



Uganda

Uganda is a major recipient of U.S. foreign aid. It has also been a top beneficiary of U.S. security assistance in Africa since the mid-2000s. U.S. officials have characterized the country as an important security partner in Sub-Saharan Africa. Uganda has played a leading role in stability and counterterrorism operations in the region, most notably in Somalia, and its role in these operations has often aligned with U.S. regional security goals. Human rights, governance and corruption concerns have complicated the bilateral relationship, however, prompting questions from Congress about its trajectory. Uganda's ties to U.S. global adversaries are also sometimes a source of strain.

Politics

Uganda has never had a democratic transition of power. President Yoweri Museveni is among the world's longest-serving heads of state. After he seized power in 1986, he wrote, "The problem of Africa in general and Uganda in particular is not the people but leaders who want to stay in power." Almost four decades later, he remains in office, supported by the National Resistance Movement (NRM), formed from the rebel group he led in the 1980s. The NRM-dominated parliament abolished presidential term limits in 2005 and removed the constitutional age limit for presidential candidates in 2017, spurring protests and a security crackdown. Opinion surveys have suggested most Ugandans support age and term limits.

Museveni, now 78, won a sixth term in January 2021, in polls marked by allegations of security force intimidation and violence, harassment of the opposition, and fraud. Per the official tally, he won over 58% of the vote, his lowest official margin of victory yet. The NRM maintained control of the parliament, but opposition candidates gained ground

Musician Bobi Wine (Robert Kyagulanyi), 41, came in second with 34%. Elected to parliament in 2017, Wine's "People Power" movement has harnessed frustration among an increasingly youthful electorate. During an opposition event in 2018, an elite security unit killed his driver, and Wine, among others, was detained and beaten, fueling protests. He was charged with treason and intent to "alarm, annoy, or ridicule" the president; the case remains pending trial. Wine has since been arrested repeatedly, including in the midst of his presidential campaign.

Museveni's son, Gen. Muhoozi Kainerugaba, announced in 2022 his interest in succeeding his father as president. He has spurred controversy with provocative tweets, some praising Vladimir Putin. After a 2023 meeting between the presidents of Russia and China, he described the countries as Africa's "greatest friends" and called the African Union (AU) to "join them in any confrontation with the Colonialists!" Museveni removed Kainerugaba from his role as army chief in late 2022 after tweets joking about invading Kenya. Museveni has yet to make his views on Kainerugaba's presidential ambitions clear.

Figure 1. Uganda Key Facts

Size: slightly smaller than Oregon
Population: 47.7 million; 3.22% growth
Religions: Protestant 45.1%, Catholic 39.3%, Muslim 13.7% (2014)
Life expectancy: 69.32 years
Median age: 15.7 years
Birth rate: 40.27/1,000 population
Fertility rate: 5.26 children born/woman
Maternal mortality rate: 284 deaths/100,000 live births
HIV/AIDS: 5.2% (2021)
Key exports: gold, coffee, milk, fish, tobacco
GDP: \$49.79 billion; \$1.11 thousand per capita; 5.7% growth



Source: Data from CIA World Factbook, IMF, and the World Bank.

In 2021, U.S. diplomats in Uganda were reportedly targeted with surveillance equipment acquired from an Israeli company, NSO Group, which the U.S. Commerce Department subsequently designated for export controls. It is unclear who was behind the hacking.

Human Rights Concerns

The State Department's most recent human rights report on Uganda documents restrictions on political rights, widespread torture, and excessive force and extrajudicial killings by security forces; it notes that officers implicated in abuses often enjoy impunity. Human rights groups have criticized the government for failing to hold security personnel accountable for torture (1,100 allegations of torture were reported between 2019 and 2022).

Political repression and violence marred the 2021 election period, during which over 1,000 people were detained. Human rights groups allege that government agents continue to abduct opposition supporters. Some victims have reported beatings and torture, others remain missing. Authorities suspended 54 civil society groups after the polls, accusing them of foreign-sponsored interference in Ugandan politics. Civil society actors have been arrested for social media posts criticizing the first family.

In the rural northeastern province of Karamoja, increased cattle raiding since 2019 prompted a military crackdown (led by Kainerugaba) and a resulting hunger crisis. The army has arrested over 18,000 people in response to the raids and has been implicated in indiscriminate detention, extortion, torture, and killings there.

Threats to lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) rights in Uganda have drawn international concern. The Anti-Homosexuality Act, signed into law in May 2023, made "acts of homosexuality" punishable by life in prison and the "promotion of homosexuality" punishable by up to 20 years in prison. It also created the capital offense of "aggravated homosexuality." U.S. officials have called the law "deeply troubling" and expressed concern about the

implications for U.S. aid, particularly around HIV/AIDS prevention. The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights says it could lead to systemic human rights violations.

In June 2023, the State Department announced visa restrictions on individuals determined to be undermining the democratic process in Uganda, and it updated its travel guidance to highlight the risk to LGBTQI+ persons.

The Economy and Corruption Concerns

Uganda faced a recession in 2020 due to COVID-19, but its economy is forecast to grow by almost 6% in 2023 and 2024. Stronger growth will be needed to manage Uganda's rapidly expanding population, three-quarters of whom are under 30. Unemployment is a key problem, as are rising demands for education and health services. Uganda has one of the lowest rates of access to electricity in Africa (29%).

President Museveni has stated plans to make Uganda an upper-middle-income country by 2040. The government has focused heavily on infrastructure investments. However, the World Bank assesses that Uganda's growth model of debt-financed public spending is not sustainable.

Uganda's economic outlook is tied to its energy sector. Recoverable oil reserves are estimated at 1.4 billion barrels. Drilling began in 2023 in a field operated by the China National Offshore Oil Corporation. Construction on an oil pipeline through Tanzania is due to begin this year. A U.S.-led consortium is working on a \$3.5 billion refinery; U.S.-based McDermott International and China's Sinopec have a \$2 billion contract to develop an oil field together.

Gold surpassed coffee in 2018 as Uganda's biggest foreign exchange earner, with gold exports rising from \$10 million to over \$1 billion in the past decade. While Ugandan officials announced the discovery of large gold deposits in 2022, reportedly only 10% of Uganda's gold exports are mined there. The United States sanctioned Uganda's Africa Gold Refinery (AGR) in 2022 for the illicit movement of hundreds of millions of dollars of gold from the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC); AGR was reportedly involved in circumventing U.S. sanctions on Venezuela in 2019.

Critics contend that state corruption is entrenched in Uganda and that the government has failed to hold top officials accountable. Uganda's state Inspector General reported in 2022 that an estimated 23% of the annual budget was lost to corruption. Some critics also argue that donor aid, which comprises a large share of the government's budget, finances political patronage. Embezzlement scandals involving the diversion of donor funds have repeatedly led donors to suspend some aid.

Uganda's Regional Relations

Uganda is one of the world's largest refugee hosts, with an open-door policy for refugees from the region. By some accounts, however, the government has profited from conflicts in neighboring countries, including through the misappropriation of refugee aid and kleptocratic networks. Uganda has intervened militarily in several cases. It deployed troops when South Sudan's civil war began, at Juba's request, to protect the state and key infrastructure; it has since been implicated in illicit arms transfers to Juba.

Uganda has complicated relationships with neighbors DRC and Rwanda. The International Court of Justice has ordered

Uganda to pay DRC \$325 million in reparations for crimes during its civil and regional wars (1996-2003). Uganda deployed troops into DRC in 2021, this time at Kinshasa's request, to counter the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF), a Ugandan-origin Islamic State affiliate that periodically attacks Uganda. The deployment may have fueled tensions with onetime ally Rwanda, which has backed a DRC rebel group, the M23. UN sanctions monitors have also accused Uganda of tacitly supporting the M23. Uganda deployed more troops to DRC in March 2023 as part of a regional intervention to stabilize areas affected by the M23.

Uganda is a key troop contributor to the U.S.-backed AU Mission in Somalia (ATMIS); U.S. officials say it plays a "critical" role in countering Al Qaeda affiliate Al Shabaab there. ATMIS' planned withdrawal at the end of 2024, if it occurs as scheduled, could have major implications for the scope of U.S.-Uganda security cooperation.

Uganda's Relations with U.S. Adversaries

China is a major source of foreign direct investment in Uganda and owns a growing share (almost 20%) of the country's external public debt. Museveni has repeatedly praised China's "non-interference" foreign policy approach and criticized Western donor conditionality. China's Huawei has provided Uganda with surveillance equipment, including facial recognition technology.

Uganda-Russia relations have deepened in the past decade. Museveni has praised Russia as a partner, and the NRM signed a cooperation agreement with its ruling party. In 2022, the countries reportedly reached a deal that allowed for Russian government-funded news to be broadcast in Uganda and for Ugandan access to a propaganda network linked to Wagner Group founder Yevgeny Prigozhin.

Uganda's North Korea ties have been a source of friction in the U.S. relationship. Under pressure to comply with UN sanctions, Uganda claimed to cut military ties in 2017, but reports suggest some engagement may have continued.

U.S. Assistance & Security Cooperation

U.S. foreign aid to Uganda has focused primarily on health programs, but also supports agriculture, education, conflict mitigation, and governance initiatives. Bilateral aid totaled over \$533 million in FY2022, and the Biden Administration has requested \$558 million for FY2024 (88% for health programs). The FY2024 budget would significantly increase Democracy, Human Rights, and Governance funding from under \$3 million in recent years to \$22 million. On top of this bilateral funding, the United States is Uganda's largest humanitarian donor, providing over \$100 million annually in recent years, mostly for food aid.

Bilateral aid figures do not include sometimes substantial, albeit declining, security assistance for Uganda's participation in regional stability operations. Its military has received U.S. training, equipment, logistics, and advisory support for its Somalia deployment; it also received U.S. support for its operations against the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) in neighboring countries (2008-2017).

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