

# Ugandans fear electoral violence, say election officials and security agents should be liable for offences on their watch

**Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 1076 | Ssenkumba Muhammad**

## Summary

The Uganda Police Force (UPF) is mandated to maintain peace and order during elections, ensure the safety of voters and candidates, safeguard electoral materials, and oversee the tallying of results (Parliament of Uganda, 2005a). The Uganda People's Defence Forces (UPDF) Act provides a legal basis for military officers to serve civil authorities in aid of the public interest, such as to deter violence and maintain law and order, including during elections (Parliament of Uganda, 2005b).

President Yoweri Museveni has defended the deployment of military personnel during previous elections, arguing that the UPDF has been crucial in preventing terrorist attacks, "crushing insurgencies," and dealing with "the indiscipline of some opposition groups" (Ajuna, 2025; Uganda Broadcasting Corporation, 2025).

However, media reports, civil society organisations, independent analysts, and human-rights activists have expressed concerns that security forces have repeatedly broken the law and violated human rights in connection with elections. Accusations have included the killing of unarmed civilians, torture, kidnapping, arbitrary arrests, detention without charge, voter intimidation, and the suppression of opposition rallies (Amnesty International, 2015; Human Rights Watch, 2016; Pan-African Human Rights Defenders Network, 2022; Robert F. Kennedy Human Rights, 2024; U.S. Department of State, 2022; Bareebe & Ashaba, 2025; Draku, 2025; Freedom House, 2021). Legal experts have called for reforms to clarify the extent and limits of military officers' powers during elections (Matovu, 2024).

Perceptions that security forces operate with impunity risk eroding public trust in state institutions and the electoral process: Civic space may narrow, and the electoral environment may be characterised by fear and disillusionment. Recent initiatives such as human-rights training for police officers ahead of the 2026 elections indicate institutional recognition of the importance of professionalism, impartiality, and accountability in policing during electoral periods (Edema, 2025).

An Afrobarometer survey conducted in January 2025 sheds light on citizens' perceptions of security forces and their role in Uganda's elections.

Almost three-fourths of citizens say they trust the military, while a slimmer majority express confidence in the police. Trust levels for both institutions decline sharply as respondents' educational attainment rises, and are lower among opposition supporters than supporters of the ruling National Resistance Movement (NRM).

While most Ugandans view severe abuses by security forces as rare in their communities, significant minorities report frequent use of excessive force, arbitrary arrests, disappearances

or killings, and use of military trials for civilian defendants. In 2022, a majority of citizens said police officers “often” or “always” use excessive force when dealing with protesters.

Concern about becoming a victim of electoral violence is widespread. One-fourth of Ugandans say security agents are primarily to blame for electoral violence, and one in 10 think stopping the deployment of soldiers during elections is the top election-related priority ahead of the 2026 contest.

Amid these mixed perceptions, there is strong public backing for holding electoral officials and security personnel personally accountable for offences committed on their watch.

## 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. Ten survey rounds in up to 45 countries have been completed since 1999. Round 10 surveys (2024/2025) cover 38 countries. Afrobarometer’s national partners conduct face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent’s choice.

The Afrobarometer team in Uganda, led by Hatchile Consult Ltd., interviewed a nationally representative sample of 3,000 adult Ugandans in January 2025. A sample of this size yields country-level results with a margin of error of +/-1.8 percentage points at a 95% confidence level. This was the 14<sup>th</sup> Afrobarometer survey conducted in Uganda.

## Key findings

- While most Ugandans see a variety of abuses as rare or non-existent in their communities, significant minorities say that security forces “often” or “always” use brutal force (30%) and arbitrarily arrest or detain people (25%).
  - About one in five (18%) say disappearances or arbitrary killings are frequent, and 14% report that people accused of crimes are often tried in military court.
  - In 2022, a majority (57%) of citizens said police “often” or “always” use excessive force against protesters.
- Citizens’ trust in the police and the military has steadily improved since hitting low points in 2019, rising to 59% and 73%, respectively, who say they trust the institutions “somewhat” or “a lot.”
  - The UPDF has consistently enjoyed higher levels of public trust than the UPF over the past decade.
  - Confidence in both institutions declines sharply with a rise in citizens’ educational attainment, while opposition supporters are significantly less trusting than NRM supporters.
- Six in 10 citizens (60%) say they fear political intimidation and violence during election campaigns at least “somewhat,” including 45% who fear them “a lot.”
  - Fear is most prevalent among residents of the Central Region (80%) and opposition supporters (69%).
- When asked who the main perpetrators of political intimidation or violence during election campaigns are, respondents most often cite opposition-party supporters or leaders (35%). But one-quarter (26%) say security personnel are to blame.
- An overwhelming majority (86%) say that electoral officials and security agents should be held personally accountable for any wrongdoing that occurs on their watch.

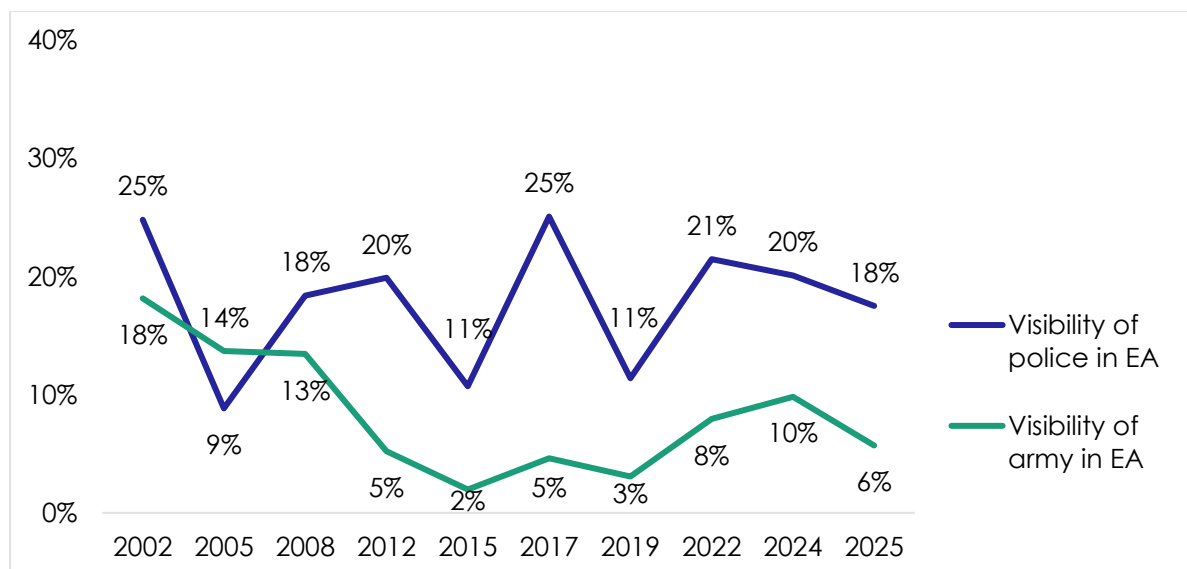
- One in 10 Ugandans (11%) say their top election-related priority is stopping the deployment of military forces during elections.

### Visibility of security forces

One factor that may shape citizens' perceptions of safety and public order is the visibility of security forces in their communities. Afrobarometer field teams routinely record on-the-ground observations in each sampled enumeration area (EA) regarding the presence of police officers and soldiers. Because these EAs are selected to represent the national population,<sup>1</sup> these observations provide reliable indicators of the extent to which state security forces are deployed across the country.

The visibility of the police in sampled communities has fluctuated considerably since 2002, stabilising at approximately one-fifth of EAs in recent years (18% in 2025) (Figure 1). Soldiers or army vehicles were recorded in 6% of EAs; except for 2005, the army has consistently maintained less of a presence than the police, dropping as low as 2% of EAs in 2015.

**Figure 1: Visibility of security forces | Uganda | 2002-2025**



**Respondents were asked:** In the enumeration area, did you (or any of your colleagues) see: Any police officers or police vehicles? Any soldiers or army vehicles?

### Security forces overstepping the law

Citizens' perceptions of security forces' behaviour are important in gauging their legitimacy. This dispatch explores views on whether security forces respect legal boundaries.

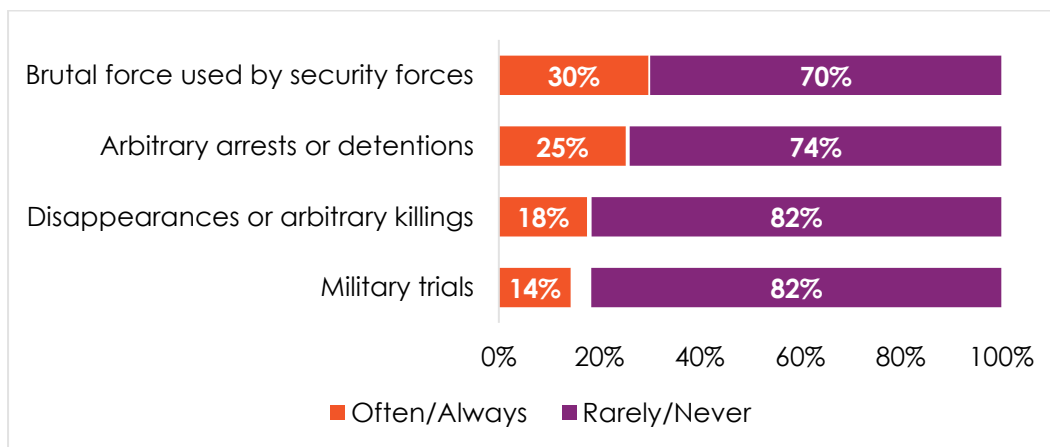
Asked about four types of possible abuses by security forces, large majorities of Ugandans say they are "rarely" or "never" experienced in their communities (Figure 2). Even so, significant minorities report that security forces "often" or "always" use brutal force (30%) and arbitrarily arrest or detain people (25%). About one in five (18%) say disappearances or

<sup>1</sup> Afrobarometer samples are based on a selection of EAs drawn randomly from the national census frame. Eight interviews are conducted in each selected EA, so interview teams usually visit about 150 EAs (for surveys with n=1,200). In each EA, the team records the presence or absence of basic services (such as electricity supply) and infrastructure (such as schools). Because of the smaller sample sizes, the margin of error on the reported figures is higher than for findings captured in individual interviews.

arbitrary killings are frequent, and 14% report that people accused of crimes are often tried in military court.

Military courts are special tribunals established under the UPDF Act to try members of the armed forces for offences under military law. Human-rights organisations allege that these courts have regularly overstepped their mandate by prosecuting civilians, particularly opposition supporters, in politically sensitive cases. According to Amnesty International, more than 1,000 civilians have been prosecuted in military courts since 2002, including opposition leaders Kizza Besigye and Robert Kyagulanyi, popularly known as Bobi Wine (Chagutah, 2025). In June 2025, the president signed a law allowing civilians to be tried in military courts after a previous attempt was ruled unconstitutional by the Supreme Court in January (Ibrahim, 2025).

**Figure 2: Perceived security-force abuses | Uganda | 2025**

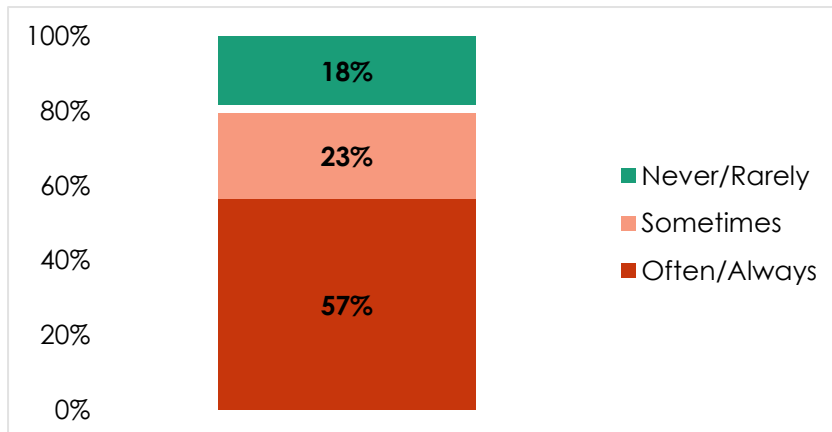


**Respondents were asked:** How often, if at all, do the following occur in your community:

- The security forces use brutal force against citizens?
- People are arbitrarily arrested or detained?
- People disappear or are arbitrarily killed?
- People accused of crimes are tried in military court

In 2022, four-fifths (80%) of Ugandans said police use excessive force during protests at least “sometimes,” including 57% who said they do so “often” or “always” (Figure 3).

**Figure 3: How often do police use excessive force during protests? | Uganda | 2022**

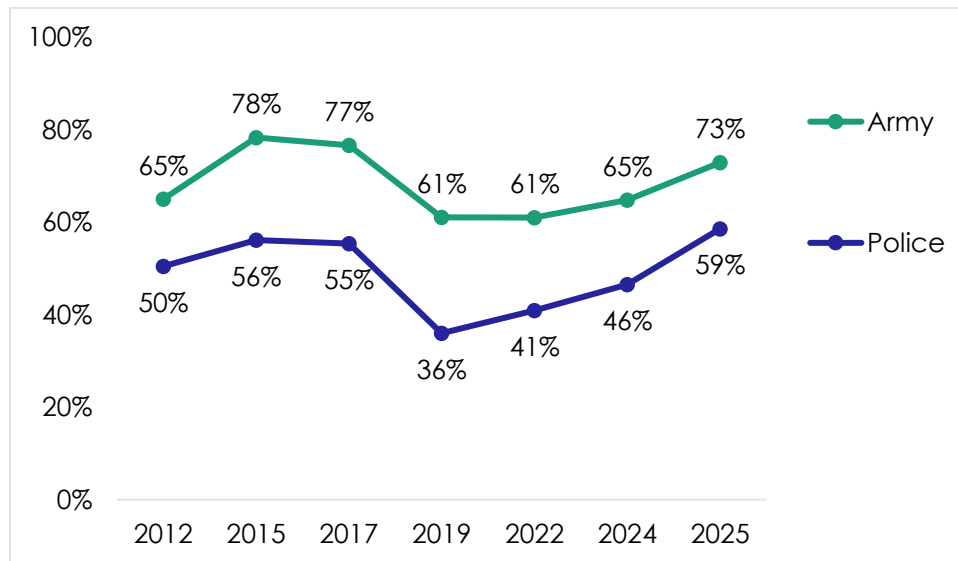


**Respondents were asked:** In your opinion, how often do the police in Uganda use excessive force in managing protests or demonstrations?

## Trust in security forces

Public trust in the police and the army has fluctuated over time, with the army consistently enjoying higher citizen confidence. After dips in 2019, the share of respondents who say they trust the institutions “somewhat” or “a lot” gradually recovered to roughly the levels seen in the mid-2010s, reaching 59% for the police and 73% for the army (Figure 4).

**Figure 4: Trust in the police and the army | Uganda | 2012-2025**



**Respondents were asked:** How much do you trust each of the following, or haven't you heard enough about them to say: The police? The Uganda People's Defence Forces or UPDF? (% who say trust "somewhat" or "a lot")

The military enjoys majority-level trust across most key demographic groups (Figure 5). One exception is supporters of opposition political parties (49%, compared to 82% among NRM adherents).

More women (63%) than men (54%) express trust in the police, while the reverse is true for the army (70% vs. 76%). Rural residents are more trusting than their urban counterparts of both security forces.

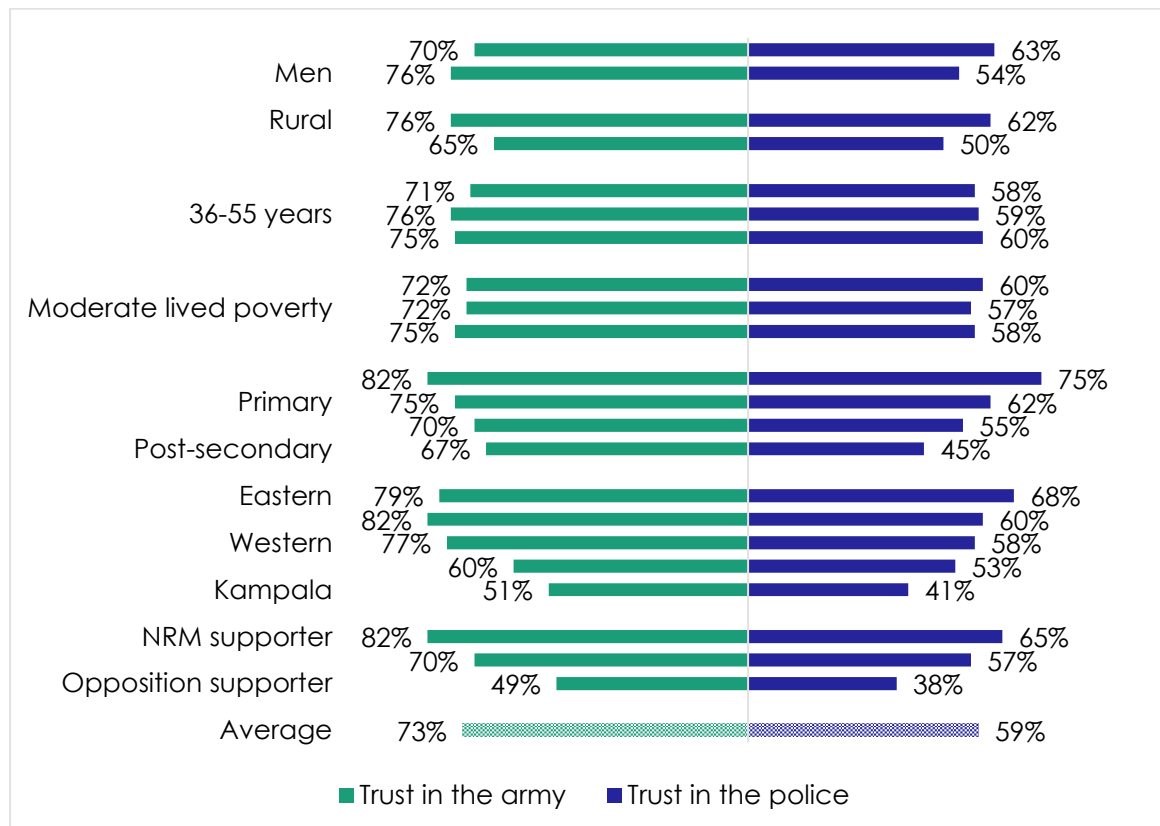
Confidence in the police declines sharply with education, from 75% among those with no formal education to 45% among post-secondary-educated adults. A similar, albeit weaker pattern holds for the army.

Regional comparisons show that residents in Kampala report the lowest levels of trust (41% for the police and 51% for the military), while the highest are recorded in the East (68% for the police) and the North (82% for the military).

Age and lived poverty<sup>2</sup> have little bearing on trust levels.

<sup>2</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 preceding year. For more on lived poverty, see Mattes and Lekalake (2025).

**Figure 5: Trust in the police and the army | by demographic group | Uganda | 2025**



**Respondents were asked:** How much do you trust each of the following, or haven't you heard enough about them to say: The police? The Uganda People's Defense Forces or UPDF? (% who say trust "somewhat" or "a lot")

### Electoral violence

Fear of election-related violence is an important indicator of electoral fairness and integrity; it could sway citizens' votes or prevent them from voting altogether. Reports of fear could also be seen as an indictment of Uganda's security forces' failure to keep voters safe and maintain public order.

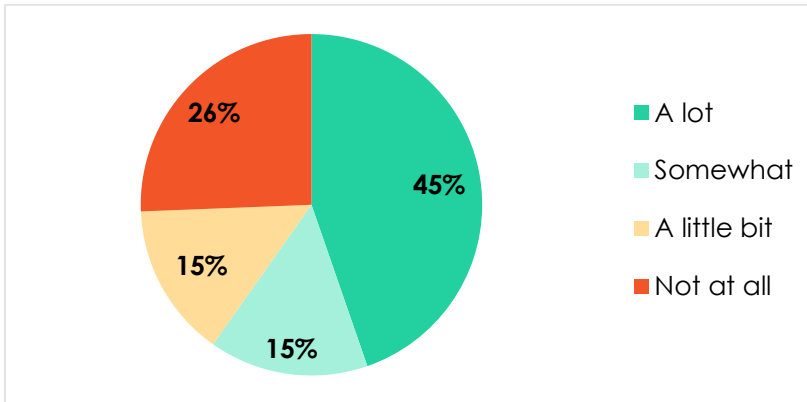
In general, physical violence (of any kind) is not an exceedingly rare occurrence in Uganda: 17% of respondents say that they or someone in their family suffered a physical attack during the previous year (not shown). Against this background, six in 10 Ugandans (60%) say they fear becoming a victim of political intimidation or violence during election periods at least "somewhat," including 45% who fear them "a lot" (Figure 6). Another 15% say they fear intimidation or violence "a little bit," while only one in four (26%) express no fear at all.

Levels of fear vary across different segments of the population (Figure 7). Fear is highest among residents in the Central Region (80%) and opposition supporters (69%), while fewer than half are worried among residents of Western Uganda (43%), individuals who lack formal education (47%), and senior citizens (49% of those aged 56 years and above).

Even among supporters of the ruling NRM, more than half (54%) are concerned about personally being harmed, as are 64% of non-partisans.

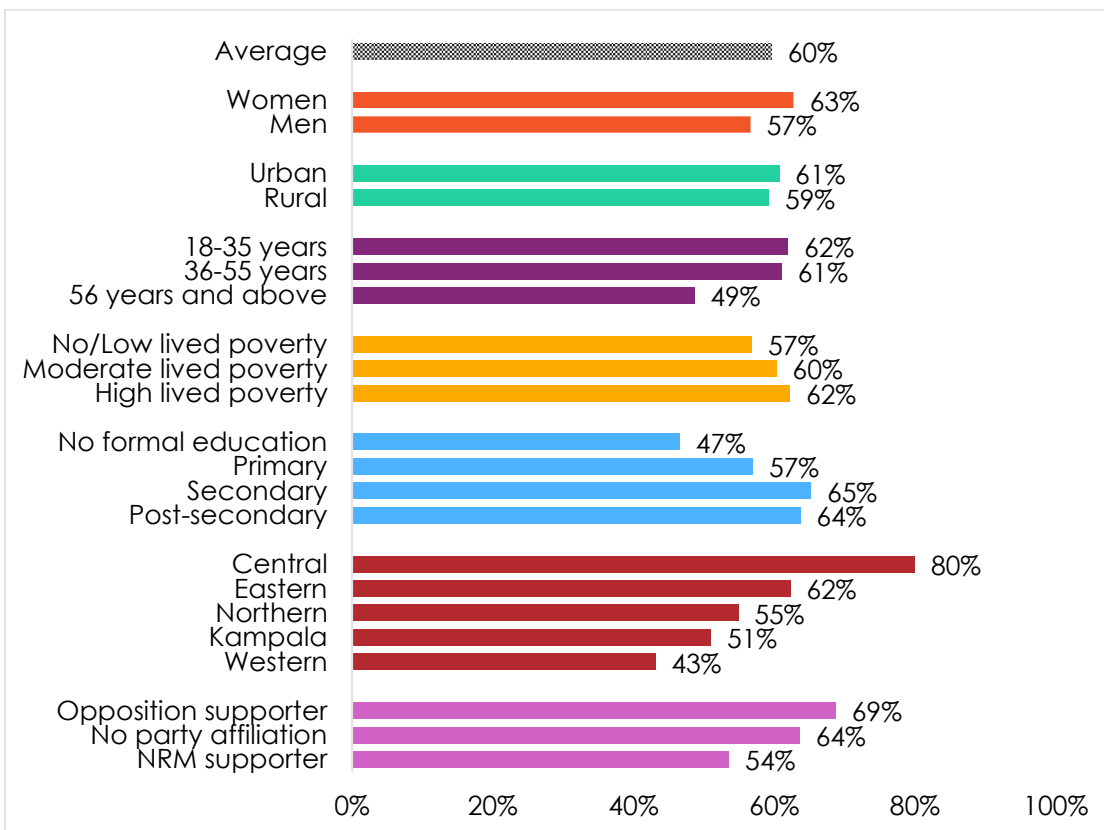
More women than men voice fear of electoral violence (63% vs. 57%). Concern increases modestly with citizens' experience of lived poverty and more significantly with educational attainment.

**Figure 6: Fear of political violence during elections** | Uganda | 2025



**Respondents were asked:** During election campaigns in this country, how much do you personally fear becoming a victim of political intimidation or violence?

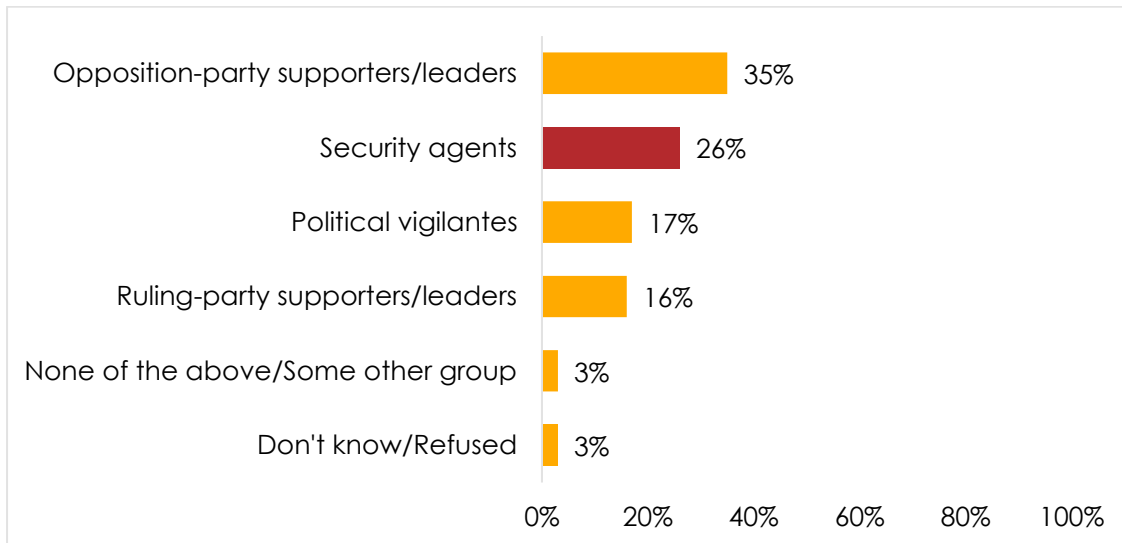
**Figure 7: Fear of political violence during elections** | by demographic group | Uganda | 2025



**Respondents were asked:** During election campaigns in this country, how much do you personally fear becoming a victim of political intimidation or violence? (% who say "somewhat" or "a lot")

When asked who they think the main perpetrators of political intimidation or violence are, one-fourth (26%) of Ugandans point to security agents (Figure 8). Citizens are most likely to cite opposition-party supporters or leaders (35%), while fewer than half as many blame political vigilantes (17%) and ruling-party supporters or leaders (16%).

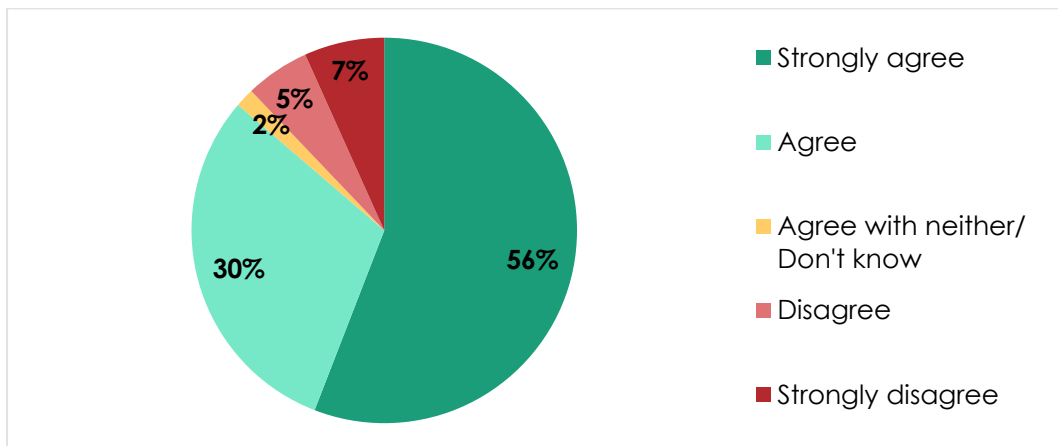
**Figure 8: Main perpetrators of political violence during elections | Uganda | 2025**



**Respondents were asked:** In this country, who, from among the following list, would you say are the main perpetrators of political intimidation or violence during election campaigns?

There is widespread public support for individual liability with respect to election-related offences: 86% of Ugandans “agree” or “strongly agree” that electoral officials and security agents should be held personally accountable for any wrongdoing that occurs on their watch, while only 12% disagree (Figure 9).

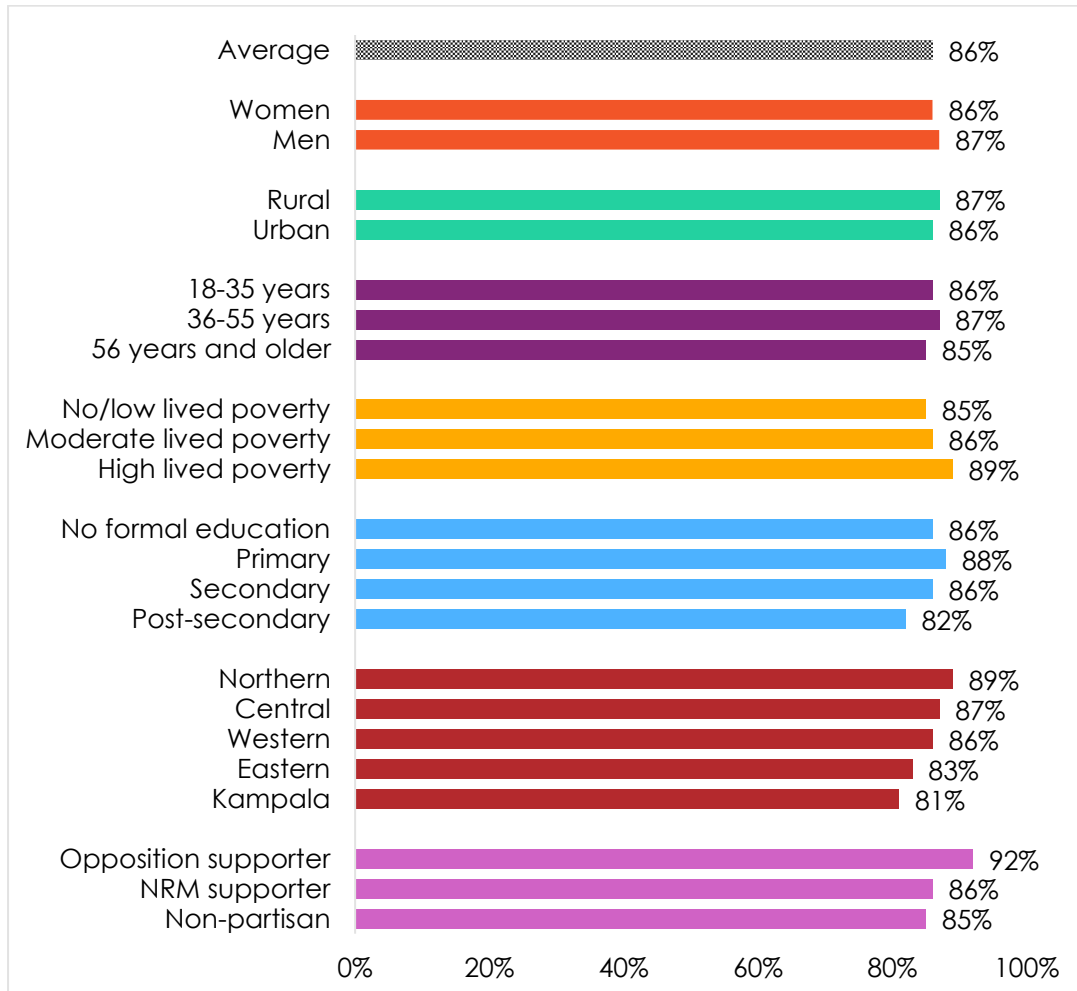
**Figure 9: Liability of electoral officials and security agents | Uganda | 2025**



**Respondents were asked:** For each of the following proposals, please tell me whether you disagree or agree: Electoral officials and security agents should be held individually liable for all offences committed on their watch?

Support for holding electoral and security officials individually liable is highest among opposition supporters (92%), residents of Northern Uganda (89%), and the poorest citizens (89%) but exceeds eight out of 10 respondents across all key demographic groups (Figure 10).

**Figure 10: Liability of electoral officials and security agents** | by demographic group  
 | Uganda | 2025



**Respondents were asked:** For each of the following proposals, please tell me whether you disagree or agree: Electoral officials and security agents should be held individually liable for all offences committed on their watch? (% who say “agree” or “strongly agree”)

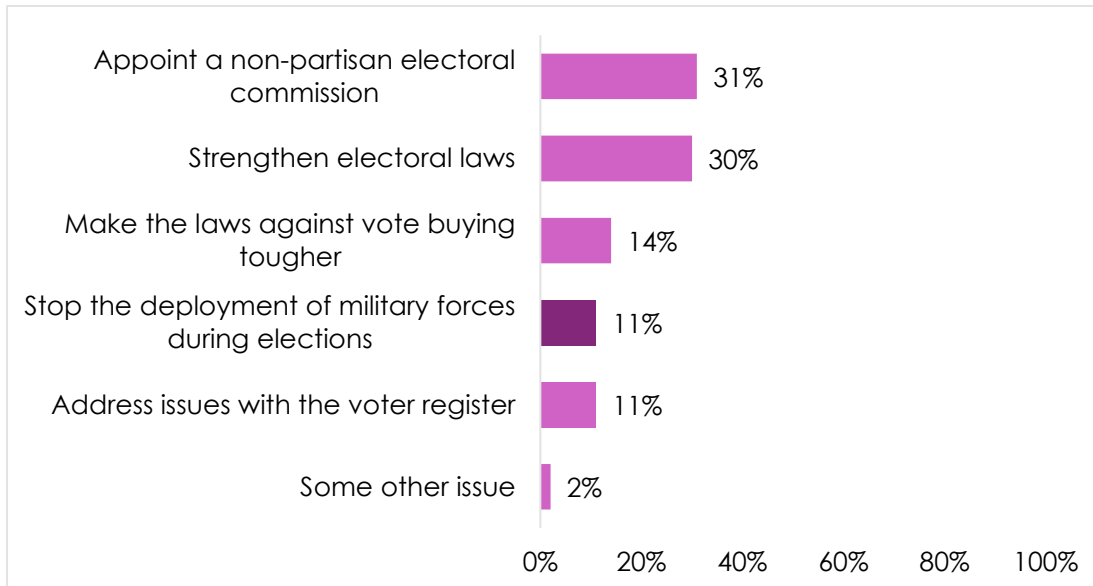
### Military deployment during elections

In 2024, Afrobarometer questioned Ugandans about their election-related priorities ahead of the 2026 election to ascertain which aspects of the electoral process most urgently need to be addressed or improved.

About one in 10 (11%) said stopping the deployment of military personnel during elections was the single most important issue (Figure 11). While others may or may not favour an end to the military deployments, almost half ranked modifications of election laws at the top of their lists, prioritising either toughening laws against vote buying (14%) or strengthening other (unspecified) electoral laws (30%).

Three in 10 citizens (31%) were most concerned about having an independent electoral commission, while 11% saw fixing problems with the voter register as most important.

**Figure 11: Citizens' top election-related priority ahead of the 2026 general election**  
 | Uganda | 2024



**Respondents were asked:** Which of the following do you see as the most important issue that should be addressed ahead of the 2026 general elections?

## Conclusion

Majorities of citizens trust the police and the army, and most Ugandans say severe abuses by security forces are rare or non-existent in their communities. However, significant minorities report frequent use of excessive force against citizens, arbitrary arrests, and disappearances or unlawful killings. And in 2022, a majority of respondents were of the view that police “often” or “always” use excessive force during protests.

More than half of the population personally fear becoming a victim of political intimidation or violence during election season, suggesting a lack of confidence in the authorities who are supposed to ensure security and maintain public order. In fact, one-fourth of respondents identify security agents as primarily responsible for past electoral violence, while one in 10 say halting the deployment of military officers during elections is their foremost election-related priority ahead of the 2026 contest.

Meanwhile, there is a broad consensus that security personnel should be held personally liable for electoral misconduct committed on their watch. This underscores the public demand for a safe, peaceful, and open electoral environment in which wrongdoers are held responsible for their misdeeds.

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