

Perspective



The Parliament of Uganda in a session. PHOTO/FILE

Protection of Sovereignty Bill a path to autocracy

Job Kijja says the Bill threatens to criminalise diaspora remittances. If a local community group or a private citizen receives funds from a relative in London or Toronto, they risk being branded an "agent of a foreigner."

As the dust settles on the January 2026 General Elections, the NRM government has moved swiftly to consolidate its "victory", ahead of the May 2026 swearing-in.

The election period was defined by a nationwide internet blackout, the arrest of prominent civil society and Opposition leaders, and a disputed victory for President Yoweri Museveni, as well as many others. The primary weapon in this new control phase is the Protection of Sovereignty Bill, 2026.

While government officials, led by Chief Whip Hamson Obua and minister David Muhoozi, a military general, defend the Bill as a shield for the country's sovereignty, a comparative look at the global landscape reveals a much darker reality.

From Russia to Nicaragua, these laws are never about protecting the people but protecting the regime from its own citizens.

The Protection of Sovereignty Bill 2026 is not a local innovation. It is a page torn directly from the "Russian-style" foreign agent model. In Russia (2012), the "Foreign Agent Law" was used to systematically decimate independent media and NGOs. In Nicaragua (2020), similar laws were used to seize the assets of universities and human rights groups, forcing multitudes of citizens to flee into exile.

Uganda's proposal takes this even further. In clause 1, the definition of a foreigner covers Ugandan citizens living in foreign countries. By this definition, the state is effectively criminalising the umbilical cord of our economy. If a local community group or a private citizen receives funds from a relative in London or Toronto, they risk being branded an "agent of a foreigner."

Such agent of a foreigner must register with the government and get a permit renewable every two years or risk being fined Shs40m, imprisonment for up to 7 years or both. Under this law, the minister of Internal Affairs becomes the ultimate judge of which funding is "patriotic" and which is "subversive," with virtually no independent oversight.

The minister also has the discretion to declare anyone or any entity a foreign agent at any time.

This law however is not alone. It is part of the broader scheme of draconian laws the government has been putting in place over the past decade to curtail freedoms. This is on the path to consolidation of authoritarian rule, having departed from the ethos of democracy at the removal of Presidential Term Limits in 2005.

Such laws include the interception of communications Act, the Public Order Management Act, the NGO Act, and the Computer Misuse Act, among others. Other progressive pieces of legislation like the Anti Money Laundering Act and Anti-Terrorism Act have been used by the regime as weapons against legitimate citizen organising. While citizens have pushed back against this weaponisation of the law through constitutional challenges, the regime has consistently circumvented these victories, applying even harsher administrative restrictions outside the law.

An imitation of global autocracies

A review of "sovereignty" laws across the globe reveals a chilling pattern of democratic decay. While Uganda stands at a precipice with its 2026 Bill threaten-

ing to criminalise diaspora remittances, it follows the repressive footsteps of Russia, where similar laws decimated independent media.

The same was in Georgia, where the 2024 law sparked mass protests and police crackdowns, and in Nicaragua, where a hostile state has closed thousands of organisations and seized their assets.

Coming off as a pariah within the EU, and attracting immense criticism from peers, Hungary has utilised its version

Militarisation.
By bypassing civilian norms and centralising control under the executive and security apparatus, including a newly designated "department responsible for peace and security" to oversee foreign agents, the state is effectively using the "sovereignty" narrative to transition from a hybrid regime into a total military-bureaucracy."

of the law to polarise society by harassing groups that investigate government graft. And just, like in Zimbabwe, where sovereignty laws target election monitors, Uganda's Bill aims to "agent-brand" any group that dares to question the electoral process and outcomes, under the guise of non-foreign interference in the elections.

Moreover, the Government of Uganda while consistently making the claim of foreign interference has never produced any evidence of any foreign interference with its elections. In fact many international partners and observer groups have disengaged with Uganda's electoral processes, concluding that it is a waste of time considering the lack of political will to reform.

Sovereignty and militarisation

Critically, this legislative push must be understood not as a standalone pol-

icy, but as a core component of Uganda's broader political transition strategy. The Bill serves as a legal anchor for a state that is becoming fully militarised in its attempt to maintain a grip on the citizenry.

This is evidenced by the insistence on the trial of civilians in military courts as seen from the circumvention of the January 2025 Supreme Court ruling against the same that had declared it as unconstitutional.

This militarisation of the law ensures that any form of independent citizen organisation is viewed through the lens of a security threat, handling domestic civil life as a battlefield where the only acceptable outcome is total compliance.

Global best practices focus on transparency for political lobbying by foreign governments. Uganda's Bill, though, targets private commercial and humanitarian activity, ignoring international standards that protect the right of citizens to associate and seek resources.

This model of state suspicion risks "aid fatigue" and the withdrawal of developmental partners, ultimately harming the quality of life for millions of ordinary citizens. A comparative analysis of "sovereignty" laws across 10 nations, including Uganda, Russia, Georgia, North Korea, Kyrgyzstan, Zimbabwe, Azerbaijan, Slovakia, Hungary, and Nicaragua reveals a troubling shared trajectory that weaponises the concept of sovereignty to stifle dissent.

While the Ugandan government claims to have benchmarked its Protection of Sovereignty Bill 2026 on the legal frameworks of the UK, Canada, and the USA, the proposed Bill fundamentally departs from these democratic models, which protect citizens and their investments.

Instead, Uganda's approach closely mirrors the restrictive models found in Nicaragua and Russia, where such laws serve as a "legal shield" to prevent independent oversight and brand monitors or Opposition as "foreign agents."

By imposing fines of up to Shs2b and prison terms of 20 years for people, the law is clearly designed to crush dissent rather than provide a regulatory framework. This aggression is even more evident in the institutional penalties where an organisation could be fined Shs4b for a breach involving as little as Shs400m, a 1,000 percent penalty that effectively guarantees the immediate bankruptcy and liquidation of any targeted entity.

These penal provisions represent a radical departure from international legal norms, which prioritise proportionality and administrative fairness over punitive destruction. This contrasts sharply with global best practices, such as the EU's Defence of Democracy Package, which mandates that sanctions must be proportionate and preceded by mandatory warnings. Furthermore, even the US Foreign Agents Registration Act (FARA), often cited by the government as a benchmark, limits sentences for willful non-compliance to five years, while the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Association emphasises that the right to resources is a fundamental freedom that should not be met with criminal incarceration.

Such aggressive sentencing effectively converts an administrative registration process into a criminal weapon, signalling a move toward the draconian standards seen in Russia, where the justice ministry uses similar lopsided fines to force the closure of human rights organisations. Ultimately, this shift results in a "democracy recession" marked by reduced transparency, stalled investment, and a dangerous "brittle stability" that prioritises regime survival over institutionalised transitions.

Uganda stands at a critical juncture

The 2026 elections showed a nation deeply divided, with youth-led Opposition and disputed results signalling a desire for change. Instead of addressing these grievances, and seeking to unite the country, the Protection of Sovereignty Bill seeks to criminalise them.

If this Bill passes, we will officially join the ranks of closed autocracies. True sovereignty does not belong to an individual, a minister or a security agent; it belongs to Ugandan citizens.

Branding our diaspora, our charities, and our citizens as "enemies" is not an act of strength, it is an admission of fear. With a leadership crisis across the board, and a captured legislature, the likelihood that such a law will be passed with no meaningful citizen consultation, and expert input, while later on implemented with no parliamentary oversight is inevitable.

To protect the future of our nation, this Bill must be rejected. Its birth water must be poured far away and buried six feet under together with the baby. It should never be given the opportunity to smell the corridors of Parliament.

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