

# Dozens killed in Uganda as police and military carry out brutal crackdown on protests

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Thirty-seven people were killed by security forces, scores of others injured and hundreds more detained after two days of protests shook Uganda's capital city Kampala and several other towns last week. The largest unrest in the East African country in a decade was sparked by the arrest of presidential candidate Bobi Wine during a campaign rally Wednesday.

After a campaign stop in Luuka, a town in eastern Uganda, police arrested Wine, claiming he violated the Electoral Commission's guidelines against holding political rallies with more than 200 persons, breaking a decree made by the election body in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Wine was released on bail on Friday.

Wine's arrest was the second in less than a month. On Nov. 3 Wine was arrested shortly after filling out forms to register his candidacy, with television cameras recording police pulling him from his car.

Wine and several other opposition politicians have faced arrest, beatings and torture from police forces in a blatant attempt at intimidation by the ruling National Resistance Movement (NRM) party, led by President Yoweri Museveni.

After the news of Wine's arrest, thousands of protesters immediately took to the streets in the capital city and other major towns across the country, setting tires afire and occupying major thoroughfares, shouting the slogan, "Free Bobi Wine!"

In a brutal response to the protests, large numbers of Ugandan police, augmented by a contingent of troops from the Ugandan People's Defence Force (UPDF), the armed forces of Uganda, deployed to repress the demonstrations.

Security forces fired live rounds and deployed armored vehicles in an attempt to brutally quell the social unrest in Kampala. Other towns and cities also

saw a heavy-handed police crackdown on demonstrators.

Security Minister Elly Tumwine told the media that "the police have a right to shoot protesters dead if they reach a certain level of violence." Ensuring reporters had heard him correctly, he emphasized, "Can I repeat? Police have a right to shoot you and you die for nothing... do it at your own risk."

Lieutenant Colonel Deo Akiki, spokesman for the UPDF, announced that the army would take charge of security specifically in Kampala, Mukono, Wakiso and Entebbe, for the duration of the election season. Additionally, he stated UPDF soldiers would occupy various other areas around the country.

Kampala police spokesman Patrick Onyango denounced as criminals the youth and workers who largely comprised the mass demonstrations. "We want to warn the youths who have been lured into participating in illegal activities to desist from participating in such acts. The joint security teams are on top of the situation and will handle anyone who attempts to destabilise the capital city."

In a demagogic response to the protests on Thursday, President Museveni told a campaign rally in the northern Ugandan town of Karamoja that protesters "were being used by outsiders... homosexuals and others who don't like the stability and independence of Uganda. But they will discover what they are looking for. We shall not tolerate confused people. They are playing with fire."

Wine, a popular reggae music artist, whose real name is Robert Kyagulanyi Ssentamu, was first elected to the National Assembly in 2017, representing Kyaddondo East, in Wakiso district, an extremely impoverished and densely populated area located a few miles east of Kampala.

After growing up in Kamwokya, one of the most impoverished sections in Kampala, Wine attended Makerere University, studying music, dance and drama, obtaining a diploma in 2003. He began his music career shortly thereafter, recording several hit songs, performing in the distinctive musical style known as Afrobeats, which catapulted him to popularity in the East African music scene.

Standing as the candidate for the newly formed National Unity Platform party (NUP), Wine is challenging Museveni in the election set to take place on Jan. 14, 2021, presenting himself as an anti-corruption, reformist candidate.

Since his election to the National Assembly, Wine has emerged as the most significant challenger to the longtime president, who has been in power since 1986 after taking power in a paramilitary coup.

The popular support Wine's campaign has drawn, particularly from youth and poorer sections across the country, has rattled the incumbent Museveni regime.

Utilizing the slogan "Our People, Our Power," Wine has made the central plank of his campaign the stated aim of uniting Ugandans against the human rights abuses and corruption of the Museveni government.

Making various pledges as a presidential candidate, Wine has advocated nothing more than a series of minor reforms which, if implemented, would do nothing to address the underlying social crisis ravaging the Uganda population. His promises to "increase business investment" in the country make clear he has no plans to disturb the flow of profits to the major corporations and banks which exploit the working class and peasantry.

The elections take place amid a period of acute social crisis gripping Uganda. The COVID-19 pandemic has ravaged the country, and as of Sunday, there are a total of 17,968 confirmed infections, with a rising infection rate showing no sign of slowing down.

The economic crisis has been exacerbated by the lockdown instituted by the Museveni government to control the pandemic, which has been accompanied by little governmental financial support for the masses who lost their means to make a living, driving millions of Ugandans to destitution.

The exploding social tensions and the economic crisis wracking Uganda must be understood as part of the broader breakdown of bourgeois capitalist rule across

the African continent. The historic crisis of the capitalist system and its complete failure to address the social catastrophe afflicting the Ugandan masses makes it clear that only the working class, based on a socialist and internationalist perspective, can lead the fight for social equality and democratic rights.



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