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# The Elections in Uganda, February 2016

Ryan Gibb

**Abstract:** On 18 February, Uganda conducted presidential and parliamentary elections. Incumbent president Yoweri Museveni of the National Resistance Movement (NRM) won the multiparty contest for a third consecutive time. If his reign as the NRM leader during Uganda's stint as a one-party state is counted, the February elections marked the beginning of Museveni's fifth overall term as president. The NRM continues to dominate parliament, having won a super-majority of the contested seats. Opposition members who competed for both the presidential seat and a seat in parliament contested the results of the election, and the primary opposition candidate Kizza Besigye was placed under house arrest. International observers questioned the integrity of the results, specifically in rural areas that were poorly monitored, and opposition strongholds in urban centres suffered logistical problems. The elections reconfirmed the strength of the NRM following years of political infighting.

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**Keywords:** Uganda, political systems, elections/voting, election campaigns, voting results

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Uganda held elections for president, the national assembly, and local councils on 18 February 2016. This election was Uganda's third since a multiparty system was reintroduced in 2004, and the third since Uganda relaxed the term limits on the presidency. The National Resistance Movement (NRM) continued to dominate, and as in previous elections, opposition candidates faced arrest, informal harassment, and a lopsided political arena.

Presidential politics in Uganda are a national drama. While the NRM has struggled with internal rifts since 2011, the party has continued to dominate at every level of government. The most competitive presidential contenders in this election were incumbent Yoweri Museveni of the NRM, Kizza Besigye of the Forum for Democratic Change (FDC), and Amama Mbabazi of the newly formed Go Forward Party, which represents a combined effort to be more influential on the part of the Democratic Party, the Uganda People's Congress, and the Justice Forum. Besigye sought the presidency in three previous elections without success, though the FDC remains the best-organised opposition to the NRM. Mbabazi, on the other hand, presented an interesting challenge to Museveni, since he is a former NRM prime minister and drew support from the NRM party base. Museveni reportedly spent 27 billion Ugandan shillings or roughly USD 7 million, which was about 12 times the combined amount spent by his two closest challengers. According to a report in *The Daily Monitor* (Kafeero 2016), the NRM party accounted for roughly 87.9 per cent of the total spending in the nation on campaigns.

The campaigns began on 9 November 2015 and lasted until 48 hours before the polls opened on 18 February 2016. On 15 January, Uganda held its first-ever presidential debate, which was organised by the Inter-Religious Council of Uganda and the Elders Forum Uganda. Seven candidates participated, though incumbent president Museveni decided not to attend. A second debate on 13 February included all of the candidates.

For the first time, the Electoral Commission (EC) of Uganda used a Biometric Voter Verification System to better verify voters' identity. The EC also distributed voter location slips to inform voters about the location of their polling stations, where voters presented their slips as identification. Nevertheless, the elections were once again plagued by logistical problems and external observers were highly critical. The chief observer of the European Union Election Observation Mission (EU EOM) noted the polarised discourse and the atmosphere of intimidation that had preceded the election, as well as the fact that 85 per cent of tally centres did not print sub-county results by polling station and thus did not comply with a protocol for total transparency (DEMGROUP 2016: 3).

Ahead of the elections, the government recruited “crime preventers,” ostensibly to protect villages during the elections. These extra-constitutional constables, however, were criticised in a joint statement by Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, Human Rights Network Uganda, Chapter Four Uganda, and the Human Rights Initiative. According to the statement, the crime preventers “acted in partisan ways and have carried out brutal assaults and extortion with no accountability” (HRW 2016). According to Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch’s reports, some crime preventers were instructed to harass opposition supporters (HRW 2016). The EU EOM estimated that there were as many as 2.5 million crime preventers across the country (DEMGROUP 2016: 16). The recruiting and training of these “crime preventers” may have also functioned as a campaign recruitment mechanism and distributional tool.

Anticipating violence, the NRM government again blocked the social media network Twitter and SMS services. According to Godfrey Mutabazi, the executive director of the Uganda Communications Commission, social media were disabled because security agents were concerned that the public would use these to incite violence. This concern was not unfounded: following the 2011 election, Kizza Besigye had warned that Uganda would experience an uprising similar to that of the Arab Spring. Following the 2016 election, the EU Observer Mission, US secretary of state John Kerry, former Nigerian president Olusegun Obasanjo, and US ambassador Deborah Malac expressed serious concerns regarding the social media shut-down, the detention of opposition figures, and the harassment of media members. On 9 July 2015, Go Forward’s Amama Mbabazi and FDC’s Kizza Besigye had been placed under “preventative arrest.” Following the elections, Besigye was also placed under “house arrest,” ostensibly to prevent him from organising protests as he had done in 2011. As of 31 May 2016 he has been standing trial for treason.

## Results

As in previous elections, Ugandans overwhelmingly elected the NRM to parliamentary positions and incumbent president Museveni to a fifth five-year term. However, the 18 February elections were plagued by logistical problems. The EC failed to deliver ballots to several polling stations around the country, and frustrated voters waited in queues. Voting materials were delayed in Mbale district, Muzimya municipality, Wakiso district, and parts of Kampala. The EC recognised these problems and apologised via Twitter.

Table 1. Presidential Election Results

Candidate	Party	Votes	Vote share
Yoweri Kaguta Museveni	NRM	5,971,872	60.62%
Kizza Besigye Kifefe	FDC	3,508,687	35.61%
Amama Mbabazi	Independent	136,519	1.39%
Abed Bwanika	PDP	89,005	0.90%
Baryamureeba Benansius	Independent	52,798	0.54%
Maureen Faith Kyalya Waluube	Independent	42,833	0.43%
Benon Buta Biraaro	FPU	25,600	0.26%
Mabirizi Joseph	Independent	24,498	0.25%
Registered voters	15,277,198		
Valid votes	9,851,812		
Invalid and spoilt votes	506,324		
Turnout	67.61%		

Source: Uganda Electoral Commission 2016.

Historical trends show that Museveni’s support comes from rural areas, whereas opposition candidates’ support originates from specific regions and/or urban centres. The NRM’s campaign united the policy platforms of its parliamentary and presidential candidates, while the other parties remained fragmented in cities and specific geographic regions. Of Uganda’s 112 districts, only 14 chose Kizza Besigye over President Museveni. Besigye’s strongholds included Soroti, Pader, Tororo, Mbale, Sironko, Lira, Gulu, Amuru, Ngora, Masaka, Kampala, and Wakiso (Kiggundu 2016). This was an increase of 10 districts over Besigye’s last attempt in 2011, and a net increase of over 1.2 million votes compared to Museveni’s increase of 189,134 votes. The overall trend in the last 10 years of presidential elections indicates a more competitive election, albeit one still dominated by the NRM.

Women candidates can run in general elections, but there are also seats reserved for women candidates in parliament. At the national level, women are increasingly competing for open parliamentary seats, with an increase from 23 women candidates (vs. 609 men) to 83 (vs. 1,223 men) – or from approximately 3.7 per cent to 6.8 per cent – in 2011 and 2016 respectively. Women’s advocacy groups note that many of the same practices that ensure NRM candidate success – incumbency advantages, clientelist support, and fear – negatively affect women’s success in the general election (Tripp 2006). According to the African Centre for Media Excellence (2015), women candidates receive less news coverage than their male counterparts. Women lack the funds to compete in the most contentious political arenas and lack the mobilisation networks that men have through their privileged social and economic status. Women’s par-

liamentary success frequently depends on their compliance with the NRM regime’s party platforms (Goetz 2002; Women’s Democracy Group 2016), and this undermines their capacity and propensity to advocate for positions that might benefit women at the expense of official NRM policy.

**Table 2. Parliamentary Election Results**

Party	Elected MPs	Reserved women’s seats	Special seats	Total seats
National Resistance Movement	199	84	10	293
Forum for Democratic Change	29	7	0	36
Democratic Party	13	2	0	15
Uganda People’s Congress	4	2	0	6
Independents	44	17	5	66
Uganda People’s Defense Force	0	0	10	10

*Source:* Uganda Electoral Commission 2016.

The NRM won 199 of the 289 seats in the general parliamentary election and 84 of the 112 seats reserved for women. As in previous elections, the NRM soundly defeated all the other parties, and the independent candidates won more seats than any of the other parties’ candidates in the parliamentary elections. Independent candidates have won more parliamentary seats than registered parties’ candidates, aside from NRM candidates, since 2006.

Local government elections followed the presidential and parliamentary elections by one week, occurring the following Wednesday. Each of Uganda’s 112 districts held elections for chairpersons and local councillors. According to Uganda’s constitution, the five-tier local council structure elects a new leadership every five years, directly following the national elections. At the highest level of local governance, NRM candidates won 82 of 112 district chairperson seats, while independent candidates won 17 seats and FDC candidates and the Uganda Peoples’ Congress each won four. The FDC won the urban districts of Gulu and Ngora, while Erias Lukwago, the Democratic Party candidate, retained his office as Lord Mayor of Kampala.

## Election Post Mortem

The NRM possesses three complementary, insurmountable advantages in every election. The first advantage is incumbency. NRM candidates

already have voter recognition and the use of state resources to operate their offices. Incumbents receive more coverage through state television, state-controlled radio stations, public venues, and state offices by virtue of their status as elected officials. Through incumbency advantages and political appointments the NRM is able to reward loyal party members (voters and officeholders) with government services in their communities. Building on the historical advantage that the NRM government enjoyed during the period when Uganda's constitution established a "no party" democracy, the NRM boasts outreach programmes, call centres, and a national grass-roots mobilisation network that is unparalleled in Uganda. Though it is illegal to use government resources for campaign purposes as stipulated under Section 27 of the Presidential Elections Act (2005) and Section 25 of the Parliamentary Elections Act (2005), the NRM government blurs the distinction between campaigning and civic education. The NRM's legal incumbency-related advantage in terms of recruitment, organisational structure, and national presence ensures the party's success as long as the current president remains head of the party.

The second advantage is the NRM's capacity to offer credible promises to Ugandans. Among other things, the NRM government has dramatically expanded primary and secondary school services (Stasavage 2005), has built and rebuilt roads to every major city, has secured peace, and has expanded local service provision through local councils and through the exponential multiplication of districts (Green 2010). Much of this service provision is clientelistic, and most Ugandans have enjoyed a much-improved quality of life under the NRM regime. Scholarly research into Ugandan politics contends that many Ugandans are unable to decouple the NRM from the government, believing that the government of Uganda is the NRM and the NRM is the government of Uganda (Bratton and Lambright 2001; Asiimwe 2010).

Popular fear of political upheaval is the final advantage that the NRM government enjoys. Ugandans old enough to remember the violence of the 1960s, 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s can recall the chaos of political violence. Those from the countryside, especially in the Luwero triangle, remember the anarchy of these decades, and this fear contributes to their support for the current president and his regime. Museveni has stoked this fear with cryptic remarks, such as his statement that

"Elections are no joke. It is a matter of life and death. If you decide wrongly, you will bear the consequences. It has happened in the past. It can happen again." (Wax 2006)



Uganda's security apparatus reinforces these claims by routinely imprisoning political opponents (e.g. Kizza Besigye, Charles Peter Mayiga, and Betty Nambooze) and by militarising urban areas during political events.

Scepticism remains regarding the results of the most recent election. Mbabazi filed a petition to the Supreme Court, but runner-up Besigye did not. The FDC candidate was under house arrest and had lost confidence in the courts. Independent polls predicted an NRM victory (Research World International 2015), and the Supreme Court affirmed the legitimacy of the election. US secretary of state Kerry and the US Embassy to Uganda, as well as other international observers, questioned the integrity of the election results and criticised the NRM's crackdown on human rights and civil liberties (DEMGROUP 2016).

Yoweri Katunga Museveni was inaugurated for the fifth time on 12 May 2016 and thus continues to be the only person to have served as Uganda's president since the country promulgated its current constitution in 1995. President Museveni's NRM party continues to dominate in parliament and is extending its tenure as the only nationally organised party. The long-term political future of Uganda is much less certain. President Museveni turns 72 in August 2016, which will make him one of Africa's oldest presidents by the time his term ends. Ugandan political commentators suggest that Brigadier General Muhoozi Kainerugaba, Museveni's oldest son and the commander of Uganda's special forces, will assume the leadership of whatever the cadre of political and economic elite call themselves after Museveni is no longer president (Gyezaho 2012; Sserunjogi 2014). Additionally, the long-term prospects for democracy in Uganda appear less than positive because of the NRM government's continuing discrimination against opposition groups, including the current (at the time of writing) trial of the only viable presidential opposition candidate, Kizza Besigye.

The elections may have reaffirmed the strength of Museveni's control within the NRM, but younger party members continue to struggle against the status quo. Without legitimate democratic contests, Uganda's entire constitution may be controversial when Museveni no longer leads the NRM. The 2016 elections more closely resembled the 2006 elections than the 2011 elections, in terms of both results and electoral violence. Unlike the case of the 2006 elections, opposition candidates unified before and after the 2011 elections, staging a "Walk to Work" protest. The Inter-Party Cooperation (IPC) coalition of party candidates challenged the government's legitimacy following the 2011 presidential and parliamentary elections, and a similar coalition of parties, the Democratic Alliance (TDA), challenged the legitimacy of the government following the 2016 elections.

As was the case in previous elections, the 2016 elections demonstrated the NRM party's dominance of national and local elections. The NRM has maintained its control of formal and informal institutions in the country despite the multiparty elections, periodic Supreme Court challenges, and infighting that threatens to splinter the party. While the party's dominance will likely continue for the time being, the question remains as to how the country will function when President Museveni can no longer rule.

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### Die Wahlen in Uganda im Februar 2016

**Zusammenfassung:** Am 18. Februar 2016 wurden in Uganda Präsidentschafts- und Parlamentswahlen abgehalten. Der Amtsinhaber, Präsident Yoweri Museveni von der National Resistance Movement (NRM), konnte den Parteienwettbewerb zum dritten Mal nacheinander für sich entscheiden. Bezieht man die Zeit ein, in der er als Führer der NRM über den damaligen Einparteiensstaat Uganda herrschte, markieren die Februarwahlen den Beginn der fünften Präsidentschaftsperiode Musevenis. Die NRM hat auch die große Mehrheit der Parlamentssitze gewonnen und dominiert damit weiterhin das Parlament. Mitglieder der Opposition, die für die Präsidentschaft oder einen Sitz im Parlament kandidiert hatten, stellten die Wahlergebnisse infrage. Der wichtigste Kandidat der Opposition, Kizza Besigye, wurde unter Hausarrest gestellt. Auch internationale Beobachter bezweifelten die Integrität der Ergebnisse, insbesondere in ländlichen Regionen, wo das Wahlgesehehen nur unzureichend beobachtet werden konnte; in Hochburgen der Opposition in städtischen Zentren hatte es zudem logistische Probleme gegeben. Nach Jahren interner Machtkämpfe wurde die Stärke der NRM erneut bestätigt.

**Schlagwörter:** Uganda, Politisches System, Wahl/Abstimmung, Wahlkampf, Wahlergebnis/Abstimmungsergebnis