

Uganda's Slow Slide into Crisis

Growing discontent threatens the dysfunctional and corrupt political system built by President Museveni, who is now manoeuvring to extend his three decades in power by raising a 75-year age limit on presidential candidates. As security, governance and economic performance deteriorates, Uganda needs urgent reforms to avoid greater instability.

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Uganda's security forces patrol on a street as students of Makerere University protest against plans to scrap a

*presidential age limit from the constitution in Kampala
on 21 September 2017. AFP/Isaac Kasamani*



- **What's the issue?** Popular discontent is growing over President Museveni's apparent desire to remain in power while governance, economic performance and security deteriorate.
- **Why does it matter?** Uganda is not in danger of renewed civil war or rebel violence, but it risks sliding into a political crisis that could eventually threaten the country's hard-won stability.
- **What should be done?** The government should hold a national dialogue over presidential succession, enact

reforms to the partisan police force, stop postponing local elections and initiate broad consultations on land reform. Donors should encourage these efforts, while avoiding projects that help perpetuate political patronage.

Executive Summary

Uganda suffers from inefficient patronage politics and a downward spiral of declining governance, poor economic performance and local insecurity. President Yoweri Kaguta Museveni, in power since 1986, appears unwilling to step down; supporters and detractors alike expect him to rule until he dies or engineers a handover to a close ally or family member. He will be 77 by the next election in 2021 and is poised to amend the constitution's 75-year age limit, despite objections from the opposition, civil society and some in his own party. The president undoubtedly retains support, particularly in rural areas, not all of which is patronage-based. He is credited with bringing stability after the 1980s civil wars and eventually defeating the Lord's Resistance Army rebellion, though his autocratic drift and systemic corruption risks wrecking this legacy. With political and institutional reform, there still is time to avoid such an outcome.

The decline in governance has ripple effects across the system. It stymies attempts to improve core services – particularly infrastructure and agriculture – that are strained by the demands of a rapidly growing population. Urgent infrastructure projects and the long-anticipated start of oil production have suffered delays, further depressing international investment. New government initiatives, nominally aimed at stimulating the economy, typically take the form of handouts, particularly to under-employed youth, designed to secure political support. The likewise politically-motivated creation of new administrative districts has not

improved local services, but instead increased the size of the public sector, straining an already overwhelmed public purse. New districts also contribute to communal tensions, particularly when delimitation reallocates control over natural resources and land.

The security sector, particularly the police, is emblematic of these problems. Police officers carry out functions that are nominally intended to preserve public order yet in reality function as the president's first line of defence against rivals. They spend much of their time disrupting opposition activities. Allegations of criminal activity within the police undermines its legitimacy; officers are reportedly involved in protection rackets, organised crime and turf wars. Violent crime, including murder, is on the rise as police ability to carry out regular duties declines. The rise of informal security groups, most notably the Crime Preventers (a non-uniformed youth militia that mobilised pro-government votes and intimidated its rivals during the 2016 election), has blurred lines, further eroded accountability, politicised policing and weakened the influence of better trained and disciplined career officers.

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As crime has risen, particularly in urban areas, local governance has deteriorated. The local council system remains the bedrock of the ruling National Resistance Movement (NRM), but the government has not held village or parish council elections since 2002, due partly to their cost but also reportedly to fears of the outcome. Local administration has withered and become increasingly dysfunctional.

Disputes over land, administrative districts and the government's recognition of “traditional” authorities – another

form of patronage – likewise prompt communal and ethnic violence, problems Ugandans doubt the state can resolve. Clashes are on the rise between the authorities and locals forcibly removed from newly demarcated wildlife reserves or who feel that ancestral lands are being grabbed by rapacious businessmen. The forthcoming land reform bill – a constitutional amendment that would ease government purchase of private land for infrastructure projects – provokes fears of more land-grabbing.

The lack of opportunities for youth plus tensions surrounding the presidential age-limit amendment and controversial land reform bills are fuelling the rise of new political actors – notably the musician turned-populist MP Bobi Wine – and increasing the risk of popular demonstrations that could provoke a violent crackdown.

Uganda is in urgent need of political and administrative reform to prevent a slide toward an increasingly dysfunctional, corrupt and insecure system. In order to mitigate longer-term dangers of civil strife, donors should be more sensitive to the political impact of their assistance by avoiding projects that contribute to ruling party patronage. For its part, President Museveni's government should:

- **Hold a credible National Dialogue:** This should be done by revisiting plans to which the ruling party itself had agreed after the February 2016 election. Such a dialogue should be broad-based and focus on popular consultations with Ugandan citizens to discuss issues associated with the presidential succession **and** reduce fears that it might end in violence.
- **Take steps to professionalise the police and improve its leadership:** To stop the decline in police operational

capacity and address criminality within police ranks, the government should re-institute a merit-based system of promotions in the senior command and investigate and prosecute alleged crimes by members of the force. It also should end or reduce use of informal, non-uniformed groups, particularly the Crime Preventers.

- **Improve local governance:** Hold local council elections to re-legitimise grass-roots administration while imposing a moratorium on the creation of new administrative districts.
- **Consult widely on land reform:** Complete consultations with the population at the local level (in local languages) in association with civil society to understand main concerns before embarking on any land ownership reform. Reforms should give local leaders – including elders and elected council leaders – a say in matters such as land allocation. The government should shelve the upcoming constitutional amendment on government land acquisition and instead prioritise reforms and anti-corruption measures within the lands ministry.

These proposed steps will not be easy. But President Museveni should recognise them as necessary to avert dangerous drift and limit the risk of damage to his legacy.

I. Museveni for Life?

President Yoweri Kaguta Museveni has led Uganda since 1986 and seems determined to remain in power. Over time, his rule slowly has shifted from broad-based and constitutional to patronage-based and personal, with his family at the centre. The president controls key institutions, including the army and police, that guarantee his political survival. His ruling

National Resistance Movement (NRM) party dominates all levels of the state. Established opposition forces, whose populist messaging often appears to resonate during election campaigns, lack the organisation, money and political space to win at the ballot box.

Despite some dissent around the 2016 election, Museveni also has neutered internal NRM opposition and remains entrenched as party head. The longer-term significance of emerging political leaders and new forms of protest remains uncertain as does the potential mobilisation of discontented youth. However, taken together these factors arguably now pose the biggest current challenge to President Museveni.

A. Survival at the Ballot Box

Although the president largely has been untroubled by opposition parties – including the main opposition party, the Forum for Democratic Change (FDC) – there are signs he is losing some popularity. In the February 2016 presidential vote, he triumphed comfortably despite two apparently strong challengers: former ruling party heavyweight Amama Mbabazi and perennial opposition leader Kizza Besigye (representing the FDC). Still, Museveni's official margin of victory over Besigye, while comfortable (60.6 to 35.6 per cent), was roughly 8 per cent lower than in 2011.

The presidential bid of Mbabazi – a former prime minister and NRM secretary general who ran as an independent – reflected discord within the ruling party, particularly around the issue of who will succeed Museveni.

Without an inspiring message, Museveni relied largely on patronage and alleged vote buying, massively out-spending his opponents. The security services, particularly the police, suppressed opposition activities. The FDC rejected the results,

claiming Besigye had won 51 per cent, and launched a “Defiance Campaign” which failed to gain much popular support. Besigye himself was imprisoned – he has already served time in jail several times before – on a treason charge, which served to keep him and his followers off the streets.

To ease post-election tensions, the government, in consultation with a coalition of civil society groups, agreed to a National Dialogue that would develop a roadmap for political transition and encourage public debate about the country’s future. A civil society working group proposed a four-track process, including a constitutional review process and direct talks between Museveni and Besigye.

But as the defiance campaign floundered and the opposition continued to insist on an audit of election results, the government’s interest in such a dialogue waned. Still, a credible dialogue would be a worthwhile concession ahead of potentially difficult 2021 elections and boost Museveni’s flagging international legitimacy.

B. The Age-limit Bill

Museveni still enjoys personal goodwill for having led the country out of the civil wars that wracked Uganda during the 1970s and 1980s. He is widely expected to be the NRM’s candidate in 2021 and many believe he intends to rule until he dies. But to do so the president, now 73, must remove or negotiate his way around a constitutional provision barring presidential candidates older than 75. Museveni has remained largely silent on lifting the age restriction, though his supporters have started the amendment process in parliament. Despite opposition protests and donor disapproval, the effort is expected to succeed given the ruling party’s dominance and

the legislature's tendency to rubberstamp presidential priorities.

In early October 2017, an NRM parliamentarian introduced a bill to remove the age limit, prompting wide protests, particularly by students, and a police crackdown.

Supporters abandoned a motion that would have allowed a parliament member to take a leave of absence to prepare the bill – the first step toward its adoption – after a brawl broke out between opposition and pro-government parliamentarians, aided by members of the Special Forces Command who had entered the parliament building. The bill eventually passed its first reading on 3 October. About two weeks later, police fired live bullets to disperse a crowd in the western town of Rukungiri, reportedly killing two protestors.

Prior to the bill's introduction, the government promised to establish a constitutional review commission to address, among other things, electoral reforms on such issues as district boundaries.

Many saw this as an attempt by Museveni to compensate for the controversial age-limit cancellation by instituting more popular reforms, such as restoring presidential term limits, which had been removed in 2005.

Thus far, however, the government has neither established the commission nor tabled a comprehensive constitutional reform bill. Instead, separate bills have been advanced on land reform and the age limit that include electoral reform measures falling far short of opposition expectations.

C. Managing Interests and Expectations

Although lifting the presidential age-limit is unlikely to present a major political challenge, Museveni still will need to manoeuvre skilfully, not only to fend off opposition in the courts or on the streets, but also to keep his own party in line. The NRM is a force bound not by ideology or policy but essentially by ambition and patronage. With five terms in office, the dominance of Bush War veterans in the government, party and army is ending.

Instead, more youthful cadres are vying for power; those defending the president and party with greatest zeal have risen furthest. At the same time, these younger politicians – who have yet to consolidate power – seem to recognise the current political order is in its twilight, spurring intense competition among them.

“Many Ugandans [...] project their hopes to redress historic injustices and overcome underdevelopment onto a post-Museveni era.

Among other swathes of society, expectations regarding a potential succession also run high. Many Ugandans, particularly from marginalised regions, project their hopes to redress historic injustices and overcome underdevelopment onto a post-Museveni era. As yet, however, there has been no broad conversation about what a transition might look like. The combination of marginalised groups’ expectations, potential intra-elite jockeying for spoils and the absence of a clear succession roadmap, means that the incumbent’s unexpected death potentially could prompt violence.

Fuelling these concerns is the lack of an obvious successor. The president has not groomed an heir – at least not openly. Nor does his family, which likely will seek to control succession politics, appear to be united.

Many see Museveni's son, Muhoozi Kainerugaba, and wife, Janet, as the most likely contenders.

Museveni was rumoured to be grooming Muhoozi when, in 2008, he put him in charge of the newly created Special Forces Unit – a powerful subdivision within the army that has now grown into a third service (alongside land and air forces).

This did not sit well with many older military officers, whose opposition triggered a reshuffle that moved a number of veterans, including long-time chief of Defence Forces, General Aronda Nyakairima, into civilian positions or administrative posts. In January 2017, Museveni moved his son from head of the special forces to senior presidential advisor, which allows the president to better protect, prepare and control him.

Muhoozi has consistently denied eyeing the presidency.

His mother, Janet Museveni – a former parliament member and current cabinet minister – apparently has not ruled the presidency out. She has crafted a powerful network of allies and a reputation as a savvy political operator.

Yet neither the first lady nor her son enjoys much popular appeal or establishment support.

The public appears to have little confidence that Museveni's departure will be followed by a constitutional transfer of power. Many expect that groups left out of power will confront the government.

In response, the military might step in, most likely in support of the NRM establishment. How the police and army rank-and-file would react to a contested transition is unclear. Although the president and ruling party enjoy a firm grip over

the police top command, lower ranks suffer poor pay and living conditions, which has fuelled divisions and encouraged corruption.

D. An Opposition in Disarray

That few Ugandans believe political change will take place via the ballot box, a popular uprising or a credible National Dialogue is unsurprising, given the state of the political opposition, suffering from funding shortages, infighting and regime co-option.

Recent attempts to form an opposition coalition, as occurred prior to the 2016 election, have run aground over disagreements regarding who should lead it.

The FDC is the official parliamentary opposition, but it is divided between rival leaders – Besigye, its flag-bearer, who enjoys widespread support among opposition activists, and the party’s president, Mugisha Muntu, whose profile is more technocratic. Their personal competition has a political dimension: while Muntu wants to focus on building grassroots party institutions, Besigye, having lost faith in elections, favours popular resistance.

The party has been weakened by a lack of grassroots structures, financial resources, divisions over strategy and regular police repression.

Faith in the democratic system remains strong overall. A 2015 survey showed that 50 per cent of Ugandans were “fairly satisfied” or “very satisfied” with the way democracy works in their country.

However, citing a widely shared view that constituencies are rewarded or punished according to election returns, Ugandans

interviewed by Crisis Group claimed that their fellow citizens often choose “not to waste my vote” on the opposition, hoping to at least reap the benefits of government patronage. Some interpret the rise of independent (but overwhelmingly NRM-aligned) candidates, who won 66 of 375 parliamentary seats in the 2016 election, as a rejection of the politics of both NRM and FDC.

E. Youth Frustration

Younger voters who tend to be most affected by economic decline are growing more active and gaining political significance. Many express themselves freely on social media, particularly regarding the age-limit bill, despite crackdowns on government critics and shrinking political space.

This evolution helped bring about the landslide election of Bobi Wine, a reggae star and vocal Museveni critic who calls for the president’s retirement and ran as an independent in the June 2017 Kyadondo East parliamentary by-election in the Kampala outskirts. His candidacy resonated with young and low-income slum dwellers who voted in large numbers. Ugandans widely read his victory – which he achieved with little infrastructure and no party affiliation – as an expression of voter frustration with party politics amid tensions surrounding passage of the age-limit bill.

Wine’s ability to mobilise hitherto neglected social groups should not be underestimated, though whether he can sustain his popularity remains unclear.

II. Failures of the Patronage State

Ugandans appear more concerned about poverty, unemployment and food shortages than the uncertain political transition.

A dysfunctional political system, focused more on keeping the president in office than on fixing the economy or providing public services, has contributed to underdevelopment and mounting insecurity. But the recipe that has worked to date – sporadic reforms while the president concentrates on sustaining patronage networks – might prove insufficient to maintain popular support at a time of growing economic hardship.

A. Economy in Decline

Annual economic growth, which ranged between 6 and 10 per cent during the boom years of 2000-2011, declined to an estimated 4.6 per cent in 2017.

It is likely to remain relatively low (though higher than most Western economies) due to declining global demand for commodities (which make up the bulk of Uganda's exports), a lack of bureaucratic support and instability in South Sudan, formerly a major Ugandan export market. Economic growth now barely keeps up with population growth, estimated at 3 per cent per year. The financial sector has experienced a particularly severe decline. This was illustrated by the 2016 fall of Crane Bank, owned by Sudhir Ruparelia, an Indian-born tycoon, due to huge non-performing loans granted to Ugandan business elites.

The young suffer disproportionately from un- or under-employment. In major towns and cities, many can only find transient work in the informal economy, as *boda boda* (moped taxi) drivers, guards, hawkers or other forms of casual labour.

Likewise, many young people lack access to land or social services.

With the rising cost of living, frustrated youth are easy prey for criminal gangs and ripe for political mobilisation.

The majority of Ugandans – some 84 per cent live in rural areas and 69 per cent are subsistence farmers – struggle to survive in a stagnating agricultural sector. Unpredictable weather patterns, environmental degradation, farm fragmentation (as land is passed down to multiple heirs) and insufficient government support, exacerbate their plight.

After a long dry spell – part of a broader regional drought – more than 1.5 million Ugandans needed food assistance in February 2017.

B. Public Sector Crisis

The public sector, undermined by decades of nepotism and corruption, is unable to meet rising demand for more and better service delivery. Acknowledging the problem in July 2016, in the wake of his election, the president committed his new term to “Hakuna mchezo!” (“No play”), vowing to stamp out corruption and putting forward a twenty-point plan for national development. The plan, which aims to turn Uganda into a middle-income country by 2020, listed twenty different areas in which progress would be made, including fighting corruption, increasing foreign investment and improving the operations of key productive sectors.

But piecemeal anti-corruption reforms largely have scapegoated junior players in a wider system of graft. Although measures such as the digitalisation of revenue and immigration services can help root out petty corruption, they do not address more sophisticated schemes by department and agency-wide networks.

Health and education are among the public services that have suffered most, with poor quality and chronic absence of doctors and teachers.

Opposition critics have attacked the government on this score, notably during the last election campaign, when Besigye's visits to dilapidated health facilities and makeshift police posts received extensive media coverage. Many of Museveni's popular 2016 campaign promises – including the delivery of eighteen million hoes to all households, 2 million Ugandan shillings (\$550) for every village's *malwa* group (women's groups brewing local beer) and free sanitary pads for school-aged girls – remain unfulfilled.

Agricultural development also has suffered. Budget allocations do not match the rhetorical emphasis on that sector and key programs have failed to deliver results.

Operation Wealth Creation, an army-led agricultural development scheme, which aimed to improve farm productivity, has not lived up to expectations.

Key infrastructure projects have progressed slowly. This includes the Standard Gauge Railway, part of an ambitious East African train network, as well as construction of a pipeline and refinery to service Uganda's new oil discoveries.

The government still hopes major oil production can begin in 2020, but industry analysts see this as unrealistic.

Construction of crucial transport arteries, such as the Kampala-Entebbe and Kampala-Jinja expressways, also lag behind schedule.

Some reforms have yielded dividends, particularly those affecting strategic agencies, like the Uganda Revenue

Authority and Uganda Roads Authority. Both have undergone changes under professional management that have improved their performance.

“In Kampala [...] the government struggles to enact necessary economic reforms and regulations opposed by key constituencies.

In Kampala, an opposition stronghold where Besigye captured 65 per cent of the 2016 vote, the government struggles to enact necessary economic reforms and regulations opposed by key constituencies. The Kampala Capital City Authority, controlled by the NRM – which wrested power away from the Lord Mayor Erias Lukwago, who was elected on the ticket of a smaller opposition party, the Democratic Party – has aggressively enforced regulations and reforms to planning and revenue collection. Yet these measures often collide with the interests of influential grassroots constituencies – *matatu* (mini-bus taxi) operators, *boda boda* drivers and street vendors – and those of powerful businessmen and property owners. Many who work in the city’s markets and streets resent paying more taxes when they receive few services in return.

In August 2017, the president ordered a series of measures to boost the economy and public services. He scrapped taxes and fees levied on informal businesses and promised to abolish dozens of agencies that duplicate the work of ministries.

These are steps in the right direction, but it remains to be seen if these initiatives will be sustained and are enough to produce tangible results.

C. Securing Political Support

Unwilling or unable to reform the public sector or address broad economic needs, the government has sought to co-opt supporters through patronage. This generally has occurred in two ways: first, via creation of new administrative districts and traditional kingdoms, which then receive constitutionally-mandated government resources; second, through politically-motivated handouts from development programs.

1. Creation of new districts and kingdoms

A decentralisation process, which is designed to improve service provision, more than doubled the number of districts (an administrative unit comprising several counties) between 2002 and 2017.

However, while it boosted both parliament's size and the public payroll, the government has not fulfilled its commitments by building the required number of schools and hospitals in each district.

Establishing new districts is popular: each one should potentially confer public sector jobs and additional public services. Lack of funds to support them forced the government to impose a moratorium on the process in 2013, however. The president lifted it in 2016 ahead of the elections.

Decentralisation carries another risk: it can aggravate identity politics when boundaries carved out along ethnic lines impact resource distribution. As a result, struggles over proposed new districts can turn bitter and sometimes violent.

In July 2017, the government announced it would review all district boundaries for re-demarcation to resolve disputes. This could be tricky, since any new delineation could trigger novel disputes among communities or between communities and the government.

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Recognition of historic kingdoms, or other traditional forms of local government, is another tool used to obtain the support of leaders and their communities.

The 2011 Institutions of Cultural and Traditional Leaders Act allowed the government to grant legal recognition to a large number of individuals who claimed cultural leader status. This has come at a cost, however. While such posts tend to offer only meagre legal, material and political entitlements, these leaders can exploit identity politics to mobilise communities, thereby posing a potential threat to the central government and the NRM machine. The state may then try to absorb kingdoms into its patronage networks.

This can heighten competition for leadership positions, further exacerbating tensions in multi-ethnic communities.

A deadly example of how government patronage can fuel tensions occurred in the western Rwenzori region, where Museveni's recognition of a new king sparked clashes between the two largest ethnic groups, the Bamba and Bakonzo.

The new Bamba king rejected the authority of the Rwenzori *Omusinga*, a traditional Bakonzo king previously recognised by the government. Ethnic clashes in July 2014 killed 89 people.

The 2016 elections sparked clashes over disputed local results in Bundibugyo district, which left fifteen dead. The vote also

consolidated the FDC's hold on the region, alarming the government.

When armed Bakonzo youth attacked army and police patrols in March 2016, killing a number of soldiers and officers, the government responded by deploying a much larger military contingent.

After security forces raided an alleged militia training camp, killing four people, the government accused the king of turning his royal guards, by law unarmed, into a private militia in hopes of establishing an independent Bakonzo kingdom (the Yira Republic). A few days later the army attacked the *Omusinga* palace in Kasese, leaving 155 dead.

The government's military response in Kasese demonstrates its uneasiness with the expanding political ambitions of traditional kingdoms, fearing they may become a focus for anti-government sentiment.

2. Handouts for votes

The NRM also seeks the support of youth and small-scale farmers through hand-outs. Over the past three years, more than 144,000 youths (organised as groups) received soft (low interest without collateral) loans to create small businesses under the Youth Livelihood Programme.

The program lacks an adequate skills training component, however. Applicants complain the selection process is opaque and critics allege the program has been tainted by local government nepotism, political favouritism and embezzlement.

Local officials and residents also claim that, ahead of the elections, the funds commonly were treated as “money to eat” (voter bribes) and fed into the NRM campaign budget.

Many recipients reportedly are linked to pro-government groups, such as the Crime Preventers. A large number of the businesses funded have failed; loan recovery has been slow, despite threats of arrest.

The military-led Operation Wealth Creation – intended to boost agricultural production through the free distribution of agricultural products, notably seeds, to smallholder farmers – also serves as a source of patronage.

Reports allege that military veterans are rewarded with jobs and that seed suppliers with government links are awarded lucrative contracts. Most farmers gain little, if any, benefit because the inputs are of low quality, provided at the wrong time of year or unsuitable for their location. Some complain the program favours pro-government beneficiaries. More significantly, because the military lacks the expertise of the now withered government agricultural support services, the program is poorly designed, focusing on seed distribution when most farmers struggle with lack of fertilisers or insufficient irrigation. It often distributes the wrong products at the wrong times. After the 2016 elections, both programs saw some changes, but these fell short of what was required.

III. Increasing Lawlessness

The ruling party’s restoration of security after a series of brutal civil wars remains the historical anchor of its legitimacy. President Museveni often refers to “*oturu*” (sleeping peacefully) under the NRM and contrasts his rule with the violence and political instability that preceded it. Still,

crime and insecurity are on the rise and, in the president's own words, "a spike of lawlessness" grips the country.

This is due in part to politicisation of the police, now more focused on disrupting opposition activity than fighting crime, and in part to the breakdown of local order as traditional institutions cannot cope with complex societal problems.

A. The Politicised Police Force

With patronage resources stretched thin, the government increasingly relies on coercion. A largely militarised and politicised police force commanded by Inspector General Kale Kayihura, a Museveni loyalist who has held the position since 2005, plays a central role in addressing dissent.

Over the past decade, the size, budget and mandate of the police force have all expanded.

The 2013 Public Order Management Act (POMA) gives the force broad powers and grants its chief wide discretion to ban public gatherings. In addition to repressing protests and breaking up opposition rallies, the police have arrested, and the government has prosecuted, critics over social media posts, sometimes on national security grounds.

Paramilitary units, including the Flying Squad and the recently disbanded Special Investigations Unit, have been accused of abuses by international and domestic human rights organisations.

In May 2017, for example, the media published pictures of alleged torture victims held at the Nalufenya police station (described by the government as a "counter-terrorism detention centre") in Jinja, a town approximately 80km east of Kampala. Opposition and civil society organisations have

accused the police of arbitrarily arresting and detaining opposition activists.

There are structural problems as well. The police hierarchy increasingly operates through informal networks that bypass the official chain of command.

The force also relies on poorly-trained auxiliaries and volunteers: the plain-clothed “Kiboko Squads” (stick wielding men) who reportedly beat citizens at public gatherings; members of the motorbike taxis association, “Boda Boda 2010”, who reportedly spy on behalf of the government; and the Crime Preventers, volunteers supervised by local station chiefs and reportedly re-introduced during the 2016 elections to mobilise support and intimidate the opposition. Police officers and other critics accuse the Crime Preventers of carrying out arbitrary arrests and extortion, saying they are undermining local government forces.

Factionalism within the police is another concern. Powerful officers appointed by the inspector general, Crime Preventers and disgruntled career policemen compete for influence and resources. Many career officers criticise the way the system functions, pointing to surging local crime and botched investigations of even high-profile murders. Rival units publicly blame each other.

Poor pay and living conditions, corruption and politicisation have allowed criminals to infiltrate the force, a problem President Museveni has acknowledged and which the leadership has taken some steps to address.

B. Rising Crime

The combination of corrupt, politicised police plus rising unemployment and deteriorating local governance, has contributed to mounting crime.

In Kampala, youth gangs at times allegedly connive with police officials. Between May and August 2017 at least twenty women were raped and murdered on the outskirts of Kampala and Entebbe, sparking public panic. In Teso and Kitgum districts, police implicated local officials in a spate of armed robberies and murder in late 2016; within the greater Masaka region, bands of thugs raided villages at night during the first half of 2017. Scores were arrested.

In recent years, armed groups have attacked police stations, stealing guns, freeing detainees, and leaving several police officers dead. In Sebei, Kapchorwa district, a purported rebel group attacked a string of police stations during the 2016 electoral campaign until its alleged ring-leader was arrested.

Locals generally dismiss the notion that this was a rebellion, pointing instead to land-related conflicts between communities and the Uganda Wildlife Authority rangers in Mount Elgon National Park.

There also has been a rise in high-profile assassinations. The best-known victim was the powerful Assistant Inspector General of Police, Felix Kaweesi, killed in March 2017.

Two years earlier, Senior State Prosecutor Joan Kagezi, who had been working on the case of the 2010 Kampala terrorist bombing, was murdered in the same professional manner by assailants on motorbikes. A dozen Muslim clerics have also been killed by apparent hitmen over the past three years. Motives remain unclear, although police have levelled unsubstantiated accusations against the Allied Democratic

Forces – a nominally Islamist rebel group of Ugandan origin that has operated in eastern Congo since 2007.

C. Erosion of Local Order

The local council system, comprising village and parish councils set up by the NRM during the Bush War, has withered and lost legitimacy.

Set up to allow communities to govern themselves and manage their own security while serving as the national party's local backbone, the system originally included local courts, defence units overseen by a defence secretary and representatives of special interest groups. In many places today, however, only the chairman and in some instances a defence secretary remain, with the former wielding predominant power.

Elections for local councillors have not been held since 2002. Critics blame the postponements on the NRM's fears that a vote could uproot its entrenched grassroots structure plus the cost of carrying out elections in 58,000 villages and parishes countrywide. Local councillor positions, last elected in 2001, often are transferred to sons or political allies.

According to a roadmap for local elections released by the election commission in late August, new council elections were supposed to take place in November 2017, but they were temporarily postponed in early November following a legal challenge. If and when the vote proceeds, voters will not cast secret ballots but line up behind their preferred candidates – a practice officially portrayed as cost-saving measure, but widely interpreted as a way to deter opposition to ruling party favourites.

D. Land Disputes

Land disputes lie behind much community-level violence. A dysfunctional system of local governance and law, coupled with ambiguities associated with customary ownership, contribute to this.

In some regions, the erosion of the local council system coupled with popular mistrust of police and politicians, has contributed to renewed demand for mediation and dispute resolution by elders and other traditional leaders. Elders know the historical boundaries of family and community lands, enjoy authority in their clans and tend to possess a reputation for greater integrity than officials and politicians. But they lack formal support or training and often struggle to meet constituents' demands. Elders can also themselves be vulnerable to corruption and political influence.

While elders can play a useful role in mediation at the village level, they are not a substitute for a properly functioning legal system.

But access to Ugandan courts is costly, legal processes are time consuming and there is little confidence in their integrity. Consequently, many land conflicts remain unresolved, giving rise to tension and, in some cases, violence. The pervasive view is that those with money and political influence usually prevail.

Government acquisitions of land and interventions in ownership disputes are seen in many communities as cover for elite land-grabs. Proposed legal reforms also provoke suspicion, including a recent constitutional amendment (the Land Reform Bill) to ease the acquisition of private land for development and infrastructure projects, which has been put on hold for now.

Examples abound of how locals distrust the government's intentions. In northern Uganda, communities in the Acholi and West Nile regions are sceptical of the government's acquisition of communal land to house the huge influx of South Sudanese refugees since 2013, and doubt that it ever will be returned.

Although those communities have shown considerable generosity toward refugees, with whom many share ethnic and cultural ties, they blame the government, the UN and NGOs for allegedly failing to deliver promised services to host communities or mitigate against adverse environmental effects. In some instances, protestors have temporarily blocked aid NGOs from accessing refugee camps.

A conflict over the boundary between Adjumani and Amuru districts in Apaa, that pits the Acholi against the Madi community, illustrates how tensions over district borders can escalate.

It first made headlines in April 2015 when Acholi women stripped naked in front of visiting ministers to protest a planned border demarcation they feared would lead to their eviction. Uganda Wildlife Authority claims on customary land earmarked for development by foreign investors already had stoked tensions, prompting local politicians and others to speak up on the community's behalf. When the government sought to define the boundary in June 2017, violence flared; sporadic clashes have caused the deaths of at least eight Acholi and Madi and displaced thousands.

IV. Halting the Slide

Uganda is not at risk of violence on the scale of the civil conflicts in the 1980s or the war with the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) in the 1990s and 2000s. But deterioration in

governance and the state's increasingly corrupt and authoritarian character mean politics likely will become more polarised and repressive, which could create conditions for future civil strife. Political and administrative reforms are necessary to prevent this slide.

International partners and donors, many of whom have contributed huge sums to Uganda's development, rightly are concerned about the country's direction.

That Uganda is an important geopolitical ally, particularly in Somalia where for many years it has contributed troops to the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM), should not prevent them from engaging critically with the government. They also should take steps to minimise the regime's use of foreign-funded development projects for patronage purposes. Donors should urge the government to enact further reform in the following areas:

- **A credible National Dialogue:** Attempts to hold a National Dialogue on a political transition and constitutional reform after the 2016 presidential election ground to halt because neither the government nor the opposition was willing to make the necessary concessions. The idea had merit, however. Such a dialogue, if well designed, could improve relations between the opposition and the government and potentially spark a genuine conversation about a post-Museveni future and a peaceful transition. It should not focus on mending relations between Museveni and opposition leaders, but instead aim for a wide-ranging national conversation that reduces the uncertainty and fear associated with the presidential succession. This should include forging clear terms of reference and common positions to which all parties are fully

committed, and having opposition parties and civil society develop common positions.

- **Police reform:** Reforms are needed to make the police less partisan and more effective. Its current heavy-handed style – particularly with respect to opposition activities – is worsening relations with the public and decreasing trust in the institution. The police also should clarify the role of non-uniformed groups, notably Crime Preventers, who often clash with uniformed colleagues and exacerbate village-level insecurity. Finally, the government should strive to stop the criminalisation and corruption of police by aggressively investigating and prosecuting individuals allegedly involved in such practises and improving standards of leadership by basing promotions on professional achievement, rather than personal appointments.
- **Local Council Elections:** The much-postponed local council elections, previously scheduled for late November 2017, should be held at the earliest possible date. Local councillors at the village and parish level need to regain the legitimacy conferred by regular elections. Although plans for voting by lining up (rather than a costlier secret ballot) are far from optimal, the polls should go ahead as a means to rejuvenate the local council system.
- **An end to new districts:** The government should refrain from creating further administrative districts, given that the human resources and capacity of existing districts already are overstretched. While new districts often are popular and pay short-term dividends, they can undermine the government itself when over time they

prove unable to provide adequate services and sometimes stimulate intercommunal tensions.

- **Consultations on land ownership:** The government's attempts to resolve land disputes through ownership registration often raise local suspicions about potential elite land grabbing, allegedly facilitated by corruption in the land ministry and local government. Anticipated passage of the land amendment bill, although presently on hold and less damaging than widely feared, feeds such concerns. There is good reason to improve the land ownership system but, in light of these suspicions and the associated risk of tension and violence, such reforms should take place only after wide-ranging consultation with the public and after sensitising the citizenry regarding the aims of any new legislation.

V. Conclusion

Major violence is unlikely for now, but Uganda nonetheless faces the gradual fraying of order, security and governance. Discontent is growing, particularly among youth, against what many Ugandans see as perpetual rule by President Museveni and his NRM government. The president cannot continue to rely on patronage and coercion by loyal security services instead of initiating the reforms necessary to reverse the decline of the economy, public services and security. This deterioration affects the lives of ordinary Ugandans and fuels grievances both among communities and between communities and the state.

Thus far, Museveni largely has managed opposition to his rule without significant violence. Yet should opposition grow, both he and the security services, particularly the police, could well resort to more aggressive repression against protestors, their

leaders and supporters in civil society and the media. This would make Uganda less governable, driving away donor support and foreign investment.

Without reform at the top, the system will become ever more expensive and difficult to manage, increasing the likelihood of a political explosion that would be impossible to contain using current methods. President Museveni holds the keys to potential – and necessary – reform. He oversaw the country's historic recovery after years of civil war. It is in the president's own interest to halt Uganda's slide, work with his opponents and give its decaying institutions a chance to recover. Failure to do these things risks spoiling the president's legacy and leading his country toward a more dangerous future.

Nairobi/Brussels, 21 November 2017

Appendix A: Map of Uganda



Map of Uganda International Crisis Group/KO, May 2017. Based on UN map no.3862 Rev. 4, May 2003.