

NGOs in a tight corner

The Executive Director of the Centre for Constitutional Governance, Ms Sarah Bireete, in the dock at the Buganda Road Magistrate's Court earlier this year where she faced charges of unlawfully obtaining or disclosing voters' data. The Centre for Constitutional Governance was among those whose accounts the government froze recently. PHOTO/ ABUBAKER LUBOWA

Tough times. More than three years after DGF folded, and the rapid dismantling of USAID by President Trump, the NGO sector now finds itself faced with a draft Bill, through which government seeks to "reduce foreign dependence of NGOs".

BY ISAAC MUFUMBA

In February, the bank accounts of some five civil society organisations (CSOs) were frozen at the behest of the Financial Intelligence Authority (FIA). Mr Samuel Wandera, the FIA executive director, did not say why Agora Centre for Research (Agora CFR), Chapter Four Uganda (CFU), the African Institute for Investigative Journalism (AIJ), the Centre for Constitutional Governance (CCG) and the Great Lakes Institute for Strategic Studies (GLISS) could not access their accounts. Information published on the website www.fundsforngos.org, however, indicated that the move was precipitated by what was described as an "ongoing investigation into suspected financial irregularities and the sources of their funding". This is not the first time that the accounts of CSOs have been frozen on the watch of the FIA, a government agency established in

2014 to combat money laundering, terrorism financing, and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. For GLISS and CFU, the recent account freeze is a repeat of what is fast turning into a familiar, if not frustrating, story. The frustration is perhaps best captured in the words of Mr Godber Tumushabe, the head at GLISS. "Sometimes you get the impression that these FIA people either like The Great Lakes Institute for Strategic Studies or they are just redundant with these kinds of stories," he posted on X (formerly Twitter) handle. Some of the entities whose accounts were frozen are part of the 10 CSOs that were indefinitely suspended in January by the National Bureau for Non-Governmental Organisations for allegedly operating in a manner that was likely to jeopardise national security. Mr Faruk Kirunda, the deputy spokesperson of the President, who also doubles as a presidential assistant on political matters, says there was credible information to justify the actions of FIA. "Most of those affected must have gone out of line. The President had good intelligence on their activities. The purge is normal because no country can allow destabilising actors. When these irregularities are addressed, there is hope at the end of the tunnel that normal operations of the organisations will resume. They have not been banned," Mr Kirunda says.

Targeted?

Some watchers of the political landscape believe that the latest action against the five CSOs is aimed at ramping up the pressure in what appears to be a sustained campaign spanning several years. The Lord Mayor of Kampala, Mr Erias Lukwago, believes that it is part of a process of clamping down on CSOs and suppressing all forms of dissent. "You see, just like political dissent has been criminalised, civil society activism has also been criminalised. Now they are stretching it to the realm of money laundering," Mr Lukwago said in a previous interview. The prime targets, Mr Lukwago says, are organisations and individuals perceived to be sympathetic to those opposed to the ruling National Resistance Movement (NRM) or those that are critical of Mr Museveni and his party. That thinking is captured by the Bertelsmann Stiftung's Transformation Index (BTI) 2024, an analysis and evaluation of how developing countries and those in transition go about implementing changes aimed at moving them towards greater democracy. The index is based on 17 indicators, including, among others, political participation and stability of democratic institutions, and political and social integration. "While citizens are free to join political parties and civic groups, the overall political environment is rather hostile to free political and civic associations and activities seen as either oppositional to or critical of the ruling party and government," says the index. Mr Livingstone Sewanyana, the executive director of the Foundation for Human Rights Initiative (FHRI), agrees with the conclusions of the BTI index. "The bans, suspensions and freezing of accounts are largely attributed to suspicion that these organisations are aligned to particular political activities or parties, but more specifically, they think that they align to particular Opposition parties, NUP (National Unity Platform) and PFF (People's Front for Freedom)," Mr Sewanyana says.

'Regime change agenda'

Mr Sewanyana says most of the CSOs that have been on the receiving end are those that have been active in the areas of governance, human rights and democracy, a conclusion which Ms Sarah Bireete, the executive director for CCG, agrees with. "Those involved in pushing for the rule of law, fidelity with the law and the constitution, human rights, election integrity and

Continues on Page 8