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2013 Scores

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

Trend Arrow ↓

Uganda received a downward trend arrow due to increased restriction and harassment of the opposition and a systematic campaign to obstruct and shut down civic groups that engage the government on sensitive issues such as gay rights, corruption, term limits, and land rights.

Overview

Throughout 2012, the political opposition and civil society challenged President Yoweri Museveni on issues such as corruption, deteriorating economic conditions, transparency in the oil sector, and gay rights. Meanwhile, the government harassed and intimidated opposition leaders and critical nongovernmental organizations. In December, parliament passed a bill regulating the oil sector that awarded significant power to the executive and threatened transparency.

Following independence from Britain in 1962, Uganda experienced considerable political instability. In 1971, authoritarian president Milton Obote was overthrown by Major General Idi Amin, who was responsible for hundreds of thousands of deaths. 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 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. Museveni and the NRM won presidential and parliamentary elections in 2001, though a ban on most formal party activities restricted the opposition, which boycotted the legislative polls.

In 2005, voters approved a package of constitutional amendments in which the ban on political parties was lifted in exchange for an end to 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. The NRM won a large majority in concurrent parliamentary elections. In the following years, the government gradually stepped up intimidation and harassment of opposition officials and its use of questionable legal and extralegal measures to suppress opposition rallies.

Tensions between the government and the Buganda region increased in 2009, and 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. A government commission of inquiry produced a report in 2011, but it had yet to be made public by the end of 2012.

Separately, in July 2010, the Somalia-based Islamist militia group Al-Shabaab bombed two venues in Kampala, killing some 75 people. The attack was in retaliation for Uganda's leading role in the African Union (AU) peacekeeping mission in Somalia.

Museveni won the February 2011 presidential election with 68 percent of the vote. Besigye, who had been cleared of treason, terrorism, murder, and firearms charges in October 2010, placed second with 26 percent. In concurrent parliamentary elections, the NRM took 263 of 375 elected seats, followed by the FDC with 34. International observers noted that the elections had been peaceful but marred by widespread administrative failings that led to mass disenfranchisement. Museveni and his party exploited the advantages of incumbency; observers criticized the passage of a \$256 million supplementary budget shortly before the election, with much of the funds going to the president's office.

In April and May 2011, Besigye and his Activists for Change (A4C) pressure group led a "walk to work" campaign of marches against corruption and the rising cost of living. Police violence resulted in at least 10 deaths, and hundreds were arrested. Attempts to renew the protests in October led to 40 arrests and treason charges for three of the organizers.

Throughout 2012, Besigye and A4C continued to pressure the government through rallies and protests. In April, after a police officer was killed the previous month while trying to disperse an A4C rally, the group was declared an "unlawful society" and banned. Besigye and 14 others, including Kampala mayor Erias Lukwago, were charged with managing an unlawful assembly in connection with the officer's death. Besigye and his allies formed a new group, For God and My Country, and continued their campaign. The group's leaders were arrested twice in early October, in advance of celebrations of Uganda's 50th independence anniversary.

In November, Mugisha Muntu, Museveni's former army chief, was elected the new FDC president, replacing Besigye. Besigye said he would continue his campaign to pressure the government and "liberate Uganda."

Political Rights and Civil Liberties

Uganda is not an electoral democracy. According to observers from the European Union (EU) and the Commonwealth, the 2011 elections were undermined by flawed administration, extensive state media bias, and government spending on behalf of incumbents. 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.

NRM legislators have recently attempted to assert some independence from President Yoweri Museveni, censuring high-level executive officials, seeking to reestablish term limits, 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 harassment of its leaders, restrictive party registration requirements, voter and candidate eligibility rules, the use of government resources to support NRM candidates, a lack of access to state media coverage, and paramilitary groups – such as the Kiboko Squad and the Black Mambas – that intimidate voters and government opponents. The military's representatives in the National Assembly have openly campaigned for 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. Uganda recently discovered large oil reserves. In October 2011, three ministers resigned pending an investigation into multimillion-dollar bribes allegedly paid by the British firm Tullow Oil, and the National Assembly voted to suspend all new oil deals until a new law regulating the sector was passed. Nevertheless, Museveni signed a deal with Tullow in February 2012. In December 2012, the National Assembly passed the Petroleum Bill, which regulated oil licensing, exploration, and development, in a 149-39 vote. The bill was passed in a roll call vote with nearly 200 legislators absent. NRM lawmakers forced through a clause that gave the energy minister regulatory and licensing powers, as well as the power to negotiate contracts and oversee transparency in the sector. The law was criticized by the opposition and international monitoring groups such as Global Witness for the lack of parliamentary or independent oversight of the energy minister's decisions.

In late 2012, the EU and several European nations froze aid to Uganda in response to a report by the auditor general's office revealing that \$13 million in donor money had been embezzled by Prime Minister Amama Mbabazi's office. Uganda was ranked 130 out of 176 countries surveyed in Transparency International's 2012 Corruption Perceptions Index.

The constitution provides for freedom of speech, and the media sector has flourished in the last decade, with more than 275 radio stations and dozens of television stations and print outlets. 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. Continuing a pattern from the previous year, throughout 2012 journalists were prevented from covering opposition-related events or attacked while doing so, summoned for questioning about content they had produced, and verbally threatened by officials. Despite an apology in June 2012 by the head of the police force for numerous attacks on journalists by the police – as well as a pledge to create a unit to probe press freedom violations – police continue to be the main perpetrators of attacks on journalists. The authorities attempted to block the social media sites Facebook and Twitter during the 2011 "walk to work" protests, but the services generally remained accessible, and continued to be used by activists in 2012 to organize rallies.

There is no state religion, and freedom of worship is constitutionally protected and respected in practice. Academic freedom is also generally respected.

Freedom of assembly is officially recognized but often restricted in practice, as illustrated by the continued police violence and criminal charges against opposition protesters during 2012. In early 2012, the executive renewed pressure on parliament to pass the Public Order Management Bill. The proposed bill would require that groups of three or more people receive prior police approval before holding a "public meeting" to discuss the "failure of any government, political party, or political organization," and would give police wide powers to allow or deny approval for such gatherings. The bill remained pending at the end of 2012.

Freedom of association is guaranteed in the constitution and the law but is often restricted in practice; nevertheless, civil society in Uganda remains vibrant. Several nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) address politically sensitive issues, but their existence and activities are vulnerable to legal restrictions, including the manipulation of burdensome registration requirements under the 2006 NGO Registration Amendment Act. In 2012, the government stepped up its campaign to harass and even shut down NGOs and civil society groups that advocate for sensitive issues, such as combating corruption, transparency in the oil sector, land rights, and LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender) rights. For example, in February, Minister for Ethics and Integrity Simon Lokodo led a police raid on a capacity-building workshop run by LGBT activists in Entebbe. Meanwhile, other NGOs that focus on issues such as service delivery were largely allowed to operate freely.

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. The prison system is reportedly operating at nearly three times its intended capacity, with pretrial detainees constituting more than half of the prison population. Rape, vigilante justice, and torture and abuse of suspects and detainees by security forces remain problems. The Joint Anti-Terrorism Task Force, established under the 2002 Anti-Terrorism Act, has committed many of the worst rights abuses. It reportedly has stepped up its efforts in the wake of the 2010 Al-Shabaab bombings, illegally detaining and abusing terrorism suspects as well as expanding the scope of the law to crack down on the political opposition.

Northern Uganda is continuing to recover from 20 years of attacks by the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), a cult-like rebel group led by Joseph Kony that is accused of killing, raping, and abducting tens of thousands of people in the region. Although the LRA continues to operate in neighboring countries, it has not staged attacks in Uganda itself since 2005. Many LRA fighters were given amnesty in 2000 in an effort to bring peace to the region; however, Kony and four other LRA leaders were charged with war crimes and crimes against humanity by the International Criminal Court in 2005. In October 2011, the United States dispatched 100 military advisers to Uganda to assist regional efforts to eliminate the LRA, and the AU in March 2012 set up a 5,000-member force to bolster those efforts. In May, Ugandan forces captured LRA leader Caesar Achellam in Central African Republic; his arrest sparked debate about whether he should be given amnesty or tried in Uganda.

Although the constitution enshrines the principle of gender equality, discrimination against women remains pronounced, particularly in rural areas. The law gives women the right to inherit land, but discriminatory customs often trump legal provisions in practice. Rape and domestic violence are widespread and underreported, and offenders are often not prosecuted. Cultural practices such as female genital mutilation persist. Women hold nearly 35 percent of the National Assembly seats, and one-third of local council seats are reserved for women. 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. Uganda continues to be a source and destination country for men, women, and children trafficked for the purposes of forced labor and prostitution.

Uganda's society and government remain exceptionally prejudiced against gays and lesbians, creating a climate of fear and insecurity. International controversy has surrounded the Anti-Homosexuality Bill, first introduced in 2009, that would make some sex acts capital crimes (under existing law, consensual sex between same-sex couples was already punishable by up to life in prison). It would also punish individuals for the "promotion" of homosexuality and for not

reporting violations with 24 hours, potentially threatening health workers and advocates for LGBT rights. The bill was re-tabled in the National Assembly in February 2012, and passed a committee in November; there were some reports that the death penalty clause had been removed. The bill was not passed by the end of 2012.

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