

SITUATION ANALYSIS REPORT:

ELECTORAL CONFLICT, MENTAL HEALTH & PSYCHOSOCIAL
SUPPORT AHEAD OF 2026 GENERAL ELECTIONS IN UGANDA



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1. The Executive Summary

Political violence has become a recurring challenge in Uganda, posing a significant threat to democracy, peace, security and stability. As Uganda prepares for the 2026 general elections, the political temperatures is becoming high especially between opposition supports and ruling government supporters. The presidential and parliamentary polls, scheduled for February 2026, will unfold against a backdrop of severe economic, security, political, and social challenges. Recognizing the complex interplay of political, socio-economic, ethnic and historical factors influencing electoral conflicts, Justice Access point (JAP) sought to analyse the potential impact of upcoming elections in 2025/26 on peace, security and stability in the country.

This report gives a comprehensive analysis of the underlying drivers, key actors, psychosocial impact and conflict dynamics that Uganda May experience during the 2026 electoral cycle. Based on historical patterns, recent political developments and current socio-economic trends, the report identifies a combination of structural, political and institutional factors that pose significant risks to the peaceful conduct of the upcoming elections at national level and in the respective regions. A central concern at the national level is political polarization and the shrinking civic space during the election period. As a result, electoral competition in Uganda has turned into a do-or-die affair as candidates explore all means at their disposal including unchecked campaign spending and violence borne out of the frustration of losing. The political landscape is increasingly defined by polarization and growing culture of intolerance where political affiliation or association with opposing views is increasingly perceived as enmity.

This deepening intolerance is likely to fuel hostility and increase the risk of election-related conflict. Further, the perceived bias and lack of independence of key electoral institutions such as the Electoral Commission, Judiciary, and Security forces including military have significantly eroded public trust and confidence. This distrust fuels frustration among political actors, some of

whom resort to violence to express grievances or contest election outcomes. The continued militarization of the electoral process, with security agencies, particularly, the military and specialized police units playing an outsized and often perceived partisan role has also highlighted.

The lack of clear legal mandates, weak accountability mechanisms and the politicization of security institutions have been seen to be a likely trigger for violence. The growing use of digital technology and social media in Uganda has opened new spaces for civic engagement and political participation particularly among the youth. However, these platforms have also been exploited to spread disinformation, misinformation, hate speech and propaganda, influenced by some political factors.

It is very clear that the government's efforts to regulate digital spaces raise critical questions about balancing national security with individual freedoms. For a peaceful and credible 2026 general election in Uganda, recommendations focused on electoral reforms, an independent Electoral Commission (EC), non-partisan security forces, and upholding human rights. The European Union and Justice Access Point note that many past recommendations have not been implemented, suggesting a need for a shift in approach for 2026 Elections.



2. Background

In 1995, the Republic of Uganda promulgated a new constitution as a foundation for constitutional governance. Article 1 of the constitution asserts that power belongs to the people and that the people shall be governed by their consent.¹ Uganda holds general elections every five years. The elections usually include presidential, parliamentary, and local government levels.² In Uganda President Yoweri Museveni has been in power since 1986 (under the National Resistance Movement - NRM).³

Ugandan electoral policing is challenged by issues of political interference, police brutality, corruption, and the militarization of the electoral process. Concerns have also been raised regarding the police's independence and neutrality, particularly in the lead-up to the 2026 general elections.⁴ As Uganda approaches its January 2026 general elections, the country's political landscape bears a troubling resemblance to previous electoral cycles, but with an intensified restrictions on civil liberties that signals a deepening crisis of democratic governance.

1 "Article 105 of the 1995 Constitution of Republic Of Uganda."

2 "Article 105 of the 1995 Constitution of Republic Of Uganda."

3 Mukasa, "Why Museveni Eyes 45 Years in Power."

4 "EOC Urges Police Neutrality and Inclusivity Ahead of Uganda's 2026 General Elections – Equal Opportunities Commission."

3. Current Situation

Political conflict in Uganda is systemic and deeply rooted in the country's political history, governance structure, and the behaviour of state institutions. It is orchestrated by an interplay of several factors including:

- a. **Political landscape:** With less than a year until Uganda's presidential election, the political climate is increasingly tense. The main opposition party NUP has condemned the brutal crackdown on activists, saying 2,000 kidnappings have taken place since the last elections in 2021, extrajudicial killings, including torture and enforced disappearances. But the government accuses the opposition of staging the abductions for political gain. Civil society organizations and opposition politicians have long accused the Museveni government of using the military courts to prosecute opposition leaders and supporters on politically motivated charges – accusations the government denies.⁵

Mobilization: There is mobilization of support along ethnic, religious, or regional lines which may create a volatile environment and increase the risk of violence as seen in the Lango and the Rwenzori sub regions.⁶⁷

Hate speech and incitement: The use of inflammatory language, hate speech and incitement to violence by political actors or in the media can and has already triggered violence as was observed in the NRM primaries in Gulu city and areas of Arua city.⁸

Disinformation and misinformation: The spread of false or misleading information, particularly through social media, can escalate tensions and contribute to violence.

5 "Civic-Space-Index-2024-New-3."

6 "Ethno cultural Conflict in Uganda_ Politics Based on Ethnic Divisions Inflamm Tensions across the Country (1)."

7 NIMD, "Election Conflict Situational Analysis & Hotspot Mapping in Uganda–2025."

8 NIMD, "Election Conflict Situational Analysis & Hotspot Mapping In Uganda–2025."

- b. Socio-economic factors:** High levels of poverty, youth unemployment, and inequality create a class society where individuals may be more susceptible to mobilization for violence. Youth unemployment (age 18-30) is about 16.1%, with worse figures for young women (18.7%) than men (13.4%). A large share of youth are NEETs (“Neither in Employment, Education, nor Training”). Over 4.2 million youth are NEETs. Formal employment for university graduates is very low: only about 12.9% of graduates find formal jobs⁹

Youth involvement: The involvement of unemployed or underemployed, frustrated and marginalized youth in political activities can increase the risk of violence, as they are more susceptible to manipulation or recruitment into violence.¹⁰

The growing use of digital technology and social media in Uganda has opened new spaces for civic engagement and political participation particularly among the youth.¹¹

- c. Ethnic and regional divisions:** Broad reasons presented for these divisions include competition for resources and positions of power which are traced back to colonial history when tribal divisions became more pronounced. While Uganda is diverse, ethnic and regional identities tend to be mobilized in some sections along leading presidential candidates, exacerbating tensions and leading to risk of violence along these fault lines.¹²

- d. Historical grievances:** Historical grievances since independence are significantly shaping Uganda’s 2026 elections, past conflicts and unresolved

9 Hilda, “The Case for Vocational Training – Economic Policy Research Centre.”

10 Kanyogonya, Election Related Conflict and Violence in Uganda.

11 “The Delicate Dance Between Uganda’s Civil Society and Technology Ahead of the 2026 Elections.”

12 Rodolphe, “Ethnocultural Conflict in Uganda_ Politics Based on Ethnic Divisions Inflamm Tensions Across the Country (1).”

grievances, including those related to land disputes or historical injustices, can be triggered or exacerbated during election periods systemic repression, the militarization of politics, and widespread economic discontent. These issues exacerbate political tensions and point toward a potentially violent and contentious electoral cycle.¹³

- e. **Security sector dynamics:** The role and conduct of security forces during elections tends to play a significant factor. The opposition parties criticised security agencies for their interference and excessive force used in the campaigns of the Kawempe North by-election raising concerns about electoral violence and the state's approach to democracy. The police are perceived to be bias and interfering with civil liberties of opposition supporters especially on freedom of association, expression and assembly.¹⁴
- f. **Weak Institutions:** While there are formal institutions, weaknesses in the rule of law, including inconsistent application of the law and perceptions of impunity, tend to undermine trust in the electoral process and increase the likelihood of violence.¹⁵ This also includes trial of civilians including opposition leaders in Military Courts against the ruling of the Supreme Court which found trial of civilians in military courts as unconstitutional.¹⁶
- g. **Lack of public confidence in the electoral commission:** Uganda's 2026 general elections are facing mounting threats to credibility and public trust due to escalating security violence, rampant vote buying, and a perceived lack of transparency in the electoral process, governance experts have warned calling for urgent electoral reforms.¹⁷

13 NIMD "Election Conflict Situational Analysis & Hotspot Mapping in Uganda–2025."

14 "Uganda-Election-Conflict-Report.Pdf."

15 "Election Conflict Situational Analysis & Hotspot Mapping In Uganda–2025."

16 Urn, "Owiny-Dollo Stands Firm On Ban Against Military Trials For Civilians - The Observer."

17 Muhamudi, "Electoral Integrity At Risk Due To Security Violence And Vote Buying - Experts Warn."

Public confidence in Uganda's Electoral Commission (EC) remains low ahead of the 2026 general elections, according to multiple reports and analyses. This long-standing distrust is rooted in a history of irregularities, violence, and concerns over the EC's impartiality.¹⁸

In July 2025, the opposition party National Unity Platform (NUP) attributed low voter turnout in Kawempe North by-election to "a loss of confidence in electoral processes"¹⁹

h. Mental Health and Psychosocial Support: There is a significant lack of mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) for victims of electoral violence in Uganda, despite recent efforts by some organizations and government commitments. This gap leaves survivors with untreated trauma, anxiety, and other long-term psychological and social challenges.²⁰

This is due to:

- ✱ **Inadequate coverage and access:** While some mental health and psychosocial services are available, their coverage is insufficient, especially in rural areas. Services by clinical psychologists and psychotherapists are not sufficient to meet the immense needs of a large population affected by electoral violence.
- ✱ **Insufficient resources:** A lack of resources, including finances and trained professionals, poses a major barrier to providing scalable and sustained mental health interventions.
- ✱ **Stigma and underreporting:** Mental health issues, such as post-traumatic stress and depression resulting from electoral violence, are

18 Nakayiza And J. Kamara, "Ad1025 - Afrobarometre."

19 Henry, "Low Voter Turnout In Kawempe By-Election: A Case Of Intimidation And Poor Mobilisation?"

20 Matovu, "Election Stress Poses Long Term Risks without Mental Health Support, Experts Warn."

often stigmatized. This can discourage victims from seeking the help they need, leaving them to suffer in silence.

- ✱ **Politicization of violence:** The politicization of electoral processes and security institutions can create an environment where violence is normalized, and victims' suffering is overlooked or downplayed.²¹

Some organizations and recent initiatives are working to address these gaps, though their impact remains limited in the face of widespread need. The Ugandan government made commitments to strengthen support services, including counselling and psychosocial support, through mechanisms like the Sauti 116 helpline and District Action Centers by 2025.²²

21 Kanyogonya, Election Related Conflict and Violence in Uganda.

22 Sserwanga, "Sauti 116 Bolsters Government Response to Violence and Abuse in Homes and Communities in Uganda | UNICEF Uganda."

4. Recommendations to Ensure Peaceful and Credible 2026 Elections

4.1 The Role of the Independent Electoral Commission

- a. **Address concerns about neutrality:** The IEC needs to actively address public and opposition concerns about its independence. Although constitutionally independent, its leadership is appointed by the president, eroding public trust.
- b. **Ensure timely implementation:** The IEC's roadmap must be implemented on time and consistently, with transparent communication regarding any changes to election activities. The IEC has already had to adjust nomination dates for parliamentary and local government elections for 2025.
- c. **Enhance transparency:** The IEC should actively work to address issues like voter register discrepancies, including duplicate or missing names, which have been a source of contention in past elections

4.2 The Role of security forces

- a. **Ensure neutrality:** Security forces, particularly the police, must remain non-partisan and refrain from using excessive force against opposition candidates and supporters. Justice Minister Norbert Mao has emphasized that police, not soldiers, should manage polling station security to prevent intimidation.
- b. **Prohibit partisan militias:** The IEC and other state bodies should enforce legal prohibitions against the formation of partisan groups or militias, such as "crime preventers" or youth brigades, which have been used to intimidate voters.
- c. **Protect human rights:** Security agencies must respect the rights of all Ugandans throughout the electoral process, including the rights to assembly and expression. The Uganda Human Rights Commission (UHRC), IEC,

and Uganda Police have held meetings to align human rights protection ahead of the elections.

4.3 The Role of candidates and political parties

- a. Promote peaceful engagement:** Political leaders must commit to peaceful dialogue, tolerance, and respect. Initiatives like those organized by the Inter-Party Organisation for Dialogue (IPOD) can provide a platform for peaceful engagement among parties.
- b. Prevent incitement:** Leaders should refrain from using inflammatory language and using youths for unlawful activities. Political parties and candidates must accept election outcomes and pursue any challenges through legal means.
- c. Engage with stakeholders:** Political parties should engage constructively with the EC, CSOs, and other stakeholders to foster a collaborative environment and build consensus on fair practices.

4.4 Role of civil society and the media

- a. Monitor the process:** Domestic CSOs and media should be allowed to freely observe and report on all electoral activities, from voter registration to result tabulation.
- b. Prioritize professional reporting:** Media outlets must provide balanced and professional coverage to prevent manipulation and the spread of misinformation.
- c. Address online threats:** The misuse of social media to spread disinformation and fake news must be addressed collaboratively by authorities, CSOs, and tech companies.
- d. Increasing anchoring of at-risk individuals** in the communities through improved messaging, economic opportunities, social linkages and sense

of belonging especially for women, youth and vulnerable communities to reduce pull and push factors towards violence

- e. **Increasing mental health literacy and access to services**, strengthening coordination between government and civil society, promoting empathetic and non-stigmatizing support for those affected by conflict or electoral stress, and tailoring support to include traditional and community-based healer

4.5 International community

- a. **Maintain monitoring:** Despite past frustrations, international observers should not disengage from Uganda's electoral process, as their presence can enhance accountability and reduce the risk of violence.
- b. **Prioritize electoral credibility:** International partners, including the EU, should link support to concrete improvements in electoral integrity, based on recommendations from previous observer missions.
- c. **Encourage multilateral engagement:** International stakeholders should pursue a multilateral, coordinated approach to urge electoral reforms rather than allowing the government to sideline individual countries

5. Conclusion

Ensuring peaceful elections in Uganda requires a collaborative effort from various stakeholders, including the Electoral Commission (EC), political parties, civil society organizations (CSOs), security agencies, and citizens. The 2026 general election cycle is already underway, and recent reports highlight the importance of addressing existing challenges, including misinformation, political manipulation, and lack of civic education.

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