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UGANDA suspends 54 faith-based and aid groups backed by the West

Why did Uganda suspend 54 faith-based and aid groups backed by the West?

By John Semakula

Religion Unplugged (10.09.2021) – <https://bit.ly/2XeclZg> -The government of Uganda has suspended 54 religious and

humanitarian organizations working in the Christian-majority country in a clampdown widely seen as politically motivated.

Western countries denounced Uganda's 2021 presidential election as unfair earlier this year. Some of the affected local and international nonprofit organizations are funded by the U.S., the EU and other Western donors. And some of the now-suspended organizations supported and openly campaigned for candidates opposing President Yoweri Museveni.

Pastor Michael Kyazze, the founder of Omega Healing Center in Kampala, told *ReligionUnplugged.com* that the suspension does not come as a surprise to him because from the onset, the conditions that the current government installed for nongovernmental organizations to legally register themselves signaled that they were seen as a threat.

"The registration process requires NGOs to go through security agencies, such as the Internal Security Organization, to vet them," he said. "If NGOs don't serve government's interests, they will be targeted."

Uganda's National Bureau for Nongovernmental Organizations, the body that supervises religious and humanitarian organizations, said in a statement on Aug. 20 that it had discovered 54 organizations were noncompliant with a 2016 law.

"The Bureau has established that 23 NGOs were operating with expired permits, while 15 others had failed to file returns and audited books of accounts," the statement read.

The bureau accused another 16 organizations of operating without a registration permit.

The suspended organizations operate from a variety of secular and religious backgrounds, including Amnesty International, Adoration Ministries, the Islamic Da-awah and Orphanage Foundation, the St. Francis Foundation for the Poor, the Liberty International Foundation, Ray of Hope International

Uganda, Jesus Shines Youth Ministries International and the Wanyange Child Support Foundation. Most of these organizations have been supporting the poor, such as widows and orphans, as high unemployment and spikes in poverty have been felt during COVID-19 lockdowns.

Some churches backed the president's rival

Museveni's administration has said it fears that some of the organizations whose activities were suspended were being used by Western countries and other groups to channel funds to opposition political parties in Uganda. The president has also accused some Muslim groups of funding Allied Democratic Forces rebels based in the neighboring Democratic Republic of the Congo.

The government accused the Roman Catholic Church in particular of supporting the main opposition presidential candidate, Robert Kyagulanyi, known as Bobi Wine, in Uganda's Jan. 14 presidential election. Some Catholic priests openly campaigned for Wine, a pop star-turned-politician.

Museveni won the election with about 59% of the votes cast over Wine's 35%. Wine, however, rejected the outcome of the election.

Wine's political party won most of the parliamentary seats from central Uganda. Among the politicians who lost in central Uganda was Museveni's pick for vice president, Edward Ssekandi. After Ssekandi's loss, Museveni was forced to choose a new vice president.

The U.S., EU and other Western election observers concluded that the election did not meet the global standard for a free and fair democratic exercise. Among their reasons: The Ugandan government arrested and deported several Western journalists ahead of the election day, and at least 10 journalists described being beaten by security forces at a campaign rally for Wine, according to Human Rights Watch.

Defunding other development aid

In February, the newly elected government suspended the Democratic Governance Facility, a consortium of Western donors with a basket fund of more than \$138 million in development aid for Uganda. The suspension affected activities of more than 70 organizations, including many faith-based aid organizations.

Late last year, ahead of the general election, the government froze the accounts of two key civil society organizations in the country: the National NGO Forum, an umbrella body of over 650 organizations, and the Uganda Women's Network, an entity that brings together 20 women's rights organizations. Both were accused of money laundering and funding subversive activities.

In 2017, Ugandan police raided the offices of ActionAid Uganda, the Uhuru Institute for Social Development and the Great Lakes Institute of Strategic Studies, seizing documents, computers and cell phones of employees before freezing the organizations' bank accounts.

Police accused the three organizations of money laundering. They were temporarily shut down, but the government's efforts to prosecute them has stalled due to lack of evidence.

Among the humanitarian organizations whose activities have been suspended indefinitely are those that monitored the election polls. They include the Citizens Platforms for Democracy and Accountability, Citizens Election Watch and Chapter Four Uganda.

Nicholas Opiyo, the executive director of Chapter Four Uganda, told *ReligionUnplugged.com* that the decision to suspend his organization based on allegations that it failed to file annual returns lacked truth and was unlawful, unjust and full of malice.

He said Chapter Four Uganda had filed its returns up to January 2020 and that its efforts to file returns for the past year were sabotaged by the NGO Bureau, which in September 2020 declined to receive the files. He also said the organization has tried to engage the NGO Bureau to meet and resolve the impasse, but the supervising agency has declined to meet with them.

“We have now petitioned the minister of internal affairs to intervene in the matter. If that route fails, we shall seek legal redress,” Opiyo said.

Organizations say harassment and intimidation is increasing

The group of 54 international organizations have argued that the suspension has intensified intimidation and harassment of civil society organizations in Uganda. The group has called for dialogue between the affected organizations and the government.

“The suspension is intended to restrict rights to freedom and association and stop the activities of independent civil society organizations that are perceived as critical of the authorities,” read a joint statement by the affected entities, including Amnesty International, ActionAid International Africa, Change Tanzania, Chapter One Foundation Zambia, the Civil Society Reference Group, the Ethiopian Human Rights Defenders Center, Advocacy Network for Africa, the Campaign for Good Governance and Civil Society Human Rights Advocacy Platform of Liberia.

These organizations have advised the Ugandan government to stick to articles 9 and 10 of the African Charter on Human and People’s Rights, which guarantee freedom of expression and association.

“Many of the organizations that are affected work in critical areas, such as legal practice to help the poor or the marginalized,” they said. “Others work on accountability and

transparency in the oil sector and some monitor human rights in the context of the elections. To shut down organizations working so closely with Ugandans abruptly will hurt people who rely on their services or advocacy.”

On the day the suspensions were announced, Wine condemned the closure of the organizations, observing that the decision has had a chilling effect on the legitimate exercise of citizens’ constitutional right to participate in the affairs of their government.

“Most of the affected organisations ... have been working to deepen constitutionalism, democracy, human rights, and public accountability in our country,” he wrote on social media, adding, “I stand in solidarity with you my fellow citizens in the civil society during this trying moment.”

The EU in Uganda tweeted the same day, saying, “Civil society is a key partner making vital contributions to Uganda’s development. We look forward to the resolution of any issues with registration of organizations, so that this important work can continue in the spirit of a genuine partner based on mutual accountability.”

Photo : Germany’s ambassador to Uganda, Marthias Schauer, right, chats with the Archbishop of the Anglican Church of Uganda, Stephen Kaziimba Mugalu, center, and Uganda Christian University’s vice chancellor and associate professor, Aaron Mushengyezi, left, after attending a conference for Anglican Church teachers in Mukono recently. Schauer asked Ugandans to fight for civil liberties. Photo by Samuel Tatambuka.

[Further reading about FORB in Uganda on HRWF website](#)

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