



SUPPORTING
AN ENABLING ENVIRONMENT
FOR CIVIL SOCIETY

Enabling Environment Snapshot

Uganda

July 2025

Context

As Uganda approaches the 2026 general elections, the political landscape has been marked by a significant increase in human rights violations and threats to freedoms of association, expression, and assembly. Current events exemplify this, including attacks on opposition actors and activists, abductions of opposition figures, torture, [and assaults on journalists during the Kawempe by-elections](#), where the military abused the electoral process.

Furthermore, amendments to [the Uganda People's Defence Forces Act](#) are likely to adversely affect human rights and curtail freedoms. Consequently, civic actors face significant risks in their responses, impacting the work of civil society.

Further complicating the work of civil society is the [withdrawal of USAID](#), which was offering funding to civil society. The funding pause comes at a particularly challenging time, as the civil society sector is still grappling with the aftermath of the closure of the Democracy Governance Facility (DGF), a multi-donor fund that had sustained operations in the sector for nearly 12 years. The loss of DGF funding disrupted many programmes aimed at strengthening democratic institutions, promoting civic engagement, and enhancing government accountability.

1. Respect and protection of fundamental freedoms

[Uganda's constitution](#) guarantees the freedoms of expression, assembly, and association; however, practical enforcement remains inconsistent. Violations of these fundamental freedoms have continued unabated. Recent examples include the amendment of the [Uganda People's Defense Forces](#). In May 2025, the Ugandan Parliament [passed](#) the Uganda People's Defense Forces (UPDF) Amendment Bill, 2025, which aims to address the trial of civilians in military courts. The bill, initially tabled in May, seeks to establish a framework for exceptional circumstances where civilians can be tried by courts-martial, following the Supreme Court's [previous ruling](#) that such trials were unconstitutional. This amendment means that more civilians will be tried in military courts, raising fears that military trials may be used as a tactic to suppress political dissent in the upcoming electoral period.

The [violence against journalists](#) in the just-concluded Kawempe North by-elections was yet another violation of fundamental freedoms where military officers indiscriminately targeted and rounded up journalists covering the elections. At least eight journalists from the Nation Media Group (NTV Uganda, Spark TV, Daily Monitor) and NBS TV were brutally beaten. Three of them were arbitrarily arrested and unlawfully detained at Kawempe police station. This undermines press freedoms and violates the human dignity of the affected journalists.

The escalating crackdown on opposition figures and activists continues unabated. This has been manifested in tweets by the Chief of Defence Forces, General Muhoozi Kainerugaba, who has constantly used his Twitter account to threaten opposition leaders and activists. In one post, he [confirmed the detention of Edward Sebuufu](#), the bodyguard of an opposition leader who had been missing for five days. In a series of tweets, Gen. Kainerugaba went further, claiming Mr. Sebuufu was "in my basement" and attaching a photo of him with a clean-shaven head. Reports indicate that Sebuufu, also known as Eddie Mutwe, had been seized by unidentified men wearing both civilian clothes and military fatigues in the central town of Kiwango. His disappearance and public display on social media sparked outrage and deep concern for his safety, underscoring the systematic campaign to silence dissent and instil fear among the citizenry.

Furthermore, accountability processes are almost non-existent. Citizens rarely succeed in holding the government to account, and those who attempt to do so are often branded as anti-government or even dismissed as foreign agents. In April 2025, for example, police [blocked several youth activists](#) who staged a mannequin protest demanding the release of opposition leader Dr. Kizza Besigye.

2. Supportive legal framework for the work of civil society actors

Uganda's legal framework for Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) has [stringent requirements](#), some of which are repetitive. This situation complicates effective operation for CSOs. For instance, NGOs and churches must register with the Uganda Registration Services Bureau, the NGO Bureau, and the Data Protection Office, while also securing recommendations to operate from local districts and the relevant line ministry. Meanwhile, online media services need to register with the UCC, while content providers face potential legal action.

Additionally, the [NGO Policy 2024](#) introduces new requirements that complicate the operating environment for civil society in Uganda, including stricter oversight of NGO finances and operations. In response, the Uganda National NGO Forum facilitated nationwide consultations with the Ministry of Internal Affairs as part of a Regulatory Impact Assessment, bringing together regional stakeholders to discuss the policy. The consultations were aimed at carrying out a regulatory impact assessment to understand how the different regulations in the NGO Policy have affected NGOs in the different regions of the country. This also involved analysing expected costs and benefits of the proposed regulations for the different stakeholders. However, civil society organisations remain concerned that the policy could increase government control over NGO finances and undermine the sector's independence, raising doubts about whether the consultation process will address these fundamental issues.

While NGOs have the freedom to outline their objectives and activities, their operations can be hindered by the requirement of obtaining MOUs from districts before implementation. Additionally, NGOs must secure MOUs with the line ministries before starting operations. This principle has been long established in the areas of refugee support and humanitarian assistance, where such MOUs are required from the Office of the Prime Minister. NGOs have continued to encounter operational challenges due to the persistent refusal of district local governments to sign MOUs with them. The denial of MOUs presents a [significant obstacle](#) to CSO operations, especially in securing donor funding, as a valid MOU is a donor requirement for financing.

3. Accessible and sustainable resources

There has been a general reduction in the resources available to civil society actors due to the closure of key funders. These include the Democratic Governance Facility, a crucial basket fund established by seven European Union member states and the EU itself, which [was shut down by the government](#) based on unsubstantiated allegations of subversion. Recently, USAID has suspended operations globally, [significantly affecting CSOs](#) involved in humanitarian work, health provision, advocacy, as well as human rights and accountability. In addition to USAID's withdrawal, several development partners and international agencies, including those from the Netherlands, Sweden, France, and Switzerland, have also significantly reduced their funding allocations to CSOs. These funding reductions exacerbate the resource constraints faced by CSOs in Uganda, limiting their ability to operate effectively and work.

In the current environment, funding for human rights work is not guaranteed to be long-term but is largely project-based. Civil society actors are expected to deliver on short-term projects of two to three years with unrealistic deliverables that often set them up to fail. This partially explains the [declining number of operational CSOs](#), as well as the increasing number of civil society actors shifting focus to less contentious fields that do not place them in conflict with the government. As a result, the most contentious issues remain unaddressed.

In light of the current funding landscape, the Royal Danish Embassy continues to provide funding to CSOs through the “Promotion of Accountability, Civic Engagement and Rights” project, which is aimed at strengthening democratic values. The embassy had to revise organisational budgets that received their grants to cushion them against the withdrawal of USAID. This has enabled the USAID-stricken organisations to continue operating despite the funding constraints. Some of these organisations were thus able to operate effectively, to be accountable to the people that these CSOs serve, and engage meaningfully with citizens.

4. State openness and responsiveness

In Uganda, legal requirements exist for publishing public information, [such as the Access to Information Act](#), but implementation is inconsistent. Whereas procedures for information requests are available, [such requests are rarely handled promptly or with the level of urgency](#). In addition, procedures to access information exist but are not known to most civil society actors. When made, such information requests are often ignored, with a lack of clear and transparent justification. These justifications range from information being classified or affecting national security.

The law provides several avenues for citizen participation. For example, citizens can engage with Parliament at the committee stage or through their individual MPs, and similar opportunities exist at the local council level. They can also take part in budget processes at the local government level. However, in practice, the government rarely consults civil society on sensitive issues such as security. A case in point is the [amendment of the UPDF Act](#), where CSOs and other groups were not consulted.

5. Political Culture and Public Discourses on Civil Society

Some politicians or government figures occasionally frame CSOs as unnecessary or potentially harmful to national interests. This has been the [situation](#) over the last five years, and has become more evident since the discussion and passage of the Anti-Homosexuality Act.

There is some level of civic engagement, especially for NGOs, professional bodies, and faith institutions. However, there are a number of limitations. For example, civic education is highly controlled by the government, and civil society in Uganda has not yet been accredited to provide voter education ahead of the 2026 general elections.

Structural and operational barriers also limit democratic participation. For instance, [election-related violence](#) has discouraged many women and minorities from taking part in the electoral process, fostering a culture of fear and apathy that keeps citizens disengaged from politics.

The process for updating the National Voters Register has also been marred by irregularities ahead of the 2026 general elections. The update exercise was conducted in accordance with Article 61(1)(e) of the Constitution and Section 20 of the Electoral Commission Act (Cap 176). The process registered a [low turnout, a lack of machines, and sensitization](#). The irregularities

were caused by [limited sensitization of the general public about the exercise](#), with some thinking that the exercise was about verifying voters rather than updating the register.

6. Access to a secure digital environment

In 2022, Uganda was [ranked](#) as having one of the most expensive internet connections in the world. The country ranked 116 out of 121 in internet penetration, making Uganda's internet service the most expensive in the East African Community, [and way too costly for the average citizens](#). Additionally, [Facebook remains blocked](#), forcing citizens to access it through a VPN. This affects both civil society actors and the general public they aim to engage for awareness, advocacy, and capacity building. This presents an even greater crisis due to [restrictions on mainstream media](#), which creates barriers for many civil society actors, especially those focused on accountability and other contentious issues.

Furthermore, there are [low levels of basic ICT skills and data literacy among the population](#), creating further challenges. This results in impediments for the general public to access digital tools and makes them vulnerable to manipulation and fake news.

As the 2026 General Elections approach, the digital environment is expected to become even more complicated for Uganda. During elections, social media is [usually blocked](#) for about three days. This stifles freedom of speech and expression, as people cannot express themselves or share information on social media.

Challenges and Opportunities

As Uganda edges towards the 2026 general elections, the political environment presents both profound challenges and limited but important opportunities for civil society. The electoral period is already generating heightened political activity and public debate, which provides CSOs with a window to expand voter education, raise awareness about citizens' rights, and influence political agendas. However, these opportunities remain fragile and conditional, given the severe restrictions on civic space.

One of the main opportunities lies in mobilising citizens around electoral processes and civic engagement. Civil society can leverage ongoing debates to amplify citizens' manifestos, advocate for accountability, and provide civic education — particularly through digital platforms, which have proven useful in past mobilisations such as the “walk to parliament” demonstrations. In this sense, online spaces, despite their limitations, can help CSOs sustain dialogue, strengthen digital literacy, and connect with citizens in ways that mainstream media and public forums no longer allow.

At the same time, the obstacles are significant. Civil society organisations face systematic repression, including arbitrary arrests, abductions, smear campaigns, and the excessive use of security forces to intimidate both activists and ordinary citizens. Restrictive legislation such as the NGO Act (2016), the Public Order Management Act (2013), and recent amendments to the UPDF Act continue to shrink the operational environment. Funding cuts — from the closure of the DGF to USAID's suspension and reductions by European partners — further weaken CSOs' ability to act on opportunities in a sustained way.

These constraints mean that the potential for impact is contingent on overcoming persistent barriers. For example, the Electoral Commission has yet to accredit civil society to conduct voter education, directly undermining one of the most urgent roles CSOs could play. Similarly, internet shutdowns and high connectivity costs threaten to limit the reach of digital mobilisation during critical electoral moments.

In short, the upcoming elections offer civil society a moment to push for accountability and citizen participation, but the scope of these opportunities will depend on whether government

institutions open space for meaningful engagement and whether CSOs can adapt to operate effectively in a hostile political and funding environment.

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