

Flygtningenævnets baggrundsmateriale

Bilagsnr.:	378
Land:	Uganda
Kilde:	Freedom House
Titel:	Freedom in the World 2019 – Uganda
Udgivet:	4. februar 2019
Optaget på baggrundsmaterialet:	21. maj 2021



Uganda

NOT FREE

36
/100

<u>Political Rights</u>	11 /40
<u>Civil Liberties</u>	25 /60

LAST YEAR'S SCORE & STATUS
37 /100 **Partly Free**

Global freedom statuses are calculated on a weighted scale. [See the methodology.](#)



Status Change

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Uganda's status declined from Partly Free to Not Free due to attempts by long-ruling president Yoweri Museveni's government to restrict free

expression, including through surveillance of electronic communications and a regressive tax on social media use.

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.

Key Developments in 2018

- In July, the government implemented a controversial social media tax, requiring users on a number of popular social media platforms including Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp to pay a daily fee of \$0.05, which is prohibitively expensive for many users.
- A July Constitutional Court ruling, which upheld a 2017 amendment removing the presidential age limit of 75, potentially cleared the way for President Museveni to remain in office for life.
- In August, security forces arrested opposition Parliament members Robert Kyagulanyi (better known as Bobi Wine) and Kassiano Wadri during a campaign event for Wadri in Arua, after opposition supporters threw stones at President Museveni's motorcade. Security forces also shot at Wine's car, killing his driver. Wine, Wadri, and 32 additional defendants in the case awaited trial on treason charges at year's end.
- Also in August, security forces shot and killed at least six demonstrators across the country protesting the arrests of Wine and Wadri. Several journalists covering the demonstrations were beaten or arrested by authorities and had their equipment damaged or confiscated.

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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 five-year terms. In the 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 2017, Parliament passed and President Museveni signed into law a constitutional amendment bill that removed the presidential age limit of 75, allowing the president to seek reelection in 2021. The amendment faced strong opposition by the public, opposition parties, and members of civil society, who argued that it could allow Museveni to become president for life.

A2 0-4 pts

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 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). Members serve terms of five years. The ruling party, the NRM, won an absolute majority with 293 seats. According to international and regional observers, the elections

were undermined by problems including the misuse of state resources and flawed administration by the EC.

A3 0-4 pts

Are the electoral laws and framework fair, and are they implemented impartially by the relevant election management bodies?	1 / 4
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Independent observers, civil society, and opposition leaders have long critiqued and called for substantive reforms to Ugandan electoral laws. On election day in 2016, the EC 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.

Following the flawed 2016 elections, the Supreme Court ordered the attorney general to implement electoral reforms within two years and update the court on the progress of the changes. The deadline passed in March 2018 with no meaningful reforms advanced, and at year's end, no election-reform legislation had been passed.

In July, the EC suspended the Citizens Coalition of Electoral Democracy in Uganda (CCEDU), a prominent nongovernmental organization (NGO), from election observation and voter education activities. The EC claimed that the group is partisan and undermines the integrity of elections. However, after representatives from the CCEDU met with the EC in October, both sides indicated that they had reached an agreement to allow the group to resume its work.

B. Political Pluralism and Participation

TOP

B1 0-4 pts

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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 September 2018 some members of the largest opposition party, the Forum for Democratic Change (FDC), broke away to form a new party, the New Formation, which some observers argued will ultimately further fragment and weaken the position of the opposition.

B2 0-4 pts

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 (although a number of them support the NRM) and several dozen opposition lawmakers in Parliament.

Presidential and parliamentary election campaigns are characterized by violence, intimidation, and harassment toward opposition parties.

Opposition candidates are sometimes arrested on trumped-up charges of treason and other capital offenses. In August 2018, independent candidate Kassiano Wadri was arrested while campaigning for a parliamentary by-election in Arua, following the obstruction of President Museveni's motorcade (Museveni was campaigning on behalf of the NRM candidate) by opposition supporters, who threw stones at the vehicles.

Security forces also shot at the car of opposition Parliament member **TOP** Bobi Wine, who was campaigning for Wadri, killing Wine's driver. Wine, who is considered one of Museveni's most prominent opponents, was arrested along with Wadri, and both were allegedly tortured while in police custody.

Wine, Wadri, and 32 additional defendants in the case awaited trial on treason charges at year's end. Despite the intense crackdown, opposition candidates managed to win five parliamentary by-elections in 2018.

B3 0-4 pts

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
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The military is closely aligned with Museveni and the NRM 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 0-4 pts

Do various segments of the population (including ethnic, religious, gender, LGBT, and other relevant groups) have full political rights and electoral opportunities?	2 / 4
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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." Due to severe legal and societal discrimination, the interests of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people are not represented in politics.

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 the president, who retains office through deeply flawed electoral processes. Lawmakers have little practical ability to influence legislation and government policies. The executive has pushed through legislation through inducement, harassment, and intimidation of the legislative branch. For example, in 2017, several opposition lawmakers were assaulted and forcibly removed from Parliament by plainclothes military officers during the reading of the constitutional amendment bill that removed the presidential age limit.

C2 0-4 pts

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 0-4 pts

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.

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Civil Liberties

D. Freedom of Expression and Belief

D1. Are there free and independent media? 2 / 4

Independent journalists face arrest, harassment, intimidation, and assault. In February 2018, journalist Charles Etukuri of the newspaper *New Vision* was abducted by security forces after the publication of an article connecting the Internal Security Organization (ISO) to the death of a Finnish businessman. Etukuri was held for six days before a court ordered his release. In July and August, while covering the campaigns for the parliamentary by-election in Arua and subsequent protests against the arrests of Wine and Wadri, several journalists were beaten or arrested by authorities and had their equipment damaged or confiscated.

Independent media outlets also risked suspension in 2018. In November, authorities shut down Unity FM, a radio station based in Lira, after it covered protests against the police's handling of the murder of a local child. Six staff at the station were arrested and briefly detained. The station reopened in December.

Despite these restrictions, independent journalists and media outlets are frequently critical of the government. 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.

A directive issued by the Uganda Communications Commission (UCC) in March required “all online data communication service providers, including online publishers, online news platforms, online radio and television operators” to receive permission from the UCC to operate. Observers noted that the directive could further limit online speech.

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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 the investigations into the crimes had not yet led to any convictions at year's end.

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 December 2018, 45 staff members at Makerere University in Kampala were dismissed for indiscipline, but critics argued that the dismissals were meant to silence critics of the government within the university.

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

Although private speech is relatively unrestrained and Ugandans openly criticize the government on social media, online communications are subject to government surveillance. In 2017, the government-appointed 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 2018, the government implemented a controversial social media tax, requiring users on a number of popular social media platforms including Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp, to pay a daily fee of \$0.05, which is prohibitively expensive for many users. Critics assailed the tax as

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an attack on freedom of expression and an attempt to limit the exchange of criticism of the government and mobilization of the opposition online. According to the Uganda Communications Commission (UCC), the tax led to a decline in the number of social media users in the months following its introduction.

In November, President Museveni instructed the Uganda Revenue Authority (URA) to monitor all phone calls within the country, claiming that the government was losing significant tax revenue due to the underreporting of calls by telecommunications companies.

Score Change: The score declined from 3 to 2 due to increased surveillance by the government, including a directive by President Museveni instructing the Uganda Revenue Authority to monitor all phone calls for tax purposes; and efforts to curb criticism of the government on social media through the institution of a social media tax that is prohibitively expensive for many users.

E. Associational and Organizational Rights

E1 0-4 pts

Is there freedom of assembly?	1 / 4
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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.

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In August 2018, security forces shot and killed at least six demonstrators in Kampala and other cities who were protesting the arrest and alleged torture of Bobi Wine and other opposition politicians.

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 activities are vulnerable to various legal restrictions, burdensome registration requirements, and occasional threats.

Several NGOs that work on human rights issues have reported break-ins of their offices and burglaries in recent years, and the police have failed to adequately investigate the incidents.

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. However, legal protections can go unenforced.

F. Rule of Law

F1 0-4 pts

Is there an independent judiciary?

1 / 4

Executive and military influence undermines judicial independence, as does systemic corruption. A July 2018 ruling by the Constitutional Court, which upheld the amendment that removed the presidential age limit of 75 and cleared the way for President Museveni to potentially remain in office for life, underscored the judiciary's lack of partiality. However, the court struck down a provision in the amendment that extended the terms of the president and Parliament by two years.

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F2 0-4 pts

Does due process prevail in civil and criminal matters?	1 / 4
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Prolonged pretrial detention, inadequate resources, corruption, and poor judicial administration impede access to justice. Even amidst these challenges, however, due process prevails in criminal and civil matters in many instances.

F3 0-4 pts

Is there protection from the illegitimate use of physical force and freedom from war and insurgencies?	1 / 4
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Rape, extrajudicial violence, and torture and abuse of suspects and detainees by security forces are persistent problems, with few examples of prosecution of the perpetrators. The alleged torture of Bobi Wine and other opposition politicians in August 2018 led to widespread protests against police brutality. The government said it would investigate Wine's allegations of torture, but no charges had been filed at year's end.

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

F4 0-4 pts

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

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Over a million refugees live in Uganda, and the government has been praised for its progressive asylum policies. However, it 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 in Uganda is largely unrestricted, including for refugees, most of whom live outside of camps and have been able to move more freely in recent years. 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.

Score Change: The score improved from 2 to 3 because individuals generally enjoy freedom of movement, including refugees, who have been able to move more freely in recent years.

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

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. Forced evictions sometimes occur in northern Uganda. In June 2018, 200 people from Apaa sought protection at the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) after security forces allegedly burned their homes down. Residents

returned home after a month, but forced evictions in the area have reportedly continued.

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

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

Domestic violence is widespread and underreported, and underage marriages are common in some communities. According to a UNICEF report published in August 2018, one in three women between the ages of 18 and 24 were victims of sexual violence as children, and more than 60 percent of young adults experienced physical abuse as children. In November, courts across the country began holding special sessions to address a backlog of thousands of rape and domestic violence cases.

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. Child labor in agriculture, domestic service, and a variety of other industries is a significant problem; more than two million children are estimated to be employed, and the issue is most prevalent in rural areas. Sexual exploitation of minors is an ongoing problem, as well.

Score Change: The score declined from 2 to 1 due to continued weak state oversight of employment conditions in the private sector and the ongoing prevalence of child labor.

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On Uganda

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Country Facts

Global Freedom Score

34/100 Not Free

Internet Freedom Score

56/100 Partly Free

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