



BRIEFING PAPER

Number 9206, 27 April 2021

Uganda: reaction to the 2021 election

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Summary

The UK Government has “significant concerns” about the treatment of opposition candidates before and after national elections, including main opposition candidate Robert Kyagulanyi, also known as Bobi Wine. The US Secretary of State described the electoral process as “neither free nor fair” and has imposed visa restrictions on those “believed to be responsible for, complicit in, or undermining the democratic process in Uganda”. This paper discusses the events surrounding the re-election of long-time President Yoweri Museveni and subsequent reaction.

Museveni extends his 35-year rule

President Yoweri Museveni was re-elected for a sixth term in January 2021. Museveni’s main opposition came from Robert Kyagulanyi, better known as singer Bobi Wine, who leads the National Unity Platform. Museveni [received 58 per cent](#) compared to Wine’s (Robert Kyagulanyi) 35 per cent. The ruling National Resistance Movement party also won a resounding majority of seats in the National Assembly, although Wine’s National Unity Platform has become the largest opposition party in parliament with 61 seats. The only other political party to gain a significant number of seats was the Forum for Democratic Change. Several cabinet ministers from Museveni’s incumbent government were unseated in the election. Wine disputed the result but has [withdrawn his petition](#) to the Supreme Court asking for the result to be overturned.

Election result: not in doubt?

Museveni’s re-election was not in doubt; Museveni and the NRM have ruled Uganda since he took power in 1986. Museveni initially enforced a “no party” system and it wasn’t until 2005. after being [endorsed in a referendum](#), that multiparty politics was allowed.

Museveni has also adapted the constitution to enable him to remain in power. The same referendum that endorsed multi-party politics also lifted the presidential term limits, paving the way for Museveni to be re-elected in 2011 and 2016. And In 2016 the Ugandan parliament voted to remove the age limit for presidential candidates, clearing the way for Museveni to run for a sixth term in office in January 2021.

2 Uganda: reaction to the 2021 election

Freedom House, an NGO that supports democracy, says the ruling party [“retains power through the manipulation of state resources, intimidation by security forces, and politicized prosecutions of opposition leaders”](#).

Election campaign marked by human rights abuses

Human Rights Watch say the campaign was [characterised by widespread violence and human rights abuses](#), including killings by security forces, arrests and beatings of opposition supporters and journalists, the disruption of opposition rallies. Access to [social media was severely limited](#) for several days over polling day.

In one event, [54 people were killed at a rally](#) in the eastern town of Luuka over the weekend of 18-19 November 2020 following the arrest of Bobi Wine. Opposition figures accused the authorities of [deliberately restricting political freedoms](#) by citing coronavirus risks to ban political rallies. Murithi Mutiga, a [Horn of Africa specialist at Crisis Group](#), said:

Even by the low standards of recent Ugandan elections, the 2021 election cycle stood out for the brazenness of official attempts to intimidate the opposition and the ferocity of the police response to protests.

Michelle Gavin, from the US-based Council on Foreign Relations, said the elections were more of an opportunity for Museveni to [“demonstrate the repressive power of the state than a chance for Uganda’s population to express its political will.”](#)

That Museveni received the [lowest percentage of the vote](#) since multiparty elections were reintroduced in 1996 highlights the [“deep frustration at the incumbent’s rule, primarily among the country’s youth”](#) according to Mutiga. Patience Akumu, a Ugandan journalist, articulated the sense of despair following the result: [“those who yearn for change are resigned to the fact that perhaps nothing can unseat Museveni”](#).

Uganda is one of the youngest and fastest growing countries in the world

Nearly half (46 per cent) of Uganda’s [total population of 45 million in 2020](#) are under the age of 14 and around 75 per cent are under the age of 30.¹ Only 2 per cent of the population is aged 65 or older. A DFID commissioned 2018 [study of youth demographics in Uganda](#) suggested the population is projected to grow exponentially, from 40 million in 2015 to 141.2 million by 2065, driven by the high fertility rate. According to the study, Uganda is one of 10 countries projected to collectively account for more than half the world's projected population increase over the period 2017-2050.

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DFID, 2018

International response to election campaign and result

On 16 January 2021, James Duddridge, the Minister for Africa, [issued a statement](#) welcoming the “relatively calm passing” of the elections. But he went to note concerns about the overall political climate in the run up to the elections and also expressed concern about the national internet shutdown “which clearly limited the transparency of the elections”. He urged the Ugandan Government to respect the right to freedom of opinion, expression and media. In responses to written questions the Minister has also expressed [significant concerns about the treatment of opposition candidates](#) and

¹ United Nations, [Word Population Prospects 2019](#), Standard projections, Annual population by age groups – both sexes [Accessed 25 April 2021]

described as “[unacceptable](#)” the constraints placed on Bobi Wine during his de facto house arrest following the election.

The UK describes itself as a “long-standing partner” (Uganda is a former British colony) and supports various projects in Uganda. Following the “[disproportionate response](#)” of Ugandan forces to protests in November 2020, the [Government paused funding for three projects](#), totalling £40,909, which were working directly with the Ugandan security services. The Minister said in February that the FCDO is [reviewing UKAID spend](#) in Uganda.

The EU said in November 2020 it [would not deploy an election observer mission](#) because the Ugandan authorities had not made sufficient progress on recommendations made by previous EU electoral missions. Following the election, the EU said it was “[gravely concerned by the continued harassment of political actors and parts of civil society](#)” and called on the Ugandan Government to respect the freedom of expression and the right to peaceful and safe assembly. The European Parliament has also condemned the violence, harassment and systematic crackdown on political opposition leaders and the suppression of civil society, human rights defenders and the media, in a [resolution adopted](#) on 11 February 2021 ([2021/2545\(RSP\)](#)).

The US had been planning to observe the election but the mission was cancelled on the eve of polling day. The US Ambassador cited the unexplained denial of more than 75 per cent of accreditations requested from the Uganda electoral commission and said the elections will “[lack the accountability, transparency and confidence that observer missions provide.](#)”

On 16 April the US Secretary of State, Antony Blinken, announced visa restrictions for those “[believed to be responsible for, complicit in, or undermining the democratic process in Uganda](#)”. Blinken described the Ugandan Government’s actions as a “continued downward trajectory” for the country’s democracy and respect for human rights. Blinken said Ugandan security forces were “[responsible for the deaths and injuries of dozens of innocent bystanders and opposition supporters](#)” and violence against journalists. He stated the election was “neither free nor fair”.

What happens now?

Crisis Group’s Murithi Mutiga suggests the frustrations expressed by Uganda’s youthful population “are likely to reverberate throughout the last years of Museveni’s presidency”. Eric Mwine-Mugaju, writing for South Africa’s Mail & Guardian, similarly points to Wine’s successful courting of Uganda’s young population, observing that “a common thread runs through successful revolutions in recent years, both on the African continent and around the world: [the mobilisation of urban youth against authoritarian dictatorships](#)”.

Some commentators suggest [international support for Museveni](#) needs to be reassessed. Chidi Odinkalu and Sandra Coliver, writing for the US-based Just Security forum, suggest “[Museveni’s model of martial rule with an artifice of electoral legitimacy persists with the assistance of Uganda’s international and regional partners](#)”. [Crisis Group](#) has previously suggested donors should avoid projects that contribute to ruling party patronage, and that Uganda’s regional role, including its considerable support for the [African Union Mission in Somalia](#), should not prevent critical engagement. Odinkalu and Coliver warn failing to do “[risks a descent into a period of instability that could imperil one of the most fragile regions in the world](#)”.

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