

DRC authorities cut internet and broadcast signals after election

Authorities in the Democratic Republic of Congo should immediately take steps to ensure citizens have access to the internet and news outlets as the country awaits the results of its election, the Committee to Protect Journalists said last week. The government has cut access to internet and SMS services, blocked the signals of at least two broadcasters, and withdrawn the accreditation of at least one journalist, according to Reuters.



Late voters check a list in a school in Kinshasa on December 30, during Democratic Republic of Congo's general elections. Authorities have cut internet access and blocked the signals to at least two news broadcasters while the results are counted. Credit: CPJ: AFP/Luis Tato.

"Authorities in the Democratic Republic of the Congo should reverse their systematic campaign of censorship and instead prioritize journalists' ability to keep citizens informed," said CPJ Africa program coordinator Angela Quintal. "The DRC should choose to open its next political chapter by committing to respect press freedom, which includes ensuring unfettered access for internet, telecommunication services, and news broadcasts."

On December 30, citizens in the DRC went to the polls to elect a president to take over from Joseph Kabila, who has led the country since 2001, according to [Reuters](#). The vote, which was repeatedly rescheduled since 2016, took place amid tensions, as multiple opposition-aligned areas were excluded due to an ongoing ebola outbreak and violence, according to [reports](#).

The day after the election, internet outages were registered by the international digital rights group [NetBlocks](#). The group noted "full blackouts" in the capital, Kinshasa, and the southern city of Lubumbashi, as well as disruptions to mobile connectivity in the eastern city of Goma. Alp Toker, director of NetBlocks, told CPJ yesterday that some connectivity had returned to the southeast, but Goma experienced further restrictions on January 1 and 2.

"Overall connectivity remains poor or non-existent for many users," Toker said. SMS services were also blocked, according to Reuters.

Barnabe Kikaya bin Karubi, a senior presidential adviser, defended the blocks as a measure to prevent the spread of "fictitious [election] results... that could lead us straight toward chaos," according to Reuters. Lambert Mende, the information minister, said that internet service would not return until the announcement of election results, according to a [report](#). The results had been due to be announced January 6, but Mende said today that they may be delayed.

In a [statement](#) yesterday, Litsani Choukran, director general of the Kinshasa-based, privately owned Leopards Groupe, which operates the local news websites *Politico*, *Direct*, *Economico*, and *Sports*, called for authorities to return internet access as part of a commitment to freedom of information and the ability to be informed.

Choukran told CPJ that in order to report and publish, his outlets were forced to rely on a roaming connection from Brazzaville, the capital of neighboring Republic of Congo, and that online views had plummeted during the outage. "We just lost 50 percent of our online traffic. They are not reading anymore," Choukran said.

The French government-funded news service RFI said in a January 2 [statement](#) that authorities have blocked nearly all its FM broadcasts in the DRC since January 1, and withdrew the accreditation of its correspondent, Florence Morice. According to a [document](#) signed by Mende and shared on Twitter by a freelance journalist, Morice's accreditation was withdrawn because RFI allegedly violated the law pertaining to CENI, the independent electoral commission. In its statement, published in French, RFI said it "respects and has respected on its antennas the texts in force and gave no result of the polls... [and] will only broadcast the results proclaimed by the CENI, in accordance with the regulations."

Authorities also [cut without notification](#) the broadcast signal of an opposition-aligned, Kinshasa-based television station, Ralik CCTV, at 4 p.m. yesterday, Michel Koyakpa, the station's editor-in-chief, told CPJ.

CPJ's repeated calls to Mende and Emery Okundji, DRC's telecommunications minister, went unanswered.

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