulator banned media outlets from live broadcasting parliamentary proceedings and debates on the constitutional amendment bill, which sought to lift the age limit on the presidency. The regulator claimed that the broadcasts were likely to incite violence.^[49] However, some media houses bypassed the ban and live broadcast the proceedings via Twitter's Periscope. The ban was later lifted in October 2017, but with the condition that media houses have "live broadcasting pre-editing software."^[50]

The March 2018 UCC directive mandating the registration of all online publishers, online news platforms, and online radio and television operators compromises user anonymity and may lead to growing self-censorship (see also: "Blocking and Filtering").^[51]

The government is known to bar media outlets from reporting on opposition activities and harass journalists believed to be reporting for the opposition.^[52] The government has also been accused of "fostering a climate of fear and paranoia" among media houses for failing to investigate a series of media office break-ins that resulted in the theft of journalists' computers in 2017.^[53] According to 2016 research by the Africa Media Barometer, Ugandans "practice their freedom of expression, but not without fear."

Social media users are increasingly setting up pseudonymous accounts to protect their anonymity and avoid harassment.^[54] Taboo topics include the military, the president's family, the oil sector, land grabs, and presidential term limits. Nonetheless, blogging continues to be popular among young Ugandans and journalists who have boldly taken to the internet to push the boundaries on controversial issues such as good governance and corruption.^[55]

Online manipulation is a growing issue in Uganda, though its influence has not been as pervasive as in other countries, such as Kenya. Research on social media trends during the 2016 elections found that auto-generated Twitter bots mimicking human users worked to manipulate online conversations by skewing discussions in favor of incumbent candidate President Museveni, leading to suspicions of paid progovernment trolling.^[56]

Content available online in Uganda is somewhat diverse, though news websites provided by the Vision Group, a media company that is partly owned by the government, are only available in four local languages (out of 40 languages and 56 native dialects). Newspapers such as *Bukedde*, *Etop*, *Rupiny*, and *Orumuri* have created online platforms. Other news sites of major privately owned newspapers are only accessible in English, which is not widely spoken across Uganda. The Google Uganda domain is available in five local languages,^[57] while the Firefox web browser can

be accessed in two languages, Luganda and Acholi.^[58] As of early 2018, Wikipedia can be accessed in Luganda, with about 1,000 articles translated.^[59]

Digital Activism

Vibrant digital activism continued to help raise awareness and mobilize citizens around cybercrimes, social injustices, and internet freedom violations in the past year.

In March 2018, the Nation Media Group – Uganda launched the online campaign #StayinYourLane, which published photographs and videos of errant drivers as a way of curbing indiscipline on the roads.^[60] The campaign has so far seen the arrest of a police officer for violating traffic laws.^[61]

In July 2018, following the introduction of a UGX 200 daily tax on social media and communications platforms such as Facebook and WhatsApp, Ugandans took to social media using the hashtag #SocialMediaTax, #MobileMoneyTax, and #ThisTaxMustGo to urge the government to abolish the tax. The social media tax also attracted international attention, mobilizing internet stakeholders around the #NoToSocialMediaTax campaign to place further pressure on the government. Despite significant activism, the tax remained in effect as of August 2018.⁶²

Violations of User Rights:

Journalists for the Red Pepper news tabloid were arrested for "offensive communication" under the Computer Misuse Act in November 2017 but were later pardoned by the president. Meanwhile, the government announced plans for a social media monitoring center and reportedly sought technical assistance from the Chinese government on "preventing social media abuse."

Legal Environment

The Ugandan constitution provides for freedom of expression and speech, in addition to the right to access information. However, several laws – including the Press and Journalist Act, 2000, sections of the Penal Code Act, 1950, and the Anti-Terrorism Act, 2002 – appear to negate these constitutional guarantees for freedom of expression. For example, the Press and Journalist Act requires journalists to register with the statutory Media Council, whose independence is believed to be compromised by the government's influence over its composition. The penal code contains provisions on criminal libel and the promotion of sectarianism, imposing penalties that entail lengthy jail terms. While none of these laws contain specific provisions on online expression, they could arguably be invoked for digital communications and generally create a chilling effect on freedom of expression both online and offline.

The 2011 Computer Misuse Act includes provisions that can specifically limit freedom of expression online. Under Section 25 of the law, the dissemination of "offensive communication" is prohibited alongside child pornography and cyber harassment, and is vaguely defined as the use of "electronic communication to disturb or attempts to disturb the peace, quiet or right of privacy of any person." Offenses under this provision of the act are considered misdemeanors and subject to fines, imprisonment of up to one year, or both.^[63]

In April 2017, Unwanted Witness Uganda and Uganda Human Rights Enforcement Foundation petitioned the Constitutional Court to challenge the constitutionality of Section 25 and "its failure to meet regional and international human rights norms and standards."^[64] As of July 2018, the case was still ongoing.^[65]

Meanwhile, the 2002 Anti-Terrorism Act criminalizes the publication and dissemination of content that promotes terrorism, which is vaguely defined, and convictions can carry the death sentence.^[66] Amendments to the act enacted in June 2015 may impact internet freedom in its broad criminalization of the "indirect" involvement in terrorist activists and the "unlawful possession of materials for promoting terrorism, such as audio or video tapes or written or electronic literature."^[67]

The independence of the Ugandan judiciary has become more tenuous in recent years.^[68] As part of his efforts to consolidate power in the lead-up to the 2016 elections, the president promoted new judges to both the Constitutional and Supreme Courts in September 2015. The process was criticized for lacking transparency and undermining judicial independence, while other critics called for more public scrutiny in the appointment of new judges.^[69]

Prosecutions and Detentions for Online Activities

During the coverage period, the government continued to curtail free speech online by prosecuting voices of dissent. In November 2017, eight journalists for the print and online daily tabloid, *Red Pepper*, were arrested for a news story about an alleged plot by President Museveni and two of his security officials to overthrow the president of neighboring Rwanda, Paul Kagame.^[70] The journalists were initially charged with treason under the penal code.^[71] The treason charges were subsequently dropped and replaced with charges under Section 25 of the Computer Misuse Act, 2011, which penalizes misuse of an electronic system to publish information prejudicial to security, libel, and offensive communication. The charges also include disturbing the peace of the president and two security officers, his brother General Salim Saleh, and the former Security Minister Henry Tumukunde.^[72] Police also reportedly confiscated the journalists' electronic devices and forced them to reveal their passwords during a raid of their offices. The journalists were released on bail a month after their arrest,^[73] and their case was withdrawn in March 2018 after the journalists met with the president in January, during which time the president had pardoned and warned them against "reckless reporting."^[74]

This case follows similar cases from the previous coverage period when citizens were arrested for online speech under the 2011 Computer Misuse Act:

- In May 2017, two WhatsApp users were arrested and charged with cyber harassment and offensive communication based on allegedly provocative messages sent in a group message chain about the Uganda Film Producers Association.^[75]
- In April 2017, security officers arrested and charged Stella Nyanzi, a Makerere University research fellow and activist, with two counts of cyber harassment for comments she made on her Facebook page, in which she referred to the president as "a pair of buttocks" and his wife as "empty-brained" for their apparent failure to fulfill basic governing promises.^[76] Nyanzi was held in detention for over four weeks and eventually released on bail; her case was still ongoing as of June 2018.^[77]

The government also uses anti-terrorism legislation to target legitimate speech. In November 2016, security agents arrested journalist Joy Doreen Biira on charges of "illegal filming of military raid" on a regional king's palace, which resulted in civilian deaths.^[78] Police accused Biira of circulating graphic photos of the aftermath of a battle between security forces and the regional king's royal guard to a widely subscribed WhatsApp group. She also posted an Instagram video of the king's palace burning and wrote about the event on Facebook.^[79] Although released on bail the following day, she was charged with abetting terrorism, which, if convicted, is punishable by

death under the Anti-Terrorism Act.^[80] Her digital devices were also confiscated, and she was forced to delete her social media posts. The arrest sparked widespread online condemnation and activism through hashtags such as #FreeJoyDoreen and #JournalismIsNotACrime. She was released on bail the following day, and there have been no updates on her case as of mid-2018.

Users are also penalized for pornographic content, which is illegal in Uganda. In July 2018, a 23-year-old student was charged and remanded to prison on 10 counts of broadcasting pornographic material.^[81]

Surveillance, Privacy, and Anonymity

There were no documented incidents of abusive government surveillance of citizens' online activities during this report's coverage period. Nonetheless, there is a strong sense that surveillance has expanded in recent years considering the government's increasing hostility toward political opposition and online criticism and its massive data collection efforts in the name of fighting cybercrime.^[82]

In June 2017, the Uganda Media Centre, the government-appointed media regulatory body, publicly announced it had implemented a new social media monitoring unit that scans the profiles of social media users to find critical posts.^[83] Later in July 2017, the *Daily Monitor* reported on a new deal with the Chinese government for assistance on a comprehensive cybersecurity strategy, which would include the "technical capacity to monitor and prevent social media abuse."^[84] No further information about the technology and its potential implementation has surfaced to date. Separately, Chinese telecom companies with potential ties to the Chinese government have played a large role in developing Uganda's telecommunications infrastructure over the years. Most recently in September 2016, ZTE signed a \$2.5 million contract with the Ugandan government to build the country's national fiber backbone.^[85]

The government has been known to surveil critics and opponents in the past, according to research by Privacy International (PI). In an October 2015 report, PI detailed the government's secret operation codenamed Fungua Macho ("open your eyes" in Swahili), which implanted FinFisher intrusion malware on the Wi-Fi of several hotels in Kampala, Entebbe, and Masaka to illegally spy on targeted activists, opposition politicians, and journalists between 2011 and 2013.^[86] It is unclear whether FinFisher was still being deployed during this report's coverage period.

The government's surveillance powers are governed by the 2010 Regulation of Interception of Communication (RIC) Act, which was hurriedly passed following the July 2010 Al-Shabaab terrorist attack in Kampala. Under the RIC Act, telecommunications companies are required to install equipment that enables real-time electronic surveillance of suspected terrorists. The RIC Act also gives the government permission to tap into personal communications for national security concerns,^[87] which can be requested by the security minister and granted after an order by a High Court judge.^[88] Service providers are further required to retain metadata for an unspecified amount of time,^[89] as well as disclose the personal information of individuals suspected of terrorism to the authorities upon issuance of a court warrant or notice from the security minister on matters related to national security, national economic interests, and public safety.^[90] Failure to comply with the provisions in the RIC Act can entail penalties of up to five years in prison for intermediaries, in addition to license revocations.^[91] It is unclear to what extent these provisions in the 2010 RIC Act have been implemented or operationalized.

In addition to the RIC Act, clauses in the 2002 Anti-Terrorism Act give security officers, appointed by the interior minister, the power to intercept communications of individuals suspected of terrorism and to keep them under surveillance, without judicial oversight.^[92]

Anonymous communication is compromised by mandatory registration for SIM cards and mobile internet subscriptions. The Registration of Persons Act, 2015 requires all citizens to acquire national IDs for any registration purpose, including SIM card registration. On March 8, 2018, the communications regulator issued a new directive to telecom companies to cease the sale of SIM cards until they could get direct access to the National Identification and Registration Authority (NIRA) database.^[93] This directive is aimed at curbing alleged crime being perpetrated through the use of unregistered SIM cards. The ban was lifted on May 8, 2018 with much stricter guidelines for registering, upgrading, or replacing a SIM card. Applicants are now required to physically present an original national ID card or, for non-Ugandans, a passport to an operator's designated customer care agent.^[94] The operator is then required to verify the authenticity of the national ID card using an Electronic Biometric Card Reader, match the applicant's live biometrics with the biometrics on the card, and obtain real-time verification with the NIRA database. Additionally, if operators fail to conduct online real-time verification, they are required to deny the issuance, upgrade, or replacement of SIM cards.^[95]

The government's renewed efforts to maintain a national database has heightened concerns over the security of data collected in the absence of data protection legislation. Civil society succeeded in pushing for the drafting of the Data Protection and Privacy Bill, 2016, but the draft was criticized for being open to misinterpretation due to the broad and vague conditions in which personal data may be collected, such as for "national security" reasons.^[96] The bill was being debated in Parliament as of mid-2018.

Intimidation and Violence

There were no known cases of retribution against bloggers or ICT users for their online activities during the coverage period. However, media freedom continued to decline as a result of government harassment and intimidation of journalists.

The last reported instance of violence for online activities occurred in April 2017, when NTV Uganda news anchor, Gertrude Uwitware, was abducted by unknown assailants and badly beaten following posts she made on her blog defending academic Stella Nyanzi's criticisms of the current regime (see "Prosecutions and Detentions for Online Activities").^[97]

Technical Attacks

The government has been known to target critics and opponents with surveillance malware, according to October 2015 research by Privacy International, which detailed a secret government operation that implanted FinFisher intrusion malware on the Wi-Fi of several hotels to illegally spy on activists, opposition politicians, and journalists between 2011 and 2013 (see Surveillance, Privacy, and Anonymity).^[98] It is unclear whether these technical attacks were still being deployed during this report's coverage period.

Vulnerable populations and marginalized communities, particularly the LGBTI community, have also been the target of regular technical attacks over the past few years. In 2016, a social worker at the Most at Risk Populations Initiative had their email and Facebook accounts hijacked.^[99] Activists believe the attack may have been perpetrated by the government given the sheer amount of information the social worker possessed about the LGBTI community through their work and private communications. Hacking attacks against gay individuals for the purpose of blackmail have also been reported. In one incident, after the Facebook account of a closeted gay celebrity was hacked, screenshots of private messages pointing to his sexual orientation were used to blackmail him.^[100]

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- 13 Uganda's national literacy rate stands at 71 percent among persons aged 10 years and above. See: Uganda Bureau of Statistics, "2015 Statistical Abstract," June 2015.
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