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Ugandan Election: Intrigues and Democratic Fragility

Election Profile

Uganda enters a new electoral cycle with elections scheduled for January 15, 2026 to elect a new president and members of parliament. Uganda's Electoral Commission has cleared 27 political parties to participate in the Presidential and parliamentary elections. Eight presidential candidates, including the 81-year-old incumbent Yoweri Museveni and opposition aspirant Bobi Wine are vying for the presidency. President Yoweri Museveni, who has been in power since 1986, is running for a 7th term under the National Resistance Movement. Museveni remains the central figure in the electoral contest, following constitutional amendments that removed both term and age limits. He came into office not through the ballot box, but an armed insurrection led by the National Resistance Army, in a country battered by fraud, violence, and instability. His initial narrative was clear: order, reconstruction, and a transition to democracy. It worked both as a promise and as a founding story. However, over the years, that script changed. First, presidential term limits were removed in 2005, and later the age limit was eliminated in 2017, paving the way for indefinite rule, shielded by legal and constitutional reforms. While Uganda maintains regular electoral cycles, the broader governance environment is characterised by constrained political competition, a weakened opposition, and persistent concerns regarding the independence of electoral and security institutions. The Electoral Commission is constitutionally mandated to administer the process; however, its perceived alignment with the executive has generated scepticism among opposition parties and civil society organisations. Past elections have been marked by allegations of administrative bias, delayed result transmission, and limited transparency, factors which continue to shape expectations ahead of the forthcoming polls.



Uganda's last elections in 2021 provide insight into the expectations for the January 15 election result. Uganda's 2021 presidential elections was defined not only by allegations, but by hard data. Yoweri Museveni was declared the winner with 58.38% (6.0 million votes), compared to 35.08% for Bobi Wine. Voter turnout stood at just 59.3%, a key indicator of political disengagement. The electoral map reveals a clear fracture: rural areas and the north aligned with the ruling party, largely due to control mechanisms. In contrast, urban areas and the central/southern regions swung toward the opposition. This is not just politics—it is demography, age, connectivity, and expectations about the future. Uganda voted split down the middle.

Pre-Election Intrigues

Uganda's 2026 electoral cycle did not begin on a level playing field. Months before the formal campaign, the pattern is already clear - militarization of public space, criminalization of opposition mobilization, and administrative control of the process. While the ruling party holds events without restrictions, the opposition faces roadblocks, event cancellations, selective arrests, and the discretionary use of force. The message is both technical and political; voting is allowed, but competition is tightly controlled. The context is marked by threats of internet shutdowns, pressure on candidates through the electoral authority, the use of "security and peace" rhetoric to justify armed deployments, and an official narrative that equates protest with destabilization. In parallel, the opposition led by Bobi Wine responds with territorial organization, vote protection, and alternative channels of communication.



Additionally, the role of the security apparatus has become increasingly prominent. Military and paramilitary forces are routinely deployed during electoral periods, often justified as preventive measures against unrest. This securitisation of the electoral environment blurs the boundary between civilian politics and military authority, reinforcing perceptions of a managed political outcome rather than an open democratic contest.

International and regional election observers are expected to be present; however, their influence remains limited. Observer missions have historically issued cautiously balanced assessments, acknowledging procedural compliance while downplaying structural constraints. This has fuelled criticism that observation efforts legitimise electoral processes without adequately addressing underlying governance deficits.

Potential Risk

The principal risk lies not in an outright breakdown of order, but in the gradual erosion of democratic legitimacy. Persistent reliance on security measures to manage political competition risks normalising coercion as a feature of governance. Over time, this may deepen public disengagement, foster political apathy, and increase the likelihood of post-election unrest, particularly among younger voters who feel excluded from meaningful political participation.

At the regional level, Uganda's election poses a normative challenge to the African Union and the East African Community. Continued tolerance of constrained electoral processes undermines continental commitments to democratic governance and civilian supremacy. Failure to address

these issues risks reinforcing a pattern in which elections are held regularly but lack substantive credibility.

In summary, Uganda's forthcoming election represents a critical moment not only for the country's political future but also for Africa's broader democratic architecture. Without reforms that strengthen institutional independence and political pluralism, the electoral process risks entrenching stability without legitimacy.

The African Electoral Monitor research report was compiled by the *Election & Governance* desk of the Gen. LEO Irabor, Early Warning System Centre, Nigerian Institute of International Affairs (NIIA), Lagos, Nigeria.

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