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I t f y Ugandans are turning to Virtual Private Network (VPN) technology to circumvent the government's "social media tax", which came into effect yesterday, according to leading VPN comparison site BestVPN.com.

The new tax is leveled against platforms that offer Over-The-Top (OTT) services such as VoIP, instant messaging, and video streaming. This includes Facebook, WhatsApp, LinkedIn, Instagram, Viber, and Skype.

The levy has resulted in a spike in interest in VPNs among Ugandan internet users, according to internal data from BestVPN.com. The comparison site recorded a 1567 percent increase on Saturday and Sunday, compared to the same period the weekend before.

The government claims the new tax will allow it to invest in infrastructure that will improve the internet for all, but critics claim it is deliberate attempt to hinder criticism of President Yoweri Museveni's government.

In 2016, social media platforms were blocked as Museveni sought a controversial fifth term in government in an election characterized by allegations of voter bribery and other electoral irregularities. Later the same year, social media blocks were reintroduced ahead of Museveni's swearing in ceremony.

The new tax is also criticized for its impracticality and because it will digitally disenfranchise the poorest sections of Ugandan society. Anyone accessing the listed social media platforms now needs to pay 200 Ugandan Shillings (UGX) per day, UGX 1400 per week, or UGX 6000 per month.

6000 shillings is around USD \$1.55 (GBP £1.20), but in Uganda millions of citizens live on less than \$1 a day.

"We are seeing the same thing happen time and time again," commented Douglas Crawford, privacy expert at BestVPN.com. "Political tyrants are terrified of losing their grip on power and so attempt to control the flow of information. The economic reality in Uganda makes this less of a levy and more of an outright ban. Those with technical know-how and financial resources are using VPNs to avoid the tax, but many citizens will feel as though they have no choice but to stop using social media. We'd urge these citizens to visit our site and look for a reputable free VPN service."

Free VPN apps are usually limited in what they allow users to do, but most should be sufficient to allow all sections of Ugandan society unrestricted access to the internet so that they participate in democratic debate on the social media platforms of their choice.

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