

Patterns of State Repression: A Comparative Review of Human Rights Violations in Uganda's 2016, 2021 and 2026 General Elections.

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Abstract

This article provides a comparative analysis of state repression during Uganda's 2016, 2021, and 2026 general elections. Utilizing a qualitative review of secondary data including human rights reports, judicial records, and legislative texts the study investigated how the Ugandan state has evolved its tactical response to political dissent. While the 2016 cycle was defined by overt, physical coercion, the 2021 and 2026 cycles revealed a transition toward "smart" repression, characterized by digital surveillance, legislative weaponization, and clandestine extrajudicial operations. This paper argues that these shifts represent a calculated move toward institutionalized authoritarianism, which fundamentally undermines democratic consolidation and constitutionalism in Uganda.

Key words: Patterns of State Repression, Human Rights Violations, General Elections.

1. Introduction

The electoral process serves as the foundational pillar of modern democracy; yet, in many contemporary African states, elections have increasingly become instruments of regime preservation rather than mechanisms for public accountability. In Uganda, the National Resistance Movement (NRM) administration has overseen a series of electoral cycles that demonstrate a consistent pattern of democratic backsliding. The 2016, 2021, and 2026 general elections provide a critical comparative lens through which to examine this phenomenon.

As argued by Levitsky and Way (2010) and supported by recent observations in the *BTI Country Report (2026)*, Uganda operates within the framework of

"competitive authoritarianism," where democratic institutions exist but are systematically undermined to perpetuate executive power. Historically, the Ugandan state utilized its security apparatus to manage opposition through traditional policing. However, the nature of this management has undergone a profound metamorphosis. By analyzing the transition from the relatively traditional policing of 2016 to the multifaceted, technologically enabled, and legally sanctioned repression of 2021 and 2026, this paper exposes the maturation of the state's repressive machinery. This study contends that the state has adopted a proactive, multi-layered strategy that integrates law, technology, and paramilitary violence to insulate the executive from electoral challenge.

2. Methodology

This study employed a non-empirical, qualitative design, specifically utilizing document analysis. This approach allows for the systematic examination of institutional behavior through public records and expert reporting. Data sources include official *Uganda Human Rights Commission (UHRC) Annual Reports*, findings from the *International*

Received: 21.04.2026

Accepted: 25.04.2026

Published on: 30.04.2026

Federation for Human Rights (FIDH, 2026), and reports from the *New York City Bar Association (2026)* regarding the targeting of civil society.

Furthermore, the analysis integrates academic insights from recent studies on voter discipline and electoral violence, such as the works of Julius and Sula (2025) and Kazaara and Desire (2025). By triangulating these sources, the research maps the evolution of human rights violations and assesses the structural impact of state interventions on political pluralism.

3. Thematic Analysis: *The Patterns of Repressions*

3.1.1. *The Weaponization of Law (law fare)*

The progression of state repression across the three election cycles reveals a sophisticated adaptation of survival strategies. The primary shift observed is a transition from *coercion-as-confrontation*—prevalent in the 2016 cycle—to a more insidious form of *coercion-as-erasure* that dominated the 2021 and 2026 electoral landscapes.

During the 2016 election cycle, the state utilized traditional, highly visible security methods. The deployment of the Uganda Police Force (UPF) and the military (UPDF) in urban centers served as a primary deterrent against political mobilization. Preventive detention of opposition leaders, most notably Dr. Kizza Besigye, was the central tactic employed to neutralize the threat during peak campaign periods. These actions, while abusive, were overt, allowing for immediate documentation by international observers. The visibility of this repression, however, created a public narrative that the state sought to avoid in subsequent elections.

Furthermore, in the 2016 cycle, the Public Order Management Act (POMA) served as the primary instruments for blocking and detaining leaders under the guise of maintaining public order. By 2021, the state adopted this strategy by “medicalizing” repression, utilizing COVID-19 health regulations to arrest candidates for allegedly violating social distancing protocols.

In contrast, the 2021 and 2026 elections witnessed a paradigm shift toward integrated, “smart” repression. The emergence of the *National Unity Platform (NUP)*, which galvanized a youth demographic disillusioned with the status quo, challenged the regime's traditional mechanisms of control. To counter this, the state deployed systemic digital repression. Nationwide internet shutdowns and social media blocks became standard procedural responses, with the 2026 shutdown occurring days before the vote to effectively sever communication channels for opposition agents and voters alike, as documented by Unwanted Witness (2021).

3.1.2. *Clandestine Violence and the “Drone” “Phenomenon*

While the 2016 election featured the highly visible house arrest of Dr. Kizza Besigye, subsequent cycles saw a shift toward more opaque forms of physical intimidation. The emergence of unmarked vans, popularly known as “drones”, in 2021 and 2026 introduced a new era of enforced disappearances. Security operatives or forces increasingly utilized these vehicles called “drones” to abduct political activists for incommunicado detention in unauthorized “safe houses”. This shift from open street violence to clandestine abductions serves a dual purpose: it minimizes the usual evidence

available to international observers while instilling a deep, pervasive “culture of fear” within the domestic electorate that discourages public participation.

According to the UN Human Rights Office (2026), this strategy was specifically designed to foster psychological terror without the public outcry associated with uniformed police arrests. Complementing this physical violence was the systematic weaponization of legislation. The government in power utilized frameworks such as the *Computer Misuse (Amendment) Act (2022)* and the *NGO (Amendment) Act (2024)* to legitimize the arrest of bloggers, activists, and the suspension of critical non-governmental organizations, effectively criminalizing dissent under the guise of the rule of law.

3.1.3 Digital Authoritarianism and Control of information

As the Ugandan opposition became more technologically savvy, the state’s repressive toolkit expanded in to digital realm. A comparative review reveals that while the 2016 social media blackout was a reactive measure, the nationwide internet shutdowns of 2021 and 2026 were strategically timed to blindfold observers during critical tallying periods. In 2026, this digital control was further entrenched through the suspensions of major NGOs.

It should be noted that, ahead of the January 15th General Elections in Uganda, a total of fifteen Non-governmental Organizations were suspended from operations by the National Bureau of Non-governmental Organizations (NGO Bureau) under the Ministry of Internal Affairs citing vague “Intelligence information” alleging activities prejudicial to national security or regulatory non-compliance. Some of these Non-governmental organizations who were affected includes; Chapter Four Uganda, Alliance for Election Finance Monitoring (ACFIM), Human Rights Network for Journalists-Uganda (HRNJ-U), National NGO Forum, Center for Constitutional Governance, National Coalition of Human Rights Defenders and African Centre for Treatment and Rehabilitation of Torture Victims (ACTV).

Additionally, it should be clearly understood that, the suspension of the National NGO Forum and others happened because the government in power targeted the exploitation of voter data bases to facilitate state-sponsored surveillance. These tactics effectively cut off the flow of information, making it impossible for civic actors to verify election results in real-time.

4. Discussion

The evidence synthesized in this review indicates that state repression in Uganda is an adaptive strategy that evolves to counter new forms of political resistance. The transition from the “defiance” campaign of 2016 to the youth-led “people power” movement of 2021 and 2026 forced the state to innovate its methods of control.

Additionally, the transition from 2016 to 2026 suggests an intentional and deep institutionalization of

authoritarianism. As Levitsky and Way (2010) theorize, competitive authoritarian regimes do not fully abolish institutions; instead, they hollow them out from within, ensuring that parliament, the judiciary, and electoral bodies function to perpetuate executive power rather than provide checks and balances.

A critical component of this institutionalization is the securitization of the military-judicial nexus. The

Received: 21.04.2026

Accepted: 25.04.2026

Published on: 30.04.2026

increasing involvement of the military in civilian political policing, including the trial of opposition members in military courts, represents a significant departure from democratic norms, as noted in the *BTI Country Report (2026)*. This securitization creates a pervasive "chilling effect" where civil society and independent media are coerced into self-censorship to avoid retaliation.

Relatedly, Titeca (2026) observes that this is further complicated by the extreme personalization of power within the executive, where key military and administrative decisions are centralized, bypassing formal bureaucratic oversight and creating a closed loop of executive accountability.

The paradox of institutional persistence is also evident. Consistent with Bratton and van de Walle (1997), the regime's endurance is tied to its ability to manage elite

coalitions through a complex mixture of co-optation and repression. In the 2026 context, the regime faced heightened uncertainty, leading to a massive increase in the costs of opposition. The systemic freezing of NGO accounts and the intimidation of independent observers signal a rejection of political pluralism in favor of an exclusive political order. This creates a destructive feedback loop: increased repression erodes public trust in institutions, which in turn necessitates further state-led crackdowns to ensure compliance, as analyzed by Kazaara and Desire (2025). Ultimately, the Ugandan state has managed to maintain the appearance of electoral democracy while ensuring the outcome of the competition is pre-determined by the strategic use of institutional violence and digital censorship.

5. Conclusion

The patterns observed in 2016, 2021, and 2026 are not merely reactive but constitute a blueprint for a long-term strategy of "managed democracy." The state's ability to adapt its repressive tactics to meet emerging threats suggests that current forms of international pressure and domestic petitioning have reached a threshold of ineffectiveness.

Furthermore, for Uganda to regain its democratic standing, reform must go beyond surface-level changes. It requires the systemic dismantling of the security-state architecture, the restoration of judicial independence, and the reversal of the legislative instruments that currently serve to silence dissent. Without these structural changes, the patterns observed over the last decade will likely serve as the blueprint for all future electoral processes, further alienating the populace and endangering the long-term stability of the nation.

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