

Uganda's 2026 vote explained: succession politics behind a familiar election



Watkins, R. (Photographer). (2012, July 11). President Yoweri Museveni of Uganda, speaking at the London Summit on Family Planning. Wikimedia Commons. CC BY-SA 2.0.

Introduction: Elections at the End of an Era

On 15 January 2026, Ugandans will once again go to the polls to elect a new president and parliament. The current election cycle once again appears familiar: the dominance of the ruling party, the strategic deployment of state power to constrain opposition mobilisation, and recurring episodes of election-related violence. On the surface, there is little that fundamentally distinguishes the present moment from previous electoral cycles. And yet, beneath this appearance of continuity, these elections are unfolding under profoundly different political conditions. The central question is no longer simply who will win the Presidential elections - an outcome that remains largely foreordained - but what these elections reveal about the internal dynamics of a regime entering its late phase.

This analysis argues that Uganda's current elections are best understood not primarily as an electoral contest, but as a multi-layered struggle over succession, access, and positioning within a late-Museveni political order. Electoral violence, the securitisation of civic space, fragmentation within the ruling party, and the proliferation of regime-adjacent campaign "movements" all point less to electoral uncertainty than to intensified manoeuvring around life after Yoweri Museveni. Elections thus function less as moments of democratic choice than as arenas in which actors—within the ruling apparatus, the security sector, and adjacent political networks—signal loyalty, relevance, and usefulness in anticipation of an uncertain post-Museveni future.

Elections, the West, and the Securitisation of Foreign Engagement

A first—and analytically central—dimension in understanding Uganda's current election cycle concerns its evolving relationship with what is commonly referred to as the "international community," shorthand for Western donors and governments. In this respect, the parallels with the 2021 elections are striking, revealing not an isolated incident but an entrenched pattern in how electoral politics is accompanied by the securitisation of foreign involvement in civic and political space.

In the run-up to the 2021 elections, the Democratic Governance Facility (DGF), a donor-pooled fund largely supported by European states and focused on democratic governance, peace, and stability, was abruptly frozen (Titeca 2022). The DGF was accused by the government of aiming to incite violence before, during, and after the election, with European funders portrayed as seeking to overthrow the government and to inspire armed resistance. In this context, several individuals associated with the DGF were expelled from the country or denied entry.

Fast-forward to 2025, and a strikingly similar scenario has unfolded—this time centred on GIZ. The funding for its program in support of governance and civil society was frozen, and the program head was refused (re-)entry into Uganda (Africa Intelligence 2025). Regime-affiliated media accused him of coordinating a "shadow financing network" and a high-level destabilisation operation (UG Diplomat 2025). The allegations

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depicted an attempt to incubate regime-change infrastructure, coordinate extremist messaging, and engineer pre-election disruption. As with the DGF, placing GIZ “on hold” effectively paralysed its partner organisations, leaving them unable to receive funds.

These developments point to two broader dynamics. First, they illustrate a profound and persistent distrust of foreign—particularly European—funding for civic and political activity. In both the previous and the current election cycles, Museveni has repeatedly blamed European actors for interference and attempts at destabilisation. Civic space is not merely regulated; it is increasingly framed as a potential security threat when external funding is involved.

Second, this distrust has become increasingly personalised, particularly in relation to Muhoozi Kainerugaba and Germany. Following a leaked vocal critique by the German ambassador—reportedly expressed during a meeting with Salim Saleh—regarding Muhoozi’s social media behaviour, tensions escalated sharply (Daily Monitor 2025a). The Uganda People’s Defence Force issued a public statement accusing the ambassador of supporting “local terrorist groups” through illegal and clandestine activities (Magezi 2025). Subsequent meetings between the ambassador and Museveni failed to de-escalate the situation, which continued to simmer, including a protest at the German embassy organised by the Patriotic League of Uganda (PLU), Muhoozi’s political vehicle (Uganda Radio Network 2025a).

The decision to freeze GIZ funding thus appears as the convergence of these elements: the resurfacing of this personalised animosity and a deeply entrenched belief among regime actors that foreign organisations are funding opposition forces to engineer regime change.

This worldview must be placed in a longer trajectory of regime threat perception. The 2011 “Walk to Work” protests marked a turning point. Triggered by rising food prices in the aftermath of contested elections, the protests took the government by surprise and became a lasting reference point for fears of urban unrest. Since then, and especially in the context of Uganda’s pronounced youth bulge, regime anxieties about an ‘Arab Spring’-style uprising have persisted (Reuss and Titeca 2017; Titeca 2019). More recently, these fears have been reframed through the language of ‘Gen Z protests’, drawing on developments unfolding elsewhere on the continent.

At the same time, threat narratives are not merely reactive but are also actively produced. Actors within the security sector have incentives to exaggerate or construct threats, as doing so increases their institutional importance, budgets, and political leverage. The creation—or amplification—of threats allows for the consolidation of influence within specific security “fiefdoms.” This dynamic was particularly visible in the handling of the staged bombings attributed to the Allied Democratic Forces earlier this year (Uganda Radio Network 2025b), as well as in accusations that the civic organisation Agora was preparing an urban rebellion involving returnees from Iraq and foreign sponsors (Charmar News 2024).

These dynamics unfold against a shifting international backdrop. Western actors have become markedly less outspoken on governance and human rights violations in Uganda than in past

decades. The United States, once more vocal at least in its public statements, has adopted a far lower profile since the return of the Trump administration. The same is true for the European Union. This shift appears driven both by the broader geopolitical context—particularly the war in Ukraine—and by a strategic recalibration in engagement, including changes in EU delegation leadership (Titeca 2022). Similar to the 2021 elections, neither the US or the EU will have election observation missions for these elections.

Crucially, all of this coincides with Uganda’s declining dependence on Western partners. The withdrawal of USAID has had tangible effects—particularly in the health sector—and aid reductions are acutely visible in the refugee sector, which is facing a major crisis. At the same time, however, new revenue streams and alternative partnerships have altered the balance. Oil production is finally beginning, and the Ugandan government has actively diversified its external alliances.

The United Arab Emirates has become an increasingly important partner through defence cooperation, energy investments, and as the principal destination for Ugandan gold exports. In parallel, relations with Russia have further intensified: Military cooperation has expanded in recent years, including substantial military donations in August 2024 and October 2026, valued at approximately 100 million and 53 million USD respectively (Blanshe 2024; UPDF 2026). While these engagements do not replace Western development assistance in scope or function, they nonetheless contribute to reducing Uganda’s political and strategic reliance on Western partners—particularly in areas central to regime security.

Yet these partnerships operate on different terms. A striking illustration occurred in November 2024, when the UAE stepped in to provide food assistance to refugees amid sharply reduced international aid—but exclusively to Sudanese refugees (UAE MoF 2024). The episode underscores both the changing nature of external engagement and the increasingly selective, politically calibrated character of support.

A Slow Burner: Violence, Control, and the Management of Expectations

It is against this backdrop of heightened threat perception and securitisation that the election campaign initially unfolded in an unusually subdued manner. By-elections in February of this year were particularly violent—with masked security forces brutalizing journalists. And light of these events, and the brutal crackdown during the 2021 elections, there was widespread expectation that repression would be immediate and severe. The memory of November 2020 remained vivid: at least 54 people were killed, and large numbers of opposition supporters were abducted or disappeared.

That early calm, however, proved deceptive. As campaigning intensified—especially as opposition rallies moved closer to Kampala and drew increasingly large crowds—the political temperature began to rise sharply. Security responses escalated, videos circulated of live ammunition being fired at gatherings, and arrests mounted. At least one person was killed and several injured, while the UN human rights office reported more than 300 arrests since the beginning of the campaign in September, and at least 550 since the beginning of the year (Daily Monitor 2025d; OHCHR

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2025). Moreover, historic opposition leader Kiiza Besigye has now been in prison for over a year.

Manoeuvring to Power: Fragmentation Inside the NRM

If the violence on the campaign trail draws attention, the more consequential struggles are taking place inside the ruling party itself. The elections matter less for their outcome than for what follows them. Hovering over Uganda's political landscape is the unresolved question of succession: what happens after Museveni?

The 2025 NRM primaries offered an unusually clear window into this uncertainty. They were marked by widespread disorder, violence, and allegations of systematic malpractice. In Eastern Uganda rival camps reportedly organised armed or semi-organised 'brigade squads', accusing one another of intimidation, illegal arrests, and detentions (Daily Monitor 2025b, c). Several people were killed in the run-up to the primaries (Daily Monitor 2025b, c). The process was also openly monetised: vote-buying was pervasive, and videos circulated of schoolchildren voting, alongside allegations that minors were bribed to do so (Muvunyi and Jjumba 2025).

The fallout was unprecedented. Approximately 210 primary losers—including a large number of sitting Members of Parliament—rejected the results outright. In a joint press briefing, they denounced the primaries as violent, corrupt, and fraudulent, and announced their intention to stand as independent candidates (Wanyenya 2025). As a result, close to half of all parliamentary contenders are now independents, including at least 200 sitting NRM MPs.

Museveni responded by publicly condemning the violence, ordering arrests of officials implicated in malpractice, and establishing an internal party tribunal. Yet these interventions did little to obscure the deeper dynamic on display (Daily Monitor 2025b, c). The primaries revealed an NRM that increasingly functions not as a political party, but as a gatekeeper to state power, where access is mediated through money, coercion, and patronage. Because the NRM ticket is treated as equivalent to electoral victory, internal contests take on a 'do-or-die' character, normalising violence and bribery and eroding internal trust. That the ticket itself is seen as decisive is evident in the fact that 14 NRM MPs are now running unopposed in their constituencies.

This monetisation was even more visible during the NRM delegates' conference, where reports emerged of allowances being paid not only to delegates but also to babies—each reportedly receiving 400,000 UGX. In response, some women allegedly began "renting out" infants to eligible participants (The Observer 2025).

Senior figures within the party have voiced alarm. Deputy Speaker of Parliament Thomas Tayebwa for example publicly warned that the party risked becoming "for sale to the highest bidder," asking pointedly, "Why is leadership becoming a matter of life and death?" He cautioned against the emergence of a "party of billionaires" (Cavton Media 2025).

Campaigning for Tomorrow: Unstoppable Uganda and Late-Regime Signalling

Alongside formal party competition, a range of campaign initiatives

has emerged that blur the boundary between mobilisation and succession signalling. These groups campaign not only for Museveni, but also for their own political relevance in a post-Museveni order (Titeca 2025).

One prominent example is "Unstoppable Uganda", which has been active since late 2024. Publicly presented as a grassroots, youth-oriented citizens' initiative celebrating stability and national progress, it is in practice a sophisticated branding campaign closely aligned with Museveni's continued rule. Its methods—billboards, branded clothing, concerts, rallies, and social-media influencers—are designed to project inevitability rather than contestation. The slogan itself, "unstoppable," conveys a message of permanence at a moment of political uncertainty.

The controversial businessman Nelson Tugume is reportedly behind the campaign, alongside other senior political and economic actors (Nduuwami 2025). The subtext is clear: participation in such campaigns functions as a demonstration of loyalty and usefulness. These actors are not simply mobilising voters; they are documenting that they have "delivered" for the regime, thereby reinforcing their claims to relevance in whatever political configuration comes next.

Quid Muohozi? Silence, Succession, and Strategic Ambiguity

The largest shadow hanging over these elections is the question of Muohozi Kainerugaba. Earlier in the year, Muohozi engaged in a number of tweet-storms, the most noticeable ones being his threats to opposition candidates – such as his threats to behead Bobi Wine or hang Kiiza Besigye (Kalegyira 2025). Yet during the election campaign itself, he has been conspicuously silent. This silence should not be mistaken for absence.

Muohozi's role looms over nearly every arena of political manoeuvring. He is widely perceived as Museveni's preferred successor, and speculation about his future position has intensified. Uganda's political rumour mill is saturated with scenarios, but several developments are particularly noteworthy.

First, during the NRM internal elections earlier this year, actors openly affiliated with Muohozi's Patriotic League of Uganda (PLU) assumed increasingly prominent positions. In elections for the party's Central Executive Committee, several long-standing NRM figures were replaced by individuals closely associated with Muohozi; with the PLU themselves claiming they won 60% of the posts (Mukhaye and Bagala 2025). Second, there is growing attention to which of these allies will secure key government or security positions in the next legislature. Third, and most consequentially, a widely circulating scenario envisages Muohozi being formally positioned closer to executive power—most plausibly through appointment as Vice President.

Such a move would serve multiple strategic purposes: it would normalise his presence at the apex of government, prepare him institutionally for succession, and—crucially—place him in the constitutional position to assume power in the event of a presidential death or incapacitation. Seen in this light, Muohozi's public restraint during the campaign may be less a retreat than a calculated effort to avoid polarisation while power is quietly rearranged behind the scenes.

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More information

This piece was previously published as '[Beyond the ballot: Uganda's elections and the politics of late Musevenism](#)', in Democracy in Africa

(5 December 2025)

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December 2025

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Conclusion: Elections as Succession Theatre

Uganda's elections thus look deceptively familiar. There is violence, repression, patronage, and a foregone electoral outcome. Yet to focus solely on these continuities is to miss what is distinctive about this moment. These elections are unfolding in the context of a late-Museveni regime, where the central political question has shifted from electoral competition to succession management. The question is not who will win, but what will happen when the next legislature is installed – at a time when international engagement has retreated to the background.

Campaign violence, the monetisation of internal party processes, the explosion of independent candidates, and the rise of regime-adjacent "movements" all point to a political system under strain – not from external opposition alone, but from internal fragmentation and anticipatory positioning. Elections have become less about governing legitimacy than about sorting winners and losers in an uncertain future.

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