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FREEDOM HOUSE

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Freedom in the World - Uganda (2006)

Polity: No polity available

Political Rights: 5

Civil Liberties: 4

Status: Partly Free

Population:
26,900,000

GNI/Capita: \$250

Life Expectancy:
48

Religious Groups:
Roman Catholic (33 percent), Protestant (33 percent), Muslim (16 percent), indigenous beliefs (18 percent),

Ethnic Groups:
Baganda (17 percent), Basogo (8 percent), Ankole (8 percent), Iteso (8 percent), Bakiga (7 percent), Langi (6 percent), Rwanda (6 percent), other (40 percent)

Capital: Kampala

Additional Info:

[Freedom in the World 2005](#)

[Freedom of the Press 2005](#)

[Nations in Transit 2004](#)

[Countries at the Crossroads 2005](#)

Overview

Ugandans voted in a constitutional referendum in July 2005 to lift a two-decades-old ban on political parties. They also voted to repeal the proviso limiting presidents to two terms in office, which will allow President Yoweri Museveni to run for a third term in the next elections scheduled for March 2006. Former president and longtime opposition leader Milton Obote died in exile in October. Another leading opponent to Museveni, Dr. Kizza Besigye, returned from exile and announced his intention to run for president.

In the years following its independence from Britain in 1962, Uganda experienced considerable political instability. Former president Milton Obote, an increasingly authoritarian leader, was overthrown by Idi Amin in 1971. Amin's brutality made world headlines as hundreds of thousands of people were killed. His 1978 invasion of Tanzania finally led to his overthrow, as Tanzanian forces and Ugandan exiles routed Amin's army. After Obote returned to power in 1980 in fraudulent elections, he and his backers from northern Uganda savagely repressed his critics, who were primarily from southern Ugandan ethnic groups.

Obote was ousted for a second time in a 1985 army coup. Conditions continued to worsen until the National Resistance Army, led by Yoweri Museveni, entered the capital of Kampala in January 1986 and assumed power. The new government imposed a ban on most formal political party activities, including the sponsoring of candidates for elections and the staging of political rallies. In June 2000, a referendum was held on whether to lift the ban. Almost 90 percent of those voting supported continuation of the de facto single-party system; however, opposition parties had called for a boycott, and overall voter turnout was just over 50 percent.

Museveni and his National Resistance Movement (NRM) comfortably won presidential and legislative elections in 2001. However, the elections were held under conditions that called their legitimacy into question. Reports by human rights groups and donor countries concerning the presidential election noted that state media and other official resources were mobilized in support of Museveni's candidacy, and that the ban on most formal party activities further hindered the opposition. Most observers believe, however, that Museveni would have won in an open contest and described the actual balloting and vote-tabulation processes as largely transparent. The opposition, which claimed that the elections were rigged, boycotted the subsequent parliamentary elections in June; the NRM's comfortable majority was buttressed by dozens of special-interest representatives nominated by the president.

In 2002, parliament passed the Political Parties and Organizations Act, putting forth the conditions under which political parties could be registered and could fully function. In 2003, the Constitutional Court ruled that parts of the law were unconstitutional, as they effectively prevented political parties from carrying out their activities. Despite the Constitutional Court's ruling, the NRM continued to dominate the nation's political life through direct and indirect means.

During 2004, the Constitutional Court voided restrictions on the freedom of political parties to function. In a July 2005 constitutional referendum, Ugandans voted to end the party ban and to repeal the proviso limiting presidents to two terms in office. As a result, Museveni could be a candidate for the presidency, for a third time, in elections scheduled for March 2006. Former authoritarian president and longtime opposition leader Milton Obote died in exile in Zambia in October 2005. Reflecting his controversial standing amongst Ugandans, his passing was both mourned and celebrated inside the country. Another leading opponent to Museveni, Dr. Kizza Besigye, returned from exile and announced his intention to run for president. Besigye was subsequently arrested on charges of treason, terrorism, rape, and unlawful possession of firearms.

Regional tensions have continued in recent years, as Ugandan military forces have withdrawn from the eastern part of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). These units had been sent to suppress rebels who had been perpetrating attacks across the border into Uganda. International human rights groups, however, criticized Uganda for continuing to support armed militias in the eastern DRC in 2004. Tensions with Rwanda over influence in the region have also remained high.

A cult-based guerrilla movement with no clear agenda, the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), continued its gruesome insurgency in northern Uganda. In 2005, a move by the LRA to bases in the DRC also heightened regional tensions. Intermittent violence in the north continued throughout the year, with human rights violations committed on both sides. Uganda's army commander claimed that his troops had been given unlimited access to fight Ugandan rebels based in Sudan. Five LRA rebels were indicted by the International Criminal Court.

Uganda has more than 500,000 people infected with AIDS. According to the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS), the prevalence of HIV/ AIDS in Uganda has declined in recent years. The overall prevalence of HIV/AIDS in the country is 6 percent, which represents a more than 50 percent reduction since 1992.

Political Rights and Civil Liberties

Citizens of Uganda cannot change their government democratically. The only open, multiparty elections were held in 1961 in preparation for the country's independence from Britain. In 1986, arguing that majoritarian democracy exacerbates religious and ethnic tensions in Africa, President Yoweri Museveni substituted a "no party" system with only one, supposedly nonparty political organization-the NRM-allowed to operate unfettered. This situation was changed in 2005 with the repeal of the ban on political parties.

The president and the single-chamber National Assembly are elected for a five-year term. As of 2006, the Assembly will be composed of 319 members. Of these, 215 will be directly elected and 94 indirectly elected from special interest groups, including women, the army, youth, the disabled, and trade unions. Additionally, 69 of these seats must be filled by women. There will also be a maximum of 10 ex-officio seats filled by cabinet ministers, who will be neither elected members of parliament nor have voting rights. Parliament asserts some independence vis-à-vis the executive branch. High-level government officials have been censured, and several government actions and policies have been influenced or altered as a result of parliamentary oversight.

Significant concerns exist regarding the ability of opposition parties to compete on a relatively level playing field with Museveni's ruling NRM. Opposition parties have protested restrictive party registration requirements and the predominant status of the NRM. Other controversial issues include federalism, voter and candidate eligibility, the use of government resources to support NRM candidates, and the use of illegal paramilitary groups, such as the Kalangala Action Plan, to intimidate voters.

In 2005, Human Rights Watch protested the arrest and detention of two opposition Assembly members. It criticized the government's use of capital charges to detain political opponents for prolonged periods of time, often for more than a year without trial. The army also occupies a position in politics incompatible with democratic principles; its representatives sit in parliament and have openly campaigned in support of Museveni.

Some governmental corruption has been reported in the media. In 2005, The Global Fund for AIDS suspended disbursement of more than \$200 million in assistance because of evidence of "inappropriate expenditure and improper accounting" in the Ugandan government project management unit. Under the 1995 constitution, new institutions were set up to investigate corruption and human rights violations and promote the return to democratic governance. These have made some headway in the fight against corruption and abuse of office by public officers, although a number of alleged corrupt acts by government officials have not been fully pursued and prosecuted. In 2005, the Assembly passed a provision creating special anticorruption courts to try government officials. Uganda was ranked 117 out of 159 countries surveyed in the 2005 Transparency International Corruption Perceptions Index.

There is some freedom of expression in Uganda. Independent print media outlets, including more than two dozen daily and weekly newspapers, are often highly critical of the government and offer a range of opposition views. Several private radio and television stations report on local political developments. Buttressed by legislation limiting press freedoms, however, the government at times selectively arrests or harasses journalists. A sedition law remains in force and is applied selectively to journalists and others who hold views that are at variance with those of the NRM. For example, in August, Andrew Mwenda, a prominent journalist and host of a live talk show on FM radio, was arrested on charges of sedition, and his radio station was temporarily closed after he alleged that the government was complicit in the death of Sudanese vice president John Garang and was planning to attack Rwanda. Museveni has threatened to close down independent newspapers that report on sensitive regional security issues. The largest newspapers and broadcasting facilities that reach rural areas remain state owned. Journalists have asked parliament to enact a freedom-of-information act. In 2004, Reporters Without Borders ranked Uganda 86 out of 167 countries in terms of press freedoms, a significant drop from the last two years. The internet industry in Uganda has experienced a rapid growth over the last two years in terms of number of service providers, although access remains limited mostly to major urban centers.

There is no state religion, and freedom of worship is constitutionally protected and respected. Various Christian sects and the country's Muslim minority practice their creeds freely. The 2004 U.S. State

Department Report on International Religious Freedom noted the significant extent to which religious freedom is promoted in Uganda. Academic freedom is also generally respected.

Freedom of association and assembly is officially recognized. The government has demonstrated increased respect for these rights in the constitution but continues to place some restrictions on them in practice. Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) currently make a significant contribution to Uganda's social, economic, cultural, and political life. They encourage the expression of different views and, significantly, have been willing to address politically sensitive issues. Local human rights organizations have shown an increasing interest in monitoring abuses and in conducting advocacy activities in comparison with their past focus on less controversial human rights education activities. The existence and activities of NGOs are, however, subject to legal restrictions, including manipulation of their registration requirements. Security forces have halted numerous political rallies, some through force, and leading opposition activists have been harassed and sometimes subjected to arbitrary arrest.

The National Organization of Trade Unions, the country's largest labor federation, is independent of the government and political parties. However, various essential workers are barred from forming unions. Strikes are permitted only after a lengthy reconciliation process.

The judiciary is still influenced by the executive despite some autonomy, as demonstrated by the Constitutional Court's interpretation that parts of the Political Parties and Organizations Act were unconstitutional. However, sensitive human rights issues, such as police brutality, rape, domestic violence, and vigilante justice, remain serious concerns. Prolonged pretrial detention, inadequate resources, the army's occasional refusal to respect civilian courts, and poor judicial administration combine to impede the fair exercise of justice.

Prison conditions are difficult, especially in local jails. A census conducted in 2003 showed there were 17,523 inmates in Uganda, even though prison capacity was estimated at 8,600. The number of inmates was estimated to have reached 20,000 by July 2005. More than 500 prisoners die annually as a result of poor diet, sanitation, and medical care. Although there is registered progress towards the improvement of conditions in the prisons, conditions in both local administration and centrally administered prisons are poor. Pretrial detainees constitute more than half of the prison population.

The 2002 Suppression of Terrorism Act, which defines any act of violence or threat of violence for political, religious, economic, or cultural ends as a terrorist act, imposes harsh penalties on suspected terrorists and has raised fears that it could be used against political opponents. The unlawful possession of arms is also defined as terrorism. Publishing news that is "likely to promote terrorism" can result in up to 10 years' imprisonment.

Both the Uganda Human Rights Commission (UHRC) in its annual report and Human Rights Watch highlighted serious human rights violations related to the ongoing guerrilla war in the northern part of the country by the LRA and the Uganda People's Defense Forces (UPDF). Torture by the security forces has continued despite the government's assurance that there is no institutionalized sanction of its use. The UHRC report also commended security forces for their role in protecting displaced persons' camps. It is estimated that around 20,000 children have been kidnapped by the group since 1987 for use as soldiers and sex slaves. Up to 12,000 people have been killed in the violence, with many more dying from disease and malnutrition as a direct result of the conflict. Nearly two million civilians have been forced to flee their homes.

Northern ethnic groups complain of official neglect. Manipulation and exploitation of ethnic divisions pose a serious and continuing threat to peace in Uganda. Baganda people in the country's south continue to demand more political recognition of their traditional kingdom.

Although the constitution enshrines the principle of equality between women and men, discrimination against women remains pronounced, especially in rural areas. Incidences of domestic violence and sexual abuse, including rape, are often not registered with police and are rarely investigated. Polygamy remains legal. There are no laws protecting women from domestic violence; draft laws, such as the Domestic Relations Bill and the Sexual Offenses Bill, have languished in the National Assembly. Cultural practices like female genital mutilation continue to exist. The UHRC and other NGOs indicate that sexual abuse of minors is increasing. According to the International Labor Organization, more than 2.7 million children are employed as workers.

Uganda has legislated quotas for women officials in all elected bodies, from village councils to the national parliament. Almost 20 percent of Uganda's parliament is female. One-third of local council seats must, by law, go to women. Formal succession laws give women inheritance rights over land, but customary patrilineal practices mean that the formal legal provisions are often ignored. Abortion is permitted in cases where the mother's mental or physical health would be seriously affected.