

African governments that shut down the internet could lose it

By [John Walubengo](#)

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In an unprecedented policy suggestion, some members of the AFRINIC community have proposed denying internet to African governments that shut it down in their respective countries.



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AFRINIC stands for African Network Information Centre, and it is one of the world's five regional internet registries, with responsibility for Africa.

The proposed AFRINIC policy, dubbed the anti-shutdown policy, aims to deny Internet Protocol (IP) addresses to governments that disconnect their citizens, particularly during critical political events like elections and demonstrations.

IP addresses are unique identifiers that are necessary to connect to the internet, without which governments cannot get online.

Proponents of the policy feel it may deter the increasingly common, and unilateral, decisions by African governments to switch off the internet. They argue that the economic costs of internet shutdowns are extremely high while their intended law and order objectives are never achieved.

This view is supported by a Brookings study that estimated the cost of internet shutdowns in selected countries for the year 2016 to be \$2.4billion (US) or Sh247 billion by current exchange rates.

Only actionable step

Most culprits of internet shutdowns are found in developing countries with Uganda, DRC, Ethiopia and North Korea cited as being notorious offenders. On Kenya the jury is still out, but the government is giving mixed signals on whether or not the internet will be shut down before, during or after the upcoming general election.

The ICT minister is on record assuring Kenyans that there will be no internet shutdowns but cautions from his colleague at the interior ministry on social media use betray some government unease. Could the anti-shutdown policy proposal give citizens of African countries more assurances than the ICT minister's gentlemanly promise?

Maybe not. Given that typical African dictators are not too bothered when large sections of their population go without healthcare, education, security or even food for months, it is unlikely that deliberate withdrawal of internet services would prick their consciences into action.

However, this policy proposal provides the only actionable step against governments that are notorious for switching off the internet in times of crisis.

If the policy proposal is adopted this year in Nairobi at the upcoming 26th AFRINIC policy meeting, it will be the first time in the world that a technical institution will be holding a big stick to sanction a government internet shutdown. But therein lies a problem that some members of the AFRINIC community are uncomfortable with.

Should an internet institution, like AFRINIC, with a limited technical mandate, move beyond distributing IP resources to get involved in acts of 'policing' the internet?

Become another statistic

Put differently, is it in order for a technical institutional whose membership is open and largely composed of ISPs, mobile operators, media companies, universities and content providers to punish the actions of a sovereign state, however evil those actions may be?

Even more complicated, the internet policy proposals are voted upon by members who happen to be in the room at the time of voting, through a process known as 'rough-consensus'.

Whereas the rough-consensus approach has worked very well in determining technical standards for the internet, its appropriateness for decisions with political implications, like those defined in the anti-internet shutdown policy, is debatable.

Notwithstanding these challenges, the policy proponents felt compelled to act following the many shutdowns, particularly the recent Cameroon internet shutdown, that has now entered its third month with little or no international intervention.

They argue it is better to do something to prevent the next internet shutdown, rather than sit and wait to become another statistic in the next internet shutdown study.

Will the proposal succeed? Kenyans are in a good position to see for themselves, since the decision will be made right here in Nairobi during the last week of May, 2017.

Source: Daily Nation

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