

Uganda's social media tax leads to sharp drop in internet users

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Since a crippling levy on social media platforms was imposed in Uganda in July, subscriptions to online platforms have plummeted in the country. According to the Uganda Communications Commission, in the nearly one year since the social media tax was imposed, more than 5 million people in Uganda have stopped participating online altogether.

The tax imposed by the government of President Yoweri Museveni targets 60 social media platforms, including Facebook, Twitter, Whatsapp, Instagram, and Voice-Over-Internet-Protocol (VOIP) telephony services, such as Skype, and levies fee of 200 Uganda shillings (\$0.05) per day on users.

While Finance Minister David Bahati stated the purpose behind the tax is the generation of revenue necessary to upgrade Uganda's dilapidated communications infrastructure, as well as other public services, President Museveni stated the tax was a method to "curb online gossip."

Overall, the tax is a significant expense for many Ugandans, and places a burden on the population, who experience impoverished conditions. According to the Economic Policy Research Centre (EPRC) in 2017, 25 percent of the population lives under the poverty line of \$1.25 (UGX 4,500) a day, with over one-third of Ugandans not able to afford three meals a day.

Additionally, many Ugandans use a variety of social media platforms to connect with people in country and around the world, and the tax has threatened to cut them off from this vital communications avenue.

The tax also targets money sending platforms, such as the South African-based Mobile Telephone Networks (MTN) and its money transfer service Mobile Money, which allows Ugandans to send money to family and friends at lower rates, compared to the high cost of banking or wire transfer services.

According to the mobile transactions have declined UGX 14.8 trillion (\$3.9 billion) in between just June and September. Paul Cise, a sales manager of Nov Mobile Limited in capital city Kampala, told the *Guardian*, "Customers are not happy about [the tax]. Many have resisted it. It has made business very difficult. I can't manage to pay employees and pay rent."

Also speaking with the *Guardian*, sales agent Florence Acen of Kyaliwajjala reported that she has lost business since the imposition of the tax, and that the levy now takes any extra earnings she formerly received from commissions, causing her to turn away poorer customers that before the tax she provided services for: "It makes us too busy for nothing. We tell them the network is off. I can't waste my time."

The tax provoked an immediate and furious outcry from the Ugandan masses, and last July thousands participated in demonstrations in Kampala led by popular Ugandan musician and member of parliament Bobi Wine, real name Robert Kyagulanyi Ssentamu, calling for an immediate end to the levy.

In a brutal response, security forces mobilized to violently quell the protest, beating and detaining scores of protesters. Police also indiscriminately fired tear gas and live rounds to disperse demonstrators.

Notably, Bobi Wine, who had organized the demonstration on Twitter, tweeted a response to the heavy-handed repression, "there's no amount of bullets, teargas or arrests that will stop us. Some of our colleagues have been beaten up and others arrested. They must be freed for they have nothing against the police but rather the terrible tax."

Underlying the imposition of a tax on platforms designed to facilitate social interactions between people is the ruling elites' fear of social opposition. The tax on

social media must be seen as an assault on the democratic rights of the Ugandan population.

The social media levy comes amid growing opposition within the Ugandan masses towards the government of President Museveni, a thoroughly corrupt regime that has ruled Uganda for more than three decades. Museveni revealed his disdain for the masses with his statement that the tax was a tactic to “curb online gossip.” Translated, what the president really intends is halting criticism of the government.

Museveni described the levy as a tax on “vices”, stating that idle people chatting online are no different than “unproductive” people who drink and smoke cigarettes.

In a verbose and ranting post on his personal blog, the president defended the tax and called social media users idle and unproductive for the Ugandan economy: “Social-media use is definitely a luxury item ... using internet to access social media for chatting, recreation, malice, subversion, inciting murder, is definitely a luxury ... a luxury that is costly to the country's economy.”

In short, the president called every person who signs onto Facebook or Twitter lazy and unproductive, and a drag on the Ugandan economy. In unvarnished form, Museveni is expressing the ruling elites’ complete contempt for the Ugandan masses.

Notably, the tax proposal coincided with the election to parliament of popular musician and Museveni opponent Bobi Wine in July, who organized his political campaign almost entirely online utilizing Facebook and Twitter.

Museveni and his corrupt ruling clique, like the ruling class worldwide seeking to censor and restrict internet platforms, see such online political interaction as a threat to their rule.

The Museveni government has resorted to antidemocratic and authoritarian methods to crack down on voices critical of his regime. In addition to the completely dictatorial shut down of the internet throughout the country before the 2016 presidential poll, stating it necessary to secure a free and fair vote, the Museveni regime has additionally shut down newspapers critical of the government and has carried out numerous arrests of political opponents. The social media tax is nothing less than blatant attempt by the Museveni regime to crack down on the right of the

Ugandan masses to exercise free speech and expression of political views.

In 2016, journalist Joy Doreen Biira was arrested by police for “illegal filming of military raid” when she circulated images on Whatsapp and Instagram of the Ugandan military storming the palace of a regional king near Kasese in Eastern Uganda who had led a paramilitary rebellion against government forces.

The *World Socialist Web Site* has warned the international working class of the ruling elites’ desire to censor the internet. In January 2018 we called for an international coalition to fight internet censorship, writing: “The United States government, in the closest collaboration with Google, Facebook, Twitter and other powerful information technology corporations, is implementing massive restrictions on Internet access to socialist, antiwar and progressive websites. Similar repressive policies are being enacted by capitalist governments in Europe and throughout the world.”

No doubt that with the imposition of a tax on internet communications platforms, the Museveni government feels emboldened by the efforts taken in the United States and Europe to censor the internet.



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