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Civic Freedom Monitor: Uganda

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Recent Developments

While we aim to maintain information that is as current as possible, we realize that situations can rapidly change. If you are aware of any additional information or inaccuracies on this page, please keep us informed; write to ICNL at ngomonitor@icnl.org.

Introduction

Civil society organizations (CSOs) and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) play a vital role in Uganda. Approximately 14,000 registered NGOs engage across a wide range of issues, including providing services to citizens, advancing democratic governance, advocating for human rights.

Uganda's legal system, rooted in English common law and customary law, is underpinned by the 1995 Constitution, which guarantees the freedoms of conscience, expression, movement, religion, assembly, and association. Article 29 (1)(e) protects the right to freedom of association, encompassing the formation and joining of associations or unions, including trade unions and political and other civic organizations. The Constitution further guarantees that civic organizations retain autonomy in the pursuit of their declared objectives.

In practice, however, civic space has narrowed considerably in recent years. A raft of restrictive legislation—including the NGO (Amendment) Act (2024), Public Order Management Act (2013), Anti-Money Laundering Act (2013), Anti-Terrorism Act (2002), Computer Misuse (Amendment) Act (2022), and the Anti-Homosexuality Act (2023)—has imposed onerous registration requirements, excessive reporting obligations, and broad government powers to suspend or dissolve NGOs. Organizations have faced the freezing of bank accounts and denial of funding. NGOs engaged in democracy promotion and human rights advocacy have often been subjected to intimidation and increasingly targeted by state and non-state actors, both offline and online, with a goal of undermining their activism.

Civic actors are also contending with shrinking space for free expression and peaceful assembly. The government has increasingly constrained the legal and practical space for expression and advocacy. Peaceful assemblies are heavily restricted under the Public Order Management Act, with organizers required to seek police approval and facing the risk of dispersal or prosecution for non-compliance.

This Civic Freedom Monitor (CFM) Country Note was made possible through the research conducted by Dr. Livingstone Sewanyana, Advocate of the High Court of Uganda.

Civic Freedoms at a Glance

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|-----------------------------|---|
| Organizational Forms | Non-governmental organizations (NGOs), trusts, and community-based organizations (CBOs) |
|-----------------------------|---|

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|-------------------------------|--|
| Registration Body | NGOs and CBOs: National Bureau for NGOs |
| Approximate Number | Approximately 5,000 NGOs |
| Barriers to Formation | Registration is mandatory, with penalties for conducting activities through unregistered organizations. NGOs seeking registration are subject to detailed documentation requirements, including a recommendation from the responsible ministry or government agency or, for CBOs, a recommendation from the district NGO monitoring committee. NGOs are also required to re-register. |
| Barriers to Operations | Beyond registration, NGOs are required to obtain an operating permit from the National Bureau for NGOs. The law imposes “special obligations” on registered NGOs, including cooperation with local councils and monitoring committees and a requirement to remain nonpartisan. The law prohibits NGOs from engaging in acts that are prejudicial to the security and laws of Uganda or “the interests of Uganda and the dignity of the people of Uganda”. NGOs are subject to involuntary inspections and information requests. The involuntary suspension of NGO operations is increasingly common. |
| Barriers to Resources | NGOs in Uganda face increasing restrictions to their access to resources, many of which are linked with counterterrorism and anti-money laundering measures. Further restrictions were introduced through a policy statement issued by the Minister of Finance in 2021, which requires all development assistance—including funding for NGOs and private sector actors—to receive prior approval by the Cabinet. |
| Barriers to Expression | NGOs are prohibited from engaging in political activities or belonging to any political group. The government has increasingly constrained the legal and practical space for expression and advocacy, with NGOs and activists subject to governmental intimidation, arbitrary arrests, and disappearances. There have also been internet shutdowns ahead of general elections. |
| Barriers to Assembly | Governmental approval is required for public gatherings. |

Legal Overview

This section provides a brief overview of Uganda's legal framework for the promotion and protection of civic freedoms. Click a subheading for more, or [click here to expand all subheadings](#).

RATIFICATION OF INTERNATIONAL AGREEMENTS

| Key International Agreements | Ratification* |
|--|----------------------|
| International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) | 1995 |
| Optional Protocol to ICCPR (ICCPR-OP1) | 1995 |
| International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) | 1987 |

| Key International Agreements | Ratification* |
|---|----------------------|
| Optional Protocol to ICESCR (Op-ICESCR) | No |
| International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD) | 1980 |
| Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) | 1985 |
| Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women | No |
| Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) | 1990 |
| International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of their Families (ICRMW) | 1995 |
| Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) | 2008 |

| Key Regional Agreements | Ratification* |
|--|----------------------|
| African (Banjul) Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights (ACHPR) | 1986 |
| African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child | 1994 |
| Treaty Establishing the African Economic Community | 2001 |
| Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa | 2010 |
| Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Establishment of an African Court on Human and Peoples' Rights | 2001 |
| African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance | No |

* Category includes ratification, accession, or succession to the treaty

CONSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORK

The Constitution of Uganda was promulgated in 1995. Relevant provisions include the following:

Article 29. Protection of freedom of conscience, expression, movement, religion, assembly and association.

1. Every person shall have the right to—

(d) freedom to assemble and to demonstrate together with others peacefully and unarmed and to petition; and

(e) freedom of association which shall include the freedom to form and join associations or unions, including trade unions and political and other civic organisations.

Article 38. Civic rights and activities.

1. In the enjoyment of the rights and freedoms prescribed in this Chapter, no person shall prejudice the fundamental or other human rights and freedoms of others or the public interest.

2. Every Ugandan citizen has a right to participate in peaceful activities to influence policies of government through civic organizations.

Article 43. General limitation on fundamental and other human rights and freedoms.

1. In the enjoyment of the rights and freedoms prescribed in this Chapter, no person shall prejudice the fundamental or other human rights and freedoms of others or the public interest.

2. Public interest under this article shall not permit –

1. political persecution;

2. detention without trial;

3. any limitation of the enjoyment of the rights and freedoms prescribed by this Chapter beyond what is acceptable and demonstrably justifiable in a free and democratic society, or what is provided in the Constitution.

Article 50. Enforcement of rights and freedoms by courts.

1. Any person who claims that a fundamental or other right or freedom guaranteed under this Constitution has been infringed or threatened, is entitled to apply to a competent court for redress which may include compensation.

2. Any person or organisation may bring an action against the violation of another person's or group's human rights.

3. Any person aggrieved by any decision of the court may appeal to the appropriate court.

4. Parliament shall make laws for the enforcement of the rights and freedoms under this Chapter.

Article 51. Uganda Human Rights Commission.

1. There shall be a Commission called the Uganda Human Rights Commission.

2. The Commission shall be composed of a Chairperson and not less than three other persons appointed by the President with the approval of Parliament.

3. The Chairperson of the Commission shall be a Judge of the High Court or a person qualified to hold that office.

4. The Chairperson and members of the commission shall be persons of high moral character and proven integrity and shall serve for a period of six years and be eligible for re-appointment.

Ugandan law also contains “directive principles”, which are non-binding provisions relevant to constitutional interpretation:

- Directive principle II (vi) provides that Civic Organizations shall retain their autonomy in pursuit of their declared objectives.

- Directive principle V (i) provides that “the state shall guarantee and respect institutions which are charged by the state with responsibility for protecting and promoting human rights by providing them with adequate resources to function effectively.”

- Directive principle V (ii) states that “The state shall guarantee and respect the independence of nongovernmental organizations which protect and promote human rights.”

On December 20, 2017, Parliament passed the Constitutional (Amendment) Act, 2017. The Act removed the Presidential age limit of 75 years provided for under Article 102 (b) of the Constitution, increased the term of Parliament and Local Government Councils from five to seven years, and restored presidential term limits. While upholding the removal of the presidential age limit, the Constitutional Court nullified the provisions seeking to extend the term of Parliament and Local Governments to seven years as well as the restoration of presidential term limits. The Supreme Court has since upheld the Constitutional Court’s position.

NATIONAL LAWS, POLICIES, AND REGULATIONS

Relevant national laws include the following:

- [Constitution of the Republic of Uganda](#) (as amended), 1995.
- [Constitutional \(Amendment\) Act](#), 2006.
- The Anti- Money (Laundering) Act, 2013
- Constitution (Amendment) Act, 2017.
- The Non-Governmental Organizations Act, 2016.
- The Non-Governmental Organizations, Regulations, 2017.
- The Non-Governmental Organizations (Fees), Regulations, 2017
- [The Companies Act](#) (2012).
- The Human Rights (Enforcement) Act, 2019
- [The Trustees Incorporation Act](#), Chapter 165 (1939).
- [Income Tax Act](#), Chapter 340 (1997).
- [Value Added Tax Act](#), Chapter 349 (1997).
- [The Value Added Tax \(Amendment\) Act](#) (2005).
- [East African Community Customs Management \(EACC\) Act](#) (2004).
- [Public Order Management Act](#) (2013).
- [Anti-Homosexuality Bill](#) (2023).
- The Non-Governmental Organizations (Amendment) Act, 2024.
- The Non-Governmental Organizations (Amendment) Act, 2024 (Commencement) Instrument, 2024.
- The Local Government Rating Act, 2005.

PENDING REGULATORY INITIATIVES

We are currently unaware of any other pending initiatives. Please help keep us informed; if you are aware of pending initiatives, write to ICNL at ngomonitor@icnl.org.

Legal Analysis

This section provides an in-depth assessment of Uganda's legal environment for civic freedoms, including the barriers to the exercise of the freedoms of association (formation, operations, resources), expression, and peaceful assembly. Click a subheading for more, or [click here to expand all subheadings](#).

ORGANIZATIONAL FORMS

Ugandan law provides for the establishment of a variety of civil society organizations (CSOs).

Non-governmental Organizations (NGOs)

NGOs are governed by the NGO Act, 2016 and the NGO (Amendment) Act, 2024. The NGO Act, 2016 defines an NGO as “a private voluntary grouping of individuals or associations established to provide voluntary services to the community or any part, but not for profit or commercial purposes.”

Trusts and Foundations

Trusts are governed by the Trustees Act, Cap. 164, 1954, and the Trustees Incorporation Act, Cap. 165, 1939. Foundations may register either under the Trustee's Incorporation Act or as companies limited by guarantee under the Companies Act, Cap. 110, 1961. Both trusts and foundations are established to provide grants and in some cases affordable loan financing to NGOs, community-based organizations (CBOs), and private organizations in support of their goals and objectives.

Community-based Organizations (CBOs)

CBOs are predominantly self-help groups focused on improving individual or household welfare. While most CBOs operate on a small scale—typically involving 10 to 20 households and covering a limited geographic area—a few play a wider role in community development. Many are organized along communal work lines, for example, to work collectively on members' farms or support funeral ceremony preparations. CBOs with larger community development roles are supported and sometimes initiated by organizations outside the community.

The NGO Act, 2015 defines a CBO as “an organisation operating at a subcounty level and below whose objectives is to promote and advance the wellbeing of the members of the community” (Section 3).

PUBLIC BENEFIT STATUS

According to Section 4(d) of the NGO Act, 2024, one of the Act's objectives is to “provide the development of strong organizations and to facilitate the formation and effective function of organisations for public benefit purposes.”

However, registration as an NGO does not automatically confer tax exemption. Under the Income Tax Act, only organizations, institutions, or irrevocable trusts that qualify as religious, charitable, or educational institutions of a public character, and that have obtained a written ruling from the Commissioner recognizing them as an “exempt organization,” are eligible for tax exemption (Income Tax Act, Section 2(bb)).

Charitable organizations established under the Companies Act do not benefit from any tax exemptions.

PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

The Ugandan Constitution, 1995, enshrines several principles related to public participation:

- “The State shall be based on democratic principles which empower and encourage the active participation of all citizens at all levels in their own governance.” (Democratic Principle (I))
- “Every Ugandan Citizen has the right to participate in the affairs of government individually or through his or her representatives in accordance with the law.” (Article 38(1))
- Every Ugandan has a “right to participate in peaceful activities to influence the policies of government through civic.” (Article 38(2))
- “Every citizen has a right of access to information in the possession of the State or any other organ or agency of the State except where the release of the information is likely to prejudice the security or sovereignty of the State or interfere with the right to the privacy of any other person.” (Article 41)

National legislation and policy seek to operationalize these constitutional protections:

- The Access to Information Act, 2005, affirms the right of every citizen to access information held by the State or any public body, except where disclosure would prejudice state security or sovereignty (Section 5(1)). It also requires that such information be kept as up to date as practicable (Section 5(2)).
- The Local Government Act, 1997, envisions decentralization as a fundamental principle to promote citizen participation in decision making (Article 176(2)(b)). The Decentralization Policy, 1997, envisions citizen participation through local councils that include special interest groups such as women, youth, the elderly, and persons with disabilities. It also promotes direct citizen engagement through village meetings, local council meetings, budget conferences, or information fora (*barazas*), and local government consultations with citizens and CSOs on policy issues.

Judicial interpretations have further affirmed and expanded the right to public participation:

- In *James Rwanyarare and Others vs. Attorney General* (Constitutional Petition No. 7, 2002), the court held that the right to public participation extends to non-state entities, including associations and political parties.
- In *Satya vs. Attorney General* (Constitutional Petition No. 0036, 2012), the court recognized the right of public participation for individuals.
- In *Saleh Kamba vs. Attorney General* (Constitutional Petition No. 38, 2012), the court held that the purpose of the right to public participation is to ensure accountability and transparency in all government organs.

Parliamentary procedure also incorporates public participation. Following the first reading of a bill, the relevant parliamentary committee is required to invite other stakeholders to present their views on the bill through public hearings (Rules of Procedure of the Parliament, Rule 114).

Public awareness of these participation mechanisms and opportunities remains limited, although state institutions are mandated to increase such awareness:

- The Uganda Human Rights Commission must “formulate, implement and oversee programs intended to inculcate in the citizens of Uganda awareness of their civic responsibilities and an appreciation of their rights and obligations as free people” (Constitution, 1995, Article 52(1)(g)).
- The Judicial Service Commission is mandated to “prepare and implement programs for the

education of, and for the dissemination of information to, judicial officers and the public about the law and the administration of justice" (Constitution, 1995, Article 147(c)).

Participation rights for marginalized and vulnerable groups are addressed in several laws:

- The Constitution provides for affirmative action on the basis of gender, age, disability, or any other reason created by history, tradition, or custom in favor of marginalized groups "for the purpose of redressing imbalances which exist against them" (Article 32 (1)).
- The Constitution provides that minorities have the right to participate in decision-making processes (Article 36).
- The Persons with Disability Act, 2006, provides for the participation of persons with disabilities in all aspects of life as equal citizens of Uganda (Sections 3(b) and (f)).
- The Local Government Act, 1997, provides for the participation of marginalized groups, such as persons with disabilities, youth, and women, in local project planning, budgeting, and monitoring (Section 10).

The Human Rights Enforcement Act entrenches the right to bring lawsuits against any law or professional practice that restricts civic participation (Articles 3 and 6). The Whistle Blowers Act, 2010, protects the right of individuals to disclose, in the public interest, information that relates to irregular, illegal, or corrupt practices.

Despite these progressive legal provisions, there are barriers to participation:

- Perhaps the most notable exclusion from participation is the LGBTI+ community. The Constitution (Article 31(2a)) prohibits same-sex marriage, and the Penal Code (Cap. 120, Section 145) further prohibits same-sex relations. In addition, S.30 (1) (a) of the NGO Act, 2016 prohibits registration of any organization whose objectives contravene the laws of Uganda. As a result, the government can deny registration to groups advocating for LGBTI+ rights given that homosexuality is outlawed under the Anti-homosexuality Act, 2023. This Act, therefore, further limited the participation and rights of LGBTI+ individuals.
- Also excluded from participation are environmental activists. For example, on June 12, 2025, a bail application for 11 environmental rights defenders, widely referred to as #KCB11, was denied for the third time since their arbitrary arrest two months earlier. They are part of a global movement opposed to the construction of the East African Crude Oil Pipeline (EACOP). This project by Total Energies involves building a pipeline to carry oil across Uganda and Tanzania and is alleged to carry significant risks to the ecosystem and local community rights. In a related development, 12 young environmental and climate justice defenders and students from various universities in Kampala and Wakiso districts, who are members of the *Students Against EACOP Uganda* campaign, were denied bail for the fourth time on October 16, 2025. These young climate justice defenders spent nearly four months in arbitrary pre-trial detention after being arrested after a peaceful protest in which they held placards and banners with the words "Stop EACOP Uganda." They were remanded to Luzira Maximum Security Prison in Kampala where they were detained despite several attempts to apply for bail.
- Citizens face routine harassment for actions in the public interest that involve public protests. Under the Public Order Management Act (POMA), 2013, public meetings—including gatherings, assemblies, processions, or demonstrations in a public place—require prior authorization (Section 8). The law has been used to disperse protests and harass and arrest political party activists, students, journalists, environmental activists, and human rights defenders. In *Human Rights Network (U) and Others vs. Attorney General*, the Constitutional Court nullified Section 8 of

POMA, which had outlawed public meetings without police permission. During Covid, public meetings were again restricted, with police dispersing several gatherings.

BARRIERS TO FORMATION

Mandatory Registration

Section 29(1) of the NGO Act, 2016 requires all NGOs, including all “private voluntary groupings of individuals,” to formally register with the National Bureau of NGOs. This requirement also extends to community-based organizations (CBOs) and self-regulatory bodies (SRBs).

Sections 20 and 21 of the NGO Act, 2016 establish District NGO Monitoring Committees (DNMCs) and Sub-county NGO Monitoring Committees (SNMCs). Among other functions, DNMCs are tasked with reviewing CBO registration applications, while SNMCs recommend CBOs to the DNMC for registration.

Section 40 prescribes penalties for carrying out activities through unregistered organizations.

Burdensome Registration Procedures

NGOs seeking registration must submit detailed applications to the National Bureau for NGOs, including information on their operations, intended area of work, staffing, geographical focus, headquarters location, and the expiration date of any previous permit.

Section 4 of the NGO Regulations, 2017 imposes burdensome documentation requirements on NGOs seeking to register with the National Bureau of NGOs, including:

- A certified copy of the certificate of incorporation
- A copy of the organization’s constitution
- A governance structure chart
- Proof of payment of the prescribed fee
- Information on sources of funding
- Copies of a valid identification document for at least two founding members
- Minutes and resolutions of members authorizing the organization to register
- A statement of compliance with Section 45 of the NGO Act (staffing requirements)
- A recommendation from the responsible ministry or government department or agency or, for CBOs, a recommendation of the DNMC. For foreign organizations, a recommendation is required from the diplomatic mission in Uganda of the organization’s country of origin.

On July 15, 2024, the President signed the Non-Governmental Organizations (NGO) Act, 2024 into law. The Act dissolved the NGO Bureau as an independent entity and transferred its functions to the Ministry of Internal Affairs. This structural change raises concerns about resource constraints and institutional independence, as the new Department for NGOs will now rely entirely on the Ministry for its budget. This dependency risks undermining the Department’s capacity to effectively register and monitor NGO activities.

Re-registration Requirement

To renew a permit, NGOs must meet the documentation requirements outlined in Section 12 of the NGO Regulations, 2017. These include:

- A copy of audited accounts
- A copy of the organization's annual report
- Minutes from the annual general assembly or governing body
- A work plan and budget or strategic plan
- Proof of payment of prescribed fees

Marginalized Groups

Section 30(1)(a) of NGO Act, 2015 prohibits registration of any organization whose objectives contravene the laws of Uganda, as outlined in its constitution. Moreover, section 44(f) creates “Special Obligations” that, among other things, prohibit an organization from acting in any way that “is prejudicial to the interests of Uganda and the dignity of the people of Uganda.” Regulatory authorities may interpret such subjective terms like ‘dignity’ to target CSOs working on controversial social issues, such as LGBTI advocacy groups. However, it is worth noting that recent court rulings in Botswana and Kenya have reaffirmed that freedom of association includes the rights of LGBTI+ people to form organizations, setting important regional precedents.

BARRIERS TO OPERATIONS

Staffing Requirements

The NGO Act does not allow organizations to employ foreign staff on a permanent basis. Section 45 of the NGO Act, 2016 mandates that NGOs submit to the National Bureau for NGOs a staffing and organizational chart, its foreign work requirements, requirements for Ugandan counterparts of foreign employees, planned period to replace foreign employees with qualified Ugandans, and compliance with Ugandan labor laws. In addition, foreign employees must submit “certificates, credentials and recommendations” demonstrating their academic and professional qualifications and work experience to the Ugandan diplomatic mission in their country of origin before entering Uganda.

On November 23, 2020, the Government of Uganda deported two foreign citizens engaged in not-for-profit, election-related work on accusations of supporting regime change. It also denied entry to foreign citizens working with international NGOs, including the Democratic Governance Facility (DGF), National Democratic Institute (NDI), and International Republican Institute (IRI).

Permissions

Beyond registration, Section 31(5)-(6) of the NGO Act, 2016 requires NGOs to obtain an operating permit from the National Bureau for NGOs. Permits are valid for an unspecified period of time “not exceeding five years” and require payment of an unspecified annual fee.

Special Obligations

Section 44 of the NGO Act, 2016 imposes several “special obligations” on registered organizations. These include cooperation with local councils and monitoring committees; a prohibition from engaging in acts that are prejudicial to the security and laws of Uganda or “the interests of Uganda and the dignity of the people of Uganda”; and a requirement to remain nonpartisan.

On July 5, 2024, the Attorney General issued an Advisory on Memoranda of Understanding between Government and Commercial Entities, Regulatory Bodies, Ministries and Agencies of Government,

including NGOs and CBOs. The Advisory cited Article 119 (5) of the Uganda Constitution, 1995 (as amended), which states that no agreement, contract, treaty, convention, or document to which the government is a party or in respect of which the government has an interest, shall be concluded without legal advice from the Attorney General. Accordingly, any Ministry, Department, or Local Government (MDA/LG) entering a memorandum of understanding with an NGO or a CBO must indicate:

- the mandate of the MDA/LG to which the MOU relates;
- whether the MDA/LG has signed a similar MOU with any other NGO or CBO, and if so, why it is necessary to enter into another MOU with another NGO or CBO;
- the benefits to be derived from entering into the MOU; and
- the track record of the NGO or CBO.

This new process raises concerns about increased bureaucracy and potential restrictions on NGO-government cooperation in areas like democracy, rule of law, and human rights.

Inspections and Monitoring

Section 27 of the NGO Act, 2016 allows the Auditor General to conduct involuntary inspections and request “any information” that appears “necessary for purposes of giving effect to this Act.”

Sections 20 and 21 create two additional layers of governmental oversight at the sub-national level: District Non-Governmental Organisations Monitoring Committees (DNMCs) and Sub-county Non-Governmental Organisations Monitoring Committees (SNMCs). Among other functions, these committees are tasked with monitoring NGO activities and reporting to the NGO Bureau.

Several instances of invasive monitoring have taken place in recent years:

- In February 2019, the Ugandan Police issued a circular requiring NGOs to provide detailed information about their organization and operations, including the organization’s name, location, date of establishment, contact details, names of directors, certificate of incorporation, constitution, certificate of operation, services provided, list of employees, list of projects funded, and monthly/annual returns.
- In August 2019, the Financial Intelligence Authority (FIA) requested that banks provide information from the past three years on certain transactions involving the accounts of 13 human rights organizations operating in Uganda.
- In 2021, the National Bureau of NGOs summoned the Citizens Coalition for Electoral Democracy in Uganda (CCEDU) over its report on the 2021 General Elections.

Criminal Penalties

Section 40 of the NGO Act, 2016 provides for imprisonment for any individual who “fails or refuses to produce to the Bureau a certificate, permit, constitution, charter or other relevant document or information relevant for the purposes of this Act.”

Suspension

Ugandan authorities have frequently suspended NGO operations on various grounds:

- In July 2018, the Uganda Electoral Commission suspended the Citizens Coalition for Electoral Democracy’s (CCEDU’s) accreditation for election-related activities on the grounds that CCEDU was

partisan and failed to adhere to the Election Commission’s legal framework and guidelines. The suspension was lifted in February 2019 after prolonged advocacy.

- In September 2020, the Ugandan government reported that it had suspended the operations of 208 refugee organizations, including 85 international groups, for non-compliance with regulations, leaving only 69 authorized agencies to serve the 1.4 million refugees in the country. According to the Minister for Relief, Disaster Preparedness, and Refugees, the organizations that were suspended lacked valid permits, possessed expired permits to operate, or were running unauthorized projects.
- In June 2021, the National Bureau of NGOs suspended six NGOs for fraud, forgery, and incompetence.
- In August 2021, the NGO Bureau announced the suspension of 54 NGOs for various non-compliance failures, including 23 that had operated with expired permits; 15 that had failed to file annual returns and audited books of accounts; and 16 that had operated without registration. The suspended NGOs included Chapter Four Uganda, CCEDU, Citizens Election Watch-IT, Center for Conflict Resolution (CECORE), and Great Lakes Institute for Strategic Studies (GLISS). In a positive development, however, some of the NGOs were able to get these decisions overturned. In May 2022, High Court Judge Musa Ssekaana ruled that the decision to suspend the operations of Chapter Four Uganda was “irregular” because of its indefinite nature. Ssekaana ordered the NGO Bureau to hear the applicant’s claim within one month. Of 54 NGOs that were suspended in August 2021, 22 have had their suspension lifted, and two NGOs whose accounts had been frozen have since had their accounts reopened.
- In January 2021, President Museveni ordered the immediate suspension of the activities of the Democratic Governance Facility (DGF)—the largest donor fund for NGOs in Uganda—alleging that it was subverting government activities. The DGF is financed by the governments of Denmark, Ireland, Austria, Netherlands, Sweden, Norway, and the European Union and aims to ensure equitable growth, poverty eradication, rule of law, and long-term stability in Uganda. The suspension crippled many NGOs and government bodies that engage in accountability, good governance, human rights, democracy, service delivery monitoring, and capacity building activities. President Museveni lifted the ban on DGF in June 2022 on the condition that government representatives sit on DGF’s decision-making structures.

Barriers to International Contact

The Constitution of Uganda (Article 29) protects freedom of association, confirming that NGOs may contact and cooperate with colleagues in civil society, business, and government both within and outside the country. It also guarantees the right to free movement in and outside Uganda. No legal provisions require advance notice of international cooperation, prohibit conferences, or restrict travel.

In February 2023, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs notified the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) that its host country agreement would not be renewed upon its expiry in August 2023, effectively ending OHCHR’s mandate in Uganda.

BARRIERS TO RESOURCES

NGOs in Uganda face increasing restrictions to their access to resources, many of which are linked with counter-terrorism and anti-money laundering measures.

Following the release of the 2021 US State Department Human Rights Report, the Ugandan government dismissed as a “falsehood” the claim that NGOs were mistreated in Uganda, affirming the state’s recognition of NGOs’ role in democracy and societal development. However, the government reiterated concerns that NGOs could be conduits for terrorism financing and money laundering, thereby justifying

increased scrutiny and monitoring.

In December 2020, for example, the Financial Intelligence Authority (FIA) froze the accounts of the National NGO Forum and Uganda Women's Network (UWONET), accusing them of maintaining links with opposition parties and engaging in terrorist financing in violation of Section 17A (2) of the Anti-Terrorism (Amendment) Act, 2015. However, in September 2022, the High Court in Kampala ruled that the FIA's actions were illegal, declaring the account freeze null and void.

Also in December 2020, Nicholas Opiyo, a human rights lawyer and executive director of Chapter Four Uganda, was arrested on charges of money laundering and related malicious acts. Authorities accused him of failing to declare the receipt of USD 340,000, in violation of 116 and 136(1) (a) of Sections 3 (c) of the Anti-Money Laundering Act (2017).

Further restrictions were introduced through a policy statement issued by the Minister of Finance on September 6, 2021, which requires all development assistance—including funding for NGOs and private sector actors—to receive prior approval by the Cabinet. The directive, justified under the Paris Principles on Aid Effectiveness, also requires that all such assistance be signed off by the Minister of Finance.

The German Corporation for International Cooperation (GIZ) has at least temporarily suspended activities in Uganda. On October 27, 2025, GIZ wrote to all its partners informing them of the decision after receiving letters from its key implementation partners, including the Ugandan Office of the Auditor General (OAG) and the National Planning Authority (NPA), which requested GIZ to halt its activities until further notice.

BARRIERS TO EXPRESSION

Article 29 of the Constitution guarantees every person the right to freedom of speech and expression. Article 38 (2) further allows NGOs to participate in peaceful activities aimed at influencing government policies.

While NGOs are prohibited from engaging in political activities or belonging to any political group, they are permitted to participate in election processes through election monitoring, voter education, and proposing reforms to improve the electoral system.

The Press and Journalist Act, 1995 seeks to ensure freedom of the press and established the Media Council, which is mandated to regulate journalistic conduct, promote ethical standards, discipline journalists, and arbitrate disputes between the state and the media.

In the past fifteen years, however, the government has increasingly constrained the legal and practical space for expression and advocacy. Notable developments include:

- In 2009, the Ugandan Parliament enacted the *Regulation of Interception of Communication Bill*, which allows the government to intercept any postal, telephone, email, and text message communications with the consent of a judge of the High Court.
- In 2013, the Parliament passed the *Communications Act*, which envisions the establishment of the Uganda Communications Tribunal with powers to hear and determine all matters relating to communications services arising from decisions made by the Uganda Communications Commission (UCC) or the Minister under the Act. Concerns have been raised over the delayed establishment of the Tribunal despite public complaints of abuse and repression by the UCC.
- In 2014, the government released stringent regulations that require all media houses to allocate prime time to promoting government programs and penalizes moderators for tolerating provocative and anti-government questions from callers.

In the lead-up to the January 2021 elections, state agencies took further measures to constrain the

freedom of expression.

- On September 7, 2020, the UCC ordered all persons engaged in the provision of online news sites to obtain authorization from the UCC by October 5, 2020, or their websites would be blocked.
- On October 29, 2020, the National Bureau for NGOs announced that National Election Watch-Uganda (NEW-U), a loose coalition of 65 NGOs formed to observe the 2021 general elections, was an illegal organization and directed its activities to stop.
- On December 10, 2020, the Media Council demanded that both local and foreign journalists covering the general elections must be accredited. On January 18, 2021, the High Court ruled that the Media Council's directive was illegal, irrational, and procedurally irregular, and accordingly issued a permanent injunction.
- On January 13, 2021, the government implemented a nationwide internet shutdown, just a day before the general elections. The shutdown continued until January 18, 2021, adversely affecting patients' access to medical care, disrupting businesses and the banking and telecom sectors, and reducing access to information on social media during the elections.

Since the January 14, 2021 elections, cases of enforced disappearances and arbitrary arrests have risen. Numerous opposition activists were abducted, with families unable to trace their relatives. Unconfirmed reports indicate that over 243 supporters of the National Unity Party (NUP) were missing as of March 2021. Government security forces acknowledged detaining 177 of them; the fate of the others remained unclear, although they were believed to be detained illegally by security forces. President Museveni admitted to the illegal detentions, but claimed that the detained had been misled by criminal groups to engage in treasonous acts.

NGOs and activists continue to face constraints on their freedom of expression:

- On January, 12, 2022, the satirical novelist Kakwenza Rukirabashaija was charged with two counts of offensive communication against President Museveni and later fled into exile.
- On March 16, 2022, police arrested Tumuhimbise Norman, CEO of Alternative Digitalk Online Television, and charged him with cyber-stalking under Section 26 of the Computer Misuse Act, 2011 for repeated dissemination of offensive content about the President.
- In March 2022, Attorney General Kiryowa-Kiwanuka declared NGOs "enemies" of Uganda. He further asserted that NGOs were a threat to the country's stability and warned NGOs not to dictate to the government the rules and guidelines within which they should operate.
- In March 2024, two staff members of Students for Global Democracy, a student-led organization promoting good governance and sustainability, were arrested during anti-corruption protests.
- In December 2024, several Tik Tok users were arrested and imprisoned over alleged political hate speech targeting the First Family and close associates.
- In April 2025, 11 environmental rights defenders, widely referred to as #KCB11, were arrested after they peacefully demonstrated by demanding that KCB Bank withdraw its financial support for the destructive East African Crude Oil Pipeline (EACOP). In August, 12 other young environmental defenders and university students were arrested following a peaceful protest in which they held placards and banners with the words "Stop EACOP Uganda."

Restrictions on LGBTI+ Advocacy

On March 30, 2023, the Anti-Homosexuality Act, 2023 came into effect. Framed as legislation to protect the “traditional family,” the Act criminalizes homosexuality and its promotion and financing in Uganda. It prescribes life imprisonment for sex between two people of the same biological sex and the death penalty for “aggravated homosexuality.” The Act restricts freedom of speech and advocacy on LGBTI+ issues, and has been used to accuse NGOs, donors, and foreign companies of promoting and recruiting people in schools and institutions of higher learning into homosexuality.

In response to constitutional challenges, the Constitutional Court of Uganda upheld most provisions of the Act in April 2024. However, it struck down clauses that criminalized the rental of premises for “homosexual purposes” and the failure to report certain homosexual activities to the police.

BARRIERS TO ASSEMBLY

The right to peaceful assembly and demonstration is enshrined in the Ugandan Constitution. The 2013 Public Order Management Act is the primary legislation governing assemblies in Uganda. The law includes several restrictive provisions that have significantly curtailed civic space and the exercise of freedom of assembly.

Time, Place and Manner Restrictions

Section 5(2)(c) of POMA restricts public meetings (except town hall meetings) to the hours of 7:00am to 7:00pm. Sections 12 and 13, along with Schedule 3, designate specific areas—including the Parliament building, international airports, the State House (the President’s official residence in Kampala), State Lodges throughout the country, and courts—as restricted.

Grounds for Refusal of Permission and Dispersal

Section 6(1) permits the government to deny permission to hold a proposed public meeting if prior notice for a meeting at the same time and place has already been received or the venue is deemed unsuitable for crowd and traffic control or will interfere with other lawful activities. Under Section 6(3), once notified of such a denial, organizers must not proceed with the meeting as planned.

Section 7(2) authorizes the dispersal of spontaneous gatherings for similar reasons. Section 8 authorizes the responsible officer to stop or prevent any public meeting held in violation of the Act or to disperse meetings where “reasonable in the circumstances.”

In January 2020, District and Division Police Commanders were directed to disband all political meetings in private homes, citing violations of POMA. Authorities alleged that politicians were holding unauthorized political meetings in their homes or those of their allies. Civil society activists view the ban as a biased interpretation of POMA aimed at suppressing political opposition.

Requirements on Organizers and Participants

The Act imposes several burdensome requirements on the organizers and participants of a public meeting. Section 10 requires organizers to provide sufficient stewards proportionate to the number of participants; ensure that meetings end peacefully before 7:00 p.m.; and cooperate and coordinate with police to ensure that all participants are unarmed and peaceful and that peace and order are maintained. Participants are required to act in a manner that avoids obstruction of traffic, confusion, and disorder. Failure to comply with these requirements can result in criminal prosecution and liability.

Excessive Force

On February 12, 2025, Ssuuna James, a cyber-activist and Executive Director of Freedom Hive Uganda, was arrested and charged with “common nuisance” under Section 148(1) Cap. 128 of the Penal Code. His arrest followed a peaceful protest held on February 10, 2025, at Constitutional Square in Kampala, where demonstrators called on the government to comply with a Supreme Court ruling directing the transfer of civilians from military to civilian courts. During the arrest, more than five uniformed and plain-clothed police officers violently dragged Ssuuna to the ground, causing him physical injuries.

Additional Resources

This section contains links to external reports and news reports relevant to civic freedoms. Click a subheading for more, or [click here to expand all subheadings](#).

GLOBAL INDEX RANKINGS

| Ranking Body | Rank | Ranking Scale (best - worst possible) |
|---|---|---|
| UN Human Development Index | 157 (2023) | 1 - 193 |
| World Justice Project Rule of Law Index | 126 (2024) | 1 - 142 |
| Fund for Peace Fragile States Index | 28 (2024) | 179 - 1 |
| Transparency International | 140 (2024) | 1 - 180 |
| Freedom House: Freedom in the World | Status: Not Free (34) Political Rights: 10 Civil Liberties: 24 (2025) | Free/Partly Free/Not Free (100 - 0) 40 - 0 60 - 0 |

REPORTS

| | |
|--------------------------------------|--|
| UN Universal Periodic Review Reports | Uganda UPR page |
| UN Human Rights Reports | Uganda |
| Council on Foundations Country Notes | Uganda |
| Dr. Abbas Mugisha | Civil Society and Electoral Reforms: Challenges and Opportunities for Electoral Democracy in Uganda (2021) |
| Albertine Watch | The Legal Environment for CSOs in Uganda (2021) |
| IMF Country Reports | Uganda and the IMF |
| Konrad Adenauer Foundation | Civil Society in Uganda (2019) |
| ICNL Online Library | Uganda |

NEWS

[Eddie Mutwe Tells Masaka Court He's 'Dying from Pain'](#) (May 2025)

The courtroom fell into a stunned silence as Edward Ssebuufu, popularly known as Eddie Mutwe, recounted the harrowing conditions he endured while in military custody, declaring before the Masaka High Court: "I take 12 painkillers every day." Mutwe, who was serving as Robert Kyagulanyi's bodyguard, added: "I am dying. I feel terrible pain." Mutwe made the statement during his appearance alongside fellow National Unity Platform (NUP) activists Achileo Kivumbi, Gaddafi Mugumya, and Smart Wakabi, as they face aggravated robbery charges. The Uganda Human Rights Commission (UHRC) issued an official release order for Mutwe, declaring his detention unlawful.

Two Ugandan held for insulting Museveni on TikTok (November 2024)

Two Ugandan men have been detained for allegedly insulting President Yoweri Museveni. In July, another 21-year-old TikToker was sentenced to six years in prison for insulting Museveni, who has ruled Uganda with an iron fist since he toppled president Milton Obote in 1986.

TikToker jailed for 32 months for insulting Uganda's president (November 2024)

A 21-year-old has become the latest Ugandan TikToker to be sent to prison after creating a video that was said to insult President Yoweri Museveni. Emmanuel Nabugodi appeared for the sentencing after pleading guilty to four charges, including hate speech and spreading malicious information about the president. He was sentenced to 32 months in jail. Nabugodi, known for sharing comedy content to his 20,000 followers, made a film of a mock trial of the head of state. In it he called for Museveni's public flogging. Rights groups have frequently complained about restrictions on the freedom of speech in the country, alleging that the president – in power since 1986 – does not tolerate criticism.

Govt warns NGOs against foreign donor funding ahead of 2026 polls (August 2024)

The Ministry of Internal Affairs has warned NGOs against receiving foreign donor funding ahead of 2026 general elections. However, NGOs also urged the government to draw lessons from the November 5 elections in the United States where voter turnout was high and uninterrupted.

No more MoUs without my nod, Attorney General tells agencies (July 2024)

Attorney General Kiryowa Kiwanuka announced that any partnership between government regulatory bodies and entities they regulate without his office's nod will not be authorized. Mr Kiryowa said his office shall not recommend the partnership of a regulatory body and a regulated private entity, except where there shall be a clear legal or policy reason to do so.

NGOs return to Internal Affairs (April 2024)

On April 24, the 11th Parliament passed the NGO Amendment Bill, 2024 following several weeks of scrutiny. Among its new provisions is the return of the NGO Bureau back to the Ministry of Internal Affairs. Under the new law, the bureau will become a department in the Ministry of Internal Affairs and will be headed by a secretary under the supervision of the ministry's permanent secretary. Until now, the National Bureau for Non-Governmental Organisations has been a semi-autonomous body under the Ministry of Internal Affairs established under the NGO Act, 2016.

Court Upholds Anti-Homosexuality Act (April 2024)

Uganda's Constitutional Court upheld the abusive and radical provisions of the 2023 Anti-Homosexuality Act. The ruling further entrenches discrimination against lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people, and makes them prone to more violence. The court did strike down sections that restricted healthcare access for LGBT people, criminalized renting premises to LGBT people, and created an obligation to report alleged acts of homosexuality.

UN ends Uganda human rights operations (August 2023)

The United Nations' human rights office said it has been forced to close its office in Uganda and that it would officially cease operations in the country. In a statement announcing the closure, Volker Türk, U.N. high commissioner for human rights, said, "I regret that our office in Uganda had to close after 18 years, during which we were able to work closely with civil society, people from various walks of life in Uganda, as well as engaging with state institutions for the promotion and protection of the human rights of all Ugandans."

A new anti-gay law in Uganda calls for life in prison for those who are convicted (August 2023)

Ugandan prosecutors have charged a man with "aggravated homosexuality," potentially a capital offense under new controversial anti-gay legislation, an official said. The law — considered one of the harshest of its kind in the world — contains provisions that make "aggravated homosexuality" an offense punishable by death and includes penalties for consensual same-sex relations of up to life in prison. The suspect "was charged in Soroti [in eastern Uganda] and he is on remand in prison. He will be appearing in court for mention of the case," said Jacquelyn Okui, spokeswoman for Uganda's directorate of public prosecutions.

[**A new anti-gay law in Uganda calls for life in prison for those who are convicted**](#) (May 2023)

Uganda has passed one of the world's toughest anti-gay laws that calls for life imprisonment for anyone convicted of homosexuality. Ugandan president Yoweri Museveni signed the Anti-homosexuality Act despite widespread condemnation from many Western governments and human rights activists. Same-sex relations were already illegal in Uganda, a religiously conservative East African nation. But the new law levies harsher penalties for LGBTQ people.

[**Total and NGOs in court over oil projects**](#) (December 2022)

Friends of the Earth, Survival and four Ugandan NGOs accuse TotalEnergies of carrying out a project in defiance of human rights and the environment and call on the company to respect a law passed in 2017 which imposes on multinationals a "duty of vigilance" on their activities around the world.

ARCHIVED NEWS

[Most Suspended Ugandan NGOs Still in Limbo](#) (July 2022)

[Ugandan Author Kakwenza Rukirabashaija Flees the Country](#) (February 2022)

[Anger as Cabinet Okays Bail Reforms](#) (October 2021)

[Electoral Commission Rejects Audit of Polls](#) (March 2021)

[People's Government Wows to Defy Ban on Political Meetings in Homes](#) (January 2020)

[Uganda police detain Bobi Wine, foil meeting with supporters](#) (January 2020)

[Government probes 13 NGOs over money laundering](#) (August 2019)

[Voter education is crucial as 2021 elections approach](#) (March 2019)

[Government Moves To De-Register 7,000 Dormant NGOs](#) (September 2018)

[Popular Ugandan opposition MP Bobi Wine charged with treason](#) (August 2018)

[NGOs told to declare sources of funding](#) (April 2018)

[Uganda's fever spikes over age limit bid](#) (September 2017)

[Uganda's Deteriorating Human Rights Record up for Review](#) (November 2016)

[Bill Threatens Rights Groups](#) (April 2015)

[Uganda Anti-gay Law Struck Down by Court](#) (August 2014)

[Government issues statement on Anti-Homosexuality Act](#) (July 2014)

[Government to Track NGO Cash](#) (May 2014)

[Uganda's LGBTI community needs the UN now more than ever](#) (May 2014)

[Analysis of 'Anti-gay Law' in Uganda](#) (March 2014)

[Students Protest the Public Order Management Bill](#) (August 2013)

[Public Order Management Bill passed](#) (August 2013)

[Uganda charges opposition figure over rallies](#) (July 2013)

[Halt Crackdown on Media Houses in Kampala](#) (May 2013)

[Civil Society Calls for Tougher Laws On Small Arms Trade](#) (January 2013)

[CSOs fault Museveni on corruption](#) (December 2012)

[OPM scandal hurts civil society](#) (November 2012)

[Civil society advocacy in Uganda: Lessons learned](#) (November 2012)

[On 50th anniversary of independence, civil society under pressure](#) (November 2012)

[Curtailing criticism: Intimidation and obstruction of civil society in Uganda](#) (August 2012)

[Government wants public order bill passed](#) (May 2011)

[Museveni's swearing in amid crackdown on the opposition and human rights violations](#) (May 2011)

[Journalists attacked during elections in Uganda](#) (February 2011)

[Uganda gay rights activist David Kato killed](#) (January 2011)

historical notes

Uganda underwent the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) for the third time before the UN's UPR Working Group on January 27, 2022. Among the recommendations made by UN Member States was for Uganda to respect and uphold freedom of expression, association and assembly, to protect human rights defenders, civil society, and journalists, and to end harassment of human rights defenders and political opponents. In response to the recommendations, the Ugandan government stated that the enforcement of COVID-19 regulations affected the enjoyment of some rights; NGOs are required to align their activities to the priorities of government; some NGOs were found to be involved in unlawful activities with respect to the Financial Intelligence Authority and their accounts were frozen; and the government would follow the guidance of the courts on issues of NGO closures.

INTERNATIONAL CENTER
FOR NOT-FOR-PROFIT LAW

<https://www.icnl.org/resources/civic-freedom-monitor/uganda>