

ENFORCED DISAPPEARANCES IN RELATION TO
ELECTORAL PROCESSES IN UGANDA

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Historical Context:

Since gaining independence in 1962, Uganda has struggled with persistent political instability and conflict, never witnessing a democratic transfer of power. This historical backdrop has fostered a culture of political violence and intolerance. In 1971, Amin staged a coup, seizing control of the Ugandan government. Following Amin's downfall on April 10, 1979, several short-lived civilian administrations ensued, marking the overthrow of the Amin regime. This period culminated in Milton Obote's return to power through a disputed election on December 10, 1980. Gen Yoweri Museveni rose to power in 1986 after waging a guerrilla war against President Obote's government after his loss in the 1980 election.

Political Repression:

Under Museveni's three-decade rule in Uganda, dissenting voices have consistently encountered systematic repression. Following the removal of the presidential age and term limits from the constitution, Museveni's administration has implemented repressive policies to cling to power. Elections during his tenure have been tainted by violence against opponents and widespread evidence of fraud. The government uses enforced disappearances frequently to target political opponents, activists, journalists, and government critics, particularly during election periods. Dissidents are often apprehended by state security agencies such as the Chieftaincy of Military Intelligence (CMI), Internal Security Organization (ISO), and the clandestine Special Forces Command (SFC). Despite the government's claims of detaining and arresting opponents for violating COVID-19 restrictions during the 2021 general election, the practice persisted even after the pandemic subsided, with more opposition supporters being abducted by security agencies.

Modus Operandi: Security agents operate in vans commonly referred to as "drones," executing abductions under the cover of darkness or by seizing individuals from streets and private residences. Victims from the National Unity Platform (NUP), the main opposition party led by Robert Kyagulanyi, also known as Bobi Wine, are frequently taken from their homes, or detained while campaigning, violating their rights and disrupting democratic processes. Witnesses have reported armed individuals, including police, military personnel, and plainclothes agents, seizing

people from streets, private residences, and workplaces, and transporting them in unmarked "drones" to unknown destinations.

Geographical Focus: Enforced disappearances are concentrated in the central region of Uganda, encompassing densely populated cities. This suggests a targeted approach aimed at undermining opposition strongholds and stifling dissent in critical areas.

Undermining Democratic Processes: This strategy aims to subvert Uganda's democratic processes by impeding the ability of opposition parties to campaign freely and participate in elections. The abduction of candidates and party leaders disrupts electoral campaigns and can sway election results, indicating a deliberate attempt to weaken opposition strongholds and silence dissent in crucial areas. During the 2021 general elections, numerous opposition candidates contesting local elections were elected into office despite being absent due to their abduction by security agents.

Human Rights Violations: Enforced disappearances entail egregious human rights violations, including torture, rape, and prolonged detention without access to legal representation or family members. Perpetrators act with impunity, utilizing unmarked vehicles, disguises, and illegal detention centers, often referred to as "safe houses," to evade accountability.

Legal Process: According to the Uganda constitution and domestic laws, specific entities are authorized to carry out arrests. Following criminal procedure, only police officers have the authority to conduct arrests without requiring an order from a magistrate or a warrant. Moreover, under the Security Organizations Act, it is considered a criminal offense for agents of entities such as CMI, ISO, or SFC to arrest or detain individuals^[1]. Private individuals also have the option to transfer a person to a police officer for formal arrest. In June 2022, the Uganda Human Rights Commission (UHRC) reported that it had investigated sixty-nine cases of disappearances during the 2021 election period and successfully facilitated the release of sixty-four detainees. The UHRC further recommended that the Uganda Police Force thoroughly investigate all instances of enforced disappearance and ensure that the perpetrators are prosecuted.

Elections Oversight: The provisions of the NGO Act 2016 enabled the government to increase its oversight of NGOs. Many NGO reported feeling intimidated and under pressure. Their political

space shrunk and civil society organizations have been facing obstacles in their work. Shortly before the 2021 election the government expelled over 50 NGO from the country.

Patterns of Election Violence:

Various forms of electoral violence plague Uganda's political landscape, encompassing intimidation, harassment, physical assaults, enforced disappearances, and even fatalities. State security agencies and pro-government militias frequently target opposition party leaders, activists, and supporters, fostering an atmosphere of fear and repression.

During his regime, Gen. Museveni oversaw the onset of violent elections in 2001, where legal constraints and arbitrary arrests were leveraged to quell political dissent. Gen. Museveni orchestrated the formation of the Kalangala Action Plan (KAP), led by his senior advisor, Major Ronald Kakooza Mutale, as part of his reelection strategy[2]. Established in 2001, the KAP functioned as a mobilization unit to bolster support for Museveni's candidacy, resorting to intimidation tactics armed with sticks and firearms in regions opposing Museveni[3]. The KAP engaged in the abduction and torture of opposition figures while rallying support for Museveni.

The government's KAP extended its reach beyond political opposition supporters, arbitrarily arresting and abducting civilians, despite lacking legal authority. As per the Human Rights Watch 2003 report, Museveni officially sanctioned the Uganda People's Defense Forces (UPDF) to arm the KAP, which underwent military training to suppress dissent using violent means. Despite lacking legal jurisdiction, the KAP unlawfully detained individuals and perpetrated violent assaults against opposition sympathizers. The group resurfaced during the 2006 presidential election campaigns, continuing its campaign of violations in support of Gen. Museveni.

Ahead of the 2016 elections, the Chairperson of the electoral commission, Badru Kiggundu, urged the government to investigate and dismantle the KAP vigilante group due to its disruptive role in the electoral process[4].

Disappearances:

Enforced disappearances occur before, during, and after elections. In the 2021 general elections, Uganda witnessed over 1096 election-related abductions (victims' names available upon request), with at least 18 individuals still missing. The initial surge of enforced disappearances began in 2020 leading up to the 2021 general election. On November 18, 2020, Bobi Wine was apprehended while on the campaign trail in Luuka District, sparking a two-day protest during which Gen. Museveni, in his primetime national address, acknowledged ordering security forces to use lethal force against demonstrators. According to Human Rights Watch, in the weeks following these protests, security forces conducted numerous abductions and arrests of opposition supporters, government critics, and others, accusing them of participating in the protests or supporting Bobi Wine.

Government's Response:

In a televised address on February 13, 2021, General Museveni publicly disclosed the names of 177 individuals who had reportedly been abducted, confirming that they were under the custody of security agencies. He instructed the security agencies to make the list available to the public[6].

On February 24, 2021, Uganda's Parliament Speaker, Kadaga, tasked the Minister of Internal Affairs, Jeje Odongo, with presenting a comprehensive list to Parliament. The list was to outline Ugandans who had been abducted by security forces before, during, and after the elections[7].

On March 4, 2021, Minister Odongo submitted to Parliament a list containing the names of 177 Ugandans who were detained during the election period. These individuals had been held in custody without undergoing proper legal proceedings and without any notification provided to their family members as mandated in Uganda's constitution[8].

On March 7, 2021, amid increasing public concern about the disappearances related to the election, Gen Museveni addressed the issue in a letter to the Daily Monitor. He stated that SFC had arrested fifty-one individuals for what he termed "treasonable acts" associated with opposition elements[9].

On March 24, 2021, security forces released sixty-one victims of enforced disappearances across the country[10]. Several of these individuals had been missing for more than two months prior to their release[11].

Victims' Profiles:

The victims of electoral violence and disappearances in Uganda represent a wide spectrum of society, including political activists, journalists, civil society leaders, and ordinary citizens. Many of these victims are young individuals actively involved in political activism and advocating for democratic reforms. Prior to 2021 general elections, Dr. Kizza Besigye, the leader of Forum for Democratic Change (FDC) was regarded as Gen Museveni's primary challenger, contesting against him four times, and consistently alleging fraud and state-sponsored violence during elections past elections[12]. Below is a partial list profiling victims of enforced disappearances during Uganda's elections.

- In 2016, Gen Museveni encountered substantial opposition for the first time from Dr. Kizza Besigye. Besigye and his party members faced egregious human rights violations during the election, including illegal detentions, abductions, physical assaults, and the deployment of pepper spray. In May 2016, just two months after the general elections, the FDC leadership reported the abduction of their party vice chairperson, Zeridah Kakayi, by suspected security operatives on May 11th, 2016. Mrs. Kakayi described being forcibly taken by unidentified individuals, bundled into an unmarked Ipsum vehicle, and transported to undisclosed locations. During a press briefing, the FDC Chief Mobilizer informed the media that Kakayi was held captive for several days in Northern Uganda, where she endured torture[13]. Eventually, she was found abandoned near a bridge connecting Paper and Gulu Districts. Alongside her arrest, several other FDC leaders, including Dr. Kizza Besigye, were detained and charged with treason.
- About a week after the January 14, 2021, elections ██████████ was forcibly abducted by three armed individuals dressed in civilian clothing in Kawempe, a suburb on the outskirts of Kampala. They confined him inside a white "Drone" vehicle and restrained him to a metal bar, showing him a video clip he had recorded weeks earlier urging people to vote for Kyagulanyi. Segawa was among those coerced into

campaigning for Museveni in the Kampala ghetto areas. In the video clip, Segawa was wearing NRM party attire while skating, where he stated that he campaigned solely for financial gains and encouraged Ugandans to support Bobi wine in the general elections. During the journey to an undisclosed location, the assailants beat Segawa with the butts of their firearms.

- They eventually took him to a large hall-like structure where approximately seven other individuals were held. Segawa witnessed signs of abuse inflicted upon them, including forcibly removed nails and burn marks from flat irons. "Their condition was distressing," Segawa remarked. "They appeared severely injured. My only hope was to survive unscathed and return home." Inside the room, the assailants removed two of Segawa's fingernails, fractured one of his fingers, burned him with an iron, and pulled his tongue. He lost consciousness at some point and woke up days later at Mulago hospital in Kampala. Segawa's relatives reported his disappearance on January 29, 2021. He was found unconscious but alive on February 8, 2021, at Mulago hospital. The next day, Bobi Wine shared images of Segawa's wounds taken during his visit to Mulago hospital, asserting that Segawa had endured burns, electrocution, and forced nail removal, for endorsing Bobi Wine's campaign.
- Between December 21 and 23, 2020, a "commando unit" apprehended at least seventeen individuals in Mukono district, adjacent to Kampala, allegedly due to their support of Abdallah Kiwanuka, an opposition parliamentary candidate. These detainees were held for a minimum of three weeks at a facility whose location remained undisclosed. Subsequently, the commando unit released the detainees sporadically, scattering them across the country over the following weeks[14]. On January 11, 2021, Kiwanuka filed a habeas corpus petition on behalf of four of the abducted men [REDACTED]. By February 4, the High Court instructed the Inspector General of Police to produce the four men. On the same day, Odongo acknowledged the abduction of the forty-four individuals to the Uganda Parliament[15]. However, they were not presented as directed by the court.
- David Musiri, a member of National Unity Platform (NUP) headed by Bobi Wine, recounted being at a supermarket in Kampala on January 18, 2021, when six plainclothes gunmen attacked him. They injected him twice with a substance that caused him to lose

consciousness. The 30-year-old Musiri stated that he was then confined alone with his hands and feet bound together. Like many others detained, he reported being interrogated about what was referred to as "Plan B" — Mr. Bobi Wine's post-election strategy. Soldiers forced him to listen to recordings of his phone calls with party officials and subjected him to severe physical abuse, leading to him urinating blood. After four days in captivity, he was released but found himself unable to walk.

- [REDACTED] resident of Kyampangara in Kiruhura district and a supporter of Bobi Wine, was abducted on December 5, 2020, and subjected to torture by security forces. Five security personnel seized him from his residence and transported him in a drone vehicle to an undisclosed location. [REDACTED] eventually released but continues to live in fear for his safety. Throughout his ordeal, [REDACTED] was questioned about his allegiance to Bobi Wine and the alleged "Plan B" associated with him. He was injected with an unidentified substance in his navel, arm, and buttocks. Presently, he is experiencing a mysterious skin condition and severe pain. Herbert provided an interview to the NUP team on February 13, 2021.
- [REDACTED] was seized by security operatives on suspicion of backing Bobi Wine. Weeks later, he was discovered abandoned near Nakawa by an unidentified drone vehicle on February 20, 2021. [REDACTED] retrieved him and rushed him to Naguru Hospital. Fabian suffered severe torture and sustained deep wounds visible on his legs, chest, and shoulders. Following initial treatment at Naguru, he was transferred to another undisclosed medical facility for further care. Fabian's sister asserted his strong allegiance to Bobi Wine and believes this to be the motive behind his abduction and torture.
- On January 29, 2021, [REDACTED] abducted by both police officers and unidentified gunmen while in Ndejje. His wife reported that they thoroughly searched the house and confiscated People Power T-shirts and posters. The abductors were operating a drone vehicle with license plate number UBG 455B.
- On February 10, 2021, a BBS TV news segment broadcasted a troubling account shared by relatives of multiple young men [REDACTED]. They reported that their family members were abducted by military personnel from their residences in the dead of night following the 2021 elections. Among those listed were Mawanda Meddie,

[REDACTED]

- [REDACTED] was abducted by security forces wielding heavy machine guns from his residence in Magere on January 12, 2021. Subsequently, soldiers subjected him to severe beatings before forcibly transporting him in an unmarked "drone" vehicle to an undisclosed safe house. Lule endured two weeks of torture in the safe house, where he also heard the suffering of other detainees. Interrogators grilled him about a supposed "Plan B,." Lule, accused of wearing a red beret associated with Bobi Wine supporters, was later found at Makindye Military barracks.

- [REDACTED] was forcibly taken from his residence on the night of January 8th [REDACTED] recounted that a group of 15 to 20 men clad in black counterterrorism police uniforms forcibly entered his home, assaulted him, and interrogated him about his alleged involvement in training "rebels." He described being held captive for over 70 days, along with others, during which they were kept hooded and shackled. They were only allowed to lift their hoods up to their lips while eating their solitary meal each day[17].

- [REDACTED] was abducted by the military, as described by his [REDACTED] at her husband, who works as an egg vendor and Uber driver, was the main provider for their family [REDACTED] faced difficulties in feeding her infant children. She earnestly appeals to the military to release him, emphasizing that he is not a criminal. [REDACTED] taken away by security operatives in plain clothing driving a drone vehicle registered as UAH 612W. The family reported to the police, but the police denied any involvement in his abduction[18].

- According to the same report, family members of young men from [REDACTED] reveal that their loved ones were seized from their residences during the nighttime following the elections. Among those mentioned are [REDACTED]

- [REDACTED] was abducted by armed security agents around January 12, 2021. According to his brother, the Police Chief (OC) was among

those involved in [REDACTED] giving orders to the abductors. However, despite multiple visits to the police station to inquire about [REDACTED] whereabouts, the OC denied any knowledge of the abduction. [REDACTED] single father, left behind children who are currently residing in the house alone, without a caregiver or provider. The children expressed their distress, stating that they may not be able to return to school as their father, who pays their tuition, was abducted.

- [REDACTED] was abducted on January 20, 2021, [REDACTED]. His family searched for him relentlessly, but their efforts were in vain.
- [REDACTED] and [REDACTED] detained for a long time without knowledge of his relatives. Despite his family's visits to various police stations, their attempts were unsuccessful[19].
- As per the news bulletin above [REDACTED] was similarly abducted by the military during the night. His wife expressed her efforts in visiting multiple prisons and police stations, yet she has received no information regarding her husband's whereabouts. His mother, overcome with emotion, tearfully implores the government to present her son in court if they are certain he has committed any crime.
- [REDACTED]
- [REDACTED] He endured brutal torture at the hands of the military, during which he was pressured to disclose information about Bobi Wine's "Plan B." [REDACTED] subsequently abandoned after being beaten to the point of unconsciousness[20].
- [REDACTED]
- [REDACTED]
- [REDACTED]
- [REDACTED]

- [REDACTED] by security operatives on December 22, 2020. The 23-year-old had been supporting the NUP candidate for the local parliamentary seat. Speaking to The Independent [REDACTED] stated, "Ever since we were abducted, masks have been covered on our faces and tied in the neck, they only spared space for the mouth to enable us to eat food once in a while. We were subjected to severe beatings every hour. It is hard to describe how the torture chambers looked like but we were stepping on tiles full of itchy water, they could at times pour on our entire bodies." [REDACTED] in the Daily Monitor

- [REDACTED] from her place of work and driven to an unknown location.

- [REDACTED]

- [REDACTED] by a drone vehicle suspected of belonging to CMI. Police refused the family's attempt to file a report.

- [REDACTED]

- [REDACTED]

- [REDACTED] he was abducted from his residence during the night, as armed men, some dressed in military attire, stormed his home, assaulted him, and forcefully placed him in a drone vehicle before driving away. Fred recounts the torture he endured, highlighting specific incidents that resulted in

injuries to his legs, impairing his ability to stand or walk. Fred remained bedridden for an extended period.

- [REDACTED] were abducted in the same manner sometime in January, on or after January 8, 2021. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

- [REDACTED]

Kyotera District, was reported missing by his family on the eve of the local elections [REDACTED]

- [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] Witnesses observed that he was taken by armed individuals in an unmarked vehicle on Nasser Road.

- [REDACTED] was seized by plainclothes military officials. They informed his family that he needed to "address cybercrime questions." For two days, his whereabouts remained unknown. Eventually, friends managed to gather information and now suspect he is [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] was taken away during daylight hours on February 1, 2021, from his workplace. He was approached by plainclothes security agents posing as salespeople.

- [REDACTED] yet he still lives in fear for his life. Fred went into hiding and was reluctant to seek medical treatment as his torturers warned him to avoid medical facilities if he wished to survive [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED] was abducted from the taxi stage where he operates. He recounted that around 7:00 PM, while refueling his taxi at a gas station, unidentified armed individuals seized him, handcuffed him, and forced him into a drone vehicle, where they proceeded to assault him. He was blindfolded and transported to an undisclosed destination where he endured captivity and torture from December 21, 2020, until his release two months later.

- [REDACTED]
- [REDACTED]
- [REDACTED] receiving threats for displaying Bobi Wine/NUP campaign posters.

[REDACTED] He was kidnapped one evening by a man in an army uniform.

- [REDACTED] supporter of NUP was abducted by the military at his [REDACTED]
- [REDACTED] NUP mobilizer and a local mechanic was abducted from his work [REDACTED]
- [REDACTED] His status was still unknown as of February 19, 2024.

[REDACTED] emotionally recounts the torture he endured. He describes how his nails were forcibly removed, and he was deprived of food until he lost consciousness, requiring hospitalization at Naggalama dispensary. Following his treatment, [REDACTED]

- [REDACTED]
- [REDACTED] says she has been searching different police stations for his brother, in vain. [REDACTED] was abducted along with three others (below).

- [REDACTED] His parents say that their son, a taxi driver, was abducted by the military on his day off from work. During said military operation, one of the abductees was shot in the arm when he tried to run.
- Additional abductees include [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] recounts hearing a commotion at 2:00 AM and, upon looking through her window, witnessed her son being assaulted and forcibly taken by military personnel, who subsequently drove away with him in a drone vehicle.
- [REDACTED]
- [REDACTED] recounts being abducted and subjected to torture by security forces on or about February 6, 2021. In an interview with NBS TV, [REDACTED] reveals that security operatives fractured his arm while interrogating him about Bobi Wine's "Plan B." The next morning, he was abandoned near Banda stage, where passersby found him and transported him to the hospital in Mityana. Due to concerns for his safety, [REDACTED] no longer resides in his home.
- [REDACTED] 19-year-old, was abducted by suspected security operatives in [REDACTED] during their search for N [REDACTED]. He was discovered unconscious by strangers, abandoned in a bush in [REDACTED] rescued by fellow NUP supporters on or before February 14, 2021.
- The following names of people were listed by Gen. Museveni in his February 13, 2021 address to the country as among the people "arrested" as "terrorist" by military commandos and the Chieftaincy Military Intelligence (CMI). It is unclear from Gen. Museveni's speech if these people were released by law enforcement or remain in custody. Their names include Adam Senyonjo, [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
- [REDACTED] was abducted on January 15, 2021 from his place of work by the military and driven to an interrogation center with his two

brothers. [REDACTED] mother broke into tears when speaking to the reporter, saying that she has been to all the police stations, prisons, and even torture centers, asking to see his son, in vain (a file of BBS TV news bulletin is video available upon request).

Impact on Electoral Process:

Electoral violence and disappearances not only cast doubt on the credibility, fairness, and legitimacy of Uganda's electoral process but also foster an atmosphere of fear and intimidation, curtailing political dissent and restricting the involvement of opposition parties and civil society groups. Furthermore, the absence of accountability for those responsible for violence and disappearances undermines confidence in state institutions and perpetuates a cycle of impunity. While one of the mandates of the Uganda Electoral Commission is to adjudicate election complaints arising before and during polling, it has failed to document and address numerous instances of election-related disappearances. Moreover, the government has neglected to implement electoral reforms mandated by the 2016 Supreme Court, allowing Gen Museveni to effectively criminalize opposition to his regime and instill a climate of apprehension surrounding elections in the country.

NUPUSA proposals to strengthening the electoral process in Uganda:

1. **Conduct Independent Investigations:** The United Nations should initiate independent investigations into allegations of enforced disappearances during electoral processes in Uganda. These investigations should be thorough, transparent, and impartial, aimed at uncovering the truth behind the disappearances and holding perpetrators accountable.
2. **Prosecute Perpetrators:** The UN should work towards ensuring that perpetrators of enforced disappearances are prosecuted and held accountable for their actions. Given the failure of the Ugandan government to fulfill its mandate in prosecuting these cases, the UN should take proactive measures to ensure justice is served.
3. **Monitor Electoral Processes:** The United Nations should actively monitor electoral processes in Uganda to prevent and deter enforced disappearances and other forms of election-related violence. This monitoring should involve close observation of government actions, security forces' conduct, and adherence to human rights standards during elections.

4. Advocate for Electoral Reforms: The UN should advocate for electoral reforms in Uganda to address the erosion of democracy and ensure that future elections are free, fair, and transparent. This may include reforms aimed at decentralizing power, enhancing the independence of electoral institutions, and safeguarding the rights of all citizens to participate in the electoral process.
5. Uphold Constitutional Standards: The UN should uphold constitutional standards and principles in Uganda, including the requirement that presidential candidates be born within the country. Any attempts to circumvent or disregard constitutional provisions should be addressed and condemned by the international community.
6. Provide Support for Civil Society: The United Nations should provide support and protection to civil society organizations, human rights defenders, and journalists in Uganda who work to promote democratic values and expose human rights violations, including enforced disappearances.
7. Engage in Diplomatic Efforts: The UN should engage in diplomatic efforts to pressure the Ugandan government to respect human rights, uphold the rule of law, and address the root causes of enforced disappearances and political repression in the country.

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