

BY DAVID WALUGEMBE

**Kampala.** As Uganda heads into next week's presidential and parliamentary elections, fears of possible internet disruptions continue to dominate public discourse, despite assurances from the government that connectivity will remain stable.

Although the Uganda Communications Commission (UCC) and the Ministry of ICT and National Guidance have repeatedly pledged that internet services will not be interrupted during the 2026 General Election, civil society actors, political players, and digital rights activists say past experience calls for caution and early preparedness.

The largest Opposition party, the National Unity Platform (NUP), last week unveiled Bitchart, an alternative communication application designed to function without internet access. The app relies on Bluetooth technology to enable users to communicate, share up-

# When the web goes dark: Navigating elections beyond the internet

dates, and transmit images of Declaration of Results (DR) forms during and after Election Day.

Legal experts warn that recent regu-

latory actions could signal a restrictive digital environment during the polls.

Mr Allan Sempala Kigozi, the head of legal affairs at Unwanted Witness Ugan-

da, said the suspension of Starlink Global Internet Services Ltd by UCC has heightened fears of broader internet disruptions.

"Starlink was offering a steady and fast internet, but it has been suspended. This raises serious concerns that the internet may not be spared during the election cycle," Mr Ssem-pala said.

He advised Ugandans to make early financial preparations, noting that disruptions affected both mobile money services and ATM withdrawals during the 2021 General Election.

"As was the case in the 2021 elections, mobile money was not working, and people could not withdraw cash from ATMs. Ugandans should withdraw money early enough to avoid inconvenience," he said.

On communication, Mr Ssem-pala urged the public to prepare for offline options such as voice calls and SMS, and to back up contact lists offline to ensure accessibility in case data services are in-

## HOW TO PREPARE FOR AN INTERNET SHUTDOWN

### •Have cash on hand

-Withdraw money early from mobile money platforms and ATMs.  
-Keep enough cash for transport, food, fuel, and emergencies.

### •Prepare for offline communication

-Rely on voice calls and SMS, which may remain functional even if data services are cut.  
-Save important contacts on your

phone and write down critical numbers.

-Agree on physical meeting points with family, colleagues, or work teams.

### •Explore alternative tools

-Download and familiarise yourself with offline communication apps such as Bitchat, which uses Bluetooth instead of internet data.  
-Test such tools in advance to understand their limitations.

### •Plan for business disruptions

-Print essential documents and

transaction records.

-Keep manual records where possible.

-Businesses that depend on online payments should prepare cash-only options.

### •Media and civic preparedness

-Journalists should plan for offline reporting, storing photos, videos, and notes locally.

-Media houses should establish offline editorial coordination plans.

-Verify information carefully once connectivity is restored.

terrupted during and after the polls.

He also called on media houses to develop robust offline operational plans, warning that platforms such as email, WhatsApp, YouTube, Facebook, and X (formerly twitter) could be inaccessible.

"In the last elections, journalists were effectively disenfranchised. Many media houses operated without internet access. Newsrooms should prepare alternative ways of gathering, verifying, and correcting information," Mr Ssem-pala said.

Human rights activist and socio-political commentator Denis Yub echoed similar concerns, recommending the adoption of Bluetooth-based applications like Bitchart as a practical alternative during possible shutdowns.

"The state does not have the capacity to disable Bluetooth on every phone in the country. This technology has been used elsewhere, including by youths in Nepal," Mr Yub said.

He added: "These alternatives are not



## Past incident.

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about taking power but about ensuring democracy does not die in the dark."

He also cautioned citizens to handle their phones carefully on polling day, warning that security forces may confiscate devices used to record videos or take photographs.

"We may still rely on phone calls, but network quality could be poor. Ugandans should prepare to adapt because there is no total guarantee that the internet will remain uninterrupted," he said.

According to UCC data, Uganda has about 10.6 million internet users, underscoring the potential social and economic impact of any disruption to digital services during the election period.

As memories of the 2016 and 2021 internet shutdowns remain fresh, observers said preparedness, adaptability, and caution will be critical for citizens, media, and businesses navigating the forthcoming polls in an increasingly uncertain digital environment.