

Flygtningenævnets baggrundsmateriale

Bilagsnr.:	232
Land:	Uganda
Kilde:	Freedom House
Titel:	Freedom in the World 2012 - Uganda
Udgivet:	10. august 2012
Optaget på baggrundsmaterialet:	14. september 2012

Title	Freedom in the World 2012 - Uganda
Publisher	Freedom House
Country	Uganda
Publication Date	10 August 2012
Cite as	Freedom House, <i>Freedom in the World 2012 - Uganda</i> , 10 August 2012, available at: http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/5028efa41a.html [accessed 29 August 2012]
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Freedom in the World 2012 - Uganda

2012 Scores

Status: Partly Free
Freedom Rating: 4.5
Civil Liberties: 4
Political Rights: 5

Overview

In February 2011, after a quarter-century in power, President Yoweri Museveni won reelection in polls that were marred by administrative defects and massive government spending in favor of incumbents. In April, protests over corruption and deteriorating economic conditions were violently suppressed by the government, causing at least 10 deaths. Attempts to resume the demonstrations in October were also crushed by the authorities. The government showed a growing intolerance for dissent during the year, and critical journalists faced harassment.

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. 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 again 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, under which only one supposedly nonpartisan political organization – the National Resistance Movement (NRM) – was allowed to operate unfettered. This system lasted for two decades.

Museveni and the NRM won presidential and legislative elections in 2001, though a ban on most formal party activities restricted the opposition, which decided to boycott the legislative polls.

In 2005, voters approved constitutional amendments that lifted the ban on political parties and abolished presidential term limits. A leading Museveni opponent, Kizza Besigye of the Forum for Democratic Change (FDC), returned from exile to contest the 2006 presidential election. However, 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 won a large majority in concurrent parliamentary elections.

Growing tensions between the government and the Buganda region concerning land reform legislation erupted into violence in September 2009, when at least 40 people were killed in rioting in Kampala, and hundreds were arrested, after police stopped Ronald Muwenda Mutebi II, monarch of the Baganda ethnic group, from attending a rally. In March 2010, a suspicious fire destroyed much of the Kasubi Tombs, the burial ground of the Baganda monarchs and a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Security forces fired into crowds that gathered following the fire, killing three and injuring five others. A government commission of inquiry produced a report in 2011, but it had yet to be made public by the end of the year.

Separately, in July 2010, the Somalia-based Islamist militia group known as the Shabaab bombed two venues in Uganda where crowds had gathered to watch the final 2010 World Cup soccer match, killing some 76 people and injuring 70 others. The Shabaab opposes Uganda's contribution of peacekeeping troops to the African Union mission in Somalia.

Museveni won the February 2011 presidential election with 68 percent of vote. Besigye, whom the Constitutional Court had cleared of treason, terrorism, murder, and firearms charges in October 2010, placed second with 26 percent. In the concurrent parliamentary elections, the ruling NRM took 263 of 375 elected seats, followed by the FDC with 34, and smaller parties or independents with the remainder. International observers noted that the elections had been peaceful but marred by widespread administrative failings that led to mass disenfranchisement. Turnout, at 59 percent, was about eight points lower than in 2006 elections. Museveni and his party exploited the advantages of incumbency; observers criticized the passage of a special \$256 million supplementary budget shortly before the election, with much of the funds going to the president's office.

Although Besigye's calls for protests after the elections were not immediately successful, he went on to lead a "walk to work" campaign of marches against corruption and the rising cost of living, prompting police violence in April and May that killed at least 10 people. Hundreds of others were arrested, and Besigye's eyes were injured after police sprayed his face with a chemical agent.

The government maintained its intolerance for opposition for the rest of the year. In September, Vincent Nzaramba, the author of a book advocating peaceful protest to overthrow Museveni, was detained for several days and said he was physically abused in custody. Attempts to renew the April-May protests in October led to 40 arrests and treason charges – which can carry the death penalty – for three of the organizers. The charges were pending at year's end.

Separately in October, the United States dispatched 100 military advisers to Uganda to assist regional efforts to eliminate the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), a cult-like rebel group established in 1988 and led by Joseph Kony that is accused of killing, raping, and abducting tens of thousands of people. Although the LRA continued to operate in neighboring countries, it has not staged attacks in Uganda itself since 2005.

Political Rights and Civil Liberties

Uganda is not an electoral democracy. The February 2011 elections were undermined by flawed administration, extensive media bias, and government spending on behalf of incumbents. The introduction of a multiparty system in 2005 has not yet delivered democracy, because the playing field remains tilted heavily in the ruling party's favor.

The single-chamber National Assembly and the powerful president, who faces no term

limits, are elected for five-year terms. Of the legislature's 386 members, 238 are directly elected and 137 are indirectly elected from special interest groups including women, the military, youth, the disabled, and trade unions. Eleven 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, significant concerns remain over the ability of opposition parties to compete with the ruling NRM. The opposition is hindered by restrictive party registration requirements, voter and candidate eligibility rules, the use of government resources to support NRM candidates, a lack of access to media coverage, 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 President Yoweri Museveni. Despite questions over the independence of the electoral commission, Museveni renewed the panel and its chairman for a second seven-year term in 2009.

Although Uganda has a variety of laws and institutions tasked with combating corruption, enforcement is weak in practice. In 2010, foreign donors announced a 10 percent cut in budget support for the next fiscal year, citing concerns over the country's failure to address high-level corruption. Uganda has recently discovered large oil reserves, which could create new opportunities for graft. In October 2011, three ministers resigned pending an investigation into multimillion-dollar bribes allegedly paid by the British firm Tullow Oil, and the parliament voted to suspend all new oil deals until a new law for the sector is passed, marking a setback for the executive branch. Uganda was ranked 143 out of 183 countries surveyed in Transparency International's 2011 Corruption Perceptions Index.

The constitution provides for freedom of speech, and the media sector has flourished in the last decade, with over 250 radio stations, 50 television stations, and about 50 print outlets now in operation. Independent journalists are often critical of the government, but in recent years they have faced substantial, escalating government restrictions and intimidation, which encourage self-censorship. In November 2011, Amnesty International reported that up to 30 journalists faced criminal charges for their reporting, including two radio journalists – Patrick Otim, detained since 2009, and Augustine Okello, detained in July 2011 – who are charged with treason, which carries the death penalty. During the February elections, the government exploited the state-run media to marginalize the opposition, and one editor at the state broadcasting corporation was fired for attempting to offer more even-handed coverage. Independent journalists reported being pressured to keep opposition candidates off the air. Journalists were also threatened and beaten by police during the April-May protests.

The authorities have begun to restrict internet usage. During the 2011 "walk to work" protests, the Ugandan Communications Commission ordered internet service providers to temporarily block the social media sites Facebook and Twitter to "prevent the sharing of information that incites the public," though the services generally remained accessible.

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 but often restricted in practice, as illustrated by the police violence and criminal charges against protesters during 2011. Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) are willing to address politically sensitive issues. However, their existence and activities are vulnerable to legal restrictions, including the manipulation of onerous registration requirements under the 2006 NGO Registration Amendment Act. Kenyan human rights activist Al-Amin Kimathi, who had traveled to Uganda to provide legal aid to Kenyan suspects in the July 2010 terrorist bombings, was arrested in September of that year and charged with complicity in the attacks. Under international pressure, the government dropped the charges against him in September 2011.

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.

Executive influence undermines judicial independence. Prolonged pretrial detention, inadequate resources, and poor judicial administration impede the fair exercise of justice. The country has also faced criticism over the military's repeated interference with court processes. Rape, vigilante justice, and torture and abuse of suspects and detainees by security forces remain problems. The Joint Anti-Terrorism Task Force has committed many of the worst rights abuses. The prison system is reportedly operating at nearly three times its intended capacity, with pretrial detainees constituting more than half of the prison population.

Although the constitution enshrines the principle of gender equality, discrimination against women remains pronounced, particularly in rural areas. Women hold nearly 35 percent of the National Assembly seats, and one-third of local council seats are reserved for women. The law gives women the right to inherit land, but discriminatory customs often trump legal provisions in practice. Cultural practices such as female genital mutilation persist. Sexual abuse of minors is a significant problem. Ritual sacrifice of abducted children has reportedly increased in recent years, with wealthier individuals paying for the killings to secure good fortune. The charity Jubilee Campaign claimed in 2011 that about 900 cases of child sacrifice had gone uninvestigated by police. Uganda continues to be a source and destination country for men, women, and children trafficked for the purposes of forced labor and prostitution.

Ugandan society and government remain exceptionally homophobic. In October 2010 a local paper published the names, photographs, and some addresses of gay Ugandans, including the activist David Kato, who was subsequently murdered in January 2011. His killer pleaded guilty and was sentenced to 30 years in prison in November. Since 2009, international controversy has surrounded an Anti-Homosexuality Bill that would make some sex acts capital crimes; it had yet to pass at the end of 2011.

Trend Arrow ↓

Uganda received a downward trend arrow due to the poor conduct of the February national elections, the government's violent response to protests over corruption and inflation, and a crackdown on journalists.

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