

The world seems too busy for a priceless democracy

What do you know about elections in Uganda? For two decades, the pattern has never changed. Election day arrives, the incumbent wins, the Opposition cries foul, and then comes the most reliable third act - a pilgrimage to the West. Delegations. Press conferences in Europe. Strongly worded statements. Threats of sanctions. And then, almost without fail, life quietly goes on.

After January 15, the script unfolded with familiar precision. Robert Kyagulanyi addressed the European Parliament virtually, appealing for sanctions, visa bans, and asset freezes against Ugandan officials - a performance Uganda's political watchers have seen rehearsed before.

The EU Parliament duly obliged with a resolution. Hilde Vautmans, chair of the Parliament's Africa delegation, solemnly promised to "keep an eye on Uganda." Kampala was unmoved.

While Uganda's ties with Western institutions have always been modest, its vulnerability to external pressure in 2026 is lower than it has ever been. Usually, where both ties and vulnerability are high, external pressure works. Where

the "international community" today! Europe has been at war on its eastern flank since February 2022, and the psychological and budgetary exhaustion of Ukraine support has transformed European foreign policy from principled idealism into transactional survivalism.

The EU's symbolic gestures toward Uganda, however well-intentioned, exist in this same exhausted diplomatic atmosphere. Resolutions are easier to pass but what about sanctions? Sanctions require consensus among member states - the same member states currently arguing about Ukrainian borders, energy prices, and migration flows from the Middle East and North Africa. Forget not the new consequences of the war in Iran.

When Western governments find themselves navigating difficult positions on one humanitarian crisis while simultaneously raising concerns about democratic governance elsewhere, the inconsistency does not go unnoticed. Obviously, Ugandan officials, like many across the Global South, must have quietly observed this gap between stated values and visible conduct, and it inevitably shapes how external criticism is received in Kampala.

The post-Cold War dream of exporting democracy is over. Today's global order is colder, more calculating, and entirely unsentimental.

Uganda brings considerable weight to this transaction - peacekeeping, security cooperation, Great Lakes stability, oil pipeline politics, and a refugee policy that UNHCR openly admires. That portfolio will always outrank a clean election certificate. This is not to dismiss international engagement entirely.

The EU's resolution, however symbolic, still enriches Uganda's democratic record, lends civil society actors a measure of legitimacy, and reminds investors that governance remains a live conversation.

Yet in this transactional climate, foreign partners will prioritise what Uganda delivers strategically. The ambition of converting those partnerships into meaningful democratic conditionality is, for now, a secondary concern at best.

My simple verdict: When external pressure weakens, democratic change must come from within. Uganda's opposition must stop appealing to a distracted world and start building institutions, cross-cutting coalitions, and sustained political bargaining that outlast election cycles.

When crises are simultaneous, self-preservation precedes solidarity - every time.

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either is weak, resolutions are brushed off the way a buffalo brushes off flies. The world that once pointed fingers at Kampala is now struggling to point beyond its own reflection.

The self-appointed guardians of liberal democracy have spent the past year dismantling their own foreign policy infrastructure. America slashed UN humanitarian contributions from \$17 billion to \$2 billion overnight. Most affected countries were African.

Well, Congress later approved \$50 billion in aid, but the democracy-promotion machinery was already gone. Imagine

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