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民主主義と独裁主義において動員はいかに影響を受けるのか ——体制維持メカニズムにおける技術的空間

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How Mobilisation is Impacted in Democracy and Autocracy: Technological Spaces in a Regime Survival Mechanism

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本研究は、民主主義と権威主義の相互作用の中で展開されるウガンダの政治的動員を考察し、とりわけ体制維持のメカニズムとして機能するテクノロジー空間に焦点を当てるものである。本研究は、市民参加や政治的動員を促進すると期待されていたデジタル技術が、なぜ一方で国家による統制の強化や野党活動の制約とも結びついているのかという問いを中心的な課題としている。具体的には、インターネット監視が政治的動員および野党活動にどのような影響を及ぼしているのか、インターネット遮断や機能不全に陥った生体認証選挙システムがコミュニケーション、政治参加、および選挙結果にどのような影響を与えたのか、さらにデジタル・コンテンツがどのようにして体制に有利な世論形成に寄与しているのかを検討する。本研究の目的は、テクノロジー空間が政治的動員と統制の双方の手段としていかに機能し、体制の安定化に寄与しているのかを分析することである。メディア分析、参与観察、インタビュー、非公式な対話、およびコンテンツ分析を含む質的研究手法を用いた結果、インターネット監視は反体制派の監視、逮捕、および威嚇を可能にしていること、インターネット遮断や組織的なメッセージ発信は野党勢力の連携を制限するとともに権威主義体制に有利な世論形成を促進していること、さらに生体認証投票システムの不具合は選挙過程における透明性を低下させていることが明らかとなった。

This study examines political mobilisation in Uganda within the dynamics of democracy and autocracy, focusing on technological spaces as mechanisms of regime survival. It addresses the puzzle of why digital technologies, expected to enhance participation and mobilisation, are also associated with intensified state control and constrained opposition activity. The study is guided by questions on how internet surveillance affects mobilisation and opposition activity, how internet shutdowns and dysfunctional biometric electoral system influence communication, participation and electoral outcomes, and how digital content shapes public opinion in favour of the regime. It aims to analyse how technological spaces function as tools of both mobilisation and control contributing to regime stability. Using qualitative methods including media analysis, participant observation, interviews, informal conversations, and content analysis, the study finds that surveillance enables monitoring, arrests, and intimidation of opponents; shutdowns and coordinated messaging restrict opposition coordination and shape opinion in favour of autocracy; whilst, failed biometric voting limits transparency in the electoral process.

The Research Puzzle

The rapid expansion of digital technologies in Uganda presents a striking political paradox. Technologies that were widely expected to deepen democratic participation, widen civic engagement, and promote electoral transparency have increasingly become intertwined with mechanisms of surveillance, control, and regime preservation. Digital platforms have undoubtedly weakened the monopoly of conventional state-aligned media by creating alternative spaces for political discussion, mobilisation, and citizen expression. Yet, these same technologies have also enabled new forms of state power, including internet surveillance, online manipulation, restrictions on opposition activity, and electoral disruptions such as internet shutdowns and failures in biometric voting systems. Rather than producing greater political openness, technological innovation appears to coexist with intensified authoritarian practices that subtly reinforce incumbency. This contradiction raises an important puzzle: why do technologies introduced in the name of transparency, participation, and modernisation simultaneously generate conditions that constrain political competition and strengthen autocratic resilience in Uganda?

Research Method

This study employed a qualitative case study design to examine how digital technologies facilitate autocratic electoral practices in Uganda. A qualitative approach was considered appropriate because it

enabled an in-depth exploration of political processes, state practices, and experiences related to digital authoritarianism and elections. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with fifty respondents from Rukungiri District in rural Uganda and fifty respondents from Wakiso District in urban Uganda in order to examine the information gaps between rural and urban voters. In addition, document and digital content analysis were conducted to provide further insight into patterns of political communication, media access, and digital engagement during the January 2026 electoral period. Interviews were conducted with purposively selected participants, including journalists, political analysts, civil society actors, political party members, and digital rights activists. Snowball sampling was also used to identify additional respondents with relevant expertise. Semi-structured interviews provided flexibility while ensuring consistency in data collection. Document analysis involved reviewing academic literature, government reports, policy documents, and media publications relating to elections, surveillance, censorship, and digital governance in Uganda. Digital content from social media and online news platforms was also analysed to examine online political communication, state control mechanisms, and digital repression practices. Data were analysed thematically by identifying recurring patterns and themes related to electoral authoritarianism and digital technologies. Ethical considerations included informed consent, confidentiality, anonymity,

and the secure handling of research data due to the sensitive political nature of the study.

Findings of the study

In Uganda, like many other contemporary autocracies, the intersection of politics and digital technology has become a defining feature of how autocratic power is exercised and reproduced. While technological spaces are often celebrated as catalysts of democratic participation and expanded civic engagement, their role within Uganda reveals a far more complex and paradoxical reality. Rather than functioning solely as instruments of empowerment, digital technologies operate within a deeply politicised environment where they are simultaneously used to facilitate mobilisation and to entrench state control. This tension raises a critical puzzle: why do technologies designed to enhance communication and political participation increasingly coincide with intensified surveillance, restricted opposition activity, and managed public discourse? Situated within the broader dynamics of democracy and autocracy, this study interrogated how internet surveillance, electoral internet shutdowns, and coordinated digital information strategies shape political mobilisation and public opinion. By examining these processes, the study seeks to uncover how technological infrastructures are embedded within autocratic regimes, ultimately transforming digital spaces into contested arenas where the possibilities of political expression are continuously constrained and reconfigured.

This digital transformation represents a

double-edged sword within contemporary political communication. On one hand, it has significantly reduced the level of content filtering traditionally exercised by conventional media institutions, which have often been criticised for favouring incumbent regimes through selective reporting and restricted access to alternative political voices. Digital platforms have therefore created new opportunities for citizens, opposition actors, and civil society groups to access information, express political opinions, and engage in public debate outside state-dominated media structures. On the other hand, this apparent openness frequently presents a false promise of citizen emancipation. Although digital spaces appear to expand freedom of expression and political participation, they also expose users to new forms of surveillance, manipulation, misinformation, and state control. Governments increasingly exploit these same technologies to monitor dissent, shape public narratives, and suppress opposition activity, ultimately limiting the transformative democratic potential that digital communication initially seemed to offer.

The promise to introduce biometric machine voting as a mechanism for enhancing transparency, credibility, and efficiency in Uganda's electoral process suffered a significant setback at the very start of the presidential polling day. Technical failures, delays, and operational challenges undermined public confidence in the system, raising widespread concerns about the reliability of the technology and the integrity

of the electoral process itself. For many observers and political critics, these failures were interpreted as a deliberate false promise designed to create an appearance of electoral reform while preserving opportunities for manipulation and control. Others viewed the situation differently, arguing that the challenges reflected Uganda's limited preparedness to effectively manage and implement complex technological innovations within a highly sensitive political environment. However, regardless of the explanation, the outcome subtly favoured the incumbent regime by creating confusion, restricting smooth electoral participation, and weakening public trust in alternative political outcomes. The incident demonstrated how technological interventions in electoral governance can simultaneously project modernisation while reinforcing existing political power structures.

Reports of civil rights abuses, abductions, and violent mistreatment in Uganda have increasingly been dismissed, trivialised, or reframed within digital spaces as artificial intelligence fabrications, manipulated content, or desperate attempts by opposition actors to gain public sympathy and political relevance. In an environment saturated with rapidly circulating and largely unfiltered digital information, the distinction between verified reality and manipulated narratives has become progressively blurred. This erosion of informational certainty has created fertile ground for competing political interpretations, where evidence of abuse can easily be questioned, discredited, or labelled

as misinformation. As a result, genuine accounts of human rights violations are often overshadowed by accusations of propaganda, making it difficult for citizens to determine what is authentic and what is politically engineered. The growing prevalence of edited content, misinformation, and digitally altered media has therefore weakened public trust in online political communication while simultaneously benefiting authoritarian structures that thrive in conditions of uncertainty and confusion. Consequently, technological spaces not only shape political mobilisation and public opinion but also influence how truth, legitimacy, and accountability are constructed and contested within Uganda's political landscape.

(1) Research content

The findings revealed a significant information gap between rural and urban respondents in relation to access to political information and digital communication during the electoral period. Respondents from rural areas largely depended on formal state and regime-aligned information structures, particularly local radio and television stations, for political news and electoral updates. Limited internet infrastructure, high data costs, and low levels of digital literacy constrained social media penetration in many rural communities. Consequently, access to alternative political narratives and independent sources of information remained restricted. The study further found that political actors aligned with the regime exercised considerable influence over the content disseminated

through local media platforms. This enabled the state and its supporters to shape dominant political narratives and limit the circulation of dissenting views, especially in rural areas where alternative communication channels were scarce. In contrast, urban respondents reported significantly higher levels of internet access and social media usage prior to the elections. Digital platforms provided opportunities for political mobilisation, citizen engagement, and exposure to opposition narratives outside state-controlled media. However, the government-imposed internet shutdown during the voting period disrupted access to online communication platforms, effectively reducing urban populations to information conditions similar to those experienced in rural areas. This demonstrated the state's capacity to use digital restrictions strategically to control information flows during critical electoral moments.

The failure or malfunction of biometric voter verification systems during the election raised concerns about the integrity and transparency of the electoral process. In response to the technical disruptions, electoral authorities resorted to traditional voter registers as a contingency measure to ensure that voting continued. However, opposition parties, civil society organisations, and election observers interpreted this shift as creating opportunities for electoral manipulation, particularly where safeguards for manual verification were weak and there was limited transparency regarding the causes of the biometric system failure. These perceptions contributed to allegations that

the breakdown of biometric technology and the subsequent reliance on traditional registers were indicative of inadequate electoral preparedness or, in more contentious political environments, a deliberate strategy to facilitate electoral fraud. The recourse to traditional registers was therefore viewed by some stakeholders as evidence of a preparedness to rig the election, although the validity of such claims depended on the available evidence, the effectiveness of oversight mechanisms, and the credibility of the electoral management body.

The findings also revealed that widespread fears surrounding the misuse of computers and the internet generated anxiety among both rural and urban respondents. Concerns were particularly centred on digital surveillance, misinformation, online manipulation, and the potential abuse of personal information during the electoral period. The study further found that public responses to government control of digital platforms reflected deeply polarised political views, often shaped by respondents' political allegiances. Respondents sympathetic to the opposition generally perceived internet restrictions, surveillance, and digital censorship as deliberate tools of political repression aimed at limiting dissent and controlling electoral narratives. In contrast, many respondents aligned with or supportive of the regime viewed such measures as necessary for maintaining national security and public order. Additionally, a considerable number of rural respondents expressed scepticism towards reports of violence

against political activists, frequently dismissing such claims as exaggerated or fabricated attempts to gain political sympathy and popularity. This reflected the broader influence of regime-aligned narratives within rural information environments, where access to alternative sources of information remained limited. Several participants claimed that opposition supporters and online activists used artificial intelligence (AI), edited media, or misleading digital content to tarnish the image of the government and generate public sympathy. Others believed that such content is primarily created to attract online attention, increase digital visibility, or gain social and political influence within online spaces. Thus, these perceptions highlighted growing public scepticism towards digital information and reflected broader concerns regarding misinformation, media manipulation, and the politicisation of online content during the electoral period. The findings also demonstrated how competing political narratives shaped public interpretations of digital evidence and influenced trust in online sources of information.

(2) Research Achievements

1. Publications

1. Karusigarira, Ian. "Clientelism and Reproduction of Corruption in Autocracies: The Making of Uganda's Pax Musevenica", *ASC-TUFS Working Papers* Volume 6 (2026).
 2. Karusigarira, Ian. "Security and Policing Global Pandemics: COVID-19 Security and 'Scientific' Politics in Uganda" *ASC-TUFS Working Papers*. 2025. Vol. 5, pp. 1-16.
 3. Shiino, Wakana and Ian Karusigarira (eds.). *Between-ness in Contemporary African Sexualities: Traditions, Education, and Practices*. Research Institute for Languages and Cultures of Asia and Africa. 2025.
 4. Karusigarira, Ian. "Social Science and its Opportunity Structures: A Case for Makerere University Social Science Graduates", In Shiraishi Soichiro, Peter Atekyereza, and Wakana Shiino (eds.), *Situated Career Choices: Student Identities and Agencies for University Education in Uganda*. Research Institute for Languages and Cultures of Asia and Africa, Tokyo University of Foreign Studies. 2025.
- ### 2. Presentations at International Conferences
- 1 Karusigarira, Ian. "How Democratic Processes Facilitate Authoritarian Resilience: Political Parties and Revolutionary Regime Co-optations in Uganda" Helsinki Conference on Emotions, Populism, and Polarisation (HCEPP): Panel: Authoritarian Transformations, University of Helsinki, Finland. (Invited), May 18~20, 2025.
 - 2 Karusigarira, Ian. "How "Democratic Processes" Facilitate Authoritarian Resilience: Culture and Typologies of Revolutionary Regime Co-optations in Uganda", Social Scientists' Association's Dialogue on Democracy in Theory, Ideology, and Practice: New directions in the Global South University of Peradeniya, Sri Lanka, (Invited), Dec 12, 2024.