



Uganda

U.S. officials have viewed Uganda as a key security partner in East Africa for over a decade. The country has played a lead role in high-profile counterterrorism and stability operations in the region, most notably in Somalia. Uganda is major recipient of U.S. foreign aid and has been one of the top recipients of U.S. security assistance in Africa. The United States provides logistics, training, equipment, and advisory support to the Ugandan military for its regional operations. Reports of torture and unlawful killings by security forces complicate the bilateral relationship, though, as do growing concerns about Uganda’s political trajectory. The country has never had a democratic transition of power.

Politics


President Yoweri Museveni, who seized power in a rebellion over three decades ago, is among the world’s longest-serving heads of state. Once dubbed part of a “new generation of African leaders,” Museveni, now in his 70s, wrote in 1986, “The problem of Africa in general and Uganda in particular is not the people but leaders who want to stay in power.” His government’s reputation has been marred by reported corruption, repression, and other abuses of power. High unemployment, rising crime, land disputes, and communal tensions have fueled popular discontent, as have poor service delivery and uneven development among Uganda’s regions. The opposition has long been divided, but a new movement now seeks to harness mounting frustration among a youthful electorate to push for change.

President Museveni was reelected to a fifth term in 2016, in a vote marked by allegations of voter intimidation, harassment of the opposition, and the misuse of state funds. His main challengers were two former government officials: former Prime Minister Amama Mbabazi and opposition leader Kizza Besigye. Both were repeatedly arrested by police; Besigye was detained on election day and kept under house arrest during the post-election period, preventing him from filing a legal challenge. The State Department suggested that the electoral irregularities and conduct reported were “deeply inconsistent with international standards” for a democratic process, contending that “the Ugandan people deserved better.”

The ruling National Resistance Movement (NRM), which was formed from the rebel movement Museveni led in the 1980s, dominates the parliament. The military, which is constitutionally granted seats in parliament, is widely viewed as a key constituency for Museveni.

Uganda’s parliament abolished presidential term limits in 2005. The constitution has barred candidates above age 75 from vying for the presidency, but in late 2017, parliament voted to remove the age limit after contentious debate, paving the way for Museveni to potentially stand for a sixth term in 2021. The age limit debate spurred protests and a security force crackdown. A 2017 survey suggested most Ugandans support presidential age and term limits.

Figure 1. Uganda Key Facts

Capital: Kampala	
Size: slightly smaller than Oregon	
Population: 40.9 million; 3.18% growth	
Religions: Protestant 45.1%, Catholic 39.3%, Muslim 13.7% (2014)	
Life expectancy: 56.3 years	
Median age: 15.9 years	
Birth rate: 42.4/1,000 population	
Infant mortality: 54.6 deaths/1,000 live births	
HIV/AIDS: 5.9% (2017)	
Literacy: 78.4% (2015)	
Key exports: coffee, fish, tea, cotton, flowers, gold	
GDP: \$30.4 billion; \$759 per capita; 6.29% growth (2019)	

Source: Data from CIA World Factbook, IMF (2019).

Musician Bobi Wine (Robert Kyagulanyi), who was elected to parliament as an independent in 2017, has emerged as the new, youthful face of the opposition. His protest songs have raised government ire (his concerts are routinely blocked), and he has drawn large crowds with his slogan of “people power.” He was a vocal opponent of lifting the presidential age limit. In August 2018, during a parliamentary by-election campaign, his driver was killed by an elite security unit and Wine, among others, was detained and beaten. He and several fellow parliamentarians were accused of inciting violence against Museveni’s motorcade and charged with treason. The incident spurred outrage and protests. The musician-turned-politician announced in July 2019 that he would vie, presumably against Museveni, for the presidency in 2021. Meanwhile, his trial is ongoing; he would be ineligible to run if convicted.

Human Rights Concerns

The State Department’s human rights report on Uganda documents restrictions on political freedoms and incidents of torture, excessive force, and unlawful killings by security forces; it notes that officers implicated in abuses often enjoy impunity. Human right groups have criticized the government for failing to hold security personnel accountable for torture (more than 1,000 allegations of torture were reported between 2012 and 2016 alone) or for the deaths of over 150 people, including children, during operations in Kasese, in western Uganda, in 2016.

Activists raise concerns with several laws, including the Public Order Management Act, which gives police broad authority to block public meetings and detain opposition candidates and supporters. Another law adopted in 2015 tightened the regulation of non-governmental organizations (NGOs), prohibiting activity “contrary to the dignity of the people of Uganda.” The government monitors social media and has arrested critics, citing the Antiterrorism Act and other laws. In 2018, the government imposed a social media tax on users (it blocked social media during the 2016 polls).

Threats to lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) rights have drawn international attention, particularly around the 2014 Anti-Homosexuality Act. That law, which made same-sex relations punishable by life in prison, was later struck down in court. Per the State Department, LGBT persons continue to face “discrimination, legal restrictions, societal harassment, violence, and intimidation.”

The Economy and Corruption Concerns

Stronger economic growth will be critical for Uganda’s ability to manage its rapidly growing population, 70% of which is under 25. Unemployment is a key problem, as is a growing demand for education and health services. Uganda has one of the lowest electrification rates in Africa, only 20% of the population has access to electricity.

President Museveni’s ambitious development strategy, which aimed to make Uganda a middle-income country by 2020 and an upper-middle-income country by 2040, will not meet its first target. GDP growth, forecast at under 7% through 2024, is well below the government’s double-digit goal. Uganda seeks to develop its energy, agriculture, and tourism sectors by improving infrastructure, developing human capital, and strengthening competitiveness. It also seeks to reform its regulatory environment: Uganda ranks 127nd in the World Bank’s *Ease of Doing Business* Index. Chinese financing comprises a growing share of Uganda’s public debt, which is over 40% of GDP and rising.

Uganda’s economic outlook is tied to its nascent energy sector. Proven crude oil reserves are estimated at 2.5 billion barrels, with 500 billion cubic feet of natural gas reserves. Production, which the World Bank forecasts could bring up to \$2 billion in annual revenues, has been delayed to 2022. New roads are under construction with Chinese financing, and land-locked Uganda plans to export oil via a pipeline through Tanzania. A General Electric subsidiary is part of a consortium working on a \$4 billion refinery.

Gold surpassed coffee as Uganda’s biggest earner of foreign currency in 2018, with gold exports growing from \$10 million to over \$500 million in the past decade. Only 10% of gold exports are mined in Uganda, however, fueling allegations of smuggling from neighboring South Sudan and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC).

Critics contend that state corruption and patronage are entrenched in Uganda, and that the government has failed to hold senior officials accountable. Some also argue that donor aid, which comprises a large share of the government’s budget, is used as a source of patronage. Embezzlement scandals involving the alleged diversion of donor funds from post-conflict reconstruction and health programs have led some donors to temporarily suspend budget support. Under pressure, the government adopted a legal framework to improve public-sector governance and created an anti-corruption court. New allegations that surfaced in 2018 regarding fraud and misuse of donor funds for refugee assistance led some donors to again freeze aid.

Uganda’s Regional Role

Uganda has won international praise for its open-door policy for refugees from neighboring countries, although its refugee host role has not been without controversy (amid reports of fraud noted above). South Sudan’s civil war has spurred an influx of over a million refugees into the

country. Uganda deployed troops to South Sudan when the war began in 2013, at the request of the government in Juba, to protect key infrastructure and state stability. It later withdrew the troops and played an influential role in pushing a peace accord in 2015. That deal collapsed less than a year later. In 2018, Uganda, in partnership with former rival Sudan, facilitated a new peace deal. Uganda is not viewed as an unbiased actor in the South Sudan conflict (it has been implicated in arms transfers to the government).

Uganda is a key troop contributor to the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM), which has a U.N. Security Council mandate to counter Al Shabaab, an Al Qaeda affiliate. In retaliation, the group conducted its first terrorist attack outside Somalia in 2010, killing 79 people, including one American, in bombings in Kampala. Uganda also led regional efforts, until 2017, to pursue the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA), a small, violent group of Ugandan origin that has terrorized civilians across Central Africa. U.S. advisors withdrew from the mission in 2017 and Uganda subsequently pulled its troops, declaring that the LRA no longer posed a security threat. Separately, Uganda has conducted operations in the DRC against a small, Islamist Ugandan rebel group, the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF).

Uganda’s deteriorating relationship with neighboring Rwanda has regional implications. The public rhetoric of the two governments, once close, has become increasingly hostile since 2017. Their feud threatens a trade route vital not only to Rwanda, but also to Burundi and eastern DRC.

U.S. Assistance

U.S. foreign aid to Uganda has focused primarily on health programs, but also supports agriculture, education, conflict mitigation, and governance initiatives. Bilateral aid rose from \$330 million in FY2007 to \$560 million in FY2018. The Trump Administration has requested \$415 million in FY2020 (95% of it for health programs). The FY2020 request does not include food aid, which is allocated during the fiscal year (it was \$31 million of the FY2018 total).

Bilateral aid figures do not include much of the substantial U.S. security assistance provided to support Uganda’s participation in regional stability operations. Uganda has been the largest recipient of U.S. support for AMISOM, which has totaled roughly \$2 billion in support to all troop contributing countries. That total includes DOD “train and equip” funding, of which Uganda has been among the largest recipients in Africa. DOD has notified Congress of over \$280 million in equipment and training for Uganda since FY2011; over \$60 million in joint support to Uganda and Burundi for AMISOM; and significant funding for the 2011-2017 counter-LRA effort. Uganda also receives counterterrorism aid through State Department funds. It received over \$30 million in support via the African Peacekeeping Rapid Response Partnership (APRRP).

Uganda’s North Korea ties have been a source of strain in the U.S. relationship. Under pressure to comply with U.N. sanctions, Uganda claims to have cut military ties in 2017, but reports suggest some engagement may have continued.

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