Fraudsters target Kenyan phone users

As election campaigns gain momentum in Kenya, fraudsters have come up with an ingenious way of deceiving unsuspecting mobile phone users.

By Carole Kimutai: @CaroleKimutai 15 Jun 2012

The fraudsters send text messages using short code '3839' and '4885' which they claim originate from The National Allianc (TNA) political party and lure phone users to send money. TNA is a party of one of the presidential contenders Uhuru Kenyatta.

The texts are in the form of an opinion poll/question regarding the TNA presidential candidature of Kenyatta.

One such text reads:
Opinion polls; if elections were held today would you vote UHURU KENYATTA as President? Sms YES to 3839 endors Uhuru, Sms NO to 3839 reject Uhuru. iBelieve!

If the response is yes: *Thanks for your opinion. Sms PEACE to 3839.To join The Supreme Candidate lobby Group, Go Mpesa MENU & pay agency fee Sh225 to paybill no.522522 a/c no.1133960413*

"The above text message is deceptive in that it signs off using the campaign slogan of our Party (iBelieve) which is clearly intended to mislead the recipient into thinking that the message has emanated from TNA, which is not the case. Furthermo the response solicits for funds from unsuspecting Kenyans to join the lobby group," reads a statement by Jasper Mbiuki, TNA party secretary in charge of administration of justice and legal affairs.

TNA's official short codes are 6551 and 4878 for Uhuru.

Recipients are further charged KSh 10 (R1) on receiving the text messages for a service that they have not subscribed to. TNA has written to all mobile operators in Kenya and the industry regulator - the Communication Commission of Kenya - requesting them to take appropriate remedial measures.

Short codes are popular among media houses who use it to run lotteries and opinion polls. The short codes are also used sell content that subscribers can access at a fee.

This new trick is a sophisticated one from the usual SMS messages. A common trick is where a fraudster sends a text message (pretending to originate from Safaricom) to a number informing the phone user that some money has been erroneously sent to them via MPesa. After a few minutes, the fraudster calls begging for the money to be resent. The victi then resends money only to later realise it was a trick.

Another popular trick is where phone users receive a text informing them that they have won money in a competition. The text then requests the phone user to send an amount of money to a mobile number or a short code that will enable the use redeem their cash prize.

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