

Sovereignty or control?

At a time when diaspora remittances have reached record highs, Uganda's proposed Sovereignty Bill threatens to undermine one of the country's most reliable economic lifelines.

Uganda is once again at a crossroads between policy and prudence. The proposed "Sovereignty Bill," presented as a safeguard against foreign interference, may instead become a tool that punishes the very citizens who sustain the country's economy from abroad.

At the heart of the concern is a troubling contradiction. On one hand, the government seeks tighter control over foreign funding, financial flows and political engagement linked to external actors. On the other hand, Ugandans in the diaspora, who are now being indirectly targeted, continue to send unprecedented amounts of money back home.

Recent data from the Bank of Uganda show that diaspora remittances have surged to \$2.5 billion, a record high and a "critical economic lifeline" that supports millions of households and contributes over 5 percent of Uganda's GDP. This raises a fundamental question: Why regulate, restrict, or potentially criminalise the very flows that keep the economy afloat?

Draft provisions of the Sovereignty Bill suggest a broad definition of "foreigner," potentially extending to Ugandan citizens living abroad. If enacted as critics interpret it, the law could subject diaspora Ugandans to the same regulatory scrutiny as external actors when engaging in political or financial activities related to Uganda.

Even more concerning are proposals that require government approval for receiving certain levels of foreign funds. Criminalise political engagement linked to "foreign interests." Impose penalties of up to 20 years in prison or fines reaching billions of shillings. For many diaspora Ugandans, this signals not protection of sovereignty, but a shift toward surveillance and control.

Remittances are not abstract figures. They are school fees paid in Mbale, medical bills

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Rights and freedoms



cleared in Gulu, rent covered in Kampala, and small businesses started in Mbarara. As the Bank of Uganda has acknowledged, these inflows are no longer just social transfers—they are a strategic pillar of macroeconomic stability, rivalling traditional exports like coffee and tourism.

Yet the proposed law risks sending a chilling message: that money from Ugandans abroad is welcome, but their voices, associations, and financial autonomy are not. This contradiction is not just political; it is economically dangerous. Evidence from policy debates on diaspora taxation already shows that diaspora investors are highly sensitive to policy signals. Perceptions of unfair regulation or control can lead to reduced remittances, capital flight, and declining investment confidence.

Beyond economics lies a deeper issue: identity. Ugandans in the diaspora do not cease to be citizens. They remain deeply connected to their families, communities and national future. By potentially treating them as "foreigners," the Bill risks criminalising ordinary acts of belonging—sending money home, supporting community initiatives, or even participating in political discourse.

Such a move would mark a profound shift in the relationship between the State and its citizens. It would suggest that citizenship is no longer defined by belonging, but by geography and compliance. Governments have a legitimate interest in protecting national sov-

ereignty and preventing undue foreign influence. Uganda already regulates foreign funding through existing frameworks, including oversight of NGOs and financial disclosures. But sovereignty must not become a blanket justification for overreach. Critics argue that the Bill's timing and scope raise concerns about its potential use as a political instrument, particularly in a context where diaspora communities have become increasingly active in shaping political narratives and mobilising support. Former Aruu County MP Odonga Otto claims the Bill fell short of adding the name of Bobi Wine [National Unity Platform party president Robert Kyagulanyi]. If sovereignty is invoked selectively, it risks losing its legitimacy.

Uganda does not need to choose between sovereignty and diaspora engagement. It can and must balance both. Any regulation of foreign funding should be narrowly defined and clearly targeted, avoiding broad provisions that sweep in ordinary citizens. Also, policymakers should recognise diaspora Ugandans as partners, not threats. Their contributions go beyond remittance. They include investment, skills transfer, and global advocacy.

At its core, this debate is about trust. Do Ugandans abroad trust that their contributions are valued? And does the state trust its own citizens to participate in national life without being treated as external risks? Policies that lean toward control rather than collaboration risk weakening that trust.

Uganda's diaspora has demonstrated its commitment by sending billions of dollars home every year. The question now is whether the country will respond with inclusion or with regulation that borders on exclusion. If the Sovereignty Bill proceeds without careful revision, Uganda may find itself in the paradoxical position of discouraging the very lifeline it depends on.

That is not sovereignty. That is self-inflicted and avoidable gunshot wound.

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