



Freedom in the World - Uganda (2010)

Capital:
Kampala

Population:
30,700,000

Political Rights Score: 5 *
Civil Liberties Score: 4 *
Status: Partly Free

Overview

The ruling National Resistance Movement party dominated the May 2009 local elections amid low voter turnout. In August, President Yoweri Museveni reappointed the electoral commission despite opposition claims that it was biased. Simmering tensions between the government and the traditional Kingdom of Buganda erupted into violence in September. Also during the year, press freedoms were increasingly restricted, and the Ugandan military undertook joint operations against the rebel Lord's Resistance Army in northern Democratic Republic of Congo with Congolese and Southern Sudanese forces, though the long-running conflict remained unresolved at year's end.

Following independence from Britain in 1962, Uganda experienced considerable political instability. President Milton Obote, an increasingly authoritarian leader, was overthrown by Major General Idi Amin in 1971. Amin's brutality made world headlines as hundreds of thousands of people were killed. However, his 1978 invasion of Tanzania led to his ouster by Tanzanian forces and Ugandan exiles. After Obote returned to power in 1980 through fraudulent elections, opponents, primarily from southern Ugandan ethnic groups, were savagely repressed.

Obote was overthrown a second time in a 1985 military coup, and in 1986 the rebel National Resistance Army, led by Yoweri Museveni, took power. Museveni introduced a "no party" system, with only one supposedly nonpartisan political organization—the National Resistance Movement (NRM)—allowed to operate unfettered. This system lasted for two decades.

Museveni and the NRM won presidential and legislative elections in 2001. While a ban on most formal party activities restricted the opposition, observers generally deemed the voting transparent and held that Museveni would have won in an open contest. The opposition boycotted the parliamentary elections, and the NRM's comfortable legislative majority was buttressed by dozens of special-interest representatives.

The National Assembly passed the Political Parties and Organizations Act in 2002, setting conditions under which political parties could be registered and function.

The Constitutional Court ruled in 2003 that parts of the law were unconstitutional, and in 2004 it voided restrictions on the freedom of political parties to function. Ugandan voters in 2005 approved constitutional amendments that lifted the ban on political parties and repealed the prohibition on sitting presidents running for a third term, allowing Museveni to seek reelection in 2006.

A leading Museveni opponent, Kizza Besigye of the Forum for Democratic Change (FDC), returned from exile to contest the 2006 presidential election. He was arrested on charges including treason and rape, and was defeated at the polls by Museveni, who took 59 percent of the vote. The NRM also won a large majority in concurrent parliamentary elections. Besigye was later cleared of the rape charges, but the treason case remained outstanding.

In February 2009, Besigye was reelected as FDC party chairman, and was the party's favored candidate for the 2011 presidential election, in which Museveni was also expected to run. Adding to the field, former foreign minister and UN undersecretary general Olara Otunnu returned to Uganda in August after 23 years abroad.

Local council elections were held in May amid low voter turnout. The NRM dominated the balloting, doing well in areas outside its traditional power base. The only opposition party to make an impact was the FDC.

In September, growing tensions between the government and the Buganda region concerning land-reform legislation erupted into violence after police stopped Ronald Muwenda Mutebi II, monarch of the Baganda ethnic group, from attending a rally. At least 20 people were killed in two days of rioting in Kampala, and hundreds were arrested.

The government continued to struggle during the year with the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), a cult-like rebel movement that had waged a vicious guerrilla war since the 1980s. From December 2008 to March 2009, the Ugandan military conducted a joint operation with the armies of Southern Sudan and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) in an effort to finally eliminate the border-crossing LRA. In another sign of improved ties between Uganda and the DRC, the two countries restored full diplomatic relations in August after a 12-year rift.

Uganda is home to more than 500,000 people infected with HIV. Due to concerted efforts, the overall prevalence rate is approximately 5.4 percent, although the United Nations reports that the infection rate may be increasing.

Political Rights and Civil Liberties

Uganda is not an electoral democracy. The single-chamber National Assembly and the powerful president, who faces no term limits, are elected for five-year terms. Of the current legislature's 332 members, 215 are directly elected and 104 are indirectly elected from special interest groups including women, the military,

youth, the disabled, and trade unions. Thirteen ex-officio seats are held by cabinet ministers, who are not elected members and do not have voting rights.

The National Assembly has asserted some independence, censuring high-level executive officials and exercising oversight to influence a number of government actions and policies. However, there are significant concerns regarding the ability of opposition parties to compete with the ruling NRM. A long-standing ban on political party activity was formally lifted in 2005, but the opposition is still hindered by restrictive party registration requirements, voter and candidate eligibility rules, the use of government resources to support NRM candidates, and paramilitary groups—such as the Kiboko Squad and the Black Mambas—that intimidate voters and government opponents. Army representatives in the National Assembly have openly campaigned for Museveni. The independence of the electoral commission has also been called into question, but Museveni nevertheless renewed the panel and reappointed its incumbent chairman in August 2009.

Although Uganda has certain measures in place to combat corruption, including the 2009 Anti-Corruption Bill and the Anti-Corruption Court, the resources to enforce them are generally lacking. A 2008 National Integrity Survey by the Inspector General of Government (IGG) reported widespread corruption in the public sector. Auditing and procurement agencies, in addition to the prosecution service, are understaffed and underfinanced. In 2008, evidence emerged that leading government officials had pressured the National Social Security Fund (NSSF) to pay inflated prices for land purchases; the fund's managing director and his deputy were suspended, and in a February 2009 cabinet reshuffle, the finance minister was demoted due to his connection to the scandal. Uganda was ranked 130 out of 180 countries surveyed in Transparency International's 2009 Corruption Perceptions Index.

The constitution provides for freedom of speech. Independent print outlets, including more than two dozen daily and weekly newspapers, are often critical of the government, and several private radio and television stations report on local politics. However, the government is increasingly demonstrating intolerance of press freedom. A sedition law is applied selectively to punish those who cross the NRM. In 2009, four journalists with the largest independent newspaper, the *Monitor*, faced criminal prosecutions. Three others with the *Independent*, including editor Andrew Mwenda, faced charges of sedition after publishing a caricature of Museveni. Mwenda faces another 21 criminal charges, including a 2005 sedition charge. A challenge to the sedition law is currently pending at the Supreme Court, and prosecutions under the legislation have been suspended. In September 2009, the government closed four radio stations and banned live debate programs after violent clashes in Kampala between security forces and supporters of the Baganda king. The ban on live debate programs lasted through the end of 2009. The authorities do not restrict internet usage, although access is limited to major urban centers.

There is no state religion, and freedom of worship is constitutionally protected and respected in practice. Various Christian sects and the country's Muslim minority practice their creeds freely. Academic freedom is also generally respected.

Freedoms of association and assembly are officially recognized. However, in August 2009, police halted a demonstration and arrested eight FDC members who protested Museveni's decision to renew the electoral commission.

Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) encourage the expression of different views and are willing to address politically sensitive issues. However, their existence and activities are vulnerable to the abuse of legal restrictions, including the manipulation of registration requirements. The 2006 NGO Registration Amendment Act requires NGOs and religious organizations to reregister with the Internal Affairs Ministry each year, though enforcement is currently suspended pending a review of the law.

Workers' rights to organize, bargain collectively, and strike are recognized by law, except for those providing essential government services, but legal protections often go unenforced. Many private firms refuse to recognize unions, and strikers are sometimes arrested. According to a 2008 report prepared by the Uganda African Peer Review Mechanism Commission, only one out of three companies comply with labor and employment laws.

The executive does not guarantee the independence of the judiciary. Prolonged pretrial detention, inadequate resources, and poor judicial administration combine to impede the fair exercise of justice. In 2007, the East African Court of Justice found Uganda guilty of violating the rights of its citizens due to repeated military interference with court processes.

The prison system is reportedly operating at three times its intended capacity, and dozens of inmates died during 2009 as a result of poor conditions. Pretrial detainees constitute more than half of the prison population. In April 2009, Human Rights Watch released a report alleging that the country's Joint Anti-Terrorism Task Force has unlawfully detained more than 100 people and tortured at least 25 over the past two years.

Human rights issues, such as police brutality, rape, and vigilante justice, remain serious concerns. The Uganda Human Rights Commission is established in the constitution as an independent government agency, but the National Assembly held its first discussion of the commission's recommendations over the last decade only in May 2009. In addition, members of an agency tasked with addressing discrimination, the Equal Opportunities Commission, have yet to be appointed.

The numbers of internally displaced persons (IDPs) have diminished in recent years due to reduced tensions in the northern part of the country and a government policy to phase out IDP camps. Concerns remain, however, about serious human rights violations related to the unresolved conflict between LRA

rebels and the military. In addition to widespread LRA abuses, torture by security forces has occurred.

Although the constitution enshrines the principle of equality between women and men, discrimination against women remains pronounced, particularly in rural areas. Uganda has legislated quotas for women in all elected bodies. Almost 20 percent of National Assembly members are female, and one-third of local council seats are reserved for women. The law gives women the right to inherit land, but customary practices often trump legal provisions in practice. There are no laws protecting women from domestic violence, and incidents often go unreported and are rarely investigated. Cultural practices such as female genital mutilation persist. Sexual abuse of minors appears to be increasing, and according to the International Labour Organization, more than 2.7 million children are employed as workers. The government maintains a hostile attitude toward homosexual rights, and in October 2009, an NRM lawmaker introduced a bill that would create new offenses, including "aggravated homosexuality," and impose harsher penalties, including capital punishment. The bill was still under review by year's end.

** Countries are ranked on a scale of 1-7, with 1 representing the highest level of freedom and 7 representing the lowest level of freedom. Click [here](#) for a full explanation of Freedom in the World methodology.*