

In name of security, many Ugandans willing to let government monitor private and religious speech

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 173 | John Martin Kewaza

Summary

Uganda's constitution promises citizens a great range of freedoms and rights (of expression, association, privacy, religion, etc.) and charges the government with ensuring public security. When these two priorities – freedom and security – are perceived to clash, debates can become heated between friends, in the news media, in Parliament, and in the courts.

Citing the need to protect law and order, the Ugandan government has taken a number of measures that critics argue restrict citizen freedoms, including the Public Order Management Act (POMA) regulating public meetings (Parliament of Uganda, 2013) and the Nongovernmental Organisations (NGO) Act creating a national bureau to register, regulate, coordinate, and monitor NGO activities (Parliament of Uganda, 2016).

While Uganda's supreme law recognizes the right to privacy and calls for its protection, the government, citing the need to safeguard the country against crime and terrorism, has ought to increase surveillance of Internet and mobile-phone communications (Privacy International, 2015, 2017).

Critics charge that some of these measures have led to increased restrictions, intimidation, and self-censorship of independent journalists and media outlets (Freedom House, 2016). Opposition leaders and supporters have complained of harassment as well as voter intimidation by paramilitary groups (Saturday Vision, 2017; Human Rights Watch, 2017). Cases have been reported in which police surrounded the headquarters of NGOs and conducted cordon and search operations (Daily Monitor, 2017).

This dispatch examines Ugandans' sense of security – as individuals in their homes and as citizens exercising their rights and freedoms. Findings from the most recent national Afrobarometer survey show considerable fear and experience of insecurity, as well as substantial concern about their safety in freely expressing their views and engaging in electoral politics. Yet most approve of the government's performance on crime and of the military's professionalism. Almost half are willing to let the government monitor private communications, such as mobile-phone conversations, and a majority support government regulation of religious speech in the name of security.

Afrobarometer survey

Afrobarometer is a pan-African, non-partisan research network that conducts public attitude surveys on democracy, governance, economic conditions, and related issues in African countries. Six rounds of surveys were conducted in up to 37 countries between 1999 and 2016, and Round 7 surveys are being conducted in 2016/2018. Afrobarometer conducts face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice with nationally representative samples.

The Afrobarometer team in Uganda, led by Hatchile Consult, interviewed 1,200 adult Ugandans in December 2016. A sample of this size yields country-level results with a margin of

error of +/-3% at a 95% confidence level. Previous surveys were conducted in Uganda in 2000, 2002, 2005, 2008, 2012, and 2015.

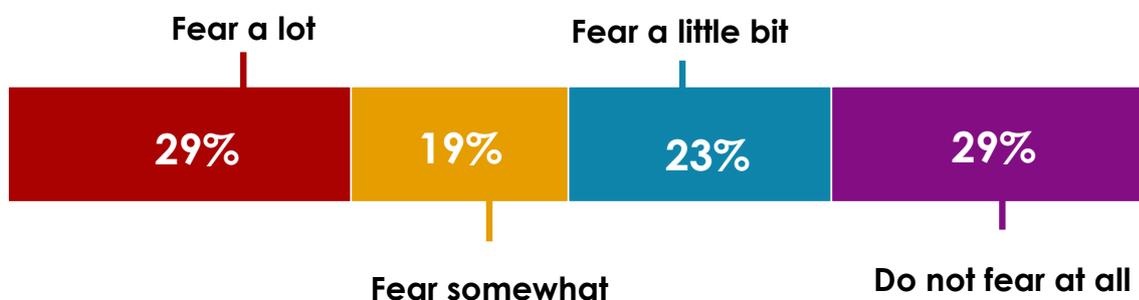
Key findings

- Nearly half (48%) of Ugandans fear “somewhat” or “a lot” becoming victims of political intimidation or violence during election campaigns.
- About one in seven Ugandans (14%) say they experienced violence at political events during the past two years, while an additional 33% say they feared but did not experience such violence.
- Almost two-thirds (64%) of Ugandans say citizens “often” or “always” have to be careful about what they say about politics.
- Six in 10 respondents (59%) say that the freedom of the political opposition to function is more constrained now than it was a few years ago.
- Domestic insecurity is high. Almost half of respondents say they experienced theft from their home (47%) and feared crime in their home (45%) during the previous year, whilst one-third (32%) felt unsafe walking in their neighbourhood.
- If necessary to safeguard security, about half (48%) of Ugandans say the government should be able to monitor private communications. And more than six in 10 say the government should be able to impose curfews and set up roadblocks (65%) and regulate what is said in places of worship (61%).

Fear of political intimidation and violence

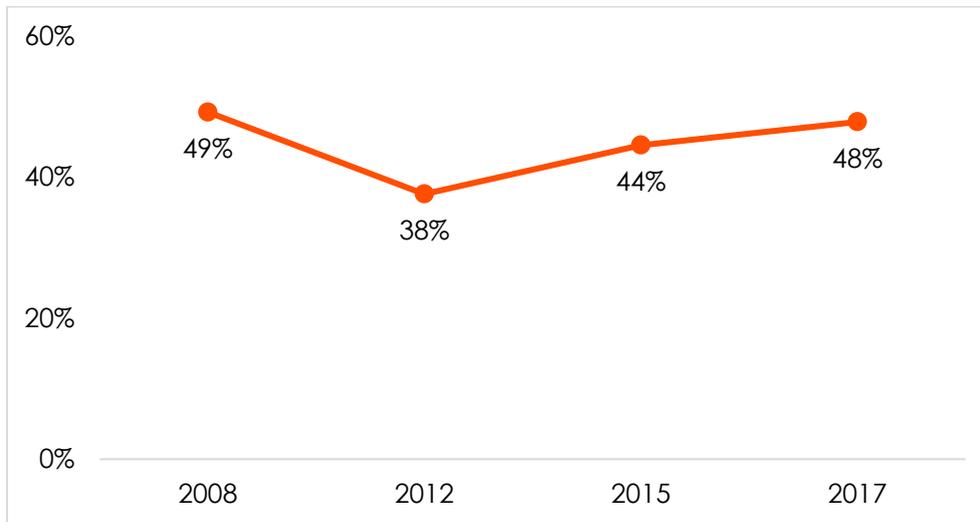
Almost half (48%) of Ugandans say that becoming victims of political intimidation and violence is something they fear “somewhat” (19%) or “a lot” (29%) (Figure 1). This proportion has increased by 10 percentage points since 2012 (Figure 2). In Afrobarometer’s Round 6 surveys (2014/2015) in 36 African countries, Uganda (44%) ranked third-worst in terms of fear of election-related intimidation and violence, behind only Nigeria (50%) and Côte d’Ivoire (49%) (Figure 3).

Figure 1: Fear of political intimidation or violence during elections | Uganda | 2017



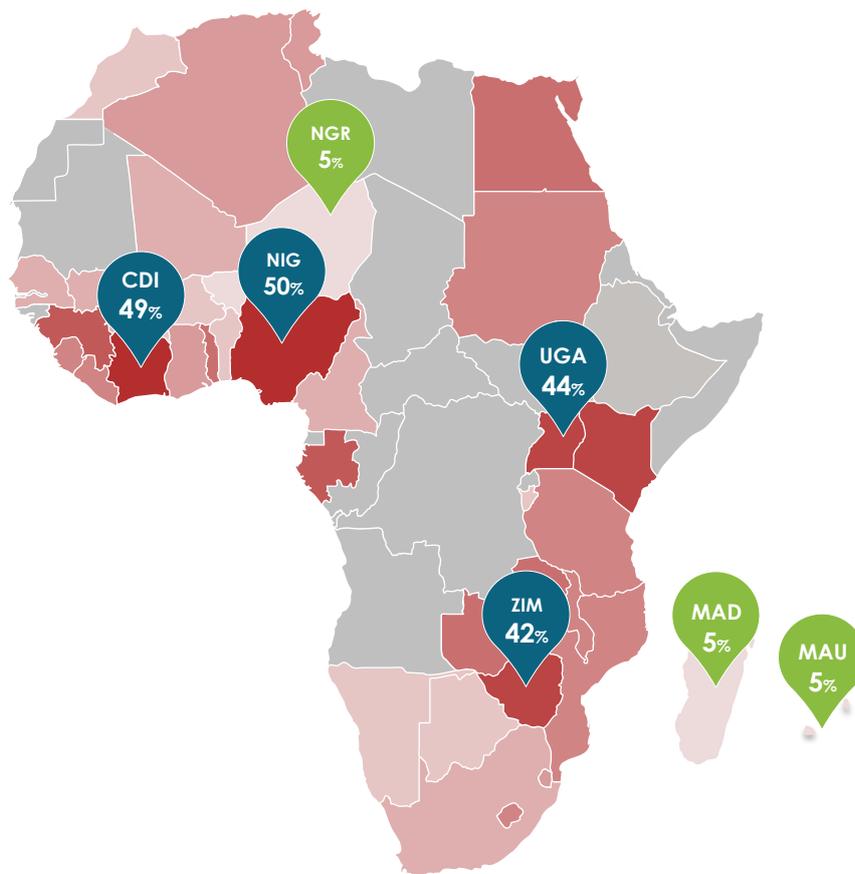
Respondents were asked: *During election campaigns in this country, how much do you personally fear becoming a victim of political intimidation or violence?*

Figure 2: Fear of political intimidation or violence | Uganda | 2008-2017



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")

Figure 3: Fear of political intimidation or violence | 36 countries | 2014/2015



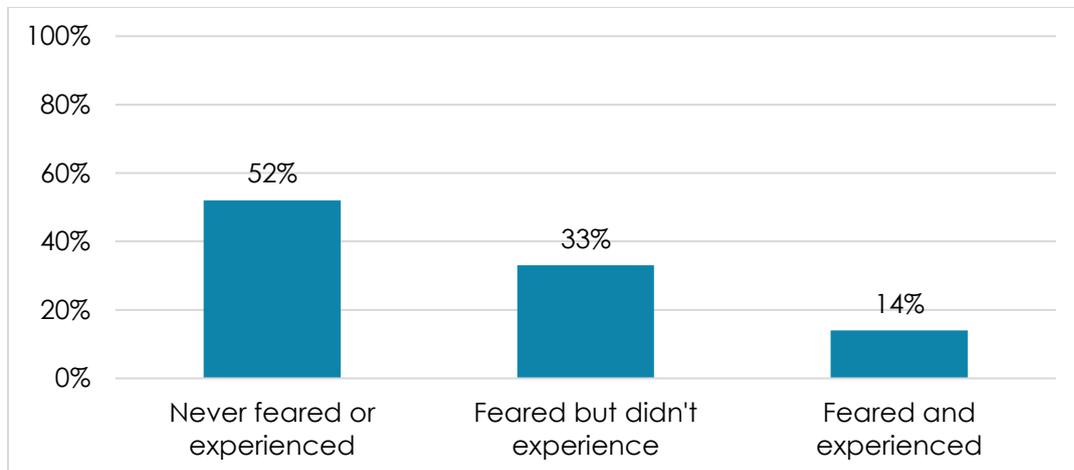
Respondents were asked: During election campaigns in this country, how much do you personally fear becoming a victim of political intimidation or violence? (% who say "somewhat" or "a lot")

One in seven Ugandans (14%) say they actually experienced violence at political events during the past two years, while an additional 33% say they feared but did not experience such violence (Figure 4).

When asked whom they fear most as the perpetrator of political intimidation or violence during election campaigns, Ugandans are about equally likely to cite opposition party leaders and supporters (17%), ruling party leaders and supporters (16%), and security agents (15%) (Figure 5).

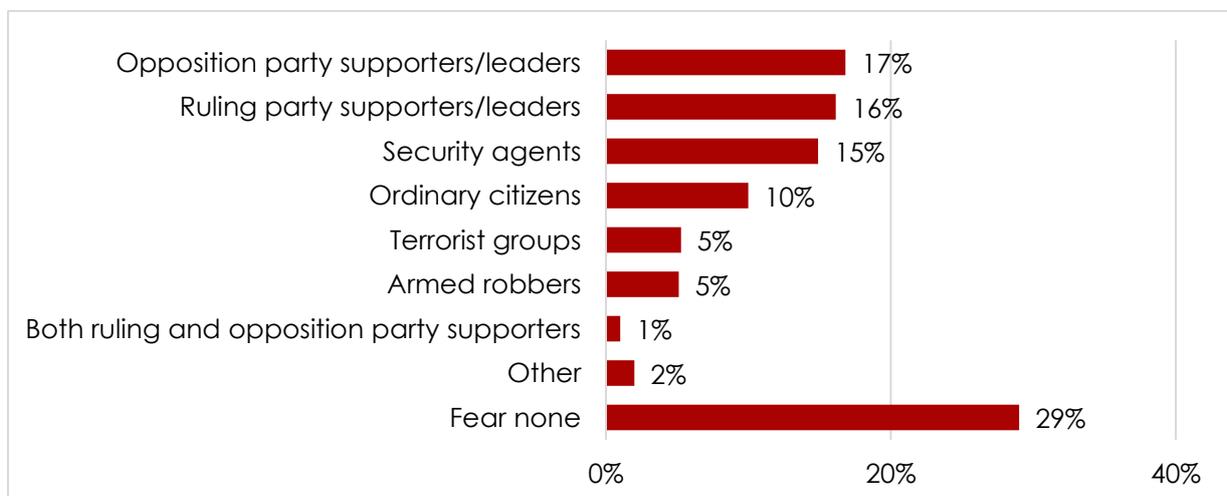
Women are more likely than men to fear becoming victims of political intimidation or violence (52% vs. 44%) (Figure 6). Fear is more common amongst urbanites than rural residents (57% vs. 45%) and amongst respondents with post-secondary education (56%) than amongst their less-education counterparts. Residents of the Central (59%) and Kampala (55%) regions are more likely to report fear than citizens in other regions.

Figure 4: Fear and experience of violence at a political event | Uganda | 2017



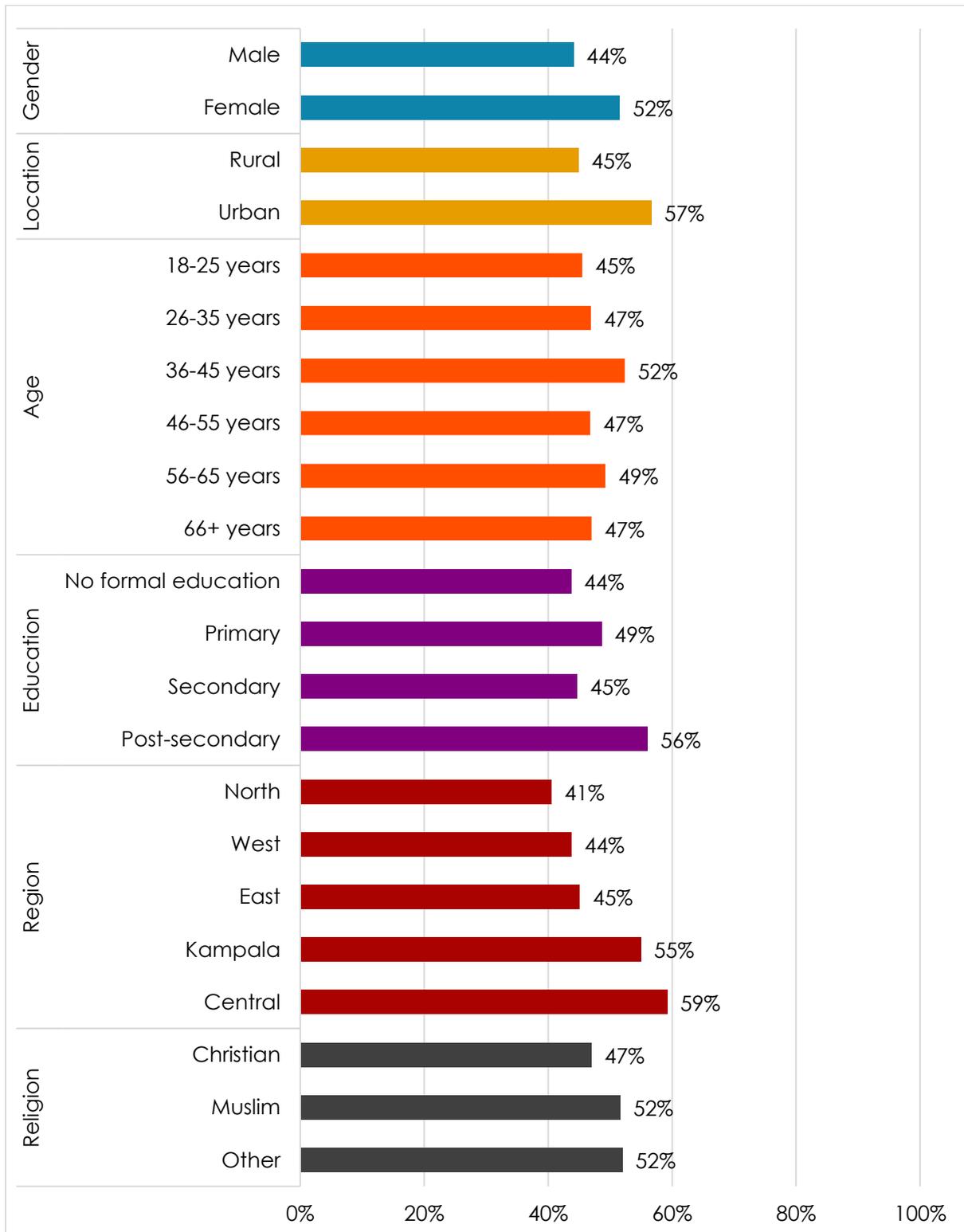
Respondents were asked: *In any society, people will sometimes disagree with one another. These disagreements occasionally escalate into physical violence. Please tell me whether, in the past two years, you have ever personally feared violence at a political rally or campaign event? [If yes:] Have you actually personally experienced this type of violence in the past two years?*

Figure 5: Perpetrators of political intimidation or violence | Uganda | 2017



Respondents were asked: *Who do you fear most as the perpetrator of political intimidation or violence during election campaigns?*

Figure 6: Fear of political intimidation or violence | by socio-demographic group
 | Uganda | 2017



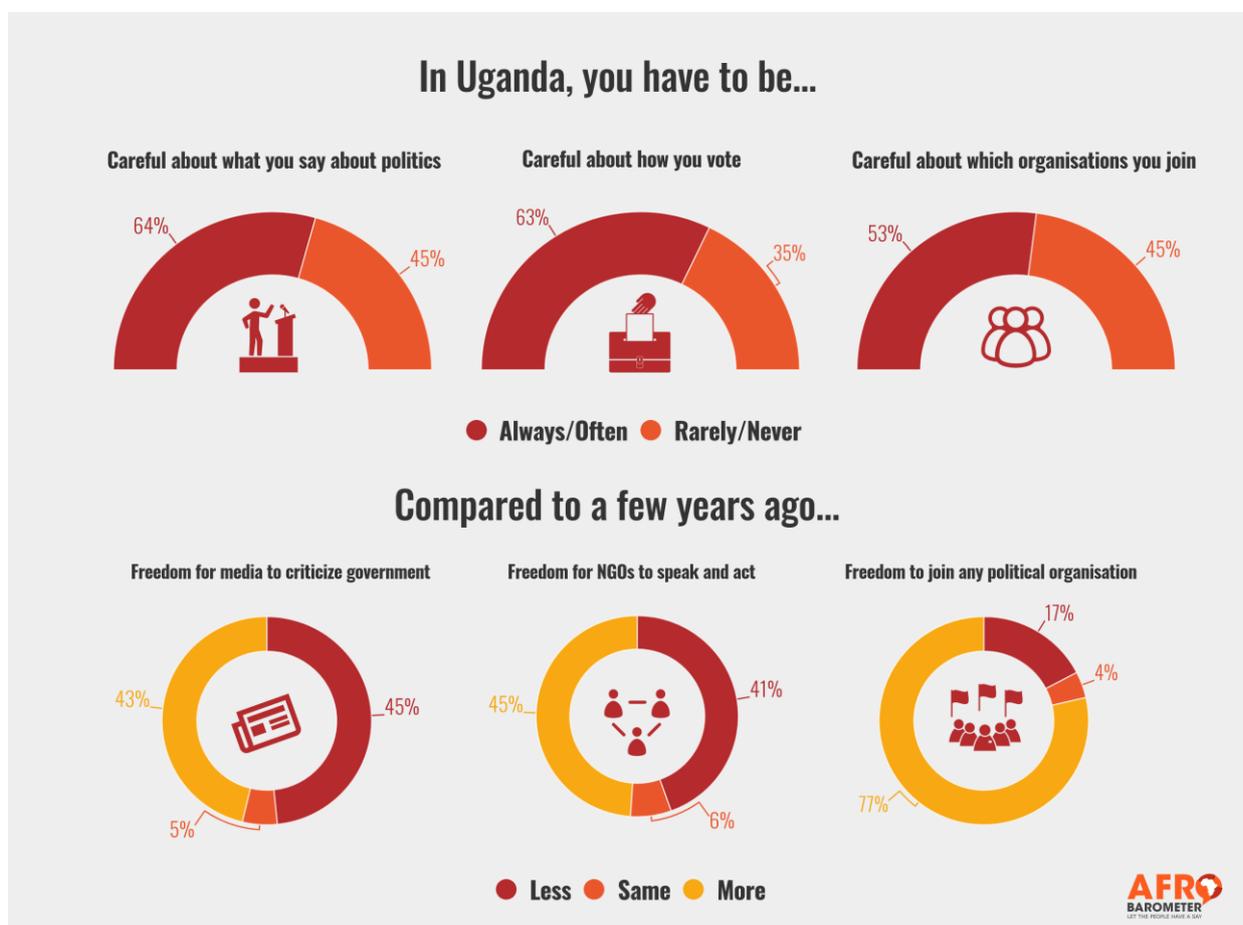
Respondents were asked: During election campaigns in this country, how much do you personally fear becoming a victim of political intimidation or violence? (% who say "somewhat" or "a lot")

Freedom of political expression

Responses to a series of survey questions about political freedoms show substantial concerns about how safe Ugandans feel in expressing their views and associating as they wish (Figure 7). Almost two-thirds of respondents say citizens “often” or “always” have to be careful about what they say about politics (64%) and about how they vote (63%). A majority (53%) say they also have to be careful about which organisations they join, although a stronger majority (77%) say they now have greater freedom to join organisations of their choice than they did “a few years ago.”

Ugandans are more evenly divided as to whether the media is freer than a few years ago to criticize the government and whether NGOs have greater freedom to act and speak out.

Figure 7: Freedom of political expression | Uganda | 2017

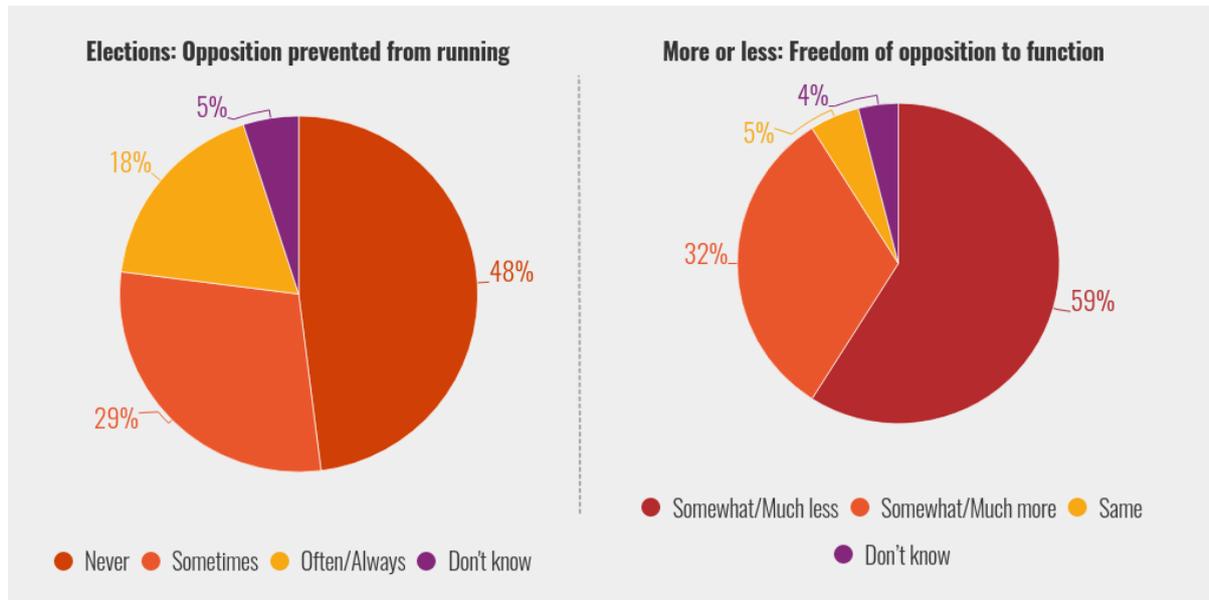


Respondents were asked:

- In your opinion, how often, in this country:
 - Do people have to be careful of what they say about politics?
 - Do people have to be careful about what political organisations they join?
 - Do people have to be careful about how they vote in an election?
- Please tell me if there is more or less freedom now for each of the following things compared to a few years ago, or are things about the same:
 - Your own freedom to join any political organisation you want?
 - The media's freedom to investigate and report on government mistakes or to criticize government actions or performance?
 - The freedom of independent groups or non-governmental organisations to speak, hold meetings, or advocate their views freely, including criticizing the government if they choose?

About half (48%) of Ugandans say the political opposition is “never” prevented from running, but 29% say this occurs “sometimes” and 18% say it happens “often” or “always.” Moreover, six in 10 respondents (59%) say that the freedom of the opposition to function is more constrained now than it was “a few years ago” (Figure 8).

Figure 8: Freedom of the political opposition | Uganda | 2017



Respondents were asked:

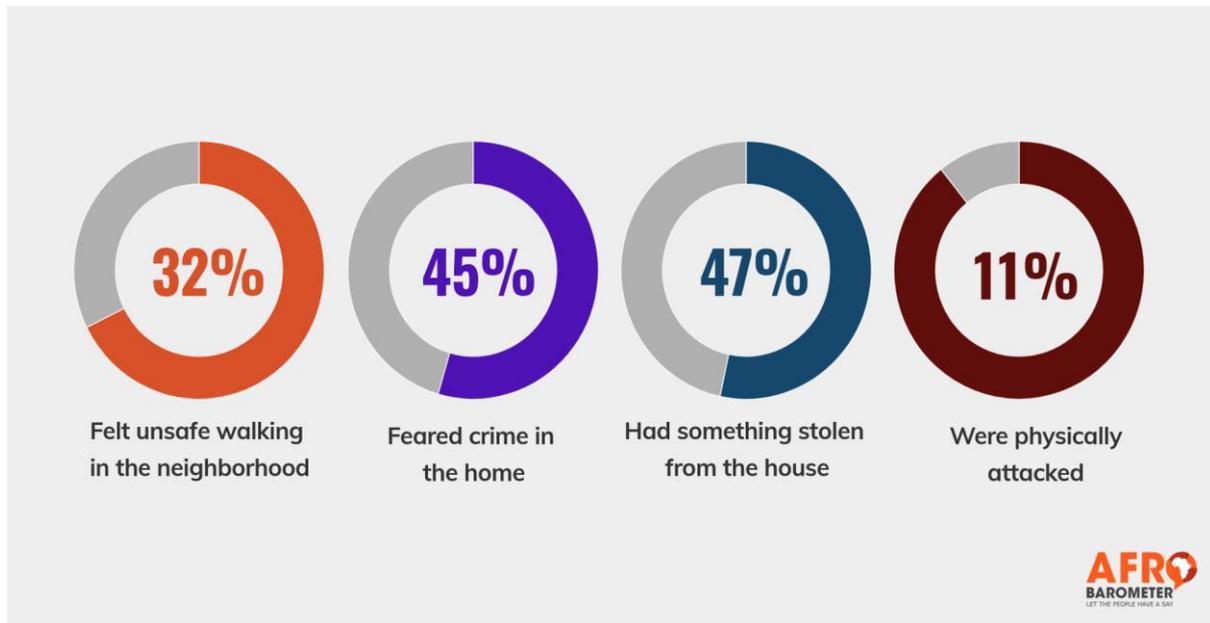
1. In your opinion, during this country's elections, how often are opposition candidates prevented from running for office?
2. Please tell me if there is more or less freedom now for each of the following things compared to a few years ago, or are things about the same: The freedom of opposition parties or candidates to speak or hold rallies, state their views, or criticize the government?

Personal safety

If insecurity is a fact of political life for a substantial proportion of Ugandans, it is also a major concern in citizens' personal lives (Figure 9). One-third (32%) of respondents say they felt unsafe walking in the neighbourhood at least once during the preceding year. Almost half say that they feared crime in their home (45%) and that they suffered a theft from their home (47%) during the previous 12 months. And one out of 10 (11%) report that they were physically attacked.

Do your own analysis of Afrobarometer data – on any question, for any country and survey round. It's easy and free at www.afrobarometer.org/online-data-analysis.

Figure 9: Personal safety | Uganda | 2017



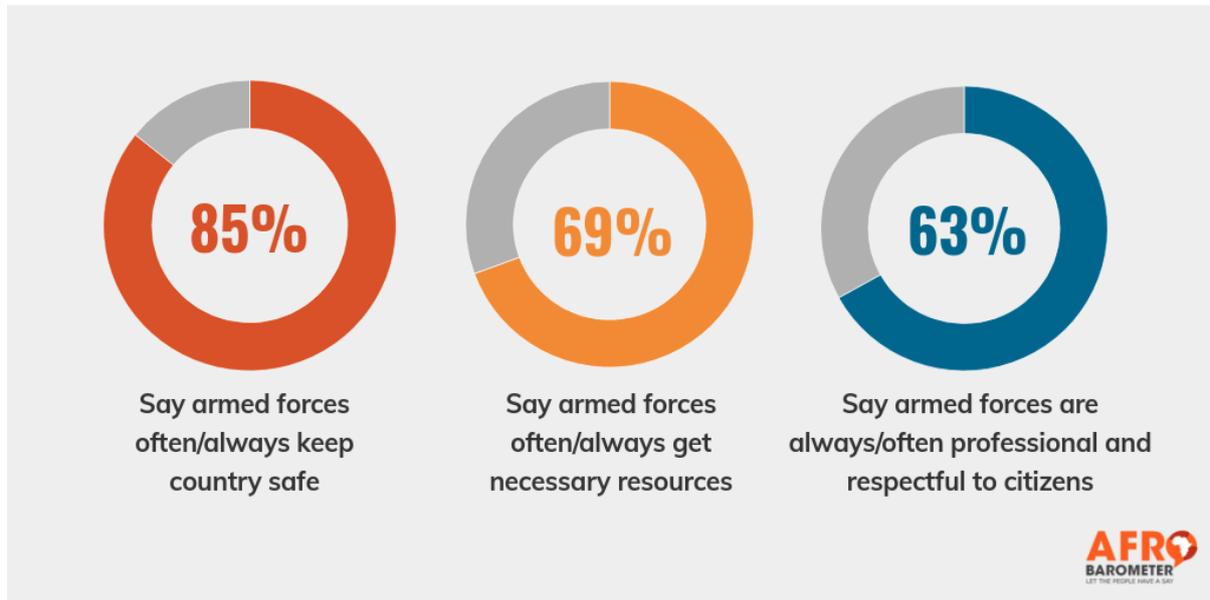
Respondents were asked:

1. Over the past year, how often, if ever, have you or anyone in your family:
 - a) Felt unsafe walking in your neighborhood?
 - b) Feared crime in your own home?
 (% who say "just once or twice," "several times," "many times," or "always")
2. During the past year, have you or anyone in your family:
 - a) Had something stolen from your house?
 - b) Been physically attacked?
 (% who say "once," "twice," or "three or more times")

In contrast to concerns about their personal safety, only 5% of respondents cite crime and insecurity as one of their three priority problems that the government should address, placing it 18th among the country's most important problems. Further, more than eight out of 10 Ugandans (85%) believe the nation's armed forces "often" or "always" keep the country safe from external and internal security threats (Figure 10). About two-thirds say that the armed forces "often" or "always" receive the training and equipment they need to be effective (69%) and that they are "often" or "always" professional and respectful toward citizens (63%).

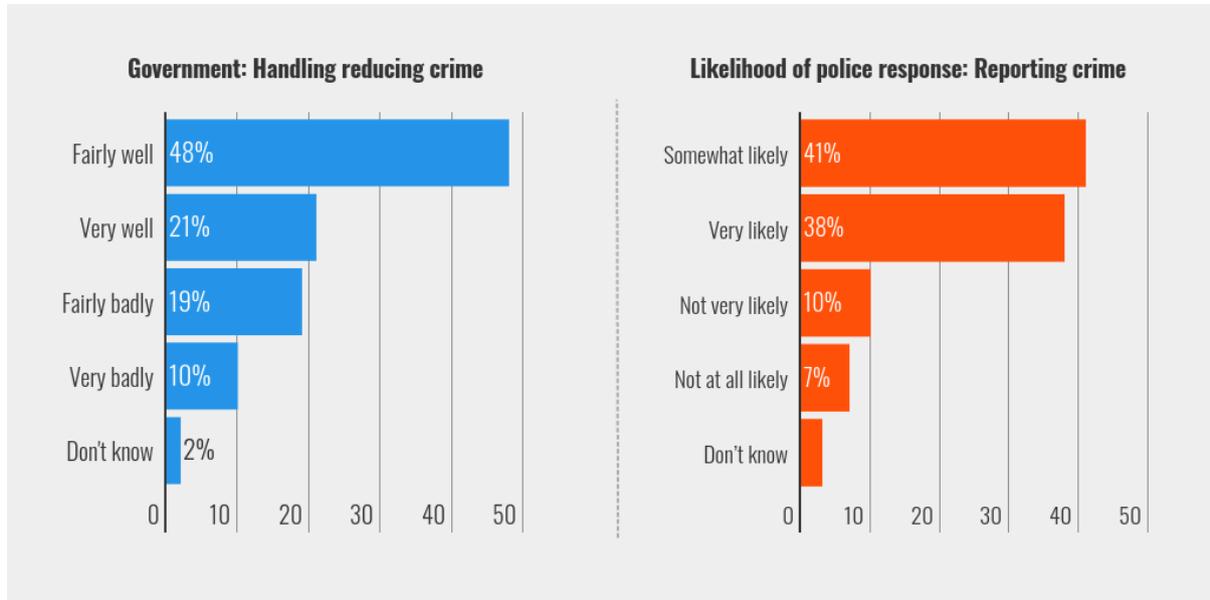
Two-thirds (69%) say the government has performed "fairly well" or "very well" in reducing crime, and more than three-fourths (79%) say they think it's "somewhat likely" or "very likely" that they could get someone to take action if they went to police to report a crime (Figure 11).

Figure 10: Perceptions of the armed forces | Uganda | 2017



Respondents were asked: *In your opinion, to what extent do the armed forces of our country: a) Keep our country safe from external and internal security threats? b) Get the training and equipment needed to be effective? c) Operate in a professional manner and respect the rights of all citizens?*

Figure 11: Government performance and police response | Uganda | 2017



Respondents were asked:

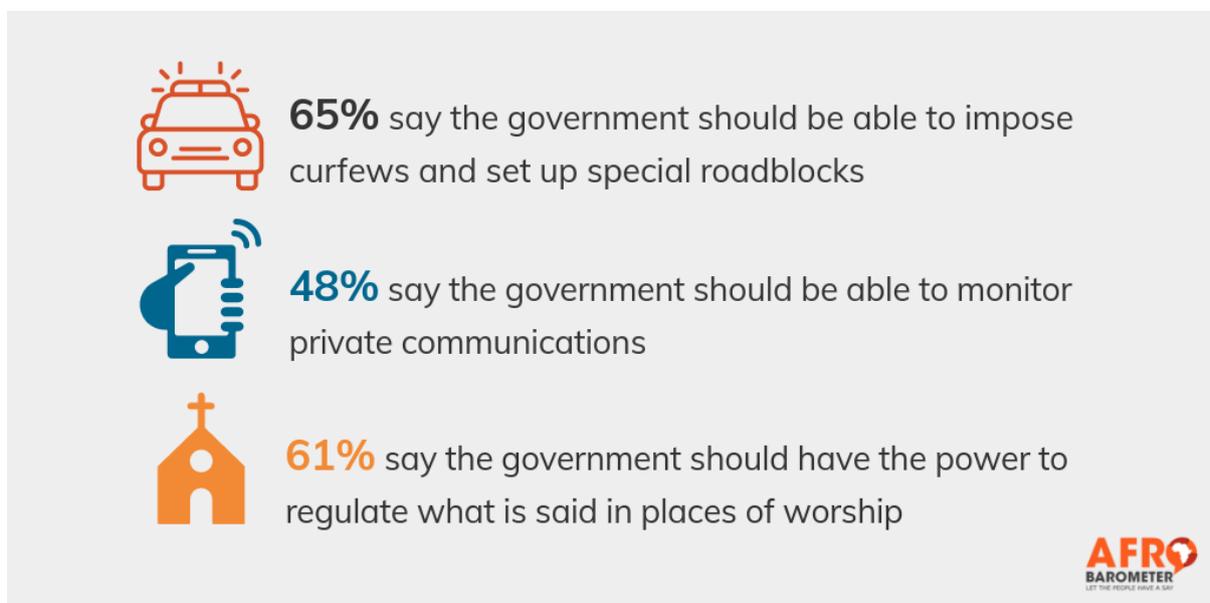
1. *How well or badly would you say the current government is handling Reducing crime, or haven't you heard enough to say?*
2. *How likely is it that you could get someone to take action if you went to the local police to report a crime, or haven't you heard enough to say?*

Freedom vs. security

Among rights enshrined in Uganda's constitution are freedom of movement, religion, and expression as well as the right to privacy. However, if confronted with threats to public security, substantial proportions of Ugandans are willing to compromise some of these rights (Figure 12). Two-thirds (65%) agree the government has the right to impose curfews and set up special roadblocks in order to protect public safety, including 44% who "agree very strongly" with this position; only 34% insist on citizens' right to move freely about the country at any time of day or night.

About half (48%) agree that the government should be able to monitor private communications, such as on mobile phones, to ensure that people are not plotting violence. And six in 10 (61%) would allow the government to regulate what is said in places of worship in order to protect public safety.

Figure 12: Freedom vs. security | Uganda | 2017



Respondents were asked:

- Which of the following statements is closest to your view?
 Statement 1: Even if faced with threats to public security, people should be free to move about the country at any time of day or night. Statement 2: When faced with threats to public security, the government should be able to impose curfews and set up special roadblocks to prevent people from moving around.
- Which of the following statements is closest to your view?
 Statement 1: Government should be able to monitor private communications, for example on mobile phones, to make sure that people are not plotting violence. Statement 2: People should have the right to communicate in private without a government agency reading or listening to what they are saying.
- Which of the following statements is closest to your view? Statement 1: Freedom of religion and worship are absolute, meaning that government should never limit what is said in a place of worship. Statement 2: Government should have the power to regulate what is said in places of worship, especially if preachers or congregants threaten public security.
 (Figure shows % who "agree" or "agree very strongly")

Conclusion

Despite high marks for the government and the military on fighting crime and insecurity, Ugandans express significant concern about their personal safety and their sense of security in exercising their political rights. In the name of security, many are willing to cede their rights to private communication and religious speech free of government monitoring.

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