

By Mary Nkurugaba
and Dedan Kimathi

Parliament yesterday concluded a marathon debate on the controversial Protection of Sovereignty Bill, 2026, making several amendments to the controversial clauses.

The Bill, which was passed at 8:41pm by 353 Members of Parliament, was described by Speaker Aneta Among as a "historic", being the final legislation of the 11th Parliament.

The most fundamental changes were made to Clause 1, which restructured key elements in the legislation.

DEFINITION OF FOREIGNER

Parliament broadened the meaning of an "agent of a foreigner" to include not only formal representatives, but also any individual acting under the direction, supervision, instruction or financial support of foreign persons or organisations.

The definition of "foreigner" was also expanded to include foreign governments, diplomatic missions, international organisations, NGOs, and companies engaged in activities covered by the Bill.

At the same time, lawmakers removed the generic term "person" from the definitions section, narrowing the law's application to clearly defined categories.

A major addition was the detailed definition of "political activities", now covering campaigning, fundraising, canvassing, elections, lobbying government decisions and attempts to influence public opinion. It also extends to ideological promotion considered inconsistent with constitutional principles.

The clause further clarifies distinctions between foreign interests and national interests, as well as between foreign policy and Government policy, aiming to separate external influence from domestic governance.

During the debate on the clause, MPs raised concerns about the status of consular officials and individuals with dual citizenship. It was clarified by the Attorney General Kiywaka Kiywaka that such persons fall under diplomatic protection and are, therefore, not subject to the restrictions of the Bill.

Parliament also amended Clause 2 by deleting the phrase "any person who acts as" and replacing it with a precise definition of an "agent of a foreigner". The revised clause captures activities such as Political mobilisation on behalf of foreign interests, fundraising for foreign causes, recruitment for foreign agenda.

Lawmakers said the

MPS PASS CONTROVERSIAL



Nabbenja (left) engaged in an argument with the Leader of Opposition Joel Ssenyonyi and other members on the opposition side (right) during the processing of the Protection of Sovereignty Bill. (Scan the picture using the Vision Digital Experience to watch video)

revision ensures the law targets intentional foreign-backed political activity rather than ordinary international engagement.

The legislators amended Clause 4 and significantly narrowed it by removing references to "foreign nationals", ensuring only defined agents of foreign interests fall under the law.

New safeguards were introduced to exclude legitimate financial flows and institutions, including banks and financial institutions, hospitals and universities, faith-based organisations, individuals receiving lawful personal or commercial funds.

The law also expressly excludes foreign direct investment, diaspora remittances, humanitarian aid, development assistance and commercial loans.

The legislators amended Clause 5 of the Bill and introduced strict penalties for agents of foreigners who promote foreign interests against national interests. According to the Bill, if convicted, a company that violates the clause will pay a fine of sh2b and individuals will pay a fine of sh1b or face 10 years imprisonment, or both.

Parliament stressed that intent must be proven before conviction.

Legislators said individuals who exercise functions or services that the Government is responsible for without permission commit a crime and upon conviction, a company will be forced to pay a fine of sh2b and sh1b or

imprisonment for ten years for individuals.

Clause 7 sparked debate as it criminalises agents of foreign entities who develop and implement policy without Cabinet approval. According to the Bill, individuals who develop and implement such policies will be fined sh1b or face 10 years imprisonment and for Companies, they will be forced to pay sh2b upon conviction.

Clause 8 requires that, where the Government has no existing policy, matters must be escalated to Cabinet for formal policy development before action is taken.

Under clause 10, the MPs said that agents of foreign entities who promote foreign government policies not approved as Uganda's official policy will be forced to pay sh2b in case of companies upon conviction and sh1b for individuals or face 10 years imprisonment.

Clause 12 criminalises attempts by foreign agents to interfere with Government operations for example illegally organising or funding meetings intended to disrupt state functions.

According to the MPs, such illegal activities will attract a fine of sh2b for Companies and sh1b for individuals or 10 years imprisonment upon conviction.

Lawmakers argued that the clause aligns with constitutional principles of legality and governance protection.

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HEAVY DEPLOYMENT

Kira Municipality MP Ibrahim Ssemujju raised concern over a heavy security deployment at Parliament ahead of the debate, warning against a repeat of the 2023 Coffee Bill incident, where security forces reportedly interfered. He noted the unusual turnout of ruling party MPs and expressed unease about the presence of security personnel.

Speaker Among reassured MPs of their safety within the House, saying she had not observed any excessive deployment. She also quipped proceedings, noting that many contentious issues in the Bill had been addressed by the committee.

The Speaker allocated 35 minutes each to both majority and minority report presenters. She emphasised that the Bill had attracted significant public interest, with about 60 stakeholders consulted. Key debated issues included the definition of a foreigner, criminal offences, registration requirements and the extent of ministerial powers.

offence of economic sabotage, targeting false information or disruptive acts that threaten economic stability. They said individuals who violate the rule face a fine of sh1b or face ten years in prison and Companies will be forced to pay a fine not exceeding sh400m.

The legislators also removed clause 16 that called for mental and physical health examinations for applicants seeking registration as foreign agents. Instead, the MPs said the focus should be on criminal record suitability, administrative efficiency, a 14-day deadline for departmental review and compliance with natural justice principles.

The MPs harmonised Clauses 17-20 that are about registration, suspension and revocation of certificates.

These clauses were harmonised to ensure consistency in issuing, renewing, suspending, and revoking certificates of registration for foreign agents. The reforms strengthen procedural fairness and standardise decision-making across the registration process.

Parliament also introduced strict disclosure rules requiring agents of foreign entities to declare any funds received that are above sh400m.

They said failure to declare attracts a fine of sh2b for Companies or sh1b - or 10-years imprisonment for individuals.

The clause replaces an earlier interpretation that mandated ministerial approval for funds above sh400m, shifting instead to a declaration-based system.

The Bill sparked sharp exchanges, particularly over political party funding.

MP Geoffrey Ekanya warned

that the law could restrict political financing, particularly those that even ruling parties receive from abroad.

Among responded that under the Inter-faith Organisation for Dialogue (I-FOD) framework, most opposition parties are members of IPOD, which is under the National Unity Platform (NUP), which has been struggling to join.

COMMITTEE OBSERVATIONS

In a joint Parliamentary Committee report, MP Stephen Kagameye, the chairperson of the defence and internal affairs committee, raised sweeping concerns about the Bill, warning that its current drafting risks legal overreach, rights disruption, and constitutional conflict.

Presenting the report to Parliament, the committee's scrutiny followed extensive consultations involving more than 200 stakeholders across government, civil society, private sector and the diaspora.

"The Committee examined the Bill in detail and engaged widely to ensure a balanced and evidence-based assessment," Kagameye said. At the centre of the Committee's concerns is the scope of the Bill, particularly Clause 2, which defines who it applies to.

Lawmakers found that the Bill intends to target agents acting on behalf of foreign interests to influence public policy, the wording does not clearly reach its reach.

The report warned that when read alongside Clause 1, the law could inadvertently apply to ordinary Ugandans, including traders, employees of foreign firms, and even individuals receiving support from relatives abroad.

The Committee questioned how the Bill interprets sovereignty, warning that it shifts emphasis from the people - who hold sovereign power - to the state.

Lawmakers cautioned that this shift could undermine democratic principles if not carefully balanced.

Concerns about the Bill's impact on the economy featured prominently in the report.

The Committee warned that

provisions requiring approval for foreign funding - particularly above the proposed threshold - could delay financial flows, disrupt remittances, and discourage investment.

According to the Committee, the Bank of Uganda flagged broader macroeconomic risks, including potential effects on capital flows, financial sector stability, and the country's standing with international lenders.

Telecommunications stakeholders also warned that mobile money systems could face disruptions. Potentially affecting millions of users.

The Committee raised red flags about the wide discretionary powers wielded by the Minister of Internal Affairs, including authority to approve funding, register organisations, and define key terms.

It warned that this could create a "permission-based system", where participation in economic and civil life depends on ministerial approval rather than clear legal rules.

At the same time, lawmakers criticised the Bill for introducing vague offences, such as "economic sabotage" and "interference", without precise definitions, while attaching heavy penalties of up to 20 years in prison. "Criminal laws must be precise," the Committee observed, warning that ambiguity could lead to arbitrary enforcement.

They also argued that the proposed law would introduce a new regulatory regime under Internal Affairs, despite existing oversight by institutions such as the Bank of Uganda and the National Intelligence Authority.

The Committee warned this could lead to conflicting mandates, multiple reporting requirements, and increased compliance costs, particularly for businesses.

Academic and health institutions cautioned that restrictions on foreign collaboration could undermine research, innovation, and healthcare delivery. The Committee noted that routine activities such as joint research and international partnerships could be unintentionally criminalised, calling for exemptions for these sectors.

OPPOSITION MPS REJECT THE BILL CALL FOR WITHDRAWAL

Alongside the main report, five minority members, each with a minority report, issued a dissenting view, warning that the Bill's flaws go beyond drafting and could fundamentally threaten civil liberties.

The MPs included MP Wilfred Nwagaba, Medard Ssegona, Bert Nambaze, Abdulla Kiywaka, and Jonathan Oduku. They argued that the Bill risks over-centralising state power, curtailing civil space, and criminalising legitimate political and social activity.

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SOVEREIGNTY BILL

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Kagameye the chairperson of the Defence and Internal Affairs Committee

civil society organisations, political actors, and individuals engaged in public discourse, particularly those with international links.

According to the minority, the proposed law may not be salvageable through amendments alone, urging Parliament to reconsider its approach to regulating foreign influence.

Oduku (UPC) had called for the entire Bill to be withdrawn altogether. Arguing that substantial amendments to key provisions had rendered it unrecognisable from the version which was tabled for first reading on April 15. "The Ministry wish to note that the amendments proposed to the Bill go to the root of the subject matter of the Bill and the Minister should be asked to withdraw the Bill, study the Bill and the amendments and if agreeable, amend the Bill and reintroduce it in the House. The withdrawal of the Bill also affords the Government to benefit from the views of the stakeholders, both in support and against and the report of the minority," he implored.

According to Oduku, 24 out of 30 clauses, which constitute about 87 per cent of the Bill, had been amended. Which phenomenon, taking into consideration previous precedents, demands that the draft law be withdrawn.

Nambaze (NUP), who said that last Thursday, when the repurposed Bill was being presented to the committee, he requested an opportunity to make her submission in her capacity as Shadow Minister for Internal Affairs.

However, she alleged that she was instead asked to wait for her turn after the Attorney General, Kiywaka Kiywaka had presented. Only to be the Chairperson of the Legal and Parliamentary Affairs Committee, Stephen Bakka Mugabi (Bukedi North, NRM) to rule that she would make her presentation during the

report-writing retreat at Speke Resort Munyonyo last weekend, which did not happen. Nwagaba tabled the other minority which was co-signed by Soreni City Woman MP Anne Adeke Ebaa (FDC) and Asuman Basalima (Bugiri Municipality, JEEMA).

The above dissent on the basis of provisions of the Bill they said infringed on freedom of expression enshrined in Article 29 and Article 1 of the Constitution by trying to convert the sovereignty of the people listed therein to sovereignty of the state.

SENYONYI, SPEAKER CLASH

The Leader of Opposition, Joel Ssenyonyi, called for the withdrawal of the Bill arguing that substantial new amendments introduced by the Executive have effectively transformed it into a different piece of legislation. Ssenyonyi contended that the changes proposed by the Attorney General and the Minister of Internal Affairs were too extensive to be treated as mere revisions. Instead, he insisted that the government should withdraw the current Bill and reintroduce it afresh.

"The Attorney General has presented considerable amendments, making it a new Bill. The Minister should rather be presenting a motion for withdrawal," Ssenyonyi said.

He further questioned what he perceived as undue Executive influence over parliamentary processes, citing a letter reportedly written by the President directing committee chairpersons to revisit specific clauses in the Bill. According to Ssenyonyi, such actions undermine the independence of parliamentary committees.

VOTING BATTLE

The debate over suspending Rule 107

became highly contentious, exposing sharp divisions between government and opposition MPs.

Opposition legislators, led by Nwagaba, objected to the rushed process, arguing that members had not been given enough time to study and understand the committee report. They resisted the Chief Whip's proposal to suspend the rule, which ordinarily requires a three-day gap before debate.

Aneta Among put the matter to a vote and ruled in favour of suspending the rule, but opposition MPs immediately challenged her decision. Ssenyonyi demanded a formal division vote to verify the outcome. Despite repeated objections and procedural challenges, the Speaker maintained control of

proceedings, insisting that business would continue.

In the division vote, the ruling party secured victory with 286 votes against the opposition's 54, effectively suspending Rule 107.

The opposition continued to protest, repeatedly demanding further verification of the results, but the Speaker dismissed the delays. Government leaders, including Prime minister Robah Nabbanja, backed the Speaker's stance, urged MPs to push forward and ensure the Bill is passed the same day. Kiywaka Kiywaka defended the speed of the process, arguing that MPs were capable of quickly reviewing the material and that the Bill primarily concerned foreign agents.

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Highlights of the Sovereignty Bill

1 Definitions: "Foreigner": Non-citizens and foreign registered companies. "Agent of a foreigner": A person an agent, representative or employee of a foreigner; on the order, request, supervision or under the direction or control of a foreigner; or while being financed or subsidised by a foreigner.

2 An agent of a foreigner who publishes false information or participates in any act or activity that weakens, undermines or damages the economic system or viability of the country, commits an offence of economic sabotage. Fine is sh1b or 10 years imprisonment or both. Legal entities shall be fined sh2b.

3 A person shall not act as an agent of a foreigner unless he or she registers with the Department of Peace and Security. Those found in breach are liable to sh1b or 10 years imprisonment or both.

4 Financial institutions shall not pay any money to an agent. If a foreigner unless he or she declares the source of funds and presents proof of written authorisation from the relevant regulator.

5 Financial institutions shall submit monthly reports

6 Financial institutions that fail to comply shall be liable to a fine not sh4b and forfeiture

7 Agents of foreigners required to submit returns to the minister detailing the amounts received and the purpose for which the funds were used. Those found in breach are liable to a fine not exceeding sh1b or 10 years imprisonment or both. Legal entities shall be fined sh2b.

8 With a court order, premises of an agent of foreigner shall be inspected for any information.

9 A person who unlawfully denies an inspector access to property 7 or any information or presents falsified documents shall be fined not more than sh40m or suffer 7 years imprisonment or both. The Minister may prescribe a penalty not exceeding sh40m.

10 A certificate for an agent of a foreigner shall be valid for three years. The person or entity in question shall apply to the Minister for renewal. Where one feels the certificate was cancelled erroneously, he shall seek legal redress in court.

11 The certificate of registration is liable to cancellation or suspension where it is discovered the agent of foreigner gave false information at the time of application, has become insolvent, poses a security threat or engages in disruptive activities.

12 An agent of foreigner is barred from soliciting, receiving any financial support or donation or loan from a foreigner exceeding sh400m in a calendar year without declaring the funds to the Minister. Persons found in the wrong are liable to sh1b or 10 years imprisonment or both. Legal entities are subject to a sh2b.

13 An agent of foreigners who receive funds for disruptive activities including overthrowing Government of Uganda or endangering national security is liable to sh1b or 10 years imprisonment or both. Additionally, any assistance or funds received in this respect shall be forfeited to the State by order of court.

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