

# Political freedom at risk? Almost half of Ugandans fear intimidation and violence during elections

**Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 866 | Dorah Babirye**

## Summary

During the 2021 national election, Uganda witnessed the highest level of election-related violence in its recent history. Protests erupted in many parts of the country after the arrest of presidential candidate Robert Kyagulanyi, popularly known as Bobi Wine, for allegedly flouting COVID-19 regulations (Gillian, 2021; Burke & Okiror, 2020). A crackdown by security forces resulted in dozens of people being killed, wounded, or arrested, while opposition candidates as well as their campaign teams were detained (Dahir, 2020; Atuhaire, 2020; Al Jazeera, 2020). In just two days in mid-November 2020, 54 deaths were recorded, mostly in the capital (Human Rights Watch, 2021). The events shook the country and unleashed a torrent of repression against opposition forces and the media.

Various solutions to the problem of electoral violence have been suggested and tried. In 2017, the Inter-Party Organization for Dialogue was established to foster and facilitate the mitigation and resolution of conflict between political parties in Parliament without resorting to undemocratic or violent means, but its future has been called into question (Independent, 2022). Some scholars suggest that voter education could help prevent electoral violence (Kayemba, Luttaguza, Kiberu, & Kibira, 2020). Since the 2021 election, civil society has been involved in attempting to resolve political violence. One example is Ugandans for Peace, an initiative that involves church leaders, youth representatives, opinion leaders, politicians, *boda boda* (motorcycle taxi) riders, and other stakeholders (Opio, 2024).

Although Uganda returned to a multiparty political dispensation in 2005, the political space has been extremely uneven. Critics say President Yoweri Museveni's National Resistance Movement (NRM) has maintained its hegemony through control of various state levers, allowing increasingly arbitrary state attacks on opposition supporters, especially during national elections (Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, 2010; Human Rights Watch, 2021).

In a special Afrobarometer survey ahead of Uganda's 2021 election, most citizens said they feel free to say what they want, to join any political organisation, and to vote without being pressured.

But a growing majority also said that people have to be cautious when discussing politics, and almost half expressed fear of election-related intimidation and violence.

Most Ugandans considered it likely that violence would erupt after the 2021 election results were announced, though they also thought security agents would prevent the violence from becoming widespread. Majorities said that competition among political parties often leads to violent conflict and that political parties and candidates frequently use violence.

## Afrobarometer surveys

Afrobarometer is a pan-African, non-partisan survey research network that provides reliable data on African experiences and evaluations of democracy, governance, and quality of life. Nine survey rounds in up to 42 countries have been completed since 1999. Round 10 survey

were launched in January 2024. Afrobarometer's national partners conduct face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice.

With financial support from the Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands in Uganda, the Afrobarometer team in Uganda, led by Hatchile Consult Ltd., interviewed 2,400 adult Ugandans between 22 December 2020 and 7 January 2021 in 300 enumeration areas across 110 districts. A sample of this size yields country-level results with a margin of error of +/-2 percentage points at a 95% confidence level. This was the 11th Afrobarometer survey in Uganda since 1999.

## Key findings

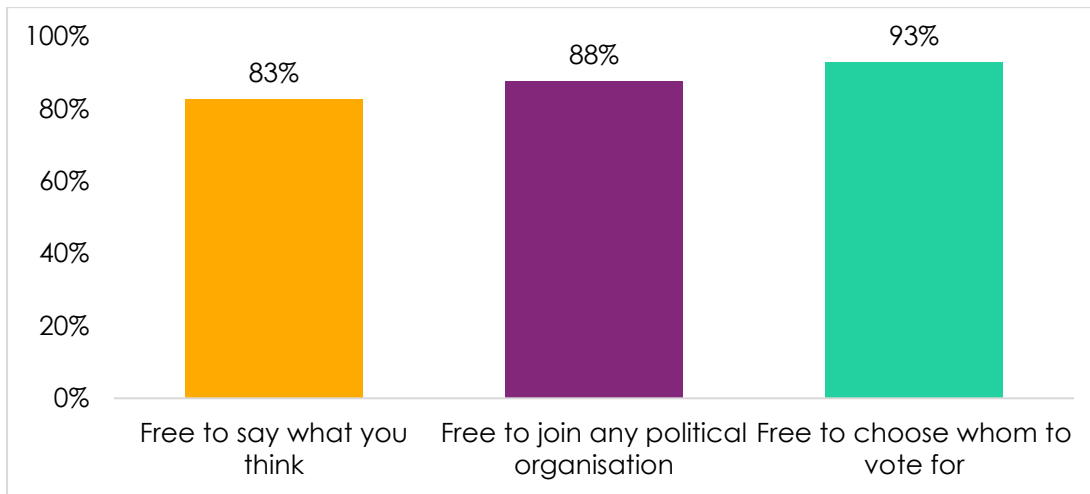
- Overwhelming majorities of Ugandans said they feel “somewhat free” or “completely free” to say what they want (83%), to join any political organisation (88%), and to vote for the person of their choice without being pressured (93%).
  - But more than two-thirds (68%) said people have to be careful about what they say about politics, a 21-percentage-point increase over the past two decades.
- Ahead of the 2021 election, half (51%) of citizens said they worried about becoming victims of electoral intimidation or violence.
  - Fears of intimidation or violence were highest in the Central region (60%) and among opposition supporters (56%) and those expressing no party affiliation (59%).
  - As of 2022, nearly half (47%) of respondents said they feared becoming victims of political intimidation and violence during elections, an 18-percentage-point increase compared to 2019.
- Three-fourths (76%) of survey participants said they expected violence to erupt after the announcement of the 2021 election results. But nearly the same proportion (73%) said they believed that security agents would likely prevent the violence from becoming widespread.
- Opposition party supporters or leaders are regarded as the most likely perpetrators of violence and intimidation during elections, cited by 41% of respondents, followed by ruling party supporters or leaders (29%).
- Six in 10 citizens (62%) said that competition among political parties “often” or “always” leads to violent conflict, and more than half (51%) said political parties or candidates frequently use violence.

## Freedom of speech, association, and vote choice

Findings from Afrobarometer's pre-election survey, completed in early 2021, show that Ugandans overwhelmingly said they feel free to vote for the person of their choice (93%), to join any political organisation (88%), and to say what they think (83%) (Figure 1).

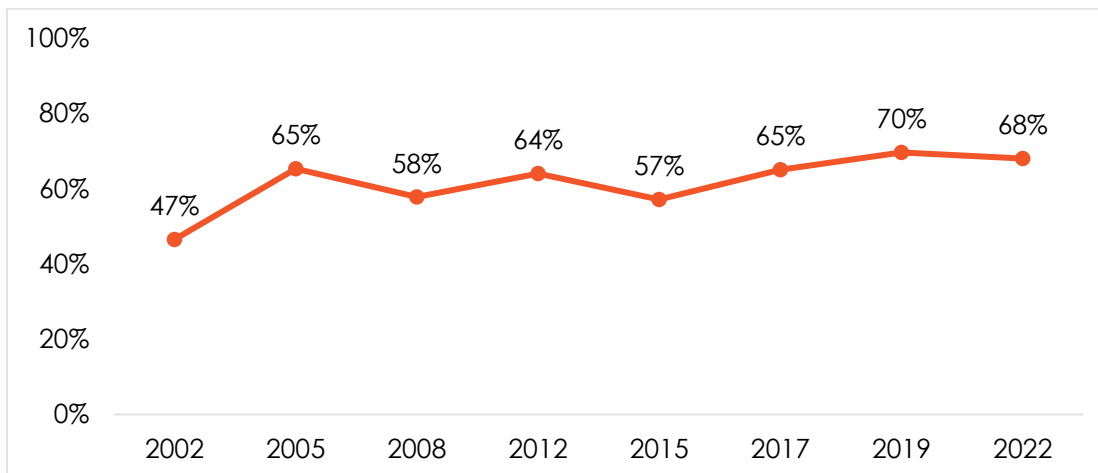
However, nearly seven in 10 citizens (68%) stated that people “often” or “always” have to be careful about what they say about politics (Figure 2). Caution about political speech was up by 21 percentage points over the previous two decades.

**Figure 1: Freedom of speech, association, and vote choice | Uganda | 2021**



**Respondents were asked:** *In this country, how free are you: To say what you think? To join any political organisation you want? To choose who to vote for without feeling pressured? (% who said "somewhat free" or "completely free")*

**Figure 2: Have to be careful of what you say about politics | Uganda | 2002-2022**



**Respondents were asked:** *In your opinion, how often, in this country, do people have to be careful of what they say about politics? (% who said "often" or "always")*

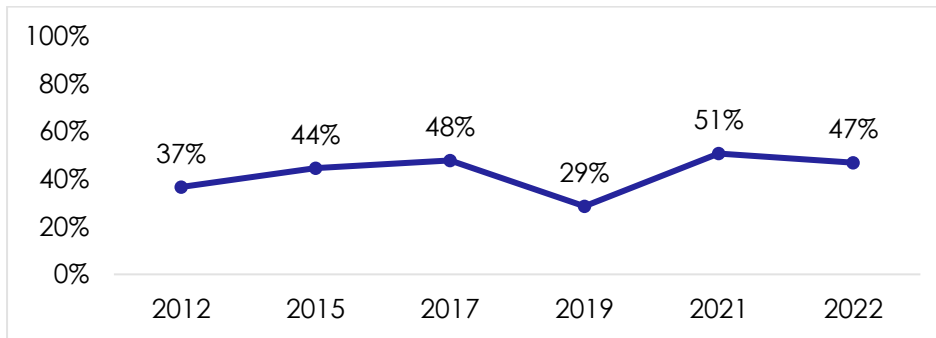
### Expectations of political intimidation or violence

Almost half (47%) of Ugandan citizens said they feared "somewhat" or "a lot" becoming victims of political intimidation and violence during the election campaign (Figure 3). This reflects a substantial rise from the 29% who reported fearing electoral violence in 2019, but it is in keeping with the long-term trend.

The 2021 pre-election survey reveals that fear of political intimidation or violence was highest among Ugandans in the Central region (60%), home to the capital, Kampala, and lowest in the Western region (35%) (Figure 4). Fear was more prevalent among supporters of opposition political parties (56%) and respondents expressing no party affiliation (59%) than among those close to the NRM (43%). Women were 6 percentage points more likely than men to

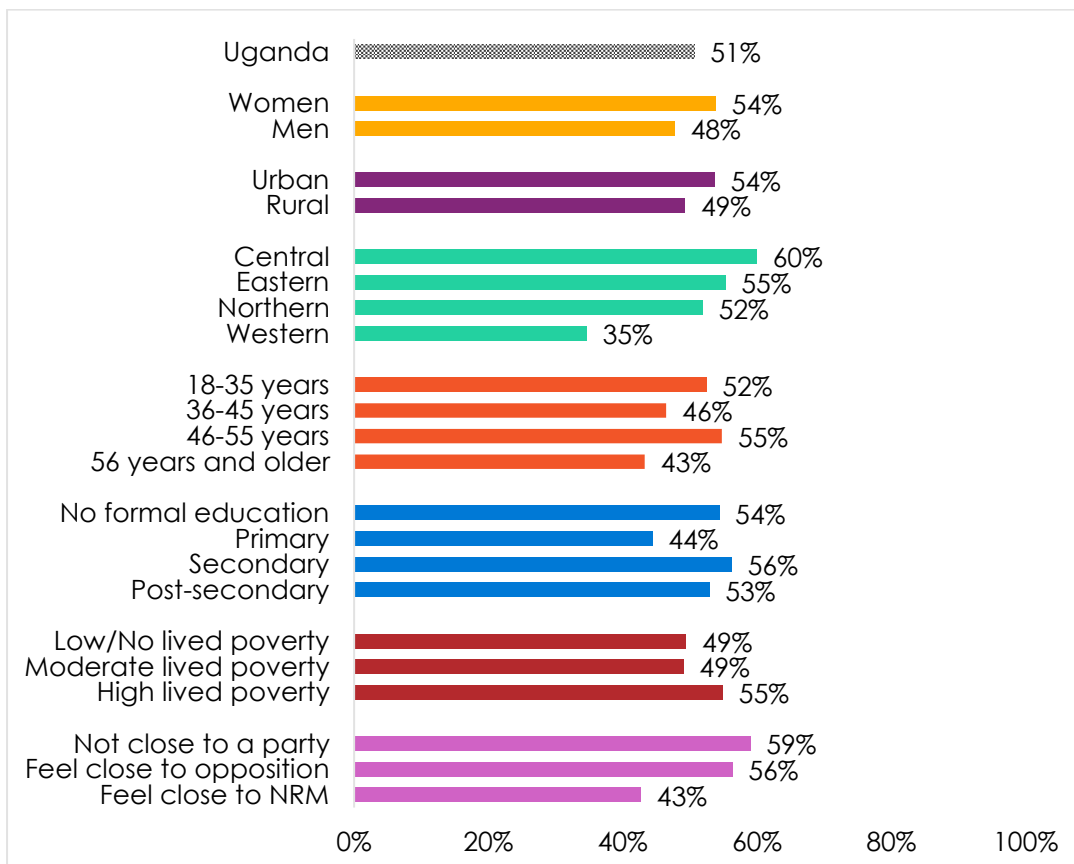
express fear of violence (54% vs. 48%). An identical gap separates respondents experiencing high levels of lived poverty<sup>1</sup> and their better-off counterparts (55% vs. 49%).

**Figure 3: Fear of political intimidation or violence | Uganda | 2012-2022**



**Respondents were asked:** During the current national election campaign, how much do you personally fear becoming a victim of political intimidation or violence? (% who said “somewhat” or “a lot”)

**Figure 4: Fear of political intimidation or violence | by demographic group | Uganda | 2021**

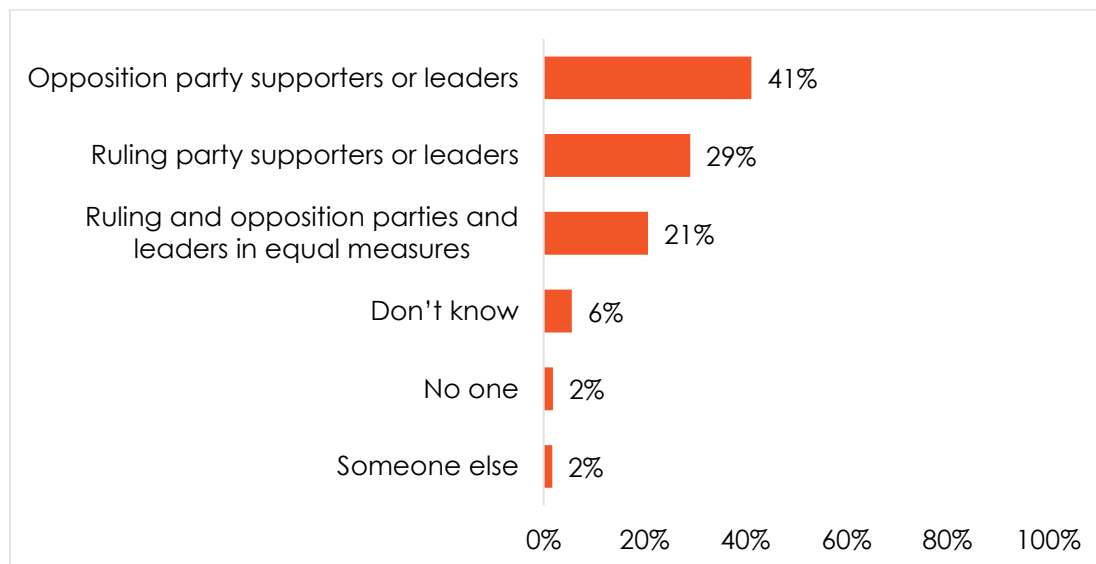


**Respondents were asked:** During the current election campaign, how much do you personally fear becoming a victim of political intimidation or violence? (% who said “somewhat” or “a lot”)

<sup>1</sup> Afrobarometer’s Lived Poverty Index (LPI) measures respondents’ levels of material deprivation by asking how often they or their families went without basic necessities (enough food, enough water, medical care, enough cooking fuel, and a cash income) during the past year. For more on lived poverty, see Mattes and Patel (2022).

Asked who they think are the most likely perpetrators of political intimidation, two-fifths (41%) of Ugandans cited opposition parties or leaders, followed by ruling party supporters or leaders (identified by 29% of respondents) (Figure 5). A further one-fifth (21%) said ruling and opposition parties and leaders are equally likely to use violent and intimidating tactics.

**Figure 5: Likely perpetrators of violence and intimidation | Uganda | 2021**

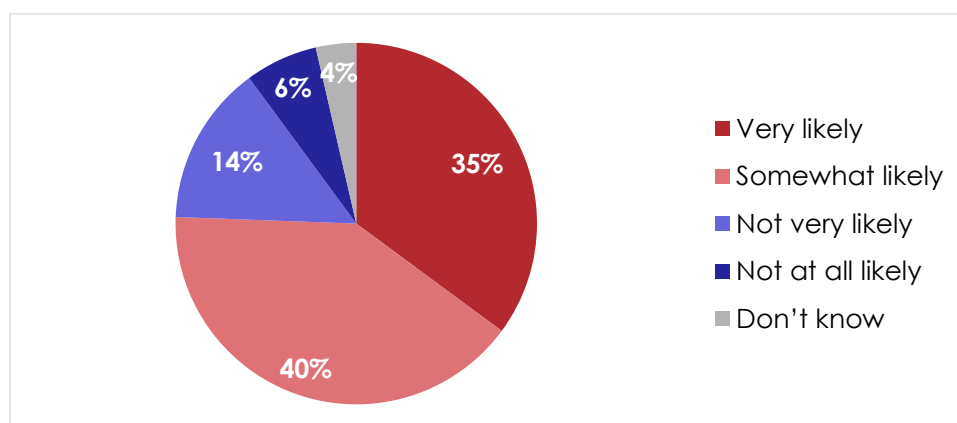


**Respondents were asked:** In your opinion, who between the ruling party and opposition parties are the most likely perpetrators of violence and intimidation in the ongoing election campaign for the 2021 general elections?

Fully three-fourths (76%) of respondents said they expected some level of violence following the announcement of election results (Figure 6). This widespread expectation highlights serious concerns about the political environment in Uganda and the potential risks associated with the electoral process.

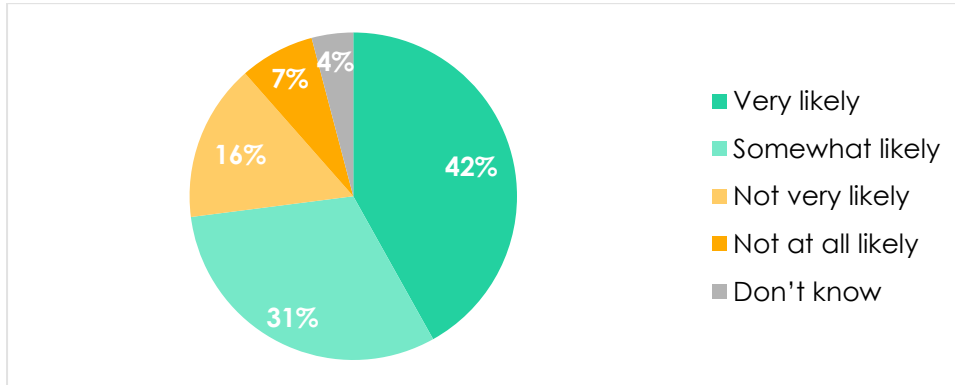
But a similar share of respondents believed that security forces were “very likely” (42%) or “somewhat likely” (31%) to prevent such outbreaks of violence from becoming widespread (Figure 7). Nearly one-fourth (23%) expressed scepticism about the effectiveness of security.

**Figure 6: Likelihood of violence after election results | Uganda | 2021**



**Respondents were asked:** In your view, how likely is it that there will be violence after the announcement of election results?

**Figure 7: Likelihood of security forces preventing large-scale violence | Uganda | 2021**



**Respondents were asked:** *In your view, how likely is it that Uganda's security agencies will be able to prevent a large-scale outbreak of violence?*

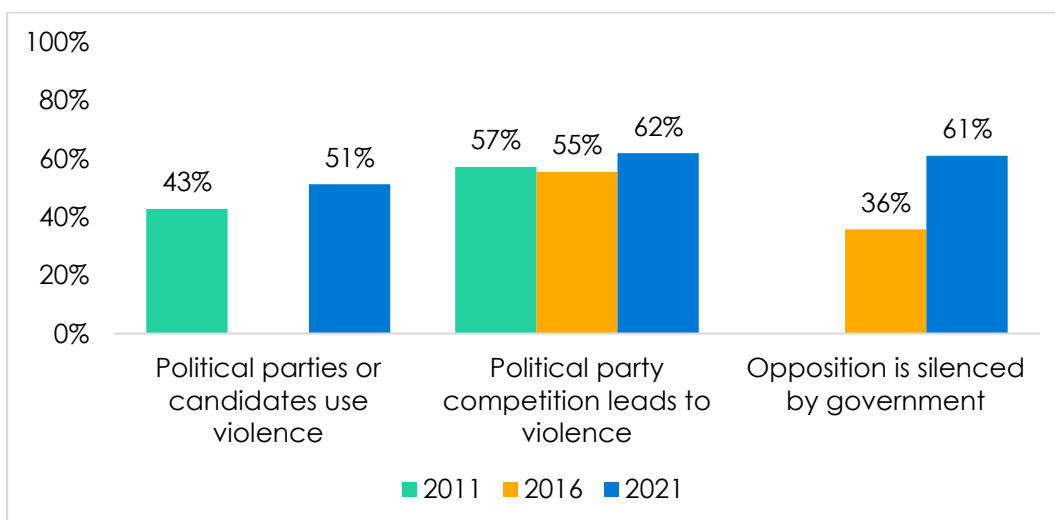
### Political party contestation

Afrobarometer survey participants are regularly questioned on their views about violence in relation to multiparty competition. Findings show that Ugandans increasingly associate political party competition with violence: In 2021, 62% of citizens said such competition “often” or “always” leads to violent conflict, a rise of 7 percentage points compared to 2016 (Figure 8).

In addition, half of Ugandans (51%) said political parties or candidates “often” or “always” use violence, an 8-point increase compared to 2011.

A growing share of respondents also reported that opposition parties or their supporters are silenced by the government: In 2021, 61% said this happens “often” or “always, a 25-point increase compared to 2016.

**Figure 8: Political party contestation | Uganda | 2011-2021**



**Respondents were asked:** *How often, in this country:*  
*Do political parties or candidates use violence?*  
*Does competition between political parties' lead to violent conflicts?*  
*Are opposition parties or their supporters silenced by the government?*  
 (% who said “often” or “always”)

## Conclusion

Afrobarometer survey results show that ahead of the most recent national election, most Ugandans felt free to vote as they please, to join political organisations, and to speak their minds – except when discussing politics, a topic on which caution was advised.

Moreover, almost half of Ugandans – and a majority of opposition supporters – worried about becoming victims of election-related violence. Majorities considered political party contestation a likely trigger for violent conflict and expected that the announcement of election results would be followed by violence.

Despite initiatives to prevent and mitigate political violence, the rise in fear of electoral violence underscores the need for more comprehensive measures that enhance citizens' sense of safety without compromising their freedom of speech and expression in political discourse. Ensuring that Ugandans can engage in the democratic process without fear is essential for fostering a stable and inclusive political environment.

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Afrobarometer, a nonprofit corporation with headquarters in Ghana, is a pan-African, non-partisan research network. Regional coordination of national partners in about 35 countries is provided by the Ghana Center for Democratic Development (CDD-Ghana), the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation (IJR) in South Africa, and the Institute for Development Studies (IDS) at the University of Nairobi in Kenya. Michigan State University, the University of Cape Town, and the University of Malawi provide technical support to the network.

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