



**Electoral Management.com**  
*Research, policy advice & training on running elections*



**Newcastle  
University**



Electoral Integrity Project



**Economic  
and Social  
Research Council**

# **Managing Elections under Covid-19 Pandemic Conditions: The Case of Uganda**

Case Study, 16 September 2021

Nic Cheeseman

© 2021 International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance

International IDEA publications are independent of specific national or political interests. Views expressed in this publication do not necessarily represent the views of International IDEA, its Board or its Council members.



The electronic version of this publication is available under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 3.0 (CC BY-NC-SA 3.0) licence. You are free to copy, distribute and transmit the publication as well as to remix and adapt it, provided it is only for non-commercial purposes, that you appropriately attribute the publication, and that you distribute it under an identical licence. For more information visit the Creative Commons website: <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/3.0/>.

International IDEA  
Strömsborg  
SE-103 34 Stockholm  
Sweden  
Telephone: +46 8 698 37 00  
Email: [info@idea.int](mailto:info@idea.int)  
Website: <https://www.idea.int>

This case study is part of a collaborative project between the Electoral Integrity Project, Electoral Management Network and International IDEA, edited by Toby S. James (University of East Anglia), Alistair Clark (Newcastle University) and Erik Asplund (International IDEA).

Created with Booktype: <https://www.booktype.pro>

## Contents

---

Managing Elections under Covid-19 Pandemic Conditions: The Case of Uganda .....	5
1. Introduction .....	5
2. The electoral context in 2021 .....	6
3. Covid-19 in Uganda .....	7
4. Covid-19 protection measures .....	8
5. Covid-19 enforcement, compliance and the campaign .....	12
6. The impact of elections on Covid-19 .....	14
7. Conclusions .....	15
References .....	16
About the author .....	19
About International IDEA .....	19

# Managing Elections under Covid-19 Pandemic Conditions: The Case of Uganda

---

Nic Cheeseman

## 1. Introduction

Elections have been a regular feature of Ugandan politics from the late colonial period onwards, but results have often been disputed and the source of political controversy (Cheeseman et al. 2020). The first Legislative Council election was held in 1958 and the first National Assembly election in 1962. After gaining independence the same year, under the leadership of Milton Obote, initial hopes for a new era of political rights and civil liberties quickly faded as the government lost legitimacy and began to rely increasingly on coercion (Mazrui 1973). A 1971 coup led by Idi Amin resulted in nine years of often chaotic military rule before Amin's defeat at the hands of Tanzanian forces paved the way for the reintroduction of multiparty elections in 1980. However, while the international community and many Ugandans hoped that the elections would heal old wounds and give rise to a more legitimate government, this was not the case. Instead, accusations that the elections were rigged in favour of Obote—who was seen as the favoured candidate of the Tanzanian Government, which retained a strong presence in the country—led to the outcome being rejected by some of the losing candidates (Willis et al. 2017).

In particular, Yoweri Museveni refused to accept Obote's victory and instead launched a long-running insurgency as the leader of the National Revolutionary Army. Museveni finally took power in 1986, when his forces captured the capital, Kampala, and has ruled ever since. The new president's outlook on elections was heavily shaped by his negative experience in 1980. In particular, he came to view multiparty competition as a potential source of division, in which unscrupulous leaders could manipulate voters for their own ends. Partly as a result, Museveni initially refused to legalize opposition parties, instead operating a 'no-party' system in which candidates were supposed to be elected on the basis of 'individual merit' (Kasfir 1998).

Non-partisan presidential and parliamentary elections were held in 1996 and 2001, in what was effectively a one-party state dominated by candidates loyal to the National Revolutionary Movement (NRM). This changed in 2005 when a referendum led to the reintroduction of multiparty politics. However, this made little difference to the composition of the government, as President Museveni won the 2006, 2011 and 2016 elections with large majorities. In each case, opposition parties alleged that the elections had been manipulated through a range of malpractices, such as the violent intimidation of opposition candidates

and supporters, vote buying, ballot box stuffing and media censorship. Uganda is therefore a classic example of a ‘competitive-authoritarian’ state that is officially democratic but in reality maintains power through a range of repressive strategies (Tripp 2010).

Given this backdrop, it is unsurprising that surveys have found that a majority of Ugandan voters do not believe that it is possible to change the government via the ballot box. Despite this well-founded cynicism, however, the 2021 general elections generated considerable public interest due to the emergence of a new opposition leader, Robert Kyagulanyi Ssentamu, a popular singer and political activist elected to the National Assembly in a by-election in 2017 who is better known by his stage name, Bobi Wine (Osiebe 2020). In particular, Wine’s strong popularity in urban areas and among younger voters was seen as representing a different challenge to Museveni who, at 76 years old, had to remove constitutional age limits—having already removed term limits—in order to be able to stand. As a result, it seemed likely even before the campaign had begun that the election would be particularly intensely contested and feature political violence.

## 2. The electoral context in 2021

Uganda holds simultaneous elections for the president and the National Assembly. The president is elected in a direct election in which the winning candidate must secure at least 50 per cent +1 of the votes. Members of Parliament are elected on a first-past-the-post basis to single-member constituencies, according to the ‘Westminster style’ system.

Eleven candidates contested the presidency. Although the Democratic Party and the Forum for Democratic Change (FDC) have a long history of contesting elections against the NRM, most analysts saw the poll as a two-horse race between Yoweri Museveni and Bobi Wine. Wine had enjoyed widespread popularity as a musician before he entered mainstream politics. His stringent criticism of President Museveni had resonated with opposition supporters, and a number of the parliamentary candidates he campaigned for in by-elections had been victorious. In addition, he had suffered heavy-handed treatment from the government and the security forces, who had detained and tortured him for taking part in public protests such as those held in July 2018 against the introduction of the ‘social media tax’, which increased the cost of using popular platforms by UGX 200 (USD 0.05) a day (Ratcliffe and Okiror 2019).

- Fifteen parties contested the legislative elections, but many parties only stood candidates in a small number of constituencies. The NRM had by far the greatest coverage, followed by Wine’s National Unity Platform (NUP) and the FDC. Voter registration was completed in December 2019. This had led to accusations that some people who would be of voting age between January 2020 and the elections in January 2021 would be disenfranchised (Ahimbisibwe and Ezaruku 2020), but it also meant that the process was completed before the onset of the pandemic.

The election was overseen by the Ugandan Electoral Commission, which has consistently been accused of favouring the ruling party (Fisher 2013). According to Afrobarometer data from 2016, an absolute majority of Ugandans (54 per cent) do not trust the Electoral Commission (Afrobarometer 2021). In the context of the 2021 elections, it was notable that the process through which the Electoral Commission adopted Covid-19 measures was criticized for not sufficiently taking the opinions and interests of opposition parties and civil society groups into account (Mumbere 2020).

### 3. Covid-19 in Uganda

Uganda has been widely praised for its response to the Covid-19 pandemic (Lumu 2020). Along with Rwanda, it was one of the first countries in Africa to introduce a wide range of measures designed to halt the spread of the disease. On 18 March 2020, four days before the country had its first confirmed case, the government announced that public gatherings would be suspended for 32 days and that anyone arriving in the country would be forced to undergo a 14-day period of quarantine in designated hotels.

The Ministry of Health confirmed a further eight cases on 24 March 2020, and the same day announced that all schools and universities would be closed for 30 days. Public transport was suspended for 14 days on 25 March 2020. However, the country's Covid-19 response was not without controversy. There were reports that measures requiring returning Ugandans to quarantine in a hotel created considerable hardship for those who could not afford it (Nyeko 2020), as well as a number of reports of human rights abuses committed by the security forces when implementing Covid-19 restrictions—a notable forerunner of what was to come during the election campaign.

Figure 1. Covid-19 cases in Uganda

#### New cases and deaths

From [JHU CSSE COVID-19 Data](#) · Last updated: 61 days ago



Each day shows new cases reported since the previous day · [About this data](#)

Source: Johns Hopkins University, <[https://www.google.com/search?q=johns+hopkins+university+covid+dashboard&rlz=1C1GCEA\\_enSE883SE883&coq=Johns+Hopkins+University+covid+dashboard&aqs=chrome.0.0i19j0i19i22i30.6358j0j4&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8](https://www.google.com/search?q=johns+hopkins+university+covid+dashboard&rlz=1C1GCEA_enSE883SE883&coq=Johns+Hopkins+University+covid+dashboard&aqs=chrome.0.0i19j0i19i22i30.6358j0j4&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8)>, accessed 15 June 2021.

On 30 March 2020, President Museveni declared a nationwide curfew from 19:00 to 06:30 for 14 days to halt the spread of the virus. Similar restrictions continued to be used in response to rising numbers, generating further controversies. On 23 July 2020, the day Uganda confirmed its first death from Covid-19, the BBC ran a story that more people (12) had been killed by

the security forces' heavy-handed enforcement of Covid-19 restrictions than by the virus itself (BBC 2020).

Nonetheless, the government's ability to keep cases and deaths low meant that its strategy was widely seen to have been a success in health terms. Data produced by the Lancet Commission for the month of August 2020, for example, identified Uganda as the best African country for containing Covid-19, and ranked it 10th of 191 nations worldwide (Lancet Commission n.d.).

Figure 1 shows that official cases remained under 50 a day until August, when the number began to rise. On the day the campaign for National Assembly, local government council and division chairpersons and councillors got under way on 9 November 2020, the number of cases was 171, with a seven-day average of 229. This average remained under 500 until 9–25 December 2020, and then fell once again so that on election day (14 January 2021) there were no new cases recorded and the seven-day average was just 144.

As of 25 May 2021, the country had experienced just over 40,000 cases and just over 300 deaths, although this—and all the official figures cited above—might underestimate the true magnitude of the pandemic due to limited testing.

#### 4. Covid-19 protection measures

In line with its approach to restricting Covid-19 more generally, Uganda introduced stringent measures to restrict the spread of Covid-19 during campaigning. However, the stringency of some of the measures in the context of a comparatively low number of cases, combined with the fact that they were unevenly enforced across opposition and ruling party campaigns, suggested an ulterior motive of seeking to undermine the ability of Bobi Wine to use his charisma to win new voters.

Although the vast majority of the coverage has focused on the 2021 general elections, Uganda also held Special Interest Group (SIG) elections in 2020. These elections to the SIG committees are for positions designed to ensure more inclusive representation, and take place at the village/cell level for 68,740 villages. To an extent, the management of these polls laid down a blueprint for the later general elections.

In early April 2020, the Electoral Commission announced the 'postponement of the programme' of SIG elections. According to the Commission Chair, Justice Simon Byabakama, the postponement was 'made as a result of the ongoing mass gatherings in the country as a measure to prevent the spread of the deadly coronavirus' (Waswa 2020). The SIG elections were subsequently held on 11, 13 and 17 August 2020. Although this gave more time for individuals and the Electoral Commission to prepare, the domestic electoral observation group, the Citizens' Coalition for Electoral Democracy in Uganda (CCEDU), concluded that it also had negative implications for the running of the process. Most notably, 'The postponement of the Special Interest Group elections caused confusion with the party primaries of some political parties. The elections of the political parties at times were conducted on the same day and time as Electoral Commission activities, using the same method of election-lining up' (CCEDU 2021).

The general elections timetable also experienced some disruption. In February, the Electoral Commission postponed the nomination dates—and hence the deadlines for the completion of party primaries—for the presidential, parliamentary and local council elections from August to October 2020. However, this change was less related to Covid-19 and appears to have been driven by concerns that government business would suffer if parliamentarians and ministers had to take time off to engage in campaigning in August (CCEDU 2021). As noted above, the February 2020 postponement occurred before the government had put in place any Covid-19 containment measures and before the country had experienced its first case.

There was considerable support for the idea of postponing the date of the general elections, especially within the ruling party and among members of the East African Legislative Assembly (CCEDU 2021). The Interparty Organization for Dialogue also called for an extension of the timetable, arguing that political parties had been forced to suspend their activities. However, although President Museveni initially spoke publicly about the potential for the date of the general elections to be pushed back due to Covid-19, they ultimately took place as scheduled on 14 January 2021. One reason for this might be that, under article 110 of the Ugandan Constitution, general elections can only be postponed if a state of emergency is declared, and this would have required changes to government practices in a number of areas and the modification of some legislation (CCEDU 2021). Once the campaign had begun, the government may also have been wary of further extending a period of considerable political controversy and instability.

Ahead of the SIG elections, on 21 June 2020, the Minister for ICT and National Guidance published a road map for what was called a ‘scientific campaign’ (ICT Ministry 2020). In practice, this meant that the elections would take place digitally, through social media, television and radio, rather than ‘in person’. In line with this approach, the road map called on political parties and organizations to focus on learning and understanding how to use the current media landscape to achieve the desired political goals, and putting in place smart media and communications task teams to guide campaigning and communications objectives.

The Electoral Commission further developed this framework on 24 July 2020, setting out a set of Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) in line with the general guidance already issued by the Ministry of Health for the elections (Electoral Commission of Uganda 2020; see Box 1). Separate guidance on campaigning made it clear that rallies were effectively banned, as the maximum number of people allowed to attend an event was set at 70 (Isilow 2020), although this was subsequently increased to 200 for the general elections (CIPESA 2021). The Electoral Commission also required all actors to respect social distancing measures (2 metres), use facemasks and enable regular hand washing.

These changes increased the cost of organizing the elections, and the Electoral Commission requested an additional UGX 54 billion (USD 15,288,312) (from the Ministry of Finance to fund the new timetable and Covid-19 materials (Kazibwe 2020). It is unclear how much of this funding was used productively, however, given the poor performance of the Electoral Commission at safeguarding polling stations (see below).

The new constraints were less of an issue for the SIG elections, for which public participation tends to be considerably lower. However, it represented a major divergence from normal practice for general elections, which, in line with most African countries, tend to be heavily concentrated on rallies, with candidates at all levels holding public events, some of which attract tens of thousands of people. According to Afrobarometer survey data, 59 per cent of Ugandans had attended a campaign rally in the previous election campaign (Afrobarometer 2021).

Many civil society and opposition political leaders criticized the restrictions. Opposition leaders and some journalists suggested that the number of Covid-19 cases was too low to justify such restrictions, arguing that the measures had been introduced to empower the government to restrict the activity of rival parties. On 22 June 2020, Bobi Wine issued a statement: ‘We unequivocally dismiss Museveni’s move to hold what he calls a “scientific election”, to yet again stage a coup & crown himself life President. We must have a free & fair election. We have advised him not to provoke the PEOPLE of Uganda!’ (Mumbere 2020).

Meanwhile, civil society groups such as the Executive Director of the Forum for Women in Democracy argued that the decision to rely on digital campaigning would disenfranchise



women and youth (*The Independent* 2020) who are less likely to have access to such media. The measures were therefore criticized on the grounds of both inclusion and participation.

A number of court actions were subsequently initiated against the restrictions, including by the journalist and pastor Joseph Kabuleta, who stated that: ‘The Presidential, Parliamentary and LC Elections Act do not allow for “scientific” elections. For the EC to consult with Museveni then seek to dictate to other candidates is mockery of an election process. Candidate M7 has to be equal to all other candidates. We off to court’ (Mumbere 2020). Nonetheless, all these challenges ultimately came to nothing.

Partly to iron out the legal complications related to tensions between the new restrictions and the constitutions of the political parties, which in some cases stipulated the need for in-person meetings, and partly to head off legal challenges, the government introduced The Political Parties and Organisations (Conduct of Meetings and Elections) Regulations Statutory Instrument (in relation to sections 10 and 27(1) of the Political Parties and Organisations Act 2005) on 2 July 2020 (Government of Uganda 2020). The Instrument aimed to ‘safeguard the health of participants in activities organised by a political party or organisation’ by enabling ‘a political party or organisation to elect leaders and sponsor candidates for nomination for general elections without compromising the health and safety of its members or the public’.

Finally, it is important to note that the Ugandan Electoral Commission reserved the right to halt campaigning activities in areas with a rising number of cases of Covid-19—a power it used towards the end of the campaign period, triggering considerable controversy.

**Box 1. Standard Operating Procedures for the Conduct of Activities for the Elections of Special Interest Groups from Village to District Level Country-Wide, 2020**

5.1 PACKING OF ELECTION MATERIALS

- Sanitize the work environment (warehouse/stores, door locks, tables, chairs, vehicles, etc.);
- Wash hands with soap, conduct body temperature checks before accessing the warehouse/stores;
- Wear hand gloves while handling materials/documents;
- Practice and observe social distancing as recommended by the Ministry of Health; and
- Avoid unnecessary movement within the work premises.

5.2 TRAINING OF ELECTION OFFICIALS

- Develop training curriculum that facilitates e-learning;
- Where training involves physical presence of trainees, provide ample venue to ensure social distancing;
- All participants to wash hands with soap;
- All venues, furniture and equipment to be sanitized; and
- Use of gloves in handling documents.

5.3 NOMINATION OF CANDIDATES

5.3.1. The Commission

- Nomination papers and guidelines to be issued at each Subcounty/Town/Municipal Division across the country and uploaded on the EC website for on-line access by Stakeholders;
- Election Officials to wear hand gloves while handling nomination papers;
- Nomination venues to be sanitized;
- Election officials to wash hands with soap;
- Nomination officials to wear face masks; and
- Nomination venue layout to comply with social distancing.

5.3.2 Aspiring Candidates

- Aspiring Candidates to turn up at the nomination venue accompanied by only proposer and seconder;
- Aspiring Candidates, proposers and seconders to wear face masks;
- No processions allowed during nominations and campaigns; and
- Aspiring Candidates, Proposers and seconders to wash hands with soap.

5.4 CAMPAIGNS

Campaigns to be conducted in a manner prescribed by the Electoral Commission.

## 5.5 POLLING

### 5.5.1. The Commission

- Polling by lining up to be done in open air and spacious venues that include; playgrounds, public grounds, public roads, etc.;
- Election officials and voters to wash hands with soap;
- Election officials and voters to wear face masks; and
- Counting of voters in the line to be contactless;

### 5.5.2. The Voters

- Voters to turn up at the polling station wearing face masks;
- Voters to wash hands with soap; and
- Voters to assemble and line up in strict observance of social distancing of at least one metre between persons in the line.

*Source:* Electoral Commission of Uganda, 24 July 2020, <<https://www.ec.or.ug/sites/default/files/press/SOPs%20for%20SIGs%20Elections%202020.pdf>>, accessed 15 June 2021.

## 5. Covid-19 enforcement, compliance and the campaign

Enforcement of the Covid-19 protocols was only a partial success. In the SIG elections, the government struggled to effectively communicate the protocols, and electoral officials and the security forces failed to enforce compliance with the SOPs on voting day. In the general elections, both parties held events at which more than 200 people attended. The Electoral Commission and the security forces responded by selectively enforcing Covid-19 protocols, shutting down opposition events and detaining and harassing Bobi Wine, while allowing ruling party meetings to continue unhindered.

### Special Interest Group elections

The SIG elections were held on 11 August 2020 for older people's groups, 13 August 2020 for people with disabilities and 17 August 2020 for youth. There was a very low turnout in all three elections, but particularly in those for people with disabilities. National turnout figures are not provided on the Ugandan Electoral Commission's website but according to the CCEDU, '6,234 of CCEDU's 10,029 observers reported that there were as low as between eight to 10 voters at each of the polling stations observed' (CCEDU 2020). This was in part because information was so poorly communicated and the government largely relied on the radio to disseminate key information, which effectively excluded deaf voters.

In general, the CCEDU was critical of the way in which the elections were run, in terms of both the quality of democracy—the NRM won 78.88 per cent of the vote in the village youth elections—and the enforcement of Covid-19 measures, where the SOPs were regularly flouted. In particular, many young voters did not wear masks or respect social distancing measures when waiting in queues at polling stations. However, many polling stations were outdoors, which mitigated the risk of spreading Covid-19 to some extent.

### General elections

The situation was considerably more complicated and problematic when it came to the general elections. The campaign period was extremely conflictual, and the security forces regularly harassed Bobi Wine and his supporters. For example, Wine was arrested on 18 November 2020 for allegedly breaching Covid-19 restrictions, and NUP supporters were subject to beatings and arbitrary arrests throughout the campaign period. Following Wine's arrest, mass protests in Kampala against his detention resulted in clashes with the security forces in which around 100 people died and 500 were injured (Human Rights Watch 2020).

Similar incidents continued throughout the campaign period, leading to an increasingly conflictual atmosphere. Most notably, on 2 December 2020 Wine announced that he would be temporarily suspending his campaign following clashes between the security forces and his supporters during which his car was shot at and members of his campaign team were injured. After resuming campaigning, Wine was detained again on 30 December 2020 after police dispersed a meeting he was speaking at with tear gas. He was then placed under a period of house arrest.

Alongside the constant harassment of Wine, the security forces consistently detained—and in some cases abducted—hundreds of opposition activists and supporters in raids on their homes and opposition rallies. In most of these cases it appears that due legal process was not followed and that correct documentation was not completed, such that the government has not even been able to confirm how many people are still being held or where. There is widespread concern that many of those detained may have been tortured and that some have been killed (Burke and Okiror 2021). Where Covid-19 is concerned, it is clear that the government's own protocols were not followed during this process, placing both those detained and members of the security forces at greater risk of contracting the virus.

In stark contrast to the treatment of the NUP, rallies organized by the NRM did not respect the SOPs but were not shut down (Schwikowski 2020). As a result, the CCEDU concluded that the 'electoral body failed to strike a balance between public safety, mitigation of health risks from Covid-19 and electoral freedoms and rights' (CCEDU 2021: 4).

The politicization of health protocols increased mistrust of the Electoral Commission, the security forces and government health authorities among opposition supporters. Therefore, when campaigning was halted in Kampala on 26 December 2020, and in 10 other areas notable for their large populations—Jinja, Kabarole, Kalungu, Kasese, Kazo, Luweero, Masaka, Mbarara, Tororo and Wakiso—official explanations that the prohibition was necessary due to rising Covid-19 numbers were disputed by opposition leaders and supporters. NUP leaders countered that the restriction was motivated by the fact that the opposition had proved to be particularly popular in these more urban areas—and that Bobi Wine had rallies planned in Kampala for the following week. Wine himself tweeted that: 'The dictatorship is in panic. They have been surprised by the massive enthusiasm and support we have received within all parts of the country. They just can't imagine what would happen if they allowed our people to meet in these areas' (Wine 2020).

Despite the focus on 'scientific' campaigns and the use of Covid-19 to justify decision making, no special provisions were made for voting in the light of the pandemic, bar requests to voters to maintain distancing, wear masks and use hand sanitizer. In other words, there was no attempt to allow vulnerable individuals to vote on a separate day, introduce postal voting or use new forms of technology. Instead, voting took place as usual, starting at 07:00 and closing at 16:00 (at which point, only those already present are allowed to vote), with mixed queues of voters lining up to cast their ballots manually, using pen and paper (Electoral Commission of Uganda 2020). Pregnant, disabled and particularly elderly voters were allowed to go to the front of the queue, as is standard practice in Uganda and not a new measure introduced in the light of Covid-19 (CCEDU 2021).

Moreover, as in the SIG elections, the SOPs were poorly observed on voting day. According to the Intergovernmental Authority on Development's Election Observation Mission, a surprising number of polling stations lacked hand washing facilities and hand sanitizers, and social distancing was not observed in the majority of polling stations (IGAD 2021). Worryingly, the CCEDU found that there was no social distancing in 99 per cent of the polling stations it observed, and that only 43 per cent had hand washing facilities with soap provided (CCEDU 2021). Again, the risk of Covid-19 transmission was mitigated to an extent by the fact that most polling stations were outdoors.

Ultimately, voter turnout was relatively low at 59.4 per cent, down from 67.6 per cent in 2016 (International IDEA n.d.). This appears to reflect public concern about the prospects for political violence, and a widespread belief that voting cannot change the government due to Museveni's refusal to accept defeat, rather than health concerns (Electoral Commission of Uganda 2021).

President Museveni was ultimately declared to have won the elections with 58 per cent of the vote, an outcome that was immediately rejected by Bobi Wine who alleged widespread electoral manipulation and rigging. Instances of repression and intimidation continued after the polls, along with continuing controversy over the fate of the hundreds of people still in detention or abducted by the security forces.

## 6. The impact of elections on Covid-19

Despite the limited compliance, both elections appear to have resulted in a relatively small increase in cases of Covid-19. Where the SIG elections are concerned, the increase was particularly minor. On 6 August 2020, when campaigning began, the number of cases per day stood at just 10, with a seven-day average of 11 (note that 'highs' and 'lows' refer to the seven-day average rather than the number of new cases per day, in order to even out the effect of weekends and delays in counting cases). By the final day of voting on 17 August, this had risen to 60 new cases and a seven-day average of 38. However, as 17 August was 11 days after the start of the campaign, and thus falls within the 14-day incubation period, it seems that this increase may not have all been due to campaigning, but to other factors.

An increase in cases is noticeable two weeks after the final day of voting, with 44 new cases and a seven-day average of 87. Moreover, the number of cases continued to increase until 23 September, when they peaked at 185 and a seven-day average of 241, before dropping off again. The correlation of this increase with the election date is strongly suggestive—although not conclusive proof—of a causal relationship, but there are a number of points worth noting. First, this is a relatively small increase and at no point in the month after the elections did the number of new cases exceed 500 a day. Second, the low number of voters in these elections combined with the fact that the number of cases may already have been rising suggest that this increase may not be wholly attributable to the elections. Moreover, August was the month in which the Lancet Commission identified Uganda as the best African country at containing Covid-19.

There was also an increase in cases around the general elections. When campaigning began on 9 November 2020, there were 171 new cases and a seven-day average of 229. This increased to a peak of 702 cases and a seven-day average of 698 on 13 December 2020. However, the number of cases subsequently declined and on the day of the general elections there were no new cases recorded and the seven-day average was just 144.

There are three features of this pattern that suggest the election led to a modest increase in the number of cases. First, having fallen since mid-September, the number of cases increased following the start of the general election campaign on 9 November 2020. Second, after the end of

the election period on 14 January 2021, the number of cases declined to levels only previously seen before the SIG elections in August. Third, the falls in numbers following 13 December 2020 and then again in mid-January 2021 are correlated with two of the most significant periods in which election campaigning was halted: Bobi Wine’s announcement that he was temporarily suspending his campaign on 2 December; and the decision by the Electoral Commission to suspend campaigning in Kampala and 10 highly populated districts on 26 December. This suggests that campaign activities resulted in higher transmission rates, which fell when campaign activities were halted.

However, there are also a number of points that are important to note in order to contextualize this finding. Even though the number of cases increased during the general elections, this only occurred during the campaign itself. There is no evidence that election day facilitated the spread of Covid-19. Indeed, the seven-day average on 2 February 2021, two and a half weeks later, was just 56. At the same time, an increase in new Covid-19 cases throughout December was to be expected due to the higher levels of socializing with friends and family around Christmas. Finally, at no point did the seven-day average exceed 1,000 cases a day, and for much of the campaign it did not exceed 500 a day.

It therefore seems reasonable to conclude that although elections in 2021 may have resulted in an increase in transmission, this increase was limited and driven by the campaign period rather than polling day (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. Covid-19 cases in Uganda with key election dates



Source: Johns Hopkins University, <[https://www.google.com/search?q=johns+hopkins+university+covid+dashboard&rlz=1C1GCEA\\_enSE883SE883&coq=Johns+Hopkins+University+covid+dashboard&aqs=chrome.0.0i19j0i19i22i30.6358j0j4&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8](https://www.google.com/search?q=johns+hopkins+university+covid+dashboard&rlz=1C1GCEA_enSE883SE883&coq=Johns+Hopkins+University+covid+dashboard&aqs=chrome.0.0i19j0i19i22i30.6358j0j4&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8)>, accessed 15 June 2021.

## 7. Conclusions

The Ugandan general elections of 2021 represent a clear case in which Covid-19 restrictions were manipulated for political ends. While keeping Covid-19 under control is a laudable aim, the inconsistent application of Covid-19 protocols clearly advantaged the ruling party, leading to considerable controversy. We lack the evidence to say for sure whether this had a direct impact on compliance, but the widespread perception that some restrictions were motivated by political rather than health reasons may have undermined discipline, especially among opposition supporters. Moreover, the heavy-handed security response to opposition

meetings and protests, which included detaining a large number of opposition supporters with little respect for social distancing measures, probably contributed to the spread of the disease.

Although Uganda has become known for its stringent Covid-19 restrictions, and the quick introduction of curfew and social distancing measures played an important role in preventing the spread of the disease from March onwards, there was poor enforcement of and compliance with the SOPs during both the SIG elections and the general elections. This ranged from the ruling party breaching the 200-person limit for political meetings, to opposition supporters taking part in mass protests and the failure of many individuals to wear masks or respect the need for social distancing. Nonetheless, the increase in the number of cases of Covid-19 around the elections was relatively small and did not lead to an uncontrollable wave of infections or place undue pressure on the health system.

## References

- Afrobarometer, 'Uganda National Survey Data', <<https://afrobarometer.org/countries/uganda-0>>, accessed 15 June 2021
- Ahimbisibwe, P. and Ezaruku, F. D., 'New voter registration will breed election chaos, EC boss', *Daily Monitor*, 3 March 2020, <<https://www.monitor.co.ug/uganda/news/national/new-voter-registration-will-breed-election-chaos-ec-boss-1878450>>, accessed 15 June 2021
- BBC, 'Uganda: where security forces may be more deadly than coronavirus', 23 July 2020, <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-53450850>>, accessed 15 June 2021
- Burke, J. and Okiror, S., "It was a torture chamber": Ugandans abducted in vicious crackdown', *The Guardian*, 22 April 2021, <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/apr/22/torture-abducted-uganda-crackdown-museveni>>, accessed 15 June 2021
- Cheeseman, N., Lynch, G. and Willis, J., *The Moral Economy of Elections in Africa: Democracy, Voting and Virtue* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), <<https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108265126>>
- Citizens' Coalition for Electoral Democracy in Uganda (CCEDU), *Beyond 2021: Positively Influencing Uganda's Democracy and Elections* (CCEDU: Kampala, 2021)
- , 'Standard operating procedures were ignored in PWD and youth elections', 18 August 2020, <<https://www.ccedu.org.ug/index.php/publications/media-center/news-highlights-events/590-standard-operating-procedures-were-ignored-in-pwd-and-youth-elections>>, accessed 15 June 2021
- Collaboration on International ICT Policy for East and Southern Africa (CIPESA), 'Technology and elections in Uganda: New policy brief highlights digital rights', 13 January 2021, <<https://www.apc.org/es/node/37125>>, accessed 15 June 2021



- Election Commission of Uganda, 'Resumption of Electoral Activities under the Revised Roadmap for 2020/2021 General Elections', 2020, <<https://www.ec.or.ug/news/resumption-electoral-activities-under-revised-roadmap-20202021-general-elections>>, accessed 15 June 2021
- , Presidential Elections 2021: Final Results, 2021, <[https://www.ec.or.ug/ecresults/2021/Summary\\_PRESIDENT\\_FINAL\\_2021.pdf](https://www.ec.or.ug/ecresults/2021/Summary_PRESIDENT_FINAL_2021.pdf)>, accessed 15 June 2021
- , 'Standard Operating Procedures for the Conduct of Activities for Elections of Special Interest Groups from Village to District Level Country-Wide, 2020', 24 July 2020, <<https://www.ec.or.ug/sites/default/files/press/SOPs%20for%20SIGs%20Elections%202020.pdf>>, accessed 15 June 2021
- Fisher, J., 'The limits—and limiters—of external influence: Donors, the Ugandan Electoral Commission and the 2011 elections', *Journal of Eastern African Studies*, 7/3 (2013), pp. 471–91, <<https://doi.org/10.1080/17531055.2013.809206>>
- Government of Uganda, The Political Parties and Organisations (Conduct of Meetings and Elections) Regulations, 2020, <<http://parliamentwatch.ug/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/The-Political-Parties-and-Organisations-Conduct-of-Meetings-and-Elections-Regulations-2020.pdf>>, accessed 15 June 2021
- Human Rights Watch, 'Uganda: Authorities weaponize Covid-19 for repression', 20 November 2020, <<https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/11/20/uganda-authorities-weaponize-covid-19-repression>>, accessed 15 June 2021
- ICT Ministry, Uganda, 'Call to Embrace the Scientific Campaign Road Map', 21 June 2020, <<https://ict.go.ug/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Press-Statement-on-Scientific-Electoctions-Road-Map.pdf>>, accessed 15 June 2021
- Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), 'Short-Term Election Observation Mission to the General Elections in the Republic of Uganda' Preliminary Report, 16 January 2021, <[https://igad.int/attachments/article/2606/01\\_16\\_21\\_EOM\\_Report%20.pdf](https://igad.int/attachments/article/2606/01_16_21_EOM_Report%20.pdf)>, p. 6, accessed 15 June 2021
- International IDEA, Voter Turnout Database, [n.d.], <<https://www.idea.int/data-tools/country-view/293/40>>, accessed 15 June 2021
- The Independent*, 'Digital campaign cannot deliver free and fair election, NGOs', 15 July 2020, <<https://www.independent.co.ug/digital-campaign-cannot-deliver-free-and-fair-election-ngos/>>, accessed 15 June 2021
- Isilow, H., 'COVID-19 casts shadow on Uganda's election campaigns: Uganda will hold general elections on Jan. 14, 2021', AA News, 13 November 2020, <<https://www.aa.com.tr/en/africa/covid-19-casts-shadow-on-uganda-s-election-campaigns/2042257>>, accessed 15 June 2021
- Kasfir, N., "'African ambiguities": No-party democracy in Uganda', *Journal of Democracy*, 9/2 (1998), pp. 49–61, <<https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.1998.0029>>
- Kazibwe, K., 'EC asks for more shs54bn as it releases revised 2021 roadmap', Nile Post, 16 June 2020, <<https://nilepost.co.ug/2020/06/16/ec-asks-for-more-shs54bn-as-it-releases-revised-2021-roadmap/>>, accessed 15 June 2021



- Lancet Commission, 'Data and statistics', [n.d.], <<https://covid19commission.org/data-and-statistics>>, accessed 15 June 2021
- Lumu, I., 'Covid-19 response in sub-Saharan Africa: Lessons from Uganda', *Disaster Medicine and Public Health Preparedness*, 14/3 (2020), pp. e46–e48, <<https://doi.org/10.1017/dmp.2020.248>>
- Mazrui, A. A., 'Leadership in Africa: Obote of Uganda', *International Journal*, 25/3 (1973), pp. 538–64
- Mumbere, D., 'Inside Uganda's proposed "scientific election"', Africa News, 24 June 2020, <<https://www.africanews.com/2020/06/24/inside-ugandas-proposed-scientific-election-analysis/>>, accessed 15 June 2021
- Nyeko, O., 'Ugandans trying to get home forced to pay for Covid-19 quarantine', Human Rights Watch, 19 March 2020, <<https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/03/19/ugandans-trying-get-home-forced-pay-covid-19-quarantine>>, accessed 15 June 2021
- Osiebe, G., 'The ghetto president and presidential challenger in Uganda', *Africa Spectrum*, 55/1 (2020), pp. 86–99, <<https://doi.org/10.1177/0002039720916085>>
- Ratcliffe, R. and Okiror, S., 'Millions of Ugandans quit internet services as social media tax takes effect', *The Guardian*, 27 February 2019, <<https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2019/feb/27/millions-of-ugandans-quit-internet-after-introduction-of-social-media-tax-free-speech>>, accessed 15 June 2021
- Schwikowski, M., 'Uganda's unequal political campaigns during Covid-19 times', Deutsche Welle, 8 August 2020, <<https://www.dw.com/en/ugandas-unequal-political-campaigns-during-covid-19-times/a-54488099>>, accessed 15 June 2021
- Tripp, A. M., *Museveni's Uganda: Paradoxes of Power in a Hybrid Regime* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2010)
- Waswa, S., 'Covid19: Electoral Commission postpones elections', The Chimp Report, 3 April 2020, <<https://chimpreports.com/covid19-electoral-commission-postpones-elections/>>, accessed 15 June 2021
- Willis, J., Lynch, G. and Cheeseman, N., "'A valid electoral exercise'? Uganda's 1980 elections and the observers' dilemma', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 59/1 (2017), pp. 211–38, <<https://doi.org/10.1017/S001041751600058X>>
- Wine, B., Twitter, 26 December 2020, <<https://twitter.com/hebobiwine/status/1342819339095965701>>, accessed 15 June 2021

## About the author

**Nic Cheeseman** is Professor of Democracy at the University of Birmingham and was formerly the Director of the African Studies Centre at Oxford University. He mainly works on democracy, elections and development and has conducted in-country research in a range of African countries including Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya, Malawi, Nigeria, Uganda, Zambia and Zimbabwe, but has also published on Latin America and post-communist Europe.

### Contributors

**Alistair Clark**, Reader in Politics at the University of Newcastle, UK.

**Toby S. James**, Professor of Politics and Public Policy at the University of East Anglia, UK.

**Erik Asplund**, Programme Officer in the Electoral Processes Programme, International IDEA.

## About International IDEA

The International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA) is an intergovernmental organization with the mission to advance democracy worldwide, as a universal human aspiration and enabler of sustainable development. We do this by supporting the building, strengthening and safeguarding of democratic political institutions and processes at all levels. Our vision is a world in which democratic processes, actors and institutions are inclusive and accountable and deliver sustainable development to all.

### What do we do?

In our work we focus on three main impact areas: electoral processes; constitution-building processes; and political participation and representation. The themes of gender and inclusion, conflict sensitivity and sustainable development are mainstreamed across all our areas of work.

International IDEA provides analyses of global and regional democratic trends; produces comparative knowledge on democratic practices; offers technical assistance and capacity-building on reform to actors engaged in democratic processes; and convenes dialogue on issues relevant to the public debate on democracy and democracy building.

### Where do we work?

Our headquarters are located in Stockholm, and we have regional and country offices in Africa, Asia and the Pacific, Europe, and Latin America and the Caribbean. International IDEA is a Permanent Observer to the United Nations and is accredited to European Union institutions.

<<https://www.idea.int>>