



EARLY WARNING COUNTRY REPORT OCTOBER 2024

An Uncertain Future

PREVENTING MASS ATROCITIES IN UGANDA

UNITED STATES
HOLOCAUST
MEMORIAL
MUSEUM

SIMON-SKJODT CENTER
FOR THE PREVENTION OF GENOCIDE

THE UNITED STATES HOLOCAUST MEMORIAL MUSEUM teaches that the Holocaust was preventable and that by heeding warning signs and taking early action, individuals and governments can save lives. With this knowledge, the Simon-Skjodt Center for the Prevention of Genocide works to fulfill Elie Wiesel’s challenge to do for the victims of genocide today what the world failed to do for the Jews of Europe in the 1930s and 1940s. The mandate of the Simon-Skjodt Center is to alert the national conscience, influence policy makers, and stimulate worldwide action to prevent and work to halt acts of genocide or related crimes against humanity, and advance justice and accountability. Learn more at ushmm.org/genocide-prevention.

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AN UNCERTAIN FUTURE: PREVENTING MASS ATROCITIES IN UGANDA

CONTENTS

Foreword.....	i
Introduction	1
Background and Methodology.....	2
Structural Risk Factors	3
History of mass atrocities	3
Identity-based discrimination and perceptions of exclusion.....	5
Poor management of land and other natural resources	8
Widespread human rights violations and lack of accountability for human rights abuses	11
Negative perceptions of state legitimacy.....	12
Precipitating Factors of Atrocity Crimes	14
Uncertainty around a coming transition.....	14
Heightened state-led political violence since the last election cycle.....	16
Escalating restrictions on civil and political rights	17
Plausible Atrocity Crime Scenarios	19
Scenario A: Political repression escalates	20
Scenario B: An illegitimate political transition	22
Scenario C: State vs. nonstate armed groups	24
Critical Uncertainties.....	25
Resilience and Mitigating Factors.....	26
Religious leaders	26
Uganda Kings and Cultural Leaders Forum (UKCL).....	26
Development partners	26
Recommendations.....	27



FOREWORD

Genocide and related crimes against humanity are devastating in their scale and scope; in the enduring scars for survivors and their families and the long-term trauma they cause in societies; and in the economic, political, and social costs and consequences, often extending far beyond the territory in which they were committed.

Working to prevent future genocides requires an understanding of how these events occur, including considerations about warning signs and human behaviors that make genocide and mass atrocities possible. We know from studying the Holocaust and other genocides that such events are never spontaneous. They are always preceded by a range of early warning signs. If warning signs are detected and their causes addressed, it may be possible to prevent catastrophic loss of life.

The Museum's Founding Chairman and Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel's vision was that the Museum would do for victims of genocide today what was not done for the Jews of Europe: "Only a conscious, concerted attempt to learn from past errors can prevent recurrence to any racial, religious, ethnic, or national group."

The Museum's Simon-Skjodt Center was established to help fulfill that vision. The Center's mandate is "to alert the national conscience, influence policy makers, and stimulate worldwide action to confront and prevent genocide." As a trusted resource for government officials, we strive to promote broad and enduring bipartisan commitment among policy makers to preventing genocide and related crimes against humanity.

One of the Simon-Skjodt Center's goals is to ensure that the United States government, other governments, and multilateral organizations have institutionalized structures, tools, and policies to effectively prevent and respond to genocide and other mass atrocities. The Early Warning Project is listed in the [Global Fragility Act](#) (2019) as a source to determine where the US government should prioritize its Global Fragility Strategy, a landmark ten-year effort to improve US action to stabilize conflict-affected areas and prevent extremism and violent conflict.

The more governments and international organizations develop their own early warning tools and processes, the better our Early Warning Project can help serve as a catalyst for preventive action.

In many places, mass killings are ongoing—in countries such as Burma and Sudan. These cases are well-known. But this risk assessment's primary focus—and the gap we seek to fill—is to draw attention to a country at risk of a new outbreak of mass killing. The SCPG focuses on large-scale, group-targeted, identity-based persecution rising to the level of genocide and/or related crimes against humanity. Additionally, the Center's mandate to work on *prevention* requires it to work on situations *before* they show definitive signs of genocide or related crimes against humanity. We focus on situations where we believe we can make the most impact based on a combination of factors. These factors include the ability for Simon-Skjodt Center

staff to conduct rigorous field work in the area (or a pre-existing level of staff expertise in the area), opportunities for effective engagement with the community at risk, and the need to draw attention to cases where policy, media, and public attention on the case are lower than merited by the level of risk.

Uganda is a remarkable country, rich in history, diversity of people, natural beauty and resources. By investing in understanding and addressing present risks, both local and international policy makers and stakeholders have the opportunity to prevent large-scale violence and save lives. While mass atrocities are not inevitable, ignoring warning signs or waiting until a crisis emerges puts the Ugandan people at risk, especially considering the legacy of past atrocities. It is crucial to analyze how mass atrocities could occur even in contexts like Uganda, where they may not seem likely.

Preventing genocide and related crimes against humanity is of course difficult. In deciding how to respond, policy makers face an array of constraints and competing concerns. Yet, the choice to prevent one potential tragedy should not take a back seat to confronting ongoing crises. We know from the Holocaust what can happen when early warning signs go unheeded. We aim for this risk assessment to serve as a tool and a resource for policy makers and others interested in prevention. We hope this helps them better establish priorities and undertake the discussion and deeper analysis that can help reveal where preventive action can make the greatest impact in saving lives.

Naomi Kikoler
Director
Simon-Skjoldt Center for the Prevention of Genocide
October 2024

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction

This report assesses the risk of mass atrocities (large-scale, systematic violence against civilian populations) in Uganda over the next one to two years. Since its independence, Uganda has experienced violent political transitions and mass atrocities. At 80 years old, President Yoweri Kaguta Museveni has ruled the country for 38 years through his political party, the National Resistance Movement. Museveni has never spoken publicly about a political transition from his rule or given an indication that he plans to step down anytime soon. Yet, his age, growing public frustration with his rule, and the presidential elections scheduled for 2026 are creating a sense that a transition must be coming. Ugandans are increasingly consumed with questions about when and how Museveni will leave office and who will lead Uganda in his wake.

The uncertainty around what could be the country's first political transition in nearly four decades is breeding division and fears about potential violence. Growing disputes over corruption, inadequate public services, and poor management of land and natural resources have also contributed to widespread frustration across communities. These disputes are often perceived along identity lines. In addition, clashes between state security forces (e.g., the police and military) and political opposition, protesters, and youth are common, especially around elections. The previous two presidential election cycles both saw large demonstrations and were marred by violence. Given the current dynamics, there is strong reason to believe that the repression and violence that transpired during the 2021 campaign and election may recur in 2026 or be worse.

Background and Methodology

This report is based on research in Uganda from August to December in 2023, as well as on expert consultations and a literature review in 2023 and 2024. The report's conceptual framework and research questions draw from the atrocity assessment framework developed by the US government.¹

Structural Risk Factors

Five structural factors—which are longstanding, slow or difficult to change, and create the context in which conflict and atrocity crimes might occur—are at the root of mass atrocity risks in Uganda:

1. History of mass atrocities: Uganda has experienced mass atrocities and violent political transitions including military coups d'état, civil wars, and communal violence.
2. Identity-based discrimination and perceptions of exclusion: Ethnic groups from the central, northern, and eastern regions perceive themselves as excluded by the state from economic opportunities and access to resources.
3. Poor management of land and other natural resources: Mismanagement of natural resources by the state or corporations is commonplace.
4. Widespread human rights violations and lack of accountability for human rights abuses: Human rights abuses and a lack of accountability for abuses are extensive.

5. Negative perceptions of state legitimacy: The public holds strong negative perceptions of state legitimacy.

Precipitating Factors of Atrocity Crimes

In the context of these structural factors, three “precipitating factors”—recent developments that may shift the balance of power, change incentive structures, and further divide groups—are increasing risks in the near term:

1. Uncertainty around a coming transition: Unpredictability around what could be the country’s first political transition in nearly four decades is breeding division and fears about potential violence.
2. Heightened state-led political violence since the last election cycle: In response to political demonstrations, Ugandan security forces have used lethal force against protesters, raising concerns about potential similar actions during the upcoming election.
3. Escalating restrictions on civil and political rights: State-led attacks against civil society indicate the government’s willingness to violate rights, tend to exacerbate anti-government sentiment, and weaken civil society’s ability to mitigate violence, which may contribute to escalating tensions and increased violence.

Plausible Atrocity Crimes Scenarios

We identify three plausible mass atrocity scenarios in Uganda. These are “worst-case scenarios,” not inevitable or even most likely outcomes. We describe plausible mass atrocity scenarios to combat the recurring “failure of imagination” often cited in past cases of mass atrocities.² Describing these scenarios can help increase attention on mass atrocity risks and inform policy and programs to prevent a worst-case outcome. In all three scenarios, mass atrocities would be committed by Ugandan state security forces.³ Although multiple actors have the potential to commit some violence, Ugandan state security forces have significantly greater capacity to commit atrocity crimes.

In two of the scenarios mass atrocities would be triggered by large-scale demonstrations. Although it is difficult to forecast the size and durability of a protest movement, we believe increasing dissatisfaction with the state makes it plausible that protests could reach a new level in the next one to two years.⁴

If political and social unrest persist, it is possible that the Ugandan government could determine that the scale or persistence of the protests would justify a more severe response, which could lead to large-scale killing of civilians.

The following scenarios represent how an outbreak of widespread violence could plausibly occur:

- **Scenario A:** In this scenario, the state would commit mass atrocities against civilians protesting governmental attacks or use of force against the political opposition and their perceived supporters.
- **Scenario B:** A perceived illegal political transition by the president or ruling party would trigger political instability and widespread demonstrations. Such a transition would also

produce a struggle between the different power centers within the government (e.g., political parties, military). The state would commit mass atrocities against civilians perceived to oppose the transition.

- **Scenario C:** A clash between nonstate armed groups and the state would trigger large-scale violence against civilians perceived to support these nonstate groups. While violence may be instigated by actors on either side, Ugandan security forces have greater capacity to target civilians on a larger scale.

In addition, we highlight a number of important uncertainties that should be monitored closely, including the tactics of security forces and demonstrators, how violence might spread, and if civilians will be targeted based on their identity.

Resilience and Mitigating Factors

Several third-party actors, including religious leaders, the Uganda Kings and Cultural Leaders Forum, and international development partners, have the ability to help reduce the risk of mass atrocities in Uganda.

Recommendations

The report's recommendations seek to spur both immediate steps to help reduce the threats of large-scale violence and longer-term efforts to address underlying mass atrocity risks in Uganda. These ideas, organized into four broad lines of effort, should serve as a starting point for policy makers and other stakeholders to develop a coordinated and comprehensive plan of preventive action.

1. **Manage conflicts through nonviolent means.** For example, the Ugandan government should ensure that the police and military operate according to the rule of law and are held accountable for human rights abuses, and civil society should implement programs aimed at discouraging youth from participating in violence and leverage the influence of religious and cultural leaders for peaceful conflict resolution.
2. **Ensure the 2026 elections are free, fair, and peaceful.** For example, the Ugandan government should support unfettered, independent election observation by domestic and international groups, and international partners should consider conditioning non-humanitarian assistance to the Ugandan government on the government's organization of free, fair, and peaceful elections.
3. **Address underlying grievances.** For example, the Ugandan government should convene a national dialogue, and international partners should use coordinated, public and private diplomacy to communicate that a political transition must be free of violence and be carried out in accordance with the democratic principles in Uganda's constitution.
4. **Lift restrictions on civil society members, including human rights defenders and activists.** For example, the Ugandan government should protect freedom of association and expression by revisiting restrictive laws.

INTRODUCTION

Uganda is a landlocked country in East Africa, bordered by the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), South Sudan, Kenya, Tanzania, and Rwanda. Uganda encompasses a diverse range of identities, comprising various ethnic groups that frequently intersect with sub-regional groups, linguistic groups, and religions. The social and political significance of ethnic and regional identities is pronounced within Ugandan society. With over 50 distinct ethnic groups and more than 40 languages spoken across different regions, certain groups maintain robust “cultural institutions” that compete with the state for authority, local resources, and sway over local communities.

Uganda’s postcolonial history features enduring grievances and unresolved conflicts over political and socioeconomic issues, largely stemming from British colonial rule.⁵ After gaining independence in 1962, Uganda experienced a number of consecutive violent political transitions and conflicts. Most notable was the rule of Idi Amin from 1971 to 1979. Amin became Uganda’s third president after launching a coup d’état. His rule included mass killings, torture, and widespread human rights abuses.⁶ According to estimates, Amin killed between 100,000 and 500,000 people under his rule.⁷

In 1986, after a five-year civil war, rebel forces captured the capital city Kampala, and Yoweri Museveni established himself as president. Since then, Museveni has remained in power and has ruled Uganda through his political party, the National Resistance Movement (NRM). Many viewed Museveni as a beacon of hope and democracy,⁸ but as the years have progressed experts claim his regime has become steadily more intolerant, less democratic, and less legitimate.⁹

Uganda is governed under a multiparty¹⁰ political system, whose candidates compete under a decentralized system of

Figure 1. Map showing approximate boundaries of kingdoms and other traditional societies in Uganda



administration in order to represent their constituencies at national and local government levels. The government is marked by patronage, widespread corruption, and an increasingly authoritarian leadership. Since gaining power in 1986, Museveni and the NRM have dominated the state, so much so that “it has become increasingly difficult to differentiate between the Ugandan state, its dominant political party (the NRM) and its leader (Museveni).”¹¹ Most opportunities for wealth and power are given to relatives, supporters, elites, and those associated in some way with the president or his party—the majority of whom hail from sub-regions in western Uganda. Through his control over parliament, Museveni amended the constitution to remove term limits (in 2005) and age limits for the presidency (in 2017), allowing him to stay in power.¹² These actions have produced a large pool of frustrated and disadvantaged groups that overtly oppose the current regime.¹³

During Museveni’s 38-year rule, various militia and insurgent groups have mobilized in violent resistance to the NRM or in response to social, political, and economic grievances. These nonstate armed groups include the Uganda People’s Democratic Army, the Uganda People’s Army, the Lord’s Resistance Army, the Uganda Freedom Fighters, and the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF). These groups committed, and in some cases, continue to commit: extrajudicial executions, indiscriminate killings, abductions, recruitment of children as soldiers, and other atrocities against civilians, especially in the northern, eastern, and western regions of Uganda.

Recent developments suggest frustration towards the government is growing.¹⁴ Disputes over land, corruption, impunity, and unemployment have contributed to public dissatisfaction. The country has one of the fastest growing and youngest populations in the world, with 78 percent of the population under the age of 30. The job market has not been able to keep up with this youth bulge. High levels of unemployment among youth have increased frustrations with the government. The 2021 elections were highly controversial and characterized by accusations of vote tampering, rigging, and unprecedented military and police brutality against the opposition, in particular towards Robert Kyagulanyi Ssentamu (widely known by his stage name Bobi Wine), the presidential candidate of the opposition party, the National Unity Platform (NUP).¹⁵ The government has placed extensive restrictions on rights and freedom, including shutting down the internet, blocking access to social media sites,¹⁶ violently harassing journalists,¹⁷ and cracking down on civil society organizations (CSOs) perceived to be anti-government.¹⁸

BACKGROUND AND METHODOLOGY

The Simon-Skjoldt Center for the Prevention of Genocide’s Early Warning Project seeks to provide governments, civil society, and vulnerable communities with advanced and reliable warning about potential atrocity crimes. The Early Warning Project highlights situations where mass atrocities—“large-scale, systematic violence against civilian populations”¹⁹—are not yet taking place but where early warning signs are apparent.

This report is the sixth in a series of studies on selected countries facing relatively high risk for mass atrocity crimes, yet lacking sufficient policy attention to address those risks.²⁰ These reports delve into country-specific contexts and help inform preventive action.

Because mass atrocities are rare but devastating events, it is critical to analyze how they might occur even in contexts, such as Uganda, where they are not the likeliest outcome. As such, this report

presents “worst-case scenarios” that could plausibly occur, not forecasts of the most likely outcomes.²¹ The intent of presenting plausible mass atrocity scenarios is to stimulate and inform preventive measures.

We selected Uganda because it has consistently ranked on the cusp of the Early Warning Project’s “high-risk” list, based on the annual Statistical Risk Assessment, yet mass atrocity risks have not received much policy attention.²² Uganda ranked 13th highest at risk (3.0 percent, or approximately one in 33 chance) for experiencing a new mass killing in 2023 or 2024.²³

Information in this report is based on research in Uganda from August to December 2023, as well as on consultations with experts and a literature review in 2023 and 2024. The report’s conceptual framework and research questions draw from the atrocity risk assessment framework developed by the US government.²⁴ We begin by detailing structural risk factors—that is, characteristics that are slow to change but create the context in which conflict and atrocity crimes might occur. We then discuss precipitating factors: more recent developments that further heighten the risk for systematic violence against civilian populations. Based on this analysis, we describe mass atrocity scenarios that could plausibly occur in the next one to two years. Finally, we discuss mitigating factors or resiliencies, which decrease the likelihood of the identified scenarios unfolding, and conclude with recommendations for the Ugandan government, international partners engaged in Uganda, and domestic and international civil society organizations.

STRUCTURAL RISK FACTORS

We highlight five characteristics that contribute to the potential for mass atrocities in Uganda: (1) history of mass atrocities, (2) identity-based discrimination and perceptions of exclusion, (3) poor management of land and other natural resources, (4) widespread human rights violations and lack of accountability for human rights abuses, and (5) negative perceptions of state legitimacy. Although these factors are difficult to change in the near term, understanding them is crucial to assessing the risk for atrocity crimes in Uganda.

HISTORY OF MASS ATROCITIES

*Countries with a history of mass atrocities are more likely to experience future mass atrocities. For example, past atrocities can indicate a willingness by powerful actors to use extreme violence in the future, and unresolved grievances from previous atrocities contribute to distrust and animosity between groups and may be used to justify future violence.*²⁵

Over the past 50 years, Uganda has experienced mass atrocities that have occurred as a result of, and separate from, military coups d’état, civil wars, and communal violence. The most well-known cases of mass atrocities in Uganda were committed under Idi Amin’s rule, and later, by the nonstate Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA) and the state’s military, the Uganda Peoples’ Defence Forces (UPDF, formerly the National Resistance Army).

Amin’s rule, from 1971 to 1979, included mass killings, torture, and widespread human rights abuses.²⁶ Amin began his reign by killing approximately 10,000²⁷ Ugandan security personnel—primarily from the Acholi and Langi ethnic groups, who had formed the core of his predecessor’s support. He also ordered Uganda’s entire Asian population to leave, forcibly expelling over 50,000

people from these communities.²⁸ By the end of his time in power, he had expanded his campaign of violence to include targeting civilians,²⁹ with estimates of the number of dead ranging from 100,000 to 500,000.³⁰

The reign of terror inflicted by the LRA, a nonstate armed group led by Joseph Kony,³¹ and the UPDF primarily between 1987 to 1994 was marked by abductions, forced conscriptions, and massacres specifically targeting the northern regions. Both the LRA and the UPDF were responsible for widespread abuses against civilians. The LRA was formed after the civil war in the late 1980s in the Acholi district in northern Uganda, a poor and politically marginalized region at the time. Kony proclaimed that in order to achieve “spiritual purification” and restore the region and the Acholi people, an armed rebellion to overthrow Museveni was necessary.³² The LRA’s attacks, notorious for the use of child soldiers and the enslavement of women—extended across Uganda, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the Central African Republic, and South Sudan (formerly part of Sudan).³³ In particular, civilians living in northern Uganda, including Acholi communities, experienced the brunt of the LRA’s violence.³⁴ The LRA is allegedly responsible for more than 100,000 deaths as well as the abduction of 60,000 to 100,000 children.³⁵ Only a couple of high-ranking LRA members have been charged for their crimes and one was convicted at the International Criminal Court.³⁶ The LRA continues to operate in border regions of Sudan and South Sudan, though at a significantly diminished capacity.³⁷

In the fight against the LRA, the Ugandan military, the UPDF, also committed numerous human rights violations, including deliberate killings of civilians, torture, rape, arbitrary arrests, and extrajudicial executions.³⁸ The UPDF is responsible for massive forced displacement campaigns during this time, which resulted in extensive abuses against civilians,³⁹ the ramifications of which continue to this day. Most UPDF soldiers, commanding officers, and military leaders who carried out or were implicated in the commission of crimes have not been investigated or prosecuted for their crimes.⁴⁰

Poor management of post-conflict transitional justice has fueled grievances against the state. For example, many of the families and communities that provided personnel and resources to support Museveni and his military during the Ugandan civil war (1981–86) maintain grievances relating to the lack of compensation for their support. Despite promises during every election campaign, veterans and civilians from those communities (especially from the Luweero Triangle region) have largely not been compensated.⁴¹ In the aftermath of the war between the LRA and the state, the government implemented a disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) program in the affected regions in the north. Unfortunately, DDR was never completed, which left many communities disgruntled. A respondent from the Acholi region,⁴² speaking about the DDR initiatives, stated that “Our youth were just forced or fooled out of [participating in] rebel activities with Kony, only to be left alone for laughter and embarrassment, and many are contemplating the next move to help themselves.” Disgruntled communities could decide to take matters into their own hands to address transitional-justice issues they feel the government has not handled properly. This could entail demonstrating against the state, participating in criminal activity, or mobilizing armed groups.

More recently, in the western Rwenzori region, civilians have experienced high levels of violence at the hands of a Ugandan nonstate armed group, the ADF,⁴³ and separately by state forces. The ADF was “founded in 1995 by Ugandan rebels who opposed the Museveni administration and sought to

topple the government.”⁴⁴ The ADF are predominantly active in western Uganda and in eastern DRC. Hardly any of the victims of prior episodes of violence have achieved justice, and very few, if any, perpetrators have been held accountable.⁴⁵ Instead of addressing grievances and advancing justice, the government has responded through a security lens. In an interview, a youth leader stated, “The [Rwenzori] region is highly securitized at the moment, indicating a dangerously evolving situation, and all government responses are militaristic. This [a militaristic approach] is what is used to solve conflicts rather than understanding the root cause, and these only trigger fear among the masses.”⁴⁶

Unresolved grievances from previous conflicts and a lack of effective transitional justice have contributed to dissatisfaction with the government and between communities. Additionally, a culture of impunity pervades Museveni’s government and the UPDF, who have shown their willingness to use violence against civilians and may perceive there are few costs to resorting to the use of violence again.

IDENTITY-BASED DISCRIMINATION AND PERCEPTIONS OF EXCLUSION

The presence of prior state-led discrimination—such as excluding a specific group of people from positions in government, the military, or other roles—is strongly associated with mass atrocities.⁴⁷ For example, past discrimination can contribute to identity-based divisions, which when characterized by “differential access to power, wealth, status, and resources,” can pose a significant source of risk.⁴⁸

Historically, Ugandan politics has been heavily intertwined with regional and ethnic identity. At any point, certain regional or ethnic identity groups have dominated the government, leaving others feeling marginalized or excluded. While the specific groups in power have changed under different leaders and ruling parties, the general pattern has persisted. The problem is not ethnic identity itself, but rather the way it has been and continues to be manipulated or politicized by political actors to mobilize groups. In Uganda, ethnicity has been utilized as a tool for political and economic competition, leading to unequal access to power and resources and causing divisions.⁴⁹ These entrenched divisions have “led to major biases in the distribution of state power, as well as violent repression along ethnic and regional lines.”⁵⁰ Control over power, resources and access to opportunities can often be associated with the ethnic or regional groups that dominate the state. One scholar argues it is this pattern of marginalization from state power that explains why Uganda has seen so many civil wars, and why it continues to remain vulnerable to the onset of new wars.⁵¹ Similarly, one youth leader stated that “marginalization of different ethnic groups has been at the center of every civil war and political regime, including all our political conflicts, and this remains an issue even as we speak in the current regime.”⁵² In this context, grievances, interests, threats, or opportunities are often qualified and framed as shared experiences across specific ethnic groups or regions.

Box 1: Distinct but Overlapping Identities

Uganda is home to many different identities, including ethnic groups that often overlap with sub-regional groups, linguistic groups, and religions. Ethnic and regional identities are socially and politically salient for Ugandans.

The country is composed of over 50 ethnic groups, speaking over 40 languages in different regions, and some groups still maintain strong cultural institutions that often compete with the state for power, local resources, and influence over local communities. Some of the groups are the Baganda (16.5 percent), Banyankole (9.6 percent), Basoga (8.8 percent), Bakiga (7.1 percent), Iteso (7 percent), Langi (6.3 percent), Bagisu (4.9 percent), Acholi (4.4 percent), Lugbara (3.3 percent), and other (32.1 percent).¹

Relatedly, kingdoms or “cultural institutions,” including the Buganda, Bunyoro, Ankole, and Toro kingdoms, among others, also influence the salience and mobilization of identities (see Figure 1). These kingdoms often represent the localized interests of specific ethnic groups. Cultural institutions and their monarchs or kings were “reinstated in 1993 after having been abolished by the former President of Uganda Milton Obote in 1967 [and] are important cultural figureheads and symbols of a common cultural identity.”² Wielding significant cultural and social influence, these institutions are politically influential and maintain large landholdings in specific regions.

Also important to citizens’ political identities are Uganda’s four regions: central, eastern, western, and northern (see Figure 2). The population is roughly equally distributed across these regions: the central (27.51 percent), eastern (26.11 percent), western (25.62 percent), and northern (20.75 percent) regions.³ Each of these regions are in turn broken into sub-regions and political districts.⁴ Although certain ethnic groups are represented more heavily in specific regions and sub-regions, members of different ethnic groups are also spread across the country.

¹ Uganda Bureau of Statistics, “The National Population and Housing Census 2014 – Main Report”, (Kampala, Uganda, 2016), https://www.ubos.org/wp-content/uploads/publications/03_20182014_National_Census_Main_Report.pdf.

² Bernard Lubega Bakaye, “Cultural Heritage and Poverty Eradication in Uganda,” *CRM: The Journal of Heritage Stewardship* 4, no. 1 (2007), <https://www.nps.gov/crps/CRMJournal/Winter2007/view2.html#:~:text=At%20the%20cultural%20core%20of,of%20a%20common%20cultural%20identity>.

³ “Uganda: Administrative Division (Regions and Districts),” Population Statistics, Charts, and Map, City Population, <https://www.citypopulation.de/en/uganda/admin/>.

⁴ The proliferation of political districts has been a major point of contention and conflict in Uganda. Some suggest the rapid creation of districts has been used to support Museveni’s patronage system and has spurred ethnic conflict, while others point to the financial burden it has placed on the state. Elliott Green “District Creation and Decentralisation in Uganda,” Working Paper Development as State-Making 24, Crisis States Research Centre (January 2008), <https://www.lse.ac.uk/international-development/Assets/Documents/PDFs/cscc-working-papers-phase-two/WP24.2-district-creation-and-decentralisation-in-uganda.pdf>; International Crisis Group, *Uganda’s Slow Slide into Crisis*, November 21, 2017, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/horn-africa/uganda/256-ugandas-slow-slide-crisis>.

Presently, members of ethnic groups from sub-regions of western Uganda hold the majority of state power.⁵³ This has been the case since Museveni, who hails from southwestern Uganda, came into power in 1986. Museveni’s regime has been characterized as a patronage system, in which most opportunities for wealth and power are given to relatives, supporters, elites, and those associated in some way to the president or his party—many of whom hail from western Uganda.⁵⁴ This practice of favoritism has resulted in a system where ethnic groups from western Uganda hold much of the wealth and power in comparison to other groups. As a former NRM minister said, western Ugandans’

domination of the private and public sector could “trigger a genocide as the marginalized groups try to fight against being left out in the national cake sharing.”⁵⁵ Since the NRM government came into power in 1986, more than 20 militant groups⁵⁶ have mobilized seeking redress over exclusion and discrimination.⁵⁷

Ethnicity has been utilized as a tool for political and economic competition, leading to unequal access to power and resources, and causing divisions.

Figure 2. Map of Uganda's four regions



In its 10th Annual Report on the State of Equal Opportunities in Uganda (2023),⁵⁸ the Equal Opportunities Commission (EOC), a constitutional body established by the Ugandan Parliament, provided evidence that western Ugandans hold a disproportionate share of positions of power (e.g., members of parliament, government officials, high-profile military positions) and wealth, and appear to have better access to resources and services. For example, while the population is distributed across the four regions, individuals from the western region hold 40 percent of all “top” level jobs in the public service and 47 percent of all Chief Executive Officer positions in government agencies (followed by those in the northern region at 20 percent, central region at 18 percent, and eastern region at 15 percent).⁵⁹

Additionally, top-ranking positions in the UPDF have primarily been held by western Ugandans, with only a few exceptions. Under Museveni's rule, there have been

around a dozen four-star generals, almost all of whom are from western Uganda.⁶⁰ There is also a strong sentiment among lower ranking soldiers that highly sought-after training and promotions are only offered to soldiers from western Ugandan.⁶¹

Differential access to resources can also be seen within the education sector. According to the same report by the EOC, western Uganda had the highest number of beneficiaries (37.8 percent) of the government loan program for university students between 2014 and 2023.⁶² Ankole, a western sub-region, had the highest proportion of students (20.2 percent) accessing the program each year, while Karamoja, a northern sub-region had the least (1.7 percent).⁶³ While these inequalities are difficult to attribute to explicit government policies, the report demonstrates a lack of opportunities and access for certain groups in favor of the groups currently controlling power in Uganda.

Unsurprisingly, many Ugandans from the central, northern, and eastern regions maintain that they have been excluded or discriminated against by the government and western sub-regional groups. This widespread perception of exclusion has in turn led many to view the western-dominated government and Ugandans hailing from the western region negatively. It should be underscored that perceptions of exclusion are not uniform and may be sensitive to government action (e.g., cabinet reshuffles and appointments of ministers, high-ranking government appointments to non-western Ugandans). For example, experts consulted suggested that Museveni’s political maneuvers⁶⁴ or posturing to the northern region have improved northerners’ perceptions of exclusion.

In addition to discrimination based on ethnic identity, discrimination over religious identity is also prevalent. Muslims continue to face serious discrimination, are branded as extremists, are victims of extrajudicial killings, and are disproportionately singled out by security agencies for arrest and torture during “counter-terrorism” operations.⁶⁵ Unresolved political and socio-economic injustices can be key drivers of recruitment and participation in violence, especially in areas like the western Rwenzori, where Islamist extremism is present through the ADF.

Identity-based discrimination and perceptions of marginalization have fueled an “us-versus-them” mentality between Ugandans from other regions towards those from the western region, including the western-dominated government. Inequalities (e.g., access to power and wealth), whether real or perceived, between these identity groups may contribute to deepening divisions that could become violent.

Identity-based discrimination and perceptions of marginalization have fueled an “us-versus-them” mentality between Ugandans from other regions towards those from the western region, including the western-dominated government.

POOR MANAGEMENT OF LAND AND OTHER NATURAL RESOURCES

Conflicts between groups can arise from resource scarcity, poor resource management, disparities in resource access, or disputes over land. For example, economic interests concerning the control, use, or distribution of resources can provide certain actors with a reason to justify violence against a specific group, increasing the risk of mass atrocities.⁶⁶

Poor management and extensive exploitation of land and other natural resources by the state or corporations are significant sources of tension for Ugandans and have contributed to violence and may again. There are a number of factors that contribute to these issues, including inadequate

systems of land tenure, ethnic divisions, and exploitation of resources by powerful actors (e.g., the state, corporations, and individuals with ties to political and economic influences). Many corporations and partnerships secure long-term leases to exploit the land or its resources for profits at the expense of local owners, depriving local communities of critical resources.⁶⁷

Land disputes in particular are a significant issue in Uganda. A 2015 survey shows that Ugandans cite land as one of the most frequent and serious justice problems they experience.⁶⁸ Many of these disputes center around “land grabbing.” Land grabbing is a term widely used to describe large-scale acquisitions of land by corporations (foreign or domestic), the government, or individuals. While definitions differ, the term typically implies that the land acquisition was done in a way that violates the rights or interests of the individual or local communities, including but not limited to a lack of prior informed consent, compensation, or consideration of the negative impacts that such an acquisition could have.⁶⁹

A core reason for the high number of disputes has to do with Uganda’s complex land tenure system. Ugandan property law recognizes four types of land tenure: customary; freehold; Mailo; and leasehold.⁷⁰ While these categories aim to cover the diverse range and complexity of land ownership, in practice, the bureaucracy of the system can be difficult to navigate, expensive, and at times problematic. Many Ugandans have been manipulated or forced to sell their properties or forcefully displaced due to overlapping or lost records and falsified titles of ownership. Corruption and a lack of strong legal avenues to pursue redress over disputes exacerbate these issues. According to one study from 2009,⁷¹ 60 percent of all land conflicts occur under the customary tenure system and 30 percent under Mailo tenure.

In the east, where customary tenure (the system used by most rural communities)⁷² disputes are high, the Ugandan government has sold or leased off large plots of lands to foreign corporations, and thousands of locals have been evicted or forced to relocate. In the Mount Elgon National Park, a project coordinated by the Uganda Wildlife Authority and the Dutch foundation, Forests Absorbing Carbon Dioxide Emissions, provides an example of large-scale land disputes. A year before the project began, the Ugandan government evicted 6,000 people from the area.⁷³ Since then, forced evictions have continued, primarily affecting the indigenous Benet community.⁷⁴ While some individuals have sued the government, many, especially those who lived on communal land, were not able to provide evidence of customary land ownership.⁷⁵

Land conflicts often have an identity dimension. In some cases, the groups who are negatively affected by land conflicts perceive themselves to be targeted due to their ethnic or regional identity, and in other cases those acquiring the land are perceived by these communities as belonging to specific ethnic or regional groups. For example, disputes concerning Mailo tenure (the system used in the central region)⁷⁶ often negatively affect ethnic Baganda tenants at the hands of wealthy or powerful individuals who are loyal to Museveni and typically come from western sub-regions.⁷⁷ The tenure system has also given rise to significant tensions between kingdoms or “cultural institutions”—such as the Buganda Kingdom, which has large landholdings under Mailo—and the government.⁷⁸ As one interviewee stated, “The problem is that Baganda do not enjoy similar privileges [e.g., wealth, access to resources] outside Buganda the same way non-Baganda do in our

region, especially under the current regime. Much of land in Buganda has been taken by westerners, but very few Baganda can purchase land in western Uganda.”⁷⁹



People in Uganda’s Hoima district have posted signs to publicly state their intention to protect their land and demand compensation. Entire villages, including landowners, have been evicted as the government clears space for oil exploration. 1 September 2016. Global Press via Alamy Stock Photo.

Poor management and exploitation of natural resources, especially by the government, have generated grievances and in some cases violence. Examples of natural resources that have been poorly managed in Uganda include oil exploration, mineral deposits such as gold (e.g., Karamoja), control of forests (e.g., Mabira Forest, Bugoma Forest), and control of freshwater and fishing sites (e.g., shores of Lake Victoria). Government mismanagement of these resources is often exacerbated by political elites, business actors, or the military, who, at times, manipulate or forcefully deny access to local communities, for example, fishing communities on Lake Victoria.⁸⁰ The ineffectiveness of mechanisms to regulate and manage natural resource utilization often pushes aggrieved parties into violent confrontations. In the western region, primarily in Buliisa and Hoima, some feel the government has mismanaged massive oil reserves. When news of the existence of oil reserves hit, up to 700 hectares of land were reported to have been grabbed by speculators in Buliisa.⁸¹ This has since ignited intense debate between the Bunyoro Kingdom, politicians, and civil society organizations with demands for commensurate benefits and a fair share of oil revenue.⁸² More recently, environmental activists and human rights groups have strongly criticized the East African Crude Oil Pipeline (EACOP), one of the world’s largest fossil fuel infrastructure projects, and the Ugandan government for forced evictions and the “risks [the project] poses to the environment, local communities, and its contribution to climate change.”⁸³

Poor management of natural resources—marked by inadequate systems of land tenure, ethnic divisions, and exploitation of resources by powerful actors—could increase frustration towards the government and may potentially escalate to large-scale violence in the future.

WIDESPREAD HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS AND LACK OF ACCOUNTABILITY FOR HUMAN RIGHTS ABUSES

Mass atrocities are typically “preceded by less widespread or systematic serious violations of international human rights and humanitarian law,”⁸⁴ often perpetrated by armed forces.⁸⁵ When such violations or crimes go unpunished, leaders and “foot soldiers” alike may conclude that such violence is acceptable and legitimate.⁸⁶

Under Museveni’s government, there is a history of state actors, including security forces (e.g., police, military, and paramilitary forces), regularly and arbitrarily arresting and attacking political opponents, journalists, and protesters with impunity.⁸⁷ According to the V-Dem Institute, an independent research organization, there has been “systematic, frequent, and violent harassment and intimidation of the opposition by the [Ugandan] government” since 2001.⁸⁸

Security forces are widely known to use excessive force against civilians.⁸⁹ Under Museveni’s rule, the police and the military have become deeply interconnected and “have been described as ‘functionally fused’ due to rotating personnel, shared training, and overlapping mandates.”⁹⁰ It is common to see UPDF military leaders in high-ranking positions within the Uganda Police Force (UPF) and to see the military deployed directly alongside police.⁹¹ Security forces have arrested, detained, and tortured hundreds of opposition party supporters in recent years, and they killed at least 54 protestors in 2020 ahead of the 2021 presidential elections.⁹² In another instance, in November 2016, the military and the police stormed the palace of Charles Mumbere, the king of the Rwenzururu Kingdom in Kasese, killing over 100 people and arresting hundreds.⁹³ The government raided the palace in response to unrest in the area—which had been growing since the disputed February 2016 presidential elections—and claimed that the King was seeking secession and secretly mobilizing the local population to fight.⁹⁴ This case in particular illustrates that no one, not even a king, is exempt from being targeted when the government perceives them as a threat. And finally, in April 2011, security forces killed a number of civilians participating in a peaceful “walk to work” protest.⁹⁵ All three of these cases lacked transparent investigations into the use of force by security forces, and no one has been held to account.⁹⁶

Under Museveni’s rule, criticism is not tolerated, particularly from the press. Journalists face harassment and violent attacks and are “regularly targeted by the security services, the leading perpetrators of attacks.”⁹⁷ Between 2017 and 2022, the Human Rights Network for Journalists-Uganda reported 840 cases of human rights violations—including assault, arrest, and property destruction—against journalists, media personnel, and media organizations.⁹⁸

Abuses by nonstate actors, including mob or communal violence, are also common. Annual crime reports from the UPF show that mob violence⁹⁹ has been increasing over recent years, with 2023 reporting the highest number of incidents since 2013, and a nine percent increase from 2022.¹⁰⁰ In some areas, nonstate groups¹⁰¹ commit crimes including murder, violent robberies, and other criminal activity.

Very few perpetrators (but especially state actors) have been held accountable for human rights violations,¹⁰² and when they allegedly are, no details are publicly provided. Research suggests that impunity may “generate grievances and degrade confidence in the state as a fair arbiter.”¹⁰³ Uganda’s widespread human rights violations may signify progression in a process of escalation.¹⁰⁴ In particular, the Ugandan government has shown its willingness to use violence against those who oppose it or are perceived as a threat. This willingness suggests the government may resort to violence again in the future.

NEGATIVE PERCEPTIONS OF STATE LEGITIMACY

When a state lacks support and recognition from its citizens—also referred to as a “state legitimacy deficit”—it can create an environment where mass atrocities are more likely to occur.¹⁰⁵ A lack of state legitimacy can be defined by low public trust and high levels of discontent and dissent. Extensive corruption, impunity, and excessive use of force, especially along lines of identity and political association, can further erode trust in the state and fuel identity-based conflicts.

Public opinion surveys and our consultations indicate that Ugandans’ dissatisfaction with the government is high as a result of widespread corruption, poor public services, unemployment, and weak government institutions. These conditions often affect non-elite working communities, women, youth, and opponents of the government, and have produced widespread distrust in the state while increasing the readiness of some to resort to violence.

According to the Corruption Perceptions Index, Uganda struggles with serious corruption problems.¹⁰⁶ In Uganda, the term state capture—“a type of systematic corruption whereby narrow interest groups take control of the institutions and processes”¹⁰⁷—is often used to describe the nature and functioning of the state and its institutions.¹⁰⁸ Such corruption is visible in all areas of Ugandan society (e.g., law enforcement, politics, religion, education, local government, health care). Many believe the state is governed solely by NRM elites, who prioritize their own control of power and resources. As one respondent stated:

There is elite state capture of the institutions of government from national to local government, where everything is pointing to benefiting just a clique of people and not the nation and its citizens. These are issues that indicate a governance deficit, which is opening the country to more conflicts, divisions, marginalization of the non-elites and local communities, political opponents, etc. The regime is only interested in staying in power while compromising other institutions.¹⁰⁹

This state capture can be seen through the NRM’s domination of almost all state institutions, as well as the rampant embezzlement of public funds and corruption with impunity involving ministers,¹¹⁰ members of parliament,¹¹¹ security agencies,¹¹² and so on. According to public opinion surveys, the justice system, for example, is perceived to be untrustworthy, highly corrupt, and a “political tool for the NRM.”¹¹³ Moreover, concerns around corrupt elections that are unfair and not free, along with constitutional changes perceived to help keep Museveni in power, have also contributed to a low perception of state legitimacy. The 2021 elections, for example, were hotly contested, with opposition parties¹¹⁴ and local observers¹¹⁵ accusing the government of rigging the elections. Impunity for corruption, especially at the highest levels of government, has gone unpunished for many years,¹¹⁶ and regularly results in anti-corruption protests.¹¹⁷

Widespread grievances over insufficient government services (e.g., road conditions, poor healthcare, a collapsing education sector, poorly designed or implemented development programs) and high levels of unemployment are prominent. Reports suggest that dissatisfaction with the government is increasing, especially among the “young and the well-educated urban population.”¹¹⁸ Weak national and local government services and programs often drive grievances in urban settings.

The increase in communal violence, as mentioned earlier, could also suggest that there is a greater willingness for citizens to participate in communal violence to redress adverse conditions.¹¹⁹ According to the US government’s annual report on human rights practices in Uganda, communities have engaged in this violence—including beatings and lynching—“due to a lack of confidence in police and the judiciary to deliver justice.”¹²⁰

Unemployment is another source of dissatisfaction, especially for youth. Not only does Uganda have one of the youngest populations in the world, with 78 percent of its population being under the age of 30, it also has one of the fastest growing populations, with a growth rate of 3.7 percent. This growing youth bulge means more people are in the job market than ever before, but the supply of jobs does not match the demand, leaving many youth unemployed. In its 2023 annual report, the EOC states that “extended youth unemployment is one of the biggest challenges the government of Uganda is still grappling with.”¹²¹ A lack of economic opportunities and a loss of trust in a corrupt government have made youth increasingly frustrated and desperate for sources of income.

Various nonstate groups (sometimes referred to as “vigilante groups”) have emerged or mobilized in the context of perceived injustices—such as corruption, exclusion from employment, land grabbing, and lack of access to natural resources—of a specific group or community, or to fill an apparent gap in state-provided services.¹²² These nonstate groups are typically composed of unemployed, “frustrated youth [who] are easy prey for criminal gangs and ripe for political mobilisation.”¹²³ For example, youth groups, including the Power-10, Kifeesi, and the Jobless Brotherhood, formed to respond to growing adversity and unemployment. These groups can also be established based on ethnic or regional identity affiliation. The Busoga Bulaale Association¹²⁴ and Nkobazambogo in Buganda¹²⁵ actively mobilize the Basoga and Baganda ethnic group members respectively to preserve, educate, and advance group interests. In the past, tensions between nonstate groups and the government have resulted in violence, such as the clashes between the Nkobazambogo and police ahead of the Kabaka’s visit in 2009,¹²⁶ or the 2016 clashes between nonstate groups affiliated with the Rwenzururu kingdom and the UPDF.¹²⁷ As these nonstate groups expand their networks, attain more resources, and gain buy-in from communities, their capacity to mobilize to fight perceived injustices improves.

Although the issues discussed in this section—corruption, unemployment, weak government services—are common in many countries, when they lead many people to lose all trust in the government, the risk of major conflict and violence are higher. As people lose trust in the government they may be more likely to participate in protests, join or support nonstate armed groups, or resort to criminal activity in an effort to address the adverse conditions discussed above. In turn these actions may contribute to the risks for mass atrocities.

PRECIPITATING FACTORS OF ATROCITY CRIMES

In situations where multiple structural risk factors are present, atrocity crimes become more likely in the near term when there are major socio-political changes that shift the balance of power, change incentive structures, and further divide groups. Three precipitating factors have emerged in recent years that increase the risk for large-scale, group-targeted violence in Uganda: (1) Uncertainty around a coming transition; (2) Heightened state-led political violence since the last election cycle; and (3) Escalating restrictions on civil and political rights.

UNCERTAINTY AROUND A COMING TRANSITION

Many Ugandans are increasingly frustrated with President Museveni’s prolonged tenure and the lack of a transition plan from his 38-year rule.¹²⁸ Museveni has never spoken publicly about a political transition from his rule or given an indication that he plans to step down anytime soon. Yet, his age, growing public frustration with his rule, and the presidential elections scheduled for 2026 are creating a sense that a transition must be coming. Ugandans are increasingly consumed with questions about when and how Museveni will leave office and who will lead Uganda in his wake. The uncertainty around what could be the country’s first political transition in nearly four decades is breeding division and fears about potential violence. Research suggests that an “abrupt or irregular regime change or transfer of power” can result in political instability and in turn, increase the likelihood of atrocity crimes.¹²⁹

The uncertainty around what could be the country’s first political transition in nearly four decades is breeding division and fears about potential violence.

Through his control over parliament, Museveni has amended the Constitution twice in order to stay in power longer. In 2005, parliament agreed to remove the presidential term limits, “allowing incumbents to run for re-election indefinitely” and removing one impediment to Museveni continuing to stand for election.¹³⁰ And in 2017, the NRM introduced a bill into parliament to remove the presidential age limit, previously set at 75, from the constitution. Despite being met with widespread opposition—fights broke out within parliament and on the streets—the bill passed.¹³¹ The age limit was removed from the Constitution, clearing the way for the then 73-year-old Museveni to run for a sixth term in 2021. In spite of the bill’s passing, 80 percent of Ugandans were in favor of a maximum age limit for presidential candidates.¹³² Recently, reports indicate that the NRM has been discussing the possibility of amending the constitution to adopt a parliamentary system of government.¹³³ If passed, this bill would mean that Ugandans would no longer directly elect their president; instead, the president would be chosen by the party holding the majority in parliament. Critics argue that this amendment is designed to allow Museveni to remain in power and to ensure the NRM and any successor he appoints retain control over the government.¹³⁴



Ugandan ruling party MP Theodore Ssekikubo, center, who opposes the extension of presidential age limits, is ejected by security after scuffles in the Parliament in Kampala, Uganda on Wednesday, Sept. 27, 2017. A government-backed lawmaker introduced a measure Wednesday to extend the long-time president's rule, removing the presidential age limit of 75 from Uganda's constitution, following a fight in which opposition lawmakers were forcibly evicted from the legislative chamber. Ronald Kabuubi via AP Photo.

The lack of a clear pathway to transition from Museveni's rule has produced political divisions marked by intense competition, fractionalization, and maneuvers by groups to position their leaders as possible successors. Museveni has frequently employed "divide-and-rule" tactics against different factions to gain influence and curb opposition.¹³⁵ This has involved sidelining influential individuals who have been with the regime since its inception (i.e., "NRM historicals" or the UPDF "old guard") and instead giving opportunities or positions to newcomers, often younger in age, whom Museveni believes he can control.¹³⁶ Recently, there appear to be some indications that Museveni may be paving the way for his son, General Muhoozi Kainerugaba, to eventually be president.¹³⁷ Muhoozi, a highly controversial figure, announced his presidential ambition when he formed his own political party, the Patriotic League of Uganda (PLU; formerly the MK Movement).¹³⁸ Despite the fact that political campaigning as a military official breaches electoral and military regulations, Muhoozi has expressed his interest in taking over from his father and has made statements about running in elections.¹³⁹ In March 2024, Museveni promoted Muhoozi to chief of defense forces of the UPDF.¹⁴⁰ These actions have produced significant divisions. Prominent figures in the UPDF and NRM have spoken out against Muhoozi's promotion and have rejected him as a presidential candidate.¹⁴¹

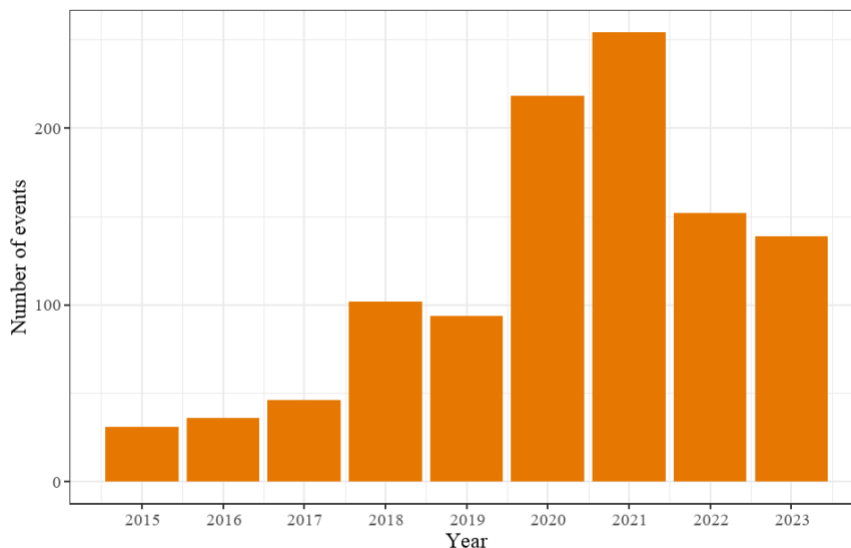
Increasing uncertainty and frustration concerning a coming political transition are contributing to tensions and growing divisions. Given that changes to the ruling party or president have almost always been violent in Uganda's history, some assume that the next political transition will also be marked by violence, which may cause various actors to mobilize in preparation.

HEIGHTENED STATE-LED POLITICAL VIOLENCE SINCE THE LAST ELECTION CYCLE

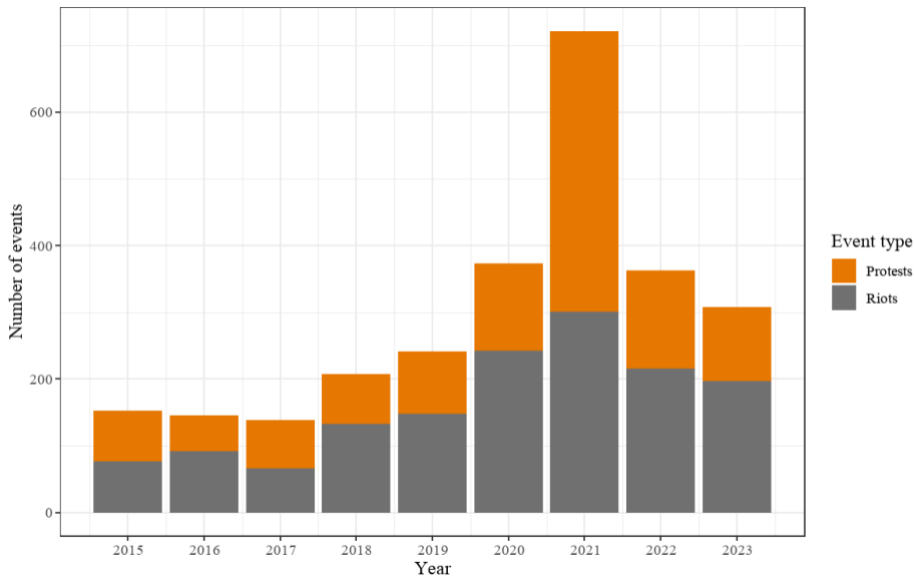
The periods immediately prior to, during, and after elections in Uganda have been marked by high levels of political violence and human rights abuses. Since 2020, the state has targeted supporters of the two main opposition parties, the NUP and the Forum for Democratic Change (FDC), through arrests and detention. State security forces have played a key role in helping the NRM and Museveni win elections and maintain power by stifling opposition activities (e.g., detaining opposition leaders, preventing or shutting down rallies). A local government official stated that “the military has played a central role in the political management of the state, leading to human rights abuses, breakdown of the rule of law, and exclusion of the people from governance.”¹⁴²

In the last election cycle, violence against civilians increased in 2020 and peaked in the 2021 election year.¹⁴³ Ahead of the 2021 elections, police and other security forces fired at protesters, arrested opposition party officials, harassed and beat journalists, and restricted the work of activists and civil society groups, including those trying to monitor elections. The NUP responded with massive rallies to demonstrate their discontent. This led to harsh crackdowns on party officials as well as protesters. In November 2020, security forces arrested Robert Kyagulanyi, the NUP’s presidential candidate, for allegedly violating COVID-19 restrictions during his campaign.¹⁴⁴ Following Kyagulanyi’s arrest, riots ensued and security forces killed at least 54 people and detained hundreds.¹⁴⁵ During this period, the African Centre for Treatment and Rehabilitation of Torture Victims documented 69 cases of torture related to elections, the majority of which were perpetrated by state security agencies.¹⁴⁶ The Uganda Human Rights Commission also reported 69 complaints of enforced disappearances.¹⁴⁷ Although Kyagulanyi was eventually released and able to run in the elections, the final results were hotly contested, in part due to the violent attacks he and his supporters faced. Figures 3 and 4 illustrate that both the number of violent events against civilians and the number of protests and riots peaked in the election year.¹⁴⁸ While violence against civilians has since decreased, it has not yet returned to pre-2020 levels as of December 2023.¹⁴⁹

Figure 3. Violent events against civilians in Uganda, 2015 - 2023



Source: Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED); acleddata.com.

Figure 4. Protests and riots in Uganda, 2015 - 2023

ESCALATING RESTRICTIONS ON CIVIL AND POLITICAL RIGHTS

Over the past decade or so, the government and state security forces have increased attacks on civil society organizations, including political parties and human rights groups. This repression has weakened these groups' ability to act as crucial 'buffers' against escalating violence.¹⁵⁰ Attacks against civil society indicate the government's willingness to violate rights and tend to exacerbate anti-government sentiment, which may contribute to escalating tensions and increased violence.

Since the 2011 elections, the government has used various “tactics to intimidate and obstruct the work of NGOs.”¹⁵¹ Civil society continues to be restricted in its ability to effectively deliver services or represent voices from repressed communities.¹⁵² This is evidenced by recent laws, including the Public Order Management Act of 2013, the Non-Governmental Organizations (NGO) Act of 2015, the Anti-Homosexuality Act of 2023, and the Computer Misuse (Amendment) Bill of 2022. In implementation, these laws are used to target the activities, advocacy, and expression of rights by many opposition political parties, minority groups, human rights defenders, and other actors. These laws also undermine civil liberties by restricting access to information, freedom of assembly, and freedom of expression. Police, military intelligence, and other state agencies have exploited these laws to arrest critics of the government, including opposition political actors and journalists. Our interviews suggest people are afraid to speak out against these restrictions for fear that they will be arrested or even killed.

International organizations also face increasing barriers to operating in Uganda, and some have been shut down. For example, in August 2023 the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights was forced to close its human rights office in Uganda after the government refused to

renew its host agreement and terminated the office's mandate.¹⁵³ Additionally, the World Bank had until recently halted all new public lending to Uganda,¹⁵⁴ citing that the Anti-Homosexuality Act “contradicts the World Bank Group’s values.”¹⁵⁵ The departure of intergovernmental and financial institutions may impact the ability of international actors to influence and ensure the respect of human rights and international norms.

Box 2: Anti-LGBTQ+ Legislation

In March 2023, the Ugandan Parliament passed the Anti-Homosexuality Act, and in May 2023 Museveni signed it into law. The new law largely reflects the measures of the annulled 2014 Anti-Homosexuality Law, reinforcing the criminality of same-sex relations with harsher punishments.¹ The new law introduces the possibility of the death penalty for several same-sex related acts, including “aggravated homosexuality” and “serial homosexuality.”² Furthermore, anyone seen providing services (e.g., healthcare, legal services) to LGBTQ+ people could face up to 20-years in prison for the “promotion of homosexuality.”³

The law has significantly impacted life for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ+) people in Uganda. It has increased their vulnerabilities enhanced social isolation and stigmatization. Since the law passed, LGBTQ+ people have been increasingly demonized, discriminated against, and exposed to hateful rhetoric and ridicule.⁴ There has been a significant rise⁵ in LGBTQ+ activists and other members of the community being blackmailed, evicted,⁶ arrested, and subject to physical attacks including torture, and sexual assault. These attacks are carried out by both security forces and by private citizens in what has been described as ‘vigilante abuses’.⁷

Uganda has faced international criticism for passing the law. The United Nations condemned the law, calling it “an egregious violation of human rights,”⁸ the US government imposed sanctions and visa restrictions⁹ for top Ugandan officials, and the World Bank suspended all new funding in 2023.

Despite international criticism, the law appears to be popular in Uganda, “where religious and political leaders frequently inveigh against homosexuality.”¹⁰ Data from Afrobarometer supports this, showing that over 90 percent of surveyed Ugandans are intolerant of homosexuality.¹¹

Scholars have argued that political homophobia, a form of identity-based discrimination, often precipitates or lays the foundation for violent escalation and, in some cases, mass atrocity crimes targeting other groups as well.¹² Similarly, Protection Approaches argues that political homophobia and transphobia create scapegoats for societal problems, legitimizing violent methods against queer people that can then be used to repress other minority identities.¹³

¹ Clare Byarugaba and Maria E. Burnett, “Uganda’s Horrific Anti-LGBTIQ+ Bill Returns: The Stakes Are Higher Than Ever,” Center for Strategic Studies, May 3, 2023, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/ugandas-horrific-anti-lgbtiq-bill-returns-stakes-are-higher-ever>.

² The law allows for the death penalty in cases of repeated same sex acts, same sex acts and intercourse with a person under the age of 18, older than 75, with HIV, or with a disability. Risdal Kasasira, “Ugandan court upholds anti-gay law that allows the death penalty in some cases,” Associated Press, April 3, 2024, <https://apnews.com/article/uganda-antigay-law-constitution-court-651623657b0a971e755080c7bda40a8b>; Human Rights Watch, “Uganda: Court Upholds Anti-Homosexuality Act Entrenches Discrimination, Enhances Risk of Anti-LGBT Violence,” April 4, 2024, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/04/04/uganda-court->

³ Clare Byarugaba and Maria E. Burnett, “Uganda’s Horrific Anti-LGBTIQ+ Bill Returns.”

⁴ Larry Madowo and Bethlehem Feleke, “Uganda passed one of the world’s harshest anti-gay laws. LGBTQ people describe living there as ‘hell,’” *CNN*, June 29, 2023, <https://www.cnn.com/2023/06/29/africa/uganda-life-for-lgbt-community-intl-cmd/index.html>.

⁵ Strategic Response Team, *Eteeka Lyayita: Even The Government Does Not Like You Homosexuals*, (Uganda, 2023), https://www.kuchutimes.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/20230927_LIVES-AT-RISK_Final-min.pdf.

⁶ “Increasing Violence and Violations: the First 21 Days of the Antihomosexuality Act, 2023” Human Rights and Awareness and Promotion Forum, June 21, 2023,

https://cdn2.opendemocracy.net/media/documents/23_06_21_HRAPF_Report_of_violence_and_violations_during_the_first_21_days_of_t_lGG8Zy.pdf.

⁷ “LGBTQ+ Ugandans fight for survival, civil rights under country’s anti-gay law,” *PBS News*, January 28, 2024, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/lgbtq-ugandans-fight-for-survival-civil-rights-under-countrys-anti-gay-law>.

⁸ “UN rights experts condemn Uganda’s ‘egregious’ anti-LGBT legislation,” *UN News*, March 29, 2023, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2023/03/1135147>.

⁹ Antony J. Blinken, “Taking Steps to Impose Visa Restrictions for Undermining Democracy And for Repression in Uganda,” *US State Department*, December 4, 2023, <https://www.state.gov/taking-steps-to-impose-visa-restrictions-for-undermining-democracy-and-for-repression-in-uganda/>.

¹⁰ Abdi Latif Dahir, “Ugandan Court Upholds Draconian Anti-Gay Law,” *The New York Times*, April 10, 2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/04/03/world/africa/uganda-anti-gay-law.html>.

¹¹ Makanga Ronald Kakumba, “Uganda a Continental Extreme in Rejection of People in Same-Sex Relationships,” *Afrobarometer Dispatch* 639, May 11 2023, <https://www.afrobarometer.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/AD639-Uganda-a-continental-extreme-in-rejection-of-people-in-same-sex-relationships-Afrobarometer-9may23-.pdf>.

¹² Jess Gifkins, Dean Cooper-Cunningham, “Queering the Responsibility to Protect,” *International Affairs* 99, no. 5, (September 2023): 2057–2078, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iad177>.

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PLAUSIBLE ATROCITY CRIME SCENARIOS

In this section we describe scenarios involving large-scale, systematic attacks on civilian populations in Uganda that we assess could plausibly unfold in the next one to two years. These are worst case scenarios, meaning by definition they are less likely to occur than others, including variations on the status quo.

We focus on describing plausible mass atrocity scenarios to combat the recurring “failure of imagination,” which has been cited in many past cases of mass atrocities.¹⁵⁶ Based on their trailblazing research on cognitive biases, Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky explain that, when people are unable to bring to mind a reasonable scenario, they dismiss the idea as “impossible or highly unlikely.”¹⁵⁷ Describing plausible scenarios can help counteract this error in reasoning. Although mass atrocities are statistically rare, history has shown that they occur with disturbing and devastating regularity. The scenario descriptions presented below are meant to help increase attention on mass atrocity risks and inform policy and programming to help prevent a worst-case outcome.

SCENARIO OVERVIEW

Our research suggests three plausible mass atrocity scenarios (see Table 1). In all three scenarios, mass atrocities would be committed by Ugandan state security forces (e.g., the police and the military). Although multiple actors have the potential to commit some violence, state security forces have significantly greater capacity to commit and sustain mass atrocity crimes.

A key element underlying the risk of mass atrocities in Uganda is the mobilization of people based on their ethnic or regional identity. In the scenarios explained below, many of the grievances, interests,

threats, or opportunities are often qualified and framed as shared experiences across specific ethnic groups or regions. This is because control over power, resources, and access to opportunities in Uganda is heavily influenced by the ethnic or regional groups that dominate the state. In this context, members of ethnic groups that are perceived to oppose state authorities and influential elites could be targeted if any of the following scenarios unfold:

Table 1. Summary of plausible mass atrocity scenarios

	Potential Perpetrators	Target Groups	Triggers	Additional Comments
Scenario A: Political repression escalates	Ugandan state-security forces (e.g., the UPDF, the UPF)	Perceived supporters of the political opposition (e.g., NUP, FDC) Ethnic Baganda	Mass demonstrations	
Scenario B: A forced transition	Ugandan security forces loyal to the first family	Civilians perceived to oppose the transition Various ethnic groups from the central, northern, and eastern regions	Widespread political instability and mass demonstrations	State authorities and security forces may fracture along ethnic lines or by way of allegiance to the first family.
Scenario C: State vs. nonstate armed groups	UPDF and state-backed militia groups	Civilian perceived to support specific vigilante groups or criminal gangs	Increased activity/capabilities of nonstate armed groups	

SCENARIO A: POLITICAL REPRESSION ESCALATES

In this scenario, tensions between supporters of the political opposition (e.g., NUP, FDC) and the state would reach a crisis point. In the face of extensive corruption by state officials,¹⁵⁸ abuse of power by political and military elites,¹⁵⁹ and a lack of redress or a clear pathway to transition from the current 38-year NRM regime,¹⁶⁰ discontent has been brewing. New measures to block political opponents from campaigning or running, prevent political rallies, or detain political opponents by state authorities prior to the election could trigger mass demonstrations in opposition. An attack on or arrest of a key traditional leader or an opposition political leader may also result in large-scale protests. If the demonstrations were to increase in numbers, the government could deploy the UPDF alongside the police to violently and lethally crack down on protesters. This scenario would initially unfold by targeting real or perceived members or supporters of the political opposition, especially youth,¹⁶¹ and most likely in the central region, but may spread to other regions and communities in Uganda.

This scenario is consistent with recent patterns of violence against civilians in Uganda. As evidenced by past election periods, the lead up to the 2026 elections may be an especially turbulent time.

Research on electoral violence in sub-Saharan Africa also indicates that violence tends to be greatest in the lead-up to elections.¹⁶² Attacks on a political opposition leader or party would likely trigger large-scale demonstrations similar to what was seen in 2020. The NUP continues to be the largest opposition party and maintains a strong following of supporters. Recently, the Ugandan government has again been accused of targeting the NUP by limiting their political activities and attacking their presidential candidate, Robert Kyagulanyi.¹⁶³ Kyagulanyi's popularity has only increased since the previous elections, partly due to the release of a documentary focused on Kyagulanyi's struggles as a political figure.¹⁶⁴ Growing popularity and media attention on Kyagulanyi could mean that his supporters would respond with increased outrage and in larger numbers to a perceived attack on him or his party. Alternatively, a perceived attack on an influential traditional leader may also trigger demonstrations. For instance, in 1966 and 2009, large-scale riots in the central region were triggered by the government's harsh treatment of the King of Buganda or the "Kabaka."¹⁶⁵



Ugandan opposition leader and singer Robert Kyagulanyi, known as Bobi Wine, is detained during an anti-government demonstration, in Kampala. Abubaker Lubowa via Reuters.

While recent violence so far has not amounted to mass atrocities, increasing public dissatisfaction and repression could plausibly result in a larger protest movement that is resilient to initial attempts to quash it. This scenario would rest on how the state responds to mass unrest and demonstrations. Museveni and the NRM-controlled government may perceive a widespread, sustained protest movement as a significant threat to power and access to resources, especially if protesters gain public support beyond opposition activists, and most acutely, if protests lead to public demands for "regime change." In this context, NRM leaders might consider extreme tactics to reassert control.

Although it is difficult to forecast precisely where violence would begin and how it would spread, our interviews suggest that the central region is more likely to experience greater political violence than

other regions. The capital city, Kampala, is located in the central region, and is the most populous city in the country. It is also the most politically active region. Kampala is home to headquarters for all government institutions, security agencies, and political parties (including opposition parties such as the NUP). The region also has the largest military presence, with forces ready for deployment. Finally, the central region is home to the largest percentage of Baganda. Baganda make up the largest ethnic group in Uganda and maintain widespread transgenerational grievances against the state over claims to certain cultural rights.¹⁶⁶ The Baganda and the kingdom of the central region are increasingly the “beating heart of criticism of Museveni’s rule.”¹⁶⁷ Baganda make up a core constituency of the NUP’s supporters, suggesting that they may be more likely (over other ethnic or regional groups) to protest against state-led attacks on the NUP or its supporters. As a result, the government may broadly perceive all Baganda as opponents and may deliberately target them for attack.

In this scenario, security forces would predominantly target protesters from opposition political parties. The majority of protesters are likely to be unemployed youth from disgruntled communities in the central region.¹⁶⁸ The NRM-controlled government is likely to perceive all demonstrating youth as the NUP supporters regardless of what they may be protesting against (e.g., political repression, corruption, unemployment).¹⁶⁹

It is important to underscore that peaceful demonstrations are protected under both international law and under the Ugandan Constitution.¹⁷⁰ This report and the scenarios discussed should not be interpreted as discouraging any individual or group from exercising their rights to assemble peacefully and freely express their opinions. The Ugandan government is responsible for protecting these fundamental rights.

SCENARIO B: AN ILLEGITIMATE POLITICAL TRANSITION

In this scenario, a perceived illegal or illegitimate political transition could contribute to political instability and to people taking to the streets to demonstrate against the actions. Such a transition would be engineered by the parts of the NRM or the UPDF, achieved through a rigged election (or other unconstitutional methods), and would lead to a transfer of power from Museveni to his son, General Muhoozi Kainerugaba, or another controversial figure. A transition such as this would produce a struggle between the different power centers within the state, and could contribute to widespread political instability and demonstrations, and ultimately lead to mass atrocities.

Considering the political, financial, and military resources under their control, the groups or actors allied with the president or his successor would have great capacity to target and repress groups who oppose the transition. If low-level repression fails to deter or contain protesters, Museveni and the NRM-controlled government may decide to use more extreme measures to maintain control and suppress dissent. In this case, civilians protesting in opposition to the transition—likely ethnic Baganda, youth, and other ethnic groups from the northern and eastern regions—may be targeted on the basis of their perceived opposition to a continuation of western dominance.¹⁷¹ The potential for violent confrontation between state security forces and demonstrators would most likely occur in Kampala and the central region, where political activism and opposition to the current regime are high. As mentioned in the previous scenario, the central region also has the largest military presence, suggesting that if the government were to respond with force to silence protesters, they could utilize both police and military forces at a high capacity.

It is plausible that such a transition would also lead to political instability within the government and the military. Although it is difficult to foresee precisely between whom internal strife could occur, there are three likely possibilities (which may take place separately or at the same time):

- **Within the NRM or UPDF.** Infighting may arise between NRM allies to the first family who support Museveni and his son and party elders or historical members who may insist that the official NRM party structures should produce a successor. One member of the Office of the National Chairman of the NRM, for example, cautioned party members that, “*Uganda is not a monarchy but a sovereign state where its leaders should be voted by citizens rather than a section of ‘selfish people,’ forcing their candidates on citizens.*”¹⁷² In a similar vein, discord may arise between the NRM-leaning faction of the UPDF and those allied with retired but influential UPDF generals who have openly opposed a forced transfer of power to General Muhoozi.¹⁷³ Following General Muhoozi’s quick rise through military ranks, some argue that there are two defacto armies: a standard UPDF military and a second informal military that is essentially controlled by General Muhoozi.¹⁷⁴ While it is unclear which factions enjoy more support from civilians, mass demonstrations against an illegal transition would likely split the military further.
- **Between political parties.** In light of a contested transition, growing tensions between (and within) the NRM party and General Muhoozi’s young PLU party could reach a breaking point.¹⁷⁵ Although some NRM members have criticized the lack of open discussion about a leadership transition, hardline members object to anything that appears to reduce their hold on power. However, some NRM members see the PLU as a necessary alternative or rebranding of the NRM.¹⁷⁶
- **Between the UPDF and political parties.** Conflict could occur between the UPDF, a force commanded by western region-dominated leadership, and political opposition parties representing other ethnic groups and regions (e.g., the NUP). If the political opposition were to publicly protest such a transition, demanding an end to the Museveni regime, the UPDF may be deployed to violently repress the dissent. While the political opposition lacks the means to form an armed resistance against the military, they may mobilize large numbers of protesters, which if great enough, could pose a significant threat to the military.

In each of the three cases above, members and supporters of any of these groups are scattered across the country, meaning that demonstrations or violence could be widespread (as evidenced during the 2021 general election) should they erupt.

This scenario is only expected to unfold if Museveni decides not to stand for re-election in future elections and transfers power to his son or another controversial figure. The status quo, in this case Museveni’s rule continuing, is a likely scenario. Museveni still maintains support from large sections of the population, with many others resigned to his rule. Should Museveni run for re-election and succeed, mass demonstrations or large-scale violence are unlikely to occur unless there are indications of significant election fraud (more than what has been seen previously) or an attack on the opposition (as outlined in scenario A).

SCENARIO C: STATE VS. NONSTATE ARMED GROUPS

In Scenario C, a clash between nonstate armed groups and the state could trigger large-scale violence against civilians perceived to support these nonstate groups. While violence may be instigated by actors on either side, Ugandan security forces have greater capacity to target civilians on a larger scale. State-led attacks on civilian populations that are perceived to support an armed challenger represent one of the most common types of mass atrocities. They are often preceded by developments that lead the government to perceive an increase in the threat posed by the nonstate armed group, such as a surprisingly successful attack by the nonstate group, a new infusion of external support to the nonstate armed group, or failure of initial attempts to quash an insurgency.¹⁷⁷

In this scenario, large-scale violence would occur if state authorities—with support from political and business elites—forcefully crack down on nonstate armed groups and the civilian communities perceived to support these groups. State-led violence could occur either in response to a specific incident, including an attack by nonstate armed groups on government officials, political elites, or their property. Incidents such as these may occur in response to specific government actions including efforts by the government to consolidate control over an area or resource (e.g., a perceived attack on cultural or traditional leader, preventing communities from accessing resources, seizing land, forcefully evicting communities). Incidents may also occur in response to government inaction (e.g., failing to protect a community from land grabbing, failing to deliver needed services). Some state authorities and elites have already demonstrated their willingness to use lethal police and military force (e.g., during forced land evictions) and as a result, local leaders have mobilized groups and communities to confront the exploitation.¹⁷⁸ In addition to the typical security forces, the state also has the ability to use state-backed vigilante groups, such the Crime Preventers, a volunteer civilian force that reports to the police.¹⁷⁹

At this time, it is difficult to forecast precisely where violence would begin and which nonstate groups would be involved. As discussed earlier, scores of such groups exist in many parts of the country. For this reason, rising tensions in communities across Uganda should be monitored closely. Recent examples, such as tensions between the Balaalo pastoralist group and communities in northern sub-regions (specifically in Acholi territory), demonstrate locals' frustration with the central government's lack of response and how quickly tensions between groups can arise. As one local official said, "If the [federal] government officials have failed to evict the Balaalo, let them tell us...we can mobilise a thousand members of the community and drive those people out."¹⁸⁰ In this case, the government's eventual involvement appeared to prevent the conflict from escalating, but ultimately, did little to resolve the underlying issues (e.g., land disputes, freedom of movement). This example also demonstrates how leaders can quickly mobilize ordinary members of a community to take up arms to address a local threat.

CRITICAL UNCERTAINTIES

The following factors are uncertain at the time of writing but should be closely monitored because they would significantly affect atrocity risk and how any atrocity scenario would unfold:

- 1. How would security forces respond to large-scale demonstrations?** How would demonstrators, in turn, respond to the tactics of security forces? If Ugandan security forces were to respond to protests nonviolently, or if demonstrators were deterred from further protests by initial responses, the risk of mass atrocities would be substantially lower. Neither the tactics of security forces nor the response of demonstrators can be predicted confidently, so these dynamics should be monitored closely.
- 2. Will civilians be targeted based on their ethnic or regional identities?** While it is likely that civilians could be targeted based on their perceived political identity, and more specifically, whether they oppose the government, other forms of identity may also be important. As discussed above, political and social issues can often be perceived along ethnic or regional lines, so it is likely that these forms of identity will play a role in any of the scenarios outlined above. However, due to the state-led discrimination against multiple ethnic groups (in favor of groups from western Uganda) it is difficult to know which specific groups (other than those mentioned above) would be targeted.
- 3. How might violence spread across the country?** Although large-scale violence is mostly likely to occur in Kampala, violence could be triggered by developments in another part of the country. If violence were to spread to other parts of the country, the conflict may intensify as different groups join to address their own grievances against the state. As the conflict spreads, more civilians will be at risk for mass atrocities.
- 4. What role will neighboring countries play in increasing or mitigating the risks of large-scale violence?** If neighboring countries were to get involved in Uganda's domestic politics, this would likely change the conflict dynamics significantly. How will other countries (e.g., Rwanda, Kenya, the DRC) respond to a political transition that is perceived to be unconstitutional? If a neighboring government were to provide the Ugandan government, specifically Museveni or his son, with weapons or other forms of support to suppress the opposition, it could make state-led violence more extreme. It is difficult to know if this would prevent or deter the opposition from mobilizing further or would rally greater numbers of people against the government.
- 6. In the absence of Museveni, who might compete for the position of president?** While our report mentions that Museveni's son, Muhoozi, is a plausible contender to replace his father, expert consultations suggest that other influential individuals may also compete for the presidency or at least play a role in the transition. If one of these influential individuals were to publicly oppose Muhoozi's presidency, the likelihood of violence would increase. On the other hand, if a more popular and less controversial figure (compared to Muhoozi) were to fairly and legally win presidential elections, the risks for violence should be lower.

RESILIENCE AND MITIGATING FACTORS

In addition to identifying the factors contributing to risk for mass atrocities, we also identify several sources of resilience, which may mitigate the risk of mass atrocities against Ugandans. Resiliencies are “social relationships, structures, or processes that are able to provide dispute resolution and meet basic needs through non-violent means.”¹⁸¹

RELIGIOUS LEADERS

As in many countries, Uganda's religious leaders have significant influence with the population, especially regarding how people view their fellow citizens of other faiths and identities. The Inter-Religious Council of Uganda (IRCU) is one important institution that can represent and reach Ugandans of multiple faiths.¹⁸² Under the Uganda National Dialogue program, the IRCU is recognized for creating “independent and safe spaces for dialogue and conciliation.”¹⁸³ They also actively engage with political candidates to address challenges before, during, and after elections. For these reasons, the IRCU has well-established channels to reach the key political and security actors, and convene relevant meetings and related activities between civil society, political actors, and government. In 2020, for example, the IRCU condemned the arrests of political opposition leaders and called for fairness during the election process.¹⁸⁴ A respondent from the IRCU stated, “During times of political turmoil, as was the case in the previous election, we were the only ones who managed to convene political dialogues and debates, bring different voices to talk about the country and we also have the mandate.”¹⁸⁵ The IRCU operates at national, regional, district, and parish levels and therefore has the capacity to help defuse and resolve more localized and community-level disputes and prevent forms of violence.

UGANDA KINGS AND CULTURAL LEADERS FORUM (UKCL)¹⁸⁶

Cultural leaders and institutions in Uganda wield significant influence and authority, extending from family units to the national political arena. Cultural institutions continue to have significant influence over values, beliefs, and practices.¹⁸⁷ During the assessment, a youth leader stated that “cultural institutions can play a critical role as agents of change because they enjoy lots of support, but also a history of inclusiveness in how they handle their followers.”¹⁸⁸ Among other things, the UKCL forum aims to bring together leaders of cultural institutions to promote peace and reconciliation. UKCL often facilitates dialogues or mediates grievances between communities and the state, particularly those that are resource-based like property and land disputes. This can contribute to building trust in collaborating state institutions and social cohesion between parties. In most social and political groups in the country, traditional leaders¹⁸⁹ command respect, have enormous influence, and are trusted messengers, particularly during crises.¹⁹⁰

DEVELOPMENT PARTNERS

Foreign investors and developers, who have significant interest in maintaining stability in Uganda, could play a role in mitigating violence. Uganda is currently dependent on grants and loans from development partners (e.g., the United Nations Development Program, African Development Bank, European Union) to meet over 40 percent of its national budget.¹⁹¹ Accordingly, foreign governments (e.g., the United States, United Kingdom, Norway) are uniquely situated to condition their support on the government's implementation of violence reduction and mitigation strategies. International financial institutions like the World Bank and the United Nations could also play a role by funding

projects (e.g., Spotlight Initiative) aimed at reducing risk and violence in Uganda. Many respondents suggested that donor influence over the Ugandan government should be leveraged to mitigate potential violence. A respondent from the local government stated, “We know that our sovereignty is financed with donor support and that we cannot have a functioning government without it. So, [the donors] need to demand certain standards from the Ugandan government.”¹⁹²

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations seek to spur both immediate steps to help reduce the threats of large-scale violence and longer-term efforts to address underlying mass atrocity risks in Uganda. These ideas should serve as a starting point for policy makers to develop a coordinated and comprehensive plan of preventive action. We organize the specific recommendations into four broad lines of effort. Where similar activities have been tried in the past or are ongoing, it will be important to assess their effectiveness and incorporate lessons into new efforts.

1. MANAGE CONFLICTS THROUGH NONVIOLENT MEANS

The Ugandan government should:

- Ensure that the police and military operate in accordance with international human rights and humanitarian law and standards and that security forces who are alleged to have perpetrated human rights violations are investigated and prosecuted.
- Ensure security forces have sufficient training in nonviolent tactics, especially when engaging with protesters.

Civil society leaders and members, including cultural and religious leaders and other community leaders, should:

- Implement programs aimed at discouraging youth from participating in violence.
- Leverage their respected positions to encourage dialogue, diffuse tensions, and promote a shared vision of peace. By drawing on the deep-rooted traditions of religious tolerance and cultural diversity, these leaders can play a pivotal role in fostering understanding and guiding their communities toward peaceful conflict resolution.
- Use their platforms to call for ethnic, religious, regional, and social tolerance and denounce any attempts to divide or target people based on their identities and real or perceived political support.

International partners should:

- Ensure that any support (e.g., funding, equipment, training) that is provided to Uganda’s military or police is contingent on adherence to international human

rights and humanitarian law and standards. Reports of civilian harm should be investigated immediately, and support halted if verified.

- Support community-level and community-led dialogue and peacebuilding to mitigate tensions between citizens and the Ugandan government.
- Publicly call on political leaders to commit to non-violence and to support local activities to promote peace. Foreign investors and developers, who have a significant interest in maintaining stability in Uganda, should contribute to these efforts.

2. ENSURE THE 2026 ELECTIONS ARE FREE, FAIR, AND PEACEFUL

The Ugandan government should:

- Support unfettered observation of elections by credible and independent domestic and international groups.¹⁹³ Observers—including the African Union (AU) and the East African Community (EAC)—should be given access throughout the country and throughout the preparation and voting process.¹⁹⁴
- Apply all election laws in fair and even-handed ways according to public international law standards and obligations.¹⁹⁵ In particular, all candidates who meet the legal requirements must be allowed to compete.

All political party leaders should:

- Adopt an electoral code of conduct that renounces the use of violence and establishes channels for inter-party communication.¹⁹⁶

International partners should:

- Support electoral violence prevention programming and monitoring of risks in advance of the 2026 elections.
- Signal that they are engaged and release a coordinated public statement calling for the Ugandan government and all political parties to uphold their commitment to free, fair, and peaceful elections.
- Consider conditioning non-humanitarian assistance to the Ugandan government on the government's organization of free, fair, and peaceful elections.

3. ADDRESS UNDERLYING GRIEVANCES

The Ugandan government should:

- Convene a national dialogue¹⁹⁷ to discuss key issues and address grievances, including a transition from Museveni's rule. Ensure that representatives from

political opposition parties, cultural and religious institutions, and civil society are given full opportunity to participate.

- Ensure that all serious allegations of human rights violations are investigated independently and that any responsible parties, including police and government officials, are held accountable. This should include investigating alleged abuses committed in recent years (specifically in Kasese in 2016 and during the lead-up to the 2021 elections).
- Expand engagement with cultural institutions and religious and traditional leaders to address local concerns in areas where grievances are most significant (e.g., the Wakiso district, the shores of Lake Victoria, Mount Elgon, Mabira Forest).
- Reduce bureaucracy around land tenure—for example, by making registrations for land titles easier and less expensive. In the longer-term, revisit controversial sections of land-tenure legislation, including in the Land Act of 1998 and the Land Amendment Bill of 2009.
- Investigate all serious allegations of corruption, including against government officials and the police, and hold perpetrators accountable in transparent ways. Vigorously apply existing anti-corruption legislation, policy, and strategies, including the Anti-Corruption Act (2009), Zero Tolerance to Corruption Policy (2019), and the National Anti-Corruption Strategy.

International partners should:

- Train and fund civil society organizations and religious and cultural leaders so they can participate effectively in activities that aim at mitigating violence and deliberate attacks on civilians.
- Apply and enforce targeted sanctions for human rights abuses and corruption, per the Global Magnitsky Act and similar authorities.
- Support programs designed to expand youth employment opportunities and build youth resilience against participation in violence or recruitment by armed groups.
- Analyze their roles, investments, and assistance streams in Uganda to ensure they are not exacerbating current violence or risk. This applies to donor governments and the private sector.
- Use coordinated public and private diplomacy to communicate that a political transition must be free of violence and be carried out in accordance with the democratic principles in Uganda’s constitution. Encourage Ugandan partners to develop plans for a political transition to reduce uncertainty that can spur fear and violence.

4. LIFT RESTRICTIONS ON CIVIL SOCIETY, INCLUDING HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS AND ACTIVISTS

The Ugandan government should:

- Protect the rights of all Ugandans to freedom of association and expression. Revisit controversial and problematic sections of legislation, including the Public Order Management act of 2013, the non-governmental organizations act of 2015, the Anti-Homosexuality Act of 2023, and the Computer Misuse (Amendment) Bill of 2022.
- Lift restrictions to allow civil society organizations working on peace and nonviolence to operate freely and without harassment.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ “U.S. Atrocity Risk Assessment Framework,” United States Department of State, December 21, 2022, <https://www.state.gov/u-s-atrocity-risk-assessment-framework/>.
- ² Samantha Power, “A Problem from Hell”: America and the Age of Genocide (Basic Books, 2013).
- ³ Ugandan state forces include the military, the Uganda Peoples’ Defence Forces, the Uganda Police Force, and other government supported forces, such as volunteer civilian forces.
- ⁴ Recognizing that protests could contribute to a situation in which some actors choose to commit atrocities should in no way be interpreted as discouraging any individuals or groups from exercising their rights to free expression and assembly. Freedom of expression and peaceful assembly are protected under both international law and under the Ugandan Constitution.
- ⁵ Golooba-Mutebi, Frederick, “Collapse, War and Reconstruction in Uganda; An Analytical Narrative on State-Making,” Crisis States Research Centre (January 2008), <https://www.lse.ac.uk/international-development/Assets/Documents/PDFs/csdc-working-papers-phase-two/wp27.2-collapse-war-and-reconstruction-in-uganda.pdf>.
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- ¹⁰ Including parties such as the National Resistance Movement (NRM), National Unity Platform (NUP), Forum for Democratic Change (FDC), Democratic Party (DP), and Uganda Peoples’ Congress (UPC).
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- ¹⁴ Murithi Mutiga, “Uganda’s Museveni Clings to Power – But Trouble Lies Ahead,” International Crisis Group, January 19, 2021, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/horn-africa/uganda/ugandas-museveni-clings-power-trouble-lies-ahead>.
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- ¹⁶ Reuters, “Uganda’s Police Chief: Beating of Reporters for Their Own Good.”
- ¹⁷ “Police Beat, Detain Journalists Covering Opposition Candidates ahead of Uganda Elections,” *Committee to Protect Journalists* (blog), January 7, 2021, <https://cpj.org/2021/01/police-beat-detain-journalists-covering-opposition-candidates-ahead-of-uganda-elections/>.
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- ¹⁹ Scott Straus, *Fundamentals of Genocide and Mass Atrocity Prevention* (Washington, DC: United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2016), <https://www.ushmm.org/genocide-prevention/reports-and-resources/fundamentals-of-genocide-and-mass-atrocity-prevention>.
- ²⁰ Previous Early Warning Project country reports cover Zimbabwe, Bangladesh, Mali, Côte d’Ivoire, and Indonesia.
- ²¹ We identify key dynamics to understand how identity-based violence—in which civilians are targeted on the basis of their perceived or real identity—may take place on a large scale. However, it should be noted that there are dynamics not addressed here that may be important for understanding how other forms of violence or closely related outcomes may unfold in Uganda.
- ²² The Statistical Risk Assessment is designed to forecast the onset of state or non-state-led mass killings, defined as deliberate actions of armed groups that result in the deaths of at least 1,000 non combatant civilians in a period of one year or less. A list view of the results is available here: <https://earlywarningproject.ushmm.org/ranking-of-all-countries>.
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Cover: People run away from tear gas as Ugandan pop star and presidential candidate Bobi Wine campaigns near Kampala. Reuters/Abubaker Lubowa via Reuters.



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