

Bar demands release of political detainees

Uganda faces a deepening human rights crisis following the January 15, 2026 General Election, in which President Yoweri Museveni was declared winner for a seventh term amid widespread allegations of fraud, repression and mass arbitrary detention.

Thousands of Opposition supporters, activists, journalists and ordinary citizens remain imprisoned or in exile on pretextual charges such as common nuisance, unlawful assembly, hate speech, malicious publication of false information, computer misuse, terrorism and incitement to violence. These detentions stem directly from legitimate political activity: participating in campaigns, attending rallies, expressing dissent, monitoring polling stations or protesting disputed results.

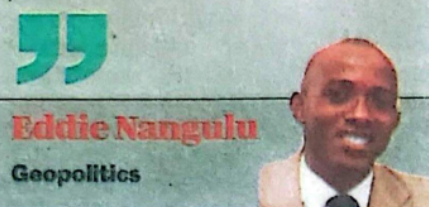
The Uganda Law Society (the Bar), as the guardian of justice and the rule of law, demands the immediate and unconditional release of all political prisoners and dissidents in exile to halt this systematic suppression of dissent and begin restoring fundamental freedoms.

The Electoral Commission, chaired by Justice Simon Byabakama, presided over a process marred by documented irregularities: a nationwide internet shutdown, malfunctioning biometric voter verification kits (BVVKs), pre-election and post-election violence, allegations of ballot stuffing, inconsistent tallying and failure to publish detailed polling station results.

These flaws, reported by domestic and international observers, have shattered public confidence in the electoral system. Justice Byabakama and the entire Commission team should resign to create room for credible future elections.

The procurement of more than 109,000 BVVKs at a cost of approximately Shs268 billion proved a colossal waste when the devices failed on polling day, forcing unreliable manual counting and fuelling suspicions of

The Law Society will spearhead a Bar-led national dialogue.



corruption or gross negligence. The contractor should be blacklisted from future government tenders, funds recovered through legal action, and an independent audit conducted to establish accountability for this misuse of public resources.

The campaign and post-election period was marked by grave human rights violations, including excessive force by security agencies that reportedly resulted in dozens of deaths, numerous injuries and mass arrests targeting Opposition supporters.

Reports indicate more than 2,000 detentions, alongside enforced disappearances and assaults. With the support of partners, the Bar will coordinate civil and criminal proceedings against perpetrators, including state actors liable for assault, unlawful detention and extrajudicial killings, while assisting victims to seek redress.

Central to this crisis are political prisoners held on fabricated or politically motivated charges — Opposition figures, polling agents and citizens arrested over social media posts or rally participation, many subjected to prolonged pre-trial detention without credible evidence. Such tactics criminalise peaceful political engagement and violate rights to freedom of expression, assembly and association. Their immediate and unconditional release is non-negotiable if meaningful na-

tional reconciliation is to begin.

The internet shutdown around polling day devastated economic activity, journalism and civic monitoring, with estimated daily losses running into billions of shillings.

The long-delayed Uganda Communications Tribunal, provided for under the Uganda Communications Act 2013, must be operationalised to investigate the shutdown, assign responsibility and explore compensation for affected citizens.

Arbitrary suspensions of civil society organisations, including key human rights and election-observation groups, days before polling crippled independent oversight. These suspensions, justified on vague security grounds, must be lifted without delay.

Given the scale of documented violence and systematic intimidation — and the failure of national institutions to ensure accountability, the Bar affirms its readiness to support or initiate proceedings before the International Criminal Court where credible evidence exists of crimes against humanity or widespread attacks against civilians. Persistent institutional capture has effectively foreclosed meaningful domestic remedies.

The Uganda Law Society will spearhead a Bar-led national dialogue on democratic transition, prioritising constitutional and statutory reforms: comprehensive restructuring of the Judiciary, reinstatement of presidential term limits, genuine independence of the Electoral Commission through non-presidential appointments, strengthened protections for freedoms of expression and association and depoliticisation of the security forces. Only such reforms can break the cycle of disputed elections.

The moment for courageous leadership is now.

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