

Uganda goes to the polls under the shadow of repression and the backdrop of US attack on Venezuela

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Uganda is holding presidential and parliamentary elections on Thursday under conditions of sweeping state repression. The purpose is to secure yet another five-year term for 81-year-old Yoweri Museveni and the National Resistance Movement (NRM), whose social base has steadily eroded amid deepening economic hardship, mounting social tensions and Kampala's participation in regional wars.

Since independence in 1962, political power in Uganda has changed hands only through rebellions or military coups. Museveni is no exception. He has ruled the country with an iron fist since 1986, when his rebel movement seized Kampala under the banner of anti-tribalism, land distribution and a “no-party democracy”.

He implemented a neo-liberal regime at the service of international capital, for which he was rewarded with “development aid” and praised as a “beacon in the Central African region” by former US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright.

Museveni has twice amended the constitution—removing term limits and later the presidential age cap—to ensure his continued hold on power, while repeatedly jailing opponents. Violence, intimidation and electoral manipulation have characterised every election held under his rule.

Museveni and the NRM are urging voters to “protect the economic gains” of recent decades and to “make the leap into high middle-income status.” Central to this narrative is the promise of future oil wealth, with Museveni banking on revenues from the newly established oil industry, associated infrastructure and the pipeline linking Uganda's Lake Albert oilfields to the Tanzanian port of Tanga—the East African Crude Oil Pipeline (EACOP)—which is scheduled to enter commercial production in July this year.

That such wealth would be shared with the population is a fiction. The only people with “gains” to defend are the financial and business elites around the state and military apparatus—including Museveni's own family. Uganda's richest 10 percent receive 35.7 percent of national income, while the poorest 10 percent survive on just 2.5 percent.

The social crisis is most acute among young people, who make up more than 70 percent of the population. More than half of those aged 18 to 30 are not in employment, education or training, according to the UNDP, with young women disproportionately affected. Only 90,000 graduates—around 13 percent—secure formal-sector jobs each year. For the vast majority of young people, the only options are unemployment or precarious and hugely exploitative work in the informal economy, without contracts, benefits, or job security amid a soaring cost of living crisis.

Access to healthcare has collapsed. The termination of US funding to USAID and the World Health Organisation—programmes that supported HIV, malaria, Ebola and maternal and child health services—led to thousands of health workers losing their jobs.

US foreign assistance to Uganda totals around \$710 million annually,

most of it for HIV/AIDS treatment, supporting more than 700,000 people. This is nearly double the Ugandan government's entire health budget for 2024/25, underscoring the fragility of the system and its dependence on external funding.

Museveni cracks down on opposition

Aware of his fragile support, Museveni has launched a savage repression on the main opposition party led by the 43-year-old National Unity Platform (NUP) leader Robert Kyagulanyi, known as Bobi Wine. In the 2021 election, he won 35 percent of the vote in the 2021 election to Museveni's 58 percent, with the NUP securing 57 parliamentary seats. When Wine rejected the results as fraudulent, his supporters faced violent repression, with dozens killed and thousands detained.

During the current election campaign, repression has intensified sharply. According to Amnesty International, around 400 NUP members have been arrested, many of them subjected to torture. The militarised repression is so pervasive that Wine wears a bulletproof vest and helmet at campaign events.

Museveni has also jailed prominent opposition figure and former ally, Kizza Besigye, who has run against him four times, after the regime abducted him in Kenya in 2024, and charged him with treason.

The campaign period has been marked by heavily militarised policing, with armoured vehicles on the streets of Uganda's towns and cities, and security forces teargassing opposition rallies.

Museveni shut down internet from Wednesday to Sunday. The blackout is intended to facilitate rigging of the election, prevent possible protesters from coordinating, and give the security forces free rein to carry out a bloodshed. Similar tactics were employed in neighbouring Tanzania, where an internet shutdown was imposed after mass protests, leading to mass killings of hundreds, potentially thousands; and in Kenya, after the Gen-Z protests erupted against austerity measures.

No one doubts that the results of Uganda's presidential and parliamentary elections will be a win for Museveni and his cronies. Through bribery, coercion and administrative exclusion, NUP candidates—especially outside Wine's central strongholds—have been induced to defect, withdraw or been disqualified to ensure ruling-party candidates run unopposed. In parallel, the regime has poured millions into vote-buying among informal-sector workers in central Uganda to undermine Wine's urban support.

Uganda and imperialism

Museveni has enjoyed the backing of US imperialism and the European powers for decades. Washington has poured more than a billion dollars over the last 20 years into military aid, training the units responsible for torture, abductions and disappearances at home and abroad.

Uganda has more than 15,000 troops stationed in Somalia, South Sudan, the Democratic Republic of Congo and the Central African Republic, where they serve as a proxy force protecting the grip of the imperialist powers and their corporations over the region's vast mineral resources, while looting resources in their own interests.

Last year, in bid to curry favour with President Donald Trump, secure trade concessions, and pre-empt any US criticism of the elections, Museveni agreed to accept migrants from third countries deported from the US.

Museveni, however, can no longer take US backing for granted. In recent years, as he has deepened ties with Washington's rivals, including China, Russia, and Iran, the US has moved to downgrade its economic relationship with Kampala. Uganda was removed from the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA), ending its preferential duty-free access to US markets, in 2023. Earlier this year the Trump administration imposed a 15 percent tariff on Ugandan exports, hitting coffee, vanilla, cocoa, and petroleum products particularly hard.

Underlying this is China's involvement in Uganda's oil industry and pipelines. China has provided crucial funding for the East African Crude Oil Pipeline (EACOP) and related oil projects while European and US states and financial institutions have withdrawn. Uganda also joined the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) bloc as a partner nation in early 2025.

Museveni himself has tacitly acknowledged the deterioration of relations with Washington. Responding to the recent US attack on Venezuela and the kidnapping of President Nicolás Maduro, he remarked, "Americans' actions in Venezuela are still unclear; we have yet to learn what is really happening. Although the Americans are powerful in the air and at sea, if they come within close range on land, we can defeat them." The statement underscored Kampala's fears that it too could be targeted for regime change.

Bobi Wine no alternative

The NUP opposition, however, offers no alternative. Wine's support is concentrated among young people and the frustrated middle-class layers in Kampala and the Buganda and Busoga (west and east of Kampala respectively) that want a greater share of the cake. He has no perspective to win the support of the rural poor who constitute around 70 percent of Uganda's population.

The NUP's Manifesto 2026–31 is explicitly pro-capitalist, pledging to "lower the cost of doing business by lowering taxes, simplifying licensing procedures, and promoting digital solutions to cut bureaucratic delays," while establishing "transparent, consistent regulatory frameworks" to make Uganda more "investor-friendly."

At the centre of the NUP's programme is "attracting foreign investment" and expanding industrial parks and special economic zones to facilitate it. The manifesto commits to developing "at least 30 industrial parks by 2030," arguing that governments must "foster industrial clusters... as common special economic zones to boost foreign investment." It promises to "provide core infrastructure, utilities, and land access to serious domestic investors" and to offer "fiscal incentives such

as tax breaks" to firms operating within these zones.

On public debt, the NUP pledges to restore so called "fiscal rule of law", to renegotiate rather than repudiate the debt, and to protect "investor confidence".

In practice, this can only translate into continued austerity imposed on already depleted healthcare, education, and social services.

In foreign policy, the most striking feature of the NUP's programme is what it omits. There is no opposition to Uganda's role as a regional military proxy for the imperialist powers, nor to the deployment of the security apparatus to defend strategic and corporate interests at home and abroad. The manifesto is silent on Uganda's military interventions in Somalia, South Sudan and the DR Congo.

Wine, himself a millionaire, is positioning himself as a more acceptable, youthful and "reform-minded" manager for imperialism and factions of the Ugandan bourgeoisie.

He has a long track record of appealing to US and British imperialism to impose sanctions on Museveni's inner circle, appealing to the very powers that have sustained his dictatorship for four decades. Significantly, Wine's rallies have been marked by the prominent display of US flags, amid the backdrop of Washington's attack on Venezuela. These are a clear appeal to Washington.

Wine has refused to condemn the recent US military attack on Venezuela and has maintained ties with factions of the Venezuelan opposition that for years have sought to oust the Bolivarian government with active support from Washington.

In 2021, Wine posted a picture of a Zoom call with Juan Guaidó, the US-trained and funded operative of the extreme right-wing Voluntad Popular (Popular Will) party, recognised by the US as "interim president", and referred to him as "President" in the post.

In his tweet he wrote, "Very pleased to speak with President @jguaido ... We discussed the way forward for both countries, and the need to build synergies for the defence of democratic principles and human rights across the globe". The post generated widespread backlash in Uganda and was later removed from his social media accounts.

Wine is now calling for mass Gen-Z style protests if there is, as expected, electoral fraud.

Lessons of the Gen Z protests

However, the experience of the Gen-Z protests across Africa provides a decisive warning. In country after country, mass eruptions of youth anger against rigged elections, austerity and repression—from Kenya and Tanzania to Mozambique and Angola—have demonstrated immense courage and determination is not enough. These movements have been channeled behind pro-capitalist opposition parties, and met with brutal repression, paving the way to the consolidation of authoritarian rule. Without a clear break from all factions of the ruling class and their imperialist backers, spontaneous protests are contained, diverted or drowned in blood.

Uganda will be no exception. Calls for "Gen-Z style" mobilisations under the political leadership of the NUP and other factions of the Ugandan bourgeoisie subordinate the social demands of youth and workers to a programme that leaves capitalist exploitation, imperialist domination and the repressive state apparatus intact.

The key task is to build a revolutionary leadership rooted in the working class and linked to workers throughout the region and in the imperialist centres. It means building sections of the International Committee of the Fourth International in Uganda and across Africa and the globe to unite workers and youth in the fight for world socialism.



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