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Security forces used intimidatory tactics to suppress political opposition members and supporters in the context of the January elections, including arbitrary arrests, abductions, prolonged incommunicado detention, enforced disappearances and prosecutions. The rights to freedom of expression, peaceful assembly and association were severely restricted; the authorities targeted organizations working on human rights and shut down the internet for five days. The High Court lifted the house arrest of the main opposition leader. The vaccination roll-out was slow. The government ordered agribusiness companies to halt the evictions of thousands of people, and the Constitutional Court found that Indigenous peoples had been illegally evicted from their ancestral land. The president refused to assent to legislation which, if enacted, could provide greater protection for survivors of sexual violence but criminalized consensual same-sex sexual relations. Uganda continued to host the largest refugee population in Africa.

Background

In 2020, dozens of people were killed in the context of electoral campaigning ahead of the January 2021 general election, most of them by police and other security forces. On 16 January, two days after polling day, the Electoral Commission of Uganda declared Yoweri Museveni, who had served as president for 35 years, the presidential winner with 58.6% of the votes. His leading opponent, Robert Kyagulanyi, head of the National Unity Platform (NUP) party, received 34.8% of the votes and disputed the results, filing a legal challenge with the Supreme Court. He withdrew this on 22 February, claiming the judges were biased.

Enforced disappearances

On 4 March, the NUP claimed that 458 of its followers had been abducted by security forces in connection with the January elections and that their whereabouts remained unknown. On 14 February, the Ministry of Information and Communications Technology and National Guidance announced that President Museveni had instructed the police and the Uganda Peoples' Defence Forces (UPDF) to provide detailed updates about anyone they had arrested in the run up to, during and after the elections. On 24 February, the then speaker of parliament instructed the Minister of Internal Affairs to present to parliament “a full list of all those in custody, whether under the UPDF or police”. On 4 March, the minister presented 177 names of people who were alleged to be missing, 171 of whom he confirmed were detained under charges including participating in riots, possessing military stores, and involvement in meetings to plan post-election violence; the other six had already been released on bond. At the end of the year, the state had not publicly disclosed official data on the numbers of all those still in detention in relation to the elections.

Freedom of association

On 20 August, the NGO Bureau, an official body responsible for regulating NGOs, ordered the immediate suspension of 54 organizations, claiming that they had failed to comply with NGO legislation, including by operating under expired permits, or by failing to file accounts or registering with the Bureau. The independent Uganda National NGO Forum said that most of the organizations were not informed of the Bureau's decision or given an opportunity to respond.¹

Also, on 20 August, the NGO Bureau suspended the activities of the Africa Institute for Energy Governance. Between 6 and 13 October, the police arrested four of its staff in Hoima city and Buliisa town in the west, and in the capital, Kampala. They were all released the same day without charge. On 22 October, on the NGO Bureau's instructions, police in Kampala arrested another six members of staff for operating without a permit. They were released three days later.

Freedom of expression

On 9 January, Facebook shut down dozens of accounts it claimed were linked to the ministry of ICT. The company said the ministry had used “fake and duplicate accounts”, to enhance its popularity ahead of the elections. On 12 January, President Museveni accused Facebook and others of interfering with the electoral process; and the executive director of the Uganda Communications Commission ordered telecommunications companies to

“immediately suspend any access and use” of social media and online messaging platforms. Service providers such as Airtel and MTN Uganda texted their subscribers announcing the suspension.² The same day, the government blocked the internet for five days.

Freedom of movement

On 25 January, the High Court of Uganda lifted the house arrest of Robert Kyagulanyi and his wife, Barbara, after security forces had surrounded their house on 14 January. The court ruled that if the state had evidence against them, it should charge them in court rather than detain them “unjustifiably”. The police spokesman said that Robert Kyagulanyi had been placed under “preventive arrest” because he had “planned to disrupt public order” but did not specify what was being planned.³

Prior to the ruling, security personnel blocked access to Robert Kyagulanyi and his family even when they ran out of food. The US embassy in Uganda said that on 18 January, their ambassador was prevented from visiting the family. The same day, security forces raided the NUP party headquarters.

Arbitrary detention and unfair trials

On 14 June, a military court in Kampala released 17 NUP supporters and associates on bail of UGX 20 million (about US\$5,670) after they had spent 166 days in military detention. They were among 126 NUP supporters and staff arrested in December 2020 in Kalangala town, central Uganda. The Chief Magistrate had granted them all bail on 4 January, but 17 of them were re-arrested the same day and held for several days. They were charged with illegal possession of ammunition and remanded at Kitalya prison in Wakiso district.

On 10 September, the Director of Public Prosecutions withdrew trumped-up money-laundering charges against Nicholas Opiyo, executive director of human rights organization Chapter Four Uganda. He had been arrested on 22 December 2020, detained at the police Special Investigations Unit in Kireka, Kampala, and later remanded to Kitalya prison.⁴ He was released on bail eight days later.

On 28 December, armed security operatives arrested author Kakwenza Rukirabashaija in Kampala, after he posted online comments about the commander of the UPDF’s Land Forces, also the president’s son. He remained in incommunicado detention at the end of the year.

Right to health

On 5 March, the Ministry of Health received the first batch of AstraZeneca Covid-19 vaccines from COVAX. It aimed to vaccinate 49.6% of the population, about 22 million people, in stages by the end of the year, but only 9,763,030 vaccine doses had been administered by 31 December. In October, the health minister said that limited access to rural areas had hampered progress in the vaccination programme. On 23 December, the government announced it had approved the use of a Covid-19 vaccine booster shot.

Right to education

Intermittent Covid-19 lockdowns led to full or partial school closures. Despite a phased reopening for some grades in February, schools were closed again in June although the government announced plans to reopen them in January 2022. The National Planning Authority predicted that more than 30% of learners would not return to school.⁵

Forced evictions

Between 2017 and January 2021, security forces had forcibly evicted more than 35,000 people (over 2,300 families) from their homes in the western Kiryandongo district, to make way for industrial farming projects.⁶ Between 12 February and the end of the year, at least 22 residents were arrested and released on bond or bail in connection with protests against evictions and land disputes. In April, the Minister of Lands, Housing and Urban Development ordered two multinational agribusiness companies to halt any further evictions affecting 10,000 residents from a 5,155-hectare piece of land in Kiryandongo’s Ndoi village, pending a decision on whether due process had been followed.

In August, Uganda’s constitutional court found that the Uganda Wildlife Authority had illegally evicted the Batwa Indigenous people from their ancestral land in the Mgahinga forest in the south-west. The court ruled that the Batwa people owned the whole or part of the area on which the forest is located “in accordance with their customs and/or practices” and the fact that they had inhabited the forest for many generations. It directed that the evicted Batwa people should be given appropriate compensation to improve their situation following evictions, saying that the government had not adequately compensated them, and had left them a “landless, destitute... disadvantaged and marginalized people”.

Gender-based violence and discrimination

In August, President Museveni refused to give his assent to the Sexual Offences Bill 2021 on grounds that it should be reviewed to address redundant provisions already provided for in other legislation. The bill, which was passed by parliament in May, proposed several provisions for the prevention of sexual violence, including greater punishment for sexual offenders, and the protection of survivors during trials concerning sexual offences and other crimes. The proposed law, however, criminalized consensual same-sex sexual relations, sex work and HIV transmission and provided for a sex offenders' register that would include people accused, even retrospectively, of consensual same-sex sexual relations and sex work.

In September, Cleopatra Kambugu announced on social media that she had become the first trans woman to obtain a Ugandan national identification card and passport which recognized her female gender.

Refugees' and migrants' rights

According to the Office of the Prime Minister and UNHCR, the UN refugee agency, Uganda was hosting 1,563,604 refugees at the end of the year, the largest refugee population in Africa. These included 953,630 people from South Sudan, about 61% of the country's refugee population; and 452,287, almost 29%, from the Democratic Republic of the Congo; people from other countries, including Burundi, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Rwanda, Somalia and Sudan made up about 10%.

On 17 August, the government announced plans to welcome 2,000 refugees from Afghanistan following the Taliban takeover in August (see Afghanistan entry).

1. [*Uganda: End Repression of Civil Society: Joint Statement on Uganda's NGO Bureau Suspension of 54 NGOs in the Country* \(Index: AFR 59/4652/2021\), 27 August](#)
2. [*“Uganda: Authorities must lift social media block amid crackdown ahead of election”*, 13 January](#)
3. [*“Uganda: End politically motivated detention of Robert Kyagulanyi and his wife”*, 20 January](#)
4. [*“Uganda: Museveni's latest government must reverse decline on human rights”*, 12 May](#)
5. [*“Address the Access Issue and the Pandemic Will Be Managed Tomorrow”: Global Vaccine Inequity's Impact in East Africa* \(Index: AFR 04/5084/2021\), 14 December](#)
6. [*Uganda: 13 Years in Limbo: Forced Evictions of the Benet in the Name of Conservation* \(Index: AFR 59/4138/2021\), 8 November](#)

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