



Genocide Watch  
The Alliance Against Genocide

## **Special Report on Uganda** **2021 Election Will Escalate Ethnic Tensions**

Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni has ruled Uganda since 1986. In February 2021 Uganda will hold elections. Museveni circumvented term limits in the Constitution to run for his sixth term.

In June 2020 the Electoral Commission of Uganda declared that due to COVID-19, the campaign for the 2021 Presidential and General Election will be held digitally as a “[scientific election process.](#)” Museveni is far better equipped than opposition groups to disseminate digital information because of his access to the internet, radio, and television media.

### **Voter Demographics & Access to Information:**

Uganda’s 2020 population is 45.7 million with [roughly 50% of the population](#) 18 years of age or older and thus eligible to vote. According to the Electoral Commission, 17,782,594 people have registered to vote in the 2021 election, [approximately 2.5 million more](#) than in the 2016 elections.

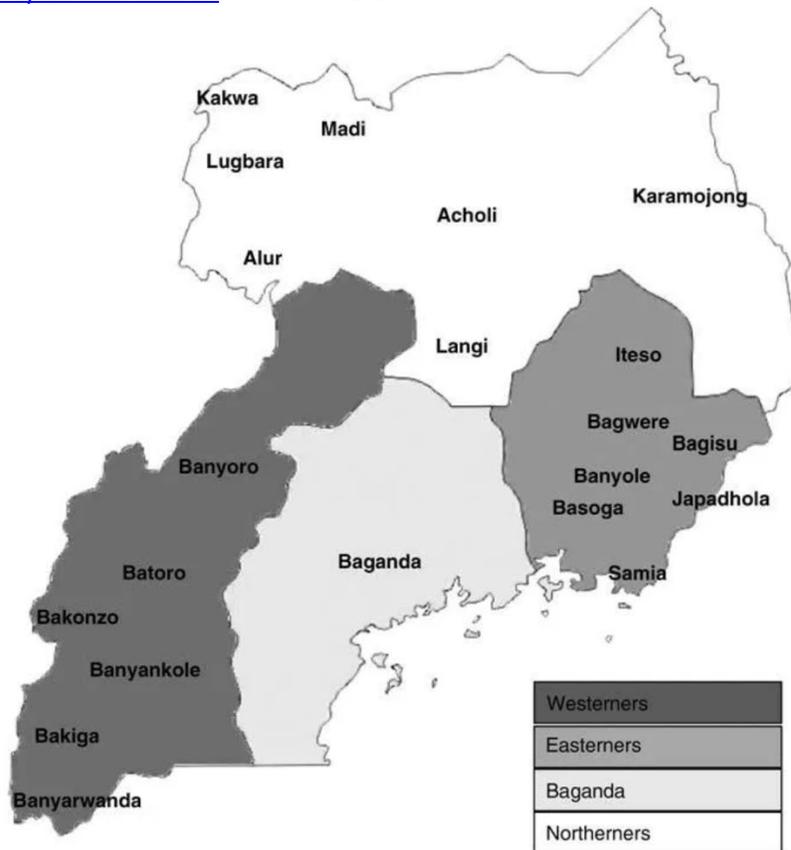


Figure 1: map of [ethnic regions in Uganda by Dr. Stefen Lindemann](#) of the London School of Economics

[75.6% of the Ugandan population lives in rural areas](#) that have limited access to digital technologies. According to the World Bank only [42.6% of the population](#) has electricity in their homes.

Groups that have opposed Museveni in past elections, such as the Acholi in the north and the Bakonjo peoples in the southwest have limited access to electricity. Museveni’s traditional supporters, urban Ugandans from the Baganda group, are much more likely to have access to TV, radio, and the internet. They will therefore have disproportionate weight in a “digital election.”

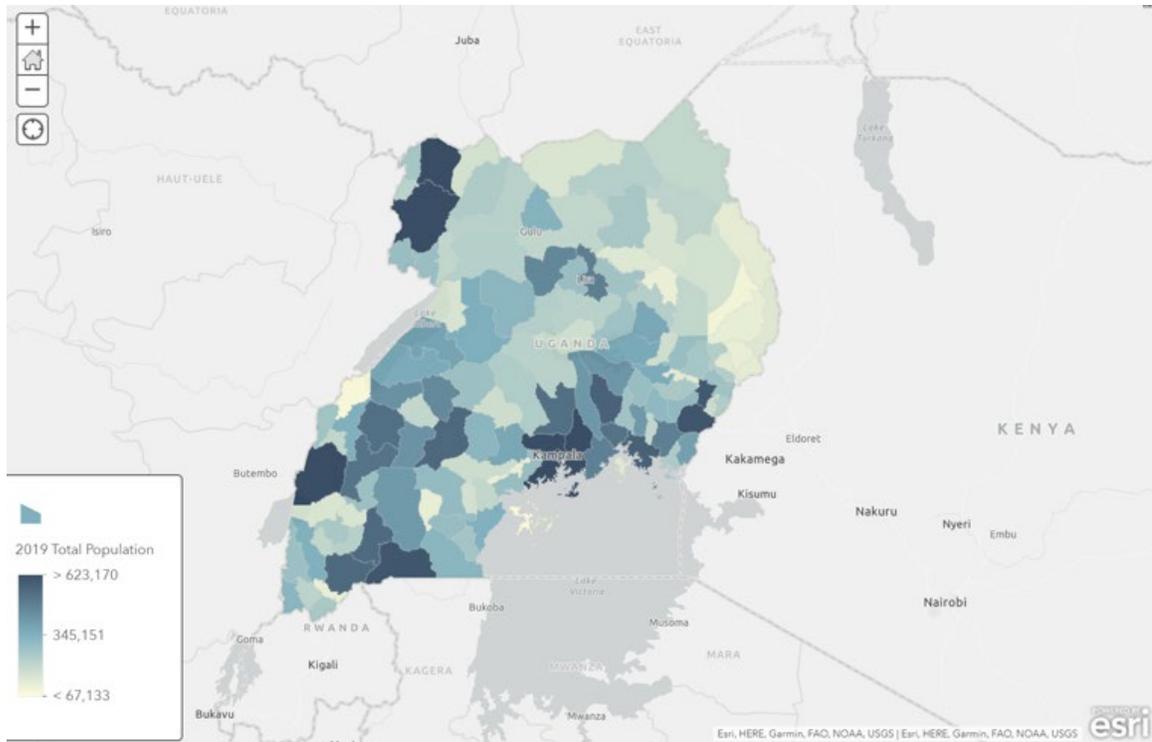


Figure 2: Ugandan Population Density 2020 with data from ESRI

**Access to electricity and digital communications**

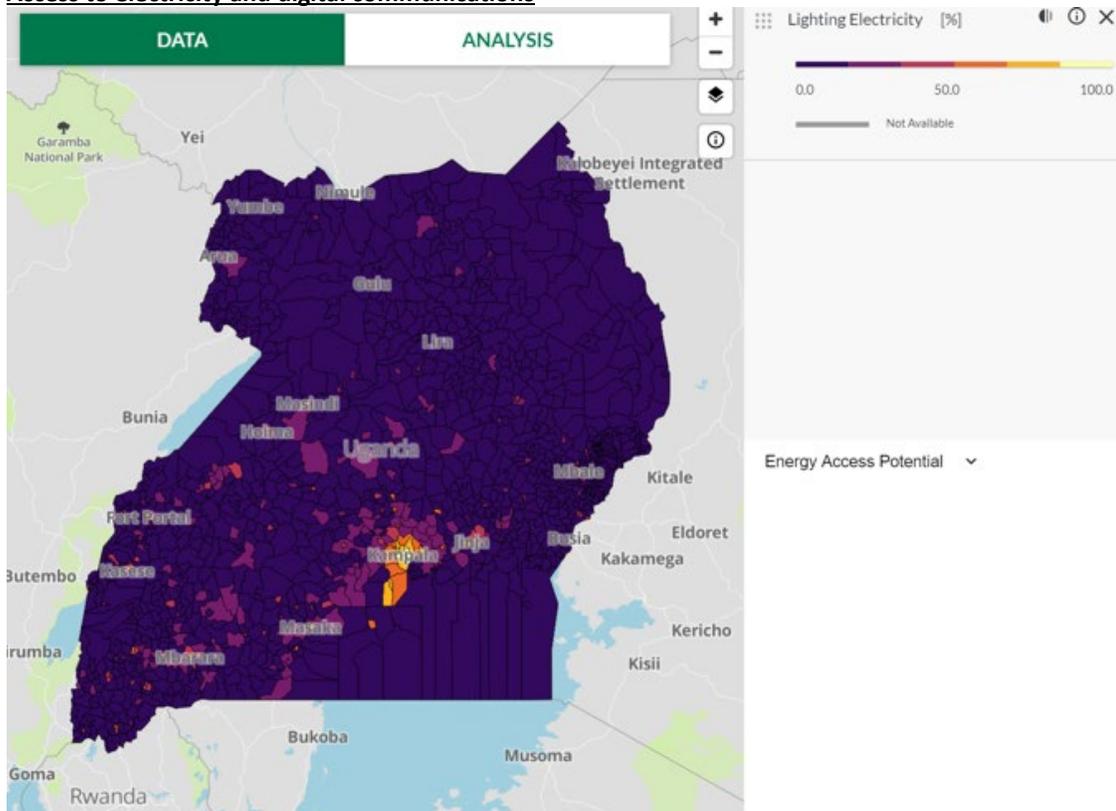


Figure 3 Lighting and electricity data courtesy of [Energy Sector GIS Working Group Uganda](#)

Ugandans must have a national identity document to obtain access to phones, bank loans, and the ability to vote. Around 80% of Ugandan women have national identity documents. 70% of Ugandans have mobile phone subscriptions. 82% of men and 63% of women [own a phone](#). Rural women are the [least likely to own a phone](#).

17 million of the 26 million Ugandan telephone subscribers have phones that have [at least rudimentary abilities to surf the internet](#). During the 2016 election, President Museveni shut down access to social media sites, ostensibly to stop the spread of misinformation and disinformation. It can be anticipated that a similar restriction will be imposed during the 2021 election.

In July 2018, an [‘idle talk’ tax](#) was imposed, ostensibly to combat online “gossip” in the country. To visit social media sites including Facebook, WhatsApp, and Twitter, Ugandans have to pay a tax of 200 shillings per day. 41% of Ugandans live below the poverty line of \$1.90 USD/day or 6,971.82 shillings. The tax constitutes at least 3% of the daily income for 41% of the population.

In Uganda, radio is the most accessible mass medium, particularly in rural areas, as batteries can power radios even where there is no electricity. The cost of the radios (around 20,000 shillings), however, is a barrier to ownership. To keep broadcasting, many Ugandan stations receive [government subsidies and donations](#) to stay afloat, which compromises a station’s ability to disseminate unbiased information. In Uganda, popular stations CBS FM and Akaboozi FM have government ties. Television is another source of news that will be used for campaigning. Uganda has 1.6 million TV subscribers.

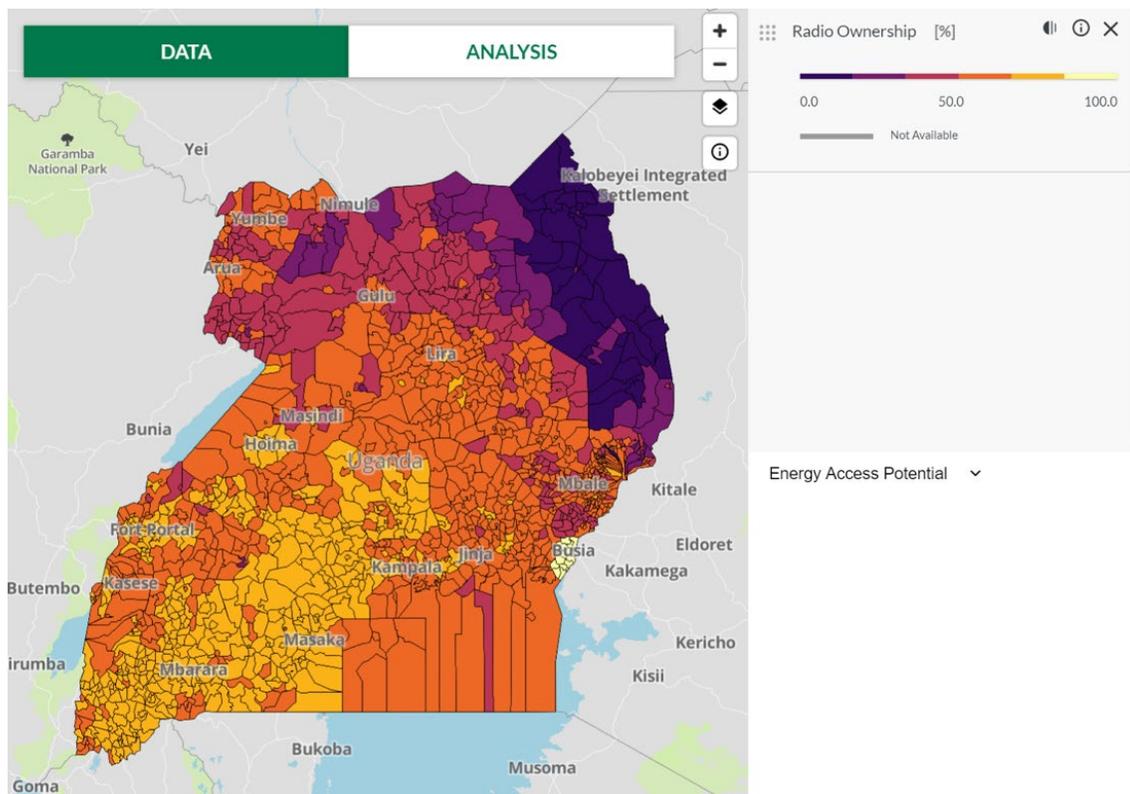


Figure 4: radio ownership data courtesy of [Energy Sector GIS Working Group Uganda](#)

Most [TV and radio stations in the country are pro-Museveni](#), so Ugandans cannot get unbiased information about opposition candidates.

The state police and military function as protection for Museveni against political rivals and ethnic opposition groups.

Radio and TV stations are now [asked to submit details to police](#) on which politicians they will invite to their shows so that police presence and curfew enforcement can be organized in advance. Opposition candidates have complained about being excluded from shows in rural areas as security agencies bar them from attending.

### **Early Signs of Violence and Intimidation:**

Over twenty candidates have expressed interested in running for president. In August 2020, one of Museveni’s opponents, pop star Bobi Wine, stated that Ugandan police [fired tear gas and bullets into crowds in Mbale](#) that were greeting him before a radio talk show. A [police spokesperson has since stated](#) that “violence suppression units” have been created to “control demonstrations and all acts of violence during the elections”. Thus far these police units have only targeted groups opposing Museveni.

In 2018 Wine was [arrested following some party gatherings](#). Police intervened with gun fire, resulting in civilian fatalities. Many have likened the treatment of Wine to the treatment of former presidential candidate, Kizza Besigye, who was repeatedly arrested during his campaigns in 2006 and 2011.

Since the beginning of 2020, Uganda has suffered its [highest levels of violence in over a decade](#). The lead up to the 2021 election is likely to result in an increase of state repression. Genocide Watch expects to see Museveni’s government targeting political opponents, their supporters, and ethnic minorities like the Bakonjo and Acholi that oppose Museveni’s rule.

### **COVID-19 and the 2021 Digital Election**

Museveni has imposed COVID-19 restrictions that limit access to political information, especially in rural areas of Uganda. The restrictions [prohibit mass rallies](#).

Since the ban on campaign rallies, eligible voters can learn about the presidential candidates only through internet, radio, or television sources. This limitation favors urban over rural voters and supporters of Museveni over his opponents.

According to data compiled by the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), [incidents of state violence against civilians](#) have markedly increased since March 21, 2020, when Uganda had its first COVID-19 case. In March 2020 state police reportedly used excessive force to impose COVID lockdown measures and targeted political opponents and ethnic groups that are at odds with Museveni’s government. Repressive measures have included forcefully breaking up demonstrations and targeting market traders. According to the [ACLED COVID-19 Disorder Tracker](#), 47% of the incidents of police violence in Uganda since March 2020 have been cases of state repression of civilians. Ugandan security forces have cracked down on writers and journalists for [criticizing the president](#).

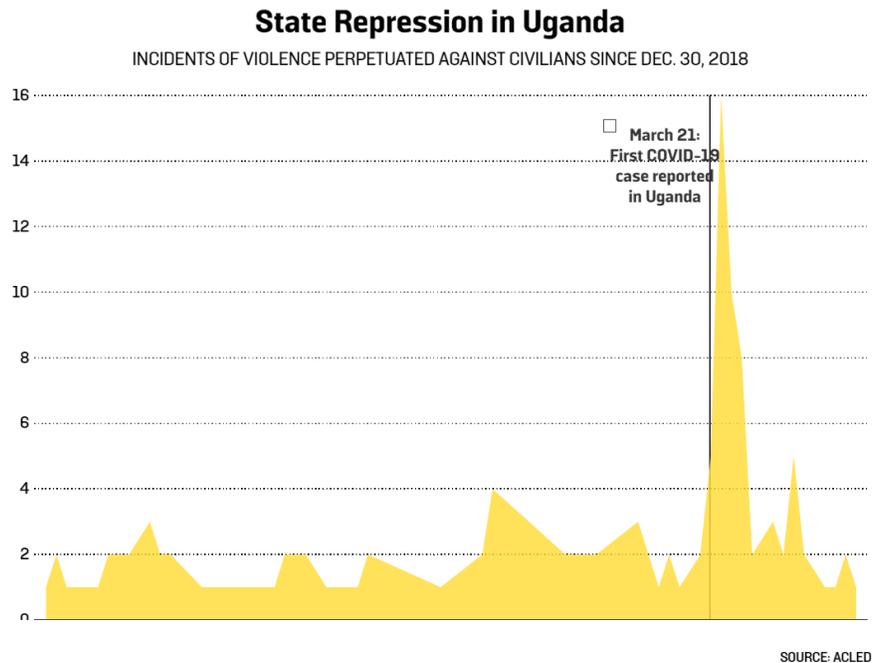


Figure 5: incidents of state repression are occurring at the [highest frequency in over a decade](#)

## **Conclusion**

The 2020 – 2021 campaign season in Uganda will likely see increased violence and state repression as Museveni's ruling party seeks to maintain power. At-risk groups include political and civilian groups opposed to Museveni and his re-election, and ethnic minorities from the North and West that are excluded from power. In their campaigns they will emphasize the corruption of Museveni's National Resistance Movement. Access to information during this so-called "scientific election" will be directly linked to unequal access to electricity and mobile phone subscriptions. Electricity in homes is largely restricted to homes near Kampala, which limits rural voters in accessing information via TV and the internet. Radios, despite state restrictions on content, will likely be the best way for opposition candidates to reach the population. But even radio stations are now subject to police control. With the backing of state sponsored media, the Ugandan Defense Forces, and the police, Museveni will have the upper hand during this election season. Violent suppression of anti-Museveni protesters may result in riots. Heavy-handed moves to enforce COVID-19 restrictions frame an increasingly violent election year in Uganda. If the official result of the election is another victory for Museveni, Uganda could erupt into violent demonstrations. Repression by the Ugandan police and military could result in crimes against humanity that target minority ethnic groups.

**Genocide Watch considers Uganda to be at Stage 6: Polarization.**

### **Genocide Watch recommends:**

- The Ugandan government must ensure that as many Ugandans as possible can connect to the internet during the election period. Freedom of expression and access to information are rights enshrined in Uganda's constitution as well as in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, to which Uganda is a state party.
- The Ugandan government should ensure that all presidential candidates receive airtime on radio and television stations without restrictions or police interference.
- The African Union, The Carter Center, The European Union, and other organizations should monitor the preparations for and conduct of the 2021 Ugandan election.