This climate activist says he was silenced on Twitter

A Ugandan environmental activist was suspended from Twitter in the midst of a high-profile campaign — a suspension he believes is connected to his opponents in the country's government and industries linked to deforestation. Twitter won't say what caused the account to be frozen, but environmental groups worry it's part of a broader trend of powerful stakeholders exploiting Twitter's moderation system to silence climate activists.

The suspension happened on the night of September 12th, after 22-year-old Nyombi Morris had just finished a television appearance about the preservation of the Bugoma Forest. The morning after the interview, he woke up to find his account was frozen without explanation. He says he contacted Twitter's Help Center at least five times during the weeks his account was suspended but couldn't figure out what had triggered the freeze, and began to suspect the suspension could be connected to his advocacy. Another Ugandan activist with Fridays for Future who fights deforestation, Leah Namugerwa, had her account frozen in September, too.

Activists were caught in a spam filter

"I was very, very disappointed," Morris told *The Verge*. "What I suspected is that because our government was trying to silence us about this Bugoma Forest, they used some people to suspend our accounts." Morris regained access to his original account on September 30th, after *The Verge* contacted Twitter regarding the suspensions. Neither Morris nor *The Verge* was told why the account was suspended in the first place.

Twitter says that at least two of the suspended accounts

belonging to environmental activists were caught in a spam filter and have since been reinstated. The social media giant didn't give any more information on why those accounts might have been flagged as spam, what happened to other accounts, or how many in all have been suspended.

The suspension has drawn concern from around the world. Fridays for Future, the global movement that started with teen activist Greta Thunberg's climate strikes in Sweden, posted a tweet on September 28th to call attention to numerous accounts suspended around the world this year. "This is unacceptable. Having a platform to talk about the climate crisis is crucial, especially for [people and areas most affected by climate change]," the group said.

> *More and more climate activists' accounts are being suspended. This is unacceptable. Having a platform to talk about the climate crisis is crucial, especially for MAPA.*
>
> *Reply with any accounts that you know have been suspended (with city/country). We'll do our best to help!*
>
> *— Fridays For Future (@Fridays4future) September 28, 2020*

Morris says the account freeze isolated him from other activists and stifled his ability to speak out. "We are not supported by our media. It is only social media which can support us, but if even on social media we are silenced — where will we go?" says Morris.

Deforestation has taken place at an alarming rate in Uganda, where 63 percent of forests have been logged in the past 25 years alone, according to the country's National Forestry Authority (NFA). The contested Bugoma Forest is home to nine mammal species on the International Union for Conservation of Nature Red List of Threatened Species, including about 600 endangered chimpanzees. Protecting the forest is also important for people, conservationists say, because locals

depend on its resources, and it functions as an important carbon sink that soaks up and stores planet-heating carbon dioxide.

Parts of Bugoma Forest were leased to the sugar manufacturer Hoima Sugar by the Bunyoro-Kitara Kingdom in Uganda in 2016. (Uganda was made up of kingdoms prior to British colonization, whose rulers are recognized by the country today even though they're not given sovereign power.) The National Forestry Authority, which manages Bugoma, took the Bunyoro-Kitara king and Hoima Sugar to court, claiming that the company didn't have the legal right to clear the forest to make way for sugar plantations. The Uganda High Court ruled against the NFA in a decision last year, and the National Environment Management Authority approved the use of land for sugar plantations this year.

Its impact on his life and work is undeniable

It's still unclear what triggered Morris' suspension, and there's no hard evidence linking it to his political opponents — but its impact on his life and work is undeniable. He previously relied on Twitter more than any other social media platform because of its reach. He'd met activists around the world through Twitter, and he felt that he had the ear of influential people. Greta Thunberg followed him, he proudly mentioned. Twitter is also where he could learn more about the environment and issues in other parts of the world, he says.

With his account down, he began tweeting from another account for an advocacy group that he started. But it has far fewer followers, and Morris lost touch with some of his friends who didn't know about his new account. It was as if his social media presence had been reduced to a whisper. He could see everyone talking, but he wasn't being heard in the same way.

"I'm no longer teaching. Now I'm there [on Twitter] to learn, but I cannot teach. That's the biggest challenge," Morris told *The Verge* while his account was still frozen.

> *I just don’t know how to thank you, but thanks to whoever tried his/her level best to see that my account released*
>
> *Am officially back, I repeat my account is back, am now able to tweet.. please welcome me once again. pic.twitter.com/ejcifB13dH*
>
> *— Nyombi Morris (@NolanQ13) October 1, 2020*

The experience went against everything that brought him to Twitter in the first place. “Social media doesn’t separate the rich and the poor, they allow everyone — that’s why I like it so much,” he says.

Social media has been an even bigger lifeline for environmental activists during coronavirus-induced lockdowns, especially when it’s paired with political turbulence. Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni, who has been in power since 1986, is up for election next year. The pandemic curbed campaign rallies and protests since mass gatherings still aren’t allowed in the country, which has had some of the strictest measures in place in Africa to curb the spread of COVID-19. That’s led to people becoming more outspoken online, and the government subsequently attempting to crack down more on blogs and social media. Uganda has imposed a tax on using social media sites since 2018, which has been criticized as an attack on free speech.

When the pandemic first began to unfold, demonstrators, including Thunberg, moved their actions online and urged their followers to follow public health guidelines on social distancing. Some environmental activists returned to the streets on September 25th for a Global Climate Strike.

In Uganda, protesters were arrested for joining the strike — including Fridays for Future leader Leah Namugerwa. “Being a climate activist, it is becoming a crime. They are ready to arrest us if we go to the streets,” Morris says. That’s why he

and others opted to post photos and videos of themselves with protest signs from their homes rather than hit the streets that day. Those who were arrested were eventually released, in part because others made a ruckus about it on social media, Morris believes.

Twitter suspensions have an outsized impact on activists working in places where it's more dangerous to oppose industry and the government. Defending the environment where you live is a deadly business in many places around the world: 212 environmental activists were killed in 2019, the highest ever recorded by watchdog group Global Witness.

One of those killed this year was Randy Echanis, a longtime advocate for the environment, workers, and peasants, in the Philippines who was found stabbed to death in his apartment in August. Soon after, activists in the Philippines appealed to Twitter to reinstate the account of the left-wing political party, Anakpawis, that Echanis chaired. They said the account was suspended after the burial march for Echanis; it's now back online. The month before Echanis was killed, Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte signed an Anti-Terrorism Act into law that human rights watchdogs say criminalizes people for simply criticizing his government, which has overseen the extrajudicial killings of thousands of Filipinos. The Philippines consistently ranks among the top three countries where land and environmental defenders are killed, according to Global Witness.

Twitter isn't the only social media giant environmental activists have called out for stifling them. Facebook faced scrutiny last month after it suspended the accounts of more than 200 people connected to an event protesting the construction of the contested Coastal GasLink pipeline in Canada. "Facebook can silence much of the climate movement at their discretion, without explanation for any duration," Lindsey Allen, chief program officer at Greenpeace USA, told *The Verge* in September. "That's unnerving."

Morris says he’s happy that he’s back on Twitter. Namugerwa’s account was restored shortly after Fridays for Future tweeted about the suspensions on September 28th. “I couldn’t believe it, I thought that I lost everything,” Morris says. He wants to raise awareness for other environmental activists frozen out of their accounts, which is especially important for those from places with less political clout that nonetheless bear the brunt of harms from climate change. What they’ll lose is up to the whims of the platform.

https://www.theverge.com/2020/10/5/21502827/climate-change-activist-twitter-account-suspended