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Uganda: Government-backed harassment and repression of critics increasing

The Uganda government and public officials are increasingly placing illegitimate restrictions on freedom of expression and peaceful assembly to silence critical voices, Amnesty International said in a report released today.

'Stifling Dissent: Restrictions on the rights to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly in Uganda' describes how journalists, opposition politicians and activists face arbitrary arrest, intimidation, threats and politically motivated criminal charges for expressing views deemed critical of the authorities.

Public protests have been banned in Uganda amid unverified claims that the organisers planned violence. In recent weeks four political activists have been charged with treason - a capital offense - for their involvement in organising the protests.

"The Ugandan authorities are creating a climate where it is becoming increasingly difficult for people to freely criticise government officials, their policies or practices," said Godfrey Odongo, Amnesty International's Uganda researcher.

The report also documents increasing restrictions on the media in Uganda which hinder it from freely broadcasting information.

One former editor at the state television broadcaster, the Uganda Broadcasting Corporation, was fired because he tried to ensure balanced coverage of all candidates around the February 2011 election.

According to one credible source: "Journalists at the state broadcaster had worked under constant pressure from the station management to black out coverage of the opposition during the general elections"

Journalists in private broadcasters and media houses have reported experiencing intimidation, harassment and temporary closure by the authorities. Up to 30 Ugandan journalists currently face criminal charges for activities which are a legitimate exercise of their right to freedom of expression.

Amnesty International fears that the current widespread intolerance of criticism by the authorities may deteriorate further because of a number of existing, recently passed or proposed laws.

For example, if passed, the Public Order Management Bill would provide the police with wide-ranging powers to impose strict time and attendance limits on public meetings. Such broad powers carry a very high risk for violations of the rights to freedoms of assembly and expression.

The Press and Journalists (Amendment) Bill would give even more power to the government-controlled Media Council to register, license and regulate print media outlets on the basis of vaguely worded and undefined criteria.

President Museveni has also threatened to scrap pre-trial bail for loosely defined crimes including involvement in demonstrations.

“All these proposed measures impose impermissible and alarming restrictions on freedom of expression and peaceful assembly in blatant violation of Uganda’s obligation under international law,” said Godfrey Odongo.

“The Ugandan authorities must halt this surge in levels of repression of human rights in the country by immediately lifting the ban on public rallies and assemblies, withdrawing the proposed laws and amending current legislation which illegitimately restricts freedoms of expression and peaceful assembly.”

Notes to Editors

- In October dozens of political leaders and activists who sought to take part in the “walk to work” protests called to raise concerns regarding rising costs of living were arrested. Four activists have been charged with treason, which carries the death penalty, for their participation in organising the protests.
- Opposition leader Dr. Kizza Besigye was prevented from leaving his Kampala home ostensibly as a measure of “preventive arrest” but which in fact appeared specifically designed to stop him from exercising the right to freedom of peaceful assembly.