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Freedom of the Press 2017 - Uganda

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Press Freedom Status: Partly Free

Total Score: 58/100 (↓1) (0 = Most Free, 100 = Least Free)

Legal Environment: 18/30

Political Environment: 25/40 (↓1)

Economic Environment: 15/30

Quick Facts

Population: 36,600,000

Freedom in the World Status: Not Free

Net Freedom Status: Partly Free

Internet Penetration Rate: 19.2%

Key Developments in 2016:

- Journalists covering the year's general elections faced harassment and arbitrary restrictions, particularly those covering activities of the opposition or stories unflattering to President Yoweri Museveni.
- Authorities, without warning, blocked access to social media websites twice: on election day in February, and again in May as Museveni took the oath of office following his reelection.
- Lawmakers took steps to restrict coverage of parliamentary activities, first by barring reporters without degrees from covering the body, and later by summoning editors of leading media houses for questioning over critical stories.
- A panel named by the government issued a report that was highly critical of the public broadcaster, the Uganda Broadcasting Corporation (UBC), and called for wide-ranging reforms there.

Executive Summary

Constitutional protections for freedoms of expression and the press are undermined by provisions in the penal code, including laws on criminal libel and treason. Journalists also encounter harassment, occasional violence, and various other obstacles in the course of their work. Security

personnel are frequent perpetrators of such offenses, though politicians are sometimes culpable as well. Most such violations are not reported, and the lack of prosecutions has created a climate of impunity.

Nevertheless, Uganda is home to one of the more vibrant media scenes in east and central Africa. Over time, the media and the government of President Museveni, who has been in power since 1986, have settled into a predictable relationship. In moments of stress, authorities lash out – for example, by detaining journalists or temporarily shutting down media houses. However, such heavy-handed actions tend not to permanently disrupt operations. The government rarely wins court cases against the media, and journalists have successfully challenged the constitutionality of restrictive laws such as the publication of false news and sedition.

In 2016, Uganda held its third round of general elections since the transition to a multiparty system in 2005. Journalists covering the elections faced increased restrictions and harassment. In January, Museveni's campaign team banned reporters from NTV, the country's largest private television station, from covering his campaign rallies unless the station used drone footage provided by the campaign's press unit. The ban was lifted after about a week, when the station agreed that it would use the footage but include a logo indicating that it had been supplied by the president's team. In February, police detained for several hours two British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) journalists and an NTV reporter as they filmed inside Abim Hospital in northern Uganda; President Museveni's primary challenger, Kizza Besigye, had visited the dilapidated hospital in late 2015 to highlight problems in the healthcare sector. They were eventually freed without charge, but the Ministry of Health soon afterward directed hospital administrators to not allow politicians and journalists to enter hospital premises without formal permission from the ministry. Also in February, four soldiers of the elite Special Forces Command assaulted a Radio Simba correspondent and deleted digital materials from her equipment; she had been recording a clash between ruling-party supporters and security personnel at a rally in Sembabule District. A number of journalists seeking to cover Besigye's house arrest, enacted after he and his supporters challenged the results of the presidential election, were detained by security forces before being released without charge. And, ahead of Museveni's swearing-in in May, authorities announced that media outlets were prohibited from covering planned opposition protests; a court had issued a temporary ban against the protest actions days earlier.

On February 18, election day, the government temporarily blocked access to social media websites including Twitter, Facebook, and WhatsApp, as well as to mobile money-transferring services, without prior warning. Authorities repeated the same action on May 12, the day President Museveni took the oath of office following his reelection. Authorities cited security concerns to justify both shutdowns. Many Ugandans circumvented the blockages using proxy servers.

Separately, lawmakers in 2016 took steps to restrict coverage of parliamentary activities. In January, lawmakers issued a directive requiring all reporters covering the legislature, effective beginning in May, to possess a degree in journalism or a related field, and to have worked as a journalist for at least three years. Later, following a series of critical media reports about lawmakers' spending habits and foreign travels, the parliamentary leadership summoned the editors of four media houses to explain the bad press. Editors from only one media house, the Vision Group, whose shares are mainly held by the government, showed up. Editors for the Uganda Radio Network, the *Observer*, and *Red Pepper* declined to appear. Critics panned parliament's behavior, arguing that it was effectively attempting to revive a sedition law the Constitutional Court had annulled in 2010.

The state-run UBC has the farthest reach in the radio and television sectors, broadcasting in several indigenous languages as well as in English and Kiswahili throughout the country. It

remains subservient to the interests of the ruling party and the government. However, in December 2016, a panel of experts tapped by the minister of information, communications, and technology to review the broadcaster's operations submitted a highly critical report, which called the UBC "mismanaged, chronically underfunded, and not treated like a public institution of strategic value." The report recommended an across-the-board overhaul aimed at transforming the UBC into a true public-interest broadcaster.

Explanatory Note

This country report has been abridged for *Freedom of the Press 2017*. For background information on press freedom in Uganda, see [Freedom of the Press 2016](#).

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