

CRS Report for Congress

Received through the CRS Web

Uganda: Recent Elections and Current Conditions

Ted Dagne
Specialist in International Relations
Zarina Harding
Research Associate
Foreign Affairs, Defense, and Trade Division

Summary

On March 12, 2001, Yoweri Museveni was re-elected president of Uganda after defeating his one-time ally, Kizza Besigye. International and regional election monitors declared the elections relatively free, although the electoral process was marred by mismanagement and sporadic violence. In the legislative elections in late June 2001, more than 50 incumbent members of Parliament were defeated, including 10 ministers. The elections were marred by violence in which an estimated 12 people were killed.

Relations between Washington and Kampala are warm. The Clinton Administration championed the Museveni regime, and President Clinton visited Uganda during his 1998 tour of Africa. Relations began to cool when Ugandan troops once again intervened in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) in 1998. Secretary of State Colin Powell visited Uganda during his four-nation tour of Africa in late May 2001. Powell met with President Museveni and opposition leaders to discuss a wide range of issues, including Sudan and DRC. This report will be updated as events warrant.

Recent Political Developments

The Presidential Elections. On March 12, 2001, Uganda held national elections, its second since Yoweri Museveni's National Resistance Movement (NRM) came to power in 1986. President Museveni won 69.3% of the votes cast,¹ while his closest challenger, Kizza Besigye, received 27.8% of the votes. Besigye, a doctor and Museveni's one-time ally, was a member of the NRM and Museveni's personal physician during the insurgency in the early 1980s. He ran on an anti-corruption platform, vowing to rid the government of its excesses. He also raised questions about Uganda's military involvement in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), advocating Uganda's withdrawal from the DRC.

¹ Ugandan Elections 2001 [<http://www.uganda-elections.com>].

Election observers, both local and international, declared the elections to be ‘free and fair’, although they acknowledged that the electoral process and management had many weaknesses. According to Reverend Cannon Grace Kaiso, the national coordinator of the Non-Governmental Organization Election Monitoring Group-Uganda (a consortium of six Ugandan non- governmental organizations), “on the whole, the results of the elections reflect the will of the people.” This sentiment was also expressed by the chairman of the Post Referendum Support Group, composed of Uganda’s donors.²

The results of the elections were rejected, however, by Besigye on the grounds that there were discrepancies and inconsistencies in the electoral process. He filed a petition at the Supreme Court in Mengo challenging the declaration of Museveni as president elect and sought to annul the elections.³ Besigye subsequently lost the petition and said he would respect the Supreme Court verdict.⁴

Pre-Election Conditions. Allegations of political violence, intimidation, and corruption characterized much of the pre-election campaigning. Opposition groups charged that the election was marred by the disappearance of voter cards and favoritism toward Museveni by the state run media. *The Monitor*, a newspaper critical of the government, reported instances of persons breaking into the Electoral Commission’s data center and bribing of prospective voters to register at multiple polling stations.

The political campaign was marked by intensely personal attacks by the two main candidates, Besigye and Museveni. Besigye accused Museveni of political intimidation and of personally approaching members of opposition groups with promises of future government positions and money if they changed sides. In return, Museveni accused Besigye of having HIV/AIDS and of being an agent of the dictatorships that ruled Uganda in the 1970s and early 1980s.⁵

Issues surrounding the elections included political freedom, allegations of official corruption, and Uganda’s involvement in the DRC.⁶ Museveni campaigned under the slogan “Vote for Consolidating Our Achievements”⁷ highlighting his accomplishments as president of Uganda.

The Post Election Environment. The post election environment was also marred by violence and charges and counter charges between Museveni and Besigye. The explosion of several pipe and nail bombs in the capital, Kampala, shortly after the elections

² Foreign Broadcasting Information Service (FBIS), March 15, 2001.

³ *The Monitor*, March 28, 2001.

⁴ BBC Monitoring Africa, April 21, 2001.

⁵ *The Washington Post*, March 15, 2001.

⁶ BBC News Online: World: Africa, March 1, 2001

⁷ Elections 2001 [<http://www.museveni.co.ug>].

results were announced, resulted in 11 dead and scores of injuries.⁸ It was unclear if these explosions were related to the announcement of Museveni's victory.

Parliamentary Elections. In late June, more than 50 incumbent members of Parliament lost their seats, including 10 ministers. The no-party parliamentary elections reportedly gave President Museveni a major base of support in Parliament. He campaigned aggressively for his favorite candidates, although a number of his ministers were defeated by lesser known individuals. According to press reports, the elections were marred by violence in which an estimated 12 people were killed.

Background and Analysis

Political Conditions. Uganda, a country slightly smaller than Oregon, gained its independence from Britain in 1962. Until the mid 1980s, the east African country was mired in civil war, ethnic strife, and a brutal dictatorship. By the time the National Resistance Army (NRA) took power in early 1986, the country was in ruins, with an inflation rate of over 240% and a non-existent economic infrastructure. Museveni is credited with bringing about relative stability to Uganda. His strategy was to coopt his political opponents and when necessary to use military means to neutralize rebel groups. His first government included opposition figures who had served in previous governments and arch critics of his Movement. Despite these efforts at reconciliation, armed opposition to his government continued for much of the 1980s and 1990s.

In March 1994, Ugandans elected a 288-member constituent assembly, whose task was to approve a new constitution. The no-party elections gave the ruling NRM and its allies 150 of the 214 elective seats, while a coalition of opposition groups secured the remaining seats. (The NRM does not identify itself as a political party, but rather as an encompassing national movement; others disagree.) President Museveni did not run, but several of his ministers were defeated by opposition candidates. The elections were considered free and fair, although restrictions on party activities hampered the chances of opposition parties. The constitution was promulgated in October 1995 and a referendum was called for in 2000 on the future introduction of a multi-party system.

In May 1996, after a long transition period, President Museveni was elected to a five year term by a large margin. Museveni won 74.2% of the votes cast, while his opponent, Paul Ssemogerere, former deputy prime minister and longtime rival of the president, received 23.7%. The elections were declared by international observers to be free and fair. However, political party activity prior to the elections was, as in the 1994 elections, prohibited. Opposition candidates were reportedly harassed, although according to observers the harassment was not widespread or systematic.

The so-called no-party elections gave President Museveni much needed legitimacy, as they represented the first attempt at democracy since he took power in 1986. Upon being elected, Museveni declared that multiparty democracy would not be restored for at least another 5 years. A national referendum on multiparty politics was held in June of 2000. The NRM prevailed with 90.7% of Ugandans favoring a no-party government system. Museveni stated that multiparty politics could only be introduced when the no-

⁸ Xinhua News Agency, March 16, 2001.

party system had succeeded in eliminating the threat of a return to sectarian politics. Critics dismiss Museveni's argument, asserting that the President is not committed to multi-party democracy.

The Economy. Uganda is blessed with fertile soils, regular rainfall, and sizable deposits of copper and cobalt. Its largest sector is agriculture, which employs 81% of the workforce, and accounts for about 90% of export earnings and 50% of Uganda's Gross Domestic Product (GDP). Coffee exports make up half its export earnings and Uganda is Africa's largest coffee producer. Other major exports include cotton, tea, and to a lesser extent, maize. Crop production has been hampered by security concerns in the northern and western regions of Uganda. To stabilize the economy, Museveni adopted a policy of reducing inflation while simultaneously increasing production and export earnings. Uganda raised producer prices on export crops, increased the prices of imported petroleum products, and boosted civil service wages.

The industrial sector has also expanded, with real output growth approaching 12% a year. The main industries include the processing of coffee, cotton, tea, sugar, tobacco, edible oils, dairy products, and grain milling as well as brewing. Other ventures include vehicle assembly and the manufacture of textiles and metal products. In 1997, Uganda's GNP per capita stood at \$330, making it one of the 17 poorest countries of the world. Museveni's economic recovery plans have long received support from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank. According to a recent IMF report, Uganda's economy grew by 5% in 1999-2000, while consumer price inflation averaged 6.3%. Meanwhile, the proportion of the population living under the poverty line declined from 56% in 1992-1993 to 44% in 1996-1997 and to 35% in 2000.⁹ According to the IMF, the government is on a path that could reduce poverty to 10% by 2017.

Obstacles to economic recovery remain. Rebel insurrections continue, and following the murder of several foreign tourists in March 1999, there has been a decrease in tourism. Moreover, Uganda's heavy reliance on coffee exports makes it vulnerable to international commodity price fluctuations and poor weather conditions.¹⁰ Falling coffee prices have hit export revenues hard. In addition, privatization initiatives pose a problem as they are seen by many to be a scramble for the fruits of state-owned property. Another problem plaguing Uganda's economy is corruption. The International Corruption Perceptions Index for 2000 - an annual index compiled by the global anti-corruption non-governmental organization, Transparency International (TI) - rated Uganda the eleventh most corrupt of 90 countries. According to TI, corruption prevails in all aspects of Ugandan life, from politics to the economy.

Foreign Debt. Uganda's debt burden is estimated at US\$3.4 billion,¹¹ which represents about 64% of its 1998 GNP. Uganda was the first African country to be declared eligible for and to benefit from the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) Initiative in April 1998. Under this Initiative, Uganda was ensured approximately \$650 million in debt relief, 50% of which is from the World Bank. Part of the debt relief was

⁹ International Monetary Fund, Press Release, May 2, 2000.

¹⁰ BBC News Online, March 6, 2001.

¹¹ The World Bank, September 9, 2000 [<http://devdata.worldbank.org>].

in the form of an International Development Association (IDA) grant of \$75 million allocated to the Universal Primary Education Program. Uganda has also been declared eligible for debt relief under the Enhanced HIPC Initiative, in recognition of its effective poverty reduction strategy to date, the involvement of civil society in the formulation of the strategy, and the government's continued commitment to macroeconomic stability. However, the IMF suspended its disbursement of a loan of US\$18 million for 2 months in 2000 because of Uganda's high defense spending. At present, though, total debt-service under the HIPC Initiative, including the US\$650 million provided under the original Initiative, will yield roughly US\$2 billion in additional resources.¹²

Foreign Policy. In the 1990s, the civilian population in northern Uganda was terrorized by the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), currently led by Joseph Kony and supported by Sudan. From its base near Juba in Sudan, the LRA consistently targeted school children; abducting hundreds and mutilating thousands. LRA's publicly stated political objective is a "holy war" against the Museveni government. Between 1993 and 1998, the LRA reportedly killed an estimated 10,000 Ugandans and forced an estimated 220,000 to seek refuge in protected camps.

Sudan. The National Islamic Front (NIF) government in Sudan is the principal backer of the LRA and uses LRA soldiers in its fight against the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA). The Khartoum government accuses the Museveni government of backing the SPLA. In December 1999, however, President Museveni and President Omar Bashir of Sudan signed an 11-point peace agreement, negotiated by former President Carter, which called for normalization of relations between the two countries. Further talks on Sept. 29, 2000 between Sudan and Uganda resulted in an agreement in principle to disarm and relocate the LRA at least 1,000km deeper into Sudan away from the Uganda border. Khartoum and Kampala also agreed to exchange diplomats and to repatriate LRA abducted children.

Democratic Republic of the Congo. In August 1998, Uganda joined Rwanda and Congolese rebels in a joint effort to oust the government of Laurent Kabila of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). Between 1996-97, Uganda along with Rwanda, had helped the then-rebel leader Kabila to oust former dictator Mobutu Sese Seko. Kabila became president in May 1997, after the ouster of the Mobutu regime, but tensions between Kabila and his allies, Rwanda and Uganda, soon began to mount. Efforts to resolve their differences failed, and by August 1998, the former allies were engaged in a full-blown conflict. By early 1999, the Congolese rebels and their Rwandan and Ugandan allies were in control of eastern Congo.

In northwest Congo, a pro-Uganda Congolese rebel group, the Movement for the Liberation of the Congo (MLC), appeared in late 1998. However, the emergence of the MLC led to serious tensions between the pro-Rwanda rebel group, the Congolese Democratic Rally (RCD), and MLC, as well as between Rwanda and Uganda. In August 1999, Ugandan and Rwandan troops clashed in Kisangani, in eastern Congo. The leaders of the two countries were able, at first, to bring a quick end to the conflict, but tensions

¹² International Monetary Fund, Press Release, May 2, 2000.

remained. Rwanda and Uganda clashed twice in 2000 but later agreed to a peace package.¹³

U.S.-Uganda Relations. Relations between Washington and Kampala are warm. Over the years, successive American Administrations considered the Museveni government as reformist and a staunch ally of the United States. The Clinton Administration championed the Museveni regime, and President Clinton visited Uganda during his 1998 tour of Africa. Relations cooled when Ugandan troops once again intervened in Congo in 1998. Clinton Administration officials were also critical of Uganda and Rwanda when the two former allies clashed in eastern Congo in 1999 and 2000.

The Bush Administration has had good relations with Kampala. Secretary of State Colin Powell visited Uganda during his four-nation trip to Africa in late May 2001. Secretary Powell met with President Museveni and opposition leaders to discuss a wide range of issues, including Sudan and DRC. Secretary Powell praised Museveni for lowering Uganda's HIV-AIDS infection rate, and pledged \$50 million to help Uganda for a period of five years to fight AIDS. Powell also won a pledge from Museveni to withdraw most of the 8,000 Ugandan troops in the Congo.

Table 1. U.S. Assistance to Uganda
(\$ millions)

Programs	FY1998 Actual	FY1999 Actual	FY2000 Actual	FY2001 Estimate	FY2002 Request
Development Aid	44.764	49.272	51.412	50.766	50.204
ESF	--	0.500	0.400	--	--
Food Aid	30.997	20.387	18.844	24.512	14.998
Peace Corps	1.397	0.972	0.276	0.961	0.797
IMET	0.357	0.305	0.247	0.100	0.100
Total	77.515	71.436	71.179	76.339	66.099

¹³ For more information, see CRS Issue Brief IB96037 by Raymond Copson.