Sovereignty Bill meets stiff resistance from public

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BY BUSEIN SAMILU & ARTHUR ARNOLD WADERO

Mr Iddi Kasozi, a Muslim scholar, political analyst

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A proposal by the government to regulate the operations of foreigners and limit foreign funding has attracted widespread rejection from across society, with religious leaders, political parties, civil society organisations, economists, NGOs, and individuals alike voicing strong opposition.

The Protection of Sovereignty Bill, 2026, which began as an NRM Parliamentary Caucus resolution in March before finding its way onto the Order Paper earlier this year, has now become the talk of the town. It faces fierce condemnation as the parliamentary Joint Committee on Defence and Internal Affairs, together with Legal and Parliamentary Affairs, continues to scrutinise it.

Muslim leaders, members of the National Unity Platform (NUP), and other individual leaders yesterday joined the swelling chorus of dissent, appearing before the joint committee.

Led by Mr Iddi Kasozi, a Muslim leader, the group raised red flags over several provisions in the Bill, warning that it threatens their religious foundations through restrictive measures.

"The Bill imposes a capital cap of Shs400m on a foreign funding without written ministerial approval. This limit is insufficient for the construction of a modern mosque and the maintenance of a large-scale institution like a national mosque. Apart from that, when we look at this amount of money they are talking about, one of these organisations listed here, I don't know whether we have an MP from Kayunga here, we are constructing a fully-fledged ward for sick or sales-people because they are being treated on the street in that hospital and its cost is over Shs400m, including furnishing it, putting everything there-in," he said.

The leaders added that the Bill violates the Constitution, specifically Article 29,1(c), by directly infringing on the freedom of worship.

"The proposed legislation creates security-led red tape that hinders the practice of Salah (prayers), Zakah (Alms giving), Hajj (Pilgrimage), and Ramadan (fasting). There is also unfair labelling of foreign agents, because the Bill unfairly categorises religious leaders, charitable institutions, recipients, beneficiaries as foreign agents, subjecting them to an unnecessary tedious process of registration," Mr Kasozi argued.

The Bill, tabled by the State Minister of Internal Affairs, Gen David Muhoozi, last week, defined a foreigner as a non-Ugandan citizen, a Ugandan citizen residing outside Uganda, a foreign government, consulate, high commission, embassy or other diplomatic mission, a corporation, company, NGO, or other legal entity, and an international or multinational organisation.

State Minister for Internal Affairs, Gen David Muhoozi (left), tabled the Bill in Parliament last week. PHOTO/FILE

It further described an agent of a foreigner as a person who acts as an agent, representative, employee, or servant of a foreigner. These, according to the proposal, are required to register with the government through the Internal Affairs minister.

10 YEARS IN JAIL FOR UNREGISTERED AGENTS

Unregistered agents of foreigners face 10 years in prison or a Shs1 billion fine, or both. In addition, an agent of a foreigner shall not directly or indirectly obtain more than Shs400m in 12 months except with permission from the minister.

The World Bank Group, in an April 23 letter to the Joint Committee through the Office of the Clerk to Parliament, criticised the proposed Bill.

The Bank explained that those involved in carrying out its functions regularly initiate dialogue on policy, develop policy options, and comment on policy, both in relation to its lending and non lending products, as part of its development mandate.

"The Bill as currently drafted criminalises the activities of agents of a foreigner where the activity seeks to influence the development of the policy of the government. The Bill also criminalises the organisation of a meeting or other function to promote foreign policy that has not been adopted by the Cabinet as government policy," the letter reads in part.

It added: "This broad language could conceivably cover meetings and conferences that involve the discussion of policy options or engage in policy dialogue, including with development partners. The penalty for such offense is a fine in the case of a legal entity and a fine or imprisonment for up to 20 years in the case of an individual."

The Director of Communication and Public Affairs at Parliament, Mr Chris Obore, sought to allay the World Bank's fears, insisting that the Bill has been made to appear negative by selfish individuals who do not wish well for Ugandans.

"All feedback is welcome and it is part of the legislative process as it leads to better enactment of laws. However, the Sovereignty Bill should not be scandalised by bad intentioned actors who think only their view of things matters," he said.

Mr Obore added: "The Government of Uganda and Parliament of Uganda are not ignorant of the importance of good relations with international actors like the World Bank. The law will recognise the interests of the World Bank without undermining Uganda's national interests, so let the public keep bringing in feedback for consideration."

Appearing before Parliament yesterday, Mr David Lewis Rubongoya, the NUP secretary general, poured cold water on the Bill.

"... National Unity Platform illegally, irregularly has been prohibited from getting public funds that it ordinarily should be entitled to. So, what this Bill is saying is that NUP as a political party should not be receiving funding of this magnitude. You know, from what it is defining as a foreigner," Mr Rubongoya said.

"Effectively, you are saying we have crippled you internally and even crippled your probable sources. (You know, if Ugandans in the diaspora collect money collectively and want to send it in one go, this Bill says that is a crime being committed," he added.

The party spokesperson and Leader of the Opposition in Parliament, Mr Joel Ssenyonyi, had earlier emphasised the same point.

"This Bill is an economic suicide note. It creates a hostile environment for capital and labour, directly worsening the severe economic pain already biting Ugandans. We are currently reeling from the recent withdrawal of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), which has pushed thousands of Ugandan health workers and NGO staff into immediate unemployment," he said.

Issue of values. [...the absence of such a law], has given external donors significant influence over Uganda's political, social and economic landscape, which has resulted into the erosion of the values we hold sacred as a nation," Attorney General, Kiryowa Kiwanuka

Mr Ssenyonyi added: "We have a plethora of laws that capture the critical concerns that the government would have, and that is why I am saying this particular Bill is irrelevant. It is not helpful when you keep putting together pieces of legislation over things that are already taken care of. You cannot have an Act of Parliament for anything and everything, each Act of Parliament will encapsulate numerous issues, but the assertion that for anything and everything, we must have an Act of Parliament, that means Parliament would be sitting every single day to pass like 50 Bills, which is not helpful."

Officials from the Opposition Uganda Peoples Congress (UPC) party also rejected what they described as a "stinky Bill" and asked for the entire proposal to be withdrawn.

UPC's secretary general Fred Ebil said: "Just like we are today in a country where we are so politically divided and coming from fresh elections with economic activities disrupted, like the kiosks being removed from all over the cities and towns and people becoming unemployed, we should try to make laws which are not discriminatory because it tries to divide between citizens of Uganda who are living abroad and citizens of Uganda who are here in Uganda."

Threat to NGOs, CSOs

The Executive Director of the Civic Advisory Hub, Mr Yonna Wanjala, said the "definition of foreigner is dangerously expansive," because it affects "the majority of the Ugandan civil society which receives funding from abroad."

"This Bill is an existential threat to civil society and civic actors. The cap of Shs400m limits work of the civil society organisations with funding beyond this," Mr Wanjala told Parliament on Friday last week.

He was presenting a joint paper signed by the Executive Director for the Center for Constitutional Governance (CCG), Ms Sarah Bireete, Forum for Women in Democracy (FOWODE), and the Civic Advisory Hub.

He said the current form of the Bill "defeats the purpose of our implementation plan in line with our contribution to the national development of this country. And we believe if this passes as it is, it is a threat to the existence of civil societies."

Lawyer Philip Karugaba also wants the Bill thrown out. He reasons that it contravenes the existing legal framework and overly empowers the minister with excessive authority over NGO work.

"It is the minister who determines who is a foreigner, by extension who is an agent of a foreigner. It is the minister who determines which activities fall within the Act. He also determines who may register and on what conditions. He also determines who may receive funding," Mr Karugaba said.

He added: "This is a single appointed official. He now becomes the gatekeeper of our civic participation, determining which citizens may engage in policy advocacy, receive funding, or operate organisations with any foreign connections. That is not protection of sovereignty. That is the displacement of sovereignty."

In a dramatic turn of events, former Opposition Forum for Democratic Change party Whip and outgoing Mawokota North MP Yusuf Nsibambi supported the Bill, saying: "It is clear that this Bill is not oppressive but really wants to operationalise the Constitution."

He added: "In essence, the Bill creates a legal regime for sovereignty, or integrity for the people of Uganda. Many legal scholars and civil society are talking about existing laws. That we have other laws starting with the Constitution, Anti-money Laundering Act, Terrorism Act, Political Organisations Act and other laws, so that you don't need this Bill because there are laws prevailing which can handle the situations highly in the Bill, which I don't want to believe."

GOVT DEFENDS BILL

As he defended the Bill before the joint committee last Friday, State Minister for Internal Affairs Gen David Muhoozi argued that "the Protection of Sovereignty Bill is grounded in the need to safeguard Uganda's autonomy and stability in the face of specific identified and unregulated challenges."

He emphasised that the Bill is a measured assertion of Uganda's right to self-govern and define the terms of its engagement with global systems."

In his presentation to Parliament's Joint Committee on Defence and Internal Affairs, and the Legal and Parliamentary Affairs Committee, Gen Muhoozi laid out six key justifications for tabling the Bill on April 14.

According to the minister, the proposed law seeks to plug the "gaps in the existing legislative framework."

He explained: "While Uganda has laws touching on specific related domains (eg the NGO Act 2016, the Data Protection and Privacy Act 2019, the Public Finance Management Act 2015, the laws against Money Laundering and Anti-Terrorism Financing), these laws address explicit subject matters and do not explicitly articulate the overarching principle of sovereignty protection."

He added: "There is currently no single policy document or legislation that declares and operationalises the nation's right to insulate itself against external interference across the board."

Gen Muhoozi further stressed that the Bill is designed to uphold Uganda's self-determination in policy formulation.

"The Bill is further justified by the principle that Uganda's policy choices and development path and laws should be determined by Ugandans, in line with our country's values and needs. This principle is increasingly important given the instances of external pressure through aid conditionalities, as well as unregulated non-budgetary support financial inflows into the country."

He continued: "While Uganda remains committed to international cooperation, it must affirm that core national decisions are not for sale. Similarly, Uganda affirmed that any acts intended to impose foreign moral or ideological agendas will be resisted."

Contrary to widespread fears among stakeholders, the government insists the law will strengthen governance and accountability. Gen Muhoozi explained: "By putting in place regulations on agents, foreigners and foreign funding, the Bill actually enhances good governance. It is a move to ensure all actors on Ugandan soil, whether governmental or nongovernmental, domestic or foreign-funded abide, by the law and operate transparently. This is in line with the constitutional mandate that all public affairs be conducted with accountability."

He added: "The justification here is that some entities, especially those with significant foreign inflows, effectively implement quasi-public functions (in health, education, human rights, etc.) and thus should be held to standards of transparency comparable to public institutions. The Bill will require more rigorous reporting of foreign funds, greater disclosure of agendas and beneficiaries, and cooperation with oversight bodies."

The minister also underscored that the draft law is distinct from existing legislation: "At present, Uganda has laws that regulate adjacent areas such as public finance, money laundering, diplomatic relations, data protection, NGO operations and criminal conduct, but there is no single law that specifically regulates foreign-directed influence, registration of agents of foreigners, and foreign funding tied to activities which if they are not regulated, may undermine Uganda's sovereignty."

He added: "The Memorandum to the Bill expressly states that Uganda currently has no specific law upholding the sovereignty of the country in a manner that addresses these forms of interference comprehensively."

Attorney General Kiryowa Kiwanuka echoed this concern, noting that the absence of such a law "has given external donors significant influence over Uganda's political, social and economic landscape, which has resulted into the erosion of the values we hold sacred as a nation."

He added: "It has also undermined our right to self-determination; and the use of online platforms by foreigners and agents of foreigners to disseminate misinformation which facilitates social discord."

In its submission to the joint committee, government signaled its intent to tighten oversight of civil society and NGOs.

"Despite the enactment of the Non-Governmental Organisations Act, Cap. 109, there is still inadequate regulation of Civil Society with regard to foreign funding," Mr Kiryowa told MPs.

He added: "While Uganda values the contribution of civil society, there is an ongoing challenge in ensuring that civil society, especially those funded by the foreigners, operate transparently and in accordance with the national laws, national policies, programmes and interests of Uganda."