

No SMS incitement to violence in Kenyan elections

In an effort to help forestall violence in the March 2013 general elections in Kenya, the Communications Commission of Kenya required politicians to submit for screening all short message service (SMS) texts for bulk dissemination. The commission is also asking mobile service operators to block any SMS texts that it deems may incite violence.

The new rules, which some consider overly stringent, stipulate that prepared text messages, which must be in KiSwahili and English, should be submitted to mobile telephone service operators 48 hours before scheduled dispatch. The messages also had to be authorised by political parties and accompanied by signed copies of their registration certificates.

The Kenyan government hoped to avoid what happened in the 2007-08 elections, when hate messages were rampantly disseminated through SMS, helping to fuel violence that killed about 1 300 persons, reported by IRIN, the UN humanitarian news service.

Kenya is not the only country to clamp down on text messages. Following post-election violence in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) in December 2011, that government ordered mobile phone service providers to block all text messages.

There are concerns, however, that a blanket ban on text messages could also block efforts to prevent violence. Following the SMS ban in the DRC, Daniel Solomon, a blogger, started an online petition to reverse the ban and quickly collected thousands of signatures. He argued that Kenya's post-election violence was lessened because peace activists were able to put out their own messages through SMS.

"SMS-based crowd-sourcing methods have become an essential tool of election monitoring and mass atrocities prevention in conflict zones," Solomon maintains. "With few journalists reporting from the ground in the DRC, SMS technology represents the only opportunity for an active stream of information from grassroots actors and civil society."

For now, Kenya's new rules affect only politicians and political parties. This will permit election monitors and civil society organisations to continue using SMS to sensitize people against violence.

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