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UGANDA'S COUNTER-TERRORISM LAWS

Suppression of democratic dissent¹

¹ The identities of the authors have been kept off the report to protect them and their sources from repercussions.



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SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Uganda is governed by one of Africa's most effective authoritarians, President Yoweri Museveni. During his tenure he has personalized power and centralized it in the Presidency.

Ahead of the 2026 elections, Uganda's intelligence services have been intensifying authoritarian control and systematically shrinking the political and civic space by increasing repressive clampdowns thereby continuing with a pattern that began with the enactment of the anti-terrorism law. Uganda's implementation of the Anti-Terrorism Act of 2002 has revealed a pattern where the law has been weaponised against individuals and groups critical of the government, straying significantly from its original aim of countering terrorism. This legislation has been leveraged to suppress political opposition, media freedom, and civil society activities, creating an environment where activism and dissent are met with legal repercussions under the guise of counter-terrorism. Politicians, journalists and civil society organisations, particularly those involved in human rights advocacy, have all been targeted. As a result, it significantly impacts the democratic space in Uganda, eroding public trust in the legal system and weakening the capacity of human rights defenders to operate freely. The suppression of public protests further

reveals how the Act has been employed to curtail democratic expressions of dissent. Key external actors, including the United States, various European countries, and international bodies like the United Nations, have played roles in operationalising these laws through training, intelligence sharing, and legislative influence, often pushing for alignment with global counter-terrorism standards. This has empowered President Yoweri Museveni and the ruling National Resistance Movement (NRM), which has maintained a firm grip on power. This paper highlights major cases that underscore the misuse of these laws and security units. It will explore cases involving journalists, politicians and activists, examining the language used in these contexts, the victims targeted, and the actions taken, such as renditions, arrests, and charges related to treason or threats to national security. It will briefly describe the security units involved in such operations. Additionally, the study will investigate the role of external actors in providing training, weapons, intelligence, and surveillance software, shedding light on their influence on these laws' implementation.

INTRODUCTION

Over the last two decades, several ruling parties in Africa and their presidents have empowered securocrats, used surveillance aimed at containing dissent through infiltration and fear, and stifled attempts at democratic reform. Many have installed surveillance states, securitised society through intelligence services' infiltration, and allowed military and security elites to economically benefit in order to ensure the survival of hegemonic regimes.

Uganda is one of these countries where national security is politically defined and weaponised against democratic reform, opposition parties, dissidents, civil society and journalists. The regime of President Yoweri Museveni has governed Uganda for 39 years creating a repressive but fragile state where economic decline, poor social cohesion, ethnic clashes, consistent human rights violations, rigged elections and corruption have created an unsustainable system of governance. For two decades, the legitimate existential threat of terrorism has been appropriated for the illegitimate clampdown on internal enemies and a free society. The authoritarian state, built by Museveni and the ruling National Resistance Movement (NRM), is interventionist and controlling, managing a captured economy and surveilled society, in an attempt to establish a durable political order. Uganda has used and instrumentalised military assistance from Western donors to ensure regime stability, to reconfigure power and build a militarised state. Under the guise of humanitarianism this “securitisation” (Duffield 2001) took the form of defence transformation initiatives and other security sector reform programmes, peacekeeping operations or direct military assistance.¹ Museveni used the process of securitised aid to enhance the capacity and effectiveness of these authoritarian actions against internal dissent and threats on their borders.²

As Museveni prepares for his seventh term in office, with elections scheduled in January 2026, the opposition prepares itself for another round of fraudulent polls and increased repression. However, nationally there is a widespread desire for reform and democratic renewal. Although Museveni took office in 1986 the first elections were only held in 1996. From the start, they were riddled with voting irregularities, compromised electoral management bodies, violence and intimidation. The Electoral Democracy Index, which includes variables on political freedoms and suffrage shows only very marginal variation since 1996 and consistently placing Uganda in an “autocratic” bracket or “electoral authoritarianism”.³ Each election cycle has become more violent and more fraudulent, beginning with the 2006 arrest of opposition leader Dr Kizza Besiye and the many subsequent detentions, and the arrest of opposition leader Bobi Wine in 2020. The 2021 polls were particularly concerning foreshadowing the many risks and dangers ahead for the upcoming presidential elections. The 2026 elections are set to be the worst and potentially most violent. The partisan intelligence and security units will be widely deployed, affirming threats to national security while using different laws and policies to clampdown.

1 Duffield, M. “Governing the borderlands: decoding the power of aid.” *Disasters* vol. 25,4 (2001): pp. 308–20.

2 Fisher, J. and Anderson, D. “Authoritarianism and the securitization of development in Africa”, *International Affairs*, 91:1, January 2015

3 Rowan Cole, *35 Years of Museveni: Uganda's 2021 Election No Break from Character*, *Varieties of Democracy*, 2021, https://v-dem.net/weekly_graph/35-years-of-museveni-uganda-s-2021-election-n.

The Anti-Terrorism Act was introduced in 2002 as a response to the pressing security challenges Uganda faced in the late 1990s and early 2000s.⁴ The law criminalises acts of terrorism, provides mechanisms for investigation and prosecution, and establishes institutional structures for counter-terrorism operations. Uganda has made significant progress in combating terrorism, evidenced by the successful disruption of several major terror plots, including successful operations against militant groups like the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF), leading to a 70% reduction in ADF attacks between 2002 and 2020, with 476 militants surrendering through the amnesty programme.⁵ The framework has also strengthened international security cooperation, evidenced by Uganda's successful leadership of the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) from 2007-2020, where it commanded over 22,000 troops and secured key areas from Al-Shabaab control.⁶ However it has been increasingly weaponised to violently crackdown on reformist voices and movements, deflecting attention from the fragilities of a paranoid and embattled regime.

This legal framework is not unique to Uganda but aligns with global initiatives in counter-terrorism legislation, reflecting the established international emphasis on robust security measures in response to heightened terrorist threats. The PATRIOT Act (2001)⁷ in the United States was established after the September 11 attacks, to prevent and punish terrorist acts, and to strengthen law enforcement agencies such as the Federal Bureau of Investigation

(FBI), Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) among others, in the monitoring of communications, financial transactions, and other activities directly linked to terrorist threats. The Patriot Act was perhaps the single largest contributor to a widespread trend of unhindered state surveillance, operating within a world of secrecy and national security that hampers oversight, accountability and transparency. Similarly, the UK Terrorism Act (2000)⁸ was introduced to address emerging security challenges by granting police and intelligence agencies enhanced powers to investigate, detain, and prosecute individuals involved in terror-related offences. These legislative counter-terrorism measures, like those in Uganda, are designed to empower security agencies with robust tools to identify, prevent, and respond to terrorism, often in contradiction to civil and political liberties.

While these laws share a common objective of safeguarding national security, their implementation often raises concerns about the potential for overreach, particularly in contexts where oversight mechanisms are weak or absent. Uganda's Anti-Terrorism Act's framework includes several safeguards to ensure its application does not overstep into the realm of legitimate political expression or infringe upon civil liberties. However, it has several clauses that allow for its weaponisation against the 'enemies' of the government. The Act has subsequently been amended numerous times. The 2017 amendment,

4 John Mukum Mbaku, "Counter-Terrorism Laws and Human Rights in African Countries," *Washington University Global Studies Law Review* 20 (2021): 863, <https://heinonline.org/HOL/LandingPage?handle=hein.journals/wasglo20&div=36&id=&page=>.

5 Matthew Pflaum, "ADF's Resilience and the Border Crises in the Rwenzoris: Book Review of *Conflict at the Edge of the African State: The ADF Rebel Group in the Congo-Uganda Borderland*," *Journal of Borderlands Studies* 38, no. 3 (2023): 533–535.

6 Paul D. Williams, "Joining AMISOM: Why Six African States Contributed Troops to the African Union Mission in Somalia," *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 12, no. 1 (2017): 172–192, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17531055.2018.1418159>.

7 Office of the Federal Register, *Public Law 107-56: Uniting and Strengthening America by Providing Appropriate Tools Required to Intercept and Obstruct Terrorism (USA PATRIOT ACT) Act of 2001* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2001), <https://www.govinfo.gov/app/details/PLAW-107publ56>.

8 *Terrorism Act 2000*, c.11, <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2000/11/contents>.

which introduced provisions for electronic surveillance, granted security agencies broad powers to access private communications without sufficient checks and balances. It expanded the definitions of criminalised acts and included provisions criminalising interference with electronic systems and possession of materials deemed to promote terrorism.⁹ It allowed for the correspondence of anyone suspected to be planning an act of terrorism to be intercepted, which could be widely interpreted. This amendment represents a broad and dangerous expansion of the government's powers to investigate, spy on, detain and prosecute individuals without adequate judicial oversight and

public transparency. There is also a lack of judicial oversight, which has contributed to instances of arbitrary arrests and prolonged detentions.¹⁰

This study will explore cases involving journalists, politicians and activists, examining the language used in these contexts, the victims targeted, and the actions taken, such as renditions, arrests, and charges related to treason or threats to national security. Additionally, the study will investigate the role of external actors in providing training, weapons, intelligence, and surveillance software, shedding light on their influence on the implementation of these laws.

POLITICAL SETTING

Uganda's political history is deeply rooted in cycles of repression stemming from post-colonial struggles and prolonged periods of authoritarian rule.

After gaining independence in 1962, the country experienced instability marked by the military coups of the 1970s and the oppressive regimes of Idi Amin and Milton Obote. These administrations used state machinery to suppress political opposition, often resorting to violence and extrajudicial killings. Political repression was institutionalised, with dissent being equated to subversion, setting a precedent for successive governments.¹¹ The NRM, led by Yoweri Museveni, rose to power in 1986, promising to restore democracy and

human rights. However, over the decades, Museveni's government has consolidated power, employing many of the same repressive tactics of its predecessors¹². The NRM has entrenched itself using a blend of patronage, constitutional manipulation, and coercion to consolidate authority. The 1995 Constitution, initially celebrated as a democratic milestone, provided for fundamental rights and freedoms, including multiparty democracy. However, subsequent amendments eroded its democratic

9 Unwanted Witness, *Impact of the Anti-Terrorism Act Implementation to the Enjoyment of the Right to Privacy*, 2025, <https://www.unwantedwitness.org/uw-policy-brief-impact-of-the-anti-terrorism-act-implementation-to-the-enjoyment-of-the-right-to-privacy/>.

10 Cephas Lumina, "Counter-Terrorism Legislation and the Protection of Human Rights: A Survey of Selected International Practice," *African Human Rights Law Journal* 7, no. 1 (2007): 35–67.

11 Holger Bernt Hansen and Michael Twaddle, eds., *Developing Uganda* (Oxford: James Currey; Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1998), <https://lcn.loc.gov/98023026>.

12 Frederick Golooba-Mutebi and Sam Hickey, "The Master of Institutional Multiplicity? The Shifting Politics of Regime Survival, State-Building and Democratisation in Museveni's Uganda," *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 10, no. 4 (October 2016): 601–18, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17531055.2016.1278322>; Derrick Wandera, "New Opposition Pressure Group Names Besigye Chairman, Lukwago Deputy," *Monitor*, 2021, <https://www.monitor.co.ug/uganda/news/national/new-opposition-pressure-group-names-besigye-chairman-lukwago-deputy-3575710>.

provisions. In 2005, the removal of presidential term limits allowed Museveni to extend his tenure beyond the constitutional maximum of two terms. In 2017, the controversial removal of the presidential age limit of 75 years paved the way for Museveni to contest and win the 2021 elections. These amendments were passed despite significant public opposition and heated parliamentary debates, with reports that indicate that bribery and intimidation influenced the outcome.¹³ These legal changes were accompanied by political crackdowns and an increasingly militarised approach to governance, reflecting a broader pattern of institutionalised repression.¹⁴ The judiciary and legislature has been co-opted by the executive through transactional politics, intimidation and corruption creating an environment where the lack of separation of powers make branches of government subservient to Museveni's interests. When any branch of the government shows a modicum of independence the executive intervenes to correct this. One recent example of this was the push by Museveni's government to amend Article 92 of the Ugandan Constitution which explicitly prohibits Parliament from passing laws that override court decisions. This occurred within a context whereby the Supreme Court ruled against civilians being tried in military courts on January 31st 2025 in the case of a controversial clampdown on opposition figure Dr Kizza Besigye (explained further in this report) .

Under Museveni's leadership, the NRM has maintained a firm grip on power, using several strategies, including the prevalence of military corruption, which has resulted in senior government and army leaders not being subject to public accountability.¹⁵

Museveni's administration portrays itself as a stabilising force in a volatile region, citing its role in mediating regional conflicts, hosting refugees, and contributing to peacekeeping missions. However, this narrative of stability often masks the erosion of democratic values and the systematic dismantling of the opposition. Key political figures such as Dr Kizza Besigye, a long-time opposition leader, and Robert Kyagulanyi, also known as Bobi Wine, have faced relentless harassment, repeated arrests, restrictions on their movements, and brutal attacks.¹⁶ Such actions demonstrate the state's prioritisation of regime survival over the democratic inclusion of dissenting voices.

The NRM's political order is, therefore, underpinned by two dynamics: the dominance of a militarised elite in politics and an extensive patronage network that co-opts influential individuals and institutions into the ruling party's orbit. This system relies heavily on state resources to secure loyalty, often at the expense of public service delivery. Government positions, military appointments, and lucrative contracts are routinely awarded based on political allegiance rather than merit. These practices not only perpetuate corruption but also weaken state institutions, as resources are diverted to sustain the patronage system.¹⁷ The politicisation of public institutions entrenches the NRM's governance, as these bodies are perceived as biased toward the ruling party, undermining their credibility and independence. For over three decades, Museveni has placed a military elite at the heart of political power in what has been called a 'Shadow State', a carefully engineered system of competing interests and elites and a shadowy network

13 Godfrey Berinde Asiimwe, "Of Fundamental Change and No Change: Pitfalls of Constitutionalism and Political Transformation in Uganda, 1995–2005," *Africa Development* 39, no. 2 (2014): 21–46.

14 Sam Wilkins and Richard Vokes, "Transition, Transformation, and the Politics of the Future in Uganda," *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 17, no. 1–2 (2023): 262–79, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17531055.2023.2236848>.

15 Roger Tangri and Andrew M. Mwenda, "Military Corruption and Ugandan Politics Since the Late 1990s," *Review of African Political Economy* 30, no. 98 (2003): 539–52, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03056244.2003.9659773>.

16 Halima Athumani and Max Bearak, "Stories of Torture Emerge as Uganda Releases Bobi Wine Supporters," *The Washington Post*, 2021.

17 Graeme Young, "Neoliberalism and the State in the African City: Informality, Accumulation and the Rebirth of a Ugandan Market," *Critical African Studies* 13, no. 3 (2021): 305–20, <https://doi.org/10.1080/21681392.2021.1999834>.

of power and money.¹⁸ Military loyalists have been integral to the NRM regime with officers being placed in civilian positions, including within the judiciary, cabinet, the revenue authority, in the intelligence services, the police and immigration, and the state broadcaster.¹⁹ In the early years, this military aristocracy was comprised of officers from the bush war years, but more recently, in particular since 2008, a process of renewal was begun, with Museveni's son General Muhoozi Kainerugaba being included in the command structures.

While the securitised state is a complex web of units, political and ethnic affiliations, as well as economic interests (which this report cannot cover), the main structures of concentrated power have remained in the Ugandan Defence Forces (UPDF), the Presidential Guard Brigade, the Special Forces Command (SFC), (which are both units of the police) and the three intelligence services (military, internal and external). Operating across these units is the Joint Anti-Terrorism Task Force (JATT). JATT, the Counter Terrorism Police Unit (CTPU) police unit and military intelligence are part of a wider politicised, nepotistic and incestuous network of security units that uphold the interest of the NRM elite and keep the regime in power. More details about their operations will emerge in this report. Unofficial and non-statutory paramilitary units also serve to extend political power. More details will emerge in the report about how they have operated. Unofficial and non-statutory paramilitary units also serve to extend power. Many of these groups are no longer in operation

and neither formally established or formally disbanded, having been created through a patchwork of different security units working to complete a particular mandate.

These units, whose mandates are not codified in law, included the Popular Intelligence Network (PIN) that was a network of civilians formed in 1996 and working with the UPDF against the Lords Resistance Army (LRA); the Kalangala Action Plan (KAP), that was formed in 2001 to assist with Museveni's elections bid; and the Black Mambas which was a death squad within military intelligence that was deployed in 2005 and 2007 to surround the High Court ahead of Kizza Besigye's release.²⁰ They also include the militia-style Crimes Preventers of the police that were very active during the 2016 elections²¹ and recruited to intimidate opposition members and reduce their political support around the country²²; the Rapid Response Unit (previously the Violent Crime Crack Unit and before that Operation Wembley) a joint operation of military intelligence, the police, and internal intelligence organization formed in 2002 to fight violent crime in urban areas.²³

The shrinking of democratic space has also included actions to dismantle civil society. To constrain the action of CSOs, the government introduced restrictive laws, such as the Non-Governmental Organisations (NGO) Act of 2016, which imposes burdensome registration requirements and grants the government extensive powers to suspend or dissolve NGOs. These measures have been used to target organisations critical of the government, particularly those working

18 Lisa Rolls, "The Shadow State in Uganda," in *The Shadow State in Africa: DRC, Uganda, Zambia, Zimbabwe, Democracy in Africa*, 2020.

19 "Army Officers Take Over Key State Affairs," *Monitor*, 2020.

20 Human Rights Watch, *Open Secret: Illegal Detention and Torture by the Joint Anti-Terrorism Task Force in Uganda*, April 8, 2009, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2009/04/08/open-secret/illegal-detention-and-torture-joint-anti-terrorism-task-force-uganda>. The group was actually named by the public for their use of black attire.

21 Rolls, Lisa, (2021), "the Shadow state in Uganda", in Cheeseman, Nic and Shishuwa, Shishuwa, *The Shadow State in Africa*, Democracy in Africa

22 Human Rights Watch, "Uganda: Suspend 'Crime Preventers': Massive Unregulated Force Threatens Election Security," 2016.

23 Open Secret: Illegal Detention and Torture by the Joint Anti-terrorism Task Force in Uganda", Human Rights Watch report, 9th April 2009.

on issues of governance, accountability, and electoral reform.²⁴ In July 2024, the parliament amended the NGO Act, which essentially centralised control of the sector under the Interior Ministry and enhanced government oversight. NGOs have also been forewarned about the risks of accepting foreign funds ahead of the 2026 polls.²⁵ The regulatory crackdown is a more benevolent strategy of impeding the work conducted by civil society and, by extension, transparency, good governance and human rights programmes.

Journalists and independent media outlets face similar challenges, with press freedom steadily declining. Laws like the Computer Misuse Act and the Public Order Management Act have been weaponised to intimidate journalists, censor dissenting voices, and stifle public debate. General Muhoozi Kainerugaba, in particular, has used public rhetoric on his X.com account, which often portrays an aggressive stance on national security, with comments suggesting readiness to use military force against both external and internal threats. His statements, including threats to capture Nairobi,²⁶ not only stir regional tensions but also paint him as a dangerous and mercurial figure that is positioning himself for future political roles. This securitised rhetoric points to a predisposition for militaristic solutions to political challenges. His approach could lead to policies that further integrate military control into civilian governance, impacting Uganda's democratic landscape

by equating opposition with security threats. His controversial posts have occasionally resulted in diplomatic tensions. Muhoozi's influence potentially steers Uganda towards a security-centric political future. Recent tweets have shocked the country, in particular pronouncements on the intent to kill or detain opposition leaders. In February 2025 he referred to Dr Kizza Besiye as a traitor that would leave prison in either "his coffin after we hang him or sheet him or on his knees apologizing to Mzee".²⁷ A month earlier the army chief had posted his intentions to behead opposition leader Bobi Wine and later openly stated that he wouldn't stand in an election against Bobi Wine but rather "simply shoot him dead".

While elections are held regularly in Uganda, their credibility has been increasingly questioned. International observers, including the European Union and the Commonwealth, have repeatedly highlighted irregularities, including voter suppression, intimidation, and a general lack of transparency in the electoral process. The 2021 elections were marred by allegations of widespread rigging, an internet shutdown that lasted five days, and a heavy security presence deployed to suppress dissent. Opposition candidates faced brutal crackdowns, with Bobi Wine being placed under house arrest during and after the election period. Civil society organisations also reported cases of state-sponsored violence, including the killing of over 50 protesters following Bobi Wine's arrest during his campaign.²⁸

24 Hannah Muzee and Andrew Osehi Enaifoghe, "Social Media and Elections in Uganda: The Case of Bobi Wine and the Arua Primary Elections," in *Social Media and Elections in Africa, Volume 1: Theoretical Perspectives and Election Campaigns* (2020): 195–213.

25 Karim Muyobo, "Govt Warns NGOs Against Foreign Donor Funding Ahead of 2026 Polls," *Monitor*, 2024, <https://www.monitor.co.ug/uganda/news/national/govt-warns-ngos-against-foreign-donor-funding-ahead-of-2026-polls-4818360>.

26 Kenyans.co.ke [@Kenyans], "Museveni's Son, Muhoozi Kainerugaba Says It Wouldn't Take Two Weeks for Uganda to Capture Nairobi," X (formerly *Twitter*), October 3, 2022, <https://x.com/Kenyans/status/1576930106605445120>.

27 The Citizen Reporter, "Muhoozi's Controversial Social Media Posts Continue to Spark Public Outrage in Uganda," *The Citizen*, 2025, <https://www.thecitizen.co.tz/tanzania/news/east-africa-news/muhoozi-s-controversial-social-media-posts-continue-to-spark-public-outrage-in-uganda-4914210>.

28 Sam Wilkins, Richard Vokes, and Moses Khisa, "Briefing: Contextualizing the Bobi Wine Factor in Uganda's 2021 Elections," *African Affairs* 120, no. 481 (2021): 629–643.

The opposition's ability to challenge the NRM is further hindered by its fragmentation and limited access to resources. While figures like Besigye and Bobi Wine have mobilised significant support, particularly among Uganda's youth, they face structural barriers that make it difficult to mount an effective challenge. These include restricted access to media, financial constraints, and targeted legal actions designed to drain their resources and divert attention from campaigning. Opposition rallies are frequently disrupted under the pretext of enforcing public order, with organisers often charged under laws such as the Public Order Management Act, which grants authorities sweeping powers to regulate gatherings.²⁹

Moreover, the government's control over the media significantly skews the political playing field. State-owned media outlets provide extensive coverage of Museveni and the NRM, while opposition figures struggle to gain airtime. Private media houses that offer critical coverage face threats of closure, hefty fines, or attacks on their journalists. During the 2021 elections, the Uganda Communications Commission ordered the suspension of several online platforms, further curtailing the opposition's ability to communicate with voters.³⁰ This asymmetry in media access stifles meaningful political debate and limits the electorate's ability to make informed choices. As such, there is growing discontent among Ugandans. Frustration with unemployment, corruption, and political repression has fuelled grassroots movements and protests, highlighting a desire for change. While these movements face significant obstacles, including state violence and limited organisational capacity, they represent a potent force for political transformation. The government's inability

to address these grievances risks further alienating the population and heightening tensions in the long term. The use of security forces to intimidate, surveil, and suppress opposition reflects a regime that views dissent as an existential threat. While this approach may sustain the NRM's hold on power in the short term, it undermines the legitimacy of state institutions and erodes public trust in governance.

As such, Uganda's democratic institutions, intended to serve as safeguards against the overreach of executive power, have progressively been weakened under the NRM government. Over the decades, the deliberate centralisation of power has eroded the independence of key institutions, undermining their ability to act as effective checks and balances. This has left the country's governance structures skewed in favour of the executive, with institutions becoming either complicit in or powerless against the dominance of President Yoweri Museveni's administration. Uganda's Parliament is constitutionally independent but has increasingly functioned as an extension of the executive. The dominance of NRM legislators secured through a mix of patronage, intimidation, and electoral advantages ensures that legislative processes overwhelmingly favour the ruling party. Bills proposed by the opposition or those critical of government policies are often blocked, sidelined, or diluted. Most recently, attempts by opposition Members of Parliament (MPs) to introduce electoral reform bills have been systematically undermined by the NRM majority, which uses its numerical strength to stifle debate and push through legislation that consolidates executive control.³¹ Moreover, opposition MPs frequently face harassment, including physical

29 Julian Friesinger, "Patronage, Repression, and Co-optation: Bobi Wine and the Political Economy of Activist Musicians in Uganda," *Africa Spectrum* 56, no. 2 (2021): 127–150.

30 Anna Macdonald, Arthur Owor, and Rebecca Tapscott, "Explaining Youth Political Mobilization and Its Absence: The Case of Bobi Wine and Uganda's 2021 Election," *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 17, no. 1–2 (2023): 280–300.

31 Oxford Analytica Daily Brief, "Ugandan Authorities May Miss Mark in Bobi Wine Affair," *Emerald Expert Briefings* (2019), <https://dailybrief.oxan.com/Analysis/DB243648/Ugandan-authorities-may-miss-mark-in-Bobi-Wine-affair>.

intimidation, arrests, and even suspension from parliamentary sessions. During the 2017 parliamentary debates on the removal of the presidential age limit, opposition MPs were forcibly removed from the chambers by security personnel. Such incidents reinforce the perception that legislative processes are heavily influenced, if not entirely controlled, by the executive, undermining the principle of parliamentary independence.

Similarly, the judiciary has been compromised under the NRM regime. While Uganda's Constitution establishes an independent judiciary, the reality is far more complex. Judges are often subjected to pressure from the executive, particularly in politically sensitive cases. Although the judiciary occasionally demonstrates independence, such as in rulings declaring certain detentions illegal or annulling election results at lower levels, these decisions are rarely enforced, reflecting the limited authority of the courts in practice.³² High-profile cases against opposition figures illustrate this perspective. Legal challenges to the 2021 presidential election results were met with procedural delays and allegations of judicial bias. In cases where opposition leaders sought judicial intervention against arbitrary arrests or detention, the courts' rulings were often ignored by security agencies, highlighting the judiciary's inability to enforce its decisions. This lack of enforcement undermines public confidence in the judicial system and signals the subordination of legal processes to political interests. One of the most significant challenges is the influence of the executive in judicial appointments. Senior positions, including those on the Supreme Court, are filled by presidential appointees, creating a perception of bias and limiting the judiciary's capacity to act independently. While the Judicial Service Commission plays a role in recommending appointments, the president retains significant discretionary powers, enabling the selection of individuals perceived to be loyal to the regime. The executive's interference extends to the

operational level, with security agencies frequently obstructing judicial processes. Multiple court orders to release detained opposition leader Dr Kizza Besigye during his numerous arrests have been disregarded by security forces.

This erosion of parliamentary and judicial independence has significantly weakened Uganda's accountability mechanisms. Institutions responsible for investigating corruption, human rights abuses, and electoral malpractices, such as the Inspectorate of Government and the Uganda Human Rights Commission, often operate under political constraints. These bodies are either underfunded or staffed with individuals loyal to the ruling party, limiting their effectiveness in holding powerful actors accountable. The lack of independent oversight has enabled a culture of impunity within the government. Corruption scandals involving high-ranking officials are rarely prosecuted to their conclusion, and even when convictions occur, they are often overturned, or sentences are lenient. This failure to address corruption not only undermines public trust in governance but also diverts resources from essential services such as healthcare and education. By consolidating power within the executive arm, the NRM has eroded the foundations of participatory democracy, leaving citizens with limited avenues to influence decision-making. This centralisation of authority fosters disillusionment among the populace, who increasingly view democratic processes as ineffective in addressing their grievances.

Notwithstanding the unfavourable political environment, grassroots movements and opposition groups continue to challenge the government. For instance, the opposition movement led by Bobi Wine, has mobilised significant support among urban and rural youth. However, such movements are met with heavy-handed responses, including arbitrary arrests, detentions, and accusations of terrorism. The state's intolerance for

32 Jude Murison, "Judicial Politics: Election Petitions and Electoral Fraud in Uganda," *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 7, no. 3 (2013): 492–508, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17531055.2013.811026>.

dissent underscores its reliance on coercion to maintain control. This blurring of lines between civilian and military authority has undermined democratic governance and

fostered a culture of impunity. Security forces often act with little accountability, as evidenced by reports of torture, arbitrary detentions, and extrajudicial killings.³³

UGANDA'S TERRORIST THREATS AND EMERGENCE OF LAWS

Uganda's Anti-Terrorism Act (2002) emerged in the context of heightened domestic security challenges, particularly due to the activities of insurgent groups such as the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF) and Lord's Resistance Army (LRA).

The ADF, one of Uganda's most persistent militant groups, had been waging a campaign of violence in the country since the 1990s, primarily targeting the western region near the border with the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). The group's actions, characterised by bombings, kidnappings, and attacks on schools, villages, and public infrastructure, exposed the inadequacy of existing laws to address the evolving threat of terrorism. One of the most harrowing incidents that underscored the need for robust counter-terrorism legislation was the 1998 attack on the Kichwamba Technical Institute.³⁴ In this attack, the ADF burned 80 students alive in their dormitories and abducted more than 100 others. The sheer brutality of this act shocked the nation and highlighted the urgent need for a legal framework that could effectively prevent, punish, and deter such acts. The incident demonstrated the ADF's capacity to cause mass casualties and disrupt social stability, presenting a threat that could not be adequately addressed under Uganda's existing legal system. Beyond the Kichwamba incident, the ADF engaged in a sustained campaign of violence, including bombings

in public spaces in Kampala and other urban centres.³⁵ These attacks created a climate of fear and insecurity, prompting calls from the public and political leaders for stronger government action. The group's ability to operate across borders, with bases in the DRC, further complicated efforts to combat its activities, highlighting the need for legislation that addressed both domestic and transnational dimensions of terrorism. As a result, the ADF's operations played a pivotal role in shaping Uganda's counter-terrorism agenda. The group's tactics, which combined guerrilla warfare with acts of terror, required a comprehensive response that went beyond traditional military measures. Government recognised that addressing the ADF threat required not only military action but also a legal framework that could disrupt the group's financing, recruitment and logistical support networks.

In addition to the threat posed by the ADF, the Lord's Resistance Army's (LRA) acts of terror in the northern region further highlighted the urgent need for counter-terrorism measures. The LRA emerged in the late 1980s, led by Joseph Kony, with the aim

33 Lewis Jennings, "Playing Out Injustice: Ugandan Songwriter and Politician Bobi Wine Talks About How His Lyrics Have Inspired Young People to Stand Up Against Injustice and How the Government Has Tried to Silence Him," *Index on Censorship* 48, no. 2 (2019): 77.

34 Pflaum, "ADF's Resilience and the Border Crises."

35 Lindsay Scorgie, "Peripheral Pariah or Regional Rebel? The Allied Democratic Forces and the Uganda/Congo Borderland," *The Round Table* 100, no. 412 (2011): 79–93, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00358533.2011.542297>.

of overthrowing the Ugandan government to establish a theocratic state based on the Ten Commandments.

Their strategy was to make the country ungovernable, spreading fear and insecurity to make Museveni's government appear weak and unable to protect its citizens. The group's methods involved extreme brutality, including mass killings, mutilations, and the abduction of children to serve as soldiers or sex slaves.³⁶ Its brutal campaign in Uganda was marked by devastating attacks on civilians, including the 1994 Atiak massacre³⁷ in Gulu district that claimed over 200 lives and the 2004 Barlonyo IDP camp attack that resulted in more than 300 deaths.³⁸ People in the northern districts of Gulu, Kitgum, and Pader were terrorized in this manner for almost two decades with more than a million Acholi had to move to protected camps. The group was mostly expelled by military forces in 2006 which led it to migrate into border regions of South Sudan, the Central African Republic, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, internationalizing the crisis. LRA operations across these 4 countries could have displaced as many as 2.5 million³⁹ and abducted between 60,000 and 100,000 children. The LRA became infamous for its reliance on child soldiers who were also put on the frontlines and forced to kill, mutilate, and rape family members, schoolmates, neighbors, and teachers. Since 2016 the LRA has started to lose momentum, suffering numerous defections, becoming militarily weaker, and factionalizing. The last LRA attacks inside Uganda occurred in 2006, although Kony and other senior figures remained at large. One commander, Dominic Ongwen, was

apprehended in 2015 and is on trial at the ICC in the Hague. With less than 300 fighters, the group has still carried out attacks in DRC, South Sudan and the CAR.

These LRA and ADF protracted campaigns influenced Uganda's security policies in several ways: there has been increased military engagement, with operations extending into neighbouring countries like Sudan and the DRC to combat these groups. Legislative responses have also been shaped by the LRA's tactics, necessitating legal frameworks which criminalise not only direct acts of terrorism but also support networks, recruitment, and financing. The conflicts have also led to policies that integrate security with humanitarian considerations, acknowledging the displacement and trauma caused by such conflicts.

As such, the Anti-Terrorism Act (2002) was crafted with these dynamics in mind. Its provisions were designed to criminalise acts of terrorism, support the prosecution of perpetrators, and provide security agencies with the tools needed to prevent attacks. The introduction of the Anti-Terrorism Act also reflected broader political change within Uganda. By the late 1990s and early 2000s, President Yoweri Museveni's government faced mounting pressure to demonstrate its ability to maintain national security and stability.⁴⁰ The ADF and LRA attacks had exposed vulnerabilities in Uganda's security apparatus, prompting criticism from both domestic and international observers. The Act was, therefore, not only a response to immediate security threats but also a means of reinforcing the government's legitimacy

36 Anthony Vinci, "The Strategic Use of Fear by the Lord's Resistance Army," *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 16, no. 3 (2005): 360–381, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09592310500221336>.

37 Florence Ebila, "Loss and Trauma in Ugandan Girls' Ex-Child-Soldier Autobiographical Narratives: The Case of Grace Akallo and China Keitetsi," *A/b: Auto/Biography Studies* 35, no. 3 (2020): 533–555, <https://doi.org/10.1080/08989575.2020.1759871>.

38 Christopher R. Day, "'Survival Mode': Rebel Resilience and the Lord's Resistance Army," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 31, no. 5 (2017): 966–986, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2017.1300580>.

39 United Nations Security Council [UNSC], 2013; Internal Displacement Monitoring Center [IDMC], 2013

40 Sathvi Weeraratne and Sarah Recker, "The Isolated Islamists: The Case of the Allied Democratic Forces in the Ugandan-Congolese Borderland," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 30, no. 1 (2016): 22–46, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2016.1139577>.

and its commitment to protecting citizens. At the same time, the Act's introduction coincided with Uganda's increasing integration into global security frameworks. The rise of global terrorism, exemplified by the September 11, 2001, attacks in the United States, placed counter-terrorism at the forefront of international agendas.⁴¹ Uganda's adoption of the Anti-Terrorism Act aligned it with global efforts to combat terrorism and demonstrated its commitment to assisting with the global war on terror. This alignment was particularly important for securing international support and funding for Uganda's counter-terrorism initiatives.

Section 7 of the Anti-Terrorism Act defines terrorism as any act involving serious violence against individuals or property, endangering lives, creating serious risks to public safety, or disrupting public services. Such acts must be designed to influence the government, intimidate the public, or further political, religious, social, or economic aims. These definitions align with international standards on counter-terrorism but also introduce significant ambiguity particularly in terms such as "influencing the government" and "intimidating the public."⁴² Section 7 further outlines specific acts that constitute terrorism, including the use of explosives or lethal devices in public spaces or infrastructure with the intent to cause death, injury, or destruction. It also criminalises targeting individuals or groups through actions such as murder, kidnapping, or maiming in public or private settings. Hostage-taking and hijacking, involving the unlawful seizure of individuals or public transport for ransom or to compel a state or organisation to act, are similarly categorised as terrorist acts. The law further addresses modern threats by penalising the serious disruption of electronic systems, emphasising

the growing importance of cybersecurity in counter-terrorism. Additionally, the unlawful possession, development, or use of firearms, explosives, or biological weapons are strictly prohibited. These provisions were crafted to address domestic security challenges posed by groups like the ADF. The ADF's activities, including the 1998 attack on Kichwamba Technical Institute where dormitories were burned and students abducted, highlighted the urgent need for legislation targeting explosives, hostage-taking, and cross-border insurgencies.⁴³ While these definitions were intended to capture a wide range of activities associated with terrorism, they also introduced a level of vagueness that has allowed for broad interpretations. For instance, "endangering public health or safety" could apply to various scenarios, from deliberate acts of bioterrorism to public demonstrations that disrupt traffic or services. Similarly, "influencing the government through intimidation" lacks specificity, potentially encompassing peaceful protests, civil disobedience, or even media reporting critical of state actions. These ambiguities made it possible for security agencies and political actors to interpret the law in ways that extended beyond genuine counter-terrorism objectives.

Part IV of the Act⁴⁴ focuses on the meaning of terrorist organisations, criminalising membership in such organisations with penalties of up to 10 years' imprisonment, as stipulated in Section 11(3). Schedule 2 of the Act initially lists four organisations identified as terrorist groups, and Section 10(5) grants the Minister authority to issue statutory instruments to declare additional organisations as terrorist entities. This power extends to dissolving these organisations, seizing their property, and transferring their assets to the state. The Act also penalises

41 Andrew Winter, "The United States of America: Counter-Terrorism Pre-9/11," in *Routledge Handbook of Terrorism and Counterterrorism*, ed. Andrew Silke (London: Routledge, 2018), 615–634.

42 Uganda Legal Information Institute (ULII), *Anti-Terrorism Act, 2002 (Act 14 of 2002)*, 2002, <https://ulii.org/akn/ug/act/2002/14/eng@2002-06-07>.

43 Abdulhakim A. Nsoby, "Uganda's Militant Islamic Movement ADF: A Historical Analysis," *Annual Review of Islam in Africa* 12/13 (2015).

44 *Anti-Terrorism Act, 2002*, ULII.

individuals who, while not formal members of these organisations, provide any form of support or further their activities, as outlined in Section 11(1)(c)(iii). Criminalising membership in terrorist organisations emerged in response to the significant threats posed by organised militant groups. These groups not only engaged in direct acts of violence but also operated through well-organised networks. The provision reflects the government's recognition of the need to dismantle the organisational structures that sustain terrorism, including recruitment, financing, and operational coordination. The inclusion of Schedule 2, which lists specific terrorist organisations and the additional authority granted to the Minister under Section 10(5) to prescribe more groups, demonstrates an adaptive approach to counter-terrorism. This flexibility allows the government to respond to emerging threats by rapidly designating new organisations as terrorist entities, particularly those that evolve or operate across borders. Such measures were essential to addressing groups like the ADF, which leveraged international networks for funding, training, and logistics. However, the lack of specific criteria and the loose use of the word 'terrorist' to designate anyone deemed as unaligned to Museveni's government gives broad powers to clamp down on political opponents.

The criminalisation of support for terrorist organisations under Section 11(1)(c)(iii) further highlights the emphasis on targeting not just the members but also the broader ecosystem enabling terrorist activities. By penalising those who provide financial, logistical, or ideological support, the Act aimed to cut off the lifelines that sustain these organisations. This approach aligns with international counter-terrorism frameworks, such as the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1373 (2001)⁴⁵, which calls on states to suppress the financing of terrorism and deny safe havens to those supporting terrorist activities.

However, the absence of an appeal mechanism for organisations or individuals designated as terrorist entities raises questions about fairness and accountability. While these measures were crafted to address genuine security threats, the expansive powers granted to the Minister under Section 10(5), coupled with the lack of procedural safeguards, reflect the government's prioritisation of security over the protection of civil liberties. This provision is intended to target insurgent groups and militant entities operating within and across Uganda's borders. The ability to dismantle terrorist organisations by freezing their assets, disrupting their operations, and prosecuting their members is a critical component of any counter-terrorism framework. The law grants significant powers to law enforcement and security agencies to combat terrorism. Section 11 criminalises the financing of terrorism, making it illegal to directly or indirectly provide financial support to individuals or organisations engaged in terrorism. Part VII of the Act grants authorised officers extensive powers to intercept communications and conduct surveillance as stipulated under Section 19(1). The scope of these powers includes intercepting letters, postal packages, telephone calls, faxes, emails, and other forms of communication, monitoring group meetings, conducting both physical and electronic surveillance, accessing individuals' bank accounts and searching premises. The Act further allows wide-ranging stop-and-search powers targeting premises or individuals specified in a warrant. Authorisation for such actions must be granted by a magistrate, based on the necessity for preventing acts of terrorism, as detailed in Section 17 and the Third Schedule. This section likely emerged in response to the global wave of counter-terrorism measures following the September 11, 2001 attacks and the subsequent adoption of UN Security Council Resolution 1373. The resolution called

45 United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, *S/RES/1373 (2001): Security Council Resolution*, 2001, https://www.unodc.org/pdf/crime/terrorism/res_1373_english.pdf.

on all member states to enhance their legal frameworks to combat terrorism by taking measures such as criminalising terrorism financing, improving intelligence sharing, and adopting stricter surveillance protocols. For Uganda, a country that has faced security challenges from internal insurgencies such as the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA)⁴⁶ and regional threats like Al-Shabaab⁴⁷, the inclusion of robust surveillance and interception provisions reflects an effort to address these security concerns.

In 2010 the government passed the Regulation of Interception of Communications Act that provides for the lawful interception and monitoring of certain communications during their transmission through a telecommunication, postal or any other related service or system in Uganda; it also provides for the establishment of a monitoring centre.

⁴⁸An application for the lawful interception of any communication can be made by the different security chiefs (Chief of Defence Forces or their nominee; the Director General of the External Security Organisation or their nominee; the Director General of the Internal Security Organisation or their nominee; or the Inspector General of Police or their nominee.) Slowly, Uganda is becoming a surveillance state where the above laws, combined with the opacity of command hierarchy, politicised national security threats, and outright repression, meet the technology that supercharges the government's capacity to spy on its population. The country has installed an Intelligent Transport Management system (ITMS) that allows for the full tracking of vehicles and the movements of any target. It has a CCTV system, mandatory SIM card registration, biometrics ID systems and has used surveillance software to access the devices of opponents (this will be discussed further in the report).

One of the primary checks within the Anti-Terrorism Act is the description of what constitutes terrorist activities. By description, the legislation should aim to target only those actions that genuinely threaten national security, thereby offering a degree of protection for legitimate political activism and public protests. This distinction is crucial because it attempts to shield political dissent from being misconstrued as terrorism, ensuring that the law does not inadvertently become a tool for political suppression. However, the definition is broad and vague, which brings an element of arbitrariness to its application. Another safeguard embedded in the provisions regards the participation and contribution to terrorism. The Act places the onus on the state to prove intent; specifically, it must be demonstrated that the accused's actions were carried out with the explicit purpose of facilitating or executing terrorist activities. This requirement of proving intent serves as a critical barrier against the misuse of the law to prosecute individuals for activities that might be controversial but not inherently terrorist. This is, however, merely theoretical, as the executive and security elites use and abuse the law to align with political priorities and risks. The process for amending Schedule 2 of the Act, which lists recognised terrorist groups, also incorporates checks to prevent arbitrary expansions of this list. Such amendments require both Cabinet and Parliamentary approval, as stipulated under Section 10 (2) & (3) of the Act. The Act further includes procedural safeguards in its Third Schedule, which outlines protocols for information gathering and investigation related to terrorism. These procedures are intended to govern how law enforcement agencies gather intelligence or conduct investigations, ensuring that the rights of individuals are not unnecessarily trampled in the process. It includes stipulations on how information is to be handled, recorded, and

46 Day, "Survival Mode," 968.

47 Ellen Chapin, Stephanie Lizzo, and Jason Warner, "Al-Shabaab's Assassinations: Investigating the Uniqueness of Al-Shabaab's Assassinations via Suicide Bombing," *The Journal of the Middle East and Africa* 12, no. 3 (2021): 321–341, <https://doi.org/10.1080/21520844.2021.1953866>.

48 Mugambi Laibuta et al., *The State of Deployment of Surveillance Technologies in Africa* (Paradigm Initiative with support from Open Society Foundation, 2024), <https://paradigmhq.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/The-state-of-Digital-Surveillance-1.pdf>.

used, aiming to balance the need for effective counter-terrorism with respect for privacy and legal rights. Moreover, the initiation of legal proceedings under the Act requires the consent of the Director of Public Prosecutions (DPP). This additional layer of oversight means that prosecutions should not proceed on a whim but should pass through a review by an independent legal authority, theoretically reducing the risk of politically motivated prosecutions. Again, these safeguards have rarely provided the protection intended to those accused. The true measure of this Act's success in safeguarding rights while combating terrorism depends on how these provisions are interpreted, applied, and potentially reformed, in light of evolving threats and democratic principles. If Uganda were a functioning and vibrant democracy, these safeguards would be considered relatively adequate. However, the cabinet, parliament, security services, justice system, and all electoral bodies are centrally controlled, deployed against dissent and increasingly authoritarian. They are not equipped for oversight but rather conditioned into aiding the monitoring and control of the population.

The Anti-Terrorism Act, 2002 has since undergone several amendments aimed at strengthening Uganda's legal framework to address evolving terrorist threats, broaden its scope, and align with international obligations. In 2015 The Anti-Terrorism (Amendment) Act⁴⁹ introduced significant changes to Uganda's counter-terrorism framework. It redefined key terms such as 'terrorism', 'funds' and 'acts of terrorism', addressing legal loopholes to

ensure the law covered emerging threats comprehensively. Additionally, it empowered the Inspector General of Police to freeze bank accounts and seize property linked to suspected terrorist activities. Similarly, the 2016⁵⁰ amendment expanded the law's scope to include the transnational nature of terrorist threats. By broadening the definitions of 'terrorism' and 'acts of terrorism' to encompass cross-border activities, this amendment responded to regional challenges, particularly the operations of groups like Al-Shabaab. Uganda's active participation in international peacekeeping missions, such as in Somalia, and its vulnerability to terrorism spillovers shaped the need for these revisions. Amendments in 2017⁵¹ further refined the definitions of 'terrorism' and 'acts of terrorism,' incorporating crimes that violated the International Convention for the Suppression of the Financing of Terrorism. This amendment was aimed at complying with international counter-terrorism standards, particularly those set by the Financial Action Task Force (FATF). However, this amendment was also used to cut off opposition funds, ahead of the 2016 elections, and was subsequently used to freeze the assets and accounts of Uganda federal Democratic Organization (UFDO) leader Aggrey Kiyingi (worth \$20 million). In December 2020, the government's Financial Intelligence Agency (FIA) froze the bank accounts of at least four human rights groups (including NGO Forum and the Uganda Women's Network (UWONET)), claiming these NGOs were involved in terrorism financing activities. This clampdown occurred just before elections and targeted CSOs critical of the government.⁵²

49 UPPC, *Bills Supplement No. 7 (Entebbe: By Order of the Government, 2015)*, [https://bills.parliament.ug/uploads/0250THE_ANTI-TERRORISM_\(AMENDMENT\)_BILL_2015_30-04-2015_Laid_Document.pdf](https://bills.parliament.ug/uploads/0250THE_ANTI-TERRORISM_(AMENDMENT)_BILL_2015_30-04-2015_Laid_Document.pdf).

50 Parliament of Uganda, *Anti-Terrorism (Amendment) Act 2016*, 2016, [https://bills.parliament.ug/attachments/Anti-Terrorism%20\(amendment\)%20Act%202016.pdf](https://bills.parliament.ug/attachments/Anti-Terrorism%20(amendment)%20Act%202016.pdf).

51 Financial Intelligence Authority, *Anti-Terrorism (Amendment) Act 2017* (2017), [https://www.fia.go.ug/sites/default/files/downloads/The%20Anti-Terrorism%20\(Amendment\)%20Act%202017.pdf](https://www.fia.go.ug/sites/default/files/downloads/The%20Anti-Terrorism%20(Amendment)%20Act%202017.pdf).

52 "Watchdogs Targeted under AML/CFT Suspicions," *European Center for Not-for-Profit Law Stichting*, n.d., <https://learningcenter.ecnl.org/news/watchdogs-targeted-under-amlcft-suspicions>;

Chapter Four, "Court Clarifies on the Financial Intelligence Authority's Powers to Order for the Freeze of Bank Accounts of NGOs," *Chapter Four Uganda*, n.d., <https://chapterfouruganda.org/sites/default/files/downloads/Court-clarifies-on-the-powers-of-the-FIA-to-freeze-bank-accounts-of-NGOs.pdf>;

"Govt Freezes Accounts of 4 NGOs Doing Poll Work," *Daily Monitor*, 2020, <https://www.monitor.co.ug/uganda/special-reports/elections/govt-freezes-accounts-of-4-ngos-doing-poll-work-3216360>.

THE SECURITY APPARATUS

Operationalising this weaponisation of the law is a constellation of security and intelligence units that often blur the direct lines of responsibility for internal security and actions, undermining the opposition while competing for resources and the president's favour⁵³.

The Joint Anti-Terrorism Task Force (JATT) was formed in 1999, prior to the passing of the Anti-Terrorism Act. Its mandate at the time was to deal with the threat posed by the ADF. JATT's operations are, as a result, not codified in the law, and many of its operations remain secretive and shielded from any accountability.⁵⁴ Under the operational command of the Chieftaincy of Military Intelligence (CMI), it was staffed by Ugandan Defence Forces (UPDF) military personnel and members of the internal and external intelligence services.⁵⁵ The JATT has for decades been accused of human rights violations, operating illegal detention centres, torturing suspects, and being responsible for an unknown amount of detainee deaths. In the past, JATT has also been at the root of friction between security units scrambling for resources and power. In 2008, an additional agency was created to fight terrorism – the Counter Terrorism Police Unit (CTPU) – tasked with diffusing explosives, rescuing hostages, apprehending terror suspects and investigating. While the JATT is more of a paramilitary agency than the CTPU, it is the JATT that spearheads counter-terrorism operations. The CTPU was barely in operation for two years when Uganda experienced

the 2010 World Cup bombings, which killed 74 people, which resulted in a small service of 600, swelling to more than 5000 in eight years. The Chieftaincy of Defence Intelligence and Security (CDIS), formerly the Chieftaincy of Military Intelligence (CMI), remains however the most powerful of the units that oversee operations internally and externally. It, like the UPDF, falls under the Defence Ministry. In theory the CMI has no powers of detention although human rights reports detail the torture of people detained in the barracks and safe houses belonging to CMI.⁵⁶ CMI personnel are often assigned to the JATT.

The powerful Special Forces Command (SFC), tasked with airborne operations, commando raids, reconnaissance, counter-insurgency, infiltration and other specialised forms of warfare, control key strategic military assets, and has been used in highly sensitive operations in South Sudan and Somalia.⁵⁷ The unit, considered a private army under Museveni's direct control, has its roots in the 1981 Wartime High Command Unit of the National Resistance Army, gradually transforming itself into a 2400-strong Presidential Protection Unit and then the SFC in 2012. In 2021, it was reported to have

53 "Bad Cop, Worse Cop," *Africa Confidential*, 2025, https://www.africa-confidential.com/article/id/13132/Bad_cop%2C_worse_cop.

54 Emmanuel Okurut, "Accountability for Acts of Torture by Counter Terrorism Law Enforcement Officials in Uganda," *University of Botswana Law Journal*, <https://journals.ub.bw/index.php/ubl/article/view/1541/987>.

55 *Open Secret*, Human Rights Watch.

56 Human Rights Watch, *State of Pain: Torture in Uganda* (2004), <https://www.hrw.org/reports/uganda0304.pdf>.

57 GlobalSecurity.org, "Special Forces Command (SFC)," 2025, <https://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/uganda/sfc.htm>.

around 10,000 soldiers.⁵⁸ When the SFC took the form of an independent unit of special forces, it had grown to include an armoured brigade, an air defence unit (monitoring airspace), an intelligence unit (coordinating a wide espionage network of informers), the commandos Zero One brigade (executing special assignments)⁵⁹, an infantry brigade and a training school. The SCF also has a cross-unit relationship with the commando core of the Presidential Guard Brigade, based in northern Uganda; the JATT, which operates from the central region; staff from Internal Security; and External Security Organisations (ESO) and a crack unit referred to in security circles as the 'Warriors' under the Chieftaincy of Military Intelligence (CMI).⁶⁰ The Warriors unit was created in 2011 and trained by US Navy Seals in 2014-15. Their training included close-quarter combat, sniper operations and being deployed as part of African Union's Mission to Somalia (AMISOM). Their domestic deployments became highly controversial and damaging to the regime after 2021 when they abducted and tortured many of the 600 members of the opposition party the National Unity Platform (NUP) that led to an International Criminal Court complaint.⁶¹

The intelligence services are also part of this system of political control. During the regimes of Idi Amin and Milton Obote, the intelligence services were personalised units that largely protected the interests of those in power. This has remained largely unchanged during Museveni's government despite a re-organisation of the services. When Museveni came to power he did away with the terror-inducing services of the previous administrations of Idi Amin and Milton Obote and passed the Security Organisations Act

of 1987 which established the Internal and External Security Organisations (ISO and ESO). The ISO has become the governments counterintelligence agency responsible for providing national security intelligence with a wide network of infiltrated operatives. The ISO also allegedly engage in covert activities requested by the president. The ubiquity of intelligence personnel to spy and obtain information while also curtailing the activities of anyone opposing Museveni, has become so wide that intelligence structures cover the village and parish levels with parish ISOs, county or Gombola levels GISOs and the local government level in the form of local councils.⁶² The ISO, currently led by Brigadier Charles Oluka, keeps growing with each election cycle or perception of real or imagined threats. Their budgets also grow. In 2021, the ISO recruited and trained 200 operative officers and 616 Gobolola Internal Security Officers GISOs and was allocated a budget of Ssh121 billion (\$33 million). For the current financial year, the parliament approved around Ssh140 billion (\$38 million) for the ISO to recruit more agents to respond to the threats of corruption, terrorism, cybercrime, livestock raids, negative foreign influence and to purchase more surveillance equipment like UAVs, precision cameras, tactical signal systems, signal receivers, direction finders and more. Their mandate is so broad that the ISO duplicates and operates across the mandates of the other intelligence and counter-terrorism units. The ESO deals with external threats but its mandate often overlaps with that of the ISO and CMI as all collect intelligence on subversive activities and threats. ESO's budget for 2024 stood at Ssh74 billion (\$20 million) with an expected increased to Ssh112 billion (\$30 million) for 2026.

58 Musinguzi Blanshe, "Uganda: Museveni's Son Muhoozi Being Manoeuvred into Place," *The Africa Report*, 2021, <https://www.theafricareport.com/86794/uganda-calls-for-muhoozi-to-succeed-his-father-president-museveni-are-growing-louder/>.

59 "Uganda's Special Forces Brigade", *The Monitor*, 13th August 2022.

60 "Muhoozi eats big in PGB shake-up", *The Monitor*, 27th February 2010.

61 "Ugandan President and Son Accused of Sponsoring Violence in ICC Testimony," *The Guardian*, July 12, 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2023/jul/12/uganda-president-son-yoweri-museveni-muhoozi-kainerugaba-accused-sponsoring-violence-icc>.

62 Ivan Mugenyi Ashaba, "Regime Survival in Uganda, Security Agencies and the Question of How Many Generals Do You Have?," *International Affairs Forum*, n.d., <https://www.ia-forum.org/Files/WDHVFV.pdf>.

All these agencies have been used to entrench Museveni's power, allowing him to win re-elections in 2001, 2006, 2011, 2016 and 2021. Under the guise of national security threats, these agencies have isolated, surveilled and targeted opponents. The police alone recruited an additional 12,000 police constables for the 2024/25 financial year to enhance security across the country while increasing the span of the CCTV surveillance system and the capacity for forensic analysis.⁶³ From social media and internet shutdowns to the deployment of the Finfisher spyware, the regime has sought to instil fear, disrupt and intimidate political opponents. In the last few years, Uganda has acquired numerous surveillance tools to spy, hack and monitor civilians, opponents, internal dissidents and even foreign diplomats. During the 2015 elections, Finfisher was used by the CMI and deployed against perceived political opponents, which included members of parliament, civil society and activists.⁶⁴ Two years later, a document leak revealed how the office of the presidency was purchasing more surveillance tools, including Nice Systems and Hacking Team.⁶⁵ In 2018 Citizen Lab reported on the government's use of the NSO's malware Pegasus⁶⁶ and in 2019, an investigation by the Wall Street Journal revealed how China's Huawei helped spy on political opponents by intercepting encrypted messages and tracking their locations.⁶⁷

The Chinese company reportedly helped Uganda's cyber-security unit to hack Bobi Wine's WhatsApp group, which led to his and his supporters' arrests. Over the years, several ad hoc units have been deployed to monitor and infiltrate the opposition; one in particular was created in 2023 and headed by Lt Colonel Emmanuel Katabazi (DG of the ISO) to maintain surveillance over the NUP with support from the head of the ESO's technical directorate and head of special operations, as well as members of military intelligence and the elite army unit the Special Operations Command (SOC) that have experience and expertise in cyber surveillance.⁶⁸

As a result, Uganda has gradually become a surveillance state. In December 2019, Museveni addressed Parliament and laid out his 10-point security plan to combat crime. The measures included the installation of CCTV cameras in urban areas and highways, the recruitment of Local Defence Unit personnel, introducing electronic number plates for cars and other measures. In 2010, the government passed the Regulation of Interception of Communications Bill (commonly referred to as the Phone Tapping Bill) and later admitted having tapped the phones of prominent Ugandans. The law was intended to be applied in exceptional cases of security and intelligence operations, giving access to private communications,

63 Chimp Corps, "Museveni Urges Security Agencies to Prioritize Stability over Immediate Welfare Demands," *ChimpReports*, 2025, <https://chimpreports.com/museveni-urges-security-agencies-to-prioritize-stability-over-immediate-welfare-demands/>.

64 Privacy International, "Ugandan Government Deployed FinFisher Spyware to 'Crush' Opposition, Track Elected Officials and Media in Secret Operation During Post-Election Protests, Documents Reveal," 2015, <https://privacyinternational.org/press-release/1036/ugandan-government-deployed-finfisher-spyware-crush-opposition-track-elected>.

65 Fred Drapari, "Uganda Police in US\$5bn Spy Deal," *Defenders Protection Initiative*, April 25, 2017, [https://www.defendersprotection.org/2017/04/25/uganda-police-in-us\\$5bn-spy-deal/](https://www.defendersprotection.org/2017/04/25/uganda-police-in-us$5bn-spy-deal/).

66 Bill Marczak et al., *Hide and Seek: Tracking NSO Group's Pegasus Spyware to Operations in 45 Countries* (Citizen Lab, 2018), <https://citizenlab.ca/2018/09/hide-and-see-tracking-nso-groups-pegasus-spyware-to-operations-in-45-countries/>.

67 Joe Parkinson, Nicholas Bariyo, and Josh Chin, "Huawei Technicians Helped African Governments Spy on Political Opponents," *Wall Street Journal*, 2019, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/huawei-technicians-helped-african-governments-spy-on-political-opponents-11565793017>.

68 Africa Intelligence, "Ugandan Intelligence Services Take the Fight against the Opposition to Washington," *Africa Intelligence*, July 17, 2023, <https://www.africaintelligence.com/eastern-africa-and-the-horn/2023/07/17/ugandan-intelligence-services-take-the-fight-against-the-opposition-to-washington,110004023-art>.

but has instead been misused to monitor and intercept the communications of anyone deemed a threat. The use of spyware by Ugandan authorities is thought to have begun in 2011 following the presidential elections. In 2013, the government introduced the requirement for mandated SIM card registration, which links phone numbers to national IDs. Since 2018, the regime has been installing CCTVs in the capital, Kampala, set up by Huawei's smart city technologies, later in 2020, installing facial recognition cameras. The government also introduced digital license plates—the Intelligent Transport Monitoring System (ITMS)—which would allow the government to track citizens' movements and activities with alarming precision. A controversial Russian firm, Joint Stock Company Global Security, was awarded the contract for the ITMS mounting tracking GPS chips in vehicles in the country (at owners' expense), which was part of the requirement for the re-registration of all vehicles and motorcycles.⁶⁹ In 2018, the government also imposed a social media tax used to curb online dissent. This was used during the 2021 elections, where NUP supporters were tracked via their phones and social media and subsequently arrested.⁷⁰ Israeli cyber company Cellebrite had previously already provided Uganda with phone hacking tools that allowed for digital forensic investigations via its UFED technology.⁷¹ In 2015, the BBC reported that Uganda was using the Finfisher spyware technology, provided by UK firm Gamma Group, to carry out surveillance on opposition leaders of the FDC.⁷² The operation codenamed Fungua Macho, involved 70 intelligence officers and was covertly deployed in buildings (including

parliament, ISO ESO and several hotels) on devices or any equipment they needed to extract information from. Uganda has no legal framework governing this vast array of surveillance technologies that can regulate their use, protect privacy and allow for independent oversight to protect against abuses.

This securitised shadow state of paramilitary and official units is inherently unstable, kept purposefully fragmented to avoid concentration of power in any commander. The purpose of this fragmentation was to avoid coup attempts, resulting in bickering, rivalries and security failings. Most of these units have had their leading commanders dismissed over some scandal or after national security failings, like the 2010, 2021 and 2023 terrorist attacks. One of the most consequential scandals came from the downfall of General Kale Kayihura, a wartime comrade of Museveni, who was appointed chief of police before the 2006 elections. Inspector General Kayihura played a central role in addressing dissent by expanding the size, budget and mandate of the police. His powers were codified into law with the 2013 Public Management Act (POMA), which gave him broad powers, including the discretionary power to ban public gatherings. His name was frequently associated with several human rights abuses, in association with paramilitary units including the Flying Squad and the disbanded Special Investigations Unit (SIU). He was dismissed in 2018 and later, like many other security chiefs, was sanctioned by the US and UK over human rights violations. In 2017, the media printed pictures of torture victims allegedly held at the Nalufenya police station (described as the government's

69 Frederic Musisi, "Russian Firm on the Spot over Vehicle Tracking Deal," *Monitor*, 2022, <https://www.monitor.co.ug/uganda/special-reports/russian-firm-on-the-spot-over-vehicle-tracking-deal--3495656>.

70 Richard Ngamita, "Surveillance or Security? Uganda's Digital License Plates and the Trade-Off Between Privacy and Governance," *Thraets*, 2025, <https://thraets.org/surveillance-or-security/>

71 Frederic Musisi, "Israel to Install Spy Systems at Uganda Borders," *Monitor*, 2022, <https://www.monitor.co.ug/uganda/news/national/israel-to-install-spy-systems-at-uganda-borders-3994308>

72 Nick Hopkins and Jake Morris, "UK Firm's Surveillance Kit 'Used to Crush Uganda Opposition'," *BBC News*, 2015, <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-34529237>

counter-terrorism detention centre) located in Jinja (80 km east of the capital Kampala.)⁷³ Kayihura's downfall began not with the emerging reports of his torture centres or other abuses but because of inter-agency rivalries involving ISO and CMI. The former IGP was accused of harbouring political ambitions in addition to recruiting 11 million crime preventers without an enabling law or formal command and control structure.⁷⁴

From 2019 the two agencies that had previously cooperated well, ISO and CMI, began accusing each other of being complicit in criminality. In 2020, an embarrassing situation occurred that led to the sacking of ISO intelligence chief Colonel Kaka Bagyenda after only three years in office. He was accused of operating illegal safehouses to torture detainees as well as feeding the president fictitious intelligence reports. One false intel report involved the framing of former IGP Kayihura for the murder of former police spokesperson Andrew Felix Kaweesi. Kaka was also accused of creating an extortion cartel at ISO by arresting suspects to subsequently extort ransoms for their freedom. In January 2022, it was the turn of CMI chief, Major General Abel Kandiho, to be removed from office, accused of being behind deteriorating relations with Rwanda, something Gen Muhoozi was deeply against. Kandiho, like Kayihura, joined a long list of US-sanctioned security officers. A revamping of the system has recently occurred to bring order and to keep these agencies in line with the political priorities of the Museveni clan. One such move has been the resurrection of the Special Branch of the Ugandan police,

disbanded in 2008 by Gen Kayihura for paying more allegiance to foreign governments by "quietly giving information to the West".⁷⁵ This unit was, however, considered one of the most efficient security forces collecting intelligence that detected and prevented crime. This time, the Special Branch is focused on detecting and 'preventing' election violence and any voting irregularities.⁷⁶

Corruption within the services has weakened their effectiveness. The army, in particular, has expanded its business interests in different sectors of the economy from the assembly of buses to road construction. An area that is notorious for corruption within the armed forces is the procurement of military hardware and defence supplies. In the mid-1990s, the NRM began to modernise and re-equip its army amidst insurrections in northern and western Uganda that threatened the NRM's rule. This began an era of mass procurement of military hardware with and from international partners (described in the following section). The UPDF has also taken over public infrastructure projects like the construction of the Luweero General hospital, which has accelerated the militarisation of the Ugandan economy. Arguments towards cost efficiency as explanations for public works projects being handed over to the UPDF's Engineering brigade failed to explain how, in 2024, the army unit reported a loss of Shs28.9 billion (\$7.8 million) in a farming project addressing food shortages.⁷⁷ Corruption has also permeated many of the other security units. JATT's operational funds come from the Ministry of Internal Affairs, although

73 "Uganda's Slow Slide into Crisis," *International Crisis Group*, 2017, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/horn-africa/uganda/256-ugandas-slow-slide-crisis>

74 "How Gen Kayihura Dug Hole for His Fall," *Monitor*, 2021, <https://www.monitor.co.ug/uganda/news/national/how-gen-kayihura-dug-hole-for-his-fall-1743784>

75 "Police Spy Unit Disbanded Due to Indiscipline – Kayihura," *Monitor*, 2021, <https://www.monitor.co.ug/uganda/news/national/police-spy-unit-disbanded-due-to-indiscipline-kayihura-1598156#:~:text=The%20Special%20Branch%20was%20disbanded,to%20detect%20and%20prevent%20crime>

76 Alen Nafuna, "UPC Welcomes Return of Police's Special Branch," *Nile Wires*, 2023, <https://thenilewires.com/upc-welcomes-return-of-polices-special-branch/>

77 Nakisanze Segawa and Patricia Lindrio, "Uganda's Military Took Over Public-Sector Construction. Private Contractors Are Reeling," *Global Press Journal*, 2025, <https://globalpressjournal.com/africa/uganda/ugandas-military-took-public-sector-construction-private-contractors-reeling/>

JATT is under CMI, which is itself under the Minister of Defence. In 2009, they had a monthly operating budget of \$50,000 USD, an amount that has risen exponentially since. In 2022, JATT received over \$3.2 million via the interior ministry.⁷⁸ An investigation into the monthly support to JATT by the US revealed how senior officers would use the money and give it to loan sharks that would loan it at high interest, splitting the yield between them.⁷⁹ Operationally, this caused delays in the release of the unit's funding. While the defence budget stands at an average (of the last three years) of \$1 billion, there are supplementary and classified budget funds that are controlled

by the Presidency.⁸⁰ Equipment bought for military and intelligence operations is thought to be procured via classified expenditure allocations under the Defence Ministry. In 2015-2016, Privacy International reported that of the \$442 million stipulated for defence, a third of that (\$190 Million) was designated confidential.⁸¹ In 2023, the president's office had a total of Shs 250 billion (\$68 million), of which Shs 38 billion (\$10 million) was deemed as classified expenditure.⁸² These classified budgets are allegedly used to funnel money into the operations of the intelligence services and the Special Forces Command but also feed the need for the economic reward of its leadership.

EXTERNAL ACTORS AND FOREIGN AID

Uganda's geographical position within the Great Lakes region and its persistent security challenges, particularly concerning groups like the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF), have made it a critical partner in regional and global counter-terrorism initiatives.

External actors have played an influential role in shaping Uganda's counter-terrorism framework. The country's descent into authoritarianism has also occurred with the tacit support of Western democracies, particularly the US. This engagement has fostered a complex ecosystem of international

collaboration. This section will briefly highlight some elements of this vast collaboration. Military training has been one of the most significant contributions of external actors to Uganda's counter-terrorism capabilities.⁸³ Uganda has served as a reliable and active contributor to regional stability by

78 Parliament of the Republic of Uganda, *Report of the Committee on Budget on the Annual Budget Estimates for FY2022/23*, 2022, <https://parliamentwatch.ug/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/BUD2-22-Report-on-the-Annual-Budget-Estimates-for-202223.pdf>

79 Obed K. Katureebe, "Security Bosses Swindle America Terror Money," *The Independent*, 2008,

80 Alliance for Campaign Finance Monitoring, National Democratic Institute for International Affairs, National Endowment for Democracy, and Transparency Uganda, *Extended Study on Campaign Financing for Presidential and Member of Parliament Races: 2015–2016 in Uganda: Alliance for Campaign Finance Monitoring Report May 2016* (Kampala: ACFIM, 2016).

81 Privacy International, *For God and My President: State Surveillance in Uganda*, 2015, https://www.privacyinternational.org/sites/default/files/2017-12/Uganda_Report_1.pdf

82 Ian Katusiime, "Behind Classified Defence Budgets," *The Independent*, 2023, <https://www.independent.co.ug/behind-classified-defence-budgets/>

83 Brian J. Hesse, "Why Deploy to Somalia? Understanding Six African Countries' Reasons for Sending Soldiers to One of the World's Most Failed States," *The Journal of the Middle East and Africa* 6, no. 3–4 (2015): 329–352, <https://doi.org/10.1080/21520844.2015.1089383>.

contributing the greatest number of troops to the AU mission in Somalia (AMISOM), hosting refugees, and actively fighting Islamic terrorism in the region. Jointly, the international community provides Uganda with over \$2 billion a year in development and security assistance.⁸⁴ During the last decade, the US alone has provided more than \$8 billion, with a large percentage of foreign aid making up Uganda's national budget. Funds come in many forms, from the Defence Department spending on military equipment and training to funds for military education and peacekeeping, with the UPDF being the largest recipient of US support for the AMISOM mission, and finally, the Pentagon's 'train and equip' funding. According to the US Department of State, the US has provided about \$970 million in security assistance per year, including facilitation of training for peacekeepers and counter-terrorism operations⁸⁵ This training has covered everything from counter-IED tactics to human rights practices in conflict zones. It has also focused on counter-insurgency tactics, urban warfare, and operational intelligence, enabling Ugandan forces to address both domestic and regional threats effectively. The skills and expertise acquired through the Africa Contingency Operations Training and Assistance (ACOTA) program have been applied in Uganda's efforts to combat the ADF.

Through AMISOM, Ugandan security forces have received specialised counter-terrorism training from international partners, including the US, the European Union, and regional organisations. Its role in Somalia has proved very valuable for Washington, with Uganda

commandos acting as US proxies dispatched in US-directed missions in Somalia as part of the counter-terrorism programs.⁸⁶ Some of these operations are conducted under the shadowy 127e programs, allowing US Special Operation forces to use local military or militias as surrogates. The US has conducted at least eight 127e programs in Africa, most of them in Somalia under the code names Exile Hunter, Kodiak Hunter, Mongoose Hunter, Paladin Hunter and Ultimate Hunter. The programs involved US commandos training and equipping troops from Ethiopia, Kenya, Somalia and Uganda as part of the fight against the Islamist militant group al-Shabab.⁸⁷ Additionally, the US has a long-standing base in Entebbe that has been used for airlift and evacuation missions, and the deployment of units in key operations like the failed mission to capture LRA leader Joseph Kony. The US has trained more troops in Uganda – estimated at 62,000 – in the last decade than in any other country in Sub-Saharan Africa except Burundi. This has been complemented by US cybersecurity initiatives, offering technical assistance to counter cyber threats related to terrorism. The bolstering of Uganda's security and military capacity has come at a high price for democracy. It has also allowed Museveni to extend and consolidate a patronage network within the army, allowing a continuous flow of resources to allies and family members.

Beyond the support extended by the US, the role of French forces in training Ugandan security personnel has been significant,⁸⁸ particularly due to Uganda's border with the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and the security needs of the Great Lakes

84 World Bank Group, "Net Official Development Assistance and Official Aid Received (Current US\$) – Uganda," *World Bank Group*, 2025, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/DOT.OA.ALLD.CD?locations=UG>

85 U.S. Department of State, "Uganda," November 24, 2020, <https://2017-2021.state.gov/countries-areas/uganda/>.

86 Nick Turse, "Progressives Use Pentagon Budget to Support Outrageous Anti-LGBTQ+ Law," *The Intercept*, June 29, 2023, <https://theintercept.com/2023/06/29/uganda-lgbtq-law-us-military-aid/>.

87 Nick Turse, Sam Mednick, and Amanda Sperber, "Exclusive: Inside the Secret World of US Commandos in Africa," *Mail & Guardian*, n.d., <https://atavist.mg.co.za/inside-the-secret-world-of-us-commandos-in-africa/#chapter-5967602>.

88 Ambassade de France en Ouganda, "French Forces Train UPDF Contingent Ahead of Deployment in Somalia," *Embassy of France in Kampala*, 2024, <https://ug.ambafrance.org/French-forces-train-UPDF-contingent-ahead-of-deployment-in-Somalia>.

region. France has provided specialised training to Ugandan security personnel, focusing on skills tailored for operations in the dense forests typical of the region. This training includes counter-terrorism tactics, intelligence gathering, and the use of advanced surveillance tools. France's involvement extends to joint military exercises that enhance Ugandan forces' interoperability.⁸⁹ Operations such as "Shujaa" against the ADF in the DRC have seen French logistical and intelligence assistance.⁹⁰ Bilateral military agreements between Uganda and France also extend beyond training to include equipment supply. The Great Lakes Security Pact of 2006, supported by France, has been pivotal in fostering a coordinated approach to regional peace and counter-terrorism. Uganda's involvement in networks like the Regional Intelligence Fusion Unit (RIFU),⁹¹ which promotes intelligence exchange among East African countries, is supported by the US and other Western nations. This collaboration was evident in operations like "Shujaa" against the ADF in the DRC, where intelligence sharing between Uganda and the DRC was enhanced by UN support through MONUSCO.⁹² Equally, the European Union has played a significant role since 2015, when it began counter-terrorism training in East Africa. In April 2024, the EU-UN Global Terrorism Threats Facility, a joint initiative of the European Union and the

United Nations implemented by the United Nations Office of Counter-Terrorism (UNOCT), conducted a counter-terrorism tabletop exercise (TTX) in Kampala to help reinforce coordination and collaboration between Ugandan investigators and prosecutors for an effective, rule-of-law based criminal justice response.⁹³ Programs like EUCAP Somalia have also built capacity for Ugandan troops deployed in AMISOM, focusing on maritime security and counter-terrorism tactics. The European Union has contributed armoured personnel carriers from France and the UK to further bolster Uganda's counter-terrorism capabilities, especially in regional operations like those in Somalia.

Another key partner is Israel, which has supplied Uganda with military hardware from artillery and fighter jets to surveillance systems and has also trained Ugandan security forces. Support for the Special Forces Command (SFC) has been crucial. In 2021, Israeli company Elbit Systems was reportedly leading the construction of the Uganda's Air force traffic control system⁹⁴, and later supplied it with at least two dozen Hermes 900 Kochav (Star) medium-altitude long-endurance surveillance drones.⁹⁵ In September 2022, Uganda's Defence Ministry signed an MoU with their Israeli counterparts on several defence measures which included installing control border management

89 Lawrence E. Cline, "African Regional Intelligence Cooperation: Problems and Prospects," *International Journal of Intelligence and CounterIntelligence* 29, no. 3 (2016): 447–469, <https://doi.org/10.1080/08850607.2016.1148479>.

90 Kristof Titeca, "'Total Success'? The Real Goals of Uganda's Operation Shujaa in DRC," *African Arguments*, June 2022, <https://africanarguments.org/2022/06/total-success-the-real-goals-of-uganda-operation-shujaa-in-drc/>.

91 African Union, "Report of the Peace and Security Council on Its Activities and the State of Peace and Security in Africa," 2016, <https://www.peaceau.org/en/article/report-of-the-peace-and-security-council-on-its-activities-and-the-state-of-peace-and-security-in-africa-3>.

92 Paul Nantulya, "Understanding the Democratic Republic of the Congo's Push for MONUSCO's Departure," *Africa Center for Strategic Studies*, 2024, <https://africacenter.org/spotlight/understanding-drc-monusco/>.

93 Naciones Unidas, "Counter-Terrorism Tabletop Exercise in Uganda," n.d., <https://www.un.org/counterterrorism/es/node/21187>.

94 "Elbit's High Tech Air Force Centre Helps Tighten Uganda-Israel Tie," *Africa Intelligence*, May 19, 2021, <https://www.africaintelligence.com/eastern-africa-and-the-horn/2021/05/19/elbit-s-high-tech-air-force-centre-helps-tighten-uganda-israel-ties,109667280-art>.

95 Patrick Kenyette, "Uganda Acquires Hermes 900 Surveillance Drone," *Military Africa*, March 2022, <https://www.military.africa/2022/03/uganda-acquires-hermes-900-surveillance-drone/>.

systems.⁹⁶ In 2009, SIPRI reported that there were unconfirmed reports of sales of the Israeli-produced Falcon Eye or Mini Falcon UAVs to 'an African state', possibly Uganda, which had earlier acquired advanced electrooptical surveillance equipment from Israel for use on light aircraft.⁹⁷ The same report stated that Ugandan armed forces may have used some artillery supplied by Israel in its ongoing conflict with the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) in late 2008 when Ugandan MiG-21 combat aircraft were used. These aircraft had been modernised in Israel in 2003 and the pilots trained by Israelis. Israeli private security is also heavily invested in Uganda, including the three security firms, Yamasec, Spartasec and SWAT, that had a stake in the company Kampala Executive Aviation and ran the Kajjasi airfield.⁹⁸ In late 2023, leaked documents revealed that an Israeli company, BIRD Aerosystems, paid a bribe to secure a deal with Uganda over the sale of surface-to-air missile defence systems in 2021.⁹⁹

Russia has gradually become an important ally to Museveni, establishing itself as a major arms supplier. However, since the war in Ukraine, African imports of Russian arms have fallen by over 50%, with Uganda being the outlier and actually increasing its trade with Moscow. In late 2024, a new joint venture with Russian Proheli established a facility at Uganda's military base in Nakasongola where Russian Mi23 and Sukhoi aircraft can

be overhauled, making Uganda Russia's largest military-technical cooperation partner in aviation and maintenance of armoured vehicles in Africa.¹⁰⁰ In August 2024, Russia made a donation of \$100 million worth of equipment to the Ugandan army in what is presumed to be an incentive for further trade. This gift represented 10% of Uganda's defence ministry's budget.

This turn towards non-Western allies has increased since General Muhoozi Kainerugaba took command of the UPDF in March 2024, diversifying Kampala's arms procurement. All defence material is purchased via the UPDF's commercial arm, the National Enterprise Corporation (NEC). As chief of staff, he cancelled his predecessor's existing projects and began reaching out to alternative partners Turkey, United Arab Emirates, France and China, allowing for Kampala to reduce its dependence on Russian defence material. One of the projects was a joint venture by the NEC with Emirati Streit Group, which specialises in the manufacture of light armoured vehicles.¹⁰¹ One of the orders, worth \$25 million dollars, is for a batch of 80 Tornado vehicles equipped with DShK 12.7mm heavy machine guns on turrets for the DRC's armed forces. The UAE also helped finance the training of several thousand Somali recruits in Uganda, who then trained military police units in Mogadishu.¹⁰² More recently, talks have been ongoing with Turkey on a joint

96 Musisi, "Israel to Install Spy Systems."

97 Siemon T. Wezeman, "Israeli Arms Transfers to Sub-Saharan Africa," *SIPRI*, 2011, <https://www.nonproliferation.eu/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/siemontwezeman4e9eb5e5806bd.pdf>.

98 Museveni intervenes in Israel arms dealer case", *The Independent*, February 15, 2015.

99 Daniel Dolev, Uri Blau, and Shomrim, "Leak Hints at Corruption in Arms Deal Between Israeli Company and Ugandan Air Force," *The Times of Israel*, 2023, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/leak-hints-at-corruption-in-arms-deal-between-israeli-company-and-ugandan-air-force/>.

100 NewVision Reporter, "Russia Courts Uganda as a Key Strategic Ally in Africa," *New Vision*, 2024, https://www.newvision.co.ug/category/news/russia-courts-uganda-as-key-strategic-ally-in-NV_195513.

101 "Army Buys Uganda-Made Streit Armoured Vehicles," *Africa Intelligence*, 2024, <https://www.africaintelligence.com/central-africa/2024/07/01/army-buys-uganda-made-streit-armoured-vehicles,110252977-art>.

102 "Uganda Seeks to Strengthen Security Ties with Turkey," *Africa Intelligence*, 2025, <https://www.africaintelligence.com/eastern-africa-and-the-horn/2024/07/19/kampala-and-addis-sketch-out-military-rapprochement,110270063-art>

project to build an assembly plant in Uganda for artillery parts and drones.¹⁰³ The plant would be set up by the company Baykar, which is run by Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdogan's son-in-law Selcuk Bayraktar. This company produces the Bayraktar TB-2 combat drones.

In terms of regional actors, Kenya is a key partner in Uganda's counter-terrorism initiatives due to shared vulnerabilities. This relationship is characterised by robust collaboration in intelligence sharing and joint military operations. Both countries have contributed troops to AMISOM and coordinated efforts to combat Al-Shabaab in Somalia.¹⁰⁴ As such, the two countries have established mechanisms for exchanging intelligence critical to pre-empting terrorist activities. Shared experiences of Al-Shabaab's terror campaigns, such as the 2010 Kampala bombings¹⁰⁵ and the Westgate Mall attack in Nairobi¹⁰⁶, created a sense of cooperation in fostering mutual trust. The East African Community (EAC) framework on peace and security further formalised these exchanges. Notable instances include Operation Linda Nchi¹⁰⁷ a Kenyan-led military initiative where Ugandan forces provided logistical and tactical support. In a similar manner, Rwanda

has committed to collaborative strategies against regional terrorist groups, emphasising the importance of a unified response to regional security challenges.¹⁰⁸

Uganda could have as many as 15,000 troops deployed across different stabilisation and counter-terrorism missions in Africa (Somalia, the DRC, Equatorial Guinea and South Sudan). The UPDF was deployed to Equatorial Guinea in February 2017 in a military training and mentoring mission (UMTMT). In November 2023, Kampala announced that it had nearly 4,000 soldiers in the DRC involved in the Shujaa operations against the ADF. 1000 Ugandan soldiers were engaged in the East African Community Regional Force (EACRF), while a further 5000 troops were deployed in the AU mission in Somalia. The deployment in the DRC has been controversial. It is underpinned by a complex interplay of historical, economic, political, and security rivalry with Rwanda, as well as by cooperation around their gold-smuggling operations.¹⁰⁹ A UN Panel of Experts report in 2024 claimed that Ugandan intelligence had provided the rebel group M23 with support and allowed the rebel group to operate rear bases within Ugandan territory.¹¹⁰ The DRC deployment has cost over shs400 billion (\$100 million) to

103 "Uganda Seeks to Strengthen Security Ties with Turkey," *Africa Intelligence*, 2025, <https://www.africaintelligence.com/eastern-africa-and-the-horn/2025/01/22/uganda-seeks-to-strengthen-security-ties-with-turkey,110365623-art>

104 Paul D. Williams, "Joining AMISOM: Why Six African States Contributed Troops to the African Union Mission in Somalia," *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 12, no. 1 (2017): 172–192, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17531055.2018.1418159>

105 Xan Rice, "Uganda Bomb Blasts Kill at Least 74 – Kampala," *The Guardian*, July 12, 2010, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2010/jul/12/uganda-kampala-bombs-explosions-attacks>

106 Patrick Gathara, "The Westgate Mall Attack and Kenya's National Amnesia," *Al Jazeera*, 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2021/9/21/forgetting-the-westgate-mall-attack>

107 Donovan C. Chau, "Linda Nchi from the Sky? Kenyan Air Counterinsurgency Operations in Somalia," *Comparative Strategy* 37, no. 3 (2018): 220–234, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01495933.2018.1486086>

108 "President Kagame Attends Security Meeting in Uganda," *IGIHE*, 2016, <https://en.igihe.com/news/president-kagame-attends-security-meeting-in>

109 "Uganda Deploys Additional Troops to DRC," *Economist Intelligence*, 2025, <https://www.eiu.com/n/uganda-deploys-additional-troops-to-drc/>

110 Mélanie De Groof et al., "Letter Dated 31 May 2024 from the Group of Experts on the Democratic Republic of the Congo Addressed to the President of the Security Council," *United Nations Security Council*, 2024, <https://docs.un.org/en/s/2024/432>

taxpayers since 2021.¹¹¹ In early 2025 Uganda reinforced its deployment with an additional 1000 troops into eastern Congo to areas controlled by Rwandan-backed M23, bringing its total deployment to around 5000 forces.

Ugandan troop deployment has acted as a spoiler in South Sudan's peace process and an enabler of repression by enhancing the fighting capacity of President Salva Kiir (one of the warring factions). In 2013, the UPDF was deployed to save Kiir's regime from internally imploding following widespread calls for democratic and political reform. This deployment gave the regime the military capacity to resolve what was a political issue. There is currently a delicate political balance with the fragile Transitional Government of the 2018 peace agreement, which was broken in March 2025 by Kiir's faction. The UPDF was once again deployed to South Sudan, allowing Salva Kiir to clamp down on the opposition and further delay the possibility of elections. The mission received reinforcements the following month via the shared land border with several hardware expected to be sent to South Sudan such

as 50 tanks, 90 armoured infantry vehicles, 200 personnel carriers with the support of helicopters.¹¹² Riek Machar's warring faction has accused Uganda of staging an aerial campaign bombing civilian areas in Upper Nile and Jonglei states, an accusation that Kampala rejects. However, posts on social media by Gen Muhoozi confirm these allegations when he wrote that the army is tired of killing Nuer people (of Machar's ethnic group). Operation 'Mlinzi wa Kimya' (the silent Guardian) was deemed illegal by Ugandan MPs due to its unilateral deployment without parliamentary approval. This operation is occurring at a time when the army is facing personnel and funding shortages as it fights on four fronts simultaneously (the DRC, Somalia, South Sudan, and Equatorial Guinea).¹¹³ With an estimated deployment of 6 battalions has cost over \$27 million in the first few weeks.¹¹⁴ UPDF's mission in 2014 in South Sudan cost billions of shillings but was paid by the government in Juba.¹¹⁵ With an estimated deployment in 2025 of 6 battalions this current mission has cost over 11 million in the first few weeks.¹¹⁶

111 Andrew Bagala, "South Sudan's VP Machar Says Uganda Is Violating Arms Embargo," *Monitor*, 2025, <https://www.monitor.co.ug/uganda/news/national/south-sudan-s-vp-machar-says-uganda-is-violating-arms-embargo-4978374#story>.

112 <https://www.africaintelligence.com/eastern-africa-and-the-horn/2025/04/18/salva-kiir-stands-firm-amid-mediation-attempts-in-his-stand-off-with-riek-machar,110436192-art>

113 Andrew Bagala and Arthur Arnold Wadero, "Uganda Covers Salva Kiir's Back Again amid Power Struggle in South Sudan," *Monitor*, 2025, <https://www.monitor.co.ug/uganda/news/uganda-covers-salva-kiir-s-back-again-amid-power-struggle-in-south-sudan-4961080#story>.

114 <https://www.dailywestnile.info/news-now/updf-seeks-additional-shs-391-billion-for-peacekeeping-operation-in-south-sudan>

115 "Ugandan Army Demands 13bn Shillings to Continue Mission in S. Sudan," *Sudan Tribune*, n.d., <https://sudantribune.com/article50864/>.

116 "UPDF Seeks Additional Shs 39.1 Billion for Peacekeeping Operation in South Sudan," *Daily West Nile*, 2025, <https://www.dailywestnile.info/news-now/updf-seeks-additional-shs-391-billion-for-peacekeeping-operation-in-south-sudan>.

CASES OF MISUSE OF CT LAWS

The following section will highlight some of the cases where the use of security forces deployed under the legal safety of the Anti-Terrorism Act has occurred not for counter-terrorism purposes but to stifle political dissent and accountability.

The language in the Act and its subsequent amendments, with terms such as ‘abetting terrorism,’ ‘threats to national security,’ and ‘intimidating the public,’ has been weaponised to target members of the press. This linguistic architecture represents a sophisticated mechanism of political control, where language itself becomes a powerful instrument of state suppression. The deliberate construction of legal terminology creates an expansive framework that transforms legitimate political discussion, journalistic investigation, and civil society activism into potential national security threats. This has allowed for unprecedented state discretion in defining and prosecuting “terrorism,” effectively blurring the boundaries between genuine security concerns and political dissent. The framing of ‘national security threats’ operates as a rhetorical strategy that expands far beyond the understanding of terrorism. Terms like ‘terrorist propaganda’ may be strategically deployed to criminalise information dissemination that challenges government narratives, creating a legal mechanism that fundamentally undermines press freedom and democratic expression.

Investigative reporting that exposes state misconduct, documents human rights violations, or critically examines government actions has been systematically recategorized as ‘terrorist propaganda.’ Such legal language provides a framework in which documenting military brutality, investigating corruption, or reporting on opposition activities is construed as threats

to national security, effectively criminalising fundamental journalistic practices. The ambiguity is intentionally constructed, creating what legal scholars describe as a “definitional elasticity”¹¹⁷ in counter-terrorism provisions. Terms like ‘unlawful assembly,’ ‘cyber-related terrorist activities,’ and ‘threats to national sovereignty’ are purposefully left undefined, granting state security apparatuses extraordinary interpretative powers. This linguistic imprecision is a strategic tool, allowing authorities to retroactively apply terrorism charges based on situational political requirements. Dissent is conflated with destabilisation, criticism a threat, and independent journalism a potential mechanism of subversion. Journalists, activists, and civil society organisations find themselves navigating an increasingly precarious legal environment where professional responsibilities may be instantaneously reinterpreted as criminal activities by the government in power. Ultimately, the language of Uganda’s counter-terrorism legislation reveals a profound transformation of the law.

Peter Waldron’s arrest in 2006¹¹⁸ represents a pivotal moment illustrating the Uganda’s police strategic use of counter-terrorism legislation. As a foreign national, Waldron became a target demonstrating how the Anti-Terrorism Act could be weaponised beyond traditional, national security contexts. The incident occurred during a politically volatile period in Uganda, characterised by increasing restrictions on political opposition and media freedom. Waldron, an American citizen was arrested on allegations of possessing illegal

¹¹⁷ Rumyana Grozdanova, “‘Terrorism’ – Too Elusive a Term for an International Legal Definition?” *Netherlands International Law Review* 61, no. 3 (2014): 305–334.

¹¹⁸ Jason Beaubien, “American Held on Terrorism Charges in Uganda,” *NPR*, February 27, 2006, <https://www.npr.org/2006/02/27/5235000/american-held-on-terrorism-charges-in-uganda>.

weapons. The charges were fundamentally ambiguous, and went beyond a simple weapons possession case. It symbolised a broader governmental strategy of using counter-terrorism provisions to create a climate of intimidation for potential foreign observers, journalists, and individuals perceived as potential sources of alternative narratives. By targeting a foreign national the Ugandan government sent a clear message about the expansive reach of its security apparatus and its willingness to use counter-terrorism legislation as a mechanism of political control. The legal proceedings surrounding Waldron's case revealed multiple layers of systematic suppression. The charges were constructed using deliberately vague language that allowed for extensive interpretative flexibility. Weapons possession became conflated with potential terrorist activities, demonstrating how counter-terrorism laws could be used to criminalise activities that would traditionally be handled through standard legal channels. Even though the charges were later dropped,¹¹⁹ his experience revealed how counter-terrorism laws could be used to create a broader chilling effect on any form of potential external observation or critique.

In another case, Joy Doreen Biira was arrested in 2016¹²⁰ after sharing videos documenting a military operation in Kasese, which resulted in over 100 deaths. Biira was charged with abetting terrorism despite her actions being consistent with journalistic principles of transparency and accountability. Her case further demonstrates how the Act has been weaponised to suppress information critical of state operations.¹²¹ By criminalising the documentation of military misconduct,

the law effectively shields state institutions from public scrutiny and accountability. As a result, human rights "organi(s)ations are now more cautious, sometimes self-censoring or reducing activities to avoid being the next target."¹²² This environment stifles advocacy work, particularly around human rights, governance, and accountability issues, where organisations fear being labelled as threats to national security.

ATTACKS ON THE MEDIA AND CIVIL SOCIETY

Civil society and the media have faced significant constraints under the guise of counter-terrorism. In September 2015, Derrick Kiyonga, a court reporter with *The Observer*, was arrested by the counter-terrorism police after he was seen passing a note from a terrorism suspect to their lawyer in court. He was detained for about an hour and a half and released without charges. There have been other instances where journalists were threatened or faced intimidation under the Act, though specific numbers and names are less documented in these contexts. During the coverage of political events or protests, security personnel have occasionally warned journalists of potential terrorism charges if they continue their reporting or if the content is perceived as critical of the government.¹²³ While these are some of the documented cases, there might be additional instances where journalists were informally threatened or where the use of the Act was implied but not formally charged. The exact number of journalists arrested or threatened specifically under the Anti-Terrorism Act

119 New Vision, "American Deported," *New Vision*, 2006, <https://www.newvision.co.ug/news/1151668/american-deported>

120 "Ugandan Journalist Joy Doreen Biira Charged with 'Abetting Terrorism'," *Committee to Protect Journalists*, November 2016, <https://cpj.org/2016/11/ugandan-journalist-joy-doreen-biira-charged-with-a/>.

121 ACME Admin, "Drop Charges Against KTN Journalist – Press Freedom Advocates," *African Centre for Media Excellence*, November 30, 2016, <https://acme-ug.org/2016/11/30/drop-terrorism-charges-against-ktn-journalist-press-freedom-advocates/>.

122 Interview conducted for this report with a human rights defender who wishes to remain anonymous.

123 "Impact of the Anti Terrorism Act Implementation to the Enjoyment of the Right to Privacy," *Unwanted Witness*, n.d., <https://www.unwantedwitness.org/uw-policy-brief-impact-of-the-anti-terrorism-act-implementation-to-the-enjoyment-of-the-right-to-privacy/>.

is not systematically recorded or reported in a centralised way, making it challenging to provide a precise count. However, these cases illustrate a pattern where the law has been used or threatened to be used against journalists, particularly those covering sensitive political or security issues in Uganda. This over-stretching of the counter terrorism laws has significantly reduced media freedom as fear of reprisal under the Anti-Terrorism Act has altered news coverage practices.

State-controlled media outlets can be observed as extensions of government messaging, reinforcing narratives that frame accused individuals as threats. By doing so, they legitimise state actions and justify the broad application of counter-terrorism laws. Coverage often omits critical perspectives, focusing instead on the 'heroism' of security forces and the purported dangers posed by accused individuals or groups. Conversely, it is difficult for independent media outlets to offer counter-narratives that challenge the government's framing. These outlets often expose inconsistencies in official accounts, report on the lack of evidence, and highlight the political motivations behind arrests. For instance, in the case of Joy Doreen Biira, independent media focused on the journalistic legitimacy of her actions, questioning the government's rationale for charging her with abetting terrorism.

Equally, human rights activists have also faced significant challenges under Uganda's counter-terrorism framework. The law has been used as a justification to surveil, intimidate, and prosecute individuals and organisations advocating for governance, accountability, and human rights. For instance, activists involved in organising protests or exposing government misconduct have been accused of 'abetting terrorism' or promoting activities that threaten national security. In 2016, Swaibu Nsamba Gwogyolonga¹²⁴ was charged with

offensive communication for posting satirical content critical of President Museveni. While his case did not directly involve terrorism charges, it illustrates how related laws and counter-terrorism provisions are often intertwined to suppress free expression. An interview with a program manager of a civil society organisation highlighted a concerning trend where laws designed to fight terrorism and money laundering are being weaponised against civil society organisations. The program manager discussed specific instances where NGOs had their accounts frozen on allegations of financing terrorism although these accusations were later proven baseless in court due to the absence of credible evidence. This situation not only affects the NGOs directly involved but also sets a precedent that discourages new human rights initiatives.

Chapter 4, a leading human rights organisation in Uganda, has long been a target of the regime. In December 2020, its executive director, Nicholas Opiyo, and four colleagues were abducted by police, accused of receiving money from criminal activities, and detained for a week, only to later be released without charge.¹²⁵ Opiyo's arrest had a significant impact on civil society; his role in defending opposition figures and advocating for civil liberties made him a target, creating a palpable fear among other advocates that even well-respected figures could be ensnared by legal tactics meant to stifle dissent. The charges against him were criticised for lacking substantial evidence, suggesting they were retaliatory for his work in human rights. His arrest followed shortly after he represented NGOs whose accounts were frozen on allegations of terrorism financing, directly illustrating how the Act's broad definitions facilitate state overreach. There was significant local and international support for Opiyo, with calls for his release from various human rights organisations

124 "Court Stays Offensive Communication Trial for Online Activist Pending a Constitutional Petition," *Unwanted Witness*, 2017, <https://www.unwantedwitness.org/court-stays-offensive-communication-trial-for-online-activist-pending-a-constitutional-petition/>.

125 *Front Line Defenders*, "Arrest of Advocate Nicholas Opiyo and Four Colleagues," n.d., <https://www.frontlinedefenders.org/en/case/arrest-advocate-nicholas-opiyo-and-four-colleagues>.

and foreign embassies in Uganda. In January 2022, novelist Kakwenza Rukirabashaija was also arrested for offending the president and his son Gen Muhoozi. He was kidnapped, held and tortured in an SFC detention centre. When he appeared in court, the Buganda court magistrate warned Kakwenza from disclosing his torture marks or discussing his case in the media. He later fled into exile.¹²⁶

In the same vein, in August 2021, the Ugandan government announced the suspension of 54 Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) for what was described as non-compliance with the NGO Act. This included organisations focused on human rights, governance, and election monitoring.¹²⁷ The suspension was criticised for lacking transparency and due process, with many organisations claiming they were not informed of specific compliance issues before the suspension. This mass suspension significantly curtailed the operational capacity of civil society in Uganda, particularly at a critical time when these organisations were needed to monitor electoral processes and advocate for human rights. This action was perceived as an intimidation tactic to reduce scrutiny of government actions during elections. While not explicitly under the Anti-Terrorism Act, the broader legal environment shaped by anti-terrorism laws, which includes provisions for scrutinising NGO funding for possible links to terrorism financing, sets a precedent for such actions.

ATTACKS ON THE OPPOSITION

Attacks on the opposition using the Act are becoming more common. Opposition parties, particularly the National Unity Platform (NUP) led by Robert Kyagulanyi's (aka Bobi

Wine) and the Forum for Democratic Change (FDC) led by veteran leader Dr Kizza Besigye. Government has deployed a special unit to monitor, infiltrate, control and disarticulate the opposition. In late 2023, this team was under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Emmanuel Katabazi (deputy director of the ISO, assisted by Major Bonny Rwantare (head of the technical directorate of the ESO), James Nkojo (who heads the Special Operations command) and other officers. In January 2024, another unit was reportedly created within the intelligence services, comprised of 15 members of military intelligence, under the direct authority of General Muhoozi. Their main task is to monitor the activities of the opposition, in particular, the NUP.¹²⁸ Over the years hundreds of NUP members and supporters have been detained, tortured and intimidated by JATT, CMI and the SFC.

These practices span almost 20 years. In 2006, Dr Kizza Besigye, a leading opposition politician, was arrested and charged with terrorism and treason.¹²⁹ The charges emerged months before the general elections, during which Besigye was a key contender. The timing of the accusations was widely viewed as a calculated effort to discredit Besigye, disrupt his campaign and intimidate his supporters. The charges against Besigye were based on allegations that he was linked to rebel groups intending to destabilise the government. However, the state failed to produce concrete evidence to substantiate these claims, leading to the eventual dismissal of the charges. Despite the lack of legal merit, the immediate impact of his arrest was significant. His detention not only hampered his ability to campaign effectively but also created a climate of fear among opposition members, discouraging political engagement and

¹²⁶ Frederic Musisi and Derrick Wandera, Torture: We Have Learnt Nothing from History, *Monitor*, February 20, 2022, <https://www.monitor.co.ug/uganda/special-reports/torture-we-have-learnt-nothing-from-history-3723438>.

¹²⁷ "Uganda: Harassment of Civil Society Groups," *Human Rights Watch*, August 27, 2021, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/08/27/uganda-harassment-civil-society-groups>.

¹²⁸ "Ugandan Intelligence Services Take the Fight Against the Opposition to Washington," *Africa Intelligence*, July 17, 2023, <https://www.africaintelligence.com/eastern-africa-and-the-horn/2023/07/17/ugandan-intelligence-services-take-the-fight-against-the-opposition-to-washington,110004023-art>.

¹²⁹ Voice of America, "Jailed Opposition Politician Becomes Ugandan," VOA, 2009, <https://www.voanews.com/a-13-2005-12-14-voa54-6>

support. In April 2011, Besigye was arrested for a fourth time during a ‘walk-to-work’ protest over the high prices of food and fuel. He was pepper-sprayed and dragged from his car by police. This was the catalyst for additional protests leading to riots across Kampala, in which at least two people were killed and 120 people wounded, leading to some 360 arrests. Besigye was arrested again in October 2012 after attempting to make a speech to vendors in Kiseka market in Kampala.

Besigye opted not to run for president in the 2021 elections, saying he would lead the opposition in ‘plan B’ to cause change in the country. He allied himself with Museveni’s main opponent, Bobi Wine. After the 2021 elections, Besigye launched the People’s Front for Transition, an umbrella movement with a common goal of causing change in Uganda. In May 2022, he was arrested during a protest over skyrocketing commodity prices in Uganda. A few days after his release, Besigye resumed protests on Kampala streets and was promptly arrested, together with his colleague Samuel Lubega Makaku, and sent to prison. The case was dismissed.

Another case was that of Michael Kabaziguruka, a former member of parliament for Nakawa Division, who in 2016 was arrested and charged with committing acts of armed rebellion and terrorism against Uganda.¹³⁰ Kabaziguruka faced charges for treason and offences relating to security, which could lead to the death penalty upon conviction. The broad nature of these accusations suggests they were politically motivated, especially given the timing amidst heightened political tension where opposition voices were frequently silenced under the guise of security laws. Kabaziguruka’s arrest highlighted how counter-terrorism legislation was stretched to criminalise political dissent, equating it with threats to national security.

REGIONAL RENDITIONS AND REGIME STABILITY

Cooperation within the region has also resulted in a high number of renditions. Two cases were particularly problematic: one was related to the terrorist bombing of 2010 and the roundup of non-terrorist suspects, and the other was the case of Dr Kizza Besigye in November 2024.

In July 2010, bombs exploded at two sites in Kampala—the Ethiopian Village restaurant and the Kyadondo Rugby Club—where people had gathered to watch the final match of the FIFA World Cup. The attacks killed over 70 people and injured a similar number. Within days, Al Shabaab publicly claimed responsibility, calling the attacks retaliation for Uganda’s participation in the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM). Less than 48 hours after the bombing, President Museveni issued a press statement saying of the attackers, “We shall look for them wherever they are and get them.” In the crackdown that followed, Kenyan and Ugandan security forces cast a wide net, rounding up dozens of people. Almost immediately, the investigation of the bombing became internationalised. Uganda responded to the attacks by working with the governments of Kenya, Tanzania, and Somalia to hunt for suspects.

In a mass roundup of suspects in Kenya, the authorities arbitrarily detained at least 12 Ugandan and Kenyan nationals suspected of involvement in the suicide bombing. The detainees were allegedly exposed to, and/or threatened with physical abuse, and unconstitutionally rendered to Uganda. On the evening of July 23, 2010, Kenya’s Anti-Terrorism Police Unit (ATPU) detained three Kenyan men—Ibrahim Magendu, Mohammed Adan Abdow, and Hussein Hassan Agade—as suspects in the World Cup bombing and rendered them to Uganda. The three men

¹³⁰ Mohammed Yusuf, “Uganda’s Supreme Court Bans Military Trials for Civilians; Government Rejects Ruling,” *Voice of America*, March 1, 2025, <https://www.voanews.com/a/uganda-s-supreme-court-bans-military-trials-for-civilians-government-rejects-ruling/7961182.html>.

were eventually taken to Luzira Upper Prison in Kampala. More renditions of men from Kenya, Tanzania, and Somalia occurred over the following year, at least until June 2011. Each suspect underwent days of interrogations in Uganda. According to government officials and court documents, the investigation into the bombings was done with the support of US, UK, Kenyan, and/or Tanzanian officials.

In September 2010, Ugandan security agents arrested a prominent Kenyan human rights defender, Al-Amin Kimathi, and held him for almost a year before all charges against him were dropped and he was unconditionally released.¹³¹ He was arrested along with a Kenyan lawyer, Mbugua Mureithi. The two were visiting Uganda to arrange legal representation for the seven Kenyan World Cup bombing suspects who had recently been rendered there. Both men were reportedly tortured. Mureithi was released and deported to Kenya after three days, but he was given no explanation for his deportation other than that he was a national security threat. Mureithi subsequently brought a complaint before the East Africa Court of Justice (EACJ). Kimathi was brought to court, charged under the Anti-Terrorism Act, and detained for almost a year before having the charges dropped and being released. Kimathi believes he was framed by the Kenyan government as payback for his human rights work defending victims of extraordinary rendition.

In August 2024, 36 members of the Ugandan party Forum for Democratic Change (FDC) were arrested and charged with terrorism after attending a leadership workshop in Kenya.¹³² The accusations alleged that the workshop was linked to activities aimed at undermining Uganda's national security. The arrests were marked by violence, with security forces reportedly raiding the participants' accommodations, confiscating personal items, and detaining them under

harsh conditions. The state justified these actions by citing provisions in the Anti-Terrorism Act. However, the lack of evidence tying the workshop to terrorist activities suggests that the charges were politically motivated. The arrests disrupted the FDC's leadership-building efforts and sent a strong message to opposition parties about the risks of organising and mobilising politically. This case exemplifies how the law has been used not only to target individuals but also to weaken institutional capacity within opposition parties.

Less than three months later, in November, Dr Kizza Besigye was abducted and renditioned from Kenya. Lured into a meeting at the Riverside apartments in Nairobi, Dr Besigye was forced into a car by Ugandan intelligence forces and driven across to the Busia border, where he was taken into military custody. The operation was allegedly conducted by CMI operatives. For two days, he was held incommunicado. Besigye is being charged with four offences relating to the illegal possession of two weapons and eight bullets (which could have been planted) as part of the greater conspiracy of allegedly committing acts in Kenya, Switzerland and Greece to depose Museveni. He denied all charges. Besigye objected to being tried by a court-martial, saying that if there were any charges against him, he should be tried in a civilian court. His lawyers also argued that the alleged offences were committed outside Uganda and therefore they were arraigned in the court martial illegally. But the court overruled the lawyers and allowed the hearing to continue.

Besigye was arraigned before the General Court Martial (GCM) and charged, along with others, with offences under the Uganda People's Defence Force (UPDF) Act. The charges were related to a contrived plot with others to overthrow the Ugandan government, as well as treachery with the particulars of serving as an agent of a foreign

131 "Activist Charged with Terrorism," *Amnesty International*, 2010, <https://www.amnesty.org/fr/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/afr590122010en.pdf>.

132 Damali Mukhaye, "FDC Members Recount Stories of Torture After Arrest in Kenya," *Monitor*, March 12, 2024, <https://www.monitor.co.ug/uganda/news/national/fdc-members-recount-stories-of-torture-after-arrest-in-kenya-4828460>.

power or any force engaging in war or war-like activities against the government of Uganda. On January 31, 2025, the Supreme Court upheld that military courts lacked jurisdiction to try civilians and ordered officials to halt all ongoing military trials of civilians and transfer them to the country's civilian court system. On the 21st of February 2025, the state arraigned Besigye before the Nakawa Chief Magistrates Court, a civilian court. He is charged with treason and misprision of treason, which carries a death sentence by hanging if convicted. On the 24th of February the High Court in Kampala dismissed an application seeking the release of Besigye from prison. His Ugandan legal team from Lukwago and Associates, and

opposition leader Dr Martha Karua, have brought together almost 50 lawyers from across the region, including the Pan-African Lawyers Union, and are taking the Ugandan government to the East African Court of Justice. In January 2026, Dr Besigye's lawyer Eron Kiiza was assaulted and arrested by the military while entering the courtroom. He was convicted of contempt of court and sentenced to 9 months in prison. When visited in prison he showed signs of physical torture in most parts of his body.¹³³ Both Besigye and Kiiza's cases shocked the country and generated much international condemnation, in what is clearly a strategy to politically disentangle the opposition ahead of the 2026 polls. The case is ongoing.

¹³³ <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2025/jan/16/lawyer-for-ugandan-opposition-politician-arrested-and-tortured-eron-kiiza-kizza-besigye-yoweri-museveni>

CONCLUSION: IMPACT ON DEMOCRATIC REFORM

As Uganda moves closer to its next elections, there is a heightened risk that the counter-terrorism laws will be employed more aggressively.

Previous election cycles, like those in 2006, 2016, and 2021, have seen an intensification of repression against opposition figures. For example, during the 2021 elections, Bobi Wine was subjected to various forms of harassment under the guise of maintaining public order, showing how these laws can be leveraged to manipulate the political environment in favour of incumbents. The use of the Anti-Terrorism Act during elections severely undermines the integrity of the democratic process. The European Union Election Observation Mission report on the 2016 elections highlighted how the legal and security environment, including the application of anti-terrorism laws, created an uneven playing field. This pattern suggests that in future elections, similar tactics could be employed to reduce the effectiveness of opposition campaigns, thereby casting doubt on the fairness of electoral outcomes. By targeting opposition leaders and supporters, the government can also manipulate the political environment to favour incumbents, thus undermining the democratic process. Over time, this practice can lead to a political culture where opposition is equated with illegality¹³⁴. Such a culture discourages government opposition and diminishes the vibrancy of political competition, which is fundamental to democratic governance.

Museveni will stand again in 2026, aged 80, in what appears to be a move to be president for life. Ahead of the highly contested presidential elections, several dynamics are

fusing into a complex political setting fraught with unpredictability and securitisation. Steps described in this report to intimidate, silence and clamp down on the opposition, civil society and the media indicate a pre-election period of violent state intervention. Ten years after the 2016 polls, where 2 million plain-clothed agents conducted counter-espionage and gathered political intelligence¹³⁵ on opposition and voters, the likelihood that the elections next year will follow similar tactics is high. During the 2021 polls, the police operationalised a new unit to suppress violence, which guarded TV and radio stations. Together with the creation of ad hoc militias to shadow and intimidate the opposition, Uganda's political intelligence machine grows, only deepening intrigue by fabricating threats, diverting from actual security threats, and deploying different units to trigger electoral violence to justify a violent crackdown. There is also growing opposition to the mandatory biometric voter system for the upcoming polls, with fears of voter disenfranchisement. Biometric voter registration will allow for voter numbers to be inflated in areas sympathetic to the ruling party, or the exclusion of voters from opposition areas. A national biometric ID program was set up in 2014, requiring mandatory registration for access to basic services like public healthcare and education, for opening a bank account or obtaining a passport. The growing presence of facial recognition cameras across urban centres will boost the government's ability to repress

134 Roger Tangri and Andrew M. Mwenda, "Military Corruption and Ugandan Politics Since the Late 1990s," *Review of African Political Economy* 30, no. 98 (2003): 539–552, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03056244.2003.9659773>.

135 "Kale Kayihura, Museveni's Master Spy at Work," *Africa Intelligence*, February 13, 2015, <https://www.africaintelligence.com/eastern-africa-and-the-horn/2015/02/13/kale-kayihura-museveni-s-master-spy-at-work,108061417-art>.

critical voices by easily identifying individuals within a crowd of protesters.

Civil society organisations, journalists, and political opposition figures interviewed for this report have all expressed concerns that the Act could be, and has been, weaponised against dissent rather than solely against terrorism. This misuse manifests in various ways but is most notably evident in how the law has been leveraged against political opposition, media freedom, and civil society activities. Political leaders and activists have found themselves on the wrong side of the law, charged with offences under the guise of terrorism that often lack substantial evidence linking their activities to actual terrorist acts. Media freedom has similarly suffered under the shadow of these counter-terrorism provisions. Journalists, who are crucial for informing the public and holding the government accountable, have been targeted. This not only restricts the flow of information but also undermines the public's right to know, a cornerstone of democratic governance. Civil society, another pillar of democracy, has not been spared. Organisations involved in human rights advocacy and governance monitoring have faced scrutiny or direct action under the Act. The broad definitions of what constitutes support for terrorism have allowed for the labelling of civil society activities as potentially terroristic, significantly restricting the space for NGOs to operate. The suppression of public assembly and protest under the pretext of counter-terrorism measures has been another significant issue.

This not only impacts the right to peaceful assembly but also sends a message that public dissent can be criminalised. The misuse of security laws to justify surveillance, arrests, and control over public spaces normalises a culture where citizens might become accustomed to limited freedoms.¹³⁶ This normalisation leads to a passive acceptance of authoritarian practices under the pretext of security. The frequent application of counter terrorism laws in ways that are politically motivated undermines the rule of law, and legal institutions that are seen as tools of the state rather than protectors of rights. This perception degrades trust in judicial independence and the legal system's integrity. Over time, these practices contribute to democratic backsliding, where the mechanisms for political competition, free speech, and public assembly are systematically weakened. This erosion of democratic norms leads to a society where political competition is stifled, and governance becomes less transparent and accountable. The misuse of counter-terrorism laws not only limits human rights and fundamental freedoms but also erodes trust in the legal system and the government's dedication to democratic principles.

Elections have, as a result, become catalysts for instability. Courtesy of the Anti-Terror law and the fear of losing power, Museveni and the NRM have made ordinary citizens, election bodies, the media, political parties, as well as institutions meant to address electoral disputes, potential perpetrators of violence and open to being classified as terrorists.

¹³⁶ "Response to the European Commission Consultation on Inciting, Aiding or Abetting Terrorist Offences," *International Commission of Jurists*, n.d., <https://www.icj.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/04/Europe-EC-Consultation-Terrorist-Offences-non-judicial-submission-2007.pdf>.