# Uganda moves to legalise military trials for civilians ahead of 2026 elections



In Uganda, opposition politicians have raised serious concerns over what they describe as President Yoweri Museveni’s efforts to suppress political dissent by prosecuting opponents in military courts ahead of the presidential and legislative elections scheduled for January 2026. The government is currently advancing legislation that would permit military tribunals to try civilians, despite a ruling from Uganda’s supreme court that declared such trials unconstitutional.

The situation came prominently into view when Kizza Besigye, a veteran opposition figure and four-time presidential candidate, was detained in Nairobi in November alongside his aide, Obeid Lutale. They were subsequently transferred to Kampala, where they faced charges of illegal possession of firearms, threats to national security, and later treachery—an accusation that carries the death penalty. Besigye’s legal team asserts that the charges are politically motivated. Since 2002, Besigye has been among more than 1,000 civilians, activists, and politicians charged in military courts.

In January this year, Uganda’s supreme court ruled that trying civilians in military tribunals was unconstitutional and ordered all such cases to be moved to civilian courts. President Museveni dismissed the decision as “wrong” and reaffirmed his intent to continue utilising military courts. Following a 10-day hunger strike in February by Besigye, his trial was shifted to a civilian court, although the Uganda Law Society states that other individuals remain under military trial.

According to The Guardian’s reporting, the government is preparing to introduce new legislation to legally allow military tribunals to try civilians in certain cases. Justice and Constitutional Affairs Minister Norbert Mao told parliament on 17 April that the draft law is awaiting cabinet approval before parliamentary debate.

Paul Mwiru, a politician from Bobi Wine’s National Unity Platform (NUP), criticised the administration’s use of state institutions to “instil fear” and claimed that the judicial system has become biased in the government’s favour. Mwiru, a former MP, shared his experience of being charged with treason in a civilian court in 2018—a case involving him, Bobi Wine, and others accused of attacking Museveni’s motorcade during election turmoil. This prosecution, which effectively stalled after two years, is an example of lengthy and deferred legal cases against opposition figures. Mwiru warned that amending the law to permit military prosecution of civilians would enable the government “to charge you and arraign you in the court if they have a disagreement with you.”

Following a history of using military courts for civilian trials dating back to 2002, the practice was initially justified by the creation of an autonomous military law enforcement unit tasked with combating armed crime amid perceived inefficiencies in the civilian judicial system. Legislation in 2005 formalised this framework, giving the military the authority to court-martial civilians.

Other notable Ugandan opposition figures who have faced military prosecutions include Bobi Wine himself, former MP Michael Kabaziguruka, and Besigye’s lawyer Eron Kiiza. Critics argue that repression extends beyond military courts, citing lengthy trials, bail denials, and pre-trial detentions in civilian courts for government critics. For example, Besigye and Lutale were denied bail this month and remain in custody.

President Museveni’s government has repeatedly defended the use of military courts, arguing it is necessary to maintain peace and stability amidst challenges alleged to be inadequately addressed by civilian courts.

Analysts highlight that the administration’s military origins deeply influence how governance is conducted in Uganda. Gerald Walulya, senior lecturer at Makerere University, explained, “Because of their background as a government that came to power through a military kind of route, they tend to approach every aspect in a military manner.” Historian Mwambutsya Ndebesa characterised the situation as Uganda suffering from “the curse of liberation,” a term reflecting how former liberation leaders feel entitled to extended rule. He further stated that the government is “weaponising the justice system for political ends” to suppress dissent, creating a “chilling effect” aimed at intimidating the wider political sphere to prevent opposition.

President Museveni has held power since 1986, leading the country through economic growth and political reform following decades of instability. However, critics have noted a decline in judicial independence and condemned the president’s extended tenure through constitutional amendments.

Uganda’s upcoming 2026 elections will mark Museveni’s seventh time seeking the presidency, with the political climate increasingly focused on concerns about the fairness and freedom of the electoral process amid ongoing prosecutions of opposition figures in both military and civilian courts.

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

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