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Freedom in the World 2025 - Uganda

Not Free

34

/ 100

Political Rights 10 / 40

Civil Liberties 24 / 60

Last Year's Score & Status

34 / 100 Not Free

A country or territory's Freedom in the World status depends on its aggregate Political Rights score, on a scale of 0–40, and its aggregate Civil Liberties score, on a scale of 0–60. See the methodology.

Overview

While Uganda continues to hold regular elections, their credibility has deteriorated. The country has been ruled by the National Resistance Movement (NRM) and President Yoweri Museveni since 1986. The NRM retains power through patronage, intimidation, and politicized prosecutions of opposition leaders. Uganda's civil society and media sectors face legal and extralegal harassment and state violence.

Key Developments in 2024

- In an April ruling, the Constitutional Court upheld the Anti-Homosexuality Act (AHA), which imposed severe penalties for same-sex activity. However, the court struck some of the law's provisions, including an obligation for third parties to report on such activity.
- In November, People's Front for Freedom (PFF) leader Kizza Besigye and a close associate disappeared while in Kenya before being returned to Uganda and detained by a military court. The two stood accused of seeking to acquire weapons from foreigners, which they denied.

Political Rights

A Electoral Process

A1 0-4 pts

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

The president is directly elected to serve five-year terms. Incumbent Yoweri Museveni, who first seized power in a 1986 coup, took 58.6 percent of the vote in the January 2021 elections, while National Unity Party (NUP) candidate Robert Kyagulanyi Ssentamu—known as Bobi Wine—secured 34.8 percent. Turnout stood at 59 percent.

The electoral period was marred by repression and violence. Authorities used COVID-19 restrictions to violently disperse opposition rallies and arrest journalists ahead of the vote; authorities killed at least 54 people while responding to protests in November 2020. The Uganda Communications Commission (UCC) cut internet access for five days during the electoral period. Wine was placed under house arrest after casting his ballot but was later released. Politically motivated disappearances and reports of torture of opposition supporters in detention increased in the months after the election.

Many foreign and domestic accreditation requests to observe the elections were denied, and few observers monitored the vote. Wine accused the government of stuffing ballot boxes but later withdrew a legal challenge. The Citizens' Coalition for Electoral Democracy in Uganda claimed the results were not credible due to coronavirus-related restrictions and preelection violence and arrests.

A2 0-4 pts

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

The unicameral Parliament has 556 seats, 499 for directly elected members. Some 353 of those members represent single-member constituencies, while the other 146 seats are reserved for women. Another 30 members represent special interest groups (youth, the elderly, workers, the military, and persons with disabilities). Presidentially appointed ex officio members hold 27 seats.

The NRM won 336 of Parliament's 499 directly elected seats in the January 2021 elections, held concurrently with the presidential contest. The NUP won 57, while the Forum for Democratic Change (FDC) won 32. No other party won more than 10. As with the presidential election, parliamentary contests were affected by violence, selectively enforced COVID-19 restrictions, internet cuts, and restrictions on journalists.

A3 0-4 pts

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 called for electoral-law reforms, which have been largely neglected. Most Ugandans do not trust the Electoral Commission (EC), which has repeatedly been accused of favoring the NRM, whether through fraud or voter disenfranchisement. The NUP criticized the management of the 2021 elections, citing the EC's admission that it did not add results from over 1,200 polling sites—many of them in Kampala—to its count, and that voter registration was halted over a year before the election, allegedly due to limitations in technical capacity.

B Political Pluralism and Participation

B1 0-4 pts

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

Uganda adopted a multiparty political system in 2005 after two decades of effective one-party rule. The formation of political parties is legally protected, and many parties are registered. However, restrictive registration requirements and candidate eligibility rules, limited media coverage, and violent harassment by state authorities and paramilitary groups hinder opposition parties' ability to compete in practice. The dominant NRM consistently wins elections deemed neither free nor fair. The government has repeatedly used public-health and security restrictions to stymie opposition groups.

Opposition groups, including the NUP, have experienced significant repression from the authorities. In February 2021, Wine claimed that over 3,000 NUP members had been abducted by authorities, though the government claimed only 31 people had been arrested. In September 2024, after 3 NUP members pleaded guilty to criminal charges, Wine accused the government of coercing prisoners into making false confessions. In July 2024, 36 FDC members were charged with terrorism-related offenses after being arrested in Kenya and returned to Uganda; the members asserted that they were attending a training seminar, while police accused them of training to engage in terrorist acts.

B2 0-4 pts

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

The NRM dominates all levels of government, and it is difficult to distinguish the party from state institutions. There are several dozen opposition lawmakers, as well as numerous independents (though many

independents support the NRM). Election campaigns are characterized by violence, intimidation, and harassment of opposition candidates and supporters. Economic resources are also significantly tied to supporting the NRM.

Opposition figures are often detained and arrested on spurious criminal charges. In November 2024, PFF leader Kizza Besigye and an associate, Hajj Obeid Lutale, disappeared while in Kenya before being returned to Uganda, where a military court ordered their detention. Besigye and Lutale were accused of seeking to acquire weapons from foreigners, which they denied.

In September 2024, Wine was injured during a confrontation with police while traveling to meet his lawyer in Bulindo. Police accused him of holding a procession without their approval.

B3 0-4 pts

Are the people's political choices free from domination by forces that are external to the political sphere, or by political forces that employ extrapolitical means? 1 / 4

The military, which remains closely aligned with Museveni and the NRM, has 10 reserve seats in Parliament. The government and NRM use public resources and patronage networks to build political support among religious leaders and other influential figures. The government has also been accused of bribing or coercing opposition parliamentarians and supporters to join its ranks.

Disappearances and political violence around the 2021 election loom large in the public's awareness, discouraging many from engaging in politics.

B4 0-4 pts

Do various segments of the population (including ethnic, racial, religious, gender, LGBT+, and other relevant groups) have full political rights and electoral opportunities? 1 / 4

Although Uganda has many diverse ethnic groups, they lack equal representation. The NRM has repressed various ethnic groups, including those affiliated with subnational kingdoms. There is a growing sense that the Bahima ethnic group, which Museveni is affiliated with, benefits disproportionately from state patronage.

The political system includes quotas for special interest groups including youth, people with disabilities, elderly people, and women. Quotas for women span all levels of government including Parliament, where women held 33.9 percent of seats as of December 2023. However, reserve seats have been criticized for creating the perception that directly elected positions are meant for men and have been called a means to co-opt

women through patronage networks rather than meaningfully improving their representation and rights.

LGBT+ people in Uganda are not represented in politics and face pervasive discrimination, which became more severe after President Museveni signed the AHA in May 2023. The AHA imposes harsher penalties on same-sex behavior, notably making “aggravated” acts punishable by death. In April 2024, the Constitutional Court overturned some of the AHA’s provisions but otherwise upheld the law.

C Functioning of Government

C1 0-4 pts

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 Museveni, who retains office through various undemocratic means. Ministers have little ability to influence legislation in which the government has a particular interest, though there is more consultation on ordinary policy matters. The executive secures passage of key legislation through inducement, harassment, and intimidation of the legislative branch.

C2 0-4 pts

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

Despite laws and institutions designed to combat official malfeasance, including the Anti-Corruption Act of 2009 and the Inspectorate of Government (IoG), corruption remains a significant problem that is widely perceived as worsening in recent years. According to findings released in late 2023, the IoG estimates that Uganda loses nine trillion shillings (\$2.4 billion) to official corruption each year. The IoG reported that the Uganda Police Force and the Finance Ministry were particularly affected by corruption.

In April 2024, the UK government imposed sanctions on three Ugandan politicians, including Speaker of the Parliament Anita Annet Among, for corruption. In May, the US government sanctioned four politicians, including the three sanctioned by the United Kingdom, for corrupt activity.

C3 0-4 pts

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

Many government departments deny requests for information under the Access to Information Act, and laws related to national security and confidentiality impede open access to information in practice. Government agencies seem to release information that only favors the regime. Public procurement decisions are generally opaque.

Civil Liberties

D Freedom of Expression and Belief

D1 0-4 pts

Are there free and independent media? 2 / 4

The media sector features many formally independent outlets. However, journalists face intimidation including arrest, harassment, destruction of equipment, and assault, especially for writing that is critical of the president and his inner circle. Particularly in election years, government authorities raid and shut down radio stations and other outlets and remove accreditation from journalists as retribution for critical reporting. A special security unit, founded in 2017, monitors journalists' social media activity.

D2 0-4 pts

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 seeks to limit and control political statements by religious leaders, tolerating those who support Museveni and the NRM while subjecting those with more critical views to intimidation, harassment, and arrest.

In June 2023, the government announced that it would oversee the activities of religious and faith-based groups under a new policy. In May 2024, the *Nile Post* reported that religious leaders were organizing a petition against that policy, under which religious groups must report their activities to the authorities.

A number of Muslim clerics have been murdered in recent years, with subsequent investigations yielding few convictions.

D3 0-4 pts

Is there academic freedom, and is the educational system free from extensive political indoctrination? 2 / 4

Academic freedom has been undermined by alleged government surveillance of university lectures and the requirement for professors to obtain permission to hold public meetings at universities. Instances of dismissal and detention of university faculty and leadership are broadly seen as government attempts to censor critical voices. Academics working at public universities fear that researching politically sensitive topics could hinder their career progression. Authorities often respond harshly to campus protests by student groups.

D4 0-4 pts

Are individuals free to express their personal views on political or other sensitive topics without fear of surveillance or retribution? 2 / 4

Individuals are nominally free to express their personal views on political and other sensitive topics; however, there is a widespread belief that supporting the opposition will limit future opportunities for education, employment, and government services. Media reports in 2021 indicated that Ugandan intelligence officials used spyware to monitor journalists, the political opposition, and foreign diplomats.

The government has implemented legislation and various policies to limit online political expression. Facebook has been banned since 2021, though many people access it through virtual private networks. In 2020, the UCC required online content creators to register and pay a fee.

While Section 25 of the 2022 Computer Misuse (Amendment) Act, which prohibited electronic communication that would “disturb the peace,” was ruled unconstitutional in early 2023, ambiguous provisions against the “misuse of social media” remain in effect. Ugandans accused of insulting Museveni’s family have been prosecuted and imprisoned. In July 2024, TikTok user Edward Awebwa received a six-year prison sentence for sharing purportedly “misleading and malicious” comments about Museveni and his family. In November, TikTok user Emmanuel Nabugodi received a 32-month sentence for posting a satirical video about Museveni.

In October 2024, Amnesty International reported that police officers and members of the public had been increasingly targeting LGBT+ people online since the AHA took effect, with LGBT+ internet users being targeted with physical attacks or blackmail via social media. LGBT+ organizations and users reported that they had consequently altered their online activities.

E Associational and Organizational Rights

E1 0-4 pts

Is there freedom of assembly? 1 / 4

Freedom of assembly for the political opposition is severely restricted in Uganda. Police and security forces have violently enforced public-assembly restrictions, resulting in injury and arbitrary detention.

In 2013, the government implemented the Public Order Management Act (POMA), which required prior registration with local police to hold any public meeting. Article 8 of POMA was annulled in 2020. Parts of Sections 5 and 10 were nullified by the Constitutional Court in March 2023. In response, a police spokesperson said that officers would continue enforcing parts of Section 5 that remained in effect and would employ existing legislation—including the Penal Code Act and the Road Act—to regulate assemblies. Police maintain purview over the timing and location of public assemblies and forcefully deter them in practice, including

through arrest and detention. These provisions are selectively enforced against the political opposition.

In July 2024, at least 45 protesters were detained in Kampala while rallying against government corruption. Authorities deployed roadblocks and maintained a heavy physical presence in the capital ahead of the protest. In September, the International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH) reported that 81 people had been arrested while protesting against a large oil-development project since May.

E2 0-4 pts

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

Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) are increasingly vulnerable to legal restrictions, burdensome registration requirements, and intimidation. Human rights NGOs have reported office break-ins and burglaries, which were inadequately investigated by police.

The government has imposed laws and policies to restrict NGO activity. In 2019, NGOs were obligated to report on staffing, finances, and activities to the National Bureau of NGOs. NGOs must register with the Personal Data Protection Office under a 2022 requirement. Activists that focus on LGBT+ rights could be accused of violating the AHA. In a report leaked in 2023, the National Bureau of NGOs recommended that the government investigate groups that “promote” homosexuality, many which had been shut down or investigated in recent years.

E3 0-4 pts

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. As of 2020, there were 42 trade unions in Uganda, representing about one million people. Most are grouped under two umbrella entities—the National Organization of Trade Unions and the Central Organization of Free Trade Unions. Despite legal and institutional protections, trade unions have been undermined by government co-optation, intimidation, and manipulation designed to frustrate their organizing and bargaining efforts. While some unions cater to informal workers, they generally prioritize the formal sector.

F Rule of Law

F1 0-4 pts

Is there an independent judiciary? 1 / 4

The Ugandan judiciary suffers from lack of investment, executive influence, and systemic corruption, which weaken judicial independence.

Many critics see the judiciary as a political tool for the NRM, particularly as it consistently rules in line with President Museveni's interests. High Court justices are selected by the president after recommendation from the Judicial Service Commission (JSC); JSC members are themselves appointed by the president with approval from Parliament.

F2 0-4 pts

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

Police routinely engage in arbitrary arrests and detentions, despite legal safeguards against such practices. Due process is also affected by prolonged pretrial detention, inadequate access to counsel for defendants, and corruption. A number of reform initiatives in recent years, including the introduction of plea bargaining in 2015, have reportedly had some success in reducing case backlogs. Police are known to rearrest suspects who have been released from detention.

F3 0-4 pts

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

Unaccountable state violence, including torture and abuse of detainees, is a threat for many, especially those active in the political opposition. Gender-based violence is also prevalent, and perpetrators are rarely prosecuted.

Prison conditions are poor. According to the World Prison Brief database, the prison system operated at 371.8 percent of its intended capacity and pretrial detainees constituted 46.8 percent of the inmate population as of August 2024.

Armed groups have impacted Ugandan security for decades. The Lord's Resistance Army, a militant group that sought to overthrow the government, was active from the 1980s until its forced withdrawal from Ugandan territory in the mid-2000s. The Allied Democratic Forces (ADF), which was formed in the 1990s and affiliated itself to the Islamic State militant group in the 2010s, operates on the border with the Democratic Republic of the Congo. The Ugandan and Congolese militaries are conducting joint efforts to fight the ADF, which has been blamed for recent attacks within Uganda. In July 2024, authorities accused Abubakar Swalleh, a Ugandan national extradited from Zambia, of providing material support to the ADF.

The Karamoja region has also seen ongoing insecurity, mainly caused by cattle raiding.

F4 0-4 pts

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

Ugandan laws prohibit discrimination based on ethnicity, religion, age, race, disability, color, and sex. However, LGBT+ people face overt hostility from the government and society. The AHA criminalizes same-sex relations (which are also criminalized under the colonial-era penal code) and criminalizes identifying as an LGBT+ person. Those convicted of “aggravated homosexuality,” referring to multiple acts, face the death penalty, while those who “promote” homosexuality face 20-year prison sentences. In April 2024, the Constitutional Court largely upheld the AHA but struck some of the law’s provisions, including one that had mandated third parties to report same-sex activity and another that imposed the death penalty for transmitting HIV.

While employment discrimination based on gender and other criteria is legally prohibited, in practice it is poorly enforced and does not apply to the vast informal sector.

The Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees reported that 1.8 million refugees and asylum seekers were living in Uganda as of December 2024. The United Nations has praised the government for its progressive asylum policies. However, the government struggles to fund basic services for some refugee populations.

G Personal Autonomy and Individual Rights

G1 0-4 pts

Do individuals enjoy freedom of movement, including the ability to change their place of residence, employment, or education? 3 / 4

Freedom of movement is largely unrestricted. Poverty often limits Ugandans’ mobility in practice. Refugees and human rights defenders may have difficulty leaving Uganda as they may lack passports or other required paperwork.

G2 0-4 pts

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

Land disputes are common, especially due to private development initiatives, resulting in forced evictions which are only sometimes compensated. In a September 2024 report, Climate Rights International noted that Ugandans living near an oil-development project at Lake Albert were evicted, were forced to sell land, and faced intimidation and violence by the Ugandan armed forces.

The government has established commissions of inquiry to report on land rights. In 2023, the government announced that it would form a commission to address land conflict in Apaa. In June 2024, an FDC member of Parliament criticized that commission, saying its work was

especially slow. In 2022, President Museveni banned all land evictions not approved by the District Security Committee, which is chaired by the presidentially appointed resident district commissioner.

While women have a legal right to own and inherit land, they are often excluded from doing so.

G3 0-4 pts

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

Aside from restrictions on same-sex relations including marriage, personal social freedoms are largely regulated at a societal and familial level. The median age of marriage for women is 18.7 years, compared to 23.3 years for men, according to a 2016 national survey. In the same survey, 25 percent of women reported that their husband or partner had multiple wives.

Domestic and gender-based violence are widespread. More than 60 percent of young adults experienced physical abuse as children according to a 2019 UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) report. In the 2016 national survey, 46 percent of ever-married women and 23 percent of ever-married men report that they are afraid of their current or most recent partner some or most of the time. In a 2021 national survey, 95 percent of women who participated said they had experienced physical or sexual violence.

G4 0-4 pts

Do individuals enjoy equality of opportunity and freedom from economic exploitation? 1 / 4

Poor enforcement of labor laws contributes to unsafe or exploitative conditions for some workers, including extremely low pay. A 2021 Uganda Bureau of Statistics report found that working women experienced widespread verbal or physical violence. Child labor in agriculture, domestic service, and other industries is a significant problem, and the issue is most prevalent in rural areas. Sexual exploitation of minors is also an ongoing problem.

Many Ugandans work abroad, with large numbers being recruited to work in Middle Eastern countries. However, accounts have described workers experiencing sexual abuse, beatings, exploitation, and torture. Kampala suspended a bilateral labor agreement with Saudi Arabia over working conditions in late 2022, but the two countries finalized an agreement that contained enhanced protections for workers in early 2023.

In March 2024, Kampala fully acceded to the 2000 UN antitrafficking protocol.

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