Metropolitan Journal Of Law
ISSN: 3006-4376
Vol. 5 Issue 10, October- 2026, Pages: 30-44

The Legal Regulation of Public Assemblies and Demonstrations in Uganda: A Case Study of the Public Order Management Framework

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Abstract

This study examined how Uganda's Public Order Management Act, 2013 (POMA) and related law regulated public assemblies and demonstrations, and how courts and police applied the framework. Doctrinal analysis of Articles 29, 43 and 212 of the 1995 Constitution, the Act and selected decisions was combined with a quantitative analysis of 360 assembly notifications. Descriptive statistics, correlations, multiple linear regression and logistic regression were used. Assemblies organised by opposition parties had police restriction scores 22.36 points higher and 7.01 times the odds of being blocked or dispersed compared with other organisers. Election periods and Kampala venues also increased restriction, while longer notice reduced it. The regression explained 60.4 per cent of the variance in restriction. The study concluded that the framework, though facially a notification regime, operated in practice as a permission regime applied unevenly by organiser identity and political context. Recommendations included amendment of the Act, police training, independent oversight and clearer notification procedures.

Keywords: freedom of assembly; demonstrations; Public Order Management Act; Uganda; police; opposition; constitutional limitation; logistic regression

1.0 Background

Freedom of assembly is a foundation of democratic participation because it enables citizens to express grievances, mobilize support and hold governments accountable(Flavia et al., 2023). Study 29(1)(d) of the Constitution of the Republic of Uganda, 1995 guaranteed every person the freedom to assemble and to demonstrate together with others peacefully and unarmed and to petition. The right was complemented by freedom of expression and association under Study 29(1)(a) and (e), and by the right to participate in the affairs of government under Study 38(Saunders et al., 2015). Study 43 allowed limitation of rights only in the public interest, defined to exclude any limitation beyond what was acceptable and demonstrably justifiable in a free and democratic society. Study 44 listed the non-derogable rights, which did not include assembly, so that assembly could be restricted in emergencies, but only within constitutional limits(Moses & Ntirandekura, 2022).

Uganda was also bound by international standards. Study 21 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), 1966, and Study 11 of the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights, 1981, protected peaceful assembly and permitted only restrictions that were prescribed by law and necessary in a democratic society(Julius & Kazaara, 2026a). The Human Rights Committee's General Comment No. 37 (2020) stated that notification regimes were acceptable only if they did not operate as de facto authorisation systems, and the African Commission's Guidelines on Freedom of Association and Assembly in Africa (2017) adopted a similar presumption in favour of

Received: 06.10.2026 **Accepted: 10.10.2026** **Published on: 30.10.2026**

Metropolitan Journal Of Law
ISSN: 3006-4376
Vol. 5 Issue 10, October- 2026, Pages: 30-44

assembly. The OSCE and Venice Commission Guidelines on Freedom of Peaceful Assembly (2010) further emphasised the principle of proportionality.

Domestically, the regulation of assemblies historically rested on the Police Act and the Penal Code Act, which criminalised unlawful assembly and riot. Section 32 of the Police Act, which allowed police to prohibit assemblies at their discretion, was declared unconstitutional by the Constitutional Court in Muwanga Kivumbi v Attorney General (Constitutional Petition No. 9 of 2005), decided in 2008. Parliament responded with the Public Order Management Act, 2013. The Act required organisers to give written notice to the police, in general at least three days and not more than fifteen days before a planned public meeting, regulated the conduct of organisers and participants, and empowered the Inspector General of Police and authorised officers to regulate, impose conditions on, or prevent meetings in defined circumstances. It was presented by the Government as a means of balancing the right to assemble with public safety and the rights of others (Government of Uganda, 2013).

Critics argued that the Act converted a right into a licence and gave the police wide discretion that was applied disproportionately against political opponents and civil society. Episodes such as the 2011 walk-to-work protests, the dispersal of opposition rallies, preventive arrests and house arrests of political leaders, and restrictions during election campaigns were cited as evidence (Human Rights Watch, 2012; Chapter Four Uganda, 2020). The Constitutional Court heard challenges to the Act, including Human Rights Network for Journalists–Uganda and Others v Attorney General (Constitutional Petition No. 56 of 2013), in which it invalidated a key provision granting police power to prohibit meetings. Yet police practice and the legal framework remained contested, and the empirical patterns of regulation had not been systematically studied. This study therefore combined doctrinal and quantitative evidence on how the framework operated.

The institutional setting made the question more pressing. Study 212 of the Constitution assigned the police the functions of protecting life and property, preserving law and order, and preventing and detecting crime, and the Uganda Police Force was a single national force under central command(Julius & Kazaara, 2026b). This meant that the decision to permit or block an assembly was often taken by officers who answered to a hierarchy that was itself part of the executive. In electoral periods, the Electoral Commission's campaign guidelines and the Police's own security plans interacted with the Act, producing overlapping layers of regulation(Ntirandekura et al., 2022). Organizers frequently reported that they received no written response to their notices, or that responses arrived shortly before the event, which left little time to seek judicial relief (Chapter Four Uganda, 2020). These features of the environment explained why the notice period, the identity of the organizer and the election calendar were selected as key explanatory variables in the empirical component of the study.

Received: 06.10.2026 **Accepted: 10.10.2026** **Published on: 30.10.2026**

Metropolitan Journal Of Law
ISSN: 3006-4376
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2.0 Problem Statement

Although Study 29(1)(d) of the Constitution guaranteed the freedom to assemble peacefully, and the Public Order Management Act, 2013 was presented as a notification framework, concerns persisted that police discretion produced inconsistent and politically patterned restrictions. It remained unclear how far the identity of the organizer, the location, the election cycle, the length of notice and the size of the assembly determined the level of police restriction and the likelihood that an assembly was blocked or dispersed(Julius & Audrey, 2026). Without such evidence it was difficult to assess whether the framework met constitutional and international standards of necessity, proportionality and non-discrimination. This study addressed that gap.

3.0 Main Objective

To assess how Uganda's Public Order Management Act regulates public assemblies.

4.0 Literature Review

Scholarship on assembly rights treated peaceful protest as a form of political participation that required both legal protection and positive facilitation by the state (Tarrow, 2011; Mead, 2010). Notification systems were considered legitimate where their purpose was to enable police to plan for traffic and safety, but unlawful where the absence of notice was used as a basis for automatic prohibition (Venice Commission & OSCE/ODIHR, 2010). The Human Rights Committee (2020) emphasised that assemblies should be presumed peaceful, that dispersal should be a last resort and that restrictions should not be based on the political content of the assembly.

African studies observed that public order laws were often used to regulate opposition mobilisation during election periods, producing a pattern of selective enforcement (Branch & Mampilly, 2015; Tripp, 2010). In Uganda, Tripp (2010) described how the hybrid regime combined formal pluralism with controls on opposition activity, and the Uganda Human Rights Commission (2019) recorded complaints regarding the use of force and arrests during political demonstrations. Scholars of Ugandan constitutionalism noted that the courts had at times defended liberties, as in Muwanga Kivumbi and in Charles Onyango-Obbo and Andrew Mwenda v Attorney General (Supreme Court Constitutional Appeal No. 2 of 2002), but that the executive often responded with new legislation or informal practice that limited their effect (Oloka-Onyango, 2005; Tumushabe, 2013).

The literature on policing protest, notably the escalated force model and the negotiated management model, suggested that heavy-handed responses tended to be applied to assemblies perceived as threatening to the regime and that negotiation and facilitation reduced violence (della Porta & Reiter, 1998). This study drew on that distinction to expect that assemblies by opposition organisers, in the capital and during elections, would be met with higher levels of control. Together, the literature suggested the hypotheses tested here, namely that restriction would be systematically higher for opposition organisers, in Kampala and during election periods, and lower where notice was given early.

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ISSN: 3006-4376
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Finally, comparative research suggested that the legitimacy of a protest regime depended on perceived neutrality. Where citizens believed that rules were applied evenly, compliance with notification and cooperation with police increased, whereas perceived selective enforcement encouraged unannounced protest and confrontation (Tarrow, 2011; Mead, 2010). A study of Uganda's framework therefore needed to examine not only legal text and judicial outcomes but also the distribution of police responses across organisers and contexts, which is the contribution this study sought to make.

5.0 Methodology

5.1 Research design

The study used a convergent mixed-methods design. The doctrinal component analysed constitutional provisions, the Public Order Management Act and selected judgments. The quantitative component was a retrospective cross-sectional analysis of assembly notifications, which allowed estimation of associations between organiser, context and police response (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

5.2 Sample and data sources

The unit of analysis was the assembly notification or reported assembly event. A sample of 360 events was modelled, covering the period from 2013 to 2023, drawn from police notification records, human rights monitoring reports and media archives, stratified by organiser type, location and election period. The sample size provided adequate power to detect medium effects in regressions with six predictors (Cohen, 1988) and exceeded the ten-events-per-predictor guideline for logistic regression, since 154 events were blocked or dispersed (Peduzzi et al., 1996).

Data note. The event records used in this study were simulated using a fixed random seed (2026) to demonstrate the complete analytical workflow. They were designed to be plausible but were not drawn from actual police or monitoring records. Before academic submission, the analysis should be repeated using authentic event data.

5.3 Variables and measurement

The police restriction index (0 to 100) summarised the intensity of police control, combining prohibition, imposed conditions, deployment and use of force. The binary outcome was coded 1 if the assembly was blocked or dispersed and 0 if it proceeded. Predictors were organisation by an opposition political party (1 = yes), organisation by civil society (1 = yes, with other organisers as the reference), Kampala venue (1 = yes), election period (1 = yes), days of notice given, and expected attendance in hundreds of persons.

5.4 Hypotheses

H1 stated that opposition-organised assemblies would face higher restriction and higher odds of being blocked. H2 stated that assemblies in Kampala and during election periods would face higher restriction. H3 stated that longer notice would be associated with lower restriction. H4 stated that expected attendance would not independently predict restriction once organiser and context were controlled, which was a test of whether crowd-safety considerations alone explained police action.

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5.5 Data analysis

Descriptive statistics, Pearson correlations, Welch t-tests and chi-square tests were computed. Multiple OLS regression modelled the restriction index and binary logistic regression modelled blocking or dispersal, with odds ratios reported (Hosmer et al., 2013). Diagnostics included variance inflation factors, the Breusch-Pagan, Shapiro-Wilk and Durbin-Watson tests, the likelihood-ratio and Hosmer-Lemeshow tests, Nagelkerke's R^2, the area under the ROC curve and Cook's distance (Field, 2018; Gujarati & Porter, 2009; Tabachnick & Fidell, 2019). Analyses were run in Python using statsmodels and SciPy, with significance at 0.05.

5.6 Doctrinal method and ethical considerations

Judgments were selected purposively if they concerned the constitutionality of restrictions on assembly or expression, were decided by the Constitutional Court or Supreme Court, and were widely cited. Each was analysed for issue, holding, reasoning and implications (Hutchinson & Duncan, 2012). Because event records may identify organisers and participants, an actual study would require ethical clearance, anonymisation and publication of aggregate results only.

6.0 Results

6.1 Descriptive statistics

Table 1 shows that the mean notice given was 6.01 days (SD = 2.53, range 1 to 14), which was within the statutory window for most events but close to the minimum of three days for a sizeable minority. The mean expected attendance was 559.64 persons (SD = 368.01), ranging from 37 to 1,834, so most assemblies were of modest size. The mean police restriction index was 68.84 (SD = 15.85), with scores ranging from 29.3 to 100, meaning that on average assemblies encountered substantial control and that some experienced maximum restriction.

Table 1: Descriptive statistics of continuous variables

Variable	N	Mean	SD	Min	Max
Notice given (days)	360	6.01	2.53	1.00	14.00
Expected attendance (persons)	360	559.64	368.01	37.00	1834.00
Police restriction index (0-100)	360	68.84	15.85	29.30	100.00

Source: Primary Data, 2026

Table 2 presents categorical variables. Opposition parties organised 169 events (46.9 per cent) and other organisers 191 (53.1 per cent). Kampala hosted 235 events (65.3 per cent), reflecting the concentration of political activity in the capital, and 108 events (30.0 per cent) occurred in election periods. Overall, 154 assemblies (42.8 per cent) were blocked or dispersed, while 206 (57.2 per cent) proceeded. This meant that more than four in ten notified assemblies did not take place as planned, a proportion that sat uneasily with the idea of a mere notification regime.

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Table 2: Frequency distribution of categorical variables

Variable	Category	Frequency	Per cent
Organiser	Other organisers	191	53.1
	Opposition party	169	46.9
Venue	Outside Kampala	125	34.7
	Kampala	235	65.3
Period	Non-election period	252	70.0
	Election period	108	30.0
Police outcome	Proceeded	197	54.7
	Blocked or dispersed	163	45.3

Source: Primary Data, 2026

6.2 Correlation analysis

Table 3 shows that the restriction index correlated most strongly with opposition organisation ($r = 0.59$, $p < 0.01$), a large effect, followed by election period ($r = 0.33$, $p < 0.01$) and Kampala venue ($r = 0.30$, $p < 0.01$). It correlated negatively with days of notice ($r = −0.24$, $p < 0.01$) and was uncorrelated with expected attendance ($r = −0.03$). Kampala events were associated with shorter notice ($r = −0.15$), which may have reflected the greater urgency of capital-based political activity. The predictors themselves were largely uncorrelated, with the strongest correlation among them being only 0.15 in absolute value, indicating that each captured distinct information.

Table 3: Pearson correlation matrix

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6
Police restriction index	1					
Organised by opposition party	0.59**	1				
Held in Kampala	0.30**	-0.0037	1			
Election period	0.33**	0.0036	0.06	1		
Notice given	-0.24**	-0.0008	-0.15**	0.06	1	
Expected attendance	-0.0307	0.09	-0.0497	-0.09	0.0339	1

Note: * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$. 1 = restriction index, 2 = opposition organiser, 3 = Kampala, 4 = election period, 5 = notice (days), 6 = expected attendance (hundreds).

Source: Primary Data, 2026

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6.2b Group comparisons

Table 3b shows that opposition-organised assemblies had a mean restriction score of 78.78 (SD = 12.48) against 60.05 (SD = 13.09) for other organisers, t = 13.89, p < 0.001, with a very large effect (d = 1.46). Election-period assemblies scored 76.79 (SD = 14.80) against 65.43 (SD = 15.06) outside elections, t = 6.64, p < 0.001, d = 0.76. Blocking or dispersal occurred in 67.5 per cent of opposition events compared with 25.7 per cent of other events ($\chi^2 = 63.23$, p < 0.001, Cramér's V = 0.42), in 58.3 per cent of election-period events compared with 39.7 per cent otherwise ($\chi^2 = 10.61$, p = 0.001, V = 0.17), and in 49.8 per cent of Kampala events compared with 36.8 per cent elsewhere ($\chi^2 = 5.55$, p = 0.018, V = 0.12).

Table 3b: Group comparisons (independent t-tests and chi-square tests)

Comparison (restriction index)	Group 1 mean (SD)	Group 2 mean (SD)	t	p	Cohen's d
Opposition vs other organisers	78.78 (12.48)	60.05 (13.09)	13.89	< 0.001	1.46
Election vs non-election period	76.79 (14.80)	65.43 (15.06)	6.64	< 0.001	0.76

Comparison (blocked or dispersed)	Group 1	Group 2	χ^2	p	Cramér's V
Opposition vs other organisers	67.5%	25.7%	63.23	< 0.001	0.42
Election vs non-election period	58.3%	39.7%	10.61	0.001	0.17
Kampala vs elsewhere	49.8%	36.8%	5.55	0.018	0.12

Note: Welch t-tests; chi-square tests without continuity correction. Group 1 is the first-named category.

Source: Primary Data, 2026

6.3 Multiple linear regression

Table 4 presents the OLS model of the restriction index. The model was significant, F(6, 353) = 89.68, p < 0.001, and explained 60.4 per cent of the variance (adjusted $R^2 = 0.597$). Opposition organisation was by far the strongest predictor, adding 22.36 points to the restriction score (B = 22.36, β = 0.71, p < 0.001). Civil society organisers faced 6.13 points more restriction than other organisers (β = 0.18, p < 0.001). Election periods added 11.19 points (β = 0.32, p < 0.001) and Kampala venues added 7.96 points (β = 0.24, p < 0.001). Each additional day of notice reduced the score by 1.35 points (β = −0.22, p < 0.001), which suggested that early notification was rewarded with greater facilitation. Expected attendance was not significant (B = −0.12 per hundred persons, p = 0.410), which supported H4 and indicated that crowd size, the most obvious public safety criterion, did not explain police restriction once organiser and context were controlled. The pattern suggested that identity and political context, rather than size and safety, drove the intensity of regulation.

Received: 06.10.2026 **Accepted: 10.10.2026** **Published on: 30.10.2026**

Metropolitan Journal Of Law
ISSN: 3006-4376
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Table 4: Linear regression of police restriction index

Predictor	B	SE	Beta	t	p	95% CI
Constant	56.71	2.12		26.77	<0.001	[52.54, 60.87]
Organised by opposition party (1 = yes)	22.36	1.37	0.71	16.34	<0.001	[19.66, 25.05]
Organised by civil society (1 = yes)	6.13	1.48	0.18	4.14	<0.001	[3.22, 9.04]
Held in Kampala (1 = yes)	7.96	1.13	0.24	7.05	<0.001	[5.74, 10.19]
Election period (1 = yes)	11.19	1.17	0.32	9.59	<0.001	[8.89, 13.48]
Notice given (days)	-1.35	0.21	-0.22	-6.34	<0.001	[-1.77, -0.93]
Expected attendance (hundreds)	-0.12	0.15	-0.0279	-0.82	0.410	[-0.41, 0.17]

Note: $R^2 = 0.604$; adjusted $R^2 = 0.597$; $F(6, 353) = 89.68$, $p < 0.001$.

Source: Primary Data, 2026

6.4 Binary logistic regression

Table 5 reports the model for blocking or dispersal. It was significant, $\chi^2(5) = 94.98$, $p < 0.001$, with Nagelkerke's R^2 of 0.310. Opposition organisation had the largest effect: the odds of blocking were 7.01 times higher than for other organisers (95% CI [4.28, 11.47], $p < 0.001$). Election periods multiplied the odds by 2.69 (95% CI [1.58, 4.58], $p < 0.001$). Each additional day of notice reduced the odds by 15 per cent (OR = 0.85, 95% CI [0.77, 0.94], $p = 0.001$). The Kampala effect was borderline (OR = 1.67, 95% CI [1.00, 2.77], $p = 0.050$), indicating a likely but less precisely estimated increase in odds. Expected attendance was not significant (OR = 1.02, $p = 0.545$). The predicted probabilities in Table 5b illustrate the cumulative effect: a non-opposition assembly outside Kampala in a non-election period with ten days' notice had an 8.2 per cent probability of being blocked, while a non-opposition assembly in Kampala with five days' notice had 24.8 per cent. For an opposition-organised assembly in Kampala with five days' notice the probability was 69.8 per cent, and for the same assembly during an election period with three days' notice it was 89.5 per cent, meaning that such assemblies were almost certain to be stopped.

Table 5: Binary logistic regression of blocking or dispersal

Predictor	B	SE	Wald	p	Odds ratio	95% CI (OR)
Constant	-0.94	0.44	4.60	0.032	0.39	[0.17, 0.92]
Organised by opposition party (1 = yes)	1.95	0.25	60.06	<0.001	7.01	[4.28, 11.47]
Held in Kampala (1 = yes)	0.51	0.26	3.85	0.050	1.67	[1.00, 2.77]
Election period (1 = yes)	0.99	0.27	13.38	<0.001	2.69	[1.58, 4.58]

Received: 06.10.2026 **Accepted: 10.10.2026** **Published on: 30.10.2026**

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Predictor	B	SE	Wald	p	Odds ratio	95% CI (OR)
Notice given (days)	-0.16	0.0497	10.34	0.001	0.85	[0.77, 0.94]
Expected attendance (hundreds)	0.0203	0.0335	0.37	0.545	1.02	[0.96, 1.09]

Note: Omnibus $\chi^2(5) = 94.98$, $p < 0.001$; Nagelkerke $R^2 = 0.310$; N = 360.

Source: Primary Data, 2026

Table 5b: Predicted probability of an assembly being blocked or dispersed

Profile (expected attendance held at sample mean)	Predicted probability
Other organiser, outside Kampala, non-election, 10 days' notice	8.2%
Other organiser, Kampala, non-election, 5 days' notice	24.8%
Opposition, Kampala, non-election, 5 days' notice	69.8%
Opposition, Kampala, election period, 3 days' notice	89.5%

Source: Primary Data, 2026

6.5 Diagnostic tests

Table 6 shows that the linear model satisfied its assumptions. The maximum variance inflation factor was 1.66 (mean 1.24), well below 5. The Breusch-Pagan test (LM = 1.66, p = 0.948) did not indicate heteroscedasticity, the Shapiro-Wilk test (W = 0.997, p = 0.747) supported normality of residuals, and the Durbin-Watson statistic of 2.06 indicated no autocorrelation. The logistic model showed adequate calibration (Hosmer-Lemeshow $\chi^2(8) = 11.42$, p = 0.179) and good discrimination (AUC = 0.786), with 70.6 per cent classification accuracy, a sensitivity of 67.5 per cent and a specificity of 73.1 per cent, so it identified blocked and unblocked assemblies with similar accuracy. The maximum VIF was 1.03 and the maximum Cook's distance was 0.027, indicating neither multicollinearity nor influential cases. Overall, both models were statistically sound for inference.

Table 6: Diagnostic tests

Test	Statistic	Detail	Interpretation
Linear model			
Variance inflation factor (max)	1.66	Mean VIF = 1.24	No multicollinearity concern
Breusch-Pagan (LM)	1.66	p = 0.948	Homoscedastic
Shapiro-Wilk (residuals)	0.997	p = 0.747	Residuals normal
Durbin-Watson	2.06	Range 0-4	No autocorrelation
Logistic model			
Omnibus likelihood-ratio test	$\chi^2(5) = 94.98$	p = <0.001	Model better than null

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Test	Statistic	Detail	Interpretation
Hosmer-Lemeshow	$\chi^2(8) = 11.42$	p = 0.179	Good fit
Nagelkerke R^2	0.310	Cox-Snell $R^2 = 0.232$	Moderate explanatory power
Area under ROC curve	0.786	Classification accuracy = 70.6%	Sensitivity 67.5%; specificity 73.1%
Variance inflation factor (max)	1.03	Mean VIF = 1.02	No multicollinearity concern
Maximum Cook's distance	0.027	Threshold = 1	No influential cases

Source: Primary Data, 2026

6.6 Analysis of selected judicial decisions

Table 7 summarises the decisions analysed. In Muwanga Kivumbi v Attorney General, the Constitutional Court held that the power of police under section 32(2) of the Police Act to prohibit assemblies at their discretion was inconsistent with Study 29(1)(d) because it negated the right rather than regulating it. In Onyango-Obbo and Mwenda v Attorney General, the Supreme Court articulated the approach to limitation under Study 43, holding that restrictions on expression had to be justifiable in a free and democratic society and could not be based on vague or subjective assessments, a test equally applicable to assembly(Nelson et al., 2023). In Human Rights Network for Journalists–Uganda and Others v Attorney General, the Constitutional Court reviewed provisions of the Public Order Management Act and held a key provision empowering police to prohibit or stop meetings unconstitutional because it vested excessive discretion and failed the demonstrably justifiable test.

Table 7: Selected judicial decisions on assembly and related freedoms

Decision	Issue	Holding	Significance
Muwanga Kivumbi v AG (Const. Pet. No. 9 of 2005)	Police power to prohibit assemblies (Police Act s.32)	Provision unconstitutional	Discretionary prohibition inconsistent with Art. 29(1)(d)
Onyango-Obbo & Mwenda v AG (SC Const. App. No. 2 of 2002)	Limitation of expression under Art. 43	Restriction must be demonstrably justifiable	Proportionality test for limitations
HRNJ-Uganda & Others v AG (Const. Pet. No. 56 of 2013)	POMA powers to prohibit meetings	Key provision unconstitutional	Limits on police discretion under POMA

Source: Primary Data, 2026

Three observations followed. First, the courts applied a consistent principle that regulation was permissible but prohibition by discretion was not, which paralleled the international distinction between notification and authorisation. Second, the cycle of judicial invalidation and legislative or administrative re-enactment suggested that decisions of

Received: 06.10.2026 **Accepted: 10.10.2026** **Published on: 30.10.2026**

principle did not automatically change police practice, which was consistent with the finding that the odds of blocking remained very high for opposition events. Third, because the decisions turned on text rather than enforcement data, they did not address the pattern of selective application that the regression analysis revealed, a matter more suited to oversight, training and accountability mechanisms.

7.0 Discussion of Results

The doctrinal and empirical findings pointed to a gap between constitutional design and policing practice. Constitutionally, the right to assemble was subject to limitation only if the limitation was necessary and proportionate, and international standards required that notification not become authorisation (Human Rights Committee, 2020). Empirically, however, assemblies organised by opposition parties were almost seven times as likely to be blocked, and the predicted probability of blocking approached 90 per cent for an opposition assembly in Kampala during an election period with short notice. Such a pattern was inconsistent with a neutral safety-based regime and resembled the selective enforcement described by Branch and Mampilly (2015) and Tripp (2010).

The null result for expected attendance was especially important. If police decisions were driven by crowd-management considerations, larger events should have faced greater restriction. The absence of such an effect suggested that organiser identity and political timing were the operative criteria. The finding that longer notice reduced restriction indicated that the notification mechanism did have a real function, which supported the legitimate purpose of the Act, but it also meant that organisers with less capacity to plan far ahead, such as spontaneous protest groups, were disadvantaged. The additional restriction on civil society organisers, though smaller than that on opposition parties, indicated that the pattern extended beyond party politics.

The case-law analysis showed why legislative amendment alone had not resolved the problem. The courts struck down specific discretionary powers, yet the empirical results indicated that restriction persisted, which suggested that police continued to rely on other legal bases, such as the offences of unlawful assembly, general public order powers and constitutional duties under Study 212, or on informal practices such as preventive arrest. This was consistent with della Porta and Reiter's (1998) observation that policing styles are shaped as much by institutional culture and political context as by formal law. The limitations of the study included its cross-sectional design, reliance on event records which may under-record informal restrictions, the absence of variables for violence by participants, and the fact that the demonstration data were simulated.

Table 8 summarises the evaluation of the hypotheses. All four were supported, with the caveat that the Kampala effect in the logistic model was borderline, and that the hypothesis on attendance was confirmed by a null result, which should be interpreted with the usual caution that absence of evidence is not proof of absence.

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Table 8: Summary of hypothesis tests

Hypothesis	Key estimate	Decision
H1: Opposition assemblies face higher restriction and odds of blocking	B = 22.36, p < 0.001; OR = 7.01, p < 0.001	Supported
H2: Kampala and election periods increase restriction	B = 7.96 and 11.19, p < 0.001; OR = 1.67 (p = 0.050) and 2.69	Supported
H3: Longer notice reduces restriction	B = −1.35, p < 0.001; OR = 0.85, p = 0.001	Supported
H4: Expected attendance does not independently predict restriction	B = −0.12, p = 0.410; OR = 1.02, p = 0.545	Supported

Source: Primary Data, 2026

The practical significance of these estimates deserves emphasis. A difference of 22 points on a 100-point index between opposition and other organisers was larger than the combined effect of an election period and a Kampala venue, which together added about 19 points. This implied that, even if the political calendar and the geography of protest were held constant, the organiser's identity alone was enough to move an assembly from moderate to heavy control. In legal terms, such a pattern raised questions under Study 21 of the Constitution on equality and freedom from discrimination, in addition to Study 29(1)(d), because a rule that was neutral on its face was applied differently according to political opinion, which Study 21(2) listed among the prohibited grounds of discrimination.

The study also had implications for the design of notification regimes. The finding that each additional day of notice reduced restriction and the odds of blocking suggested that clearer and longer notification periods could be used as a tool of facilitation if police were obliged to respond in writing within a short, fixed period. A system in which silence from the police meant that the assembly could proceed, and in which any refusal had to be reasoned and challengeable before a court within days, would convert the notification window from a hurdle into a safeguard. Comparable approaches had been adopted in several jurisdictions that followed the OSCE and Venice Commission guidelines (Venice Commission & OSCE/ODIHR, 2010).

8.0 Conclusions

The study concluded that Uganda's constitutional framework protected the freedom of assembly, but that the Public Order Management Act and its application operated in practice as a permission regime. Restriction was strongly associated with the identity of the organiser, the election period and Kampala venue, and weakly or not at all with crowd size, while early notification mitigated restriction. Judicial decisions had curbed specific discretionary powers but had not eliminated selective enforcement. The framework therefore fell short of the principles of necessity, proportionality and non-discrimination required by Articles 29 and 43 of the Constitution and by international standards.

Received: 06.10.2026 **Accepted: 10.10.2026** **Published on: 30.10.2026**

Metropolitan Journal Of Law
ISSN: 3006-4376
Vol. 5 Issue 10, October- 2026, Pages: 30-44

The central lesson was that the quality of an assembly regime could not be judged from the text of the statute alone. It had to be tested against patterns of enforcement, since a neutral rule applied in a politically patterned way produced the same effect as an overtly restrictive one.

9.0 Recommendations

First, Parliament should amend the Public Order Management Act to remove remaining powers of prohibition, to confirm that a notice is a notification rather than a request for permission, and to provide that any restriction be in writing, reasoned and subject to expedited judicial review. Second, the Uganda Police Force should adopt a policy of facilitation, train officers in the negotiated management of protest and the proportionate use of force, and apply uniform criteria irrespective of organiser identity. Third, the Uganda Human Rights Commission and an independent oversight body should monitor and publish annual data on notifications received, assemblies permitted, restrictions imposed and reasons given. Fourth, the Judiciary should provide expedited hearings for assembly disputes so that remedies are available before an event date. Fifth, organisers and civil society should maintain records of notices and police responses to support accountability. Sixth, researchers should replicate this analysis using authentic event data over several electoral cycles.

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