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# Uganda Country Forum Conference Report

Fostering a Conducive Environment for  
Credible, Free, Fair and Peaceful 2026 General  
Elections in Uganda



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## 1. Executive summary

On Thursday, July 3, 2025, the Center for Constitutional Governance (CCG), in collaboration with the Uganda National NGO Forum (UNNGOF) and the Alliance for Finance Monitoring (ACFIM), and with support from the East and Horn of Africa Election Observers Network (E-HORN), successfully convened a multi-stakeholder forum at Hotel Africana in Kampala. This crucial Country Forum was organised under the EU-funded AHEAD Africa Program. Details about the program can be found at <https://ahead.africa/en/>. Over 90 participants attended, including key representatives from the Electoral Commission (EC), Uganda Human Rights Commission (UHRC), political parties, civil society organisations (CSOs), academia, security agencies, and the media. The forum's primary objective was to discuss crucial pathways toward peaceful, transparent, and inclusive elections in Uganda. The event was officially opened by the Minister of Justice and Constitutional Affairs, Honorable Norbert Mao.

The forum identified several significant barriers to electoral integrity, such as the increasing commercialisation of politics, selective enforcement of laws, media restrictions, and limited accreditation of CSOs. A prominent concern raised was the role of security forces and the emergence of paramilitary groups, particularly their potential to disrupt electoral peace.

### **Key discussions emphasised the importance of:**

- Strengthening the legal and institutional framework for elections.
- Promoting civic education and voter awareness.
- Enhancing transparency through real-time results publication and digital reporting.
- Regulating political financing and introducing campaign spending limits.
- Building trust among stakeholders through continuous engagement and accountability.

Among the key recommendations were fast-tracking CSO accreditation for observing and monitoring the 2026 General Elections, establishing a special Electoral Offenses Court, reviewing public funding allocations to political parties, and prohibiting foreign campaign contributions. Stakeholders also called for the establishment of "democracy schools" to enhance civic knowledge and legal literacy among citizens and political actors.



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Honorable Norbert Mao reaffirmed the government's commitment to democratic principles while acknowledging the pressing need for reforms, restraint by security agencies, and greater inclusion in the electoral process.

This report comprehensively outlines the forum's key deliberations, outcomes, and strategic recommendations, aiming to inform future electoral reforms and collaborative actions ahead of the 2026 general elections.

## 2. Introduction

### Background and Context

Uganda is set to hold its next general elections in January 2026, a pivotal moment in the nation's democratic journey. As a multiparty system, Uganda's elections are expected to genuinely reflect the will of the people, promote inclusive participation, and uphold democratic accountability. However, persistent concerns over the past two decades suggest that these ideals remain largely aspirational.

Despite operating under a legal framework that supports multiparty democracy, Uganda continues to grapple with significant democratic and governance challenges. These include rising political violence, the shrinking of civic and political space, and enduring doubts about the credibility of the electoral process. These concerns are not only raised domestically but have also been highlighted by independent international assessments. For instance, Freedom House (2024) categorises Uganda as "Not Free," assigning it a score of 34 out of 100 in terms of political rights and civil liberties. Similarly, the CIVICUS Monitor (2024) rates Uganda's civic space as "Repressed," with a score of 30 out of 100, underscoring restrictions on freedoms of expression, assembly, and association.

In response to this increasingly constrained democratic environment, the Center for Constitutional Governance (CCG), in partnership with the Uganda National NGO Forum (UNNGOF) and the Alliance for Finance Monitoring (ACFIM), and with support from the East and Horn of Africa Election Observation Network (E-HORN), organised this multi-stakeholder forum. The forum's primary objective was to assess Uganda's current political and electoral landscape, advocate for necessary reforms, and identify areas requiring urgent attention before the 2026 elections.

Held on July 3, 2025, at Hotel Africana in Kampala, the forum brought together over 50 participants from key democratic institutions and sectors. This diverse group included representatives from the Electoral Commission, the Uganda Human Rights



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Commission (UHRC), political parties, civil society organisations, security agencies, academia, and the media. The event also featured Honorable Norbert Mao, Minister for Justice and Constitutional Affairs, who attended as the Chief Guest and shared valuable insights on legal and institutional preparedness for the upcoming elections.

This report details the key deliberations, emerging concerns, and actionable recommendations from the forum, all aimed at strengthening Uganda's democratic processes and fostering a peaceful, free, and fair electoral environment in 2026.

## **Purpose**

The overarching goal of the Uganda Country Forum is to contribute to creating an enabling and peaceful environment for credible, free, and fair general elections in 2026, while ensuring enhanced citizen participation and the safeguarding of fundamental democratic principles.

Specifically, the forum aimed to:

- Facilitate constructive dialogue among diverse stakeholders on the challenges to, and opportunities for, enhancing electoral integrity and transparency in Uganda.
- Identify and analyse the root causes of political violence and restrictions on civil and political liberties, and propose practical mitigation measures.
- Promote a shared understanding of the roles and responsibilities of various actors in upholding democratic principles throughout the electoral cycle.
- Strengthen collaboration and coordination among civil society organisations, political parties, the Electoral Commission, security agencies, academia, and the media to collectively address identified concerns.

## **Methodology**

The forum experienced strong in-person attendance, attracting a diverse group of participants from key democratic institutions and civil society. In addition to those physically present, many others followed the proceedings virtually through a live broadcast on Civic Space TV, the Center for Constitutional Governance's digital platform on YouTube. Engagement was further amplified on social media via the hashtags #EyesOnElections and #UgandaDecides2026, which facilitated wider public participation and real-time discourse on the forum's key messages. A sign language interpreter was also present to ensure inclusivity.



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The forum's structure included remarks from key stakeholders, insightful panel discussions, and interactive plenary sessions to foster inclusive engagement. Ms. Judith Atim, Programs Lead at the Center for Constitutional Governance, expertly moderated the event.

### 3. Opening Remarks from Dr. Sarah Bireete

Dr. Sarah Bireete extended a warm welcome to delegates from South Sudan, Kenya, and Tanzania. She introduced E-HORN's mission, which is to strengthen and monitor elections across the East and Horn of Africa. She highlighted several key challenges currently affecting Uganda, including:

- Increasing human rights violations, particularly by the police.
- Restrictions on media freedom, with a pointed question to the Minister regarding the government's intentions behind such blockades.
- Hindrances to Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) whose mandate covers elections.
- Extreme commercialisation of elections.
- Selective application of the law.

Dr. Bireete also raised major concerns regarding electoral integrity, such as:

- Election-related violence.
- Lack of transparency in the tabulation and transfer of election results, particularly at the national tally center.
- Denial of accreditation to CSOs with a mandate on constitutionalism.

She offered the following recommendations:

- Emphasise the use of technology in elections, as highlighted by the President, and urged the Electoral Commission to communicate clearly on all election-related issues.
- Prioritise stopping election violence and developing a clear code of conduct for security forces.
- Increase transparency, especially concerning presidential results.
- Promote comprehensive voter education.
- Ensure respect for the rule of law and adherence to rules-based electoral processes.



## 4. Overview of E-HORN: Eustace Kinywa, E-HORN Secretariat

Eustace Kinywa provided an overview of E-HORN, a network of election observer groups established in 2013 with seven founding organisations. Its core ambition is to promote free and fair elections across the East and Horn of Africa.

He elaborated on the A-HEAD Project, which empowers CSOs to contribute to civic knowledge with the intent to conduct national, regional, and international advocacy. The project's objectives include:

- Improving electoral transparency.
- Promoting evidence-based electoral governance.
- Invigorating dialogue spaces for electoral reforms.
- Building a community of support and practice.
- Engaging a broader range of CSOs.

## 5. Remarks from Uganda Human Rights Commission (UHRC): Ms. Mariam Wangadya, Chairperson, UHRC

Ms. Mariam Wangadya underscored that elections represent dignity, not merely ballots. She acknowledged that Ugandan elections sometimes involve an element of fear, stressing the need for the country to learn from Kenya's experiences. She offered the following key recommendations:

- Security forces must protect human rights.
- The media must uphold and defend the truth.
- Religious and cultural leaders must actively promote peace.
- CSOs must diligently monitor and hold the government accountable.
- The government must adequately fund civic education initiatives.
- Ms. Wangadya further emphasised the critical importance of building a chain of trust among all stakeholders through continuous and meaningful engagement.

## 6. Remarks from Electoral Commission (EC): Julius Mucunguzi, EC Spokesperson

Representing the EC Chairperson, Justice Simon Mugenyi Byabakama, Mr. Julius Mucunguzi underscored the fundamental principles of credible elections: they must be rules-based, participatory, and competitive. He affirmed the Electoral Commission's unwavering commitment to these principles. While acknowledging

existing gaps in participation, he pledged ongoing efforts for improvement and urged all actors to collectively work towards peace.

## 7. Remarks from Chief Guest Hon. Norbert Mao, Minister of Justice and Constitutional Affairs

Honorable Norbert Mao highlighted three critical environments that significantly impact elections:

- **Legal Environment:** He noted that many discussions around elections often occur without a thorough understanding of the law. He urged citizens to become familiar with the relevant laws and to act with genuine intent.
- **Conscious (Mind) Environment:** Hon. Mao questioned the electorate's genuine interest in elections when they are often unfamiliar with their leaders. He encouraged participants to actively get to know their local leaders and understand their political surroundings.
- **Security Environment:** Expressing concern about Uganda's increasing guns per capita, Hon. Mao called for accountability and restraint among security forces before resorting to violence. He also reminded security forces to communicate openly with the public before taking any action, fostering a positive perception of security forces in Uganda. He urged CSOs to maintain their convictions, even when facing government scrutiny.

He lamented the high levels of poverty and material deprivation, which, unfortunately, significantly influence political decisions, voting patterns, and existing governance struggles. He encouraged participants to understand the mindset of the "broker of power" in Uganda—the President—when engaging in discourse about the country's democratic state.

Lastly, he extended an invitation to participants to partner with the Ministry of Justice and Constitutional Affairs to commemorate 30 years of the 1995 Constitution (as amended) in 2025. Specifically, he asked CCG to co-convene this year's week-long commemorative event. Hon. Mao made the following calls to action:

- Marginalisation of extremists across all political spectrums.
- Launching a "no violence" campaign and publicly denouncing all perpetrators of violence by naming them.
- Promoting proactive voices against torture.
- Ensuring impartial and objective reporting by the media.
- Fostering a culture of organised defiance with clear objectives.
- Encouraging dialogue, reconciliation, and progressive reforms.



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## 8. Plenary Discussions

The plenary session featured active engagement from various participants, who raised critical questions and concerns to the panelists.

Participant 1:

To Hon. Mao: Questioned the hierarchy of security forces, noting the army's involvement in demonstrations instead of the police, and suggested that defiance is unrealistic in such a context.

To EC: Challenged the EC to "walk the talk," asserting that the absence of war does not necessarily mean the presence of peace. Urged the EC to analyse issues realistically.

Participant 2:

To EC: Juxtaposed Uganda's global image with its domestic reality. Asked the EC to contrast power retention through violence with citizens' violent responses. Accused the EC of complicity with the government in unleashing violence against citizens.

Participant 3:

To Hon. Mao: Argued that unfavorable media coverage of government-allied individuals does not imply a lack of impartiality when the same is applied to opposition actors. Called for the installation and use of cameras at polling stations to ensure transparency. Also requested Hon. Mao to facilitate CSO engagement in voter sensitisation and to revise the Public Order Management Act (POMA). Questioned the EC about preparations for electoral reforms and the EC's impartiality in holding fair elections.

Participant 4: Asked the EC if it was aware of the manipulation of electoral materials and the transfer of voter locations.

Participant 5: Emphasised the crucial need for a clear code of conduct for security agencies during elections.

Participant 6: Raised concern about CSO accreditation occurring only close to elections, suggesting it should be a permanent mandate of the EC.



Participant 9: Expressed concern about the condition of political prisoners and online gender-based violence against women.

Participant 10: Asked whether the EC truly has control over elections, as they often appear to require backup from the army.

Participant 11: Asked if it was time to review the 1995 Constitution (as amended) and questioned why the voter register had been updated using 2014 data.

Participant 12: Observed that the EC does not count opposition voters and that there is no media coverage for this, requesting a solution.

Participant 13: Sought reassurance that there would be no violence in the forthcoming general elections and expressed optimism about institutional improvement.

Participant 14: Raised concern about the harassment of activists peacefully demanding accountability and called for justice.

Participant 15: Expressed concern about arbitrary arrests and disappearances of citizens, calling for these issues to be addressed.

#### Responses

Hon. Mao:

- Advised activists seeking to defend democracy to explore alternative, meaningful ways, drawing on his personal experiences to caution them about the inherent dangers of such struggles.
- Stressed that his experience with the media has not been ideal and urged the media to uphold impartiality.
- Acknowledged that he would reflect on and urgently address the issue of a code of conduct for security officers.
- Conceded that poverty is not an excuse for political corruption, but stated that until stronger countermeasures against the influence of money in elections are in place, eliminating political corruption remains challenging.
- Discussed efforts to bring peace to Uganda's chaotic political environment, including the Transitional Justice Bill, which proposes a permanent dialogue

committee to facilitate and address grievances of Ugandans. He also mentioned a war victims compensation fund underway.

- Called on police representatives present to address questions about their actions and urged restraint from participants.
- Spoke of his efforts to release political prisoners through various avenues like plea bargains and the presidential prerogative of mercy. He also hinted at upcoming bills, such as the Human Rights Defenders Bill and the Legal Aid Bill.
- Lastly, acknowledged the need for a Constitutional review, particularly reinstating term limits and other reforms.

Electoral Commission Representative (Mr. Julius Mucunguzi):

- Acknowledged that the constitutional mandate of the EC is derived from the people and affirmed that there is room for improvement, especially regarding shortcomings. He added that the EC and security forces are continuously engaging to enhance performance.
- Justified the need for accreditation during election season as a means of ensuring order.
- Called for mutual support from various stakeholders to achieve free and fair elections.
- Underscored that, ideally, the EC should not only authorise but also fund CSOs promoting voter education. He suggested that accreditation is unnecessary as new voters emerge daily.
- Observed a trust deficit between the EC and stakeholders.
- Called for accreditation to be accompanied by protection for CSOs.
- Suggested that there should be campaign spending caps and real-time result displays.



## 9. Session One & Two Combination: Towards a Free, Fair, and Inclusive 2026; Political Finance as the Next Frontier of Democratic Reform in Uganda

Moderator: Job Kijja. Panelists:

- Julius Mucunguzi, EC Spokesperson
- Perry Aritua, Executive Director, Women in Democracy Network Uganda
- Kulaigye Hillary, Deputy Chief Political Commissar, Uganda Police Force
- Saasi Marvin, Secretary for Diaspora Affairs, National Unity Platform (NUP)

Key Discussions:

- Electoral Commission on CSO Accreditation: Urged CSOs to seek accreditation despite delays, promising eventual responses.
- Use of Technology: The EC stated its use of biometric voter verification to prevent ballot stuffing.
- CSO Preparedness: CSOs complement government efforts and utilise social media and informal groups for voter education.
- Internet Shutdown Preparation: CSOs are strategising to maintain voter education despite potential internet shutdowns.
- Police on Paramilitary Groups: Emphasised that all paramilitary groups are illegal and vowed to stop them.
- NUP on Paramilitary Group Egaali: Argued for the constitutional right to associate, stating that the group (Egaali) aims to protect voters' rights non-violently, and thus, it is not a paramilitary group.



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Individual Panelist Contributions- Perry Aritua, Executive Director, Women in Democracy Network Uganda (WDN):

- Acknowledged the laws governing elections as the basis for the existence and operations of CSOs.
- Asked the EC to complement and protect CSOs to ensure effective work.
- Spoke about the roles CSOs play, including providing a platform for voter education, and called on the government to view CSOs as partners, not adversaries.
- Noted that CSOs are employing diverse approaches, such as including more people and referring individuals to the EC.
- Stated that CSOs are also training candidates vying for elective office to ensure the country has committed leaders. These trainings and support are conducted using established informal groups in society, such as religious platforms, to promote peaceful elections.
- Encouraged different stakeholders to form useful partnerships with the EC.

Julius Mucunguzi, EC Spokesperson:

- Emphasised the importance of accrediting CSOs, especially during election season, despite systemic weaknesses.
- Acknowledged the EC's weaknesses and committed to improving the electoral process.
- Noted that voter and civic education should not be solely tied to elections, adding that the EC will provide clarification to CSOs who applied for accreditation to observe elections based on their adherence to the law.
- Stated that the EC would employ technology in the elections, specifically using biometric machines for voter verification to ensure transparency.
- Regarding reforms, he stressed that they must be timely, adding that the electoral season is too short to allow sufficient time for reforms. Electoral



reforms, he argued, must be undertaken much earlier and outside the election season.

- Encouraged participants to remain optimistic about elections and their outcomes, provided they fulfill their roles according to the law.

Kulaigye Hillary, Deputy Chief Political Commissar, Uganda Police Force:

- Acknowledged the role of the Uganda Police Force and the laws governing the invitation of other national security agencies to support the police.
- Acknowledged the shortcomings of security agencies in previous elections, particularly the unprecedented violence unleashed on voters during the Kawempe North by-election. He informed participants that investigations are underway, though classified.
- Reassured participants that the upcoming elections would be peaceful, as the police force is better prepared and has learned from past mistakes.
- Raised concerns about emerging paramilitary groups, stating they are illegal and must be stopped. He added that security forces have been harmed by paramilitary groups like the Egaali group.
- Noted that previous elections occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic with stringent regulations, but these regulations have now been relaxed post-pandemic.

Saasi Marvin, Secretary for Diaspora Affairs, National Unity Platform (NUP):

- Defined "Egaali" as vote protection units employed by opposition parties due to the EC's perceived inaction in ensuring credible elections.
- Called out the ruling party and government institutions for allegedly conspiring to consolidate power for the regime. In this regard, he accused the police of double standards against opposition parties, claiming they do not deal with them in good faith. He also accused the EC of complicity with security forces.
- Emphasised the constitutional right to associate and encouraged participants to avoid falling for narratives designed to portray the opposition's Egaali as paramilitary groups.



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### Plenary Session

Participant A: Asked why the EC appears to be an observer of security forces while security forces control elections.

Participant B: Concerned about voter and civic education. Asked why accreditation is necessary and concurred with Mr. Hillary Kulaigye's concerns about political party groups or paramilitary groups.

Participant C: Emphasised to the NUP representative Mr. Saasi that paramilitary groups (Egaali) are real and cautioned him on the need to hold them accountable as perpetrators of violence in elections. Noted that the EC is incapable of holding elections, hence the rise of misguided vigilantes.

Participant D: Called out the EC for deliberately delaying CSO accreditation. On the other hand, also expressed sympathy for the EC being bullied by security forces.

Participant E: Asked security forces to call the Chief of Defence Forces (CDF) to order. Observed that the village (LCI) elections were a litmus test for national elections and questioned the EC's ability to handle national elections after that experience.

Participant F: Asked why the EC refuses to provide registers for opposition candidates.

Participant G: Called for a code of conduct or regulations for voter protection units to avoid ambiguity.

Participant H: Appreciated the EC for acknowledging the law and questioned why they recognise illegally declared winners of internal political party elections.

Participant I: Stated that she does not recognise police constables in polling stations and doubted the ability of police to handle elections. Asked for reassurance from the police force. Also agreed that the Egaali are not entirely law-abiding and called for caution. Flagged discrepancies with NIRA that are likely to affect the electoral process.

Participant J: Expressed concern about the arrogance and impunity of the CDF, noting that only the CDF has unchecked paramilitary groups and asked how he can be checked to protect Ugandan lives during the 2026 elections. Quoting Article 2 of the Constitution, she asked whether elections are a national emergency



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requiring army involvement. She asked police to inform citizens about the need for military involvement in elections so they can make informed decisions.

Responses:

Saasi Marvin, Secretary for Diaspora Affairs, National Unity Platform (NUP):

- Noted that NUP is deliberately being excluded from elections, which provokes supporters.
- Spoke of the deep-seated culture of impunity orchestrated by the ruling party and government institutions, adding that no goodwill is being extended to NUP.
- Called for a candid discussion on a post-Museveni Uganda.

Kulaigye Hillary, Deputy Chief Political Commissar, Uganda Police Force:

- Reiterated that the circumstances of the Kawempe North by-elections are under investigation.
- Agreed with participants C and I regarding the need to check the impunity of Egaali.
- Stated that legal provisions guide the actions of the CDF.
- Encouraged continuous engagement and assured participants that the police would manage to maintain peace for free and fair elections, though not necessarily free of incidents.

Julius Mucunguzi, E.C Spokesperson:

- Called for collective efforts to condemn negative aspects to lend credibility to the electoral processes.
- Stated that this can be achieved through continuous engagement with stakeholders, continuous advocacy for reforms, internal party democracy, and engaging with the goal of fairer civic engagement.



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Perry Aritua, Executive Director, Women in Democracy Network Uganda (WDN):

- Emphasised the need for the EC and police to meet international human rights standards to inspire public trust, adding that perpetrators of violence should be held accountable.
- Flagged the shutting down of the internet during elections as an abnormal and counter-productive practice.
- Called upon all stakeholders to commit to doing the right thing, emphasising that there must be equal application of the law.

## **10. Session Two: Political Finance as the Next Frontier of Democratic Reform in Uganda: Rethinking the Role of Money in Politics Ahead of the 2026 General Elections**

Speaker: Henry Muguzi, Executive Director, ACFIM

Henry Muguzi examined the pervasive influence of money in elections, noting that it now unfortunately dictates electoral outcomes behind the scenes, thereby discrediting credible representation. He called for a comprehensive legislative overhaul, stronger oversight, increased transparency, digital reporting, enhanced voter education, and vigorous investigative journalism to address this issue.

## **11. Panel Discussion**

Moderator: Judith Atim

Panelist: Hon. Lyandro Komakech, Former MP

Honorable Lyandro Komakech delivered a presentation that seamlessly blended policy issues with general challenges in Uganda. He acknowledged the enduring contribution of Uganda's colonial legacy and identified poverty as the biggest inhibitor of issue-based politics. He recommended enforcing campaign finance regulations and called for an electoral offenses court to ensure the timely resolution of election-related disputes, in addition to other recommendations from previous speakers.

## **Plenary**



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Participant (i): Inquired about IPOD's standard for political party funding and noted that it appears to be a cycle of inequality enshrined in law. She called for the regulation of money in politics and for mandatory disclosure of politicians' donation sources.

Participant (ii): Observed that political parties need to mobilise but also noted that political corruption is a significant issue requiring attention.

Participant (iii): Noted that public financing is crucial for impartiality and to free local politics from foreign influence.

Participant (iv): Observed the need for broader perspectives as laws no longer seem effective. He highlighted the need for proper engagement to review existing laws and systems.

Participant (v): Called for regional coordination to tackle political violence, regular stakeholder meetings (even without CSO initiation), and a special police unit dedicated to elections and human rights observance.

Participant (vi): Called for people-centered solutions to address the influence of money in politics.

Participant (vii): Noted that political will is essential; otherwise, political financing regulations will be a mere façade.

General Recommendations:

The forum concluded with a series of comprehensive recommendations aimed at improving Uganda's electoral landscape:

- Enforce campaign finance regulations to curb the influence of money in politics.
- Mandate public disclosure of all campaign expenditures and resources.
- Increase equitable public funding for political parties, restructuring the current imbalance that heavily favors the ruling party (approximately 80%).
- Create a dedicated Electoral Offenses Court to ensure swift and impartial resolution of election-related disputes.
- Promote robust civic education and encourage issue-based voting rather than financially driven decisions.



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- Regulate campaign contributions by linking funding to performance, gender inclusion, and genuine policy engagement.
- Review and strengthen the IPOD framework to empower smaller political parties.
- Address loopholes that allow politicians to remain in office while facing unresolved electoral offenses.
- Launch nationwide civic education initiatives on voting rights and democratic values.
- Prohibit foreign campaign donations to safeguard national interests.
- Strengthen laws against vote buying and selling and ensure their strict enforcement.
- Collaborate with faith-based organisations to rebuild moral fabric and resist the misuse of religious platforms for political gain.
- Encourage religious leaders to educate their followers on values-based leadership and good governance.