

Uganda's 2026 General Elections

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ABSTRACT

Uganda's January 2026 general elections were the seventh in a five-cycle that started in 1996 after the promulgation of a new constitution in 1995. Predictably, incumbent President Yoweri Museveni scored a landslide victory, and his ruling National Resistance Movement party cemented its supermajority in the national legislature and claimed an overwhelming majority of local government positions. With widespread state repression and an uneven campaign environment, the opposition lost ground at all levels to the ruling president and party, who commanded vast incumbency advantages. This election cycle reflected a continuation of a deepening autocratic landscape. Opposition leaders and supporters were arrested, detained, and tortured. The internet, social media, and mobile money services were shut down two days before the polls, and on polling day, technical failures of biometric voter verification kits caused long delays in the start of voting. These issues, along with possible voter fatigue, combined to produce a historically low turnout, according to official results from the Electoral Commission. Museveni was re-elected for a new term, which will amount to 45 years of uninterrupted rule when it ends in 2031. Furthermore, at 81 years old, Museveni once again delayed the question of presidential succession, which is Uganda's most important unresolved political question.

Keywords: autocratisation, Bobi Wine, Museveni, NRM, Keinerugaba

INTRODUCTION

Uganda held general elections for parliament and president on 15 January 2026, followed by local government elections for cities, districts, municipalities, and sub-counties from 22 to 27 January. This was the seventh round of routine elections

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under a five-year cycle that began in 1996, following the promulgation of the 1995 Constitution. According to the official 2026 results, the ruling National Resistance Movement (NRM) won at all levels. The incumbent President Yoweri Museveni has been in power since 1986, when his guerrilla rebel National Resistance Army (NRA) scored a decisive military victory. In January 2026, Museveni was again declared the winner, with a landslide 71.65% of the votes – the highest since the first general election in 1996.

Between 1986, when the NRA came to power, and 1996, when the first general elections were held, there were no presidential elections. But grassroots Resistance Councils elections took place in 1989, and through an electoral college system, members of parliament (MPs) were elected to expand the interim national legislature, called the National Resistance Council, to 270. This was a marked increase from the original 38 selected after the NRA captured power in 1986 (Kasfir, 1991). In 1994, elections were held to choose delegates to the National Constituent Assembly, which debated and passed the 1995 Constitution (Makara et al., 1996).

Before 1996, Uganda had only two national elections, one in April 1962, just months before independence in October of that year, and the other almost two decades later, in December 1980, after the nearly decade-long fascist regime of Idi Amin (1971–1979). These were not general elections, as voters did not directly elect the president; rather, he was the leader of the political party with the majority of seats in parliament (Khisa, 2026, p. 174). At independence, Uganda adopted a Westminster system with an executive prime minister and a ceremonial president. In 1966, Prime Minister Milton Obote militarily forced out the then-president Edward Mutesa, abrogated the independence constitution, and introduced a Republican constitution, with himself as president and no executive prime minister.

During the first three decades of independence, from 1962 to 1995, elections in Uganda were irregular and held far apart. By contrast, since 1996, a five-year election cycle has become regularised, routinised, and institutionalised at both the national and subnational levels. It is underpinned by a constitutional and legal framework. Hence, over the past 30 years, Uganda has maintained a fixed, uninterrupted, and predictable electoral calendar. Parliamentary elections are held under a single-member constituency, first-past-the-post system for 499 seats, one-third of which (currently 146) are reserved for women. There are 30 additional seats for special interest groups, bringing the total to 529 MPs. This figure makes Uganda's legislature one of the largest in the world relative to its population size (about 50 million people). At the top, the president is popularly elected and must garner an absolute majority of 50% plus one vote; otherwise, a runoff is held.

Despite their routinisation and institutionalisation, elections in Uganda have not produced 'democratisation by elections', as scholars previously suggested

when highlighting the value of electioneering even under authoritarian settings (Lindberg, 2009). Rather, the country has experienced ‘autocratisation by elections’ (Sjögren, 2024). As I state elsewhere, ‘The five-year cycle has served to deepen autocracy rather than to propel the country onto a firm path of democratic governance’ (Khisa, 2026, p. 174). This paper analyses the contours of the January 2026 elections, underscoring the stakes for presidential succession and the implications for the country’s political stability.

This year’s elections took place in an environment of heightened political uncertainty, punctuated by deepening repression and over-militarisation (Namwase et al., 2023; Khisa & Rwengabo, 2024; Melchiorre, 2025). For an incumbent who had ruled uninterrupted for 40 years, Museveni’s landslide victory as officially announced flattered to deceive. Instead of rapturous street celebrations, there was muted post-election public reaction and a tense political climate (Daily Monitor, 20 January 2026). While countries like Tanzania and Mozambique experienced violent street protests, Uganda saw tenuous calm accompanied by a targeted clampdown on opposition leaders through kidnappings and detentions, both before and after the elections. Quite instructively, fearing imminent arrest and possible physical harm, the leading opposition candidate, Robert Ssentamu Kyagulanyi (aka Bobi Wine), escaped into hiding after enduring a security siege on his home. He eventually fled into exile.

CONTEXTUALISING THE 2026 ELECTIONS

Uganda held the first multiparty elections of Museveni’s era in 2006, after 20 years (1986–2006) of a ‘no-party’ or ‘movement’ system. In 1986, political parties were effectively barred from engaging in nationwide activities, including sponsoring election candidates, and were instead confined to their national headquarters. They were not allowed to convene large gatherings, including party conferences for leadership renewal. This ban was arguably the most important anti-democratic measure instituted by the NRA in 1986. It was subsequently integrated into the 1995 Constitution but was subject to a national referendum every five years, during which voters would decide whether to continue with the no-party system or choose multiparty politics. The first referendum took place in 2000, officially returning an overwhelming endorsement of no-party rule, only for the second referendum five years later (in 2005) to swing the pendulum back to multiparty rule. The main opposition parties at the time, along with civil society activists, advocated a boycott of both referenda, arguing that freedom of association is a fundamental and inalienable human right, neither granted by the state nor subject to public approval through a plebiscite.

In placing an indefinite freeze on political parties, Museveni and his NRA/M faulted parties for engendering divisiveness and fuelling sectarian fissures in

a context supposedly bereft of clear social classes and defined group interests that informed the emergence of parties in the West. Thus, parties were seen as unsuitable for an African social setting. This reasoning was not new. It was an old self-serving rationale widely used by immediate post-independence incumbent African rulers to consolidate their power by proscribing organised competition (Khisa, 2026).

To properly contextualise the 2026 elections, it is important to emphasise that Museveni and the NRA/M came to power through the use of armed force, placing the military at the centre of political processes. Worse, they proscribed organised political competition for two decades, running the country as a *de facto* one-party state, packaged as a 'non-party' movement system (Magaju & Oloka-Onyango, 2000). The no-party / movement system was predicated on the principle of individual merit, supposedly unencumbered by rigid partisan considerations and deleterious divides tethered to religious, regional, and ethnic markers. In theory, individual merit is a strong argument. In practice and with hindsight, however, it was little more than a ruse for engineering regime hegemony, laying the foundation for the longevity of rule and creating a durable electoral autocracy (Rubongoya, 2007; Carbone, 2008).

With no general elections in the first 10 years (1986–1996) and an effective ban on political parties until 2006, Museveni bought enough time to cement a firm grip on state power and solidify incumbency advantages, which shaped subsequent elections. When the five-year electoral cycle started in 1996 under the no-party system, and especially by 2006 when the first multiparty elections took place, Museveni's practices of power and tight control of the system had been embedded into the electoral processes. The first 20 years (1986–2006) were thus critical to establishing far-reaching hegemonic control and fusing the ruling organisation with the state, particularly the military, intelligence, and security apparatuses (Khisa, 2024; Tapscott, 2021; Tripp, 2010).

Since 1996, the seven successive general elections have had the same incumbent, who wields unmatched power against a repressed opposition, making the elections fall short of a competitive struggle for the people's vote. This despite fleeting appearances of stiff challenge from the main opposition candidates – Kizza Besigye from 2001 through 2016, and Robert Kyagulanyi for the last two cycles in 2021 and 2026. At best, the elections have been a tool of 'controlling consent', an apt title for a book on the 2016 elections (Oloka-Onyango & Ahikire, 2017).

THE PREDICTABLE OUTCOME OF AUTOCRATIC ELECTIONS

The 2026 election cycle reflected a continuous trajectory in Uganda's electoral politics over the past 30 years. Unsurprisingly, incumbent Museveni was

declared the winner. His ruling NRM, also unsurprisingly, took more than two-thirds of the parliamentary seats, although there are pending petitions yet to be fully adjudicated by the courts. The NRM secured an even larger share of local government positions.

While as predictable as can be expected from an electoral autocracy, some election results were both underwhelming and shocking. For one, Museveni is past his prime and arguably unappealing to a largely young Ugandan electorate, estimated to be more than 70% under 35 years of age. Yet the octogenarian incumbent officially scored a landslide victory with 71.65%, his highest count since 1996. This flattering figure had a notable and dispiriting corollary: official voter turnout was at its lowest ever, at just 52% nationally.

Table 1: Presidential Election Results

Candidate	Political Party	Percentage Score
Elton Joseph Mbirizi	Conservative Party	0.21
Mubarak Munyagwa	Common Man's Party	0.29
Robert Kasibante	National Peasants Party	0.30
Frank Bulira Kabinga	Revolutionary People's Party	0.41
Gregory Mugisha Muntu	Alliance for National Transformation	0.53
Nathan Nandala Mafabi	Forum for Democratic Change	1.88
Robert Ssentamu Kyagulanyi	National Unity Platform	24.72
Yoweri K. Museveni	National Resistance Movement	71.65

Source: Provisional Results from the Electoral Commission (Daily Monitor, 20 January 2026)

Details of the officially reported voter turnout reveal a suspicious, and perhaps unsurprising, pattern pointing to possible electoral fraud. Voter turnout was notably high in districts and regions that voted overwhelmingly for Museveni and far lower in opposition strongholds (Daily Monitor, 20 January 2026; The Africa Report, 20 January 2026). For example, in the populous Buganda / Central region, where the main opposition candidate (Robert Kyagulanyi) obtained more votes than the incumbent, voter turnout was reportedly only 45%. It was below 30% in Kampala, the capital and heart of the opposition. By contrast, in the Ankole and Karamoja subregions, where the incumbent's tally was more than 90%, turnout was officially 70%. Such patterns were widespread. In the relatively urban areas of Kampala Metropolitan and in upcountry urban centres, which largely supported the opposition, turnout was much lower than the national average.

By contrast, turnout tended to be far higher in rural districts, which constituted the incumbent's support base.

The failure of some biometric voter verification kits (BVVKs) on polling day may have contributed to turning away voters, which could have played a role in the poor turnout (The Africa Report, 20 January 2026). Sheer election fatigue after repeated cycles of opposition defeat also contributed to the low turnout. In addition, the incarceration of the veteran opposition leader, Kizza Besigye, may have had a demoralising impact on opposition supporters.²

On election day, voters cast three separate ballots, one for the president and two for MPs. The MPs included a constituency representative and a woman (district) representative under a quota system where, constitutionally, women have reserved seats, ensuring they hold at least one-third of all seats in the national legislature. Typically, therefore, citizens vote for two MPs, one of whom must be a woman. Alternatively, both MPs can be women, because in the unreserved constituency women may also compete (and win), but in the seats reserved for women, men are obviously not candidates. These two categories of MPs, namely, the constituency – essentially a county or part of one – and the district woman's seat account for 499 seats. There are another 30 seats for special interest groups, with five each for people with disabilities, the elderly, youth, and workers. The final 10 seats are for the army, who are non-partisan but vote with the NRM.

Table 2: Parliamentary Election Results

Political Party	Number of Seats
National Resistance Movement (NRM)	372
Independents	68
National Unity Platform (NUP)	49
Uganda People's Congress (UPC)	12
Forum for Democratic Change (FDC)	9
Democratic Party (DP)	6
People's Front for Freedom (PFF)	2
Alliance for National Transformation (ANT)	1
Total	519 + 10 Army Seats = 529

Source: Summarised from the official *Government Gazette* (Republic of Uganda)³

² This was according to interviews I had with different sections of the public in the weeks leading to the elections.

³ These figures are subject to change, as there are dozens of court petitions challenging the results. But any change will be marginal, probably only a few seats switching parties, with no substantial impact on the numbers.

The 2026 parliamentary election cycle experienced an unprecedented phenomenon in which the election management body, the Electoral Commission (EC), 'de-nominated' candidates. This entailed removing them from races on various grounds, including allegedly forged signatures on nomination forms, inadequate or fraudulent academic credentials, and procedural issues such as failing to resign from public office on time. Curiously, nearly all of the dozen cases of de-nomination – some decided very late in the process and just weeks before polling day – were against opposition candidates and in favour of the ruling party. In a few cases, de-nomination resulted in candidates being declared unopposed because nominations had already closed and campaigns were underway or about to end.

A second feature, not at all unprecedented, was the very high turnover. As with past elections, the fight for a seat in Uganda's parliament was fierce and high-stakes, starting with 'do-or-die' battles in the ruling party's primaries (Kjær & Katusiimeh, 2021). At least nine ministers lost in the general election; roughly the same number were defeated in NRM primaries. Fifty-nine percent of incumbents either lost or bowed out of re-election, meaning only about 41% of the new parliament would be returning MPs.

For the presidential race, media hype painted an unmistakably sensationalised portrait of a courageous pop star intent on unseating a long-surviving ruler, especially going into the 2021 elections and their aftermath, and again in the 2026 cycle. Nonetheless, Kyagulanyi was up against the same entrenched electoral autocracy that Besigye had unsuccessfully contested four times between 2001 and 2016. Uganda's electoral system, and indeed regime politics writ large, is anchored in imposing control using the two major instruments of state power, namely force and finance (Khisa, 2024, pp. 9–17). As with previous cycles, the 2026 elections were characterised by the incumbent's unlimited use of the state's coercive arsenal against the opposition, without any institutional checks or oversight constraints, as well as the deployment of the soft power of money in a sprawling patronage apparatus that ensnared a wide array of constituencies and actors among both the elites and the masses.

At all levels, force and finance permeated the electioneering processes, leaving the opposition unable to meaningfully challenge Museveni. The use of state repression and coercion shaped the election outcome not only during the short campaigning season but also through a long and continuous process involving a partisan security apparatus explicitly weaponised by the incumbent (Tapscott, 2021; Bareebe, 2024; Melchiorre, 2025). Through state coercion and the distribution of patronage spoils, Museveni has consistently stayed ahead of the game, maintaining unfettered access to the electorate by utilising the vast official budgets for the State House/Presidency and for defence and security – both classified and directly under his control. For example, long before the 2026 election

campaign season officially began in the last quarter of 2025, Museveni was on the trail through a range of activities, including 'fighting poverty' by promoting Operation Wealth Creation (run by the military) and the Parish Development Model, a government poverty alleviation programme. Even while he campaigned between elections, opposition parties and leaders were prohibited from convening rallies and other forms of public gatherings until the official election campaigns had started.

The EC is constitutionally mandated to manage elections and adjudicate political competition impartially and independently, in accordance with constitutional and legal provisions.⁴ But the EC is neither constituted through a meritorious process nor run independently of executive influence. Members of the top governing body – a seven-person commission – are appointed exclusively by the incumbent and rubber-stamped by Parliament, which is fully controlled by the ruling party (Khisa, 2026, p. 176). In Parliament, the Speaker and Deputy are not just NRM leaders; they are overtly pliant to the president, making the legislature largely an appendage of the executive. The incompetence of the EC was on full display in the January elections, with widespread failures of the BVVK equipment on polling day, leading to long delays even in starting to vote.

Uganda's electoral landscape reflects remarkable continuity, but also important changes. The NRM and President Museveni maintain an impregnable hold on the country's electoral terrain, especially in rural areas, where the 'uncaptured peasantry' – to borrow Göran Hydén's (1980) famous phrase – serves as a voter reservoir for the ruling party. Since assuming power 40 years ago, the NRM has taken pride in the poor masses as its social base, however undefined and hard to verify in an unfree political environment. This year's elections underscored the extent to which the NRM maintains an unmatched hold on the country's political landscape, including electioneering processes, through a cadre of operatives in the state's security, intelligence, and presidential political appointees at the subnational level. The fusion of the state with the ruling party runs deep and diverse from the centre to the lowest level; in fact, it is most elaborate and electorally consequential at the grassroots level (Tapscott, 2021, p. 57).

Activities in the days leading up to the elections and on polling day reflected remarkable continuity in the praxis of NRM's and Museveni's power play, with a heavily militarised landscape and the pervasive, blatant use of money to sway voters. But in starker terms than during past election cycles, the January elections showed the incumbent's unbridled and practically unlimited use of the full apparatus of the coercive state and the fiscal power of government in demobilising

4 These are the *Electoral Commission Act*, the *Presidential Elections Act*, the *Parliamentary Elections Act*, the *Local Government Act*, and Chapter Five of the 1995 Constitution.

the opposition. This has invariably resulted in a decidedly skewed electoral landscape.⁵ Consequently, all opposition parties emerged from the elections with fewer parliamentary seats than they held in the outgoing parliament. Seats for the main opposition party, Kyagulanyi's NUP, dropped from 57 to 49, while the NRM increased its supermajority.

Ahead of the elections, there were overt and explicit verbal threats to the opposition and its supporters from the president himself, but more importantly and, quite unprecedentedly, from General Muhoozi Kainerugaba, the Chief of Defence Forces (CDF), who is the president's son (Daily Monitor, 19 December 2025; Reuters, 6 January 2026). Worse, opposition supporters and leaders were arrested and reportedly tortured, allegedly on the orders of the CDF, prompting a statement from the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (Reuters, 25 November 2025; Daily Monitor, 4 December 2025). On polling day, at least 10 people were shot dead by security forces in one incident at the home of prominent opposition leader Muhammed Muwanga Kivumbi, the NUP Deputy President for the Buganda region. He was subsequently arrested, charged with terrorism, and remanded (BBC, 22 January 2026).

As in previous cycles, the national army, the Uganda People Defence Forces (UPDF), played an oversized role in the 2026 elections (BBC, 16 October 2025). The deployments were deep and extensive, making this easily the most militarised and securitised election to date. The military's campaign-period and polling-day involvements were part of a broader militarisation strategy that included implementing the anti-poverty programmes mentioned earlier and deploying military personnel across the public sector (Namwase et al., 2023; Tapscott, 2021; Khisa, 2020). Leveraging military muscle and the state's fiscal wherewithal, the NRM and Museveni captured political support by embedding perceived benefits into the electioneering processes.

Previously, heads of the military had played active roles in supporting Museveni's re-election, but nowhere near the level and magnitude seen in this year's cycle. In 2026, Museveni's son showed flagrant disregard for the law that bars serving army officers from expressing partisan speech or engaging in any form of politicking. The army's role this time was much more direct. Indeed, it was unapologetically broadcast on Twitter by the CDF, who, following the 2024 launch of the 'UPDF Establishment', assumed total command and control of the military. Until then, it had been the preserve of the Commander-in-Chief.

Wielding full power over the military, the CDF is the head of security under a regime already built around security as the central plank. Thus, Kainerugaba oversaw critical decision-making related to the elections, including deploying

5 This comment is based on my observations and informal interviews before and on election day.

troops, drawing from a classified security slush fund, demobilising the opposition, and shutting down the internet or mobile money services (Reuters, 23 January 2026). He declared that voters would not be allowed to stay near the polling area, even though the law permits observing polling from a 20-metre distance (Daily Monitor, 19 December 2025). Worse, the government ordered a total shutdown of the internet, social media, and mobile money services two days before election day. The blackout lasted five days (*New York Times*, 13 January 2026; Daily Monitor, 23 January 2026). Overall, the heavy deployment of the military and the increased police presence created an atmosphere that was un conducive to a free and fair outcome.

FATHER-TO-SON SUCCESSION

Museveni is essentially a ‘president-for-life’, a project necessarily entailing the construction of a personalist system of rule where critical decision-making stops with him. Only two other individuals wield power that compares to Museveni’s. They are his son (the CDF) and his brother, General Salim Saleh, who is arguably the de facto deputy president, despite holding no official government position. This family rule tramples entire institutions.

The son’s role in the 2026 elections highlighted his place in the power hierarchy and succession queue. His untamed Twitter/X comments were a key part of the campaign season and electioneering activities, which included overt threats to harm opposition leaders and unhinged claims of his father’s exclusive legitimacy, leaving no place for opposition. His wild behaviour points to his top position in the power hierarchy, arguably second only to his father; however, it has also triggered scepticism about his temperament and presidential suitability.

Beyond Kainerugaba’s personal conduct and public standing, whether prudent or flawed, there is the critical role of key individuals from the ‘bush-war’ old guard. These are the guerrilla fighters of the 1980s, who may not acquiesce to a father-to-son transfer of power, thus complicating the succession dynamic. Although retired from the army, this small but not insignificant group of generals remains active and influential. One of them, Internal Affairs Minister Kahinda Otafiire, has openly expressed critical sentiments against Kainerugaba.

Since Kainerugaba’s elevation to the all-powerful position of CDF in 2024, there has been marked intensification of state repression and the arrests of opposition leaders and activists, particularly in the period leading up to the 2026 elections as well as during and after them. Over the past two to three years, sparrings between Kainerugaba and Kyagulanyi on Twitter/X appear to have added fuel to the tenor of opposition repression, with the former openly gloating over the arrest, torture, and incarceration of the latter’s aides and personal

bodyguards. Kyagulanyi often chides and mocks Kainerugaba, portraying him as a 'stupor' who abuses the powers and privileges granted to him by his father. Kainerugaba, in turn, constantly denigrates Kyagulanyi as an unworthy political challenger, a lightweight to be physically crushed.

The very personal focus Kainerugaba has placed on Kyagulanyi partly underscores Uganda's succession conundrum. Even if roadblocks to succeeding the father have been largely cleared for the son within the NRM and UPDF, Kainerugaba evidently remains irritated by a menacing external foe, Kyagulanyi, who commands popular appeal – especially among young Ugandans. His celebrity status, complete with a compelling personal profile of rising to stardom, appears to trigger personal indignation and ruthless reactions from Uganda's most powerful military man, the CDF. This dynamic may account for the rampant arrests and brutality unleashed on NUP supporters and leaders.

CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS: THE ROAD AHEAD

At the time of writing, Museveni was due to be sworn in for a new five-year term on 12 May 2026. This puts him on course to rule for nearly half a century, cementing his number three position among Africa's longest-surviving presidents, behind only Cameroon's Paul Biya and Equatorial Guinea's Teodoro Obiang. Yet Museveni's new term will start under intense political uncertainty, mounting tensions, and heightened fissures within the ruling regime. These issues all revolve around the vexed question of presidential succession in a country that has yet to experience a peaceful power transition in its more than 60 years of independence.

The succession conundrum has enormous implications for Uganda and the broader East African region. A sudden breakdown of political order in Uganda, or worse, state implosion, would have catastrophic ramifications for the Great Lakes region and the Horn of Africa. Uganda officially hosts more than two million refugees, but unofficially, the number is probably higher due to its porous borders, making it Africa's top refugee-hosting nation. The country has also been deeply involved in several foreign military interventions and still maintains troops in the Democratic Republic of Congo, South Sudan, and Somalia. Depending on how one positions the analytical lens and empirical aperture, Uganda has played both stabilising and destabilising roles in the region's geopolitics and security complexes. An unexpected regime collapse and state disintegration would probably have reverberations well beyond the country's borders.

The January elections also did not resolve Uganda's most pressing political question, which is the conundrum of power succession. While Museveni demonstrated that he retains control of both the ruling party and the state apparatus, the election cycle exposed deepening fissures. In particular, loyalists

of Museveni's son, under the Patriotic League of Uganda (PLU), were pitted against the old guard in the NRM. Fierce fights and sharp divisions in the NRM primaries and elections for the party politburo were contained in large part because of Museveni's commanding power. In his absence, it is possible that matters may spiral out of hand.

Museveni is 81 years old and therefore might not finish the current term or seek another in 2031, although he seems determined to press on (Khisa, 2026, p. 179). The Constitution provides for the vice president to take over in the event of the president's death or incapacitation. Throughout his rule, Museveni has never had a real vice president – someone who wields power, has gravitas, and can be taken seriously as the president-in-waiting. If, in the next cabinet, he were to name his son as vice president, that move would be the clearest signal of a succession path and a formal transfer of power from father to son.

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