Sovereignty Bill: Reforming the law or redefining control?

Uganda's proposed Sovereignty Bill, recently tabled before Parliament, has been framed as a necessary step to protect the country from undue foreign influence. On the surface, that argument is difficult to oppose. Every nation has the right to define and defend its interests.

Yet Uganda is not entering unfamiliar territory. Existing legal frameworks already regulate external funding, civic organisations, and public engagement. The question, therefore, is not whether regulation is needed but what exactly is being amended, and to what end.

Is this a refinement of existing safeguards or a shift towards a new model of control?

At its core, the proposed legislation seeks to tighten oversight over foreign actors, particularly non-governmental organisations, funders, and external partners operating within Uganda. Supporters view this as a long-overdue assertion of national sovereignty. Critics warn that such laws often extend beyond external regulation and begin to shape or restrict domestic civic space.

This is not a uniquely Ugandan dilemma. It is a global pattern. In the United States, the Foreign Agents Registration Act (FARA) requires those acting on behalf of foreign interests to declare their affiliations. It is often cited as a model of transparency. Yet influence remains embedded, with lobbying continuing to shape policy outcomes. Transparency does not neutralise power; it makes it visible.

That contradiction was exposed in the case of Julian Assange. When sensitive information about State conduct was revealed in the name of transparency, the response was not openness but prosecution. The message was clear: transparency has limits.

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Elsewhere, countries have opted for more assertive approaches. Russia's "foreign agents" law has been used to label organisations and individuals receiving foreign support, often placing them under intense scrutiny. China's 2017 Foreign NGO Law similarly brings external organisations under strict state supervision, ensuring engagement occurs only within tightly controlled parameters.

India presents a hybrid model. The Foreign Contribution Regulation Act (FCRA) has restricted foreign funding to thousands of NGOs, including prominent international organisations. While framed as accountability, critics argue that the law has narrowed space for independent civic activity.

Closer to home, Ethiopia offers a cautionary lesson. Its 2009 civil society law sharply limited foreign-funded organisations from engaging in governance and rights-based work. The result was a contraction of civic space so severe that the government later revised the law.

Taken together, these examples reveal a consistent truth: no country has eliminated foreign influence they have only chosen how to manage it, each with consequences.

And that is where Uganda now stands. The issue is not whether foreign influence exists. It does in aid, trade, diplomacy, and even ideology. Nor is it whether sovereignty should be protected. It must be.

The real question is more complex: how can sovereignty be strengthened without narrowing the very civic space that gives it meaning?

Because sovereignty can take two forms. It can act as a shield, protect citizens, ensure transparency, and promote accountability. Or it can become a filter, determining which voices are legitimate and which are not. The distinction lies not in the language of the law but in its application.

Uganda's debate, therefore, is not simply about legislation. It is about the kind of system the country is building; one that manages influence while preserving openness, or one that controls influence by limiting participation. History suggests that this line is often crossed gradually. What begins as reform can become redefinition. Once that shift occurs, it is rarely easy to reverse.

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