



Delhi Policy Group

Advancing India's Rise as a Leading Power

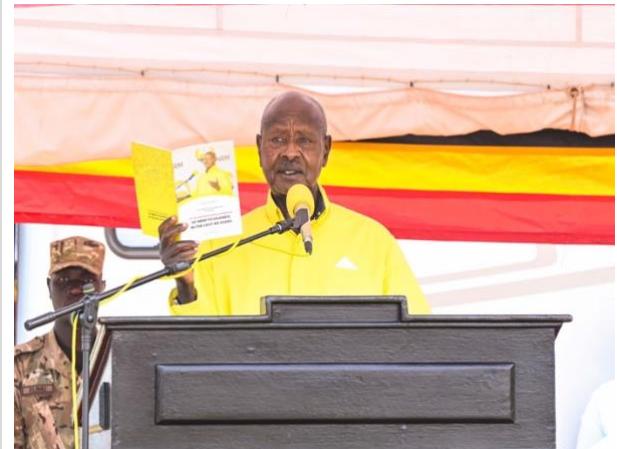
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President Yoweri Museveni addresses supporters at a presidential campaign rally on January 10, 2026. Source: [X/@KagutaMuseveni](https://twitter.com/KagutaMuseveni)

Supporters of President Yoweri Museveni at a campaign rally ahead of Uganda's presidential election, January 8, 2026. Source: [X/@KagutaMuseveni](https://twitter.com/KagutaMuseveni)

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African Pulse:

Uganda's January 2026 Election and Democracy in Africa

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Uganda's January 2026 Election and Democracy in Africa

by

Ambassador Ruchira Kamboj & Arshiya Chaturvedi

Executive Summary

On January 15, 2026, the Republic of Uganda held national elections to elect its president. Unsurprisingly, incumbent President Yoweri Museveni was announced as the victor with a decisive margin¹, securing a seventh term in office. Having been in power since 1986, this victory extends his leadership to 40 years.

According to the official results released by the Electoral Commission on January 17, President Museveni, representing the National Resistance Movement (NRM), secured 71.65% of the vote. His primary challenger, Robert Kyagulanyi (popularly known as Bobi Wine) of the National Unity Platform (NUP), followed with 24.72%.²

However, the credibility of these results has been heavily contested. Bobi Wine and other opposition parties have alleged serious discrepancies and "fake" tallies within the electoral process. These grievances have sparked widespread protests across the country, leading to violent clashes between opposition supporters and security forces that have resulted in deaths and mass arrests.³

Uganda's political system has been under increasing strain during President Museveni's four decades in power. Critics argue that the democratic framework has been undermined by sustained institutional meddling, including several constitutional amendments, most notably the removal of presidential age and term limits, to facilitate his continued rule. Furthermore, the frequent use of law-and-order mechanisms to target opposition voices has raised significant human rights concerns.⁴

Ultimately, these persistent challenges to the political fabric have cast a long shadow over the 2026 elections, leaving many to question the overall integrity and future of Uganda's democratic system.

¹ Nkonge, Anita. "Uganda Election Result: Yoweri Museveni Beats Bobi Wine to Extend 40-Year Rule." BBC, January 17, 2026. <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c2lgxxrd52o>.

² Staff, Al Jazeera. "Uganda's President Yoweri Museveni Wins Seventh Term: Electoral Commission." Al Jazeera, January 17, 2026. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2026/1/17/ugandas-president-yoweri-museveni-wins-seventh-term-electoral-commission>.

³ Christou, William. "Yoweri Museveni Wins Ugandan Election as Opponent Condemns 'Fake Result.'" The Guardian. The Guardian, January 17, 2026. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2026/jan/17/yoweri-museveni-wins-ugandan-election-as-opponent-condemns-fake-result>.

⁴ Ibid

The January 2026 elections in Uganda offer a useful case study for the wider strains to democratic systems across parts of Africa. While President Museveni's administration is set to secure another term, largely through deeply embedded institutional arrangements, the outcome points to a quieter but significant tension: the gap between the endurance of political systems and the expectations of a young and increasingly aspirational population. In this sense, Uganda reflects a broader challenge of aligning political stability with evolving democratic demands.

However, a nuanced view reveals that democracy in Africa is not in a uniform retreat; rather, it is in a state of divergent trajectories. While some nations succumb to 'lawfare' and digital repression, others continue to institutionalise peaceful power transfers. For Africa's 'continental pivot' toward self-reliance and developmental integration (such as the AfCFTA) to succeed, it requires the stability of rule-based governance rather than the volatile predictability of long-term personal rule.

Understanding Uganda's Political and Democratic Structure

The 81-year-old Yoweri Museveni, Uganda's longest-serving leader, was re-elected for another term in January 2026, extending a presidency that has spanned four decades. He rose to power in 1986 after leading a successful five-year guerrilla uprising against the government of President Milton Obote and, subsequently, the military junta led by Tito Okello. His was a triumphant rise—a revolutionary leader who ended a long period of authoritarian rule and tyranny, marked by violence, mass killings, economic collapse, and the systematic undermining of the democratic system, all without any external support.

His early political rhetoric, after assuming the leadership of Uganda, focused on policies restoring personal freedoms, improving the socio-economic conditions of the population, upholding respect for human rights and the sanctity of life, and eliminating corruption. This political philosophy was firmly established in his 1982 draft document, the Ten-Point Programme of the National Resistance Movement. In it, he articulated a commitment to redressing the political and social injustices suffered by the Ugandan people during previous decades.

The following years saw targeted efforts toward state-building, such as the establishment of "Resistance Councils" to empower citizens through grassroots-level political participation, the creation of a Constitutional Commission to draft the Constitution, and the subsequent election of a Constituent Assembly to deliberate on and enact Uganda's Constitution, which was adopted in 1995. Extensive market reforms also formed a fundamental part of Museveni's early political strategy, which included active economic liberalisation combined with donor-driven restructuring efforts, notably the IMF-supported Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP). These

policy measures collectively contributed to marked growth rates throughout the 1990s and also saw considerable poverty reduction during the period.⁵

While these developments brought economic growth and political stability in the initial years, from the 2000s onwards, Uganda has seen serious economic, social and political backsliding. The economic growth observed in the initial period slowed down while inequality widened. Persistent corruption remained a defining feature of this period, punctuated by major scandals that forced rare public admissions from President Museveni himself.⁶ Human rights violations were widespread, with numerous reports of violence, extrajudicial killings, kidnappings, arbitrary arrests, protest crackdowns, and the suppression of free speech and the media.

In the political sphere, the country witnessed a significant erosion of institutional integrity. This decline was marked by the alleged manipulation of parliamentary processes to secure legislative control, the appointment of subservient judges to the bench, and the political capture of the Electoral Commission. Furthermore, the military and security apparatus were increasingly instrumentalized to suppress political dissent. The electoral process itself was marred by persistent irregularities that undermined its credibility and eroded public trust. Malpractices such as ballot stuffing, vote tampering, and discrepancies in voter registers became routine. These were often compounded by non-transparent tallying, voter intimidation, the tactical harassment of opposition leaders, and a restrictive grip on information channels.

Furthermore, Museveni, who once famously criticized African leaders for "overstaying" in power, presided over a series of contentious constitutional amendments to entrench his rule. This included the removal of presidential term limits in 2005 and the lifting of the age cap in 2017. Critics argue that these maneuvers, largely executed through political dominance and state apparatuses, have systematically eroded the democratic safeguards intended to ensure a peaceful transfer of power. By altering the "rules of the game" to facilitate indefinite incumbency, such practices significantly impair the ability of citizens to exercise free and informed choice within the current political system.

In the wake of the 2026 elections, the opposition has accused the government of systemic vote-rigging, citing a range of significant irregularities. These include widespread disruptions caused by biometric verification failures, a nationwide internet blackout imposed just ahead of polling day, and the suppression of

⁵ Wolfensohn, James. "The World Bank Group Archives Public Disclosure Authorized Folder Title: President Wolfensohn -Briefing Book for President's Meetings and Events - President Yoweri Kaguta Museveni of Uganda," 1995. <https://thedocs.worldbank.org/en/doc/088022725066324022-0560011995/original/WorldBankGroupArchivesfolder30484437.pdf>.

⁶ Daybreak Africa. "Uganda's President Museveni Goes Tough on Graft." Voice of America, June 7, 2024. <https://www.voaafrica.com/a/uganda-s-president-museveni-goes-tough-on-graft/7646473.html>.

opposition mobilization by security forces.⁷ These measures have been widely condemned as fundamental challenges to the election's fairness and transparency. The resulting tensions sparked large-scale civil unrest, during which nearly 2,000 opposition supporters were reportedly arrested, and over 30 deaths have been recorded to date.⁸ These events have left the country in a state of deep political uncertainty as the legitimacy of the outcome continues to be contested.

The State of Democracy in Africa

However, the democratic backsliding witnessed in Uganda is not an isolated event; it is a symptom of a broader 'democratic recession' affecting parts of the continent. Several African states have experienced a spate of military takeovers and attempted coups since 2020⁹, illustrating a broader pattern of political instability in parts of the continent. Furthermore, Africa remains home to some of the world's longest-serving leaders, a gerontocracy that often stands in stark contrast to the continent's status as the youngest in the world. Yet, this is only half the story. In 2024 and 2025, nations like Botswana¹⁰ and Senegal¹¹ demonstrated remarkable resilience, seeing peaceful transfers of power and judicial independence that challenge the narrative of a uniform decline.

The socio-economic landscape is equally complex. Prolonged armed conflicts and entrenched insurgencies – particularly in the Sahel and the Great Lakes regions – have undoubtedly stalled progress, leaving Africa with 32 of the 44 least developed countries globally. These hostilities do more than damage infrastructure; they erode the 'social contract' between the state and its citizens. However, even amidst these challenges, Africa is projected to be one of the fastest-growing economies of all world regions in 2026, with an estimated growth rate of 4.2%.¹² The paradox of 2026 is that

⁷ Mureithi, Carlos. "Opposition Candidate Bobi Wine Claims 'Massive Ballot Stuffing' as Uganda Goes to Polls." *The Guardian*. The Guardian, January 15, 2026.

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2026/jan/15/uganda-vote-election-yoweri-museveni-bobi-wine>.

⁸ Reuters Staff. "Uganda Detains 2,000 Opposition Supporters, Kills 30 after Disputed Election, Army Chief Says." *Reuters*, January 23, 2026. <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/uganda-detains-2000-opposition-supporters-kills-30-after-disputed-election-army-2026-01-23/>.

⁹ Agence France-Presse. "10 Coups in 5 Years: The Troubled Past and Present of Africa." *Firstpost*, December 8, 2025. <https://www.firstpost.com/explainers/africa-military-coups-in-5-years-benin-president-patrice-talon-ousted-13957573.html>.

¹⁰ Mofokeng, Kevin. "Botswana's Peaceful Power Shift: Is the Era of One-Party Dominance Over? | Democracy in Africa." *Democracy in Africa | A Resource for the Study of Democracy in Africa*, November 19, 2024. <https://democracyinafrica.org/botswanas-peaceful-power-shift-is-the-era-of-one-party-dominance-over/>.

¹¹ OHCHR. "Senegal Election Is a Boost for Coup-Prone Region." Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), 2024. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/stories/2024/06/senegal-election-boost-coup-prone-region>.

¹² AfDB. "African Development Bank Group Highlights of the 2025 Africa's Macroeconomic Performance and Outlook (Meo) Report." *African Development Bank Group*, 2025. <https://afdb-org.jp/wp-content/uploads/2025-MEO-Key-Highlights-EN-1.pdf>.

while structural poverty remains, a 'continental pivot' is emerging through initiatives like the AfCFTA, which seeks to transform resource endowments into shared prosperity by bypassing traditional governance bottlenecks.

The failure to achieve consistent sustainable development is less a failure of resources and more a reflection of 'procedural' rather than 'substantive' democracy. In many states, the 'hardware' of governance - elections and parliaments - is present, but the 'software': accountability, transparency, and the rule of law is malfunctioning. While authoritarian models are often marketed as a faster route to stability, the 2026 reality suggests that without inclusive institutions, developmental gains are prone to elite capture. The path forward lies in moving beyond 'managed democracy' toward systems where political institutions are strong enough to withstand the whims of individual leaders.

The Next Chapter

Over the past decade, Africa has made a strategic pivot through collective efforts like Agenda 2063 and the AfCFTA to move beyond historical underdevelopment. Initiatives such as the "Silencing the Guns" project and collaborations in climate action demonstrate a continent-wide commitment to stability. However, the 2026 reality remains a "kaleidoscope" of progress; while the AfCFTA has begun to unblock intra-African trade, its success is tethered to national governance. As seen in the recent Ugandan elections, institutional fragility can stall these continental goals, proving that high-level initiatives require effective, ground-level implementation to truly transform lives.

In this light, a robust democratic system must be Africa's priority. Beyond being a Western ideal, democracy acts as the "operating system" for sustainable development by providing the checks and balances necessary to protect public investments and transparently manage institutions. While some argue for "performance legitimacy" prioritizing immediate economic growth over pluralism, nations like South Africa and Zambia show that active citizen participation is the most reliable tool for establishing accountability. In 2026, the demand for democracy remains high among Africa's youth, who increasingly view the ballot box as the primary mechanism to ensure that the continent's vast natural endowments are not lost to elite capture.

Despite decades of effort, many African nations still rank low on global democracy indices, often due to "procedural" democracy, where elections are held but institutions remain weak. The 2007 African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance (ACDEG) was a landmark normative step, but its enforceability has been hampered by the principle of non-interference. However, there are notable successes: countries like Botswana, Cape Verde, and Senegal have successfully institutionalized these

norms, proving that the Charter can work when backed by political will. These "anchor democracies" provide a blueprint for the rest of the continent, demonstrating that constitutional rule is a foundation for long-term peace rather than a mere formality.

Moving forward, the African Union and Regional Economic Communities (RECs) such as ECOWAS and SADC must move beyond norm-setting toward proactive enforcement. This entails a pragmatic framework that imposes clear political and economic consequences for actions that undermine democratic governance and constitutional order. Strengthening the "software" of the state: judiciaries, electoral bodies, and civil society, is essential. By deepening collaboration with international agencies and ensuring that development assistance is "principled" and "conditional," Africa can build resilient institutions. This collective strengthening will ensure that the rule of law, rather than the whims of individual leaders, guides Africa's pivot toward its 2026 developmental milestones.

Conclusion

In 2026, Africa presents a complex kaleidoscope of progress, where the entrenchment of long-serving leaders like Yoweri Museveni (Uganda) and Paul Biya (Cameroon) stands in striking contrast to a resilient tide of democratic renewal. While the January 2026 elections in Uganda highlighted the persistent challenges of institutional meddling, the continent is simultaneously attempting a historic pivot toward self-reliance through the AfCFTA and Agenda 2063. This awakening is increasingly driven by a new generation of charismatic voices, such as Bassirou Diomaye Faye in Senegal, Duma Boko in Botswana, and Hakainde Hichilema in Zambia, who demonstrate that accountability can be a powerful engine for development. Ultimately, the 2026 landscape suggests that for Africa to translate its vast natural and human resources into sustainable prosperity, a robust democratic framework is not merely a preference, but a practical necessity for inclusive growth, requiring realigned, collaborative support from regional bodies and global partners to move beyond rhetoric and into the strengthening of sovereign institutions.



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