



SUPPORTING
AN ENABLING ENVIRONMENT
FOR CIVIL SOCIETY

Enabling Environment Snapshot

Uganda

March 2026

Context

Reporting period covered by report: July 2025 to March 2026.

Uganda's civic space has been shaped by an increasingly consolidated political environment, where state authority continues to be reinforced through institutional, legislative, and security mechanisms. In the lead-up to the 2026 general elections, public debate and political engagement became more tightly controlled, with heightened sensitivity toward actors perceived to influence governance processes. This period also saw renewed emphasis on narratives of national sovereignty and self-determination, reflected in emerging legislative discussions such as the Protection of Sovereignty Bill. These developments indicate a shift toward a governance approach that places greater scrutiny on external influence, especially in sectors traditionally supported by international partners like civil society.

At the same time, public institutions face mounting pressure to meet citizen expectations amid fiscal constraints and rising living costs. Concerns about [public debt](#), expenditure priorities, and service delivery, particularly in health, education, and governance, remain central to public discourse. These pressures have increased citizens' demand for accountability and transparency, areas where civil society organisations have historically played a vital role. However, this growing demand coincides with a more cautious operating environment, where engagement on governance issues is handled with increased sensitivity.

The context is also characterised by shifting dynamics in Uganda's relationship with international partners. The continued decline and restructuring of major governance-focused funding mechanisms, along with a broader diversification of diplomatic and economic partnerships, have lessened the influence of traditional donors in shaping governance reforms. This has affected civil society, especially organisations dependent on external funding for advocacy, research, and accountability initiatives. The evolving external landscape, along with domestic policy emphasis on sovereignty, has created a more uncertain and constrained funding and operational environment.

Uganda's demographic profile continues to shape patterns of civic engagement. [A large, youthful population](#), combined with [limited formal employment opportunities](#), sustains public interest in governance, economic inclusion, and service delivery. Digital platforms remain key spaces for expression and engagement, although access is uneven and is disrupted during politically sensitive periods.

The role of civil society remains vital in supporting accountability and citizen engagement, but it is increasingly carried out within a context that requires careful navigation of political sensitivities and operational risks.

1. Respect and protection of fundamental freedoms

Uganda's [Constitution](#) guarantees freedoms of expression, association, and peaceful assembly; however, the period around the 2026 elections saw significant restrictions on these rights. One of the most impactful actions was the [nationwide internet shutdown](#) shortly before and during the election, which disrupted access to social media, messaging services, and email communications. This severely limited citizens' ability to share information, report irregularities, or participate in public discourse. The shutdown also affected civil society groups

that rely heavily on online platforms to advocate, mobilise citizens, and document human rights violations.

Freedom of association was also greatly impacted by the [suspension](#) of several key human rights civil society groups by the National Bureau for Non-Governmental Organisations. Suspended organisations included Chapter Four Uganda, Human Rights Network for Journalists Uganda, Alliance for Finance Monitoring, African Centre for Media Excellence, African Centre for Treatment and Rehabilitation of Torture Victims, and Uganda National NGO Forum. These suspensions, occurring just days before the election, effectively halted the work of organisations vital to governance monitoring, civic education, and human rights documentation. These arbitrary suspensions mirror previous efforts by the NGO Bureau to impede the operations of CSOs during an electoral period. A few months before the 2021 general elections, the NGO Bureau [issued similar immediate suspensions](#) of fifty-four CSOs in Uganda.

Restrictions on peaceful assembly were also widely observed during this period. Security forces frequently [dispersed gatherings](#) using tear gas and, in some instances, excessive force, particularly in urban areas and opposition strongholds. There were also reports of undue restrictions on freedom of movement, including roadblocks and limitations on public gatherings for opposition candidates, which constrained both formal and informal civic engagement. These measures were accompanied by [arrests of protesters, opposition supporters, and activists](#), further shrinking the space for collective civic action and reinforcing a climate of deterrence around public assembly.

The crackdown extended to the [arrest of prominent civil society leaders such as Sarah Bireete](#), an advocate for governance and accountability, facing charges related to public order and incitement. She was later [released on bail](#) on 27 January after a short period in detention. The arrest sent a strong signal to civil society actors about the risks associated with advocacy, particularly during politically sensitive periods. The incident contributed to heightened self-censorship among activists and organisations, reinforcing a broader climate of fear and uncertainty. These developments underscore a pattern in which legal, administrative, and security measures are used to restrict fundamental freedoms, with significant implications for the independence of civic space in Uganda.

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

Uganda's legal framework for civil society organisations is primarily governed by the [Non-Governmental Organisations Amendment Act 2024](#). It provides the basis for registering and regulating NGOs through the National Bureau for Non-Governmental Organisations under the Ministry of Internal Affairs.

Although the law permits civil society organisations to operate, it includes provisions that give broad discretionary power to regulators. These allow the NGO Bureau to suspend organisations if their activities are considered against the interests of Uganda or harmful to national security. The suspension of several major organisations before the 2026 elections demonstrated how regulatory tools can be used to restrict civic space during politically sensitive times. The suspensions [cited](#) intelligence reports and alleged that the organisations'

activities were prejudicial to national security, invoking provisions under Section 42(d) of the NGO Act (as amended). Banks were instructed to freeze the organisations' accounts, effectively halting operations and staff remuneration. The timing and nature of these actions underscored how broad regulatory powers can be mobilised to restrict civil society, particularly during politically sensitive periods, and significantly undermine civic space, independent oversight, and public debate.

Civil society organisations face a [complex regulatory environment](#) that requires multiple registration approvals from district local governments and line ministries before they can implement projects. These administrative hurdles often delay programmes and create uncertainty, especially for organisations working across multiple districts. The threat of sudden regulatory actions increases self-censorship among civil society organisations involved in governance, human rights, and accountability issues.

The [proposed Protection of Sovereignty Bill](#) further complicates the legal framework for civil society actors. Designed to safeguard Uganda's national interests, the bill requires organisations to declare foreign funding within 14 days and grants expanded monitoring powers to the Minister of Internal Affairs. Non-compliance may result in fines, criminal penalties of up to 20 years in prison, or forfeiture of assets. This bill, if passed into law with its broad and ambiguous language, could criminalise legitimate activities, stifle independent policy engagement, and severely restrict operational space, particularly for organisations involved in governance, elections, and public policy research.

3. Accessible and sustainable resources

Access to sustainable financial resources is still a major challenge facing civil society organisations in Uganda. Funding constraints have intensified in recent years following the closure of key funding mechanisms such as [the Democratic Governance Facility](#), [the GIZ governance programme](#) and [the United States Agency for International Development](#), which had previously provided significant support to governance and accountability programmes.

The suspension of human rights-based CSOs ahead of the 2026 elections further worsened the funding challenges. In addition to suspending their operational permits, authorities [froze the bank accounts of some of the affected organisations](#). The organisations are unable to access funds needed to pay staff salaries, meet contractual obligations, or continue programme activities. The freezing of accounts has paralysed the operations of civil society actors at a critical moment in the country's democratic process.

The broader funding landscape also remains uncertain as many donors have shifted toward short-term project-based funding rather than long-term institutional support. This trend has forced many organisations to adjust their programming priorities and, in some cases, move away from politically sensitive work such as governance monitoring and human rights advocacy in favour of less contentious sectors.

4. State openness and responsiveness

Uganda's legal framework provides mechanisms through which citizens and civil society organisations can engage with public institutions, including parliamentary committee hearings and local government consultations. However, the level of state openness to civil society engagement varies significantly depending on the political sensitivity of the issue.

Despite these challenges, [some channels of engagement between the government and civil society remain open](#). Civil society organisations continue to engage with regulatory bodies such as the NGO Bureau in efforts to resolve compliance issues and maintain their operational status. However, the broader environment remains cautious, with many organisations carefully navigating their relationships with state institutions.

5. Political Culture and Public Discourses on Civil Society

Political discourse around civil society in Uganda remains highly contested. Government officials and some political actors frequently portray civil society organisations, particularly those working on governance and human rights, as agents of foreign interests or actors seeking to destabilise the country. Such narratives have become more prominent during politically sensitive periods, including elections.

The arrest of civil society actors like Sarah Bireete and the suspension of several civil society organisations ahead of the 2026 elections reinforced these narratives, as authorities [justified their action](#) by citing concerns about national security and the alleged involvement of some organisations in activities considered harmful to the state. These narratives contribute to public scepticism toward civil society organisations and weaken their legitimacy in the eyes of some segments of the population.

Additionally, the proposed Protection of Sovereignty Bill reinforces the narrative that casts civil society organisations and human rights defenders as agents of foreign interests. In a political climate where foreign ties are equated to subversion, being labelled a foreign agent risks casting individuals and organisations as dangerous entities promoting foreign entities. This discourages ordinary citizens from associating and engaging with civil society organisations for fear of being associated with foreign interest agents. Over time, this will lead to the delegitimisation and isolation of civil society organisations.

Furthermore, during the 2026 electoral process, civil society organisations were [denied accreditation](#) to conduct voter education and election observation. These roles are usually undertaken by civil society actors and are regarded as important mechanisms for strengthening transparency and public trust in electoral processes. The denial of accreditation limited independent oversight of the elections and further reduced opportunities for civic participation in the electoral process.

With President Yoweri Museveni's re-election in January 2026, following more than four decades in power, public belief in citizens' own agency for change has been under strain. Museveni was [declared the winner](#) with a commanding share of the vote of 71.65 per cent, an outcome that election observers described as occurring in a constrained political environment marked by irregularities, opposition suppression, and allegations of manipulation. [Turnout in](#)

[the presidential vote](#) was 52.5%, the lowest turnout ever in election history in Uganda, a reflection in part of disillusionment and fear among some segments of the electorate about the fairness of the process. This has affected perceptions of civic agency. For citizens who hoped that greater engagement, mobilisation, or advocacy through civil society could produce substantive political change, the election results and the heavy tilt toward the incumbent reinforced a sense that ordinary participation, even when lawful and peaceful, may be insufficient to challenge entrenched power structures. This has led to political fatigue and a reduction in willingness to engage actively, as the prospect of altering long-standing political dynamics through voting alone appears unattainable.

6. Access to a secure digital environment

The digital environment in Uganda is constrained by both structural and political factors. Internet access is [relatively expensive compared to regional standards](#), limiting the ability of many citizens to engage fully in online civic and political discourse. [Digital literacy levels also remain uneven, particularly in rural areas](#), further limiting the reach of online engagement initiatives.

The [internet shutdown](#) that occurred during the 2026 election period demonstrated the vulnerability of Uganda's digital space to political interference. The Uganda Communications Commission (UCC) issued a directive to telecommunications operators and internet service providers to suspend public internet access and selected mobile services nationwide. The directive justified the blackout on grounds of preventing the rapid spread of misinformation and disinformation, curbing electoral fraud, and averting incitement to violence that could undermine public order and national security. It was framed as necessary to protect the integrity of the electoral process and maintain stability during a politically sensitive time. Authorities cited provisions of the [Uganda Communications Act](#), particularly broad regulatory powers to oversee communications, as the legal basis for the directive. The blackout lasted several days and was only partially lifted after the results were announced. [Ugandan authorities routinely tighten internet access during elections](#), depriving voters of crucial electoral information. By suspending access to internet services and social media platforms, authorities significantly restricted the ability of citizens and civil society organisations to communicate, share information, and document events during a critical moment in the country's political life.

For civil society organisations, digital platforms are essential tools for advocacy, civic education, and mobilisation. However, the risk of internet disruptions and digital surveillance continues to shape how organisations use these tools, often forcing them to adopt cautious communication strategies.

On the brighter side, in March 2026, Uganda's Constitutional Court delivered a [landmark ruling](#) that nullified the entire Computer Misuse (Amendment) Act, 2022, declaring it null and void because Parliament passed it without the required quorum, in violation of its own Rules of Procedure and Articles 88 and 89 of the Constitution. The Court struck down provisions broadly criminalising unauthorised data access or recording, sharing certain categories of information (including about children), so-called "offensive" or "malicious" communication, unsolicited information, and misuse of social media identities, along with criminal libel under the Penal Code. This judgment removes vague and broadly worded offences that had frequently been used to arrest and intimidate activists, journalists, bloggers, and human rights

defenders for online criticism, satire, information-sharing, election monitoring, and public interest advocacy. By substantially reducing self-censorship and legal risks in the digital space, which serves as a key platform for civic mobilisation amid tightening offline pressures such as the ongoing Protection of Sovereignty Bill debates, the ruling provides breathing room for freer expression and digital rights.

Challenges and Opportunities

In the coming period, civil society in Uganda is likely to continue operating in a constrained and politically sensitive environment following the 2026 elections. Post-election tensions, the suspension of several civil society organisations, and increasing hostility toward governance and accountability work are expected to limit civic space. Civil society actors need to navigate heightened regulatory scrutiny, protect their operational space, and continue engaging cautiously with state institutions while promoting accountability, human rights, and citizen participation in an increasingly restrictive political environment.

Civil society organisations, however, have continued to demonstrate resilience by adapting their strategies and maintaining engagement with government institutions. Dialogue with regulatory bodies such as the NGO Bureau remains an important avenue through which organisations seek to resolve compliance issues and safeguard their operational space.

Many civil society organisations have adopted cautious approaches to their work, recognising that they operate in an environment where regulatory sanctions remain a constant possibility. The persistence of civic engagement initiatives and ongoing collaboration between civil society actors suggests that the sector continues to search for ways to sustain its role in Uganda's governance landscape, even within a constrained civic space. In the current political reality, the sector's survival depends on pragmatic, low-profile engagement as the situation normalises.

Efforts should focus on strengthening organisational resilience, providing flexible funding mechanisms, and supporting capacity-building initiatives that enable CSOs to navigate restrictive regulations safely. External actors can also facilitate discreet platforms for dialogue, knowledge sharing, and advocacy, while creating international awareness about the shrinking civic space in Uganda. Such visibility can strengthen the enabling environment, generate support for civil society's work, and reduce pressures on organisations operating under restrictive conditions.

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