Ugandan authorities ordered a nationwide internet blackout late Tuesday, two days before a presidential election in which President Yoweri Museveni is seeking to extend his nearly 40-year rule. The move has raised concerns among opposition leaders, rights groups, and international observers.

The Uganda Communications Commission (UCC) instructed internet service providers to suspend access beginning at 6 p.m. local time (1500 GMT). The blackout will remain in effect until further notice, though essential government services are exempt.

In a letter to providers, the UCC said the shutdown was necessary to prevent the spread of misinformation, curb electoral fraud, and stop incitement to violence that could undermine public confidence and national security during the election period.

The government did not publicly announce the measure. Two officials confirmed the letter's authenticity to The Associated Press but said authorities did not want to "own" the decision. The directive contradicts earlier government assurances that the internet would remain accessible. In a Jan. 5 post on X, officials dismissed reports of a shutdown as "false, misleading, and intended to cause unnecessary fear and tension."

Uganda also cut internet access during the 2021 elections, which were criticized over allegations of vote rigging and violent crackdowns on opposition supporters. Bobi Wine, a popular singer-turned-politician, is again challenging Museveni, drawing large crowds despite security disruptions and arrests of his supporters.

Museveni, 81, is widely expected to secure a seventh term due to his firm control over state institutions and security forces. On Tuesday, he held his final campaign rally at Kololo National Ceremonial Gardens in Kampala, attended by thousands who said they were transported to the venue and provided with food. International journalists were largely barred from covering the event despite holding government accreditation.

Rights groups say hundreds of opposition supporters have been detained ahead of the vote. Another prominent opposition figure, Kizza Besigye, remains on trial after being abducted in Kenya last year and returned to Uganda to face military court proceedings.

At the rally, some attendees praised Museveni's long rule. "Forty years doesn't

matter. We need even more," said Banura Oliver, 41. Others questioned the president's leadership. "You give me food for today, but what about tomorrow?" said Mugaala, 23, who said he did not plan to vote for Museveni.