



When institutions fail: Uganda's stalled war against corruption

If you want to know the true condition of a nation, do not begin with the laws written in its statutes. Look instead at the confidence citizens place in the institutions meant to enforce them.

Laws can be beautifully drafted and constitutions elegantly framed, but when trust erodes in the courts, Parliament, and the broader machinery of government, the promise of the law begins to ring hollow.

Recent data on governance and corruption suggests that Uganda is approaching precisely such a moment. The latest Corruption Perceptions Index released by Transparency International paints a troubling picture. Uganda scored 25 out of 100, ranking 148th out of 182 countries worldwide. This is not simply a low score; it reflects a deeper problem of stagnation. For several years, Uganda has hovered between 25 and 26, an indication that despite institutional reforms, anti-corruption agencies, and periodic high profile investigations, the overall trajectory has barely shifted.

The regional comparison is equally sobering. Rwanda scored 58, Tanzania 40, while Kenya registered 30, leaving Uganda among the weakest performers in East Africa. Such comparisons do not tell the entire story, but they reinforce an uncomfortable reality: the country's fight against corruption has not gained meaningful ground. More revealing than the rankings themselves is what Ugandans increasingly believe about their own institutions.

Data from Afrobarometer shows that public confidence in the Judiciary has declined markedly over the past decade. A Judiciary may retain its constitutional powers on paper, but once public confidence begins to fade, its authority inevitably weakens. Equally concerning is the widespread perception that Executive power often operates beyond judicial restraint. According to the same Afrobarometer survey, about 32 percent of Ugandans believe the President of

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ten or always ignores the courts and the law. Whether entirely accurate or shaped by political perception, this belief has profound implications.

Parliament, which should serve as the principal watchdog over public power, faces its own crisis of confidence. Nearly 47 percent of Ugandans say that most or all Members of Parliament are corrupt. These perceptions have been reinforced by a succession of scandals and investigations involving alleged bribery and fraudulent schemes that led to some MPs being prosecuted in courts of law.

At the same time, the financial cost of maintaining Parliament has continued to rise. Yet while the financial burden grows, public confidence in Parliament's oversight role appears to decline. The consequences of corruption are not merely institutional or political; they are profoundly economic and social. And for ordinary citizens, corruption is rarely an abstract concept. It often appears at the most painful points of daily life. Afrobarometer reports that 41 percent of Ugandans say they have had to pay a bribe simply to receive medical care, while 76 percent say they have paid a bribe to obtain police assistance. These experiences reinforce a growing sense that public institutions increasingly serve private interests rather than the public good.

Perhaps the most troubling finding concerns

the climate of fear surrounding corruption reporting. At least 83 percent of Ugandans believe citizens who report corruption risk retaliation. In such an environment, silence becomes a form of self-preservation. Even when wrongdoing is widely known, fear discourages people from speaking out. Corruption then evolves into what economists describe as a collective action problem: everyone recognises the problem, yet few feel safe confronting it.

Taken together, these trends reveal a deeper institutional dilemma. Uganda's anti-corruption campaign has not collapsed outright, but it has clearly stalled.

Confidence in the Judiciary is weakening, Parliament's credibility is under strain, and the economic cost of corruption remains staggering.

History shows that anti-corruption campaigns succeed only when the cost of corruption outweighs its rewards. Where political loyalty, patronage networks, or institutional protection provide greater security than the risk of punishment, corruption becomes a rational choice within the system.

Uganda's challenge, therefore, goes beyond prosecuting individual cases or creating new oversight bodies. The more urgent task is restoring credibility to the institutions already entrusted with defending and enforcing the rule of law.

Without that credibility even the most carefully designed reforms will struggle to produce meaningful change.

Ultimately the fight against corruption is not won in courtrooms alone. It is won in the public conscience—when citizens believe that institutions act fairly, when accountability is real rather than symbolic, and when those entrusted with power are seen to serve the nation rather than themselves.

Until that shift occurs, Uganda's corruption indicators will likely remain stubbornly red. And if that continues, the country risks losing more than a statistical battle against corruption. It risks losing the public trust on which the legitimacy of every institution ultimately depends.

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