

BY DAVID WALUGEMBE

KAMPALA: Last week, the National Unity Platform (NUP) unveiled Bitchat, an offline messaging application designed to function without mobile data, Wi-Fi, SIM cards, or cellular networks, positioning it as a contingency tool in the event of internet disruptions.

The application uses Bluetooth mesh technology to allow peer-to-peer communication between nearby devices, creating a decentralised network that does not rely on central servers.

Independent software expert William Ssentenza describes Bitchat as a potential lifeline for communication during a blackout, noting that it operates entirely offline.

“The app works without internet, servers, or mobile networks,” said Mr Ssentenza. “Once users turn on Bluetooth, allow offline permissions, create a username, and open the app, they can

Will Bitchat keep Ugandans connected amid internet shutdown?

communicate with nearby devices.”

He advised users to disable GPS, avoid using real names, and verify information before sharing to minimise risks of tracing and misinformation.

Mr Ssentenza said the decentralised nature of the platform makes it difficult to shut down. “To block it, authorities would need to deploy Bluetooth jammers across large areas, which is economically unviable,” he said.

However, other experts caution that the app has significant limitations.

IT specialist Elvis Katumba said Bitchat’s reliance on Bluetooth restricts its effectiveness to short distances, typically between 10 and 100 metres, depending on device strength.

“In densely populated urban areas, a mesh can form easily, allowing mes-

sages to propagate,” Mr Katumba explained. “But in rural polling stations, where there are fewer users in proximity, messages may stall or fail to reach intended recipients.”

He also warned that anonymity presents challenges in verifying information.

“Messages are tied to temporary device identifiers, not known individuals or accredited polling agents,” he said. “This makes it difficult to establish trust or distinguish accurate information from misinformation.”

Bitchat, developed in the United States and launched in July 2025 by tech entrepreneur Jack Dorsey, a co-founder of X (formerly Twitter), is still new to Africa. The app requires no phone number, email, or SIM card, mak-

ing users anonymous by default.

Though there is no conclusive evidence, similar offline messaging tools were reportedly used during youth-led protests in Nepal in September 2025 after the government blocked major social media platforms.

The Uganda Communications Commission (UCC) has downplayed the significance of the app.

Addressing journalists on Monday, UCC Executive Director Nyombi Thembo urged Ugandans not to “over-excite” themselves over Bitchat, because misuse would attract legal consequences.

“We know this app very well. It is a small thing,” said Mr Nyombi. “Anyone who wants to commit a crime using it, my sympathies.”

He reiterated that the internet would

remain available during and after the elections.

Uganda has an estimated 10.6 million internet users, according to UCC data, underscoring the economic and social stakes of connectivity.

During the 2021 General Election, the government imposed a nationwide internet shutdown that lasted about 100 hours. According to estimates by TOP10VPN, the restrictions cost Uganda approximately Shs390b, placing the country among the top five globally in economic losses linked to internet shutdowns.

As election day approaches, Bitchat has emerged as both a symbol of digital resilience and a reminder of persistent mistrust over information access during next week’s polls.