

# Election Watch for the Digital Age



## Uganda

### Preelection assessment

*General elections set for January or February 2021*

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Presidential candidate Yoweri Museveni has been in power since 1986. His National Resistance Movement (NRM) government has increasingly relied on the misuse of state resources, political patronage, and repression in order to maintain authority. Security forces have been heavily deployed during previous election periods in order to violently disperse protests and intimidate or arrest opposition supporters. Presidential candidate Robert Kyagulanyi, better known as Bobi Wine, and several other opposition personalities have been regularly targeted with physical and legal harassment, as well as surveillance. Journalists have routinely faced pressure and prosecution from the police and interference from the state media regulator, the Uganda Communications Commission.

Since public gatherings are banned due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the electoral commission has pushed candidates to conduct their campaigns online, leading Ugandans to dub the upcoming vote a “scientific election.” Social media, which was briefly blocked during the previous election, will again serve as an important source of diverse reporting and independent information. However, given that internet penetration is estimated at only 23 percent, the emphasis on online campaigning could exacerbate existing digital divides, particularly in rural areas.

Uganda has a score of 43 out of 100, with 100 representing the least vulnerability in terms of election integrity, on Freedom House’s Election Vulnerability Index, which is based on a selection of key election-related indicators. Uganda’s score reflects problems with the integrity of past elections and the political environment, degraded media freedom and rule of law, and shrinking space for protests and nongovernmental organizations. The country is rated **Not Free** in *Freedom in the World 2020*, with a score of 34 out of 100 with respect to its political rights and civil liberties, and **Partly Free** in *Freedom on the Net 2019*, with an internet freedom score of 56 out of 100. To learn more about these annual Freedom House assessments, please visit the Uganda country reports in [Freedom in the World](#) and [Freedom on the Net](#).

Freedom House has identified the following as key issues to watch ahead of election day:

- **Arrests and prosecutions:** Journalists and political activists are often arrested, prosecuted, or threatened with prosecution after criticizing the government online. There is potential for an uptick in arrests for political speech as the election approaches in order to silence opponents and others online.
- **Blocking social media:** The government cut off access to Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp for four days during the 2016 elections. Though social media restrictions have not been repeated

since then, the move may signal a willingness on the part of the government to implement similar restrictions on social media and messaging apps in the future, especially during the electoral period.

- **Hate speech:** Hate speech, particularly along ethnic lines, is a concern heading into the electoral period. Voter and opposition intimidation have been a problem in the past, and an uptick in hate speech could contribute to an intimidating environment.
- **Influence operations:** Researchers documented evidence of bot activity during the 2016 election to amplify posts in favor of President Museveni. There have been no confirmed reports of the government paying individuals to surreptitiously manipulate online discussions. However, this election could still see a rise in coordinated inauthentic behavior, given the booming and unregulated industry for such services around the continent.