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Uganda

NOT FREE

34
/100

<u>Political Rights</u>	10 /40
<u>Civil Liberties</u>	24 /60

LAST YEAR'S SCORE & STATUS

35 /100 **Not Free**

Global freedom statuses are calculated on a weighted scale. See the methodology.



Overview

While Uganda continues to hold regular elections, their credibility has deteriorated. The country has been ruled by 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 2023

- The Anti-Homosexuality Act (AHA), a law that further criminalizes same-sex activity and includes other wide-ranging provisions targeting LGBT+ people, took effect in May. The first person to be accused of “aggravated homosexuality,” an AHA-related offense that carries the death penalty, was charged in August. The Constitutional Court began hearing a legal challenge to the law in mid-December.
- In June, armed assailants killed 42 people when they attacked a school in the western town of Mpondwe. The government blamed the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF), an armed group active since the 1990s, for the attack. In October, Museveni said that police had prevented an apparent ADF plot to bomb churches in the central district of Butambala.

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 notably 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.

Few observers monitored the vote, and both foreign and domestic accreditation requests to observe the elections were denied. 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; 353 members are directly elected to represent single-member constituencies, while 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 won 32. No other party won more than 10 seats. 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 NUP has experienced significant repression from the authorities, particularly after the 2021 elections. That February, Wine claimed that over 3,000 NUP members had been abducted by authorities, though the government claimed only 31 people had been arrested.

The government has repeatedly used public-health and security restrictions to stymie opposition groups. In September 2023, for example, police cited “disturbances to public order” when they halted NUP-organized rallies.

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 overtly or quietly supporting the NRM.

Opposition figures are sometimes arrested on spurious criminal charges. In 2022, opposition politicians Kizza Besigye and Samuel Lubega Mukaaku were detained for allegedly inciting violence after participating in protests in Kampala. In July 2023, a court issued new arrest warrants for both men, who allegedly did not appear for a hearing on that case. In October, Wine said he was placed under house arrest after returning to Uganda from South Africa, though authorities claimed they were escorting him from the airport.

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 reportedly 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, particularly as some people have not returned from detention, discouraging many from engaging in the political sphere.

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 the political representation of various ethnic groups, including those affiliated with subnational kingdoms. There is a growing sense that the Bahima ethnic group, which Museveni is affiliated with, is benefiting disproportionately from official 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 33.8 percent of seats as of September 2021. 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, and criminalizes the “promotion of homosexuality.” In September, a consortium of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) operating in Uganda warned that LGBT+ people faced higher levels of violence and discrimination after the AHA’s passage.

Score Change: The score declined from 2 to 1 because a wide-ranging law that imposes severe penalties on same-sex activity took effect in May, resulting in worsening conditions for Uganda’s LGBT+ population.

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. According to findings released in September 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 (UPF) and the Finance Ministry were particularly affected by corruption.

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, 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.

In March 2023, President Museveni ordered that all government advertising be routed through the publicly owned Uganda Broadcasting Corporation. Under a subsequent directive, print advertising was to be routed through the New Vision Printing and Publishing Company. Other media entities opposed the shift, citing their own financial difficulties. Museveni rescinded the directive in August.

In September 2023, the Chimp Reports news outlet reported that the UPF was investigating Liam Taylor, a British journalist operating in Uganda, after he requested information from the Lands Ministry. The International Press Association of Uganda, which objected to the investigation, reported that Taylor was working on an article involving a land dispute.

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.

A number of Muslim clerics have been murdered in recent years, with subsequent investigations yielding few convictions. In September 2023, a man confessed to

murdering a cleric in 2020. A military court handed him an effective 41-year prison sentence in October.

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 one's future opportunities for education, employment, and government services. Media reports in 2021 indicated that Ugandan intelligence officials used spyware to monitor journalists, 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.

The Computer Misuse (Amendment) Act took effect in 2022. The Constitutional Court ruled that Section 25 of that law, which prohibited electronic communication that would "disturb the peace," was unconstitutional in January 2023. However, ambiguous provisions against the "misuse of social media" remain in effect.

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. Authorities continue to use public-order justifications to restrict assembly.

From 2013 until early 2020, the police imposed the Public Order Management Act (POMA), which required prior registration with local police to hold any public meeting. The Constitutional Court annulled Article 8 of POMA in 2020, but the decision was appealed to the Supreme Court. In March 2023, the Constitutional Court nullified parts of Sections 5 and 10 of POMA. In response to the March ruling, the UPF vowed to use other laws to halt assemblies deemed unlawful.

E2 0-4 pts

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 NGOs address politically sensitive issues. However, their operations are vulnerable to legal restrictions, burdensome registration requirements, and intimidation. Human rights NGOs have reported office break-ins and burglaries; police have failed to adequately investigate the incidents.

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. Civil society may also be affected by the AHA, which took effect in May 2023, as activists that focus on LGBT+ rights could be accused

of violating its provisions. In a report leaked in January, 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.

In February 2023, the government decided to terminate the mandate of the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) in Uganda; the OHCHR’s local offices were fully closed by August.

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 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 360 percent of its intended capacity and pretrial detainees constituted 48 percent of the inmate population as of September 2023.

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 ADF, which was formed in the 1990s and affiliated itself to the Islamic State militant group in 2016, operates on the border with the Democratic Republic of the Congo. The Ugandan and Congolese militaries are conducting joint efforts to fight the ADF. Ugandan authorities blamed the ADF for a June 2023 attack on a secondary school in the town of Mpondwe that resulted in 42 deaths. In October, President Museveni said that authorities prevented an ADF plot to bomb churches in Butambala.

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, which Parliament passed in March 2023 and Museveni signed in May, criminalizes same-sex relations (which are also criminalized under the colonial-era penal code) and criminalizes identifying as an LGBT+ person. The first person to face AHA-related “aggravated homosexuality” accusations, a capital offense, was charged in August. A group of NGOs, legislators, and professors launched a legal challenge to the AHA, which the Constitutional Court began hearing in mid-December.

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 1.6 million refugees were living in Uganda as of June 2023. 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. Economic barriers to movement often limit Ugandans' mobility in practice.

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 July 2023, Human Rights Watch warned that the construction of a new oil pipeline in western Uganda would cause considerable displacement.

The government has established commissions of inquiry to report on land rights. In July 2023, for example, the government announced it would form a commission to address land conflict in Apaa. In 2022, President Museveni banned all land evictions not approved by the District Security Committee, 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 violence is widespread; more than 60 percent of young adults experienced physical abuse as children according to a 2019 UN Children's Fund 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.

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 March 2023.



On Uganda

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Country Facts

Global Freedom Score

34/100 **Not Free**

Internet Freedom Score

Other Years

2023

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