

Topic Internet Repression

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Key Takeaways Background

The webinar explored how internet shutdowns and digital rights violations during elections impact democratic participation, through case studies from Uganda (2021 elections) and Guinea (2020 presidential elections). In Uganda, elections were marked by violence, repression, and internet shutdowns, directly affecting youth political participation. In Guinea, the organization Ablogui documented internet disruptions during the 18 October 2020 election, built a coalition, and brought the case before the ECOWAS Court of Justice, which ruled in October 2023 that the Guinean state had violated freedom of expression and access to information.

Elections under repression: the Ugandan experience

- Youth participation exists formally (youth MPs), but in practice is constrained by violence, money, and political pressure.
- Electoral processes can escalate into violent environments: in a later local election, 3 young people were killed, leading to suspension of the vote.
- Elections were described not as democratic processes, but closer to “military operations” due to repression and securitization.

Internet shutdowns as a tool of control

During the elections, authorities denied shutdown plans, but the country woke up to a complete internet blackout.

Shutdown effects included:

- loss of communication and information access
- inability to organize politically
- disruption of mobile money and banking systems

The shutdown enabled targeted repression, including tracking and attacking opposition supporters during the night.

Ablogui case (Guinea): from disruption to legal action

- Context: political crisis linked to Alpha Condé's third-term bid (2019–2020).
- On 18 October 2020, after polls closed, internet bandwidth was reduced, followed by continued disruptions (23–25 October) and Facebook blocking until December 2020.
- These restrictions impacted:
 - access to electoral information
 - citizen expression
 - election observation tools (e.g. Guinée Vote platform)

Ablogui officially filed a case before the ECOWAS Court in July 2021. In October 2023, the Court ruled that Guinea had violated digital rights without legal justification.

How to respond to internet shutdowns: Ablogui step-by-step approach

- Immediate documentation
 - Start collecting evidence as soon as disruption begins
 - Digital evidence disappears quickly → urgency is critical
- Mobilize communities
 - Activate networks of youth, bloggers, and activists
 - Collect: screenshots, user reports, testimonies
- Use technical tools and partners
 - Collaborate with organizations like NetBlocks and OONI
 - Combine citizen evidence with technical verification
- Build a coalition
 - Ablogui partnered with: Villageois 2.0, African League for Human Rights and African Centre for Human Rights Development
- Strengthen evidence with impact cases
 - Add testimonies from: journalists, entrepreneurs
 - people whose work depends on internet access
- Secure legal and financial support if possible
 - Collaboration with Media Defence enabled legal action
- Use regional legal mechanisms
 - ECOWAS Court used due to limits of national courts
- Long-term follow-up

Case lasted 2021–2023
Required continuous documentation and exchanges

Lessons learned from ABLOGUI case

- Technical proof alone is insufficient
- Strong cases require: evidence of restriction, evidence of human, economic, and civic impact
- Testimonies were identified as a missing but critical element in early stages
- Success depended on external partnerships and networking : Access Now and Media Defence. International support provides: expertise, funding and advocacy leverage.

Key lessons for youth organizations

- Document early and systematically
- Combine technical data + testimonies
- Build coalitions with diverse expertise
- Use regional and international mechanisms when national ones fail
- Connect with international networks for support
- Continue training youth on digital rights and monitoring tools
- Amplify violations at the global level