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EDITORIAL

Put the skids under move towards authoritarianism

News that the Government of Uganda (GoU) is considering legislation that would give it sweeping powers to not only run the rule over but also outrightly ban organisations deemed a threat to national sovereignty is troubling. The Bill, titled The Protection of Sovereignty Act, 2026, has surged to the fore on the back of a recent caucus involving legislators from the ruling party, the National Resistance Movement (NRM).

Since the NRM party has an overwhelming majority in the House, the goings-on in its caucus cannot be seen through a narrow prism. The draft law, cleared by the ruling party's legislators, recommends the blacklisting of "an agent of a foreigner or other person receiving any funding from a foreigner" deemed to threaten the sovereignty of Uganda. The broad view taken by the legislation insofar as defining what constitutes a threat risks using the cloak of vagueness to the enfeeble democratic institutions and gradually undermining the rule of law in Uganda.

It is not only what is proscribed that has a chilling effect in the draft draconian law but also the tough penalties prescribed. It is, therefore, our considered view that this is a classic example of a law meticulously crafted to label dissenting opinions, independent media, and civil society organisations (CSOs) as "foreign influence" or "foreign agents." Whereas there are rich rewards in a country safeguarding its sovereignty, conventional wisdom suggests that so-called foreign agent laws are no more than self-serving propaganda.

The issue:
Protection of Sovereignty Act, 2026

Our view:
We urge responsible authorities to frown upon the new legislative proposal that was green-lighted by the NRM's parliamentary caucus

Their growing popularity should come as a troubling development. When Russia, in 2012, styled stigmatisation of critics via a foreign agent law as transparency measures intended to safeguard national sovereignty, it took a little over a decade for the bug to bite. Since then, Hungary, Georgia, and the two confederal entities of Bosnia and Herzegovina have either flirted with or outrightly adopted so-called foreign agent laws.

It is, in our assessment, profoundly disturbing that Uganda wants to be the first mover, so to speak, on the African continent. Far from being a badge of honour, any move in that direction will cement the country's reputation as a hybrid regime.

The burden of compliance and fear of criminal prosecution that the draft law intends to place on alternative views within Uganda's civic space speaks to the authoritarian—even belligerent—outlook that the GoU risks embodying. Since such overtures rarely stand Uganda in good stead, we urge the GoU to rethink its plans. If the GoU intends to shed its current tag as a hybrid regime, embracing a foreign agent law is hardly a step in the right direction. That, if it must be stressed, is not how a democracy works. Democracies run best when there is a contest of ideas and equal treatment of citizens in everyday administration. A foreign agent law does not engender this, even when seen through the rose-tinted spectacles of the GoU.

It is against this backdrop that we urge responsible authorities to frown upon the new legislative proposal that was green-lighted by the NRM's parliamentary caucus. The loose definition of so-called foreign influence has the possibility of visiting upon Uganda's body politic all manners of grim outcomes. The self-regulation it risks willing into existence can only succeed in seeing Uganda swing from bad (i.e. hybrid regime) to worse (i.e. authoritarian state) in a heartbeat. That such a possibility is gravely being challenged should worry us all.

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