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Freedom Status: Partly Free

Aggregate Score: 37 (0 = Least Free, 100 = Most Free)

Freedom Rating: 5.0 (1 = Most Free, 7 = Least Free)

Political Rights: 6 (1 = Most Free, 7 = Least Free)

Civil Liberties: 4 (1 = Most Free, 7 = Least Free)

Quick Facts

Population: 36,600,000

Capital: Kampala

GDP/capita: \$674

Press Freedom Status: Partly Free

Net Freedom Status: Partly Free

OVERVIEW

While Uganda holds regular elections, their credibility has deteriorated over time, and the country has been ruled by the same party and president since 1986. The ruling party, the National Resistance Movement (NRM), retains power through the manipulation of state resources, intimidation by security forces, and politicized prosecutions of opposition leaders. Uganda's civil society and media sectors remain vibrant, despite suffering sporadic legal and extralegal harassment and state violence.

Status Change Explanation:

Uganda's status improved from Not Free to Partly Free and its civil liberties rating improved from 5 to 4 due to the resilience of the media sector and the willingness of journalists, bloggers, and citizens to voice their opinions, though the political environment remained tightly restricted under the regime of long-ruling president Yoweri Museveni.

Key Developments in 2017:

- In December, Parliament approved and President Museveni signed into law a constitutional amendment that removed the presidential age limit of 75, allowing the president to run for reelection indefinitely. The amendment was widely criticized by the public, and by opposition parties and civil society groups.

- In October 2017, two people were killed during a violent police crackdown on a protest against the proposed amendment to repeal the presidential age limit. Kizza Besigye, the prominent opposition figure who led the protest, was charged with their murder.
- Stella Nyanzi, a feminist academic at Makerere University, was detained for a month on charges of cyberharassment and offensive communication after she posted a note critical of President Museveni on social media.

POLITICAL RIGHTS: 11 / 40

A. ELECTORAL PROCESS: 3 / 12

A1. Was the current head of government or other chief national authority elected through free and fair elections? 1 / 4

In the February 2016 presidential contest, President Museveni won with 60.6 percent of the vote, according to official results. Kizza Besigye of the opposition Forum for Democratic Change (FDC) placed second, with 35.6 percent. According to international and regional observers, the 2016 elections were undermined by problems including the misuse of state resources and flawed administration by the Electoral Commission (EC).

In December 2017, the Ugandan Parliament passed and President Museveni signed into law a constitutional amendment bill that removed the presidential age limit of 75, allowing the president to run for reelection indefinitely. The amendment faced strong opposition by the public, opposition parties, and members of civil society.

A2. Were the current national legislative representatives elected through free and fair elections? 1 / 4

The 2016 legislative elections were held concurrently with the presidential vote. A total of 426 members of Parliament (MPs) were chosen, including 289 elected in single-member districts, 112 elected to reserved seats for women, and 25 chosen to represent special interest groups (the military, youth, people with disabilities, and trade unions). The ruling party, the NRM, won an absolute majority with 293 seats. According to international and regional observers, the 2016 elections were undermined by problems including the misuse of state resources and flawed administration by the EC.

A3. Are the electoral laws and framework fair, and are they implemented impartially by the relevant election management bodies? 1 / 4

Independent observers, civil society, and opposition leaders have long critiqued and called for substantive reforms to Ugandan electoral laws. Moreover, much of the public is wary of the EC; this was reflected in an Afrobarometer study released in December 2017, which found that only 42 percent of survey respondents had expressed confidence in its administration of the 2016 elections. On election day, the EC had experienced significant technical and logistical challenges, causing some citizens to wait for hours to cast their votes. The EC extended the voting time for polling stations that opened late, with voting in some areas continuing for an extra day even as counting was well under way. This fueled existing mistrust of the EC and raised suspicions of malfeasance.

B. POLITICAL PLURALISM AND PARTICIPATION: 5 / 16

B1. Do the people have the right to organize in different political parties or other competitive political groupings of their choice, and is the system free of undue obstacles to the rise and fall of these competing parties or groupings? 1 / 4

Opposition groups are hindered by restrictive party registration requirements and candidate eligibility rules, the use of government resources to support NRM candidates, a lack of access to state media coverage, state violence and harassment, and paramilitary groups that intimidate voters and government opponents. In July 2017, police raided a private home in Kampala and arrested dozens of members of the opposition FDC on charges of holding an illegal assembly.

B2. Is there a realistic opportunity for the opposition to increase its support or gain power through elections? 1 / 4

The ruling party dominates at all levels of government. However, there are numerous independents and several dozen opposition lawmakers in the parliament.

Throughout the 2016 electoral period, violence, intimidation, and harassment toward opposition parties – especially the FDC and its supporters – were particularly acute. Besigye, the leading opposition presidential candidate, was charged with treason following months of arrests, detentions, and periods of house arrest. In October 2017, he was charged with murder in connection with the deaths of two protesters at an antigovernment rally at which participants had protested the proposed removal of the presidential age ceiling. Police had violently dispersed the demonstration, reportedly firing live rounds at participants.

Separately, Robert Kyagulanyi, a popular musician who ran as an opposition-leaning independent in a 2017 by-election in the urban Kyaddondo East Constituency, won a landslide victory, defeating both the NRM and the FDC candidates. His victory suggested that opposition candidates could potentially challenge the NRM in future elections, especially in urban constituencies.

B3. Are the people's political choices free from domination by the military, foreign powers, religious hierarchies, economic oligarchies, or any other powerful group that is not democratically accountable? 1 / 4

The military is closely aligned with Museveni and holds 10 seats in Parliament. During the 2016 election period, the military and police services worked to dissuade any protests against the results, mounting a visible armed security presence with heavy deployments in and around the capital.

B4. Do various segments of the population (including ethnic, religious, gender, LGBT, and other relevant groups) have full political rights and electoral opportunities? 2 / 4

No group is systematically excluded from the electoral process. However, the dominant position and coercive tactics of the NRM impede free political participation and advocacy of interests by Uganda's various ethnic groups, including those affiliated with traditional kingdoms as well as smaller indigenous groups. An assessment of women's participation in the 2016 elections by the Women's Democracy Group, a coalition of Ugandan civil society organizations, noted a widespread perception that because a certain number of legislative seats are reserved for women, "they should not contest for direct positions so as to reduce on the competition for male contestants."

C. FUNCTIONING OF GOVERNMENT: 3 / 12

C1. Do the freely elected head of government and national legislative representatives determine the policies of the government? 1 / 4

Power is concentrated in the hands of the NRM leadership, the security forces, and especially the president, who retains office through deeply flawed electoral processes. Ordinary lawmakers and civic groups have little practical ability to influence legislation or government policies.

In September 2017, several opposition MPs were attacked and forcibly removed from the parliament by plain-clothes security guards during the reading of the constitutional amendment bill that removed the presidential age limit.

C2. Are safeguards against official corruption strong and effective? 1 / 4

Despite high-profile scandals, investigations, intense media attention, and laws and institutions designed to combat corruption, malfeasance continues and top government officials are rarely prosecuted for such offenses.

C3. Does the government operate with openness and transparency? 1 / 4

Many government departments deny requests for information under the country's Access to Information Act. Other laws related to national security and confidentiality also impede open access to information in practice. Public procurement procedures are generally opaque.

CIVIL LIBERTIES: 37 / 60 (+2)

D. FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION AND BELIEF: 11 / 16 (+2)

D1. Are there free and independent media? 2 / 4 (+1)

Independent journalists and media outlets are frequently critical of the government, in spite of government restrictions and intimidation. More than a dozen journalists were arrested and beaten by state officials in 2016, in some cases during live broadcasts. The government in 2016 also banned journalists from reporting on opposition activities, threatening arrest or cancelation of their licenses if they failed to comply. In September 2017, after news outlets carried a live broadcast of a brawl in the parliament, the Uganda Communications Commission (UCC) issued a warning that the transmission of live broadcasts that did not comply with poorly defined "minimum broadcasting standards" could result in the suspension or revocation of broadcasting licenses.

There have been some improvements over the years in the legal protection of journalists, with leading journalists successfully turning to the courts to ensure that constitutional guarantees of freedom of expression are upheld. While spurious legal cases against journalists have continued, they rarely lead to convictions.

Score Change: The score improved from 1 to 2 because the media remains active and vibrant, and journalists have continued to provide critical coverage despite harassment.

D2. Are individuals free to practice and express their religious faith or nonbelief in public and private? 3 / 4

There is no state religion, and freedom of worship is both constitutionally protected and generally respected in practice. However, the government has barred religious leaders from engaging in

political debates and restricted religious groups whose members allegedly pose security risks. A series of Muslim clerics have been murdered in recent years, and in 2016 police raided mosques and carried out arrests in search of those responsible for the killings and other criminal activity, drawing complaints that the officers acted arbitrarily and unlawfully.

D3. Is there academic freedom, and is the educational system free from extensive political indoctrination? 3 / 4

Academic freedom has been undermined by alleged surveillance of university lectures by security officials, and by the need for professors to obtain permission to hold public meetings at universities. In 2017, Stella Nyanzi, a feminist academic at Makerere University, was detained for a month on charges of cyberharassment and offensive communication after she posted a note critical of President Museveni on social media. She was also suspended from the university.

D4. Are individuals free to express their personal views on political or other sensitive topics without fear of surveillance or retribution? 3 / 4 (+1)

Communications online are subject to government surveillance. In June 2017, the country's government-appointed regulator, the Uganda Media Centre, announced that it had inaugurated a new unit that would scan social media websites for posts that are critical of the government, prompting concern from rights advocates. In July, media reports claimed that the government had sought internet monitoring technology from the Chinese government. In August, the government announced plans to monitor for material deemed pornographic, and sanction those found possessing such material.

Nevertheless, private speech in Uganda is relatively unrestrained. According to an Afrobarometer survey conducted in 2016 and 2017, 80 percent of survey respondents in Uganda said they felt "somewhat" or "completely" free to say what they think, and 60 percent said they had more freedom to say what they think specifically about politics than they did a few years ago. Moreover, there is widespread discussion and vocal opposition to government policies, including the 2017 law that removed the presidential age limit. Criticism of the government, ruling party, and president on social media platforms is widespread.

Score Change: The score improved from 2 to 3 because there has been vibrant discussion among bloggers and citizens, especially on social media, on controversial topics including the removal of the presidential age limit, and because recent survey data from Afrobarometer showed an increasing willingness of Ugandans to speak their minds openly.

E. ASSOCIATIONAL AND ORGANIZATIONAL RIGHTS: 4 / 12

E1. Is there freedom of assembly? 1 / 4

Freedom of assembly is restricted by the 2013 Public Order Management Act (POMA), which requires groups to register with local police in writing three days before any gathering, public or private, to discuss political issues. The police have authority to deny approval for such meetings if they are not deemed to be in the "public interest," and to use force to disperse assemblies judged unlawful.

In October 2017, two people were killed in a violent police crackdown on a protest against the government's move to repeal the presidential age limit. Besigye, who led the rally, was charged

with murder over the deaths. The crackdown prompted a statement of concern about "heavy-handed" police tactics from the US Embassy in Kampala.

E2. Is there freedom for nongovernmental organizations, particularly those that are engaged in human rights- and governance-related work? 1 / 4

Civil society in Uganda is active, and several nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) address politically sensitive issues. However, their existence and activities are vulnerable to various legal restrictions and the manipulation of burdensome registration requirements. In September 2017, the organizations Action Aid, Solidarity Uganda, and the Great Lakes Institute (GLISS), faced police raids and equipment confiscation, with search warrants granted on suspicion of "illicit financial transactions" and "subversive activities to destabilize Uganda." All of the groups had opposed the removal of presidential term limits.

E3. Is there freedom for trade unions and similar professional or labor organizations? 2 / 4

Workers' rights to organize, bargain collectively, and strike are recognized by law, except for workers providing essential government services. However, legal protections can go unenforced.

F. RULE OF LAW: 4 / 16

F1. Is there an independent judiciary? 1 / 4

Executive and military influence undermines judicial independence, as does systemic corruption. The justice system's handling of politically charged cases surrounding the 2016 elections underscored its lack of impartiality. In response to Besigye's 2016 arrest and detention on treason charges, the president of the Uganda Law Society questioned the independence of the judiciary in dealing with political cases and cautioned that the courts should not be used to settle political disputes.

F2. Does due process prevail in civil and criminal matters? 1 / 4

Prolonged pretrial detention, inadequate resources, and poor judicial administration impede access to due process and justice.

F3. Is there protection from the illegitimate use of physical force and freedom from war and insurgencies? 1 / 4

Rape, extrajudicial violence, and torture and abuse of suspects and detainees by security forces are persistent problems, and there are few examples of prosecution and accountability for serious crimes. In 2016, Ugandan security forces stormed the royal enclosures and palaces of the traditional Rwenzururu Kingdom in the Rwenzori region, after palace guards allegedly attacked police stations. The fighting left more than 100 people, including children, dead, and human rights groups cited evidence of indiscriminate violence and summary executions on the part of security forces. There has been no investigation of the events.

The prison system is operating at more than twice its intended capacity, with pretrial detainees constituting much of the prison population.

F4. Do laws, policies, and practices guarantee equal treatment of various segments of the population? 1 / 4

The LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) community continues to face overt hostility from the government and much of society. Homosexuality remains effectively criminalized under a colonial provision banning "carnal knowledge" among people of the same sex. Men and transgender women accused of consensual same-sex conduct may be forced to undergo an anal exam that Human Rights Watch (HRW) says could amount to torture.

Over a million refugees live in Uganda, and the government has been praised for its progressive asylum policies. However, it struggles fund basic services for some refugee populations. In October 2017, there were riots among refugees in Adjumani District in response to temporary cuts to food assistance.

G. PERSONAL AUTONOMY AND INDIVIDUAL RIGHTS: 7 / 16

G1. Do individuals enjoy freedom of movement, including the ability to change their place of residence, employment, or education? 2 / 4

Freedom of movement in Uganda is largely unrestricted. However, bribery is common in many facets of life, such as interacting with traffic police, gaining admittance to some institutions of higher education, and obtaining government jobs. Serious impediments to changing residence, employment, and education are largely financial.

G2. Are individuals able to exercise the right to own property and establish private businesses without undue interference from state or nonstate actors? 2 / 4

Customary land tenure is widespread in the north, and land disputes – some of them violent – are common, particularly when private development projects are at stake. In 2017, the government proposed a constitutional amendment that would give the government powers to seize land without providing timely compensation if the land were deemed necessary for public infrastructure projects.

The law gives women the right to inherit land, but local customs sometimes trump legal provisions in practice.

G3. Do individuals enjoy personal social freedoms, including choice of marriage partner and size of family, protection from domestic violence, and control over appearance? 1 / 4

Domestic violence is widespread and underreported. In August 2017, as part of its antipornography drive, the Ministry for Ethics and Integrity indicated that authorities would begin enforcing a ban against miniskirts on women and tight clothing on men, though by year's end it was unclear whether anyone had actually been penalized over their choice of clothing.

G4. Do individuals enjoy equality of opportunity and freedom from economic exploitation? 2 / 4

Poor enforcement of labor laws contributes to unsafe or exploitative conditions for some workers, though the majority of Ugandans are engaged in subsistence agriculture. Child labor in agriculture, domestic service, and a variety of other industries is a significant problem, as is sexual exploitation of minors.

Scoring Key: X / Y (Z)

X = Score Received

Y = Best Possible Score

Z = Change from Previous Year

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