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Freedom House

Freedom in the World 2022 - Uganda

Not Free

34

/ 100

[Political Rights](#) 11 / 40[Civil Liberties](#) 23 / 60

Last Year's Score & Status

34 / 100 Not Free

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

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 independent media sectors suffer from legal and extralegal harassment and state violence.

Key Developments in 2021

- President Yoweri Museveni won reelection in January with 58.6 percent of the vote while Robert Kyagulanyi Ssentamu—better known as Bobi Wine—won 34.8 percent. The preelectoral and postelectoral periods were marked by repression, with authorities abducting opposition supporters, disrupting internet access, interfering with journalists, and preventing observers from monitoring the contest.
- The NRM won a clear parliamentary majority in the concurrent legislative contests, which were similarly marred by government repression. The opposition National Unity Platform (NUP) and Forum for Democratic Change (FDC) were the only other parties to win more than 10 seats.
- In April, the government announced that it would replace a 200 shilling (\$0.05) social media tax, which was criticized as an attack on freedom of expression upon its 2018 introduction, with a 12 percent tax on internet data.
- In August, the government ordered the closure of 54 nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), accusing of them of failing to comply with legal requirements. Groups affected included the Citizens' Coalition for Electoral Democracy in Uganda (CCEDU) and human rights NGO Chapter Four.

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 won the January 2021 election with 58.6 percent of the vote, while NUP candidate Bobi Wine won 34.8 percent. Turnout stood at 57 percent.

The campaign period, which began in late 2020, was marred by repression and violence, though polling day itself was calm besides a military presence in Kampala. Wine, who had been arrested several times in 2020, was placed under house arrest after casting his ballot, though the High Court of Kampala ordered his release later in January 2021. Authorities selectively used COVID-19 restrictions to disperse opposition rallies and arrest journalists, while

NRM events were allowed to proceed. Ugandans lost internet access as the electoral period ended, with the Uganda Communications Commission (UCC) ordering a five-day blackout the day before polling. Internet access was largely restored by February 2021.

Few observers monitored the vote. The United States cancelled its own effort, while the European Union's offer to send experts was declined. Ugandan NGOs, meanwhile, reported that almost none of its accreditation requests were granted. The CCEDU warned the results were not fully credible due to preelectoral violence and COVID-19-related restrictions. While Wine accused the government of stuffing ballot boxes, the CCEDU did not report such incidents. Wine filed a legal challenge in early February, calling for the results to be rejected, but withdrew his case later that month.

A2 0-4 pts

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

The 2021 elections for members of the unicameral Parliament were held concurrently with the presidential vote. A total of 499 representatives were directly elected, including parliamentarians for 353 single-member constituencies and 146 holders of seats reserved for women. Another 30 were chosen to represent special interest groups (youth, the elderly, workers, the military, and persons with disabilities). Ex officio members hold 27 seats.

The ruling NRM won 336 directly elected seats in January 2021, while the NUP won 57 and the FDC won 32. No other party won more than 10 seats. As with the concurrent presidential election, parliamentary contests were affected by violence, selectively enforced COVID-19 restrictions, internet shutdowns, and restrictions on journalists.

A3 0-4 pts

Are the electoral laws and framework fair, and are they implemented impartially by the relevant 1 / election management bodies? 4

Independent observers, civil society, and opposition leaders have long called for substantive electoral-law reforms. Following the flawed 2016 elections, the Supreme Court called on the attorney general to implement electoral reforms, though no meaningful changes were advanced by a 2018 deadline. In early 2020, Parliament passed five overdue electoral reform bills, four of which received assent that July.

Opposition politicians criticized the management of the January 2021 elections. The NUP noted the Electoral Commission's (EC) admission that it did not add results from over 1,200 polling sites, many of them in Kampala, to its count. The NUP also accused authorities of confiscating a computer containing voting data after polling day, which it claims would have shown evidence of fraud. Residents of the northern village of Apaa, the site of a long-running land-rights dispute, were unable to vote after the EC excluded them from the voter roll.

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 1 / competing parties or groupings? 4

The formation of political parties is protected by law, and multiple parties exist and compete in practice. However, the activities of opposition groups are hindered by restrictive party registration requirements and candidate eligibility rules, a lack of access to state media coverage, and violence or harassment by state authorities and paramilitary groups.

In June 2020, the government prohibited all political gatherings, ostensibly to curtail the spread of COVID-19, but disproportionately enforced the ban on the opposition. Candidates were forced to campaign using media that are heavily influenced by the NRM, like radio and television. While opposition rallies were dispersed, the NRM held events without interference. Following the November 2020 arrest of Wine at a rally, security forces violently dispersed protests organized by Wine's party, killing 54 people.

The government maintained pressure on the opposition after polling day in January 2021. Several days after the polls, the NUP reported that military personnel raided its headquarters. In early February, Wine claimed that over 3,000 NUP members had been abducted by the authorities, though the government claimed that only 31 members had been arrested. Academic Stella Nyanzi, a 2021 FDC parliamentary candidate, claimed that her partner, an NUP member, was abducted and tortured days ahead of the vote. Nyanzi and her children fled for Kenya in February.

B2 0-4 pts

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

The NRM dominates all levels of government. There are several dozen opposition lawmakers, as well as numerous independents, though some of the latter support the NRM. Election campaigns are characterized by violence, intimidation, and harassment toward opposition parties.

Leaders of opposition parties and political movements are sometimes arrested on trumped-up criminal charges. Wine was arrested several times during the 2020–21 campaign period and was placed under house arrest on polling day. Wine had previously been charged with treason over a 2018 incident; police alleged that Wine and his supporters

obstructed Museveni’s motorcade and threw stones at the vehicles. In September 2021, two NUP parliamentarians accused of murder earlier in the year were arrested on treason charges. In December 2021, Wine reported that authorities surrounded his home as he prepared to travel to Kayunga District ahead of a local by-election.

B3 0-4 pts

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

The military, which is closely aligned with Museveni and the NRM, holds 10 seats in Parliament. The government and ruling party reportedly use public resources and patronage networks to build political support among religious leaders and other influential figures.

B4 0-4 pts

Do various segments of the population (including ethnic, racial, religious, gender, LGBT+, and other 2 / relevant groups) have full political rights and electoral opportunities? 4

Although Uganda has many diverse ethnic groups, they lack equal representation and opportunities. Groups like Alur, Ik, Bagungu, Bakonzo, Kakwa, Batwa, and Karamojong are disproportionately affected by violent conflicts, have less access to education, and receive inadequate health care. The NRM’s dominant position and coercive tactics impede free political participation and advocacy of interests by various ethnic groups, including those affiliated with subnational kingdoms and smaller Indigenous groups.

An assessment of women’s participation in the 2016 elections by the Women’s Democracy Group, a coalition of Ugandan NGOs, noted a widespread perception that “[women] should not contest for direct positions... to reduce on the competition for male contestants” because some seats are reserved for women. Women hold 33.8 percent of Parliament’s seats as of September 2021.

Due to severe legal and societal discrimination, the interests of 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 1 / of the government? 4

Power is concentrated in the hands of the NRM leadership, the security forces, and especially Museveni, who retains office through deeply flawed electoral processes. Lawmakers have little practical ability to influence legislation in which the government has a particular interest, though there is more consultation on ordinary policy matters. The executive has secured 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

Corruption is a serious problem. There are laws and institutions designed to combat official malfeasance, including the Anti-Corruption Act of 2009 and the Inspectorate of Government, and instances of alleged graft have led to investigations and intense media attention. However, the system has not been effective at addressing corruption in a sustained manner, and top government officials are rarely prosecuted in practice.

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 (AIA). Other laws related to national security and confidentiality also impede open access to information in practice. The AIA is not uniformly applied. Government agencies seem to release information that only favors the regime. For example, in September 2020, the EC made public the academic documents of Bobi Wine while refusing to release those of President Museveni, despite numerous petitions.

Public procurement decisions are generally opaque.

Civil Liberties

D Freedom of Expression and Belief

D1 0-4 pts

Are there free and independent media? 1 / 4

The media sector features many independent outlets. Ugandans rely heavily on local radio stations. Journalists and authors face arrest, harassment, intimidation, and assault in reprisal for their work. Authorities routinely raid and shut down radio stations and other outlets and remove accreditation from journalists in retribution for their reporting.

During the 2020–21 electoral period, journalists covering Wine’s campaign events were harassed, assaulted, and detained on various charges. At least four journalists were harassed and detained between January 12 and January 20, 2021. One journalist, *New Vision* reporter Emmanuel Ojok, was physically attacked and detained by soldiers

when he filmed their confrontation with an opposition candidate. In February, security forces assaulted at least 10 journalists covering Wine’s delivery of a petition to the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (UNHCR) in Kampala.

Outlets were also targeted during the electoral period. In November 2020, military and police personnel forced Wine to leave the studio of Spice FM in Hoima District; by then, Wine had been prevented from speaking on 13 radio stations. That December, Jinja radio station Busoga One was threatened with closure for hosting Wine. Busoga One was closed on polling day in January 2021, with police claiming it was inciting violence; it resumed broadcasting later that month. Jinja-based Baba FM was shut down several days after the polls, with the authorities making similar accusations.

In December 2021, author Kakwenza Rukirabashaija was detained by authorities after making satirical comments about President Museveni and Lieutenant General Muhoozi Kainerugaba, his son, on social media. Rukirabashaija remained in custody at year’s end.

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 has restricted religious groups whose members allegedly pose security risks. It has also sought to control political statements by religious leaders, tolerating those who express support for 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, and the investigations into the crimes have not yet led to any convictions.

D3 0-4 pts

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

Academic freedom has been undermined by alleged surveillance of university lectures by security officials, and by the need for professors to obtain permission to hold public meetings at universities. In 2018, 45 staff members at Makerere University in Kampala were dismissed for indiscipline, but critics argued that the dismissals were meant to silence government critics. In September 2021, Victoria University vice chancellor Lawrence Muganga was detained over espionage suspicions. Muganga, a member of the Banyarwanda ethnic group, previously campaigned to rename the community in Uganda to lessen government discrimination. Muganga was released a day later.

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

Private speech is relatively unrestrained, and Ugandans openly criticize the government on social media. However, individuals risk criminal penalties for such speech, and the government reportedly monitors social media platforms. Media reports in December 2021 indicated that Ugandan intelligence officials used the Pegasus spyware suite against journalists, at least one opposition figure, and US government employees working in Uganda or on matters there.

In 2018, the government implemented a controversial social media tax, requiring users on platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp to pay a prohibitively expensive 200 shilling (\$0.05) daily fee. The tax was repealed in April 2021, with that decision taking full effect in July. However, Parliament also voted to introduce a 12 percent internet data tax in April.

In late 2020, the UCC announced that online content creators must register and pay a \$27 fee. Critics claim the regulations curtail freedom of speech for Ugandans who criticize the government online.

E Associational and Organizational Rights

E1 0-4 pts

Is there freedom of assembly? 1 / 4

In March 2020, the Constitutional Court annulled the Public Order Management Act (POMA), the 2013 public order law that required groups to register with local police in writing three days before any gathering to discuss political issues. The government prevented opposition rallies using POMA, which gave police the authority to deny approval for meetings that were not deemed to be in the “public interest” and to forcefully disperse assemblies judged unlawful.

Unlawful, unjustified, and disproportionate uses of force against protesters were common occurrences in 2020. That November, the authorities killed 54 people during protests in Kampala and other towns. Authorities continued to interfere with protests in 2021; in March, police and military personnel briefly detained Wine as he participated in a Kampala protest.

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 various legal restrictions, burdensome registration requirements, and occasional threats. NGOs that work on human rights issues have reported break-ins at their offices and burglaries in recent years, with police failing to adequately investigate the incidents.

In 2019, the government required NGOs to submit information to the National Bureau for NGOs on their staffing, finances, and activities. That November, the interior minister ordered some 12,000 NGOs to close for failing to renew their registration, though the bureau said the groups would still have an opportunity to reregister. In August 2021, the government ordered the closure of 54 NGOs, including the CCEDU and Chapter Four, ostensibly for failing to comply with legal requirements.

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 2018, there were 42 trade unions in Uganda, representing close to one million people. Most are grouped under two umbrella entities—the National Organization of Trade Unions (NOTU) and the Central Organization of Free Trade Unions (COFTU). Despite their legal and institutional protections, trade unions have been undermined in practice by co-optation, intimidation, and manipulation designed to frustrate their organizing and bargaining efforts.

F Rule of Law

F1 0-4 pts

Is there an independent judiciary? 1 / 4

Executive influence and systemic corruption weaken judicial independence. In 2019, the chief justice established an internal task force to investigate corruption allegations, but the FDC called for an independent probe. In 2020, the US State Department sanctioned two judges over allegedly corrupt behavior linked to an adoption program.

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

Rape, extrajudicial violence, and torture and abuse of suspects and detainees by security forces are persistent problems, and perpetrators are rarely prosecuted.

The Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA), 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. In February 2021, the International Criminal Court convicted LRA leader Dominic Ongwen of crimes against humanity. Ongwen received a 25 year prison term in May.

Prison conditions are poor. The prison system operates at triple its intended capacity, with pretrial detainees constituting nearly half of the inmate population.

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 ethnic origin, religion, age, race, disability, color, and sex. However, the LGBT+ community faces overt hostility from the government and much of society. Same-sex relations are criminalized under a colonial-era law. Men and transgender women accused of consensual sex are sometimes forced to undergo an anal exam that Human Rights Watch (HRW) says could amount to torture. In May 2021, Parliament approved the Sexual Offences Bill of 2019, which would criminalize same-sex intercourse and anal sex regardless of gender. Museveni declined to sign it in August, saying its provisions effectively exist in the penal code.

The law prohibits employment discrimination based on gender and other criteria, but it does not cover the informal sector, in which most women work, and women are subject to de facto discrimination in employment and other matters.

There were 1.6 million refugees living in Uganda as of November 2021, and the United Nations has praised the government 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, 3 / employment, or education? 4

Freedom of movement is largely unrestricted, including for refugees, most of whom live outside of camps. 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.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the Ugandan government implemented strict measures and movement restrictions, which were at times violently enforced.

G2 0-4 pts

Are individuals able to exercise the right to own property and establish private businesses without 2 / undue interference from state or nonstate actors? 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 and central Uganda. The law allows women to inherit land, but local customary rules and societal practices put women at a disadvantage regarding land tenure and inheritance.

In 2020, the government received a commission of inquiry’s (CoI) report on land rights, which recommended the establishment of land courts and of an ombudsman among other measures. In April 2021, Museveni said the government would legislate based the CoI’s findings.

In August 2021, Museveni and local leaders in Apaa agreed to launch a CoI to address a long-running land dispute; authorities have evicted residents for years after land there was devoted to conservation in 2002.

G3 0-4 pts

Do individuals enjoy personal social freedoms, including choice of marriage partner and size of family, 1 / protection from domestic violence, and control over appearance? 4

Domestic violence is widespread and underreported, and underage marriages are common in some communities. Some 34 percent of women aged 20 to 24 are married by age 18 and more than 60 percent of young adults experienced physical abuse as children, according to a 2019 UN Children’s Fund report.

A Nordic Africa Institute report published in May 2021 noted that Ugandan girls were at higher risk of gender-based violence (GBV) during COVID-19-related school closures. Nearly 645,000 teenage pregnancies were reported between March 2020 and September 2021 according to the UN Population Fund.

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, and the issue is most prevalent in rural areas. Sexual exploitation of minors is also an ongoing problem.

While Uganda maintains domestic laws to promote workers’ rights, the government has failed to regulate the recruitment and transfer of Ugandan domestic workers to Middle Eastern countries. Accounts that surfaced in 2019 described workers experiencing sexual abuse, beatings, exploitation, and torture. In September 2021, The Gender, Labour, and Social Development Ministry introduced draft regulations meant to address this issue.

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