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BY PATRICK SSENTONGO

When Uganda's Parliament passed the Copyright and Neighbouring Rights (Amendment) Bill, 2015 on March 17, it not only marked the end of a legislative process years in the making but also the beginning of a far more uncertain phase.

The headlines focused on victory. Artists had pushed, Parliament had listened, and a Bill widely seen as transformative for the creative economy had cleared its final hurdle. But beneath that moment lies a more complex story: one of political tension, last-minute negotiation, and a legal framework that could either redefine the industry or expose its enduring weaknesses.

The final shape of the legislation passed by the House was not inevitable. In fact, just days before its passage, it appeared fragile. During the Second Reading debate on March 12, concerns raised on the floor of Parliament—including remarks by Speaker Anita Among—put Clause 9, the Bill's most consequential provision, under scrutiny. The clause, which establishes a framework for setting fees for access to copyrighted works, had already drawn resistance from some quarters. Its future looked uncertain.

The session was halted. What followed was a rapid mobilisation across Uganda's creative sector. Collective Management Organisations (CMOs) issued a joint statement warning against any dilution of the clause. Individual artists and industry leaders wrote directly to the Speaker. Behind the scenes, coordination intensified.

By Tuesday morning, this week, hours before the final parliamentary sitting, a closed-door meeting had been convened. Present were key sector figures: Martin Yoyo, board chairperson of the Uganda Performing Rights Society; Eddy Kenzo, president of the Uganda National Musicians Federation and presidential adviser on creatives; Jeff Ekonkot, chief executive of the Uganda Musicians Association; and Charles Batambuze from the Uganda Reproduction Rights Organisation; among others.

The group met the Speaker and government legal officials to make their case. By the afternoon, Parliament passed the Bill at Third Reading. The legislative campaign had taken years. The decisive lobbying lasted less than a week. Both proved critical.

What does the law actually change?

Public debate has largely centred on

What the amended copyright Bill really means for creators



Attorney General Kiryowa Kiwanuka makes a case for the copyright on the floor of Parliament during the Bill's second reading on March 12. PHOTO/PATRICK SSENTONGO

bers, for the commercial use of copyrighted works. For the first time, tariff-setting moves from a contested practice into clearer statutory ground. But the deeper impact of the law lies in a set of structural changes that could reshape how Uganda's creative economy functions.

One of the most significant is the introduction of mandatory written contracts for all copyright transactions. Under the new framework, assignments, licences and transfers of rights must be documented. In an industry long dominated by verbal agreements, this provision sets a new legal baseline. It does not undo past arrangements, but it alters the future: undocumented deals are now legally exposed.

Another key reform addresses telecom revenue, particularly caller ring-back tones (CRBTs). The law formalises a revenue split in which authors and performers each receive 30 percent of net earnings, recognising them as distinct economic actors. This distinction matters in practice. A songwriter and a recording artiste may now have independent claims on the same work—a shift from earlier frameworks that often blurred or merged those entitlements.

The law also imposes a 70/30 rule on CMOs, requiring that at least 70 percent of collected revenue be distributed to rights holders, with a maximum of 30 percent retained for administrative costs. This provision speaks directly to longstanding concerns about transparency and efficiency within collecting societies. It does not guarantee good governance, but it establishes a legal benchmark against which performance can be measured—and challenged.

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fell away during the legislative process. A proposed clause on artificial intelligence (AI), which would have addressed ownership and consent in AI-generated works, was dropped. The Government of Uganda (GoU) argued that AI should be handled under a separate policy. For a sector already encountering AI-assisted creation and data scraping, this leaves a regulatory gap that may soon



demand attention.

Proposals to strengthen reversion rights, allowing authors to reclaim their works under specific conditions such as publisher insolvency or works going out of print, were also scaled back. The GoU's more general framework prevailed, leaving some of the practical scenarios faced by Ugandan artists less explicitly addressed.

Meanwhile, the fair use provision for education was narrowed. Protection that had been framed to include individual learners was limited to institutions, shifting interpretive responsibility to courts and potentially complicating access for users outside formal systems.

Who stands to gain if or when President Museveni signs on the dotted line?

If effectively implemented, the law could redistribute value across the creative ecosystem, particularly toward groups that have historically been marginalised.

Session musicians and studio performers, long treated as one-time contributors rather than ongoing rights holders, stand to benefit from clearer recognition under telecom revenue provisions. Their entitlement to a defined share of earnings marks a shift in how creative labour is valued.

Artists dealing with broadcasters and commercial venues may also find stronger footing. The statutory backing for tariff-setting reduces the ambiguity that has allowed some users to avoid or delay payments. Whether that translates into consistent compliance will depend on enforcement.

For emerging artists, the requirement for written contracts offers a degree of

power imbalances between new artists and established industry players.

What about the persistent tensions in the creative economy?

The law attempts to rebalance relationships within the creative economy, but it does not eliminate longstanding tensions.

One of these is the divide between authors and performers. Uganda's copyright system has traditionally privileged authorship—composers and lyricists—over performance. The new provisions begin to recognise performance as a distinct economic contribution, but gaps remain, particularly in audiovisual sectors.

Another is the disparity between established rights holders and emerging artists. While Parliament noted that public consultations were conducted, the final law does not include targeted protections for early-career creatives navigating contracts with more experienced counterparts. The structural imbalance persists.

In the digital space, the law introduces clearer enforcement tools, including provisions for addressing unauthorised online use. Yet enforcement against platforms operating beyond Uganda's jurisdiction remains a practical challenge. Legal clarity does not automatically translate into effective control.

Are we looking at a new chapter or is it a familiar cycle?

With parliamentary approval secured, the Bill now awaits assent from President Museveni. Once signed and gazetted, it will become law. But for many in the sector, the more consequential phase begins after that moment. Implementation has historically been the weak link in Uganda's creative sector reforms.

Collective management organisations will need to operationalise the 70/30 distribution rule with transparent systems and credible data. Tariffs established under Clause 9 will need to be published, defended and enforced. The written contract requirement will require not just legal backing but industry-wide behavioural change.

The unresolved questions around artificial intelligence or AI will also demand attention, as global shifts in content creation increasingly intersect with local industries.

Ultimately, the law provides a framework. Whether it delivers on its promise will depend on how actively it is used.

In her closing remarks, Speaker Among urged the creative sector to use the legislation, if assented to, to enforce its rights, signalling a shift in responsibility from lawmakers to industry actors.

That message captures the moment. Parliament has acted. The framework is in place. But the transformation artists have long demanded—fair compensation, stronger bargaining power, and sustainable income from creative work—will not come automatically.

It will depend on whether the same urgency that carried the bill through its final days can be sustained in the slow-