

Protection of sovereignty but at what cost to press freedom, democratic accountability?

Uganda has every right to safeguard its sovereignty. No nation should be indifferent to external interference in its political, economic welfare. It is within this context that the proposed Protection of Sovereignty Bill has been introduced as a shield against foreign influence. But beneath this legitimate objective lies a troubling question: at what cost to press freedom and democratic accountability?

At first glance, the Bill appears to target foreign actors and undue external pressure. However, a closer reading reveals provisions that could significantly alter the day-to-day work of journalists. In its current form, the law risks casting too wide a net, one that could entangle not just foreign agents, but also independent media practitioners doing routine reporting.

One of the most concerning aspects is the potential criminalisation of ordinary journalism. If critical reporting on governance, corruption, or human rights can be interpreted as "economic sabotage" or promoting foreign interests, then the line between journalism and criminal conduct becomes dangerously blurred. In such an environment, truth-telling itself may carry legal consequences.

Equally worrying are the severe penalties attached to these broadly defined offences. The possibility of long prison sentences does not just punish wrongdoing, it can deter legitimate reporting before it even happens. When journalists must weigh every story against the risk of prosecution, caution inevitably replaces courage.

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Sovereignty Bill

The Bill's provisions on mandatory registration of individuals and organisations linked to foreign entities further complicate the media landscape. Many Ugandan media houses rely, at least in part, on international partnerships, training, or donor funding. Labelling them as "foreign agents" could stigmatise their work,

expose them to heightened scrutiny, and undermine public trust. More critically, it could compromise editorial independence and the confidentiality that journalism depends on.

Financial sustainability is another silent casualty. Restrictions on foreign funding may sound reasonable in principle, but in practice, they could suffocate already struggling independent media outlets. Investigative journalism, which is often resource-intensive, may be the first to suffer. The result would not just be fewer stories, it would be fewer important stories.

Beyond the legal and financial implications lies a more subtle, yet equally damaging effect: self-censorship. Laws do not need to be enforced aggressively to be effective; their mere existence can reshape behaviour. Faced with vague definitions and harsh penalties, journalists may simply choose to avoid sensitive topics altogether. The public, in turn, receives a narrower, less critical view of national issues.

This is where the broader democratic concern emerges. Journalism serves as a watchdog, holding power to account and amplifying citizen voices. When that watchdog is weakened, accountability suffers. Without robust media scrutiny, governance risks becoming less transparent, and public trust erodes.

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