

Breakdown of biometric machines

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Ahead of the elections, the electoral body had touted the technology as a magic bullet against voting irregularities.

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The widespread failure of Biometric Voter Verification Kits (BVVKs) in yesterday's presidential and parliamentary elections was likely a result of internet shutdown, according to highly-placed sources.

Uganda's Electoral Commission (EC), the legal entity mandated to organise elections and referenda in the country, however, said the glitches had nothing to do with lack of internet.

EC spokesperson Julius Mucunguzi acknowledged that internet connectivity was required for verification of voters' particulars, but said other aspects of the devices could function while offline.

"It was not expected that they would be working using the Internet. The processes of [the functioning of the BVVKs], save for the biometric verification, are all offline," he noted. "So, the malfunctioning of the machines is not linked to the absence or presence of the Internet," he added.

In a demonstration to journalists last month, the EC showed that authentication of a voter's particulars included an operator using BVVK to scan QR code on a Voter Locator Slip or National Identity Card to automatically pull up the profile of a duly registered individual from the National Voters' Register.

The voter would be fingerprinted or facially scanned and his or her



Voters line up at polling stations in Kampala yesterday. The voting exercise across the country was delayed by the breakdown of the Biometric Voter Verification Kit

photograph displayed to prove right particulars, correct polling station and status of whether they already cast the ballot or not.

This elaborate process aimed to tame electoral fraud, and for whose purpose the EC spent more than Shs150 billion in tax payers' money to buy and deploy BVVKs to the 50,700 polling stations countrywide, yesterday ended up in disappointment.

Among the victims was incumbent President and ruling National Resistance Movement (NRM) presidential flag bearer Yoweri Museveni, whose authentication as a registered voter

through fingerprinting on the BVVK failed.

Speaking after voting in his home district of Kiruhura, he said his particulars were instead verified using facial recognition option on the machines. "Was this deliberate? We are going to check that," Mr Museveni said as he announced formal inquiries into the widespread failure of BVVKs across the country.

Museveni's take

He gave no timeline to conclude the inquiries and did not say if the findings would be made public.

It was unclear if Mr Museveni was speaking in his capacity as President of Uganda or a candidate seeking re-election.

He disclosed that he had been briefed that the glitches, which included presiding officers and operators failing to log-in using own credentials, emanated from delayed submission of their particulars to the EC to upload on the devices.

"The machines have no problem, but some people in the EC delayed to bring their bio-data so that it [would be] entered into the machine because that machine can only be operated by

somebody to whom it is allocated," he said.

Mr Museveni added: "So, somebody in the Electoral Commission delayed to send the picture. Some people in the EC did not send the particulars of the operators to the machines."

Other senior government officials, who were either involved in election exercise or briefed on the matter, said the EC was in possession of particulars, including National Identification Numbers (NINs), of its designated presiding officers and BVVK operators by the time of their appointment.

The sources whom we are not

linked to internet shutdown



PHOTO/ABUBAKER LUBOWA

naming due to the sensitivity of the matter, noted that Internet connectivity was required to link the machines to centralised EC servers to automatically locate, pull up and verify a voter's particulars.

When the nation-wide glitch became apparent, stakeholders held multiple high-level meetings to explore whether to unblock Internet countrywide to power the devices or resort to manual authentication of voters' particulars.

Mr Museveni said he was briefed and greenlit the latter proposal "because it

was not correct for people [who had queued from early morning to vote] to just go home".

Asked yesterday how the EC had planned to authenticate voters' details without Internet connectivity, Spokesman Mucunguzi told this newspaper that:

"I am not in a position to discuss the details of those machines now and I am not going to attempt to go into those explanations."

The communications sector regulator, Uganda Communications Commission (UCC), citing inter-agency security decision, ordered telecoms and other service providers to switch Internet off on Tuesday evening.

However, selected agencies and institutions critical for the smooth functioning of the state were white-listed to access Internet and other services restricted to the general population including social media.

What UCC says

Mr Ibrahim Bbosa, the UCC's head of public relations, insisted that the failure of the biometric voter identification was not linked to the Internet shutdown.

"Please, note that there is no linkage between the internet shutdown and the functioning of the [BVVM] machines. It is public information that they operate in offline mode and a few polling stations have been able to use them," Mr Bbosa said.

His statement challenged comments by Mr Livingstone Sewanyana, the executive director of the Foundation for Human Rights Initiative (FHRI), that it was "very likely that the failure of the machines is linked to the Internet shutdown".

"The machines could not recognise the operators' log-in credentials because the [Internet-enabled] system was down. Remember that the machines were recognising them when their bio-data was entered. Why aren't they recognising them now?" he asked.

Other parts of the country catalogued cases where the BVVMS failed at both facial recognition and



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fingerprinting authentication. "The BVVK machines were all faulty. They failed to recognise the thumb prints and facial features of the voters as had been expected," Mr Rogers Kiduma, the assistant resident district commissioner of Kaliro said.

Investigators were expected to widen the inquiries into whether the machines were defective, had no software for interface with EC central servers or had been breached.

In an address last night, EC Chairman Simon Byabakama said following the glitches with BVVMS, they invoked powers granted to the institution by the Electoral Commission Act to authorise use of manual registers so that Ugandan voters would not be deprived of their "supreme and sacred" right to democratically choose their leaders.

He did not explain the cause of nationwide failure of the biometric verification machines that Mr Museveni previously billed as the panacea to end multiple voting and

ballot casting by otherwise ineligible persons.

On March 16, last year, three days after Ms Faridah Nambi Kigongo, the National Resistance Movement (NRM) candidate in the Kawempe North parliamentary by-election suffered defeat at the hands of Mr Elias Luyimbazi Nalukoola of the opposition National Unity Platform (NUP), Mr Museveni called for public support for outlawing manual voting.

"Nobody else who is not biometrically verified will vote. I hope all the Ugandans who want peace will support this. It must be one person, one vote," Mr Museveni said.

Prior to that, he had on September 12, 2024, while speaking at the first Defence Expo, claimed that the opposition was exploiting manual voting to rig. He called for abolition of manual voting.

"The law must be amended to state that if the electronic system fails, elections at that polling station should be suspended," Mr Museveni said.

The Defense Expo was organised in memory of the late former Minister for Internal Affairs, Gen Aronda Nyakairima, who died on September 12, 2015.

Impact

Yesterday's technical failures delayed start of voting, initially scheduled to run from 7am to 4pm, by four or more hours at thousands of polling stations across the country, prompting EC to extend the voting by at least an hour.

There were reports that polling officials and operators, among them those in Jinja, Wakiso, Mukono, Masaka and Gulu, failed to operate the machines. "The machines could not recognise the polling officials' login credentials," said Ms Rachel Babirye, a presiding officer at Kakindu Polling Station in Jinja City.

Questions emerged about the preparedness of polling officials after Kiruhura Returning Officer Komuhangi Alex, whom Mr Museveni had summoned to explain the glitches during his media engagement after casting the ballot, revealed that they