

If the Sovereignty Bill's framing of Ugandans abroad becomes the norm, the State can pass new laws that strip "foreigners" of rural land above certain thresholds, writes Charles Onyango Obbo.

Perhaps a point in the Sovereignty Bill might make sense, but a thousand flaws render it worthless in its current form. Here I focus on two of them. First, the Bill labels all Ugandans living abroad as "foreigners". Second, it turns anyone who receives money from foreigners (including these Ugandans now classed as foreigners) vulnerable to being labelled a foreign agent and national security threat.

Sovereignty Bill and battle



Internal Affairs Minister Gen David Muhoozi moved the motion for reading of The Protection of Sovereignty Bill, 2026. PHOTO/PARLIAMENT X

Take the example of the Anti-Homosexuality Act

President Museveni signed it on May 26 2023. During the debate, MPs whipped up hysteria. They claimed homosexuals were destroying Ugandan culture and preying on its children. Both the ruling NRM and the Opposition backed the Bill almost unanimously. Only two MPs opposed it, the loudest being ruling-NRM legislator Fox Odoi, who once served as Museveni's legal assistant.

You would have thought tens of thousands of gay men were rampaging across the country, raping children. Yet official data for 2022 shows only 310 boys and 12,470 girls suffered defilement. A single rape is terrible, but heterosexual perpetrators cause the real crisis. Given the panic over the "Kill the Gays" Bill, you would expect authorities to arrest thousands of dangerous homosexuals after it became law.

In reality, police made only about 125 homosexuality-related arrests in the first two years, and courts secured hardly any convictions. These numbers reveal the truth. The significant political energy invested in the Bill served other purposes.

In Uganda and across Africa, most people who support gay rights are not gay or lesbian. They tend to be liberal, freedom-loving, progressive on issues like marriage, secular or agnostic, and internationalist.

In the grand scheme, the "Kill the Gays Bill" delivered a successful attack on Uganda's liberal constituencies (including both Opposition and NRM members). Apart from a handful of activists and intellectuals, they were silenced nationally during that period and haven't recovered.

Fox Odoi became a martyr of sorts, losing his West Budama North East constituency in Tororo District in the January vote. Along with the crackdown on civil society, the liberals are now in their

weakest position in over 30 years, heading into the Museveni succession battles that will unfold over the next five years.

Museveni threw the Bill like a yellow tennis ball for the dogs to chase, while real power shifted elsewhere.

1986 blueprint for control

Therefore, we have to see the patterns that have led to the Sovereignty Bill working in the same way as the picture painted above. The Bill ostensibly targets civil society and its international backers, but under direct closure by the state and administrative strangulation, the data shows that over 9,000 NGOs have been shuttered in Uganda over the last five years. That is a 64 percent decrease in their numbers.

Additionally, reports from early 2026 suggested that 84 percent of democracy-focused NGOs in Uganda had experienced a 30-50 percent drop in funding compared to 2021 levels. The sector the government is worried about is almost dead; it doesn't need a sledgehammer.

Some commentators have also alleged that the recent flight into exile of Museveni's rival in the January election, Bobi Wine (Robert Kyagulanyi), has terrified Kampala, with his vast "Ganda-based" diaspora, who can fund a rebellion against the government.

However, whatever one might think of him, Bobi Wine's primary strength is his image as a democratic, non-violent reformer. Transitioning into "funding a rebellion" would instantly strip him of some of both of his local and international support and allow Museveni to frame him as a "terrorist" rather than a constitutional political rival.

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It declared that the NRA/NRM now governed Uganda. The notice gave the government control over political activity and public order. In practice, it locked in the no-party "Movement system" and blocked parties from mobilising. Not entirely wrongly, the NRM blamed Uganda's past chaos under Idi Amin and Milton Obote on sectarian politics rooted in tribe, religion and region. Legal Notice 1 provided NRM with the legal basis to make anti-sectarianism a central doctrine, even if the notice never explicitly stated so.

That doctrine became law in December 1988 with the Anti-Sectarianism Law. It criminalised the promotion of hatred or division based on ethnicity, religion, tribe or origin. However, this only created in statute what the government had already been enforcing since 1986.

Again, the grand scheme mattered more than the stated purpose. After Museveni seized power in 1986, opponents in central and northern Uganda and in exile challenged his legitimacy. They called him, in what I always considered reactionary, an "outsider" because of his alleged Rwandan/Burundi lineage and cross-border family ties.

They highlighted the many fighters with Rwandan backgrounds in the NRA. These critics painted the war's brutality as the work of a "foreigner" who felt nothing for Ugandans and wanted to erase indigenous folk and seize their land for outsiders. At the same time, complaints grew that people from western Uganda were grabbing most top jobs and contracts (the "Twarire" grumble).

The anti-sectarianism law aimed to shut down these attacks. The government's own fierce anti-Northern rhetoric, hypocritically, escaped the law, which weakened its credibility. Still, the measure helped neutralise a potent line of attack at a fragile moment and pushed "Museveni the foreigner" narratives to the political fringes and exile circles.

Events soon after made much of this moot. In October 1990, the Rwanda Patriotic Army/Front launched its return-to-the-homeland war and took power in Kigali in 1994. This eased the sharp edge of the "Banyarwanda question" in Ugandan politics.

Prosecutions under the anti-sectarianism law stayed few. Yet in 1997, the government toughened the penalties. Why? The country had plunged into a bitter debate over what became the Uganda Land Act of 1998.

The 1995 Constitution declared that all land in Uganda belongs to Ugandan citizens. Article 237(1) states: "Land in Uganda belongs to the citizens of Uganda and shall vest in them in accordance with the land tenure systems provided for in this Constitution."

This clause ranks among the most citizen-friendly in the world because it recognises customary tenure. A family that has lived on land for 100 years without a "paper title" still legally owns it.

The Constitution did little more. The 1998 Land Act filled the gap. Its most controversial part gave security of tenure to "lawful and bona fide occupants", usually long-term tenants on mailo land. The Act protected them from arbitrary eviction and forced landlords to follow strict rules.

Landlords protested that the law weakened property rights and handed control to tenants without compensation. They could no longer sell, lease or mortgage occupied land without consent. Critics warned that it made land difficult to use as collateral, scared off investment, and created dual ownership.

Buganda nationalists saw it as a plot to seize their land

If, like me, you hoped the Act would create a true free market in land, you felt disappointed. The new NRM-linked land-owning class made sure the law ignored land hoarding and speculative holdings. These issues have now fed into the Sovereignty Bill through the back door.

Now, the Constitution was an act of cowardice regarding who is a citizen and who is a foreigner. My thinking (a hopelessly liberal one that admires the Roman view of citizenship) is probably too far out and marginal in the Ugandan context.

Still, the Constitution should have granted citizenship to everyone living in Uganda in 1995 who had been in the country for more than five years and wanted it. They would then have had to come forward and register for it. Instead, it capped eligibility at those who were resident at independence in 1962

for coffee, land and diaspora cash

THE KEY PILLARS

Land

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Coffee

Coffee will be another key cog in this power game. Centralising its control in a minister and shifting market functions to State-backed, favoured local companies will continue. Foreign firms that dominate exports today could lose ground under new rules limiting foreign control. It is a very likely end because, as the world moves away from fossil fuels, coffee will grow more valuable than oil. The global coffee market stands at \$250-380 billion, while oil reaches \$2-4 trillion, yet coffee fetches five to 10 times more per kilogramme. High stakes lie ahead.

Remittances

Unlike aid, remittances go directly to households, bypassing government bureaucracy. The State now wants control. The Sovereignty Bill would require anyone receiving money from the diaspora to obtain authorisation from the Interior Ministry, with penalties of up to 10 years in prison for non-compliance and up to 20 years for offences such as "economic sabotage." The net result is that if ministers can hold the money for even three months while they check whether dangerous "foreigners" are not funding regime change through gifts to mothers and grandmothers, it would ease the government's chronic cash-flow problems considerably.

Museveni's last song

Uganda, as noted earlier, suffers a severe landlessness crisis, especially in central and south-western regions, but across the country too. Much prime land is held by "legacy families" (those who gained privilege between 1900 and 1990 and accumulated large holdings). Many younger members of these families now live abroad. If the Sovereignty Bill's framing of Ugandans abroad becomes the norm, the State can pass new laws that strip "foreigners" of rural land above certain thresholds. This would let the government seize land from the wealthiest, best-educated members of these families who live overseas. It would claim it is to ease landlessness, but in reality, it would transfer economic power to a new class ready to back the post-Museveni order. Coffee will be another key cog in this power game. It will keep rising in value. Urbanisation, the growth of middle classes in Asia and Africa, shifting youth tastes, and premiumisation will all continue to drive demand.

(which some nationalists still considered too recent, by the way).

Coffee and the power grab

Seven years later, in 2007, the global financial crisis hit Uganda too. By then, Uganda had become closely aligned with the United States militarily. Thousands of Ugandans, many of them army veterans, worked as private military contractors in Iraq and later Afghanistan.

At home, pressure forced the NRM to abandon its no-party system. In 2005, Uganda returned to multiparty politics, but only after scrapping presidential term limits so Museveni could stay in power as the price. The 2006 election convinced many NRM leaders (several with exile links and family abroad) to build a long-term family insurance policy.

In 2009, these factors led the government to push through the Uganda Citizenship and Immigration Control (Amendment) Act. It legalised dual citizenship.

Supporters argued, quite sensibly, that it would boost diaspora investment. By that point, after over 40 years of exile,

\$2.5b

In 2025, Uganda received \$2.5 billion (about Shs9.25 trillion) in remittances (roughly 3.8 percent of GDP).

many educated and successful Ugandans now held citizenship in their host countries. Dual citizenship would give them confidence to bring money home.

To some extent, it worked. Many invested in real estate and bought large tracts of land, much of which still lies unused. Meanwhile, Uganda faces a growing landlessness crisis that radicalises opposition and pushes the government to ever harsher violence to retain control.

These forces set the stage for 2024. Amid chaos (fistfights and suspensions of MPs), the government forced through the bitterly contested National Coffee (Amendment) Bill on November 6. The

fiercest fights centred on abolishing the quasi-independent Uganda Coffee Development Authority (UCDA) and shifting all its powers to the Ministry of Agriculture, Animal Industry and Fisheries. Critics feared the move would wreck quality control, research, marketing and farmer incomes.

Opposition MPs and coffee farmers saw it as a dangerous downgrade for the entire sector.

The Sovereignty Bill, as we will show shortly, now opens the political door to handle these issues, albeit in a crude, partisan and extortionate fashion. The Bill could have created categories such as "Ugandans abroad" or "hostile non-resident Ugandans". Instead, it simply brands them all "foreigners". This choice was deliberate.

The NRM knows the power of "foreigner" politics. They once tried to banish it with the 1988 anti-sectarianism law. Now they wield the same weapon themselves.

The Bill also lets them settle unfinished business from the 1995 Constitution and the 1998 Land Act. It reshapes the balance of power for the decade ahead, a decision that must be made by 2030.

BY KARIM MUYOBO

KAMPALA. The Deputy Resident City Commissioner (RCC) for Kawempe Division, Mr Kagenyi Lukka, has withdrawn his earlier directive ordering Makerere University to hand over part of the disputed Katanga land to a private developer, citing legal advice and existing court orders.

Mr Kagenyi had, in a March 23, 2026, letter, instructed the university to transfer possession of a section of land near Wandegeya to Nanziza Construction Company Uganda Limited for redevelopment, arguing that the move would improve management and enhance the value of the government property.

However, addressing residents during a meeting at Katanga Playground on Saturday, the RCC said he had reversed the decision after reviewing documentation and consulting authorities, including the Attorney General.

"I had issued an order to arrest Pastor Daniel Walugembe, but after guidance from the Attorney General regarding

RCC rescinds Katanga land directive

PAST COURT RULINGS

At the centre of the dispute is Pastor Daniel Walugembe, who claims substantial kibanja interests in the area. It is said he purchased these interests from family members previously recognised as bona fide occupants. Court records indicate that in 2015, then High Court judge Alfonso Owiny-Dollo ruled that Makerere University holds the registered title to the land, but also recognised certain occupants and their licensees as bona fide Katanga valley residents. In a subsequent 2019 ruling, High Court judge Alexandria Rugadya Nkonge dismissed a case filed by more than 100 people challenging him.

court orders on this land and the risk of contempt of court, I hereby rescind my earlier directives," Mr Kagenyi said.

He added that operations at the contested washing bay, which had been earmarked for takeover by the developer, would continue uninterrupted, and urged residents to remain calm.

"I appeal to all parties to stay peaceful and live harmoniously. No one will be evicted. Everyone should safeguard their interests without engaging in conflict," he said.

Ongoing wrangles

Despite the reversal, Mr Kagenyi indicated that efforts to resolve the long-standing dispute are ongoing. He said he had written to President Museveni proposing that the government acquires the land through the land fund, construct low-cost housing, or enter into agreements with occupants.

"We are awaiting guidance from the

President on the way forward," he said. Local leaders welcomed the RCC's decision but called for a lasting solution to the dispute, which has persisted for years.

Mr Thomas Bagonza, chairperson of Kimwanyi Zone in Katanga, said while the withdrawal of the directive had eased tensions, underlying ownership conflicts remain unresolved.

"We need a permanent remedy. The matter has taken too long, yet all parties know their interests. There should be a way for people to coexist peacefully," he said.

At the centre of the dispute is Pastor Daniel Walugembe, who claims substantial kibanja interests in the area. According to Mr Bagonza, Walugembe purchased these interests from family members previously recognised as bona fide occupants.

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Taken together, land, coffee, and diaspora cash form a triangle of power, and they are lined up for capture. Control over them would confer influence and power that Museveni himself may lack in his final years as his authority fades.

The post-Museveni preparatory order will need this leverage, as they cannot possibly rely on the historical legitimacy and struggle credentials that Museveni once enjoyed. It is tragic that it requires denationalising a large part of their own citizens and labelling them "foreigners" (the very thing the early NRM and Museveni once rejected) to secure their future for them.



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iny-Dollo ruled that Makerere University holds the registered title to the land, but also recognised certain occupants and their licensees as bona fide residents of Katanga valley.

In a subsequent 2019 ruling, High Court judge Alexandria Rugadya Nkonge dismissed a case filed by more than 100 individuals challenging Pastor Walugembe's kibanja interests.

Unfazed

Speaking separately, Pastor Walugembe said he has no dispute with other residents as long as his rights are respected.

"I was surprised by the earlier directive for my arrest, yet court orders had already cleared my position. It is good that the situation has now been clarified," he said.

The Katanga land dispute remains one of Kampala's most protracted urban land conflicts, involving competing claims between registered landowners, kibanja holders, and occupants, with repeated calls for government intervention.