

Sovereignty Bill versus the suitcase economy

If you stand at Entebbe airport on any given week, you will witness a quiet national ritual: young Ugandans boarding flights with small suitcases and very large hopes. Some are headed to Qatar, others to Saudi Arabia, and many to places they had never imagined while growing up in Pallisa, Mbarara, or Arua. They are not tourists. They are economic ambassadors—unofficial, unpaid, but deeply relied upon.

Now enters the Sovereignty Bill 2026, walking confidently into this already delicate arrangement like a strict uncle at a wedding—concerned, well-intentioned, but dangerously close to stopping the music.

At its core, the Bill argues something that is hard to oppose: Uganda must protect itself from foreign interference. Fair enough. No country wants to be remote-controlled like a television with missing batteries. But like many well-meaning policies, the problem is not the intention—it is the execution. Or, in simpler language: the medicine might be stronger than the disease.

Let us start with the reality on the ground. Uganda's economy, while growing on paper, is still heavily supported by what one might call the "suitcase economy." Remittances from Ugandans working abroad quietly do what many policies loudly promise—pay school fees, build houses, sustain households, and keep small businesses alive.

Now imagine telling that system: "Before anything enters, we must first inspect its intentions."

The Bill proposes stricter controls on foreign funding, registration of "foreign agents," and tighter monitoring of financial flows. On paper, this sounds like locking the gate to keep out thieves. But in practice, it risks locking out the very relatives bringing food.

One begins to wonder: in trying to protect sovereignty, are we accidentally interrogat-

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External influence

ing survival? Take the labour export sector. Over the past decade, companies facilitating overseas employment have grown because opportunity at home remains limited. These companies, imperfect as they may be, have become bridges between unemployment and income.

Now introduce heavy regulation, suspicion of foreign ties, and potential criminalization of influence. Suddenly, these bridges begin to look like checkpoints. Investors hesitate. Agencies become cautious. Processes slow down.

Of course, the government is not wrong to worry. Foreign influence is real. Money often comes with invisible instructions. But the solution cannot be to treat every external interaction like a conspiracy meeting in disguise.

The real question, therefore, is not whether sovereignty should be protected—it should. The real question is how to protect it without suffocating the very systems that keep citizens afloat. A more balanced approach would look less like a crackdown and more like calibration.

First, instead of broadly restricting foreign financial flows, the government could strengthen transparency systems. Track

money, yes—but do not choke it. There is a difference between monitoring a river and damming it completely.

Second, rather than labelling individuals or organizations as "foreign agents" in a sweeping manner, there should be clear, narrow definitions. Otherwise, we risk a situation where a daughter receiving school fees from her brother in Dubai must first consult a lawyer.

Third, if the concern is external influence, then invest heavily in internal strength. Build local industries. Create meaningful employment. Improve wages. Because sovereignty is not only defended at borders, it is sustained in pay checks.

Fourth, engage stakeholders instead of surprising them. Labour export companies, civil society, financial institutions, and even the diaspora should not read about policies affecting them like they are reading football scores. Consultation builds trust; surprise builds resistance.

Finally—and perhaps most importantly—policy must recognise the lived reality of the average Ugandan. The person boarding that plane is not thinking about geopolitics. They are thinking about rent, school fees, and whether their mother has enough to eat. Any law that ignores that reality risks becoming technically correct but practically harmful.

In the end, sovereignty is not just about control—it is about capacity. A strong country does not fear interaction; it manages it wisely. It does not silence its citizens; it empowers them so that external influence becomes less attractive, not more suspicious.

So yes, let us protect Uganda. But let us not protect it so tightly that it cannot breathe. Because a nation, like a person, does not survive by isolation alone—it survives by balance.

And if we are not careful, we may wake up one day to find that in trying to guard the house, we accidentally chased away the people who were bringing the groceries.

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