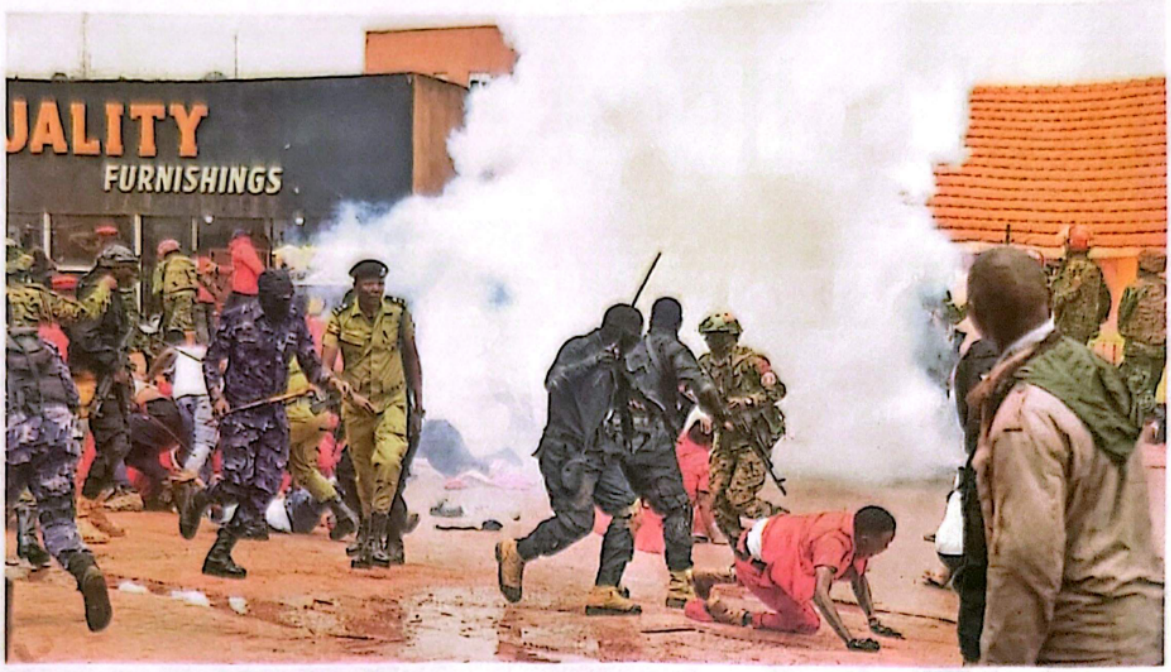

Security personnel beat up a National Unity Platform (NUP) supporter during a confrontation at Kawempe Muslim Primary School, where party president Robert Kyagulanyi Ssentamu (Bobi Wine) had gone to campaign for the party flag bearer in the Kawempe North by-election. PHOTO/FILE

Toward post-election authoritarianism

In the aftermath of the 2026 General Election, Uganda is witnessing a troubling shift toward arbitrary arrests, judicial manipulation and media censorship – signs of a deepening post-election authoritarianism.

BY TIMOTHY KALYEGIRA

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Three to five months is the average pre-trial remand in politically sensitive cases.

Uganda is inching closer and closer with every passing month toward the dreaded "dark days" told so often of the country's history.

The tactic of using the judicial system to punish opponents or critics of the NRM State is becoming worrisome.

It is now extrajudicial punishment.

The Speaker of Parliament, Ms Anita Among, stated on February 12 that the government is planning to release several Ugandans who were arrested during the recently-ended general election season.

This is an example of what I meant while appearing on *NTV* on January 17, to analyse the announcement of the final election tally.

During that broadcast, I said one of the features of the next NRM government term would be a return to the arbitrary, random arrest of ordinary people in Kampala that in the early 1980s was termed "*panda gari*".

The UNLA, police, or Special Force would stage an unannounced swoop in Kampala or other towns, roundup pedestrians at random, and take them to detention centres to isolate any NRA or UFM guerrillas among them.

Today's *panda gari* is extending to the online world of social media.

A journalist, Opposition activist, or random user posts something on social media. It is one of tens of thousands of daily comments, quips, and banter that fill social media.

But an irritated NRM State or some individuals in it, decide they must punish this individual.

So, one is arrested and sent straight to jail. Once there, the procedures that should have been observed at the start now get going.

The police claim they are still investigating or looking for evidence.

When the arrested person is produced before a court of law, the State prosecution claims the police is still carrying out investigations, thus the person is sent back to jail.

The presiding magistrate denies bail to the person.

After four or five months of the bullying and extrajudicial punishment, the normal judicial procedures are finally followed and the person is granted bail or the case is dropped.

The cruelty of this method of detention without trial is its arbitrariness.

It does not depend on the seriousness of the offence but rather on the vindictiveness or pettiness of the government official doing the punishing.

The slightest meme, cartoon, social media comment or joke can become an excuse to have somebody arrested. The purpose is not long-term incarceration, but short-term inconvenience.

If a Cabinet minister or army officer can have one jailed for three months, that's enough punishment for a shot Tiktok video making fun of the public official.

From several media reports, most of the young National Unity Platform (NUP) party activists recently sent to jail were only to protect the ballots and Declaration results forms of NUP candidates.

For this act of trying to keep watch port the rigging in their localities, they framed with charges such as terrorism.

A similar new tactic is to rig an elec and then when the aggrieved parties ly points out to the presiding officers polling stations or tally centres that sults they are announcing don't match the various DR forms indicate, the officials tell them to take the matter courts of law.

In this act of cynicism, they know the backlog of cases of all types that the ary is faced with.

They know that an LC I candidate is ly of humble means, both in terms of es and education, and can't afford a Most don't even know how to begin to tact a lawyer.

Obviously, these returning officers know that in the unlikely event that I Forum for Democratic Change (FDC) or Democratic Party (DP) candidate lawyer, most senior officials in the were appointed directly or indirectly by ident Museveni, and so Opposition can't hope for a fair hearing.

In other words, 20 or 25 years ago, the gets of this kind of State abuse were the est-profile national names like Dr Kizza sigye.

Today, however, this cynical manipulat of the Judiciary system has been taken do to the grassroots, affecting the lowly large society, from boda boda riders and party tivists to innocent bystanders caught up teargas skirmish.

We are living through a disturbing tim Last week, the Uganda Communications Commission (UCC) published a letter direc ing media houses not to invite to TV or radi talk shows guests, analysts or any body wh refuses to accept the official EC general ele tion results.

In the lead up to the January 15 election self, UCC had already warned media house against announcing any results in any form

The media is currently facing severe finan cial challenges, most of them stemming fro the worldwide effect of the Internet on th publishing and entertainment industries.

Advertising revenue has fallen off a cliff.

Media houses, thus, can't risk the State de ing them the final blow of shutting the down even for two weeks.

The result is self-censorship of a degree tha effectively kills their journalistic functionin

Because if no critics of the State are to b hosted and all we have is a one-sided pro NRM narrative, audiences will tune out, fu ther giving advertisers no reason to sponso shows.

We should all be concerned by this drift t ward authoritarian rule not just in Ugand but in the other East African countries.

If international media or Western diplo mats and governments are any good, this i the time for them to come to the rescue o Uganda's beleaguered population.

Only the West has the political, media, and economic muscle to act as a deterrent and counterweight to our increasingly arbitrary and autocratic government.

POST-ELECTION SQUEEZE

One election cycle has produced dozens of detentions, months-long remand without conviction, and at least one directive restricting media platforms. Arrests increasingly come first, investigations later, with grassroots activists and ordinary citizens now facing pressures once directed mainly at high-profile Opposition figures.

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INCARCERATED DURING ELECTION SEASON

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