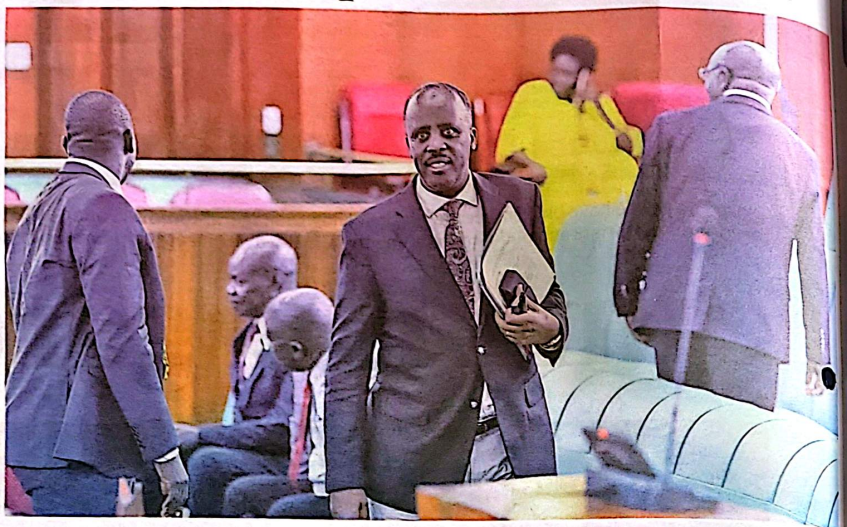
Sovereignty Bill and battle

If the Sovereignty Bill's framing of Ugandans abroad becomes the norm, the State can pass new laws that strip "foreigners" of rural land above certain thresholds, writes **Charles Onyango Obbo.**



Internal Affairs Minister Gen David Muhoozi moved the motion for reading of The Protection of Sovereignty Bill, 2026. PHOTO/PARLIAMENT X

Perhaps a point in the Sovereignty Bill might make sense, but a thousand flaws render it worthless in its current form.

Here I focus on two of them. First, the Bill labels all Ugandans living abroad as "foreigners".

Second, it turns anyone who receives money from foreigners (including these Ugandans now classed as foreigners) vulnerable to being labelled a foreign agent and national security threat.

The definition of an "agent of a foreigner" includes anyone "directly or indirectly...financed or subsidised" by a foreigner. You don't need to be directed or controlled. Only funded. So that can be your grandmother or your aunt in a small upcountry town.

I will not dwell on why these clauses are dangerous. Instead, I explore the real, unstated reason why I think they exist. In Uganda, such laws rarely mean what they say on the surface. They serve a bigger grand scheme.

Take the example of the Anti-Homosexuality Act

President Museveni signed it on May 26 2023. During the debate, MPs whipped up hysteria. They claimed homosexuals were destroying Ugandan culture and preying on its children. Both the ruling NRM and the Opposition backed the Bill almost unanimously. Only two MPs opposed it, the loudest being ruling-NRM legislator Fox Odoi, who once served as Museveni's legal assistant.

You would have thought tens of thousands of gay men were rampaging across the country, raping children. Yet official data for 2022 shows only 310 boys and 12,470 girls suffered defilement. A single rape is terrible but hetweakest position in over 30 years, heading into the Museveni succession battles that will unfold over the next five years.

Museveni threw the Bill like a yellow tennis ball for the dogs to chase, while real power shifted elsewhere.

1986 blueprint for control

Therefore, we have to see the patterns that have led to the Sovereignty Bill working in the same way as the picture painted above. The Bill ostensibly targets civil society and its international backers, but under direct closure by the state and administrative strangulation, the data shows that over 9,000 NGOs

The Genesis.

We must, therefore, go back further to find where all this started and is going. On February 22, 1986, barely a month after Museveni's formal swearing-in on January 29, the new government issued Legal Notice No. 1 of 1986. It declared that the NRA/NRM

Again, the grand scheme mattered more than the stated purpose. After Museveni seized power in 1986, opponents in central and northern Uganda and in exile challenged his legitimacy. They called him, in what I always considered reactionary, an "outsider" because of his alleged Rwandan/Burundi lineage and cross-border family ties.

They highlighted the many fighters with Rwandan backgrounds in the NRA. These critics painted the war's brutality as the work of a "foreigner" who felt nothing for Ugandans and wanted to erase indigenous folk and seize their land for outsiders. At the same time, complaints grew that people for in this Constitution." This clause ranks among the most citizen-friendly in the world because it recognises customary tenure. A family that has lived on land for 100 years without a "paper title" still legally owns it.

The Constitution did little more. The 1998 Land Act filled the gap. Its most controversial part gave security of tenure to "lawful and bona fide occupants", usually long-term tenants on mailo land. The Act protected them from arbitrary eviction and forced landlords to follow strict rules.

Landlords protested that the law weakened property rights and handed control to tenants without compensa

for coffee, land and diaspora cash

THE KEY PILLARS

Land
The 1995 Constitution declared that all land in Uganda belongs to Ugandan citizens. Article 237(1) states: "Land in Uganda belongs to the citizens of Uganda and shall vest in them in accordance with the land tenure systems provided for in this Constitution." The 1998 Land Act filled the gap. Its most controversial part gave security of tenure to "lawful and bona fide occupants", usually long-term tenants on mailo land. The Act protected them from arbitrary eviction and forced landlords to follow strict rules. Landlords protested that the law weakened property rights and handed control to tenants without compensation.

Coffee
Coffe will be another key cog in this power game. Centralising its control in a minister and shifting market functions to State-backed, favoured local companies will continue. Foreign firms that dominate exports today could lose ground under new rules limiting foreign control.
It is a very likely end because, as the world moves away from fossil fuels, coffee will grow more valuable than oil. The global coffee market stands at $250–380 billion, while oil reaches $2–4 trillion, yet coffee fetches five to 10 times more per kilogramme. High stakes lie ahead.

Remittances
Unlike aid, remittances go directly to households, bypassing government bureaucracy. The State now wants control. The Sovereignty Bill would require anyone receiving money from the diaspora to obtain authorisation from the Interior Ministry, with penalties of up to 10 years in prison for non-compliance and up to 20 years for offences such as "economic sabotage."
The net result is that if ministers can hold the money for even three months while they check whether dangerous "foreigners" are not funding regime change through gifts to mothers and grandmothers, it would ease the government's chronic cash-flow problems considerably.

...ch some nativists still considered too recent, by the way).

Coffee and the power grab

Seven years later, in 2007, the global financial crisis hit Uganda too. By then, Uganda had become closely aligned with the United States militarily. Thousands of Ugandans, many of them army veterans, worked as private military contractors in Iraq and later Afghanistan.

At home, pressure forced the NRM to abandon its no-party system. In 2005, Uganda returned to multiparty politics, but only after scrapping presidential term limits so Museveni could stay in power as the price. The 2006 election convinced many NRM leaders (several with exile links and family abroad) to build a long-term family insurance policy.

In 2009, these factors led the government to push through the Uganda Citizenship and Immigration Control (Amendment) Act. It legalised dual citizenship.

$2.5b
In 2025, Uganda received $2.5 billion (about Shs9.25 trillion) in remittances (roughly 3.8 percent of GDP).

Supporters argued, quite sensibly, that it would boost diaspora investment. By that point, after over 40 years of exile, many educated and successful Ugandans now held citizenship in their host countries. Dual citizenship would give them confidence to bring money home.

To some extent, it worked. Many invested in real estate and bought large tracts of land, much of which still lies unused. Meanwhile, Uganda faces a growing landlessness crisis that radicalises opposition and pushes the government to ever harsher violence to retain control.

These forces set the stage for 2024. Amid chaos (fistfights and suspensions of MPs), the government forced through the bitterly contested National Coffee (Amendment) Bill on November 6. The fiercest fights centred on abolishing the quasi-independent Uganda Coffee Development Authority (UCDA) and shifting all its powers to the Ministry of Agriculture, Animal Industry and Fisheries.

Critics feared the move would wreck quality control, research, marketing and farmer incomes.

Opposition MPs and coffee farmers saw it as a dangerous downgrade for the entire sector.

The Sovereignty Bill, as we will show shortly, now opens the political door to handle these issues, albeit in a crude, partisan and extortionate fashion. The Bill could have created categories such as "Ugandans abroad" or "hostile non-resident Ugandans". Instead, it simply brands them all "foreigners". This choice was deliberate.

The NRM knows the power of "foreigner" politics. They once tried to banish it with the 1988 anti-sectarianism law. Now they wield the same weapon themselves.

The Bill also lets them settle unfinished business from the 1995 Constitution and the 1998 Land Act. It reshapes the balance of power for the decade ahead, a decision that must be made by 2030.

Museveni's last song

Uganda, as noted earlier, suffers a severe landlessness crisis, especially in central and south-western regions, but across the country too. Much prime land is held by "legacy families" (those who gained privilege between 1900 and 1990 and accumulated large holdings). Many younger members of these families now live abroad.

If the Sovereignty Bill's framing of Ugandans abroad becomes the norm, the State can pass new laws that strip "foreigners" of rural land above certain thresholds. This would let the government seize land from the wealthiest, best-educated members of these families who live overseas.

It would claim it is to ease landlessness, but in reality, it would transfer economic power to a new class ready to back the post-Museveni order.

Coffee will be another key cog in this power game. It will keep rising in value. Urbanisation, the growth of middle classes in Asia and Africa, shifting youth tastes, and premiumisation will all continue to drive demand.

Centralising its control in a minister and shifting market functions to State-backed, favoured local companies will continue. Foreign firms that dominate exports today could lose ground under new rules limiting foreign control.

It is a very likely end because, as the world moves away from fossil fuels, coffee will grow more valuable than oil. The global coffee market stands at $250–380 billion, while oil reaches $2–4 trillion, yet coffee fetches five to ten times more per kilogramme. High stakes lie ahead.

Remittances form the third pillar. In 2025, Uganda received $2.5 billion (about Shs9.25 trillion) in remittances (roughly 3.8 percent of GDP). Projections suggest this will rise to between $3.5 billion and $4 billion by 2030.

Unlike aid, remittances go directly to households, bypassing government bureaucracy. The State now wants control. The Sovereignty Bill would require anyone receiving money from the diaspora to obtain authorisation from the Interior Ministry, with penalties of up to 10 years in prison for non-compliance and up to 20 years for offences such as "economic sabotage."

The net result is that if ministers can hold the money for even three months while they check whether dangerous "foreigners" are not funding regime change through gifts to mothers and grandmothers, it would ease the government's chronic cash-flow problems considerably.

Taken together, land, coffee, and diaspora cash form a triangle of power, and they are lined up for capture. Control over them would confer influence and power that Museveni himself may lack in his final years as his authority fades.

The post-Museveni preparatory ord... will need this leverage, as they cann... possibly rely on the historical legitim... cy and struggle credentials that Mus... eni once enjoyed. It is tragic that i... quires denationalising a large pa... their own citizens and labelling th... "foreigners" (the very thing the ... NRM and Museveni once rejected ... cure their future for them.



The author is a jour... and curator of the ... Africans. X@cobb...

See a related sto...

CamScanner