

National news

www.monitor.co.ug

NGO existence is not only mandated by the Constitution, but also borne out of the history of struggle for self-determination.

BY MIKE SEBALU

Civil society organisations (CSOs) have pushed back against proposed government measures to regulate funding and accreditation of non-governmental organisations (NGOs), warning that the move risks shrinking civic space and undermining constitutional freedoms.

Speaking during a stakeholders' engagement yesterday, civil society actors argued that NGOs play a critical role in bridging service delivery gaps left by government inefficiencies, and should not be subjected to restrictive controls.

Mr Andrew Karamagi, lawyer and member of Pan-Africa Union, said the harmful government narratives towards Civil Society Organisations are only intended to close the space for civil engagements in Uganda.

"Civil society organisations and NGOs are an indispensable component of the socioeconomic and political fabric of our polity," he said.

CSOs reject proposed NGO funding controls



Illegal.

The NGO Amendment Act of 2024, which merged the original NGO Bureau back as a Ministry Department, first of all, redefined the Bureau. What we have is the secretary of the Bureau, who is at the level of a Commissioner in the Ministry of Internal Affairs. — Ms Sarah Bireete, executive director of Centre for Constitutional Governance.

"Our existence is not only mandated by the Constitution, but is also borne out by the history of struggle for self-determination. From providing essential services to promoting accountable governance, NGOs are necessary in a developing society that lacks adequate government presence," he added.

In 2017, raids were carried out on Action Aid, GLISS, and the Uhuru Institute during the Presidential age limit debate, leading to the 2021 arbitrary suspension of 54 NGOs.

In August 2021, Uganda's NGO Bureau suspended 54 civil society organisations for alleged non-compliance with the 2016 NGO Act, including expired permits and filing issues, with some accounts frozen.

This action targeted human rights groups, signaling reduced civic space, with court challenges eventually overturning some suspensions, such as Chapter Four Uganda.

CSOs believe that the current assault on the eve of and in the aftermath of the 2026 General Election is a concerted effort to silence civic engagement on

salient governance challenges like corruption, human rights violations, and flawed elections.

Illegal bureau

Ms Sarah Bireete, the executive director of Centre for Constitutional Governance, further accused the government of illegally imposing sanctions on CSOs.

"The NGO Amendment Act of 2024, which merged the original NGO Bureau back as a Ministry Department, first of all, redefined the Bureau. When you mention the NGO Bureau, it is the former Board members of the NGO Bureau, and these people do not exist," she said.

She added, "What we have is the Secretary of the Bureau, who is at the level of a Commissioner in the Ministry of Internal Affairs. The members who were originally known as members of the Board no longer exist after the amendment."

Even when we are engaged in negotiations, we are engaged in negotiations with the Administrator of the Bureau, not the Bureau. The law required the

Minister to gazette members of the Bureau. Nobody has ever seen this gazette. So legally, we have a non-existent NGO Bureau," she added.

The CSOs also challenged the ongoing proposals by the government to have an NGO fund before it was overwhelmingly rejected.

Mr Job Kijja, a civic activist, said this was because the spirit behind it was not necessarily to facilitate the operations of the NGO sector, but it was rather to control and constrain the operations of the sector.

"NGOs exist to fill the gaps that are left by the inefficiencies of government. So how can the government claim that they can actually finance NGOs?" He asked.

He also accused the government of having a bad track record in terms of accountability.

In other calls to action measures, CSOs called for the halting of all the Regulatory Impact Assessment (RIA) proposals that seek to control funding and donor accreditation, and ensure meaningful input by the sector and all relevant stakeholders.

Articles 29 and 38 of the Constitution, guaranteeing the rights to association, expression, and participation in governance, must be respected by the government, and all the defamatory rhetoric and recognition that a thriving civil society is a shield for the citizen, not a threat to the state, must also be stopped, among others.