



CENTRE for BASIC RESEARCH

# **Navigating Uganda's Political Future:**

*Tectonic Shifts, Trends, and Contestations in the 2026 Elections and Beyond*

## ***A Book Project***

**Sense-Making Seminar Series**

*Seminar 2*

***The State of Preparedness of the Electoral Commission***

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# 1. Preamble

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This Sense-Making Seminar Paper No.2 documents the outcomes of the second seminar in the ongoing book project on Navigating Uganda’s Political Future: Tectonic Shifts, Trends, and Contestations in the 2026 Elections and Beyond. These seminars are part of a broader initiative aimed at synthesizing diverse insights into focused analyses to inform the upcoming publication. The project seeks to engage multiple stakeholders – scholars, activists, practitioners, and policymakers – in critical reflections and constructive dialogues about Uganda’s evolving political landscape.

The Navigating Uganda’s Political Future seminar series serves as an intellectual platform for documenting and analyzing key dimensions that shape Uganda’s political trajectory in the lead-up to the 2025/2026 elections. Each seminar contributes to the development of an evidence-based examination of electoral processes, governance structures, and democratic trends. Through exchanges of critical perspectives and practical insights, the seminar series builds a foundation for in-depth scholarly interventions that interrogate emerging issues and offer actionable recommendations.

This initiative comes at a time of significant political anticipation and uncertainty as Uganda prepares for the 2025/2026 general elections. The electoral cycle is not merely an event, to be judged based on what happens on and after polling-day activities, but a complex set of interrelated processes that influence the country’s governance, socio-political stability, and democratic resilience.

The ongoing seminar series explore critical thematic areas, including management of the electoral cycle, public participation, popular culture, and the socio-economic and geopolitical factors shaping Uganda’s electoral environment.

This project examines Uganda’s democratic journey in detail, providing valuable resources for researchers, policymakers, and citizens. Through these debates and insights, it contributes to a national agenda for democratic renewal. Documenting these discussions ensures that future electoral processes can benefit from evidence-based recommendations and lessons learned. This, in turn, will contribute to a culture of tolerance, constructive engagement, and inclusive democratic governance.

## **2. Background to the Book Project**

As Uganda approaches its 2025/2026 general elections, the nation is at a critical juncture marked by heightened anticipation. The Navigating Uganda's Political Future project aims to analyze Uganda's electoral processes and broader political trajectory, building on existing research, like the 2016 elections that were documented in a Centre for Basic Research (CBR) anthology, *Controlling Consent: Uganda's 2016 Elections*.

By connecting past electoral experiences to current trends, the project charts a path forward for understanding Uganda's democratic evolution in a changing demographic landscape. With over 75% of the electorate under 35, the 2025/2026 elections are significant for the political aspirations of Uganda's youth.

The project employs a multi-pronged methodology, including basic research, sense-making seminars, public discussions, and stakeholder engagements, producing outputs like a book anthology, working papers, and media commentaries. Monthly seminars and public engagements explore elections as events that redirect political, social, and policy choices. The project will foster democratic renewal by promoting evidence-based recommendations for electoral reforms and citizen participation, highlighting pathways for strengthening democratic institutional culture and supporting efforts towards political stability. Ultimately, it seeks to provide a record of this critical period in Uganda's history, offering insights to inform both contemporary electoral debates and future democratic processes.

### 3. Seminar Two: Electoral Commission Preparedness

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The second seminar in the Navigating Uganda’s Political Future series builds upon the foundation established in the first seminar, furthering the book project’s agenda of analyzing Uganda’s electoral dynamics and political future. Held as part of a series of sense-making discussions, the second seminar brought together key stakeholders, including the Electoral Commission, researchers, activists, and civil society representatives, to examine Uganda’s preparedness for the 2025/2026 elections.

This seminar was particularly significant: it offered the Electoral Commission an opportunity to engage directly with participants on Uganda’s electoral roadmap, current level of preparedness, and critical challenges surrounding electoral processes.

Commissioner Prof. Sallie Simba Kayunga, represented the EC. He delivered a comprehensive presentation detailing the Commission’s activities, the electoral roadmap, and the institutional challenges in ensuring free, fair, and credible elections.

The hybrid nature of the seminar — featuring both physical and online participation — enabled inclusive engagement with a diverse group both in-country and beyond. Diverse voices contributed insights, raised pertinent questions, and reflected on Uganda’s electoral landscape. The discussion served as a platform for critical dialogue on procedural and substantive aspects of democracy, voter engagement, institutional roles, and the broader political environment.

## 4. Presentation by the Electoral Commission

The highlight of the seminar was a comprehensive presentation by **Prof. Sallie Simba Kayunga**, Commissioner at the Electoral Commission of Uganda. The presentation provided critical insights into the EC's understanding of free, fair, and credible elections, its level of preparedness for the 2025/2026 general elections, and the challenges it anticipates. The following is a synopsis of the presentation:

### *i. Core Principles for Credible Elections*

Prof. Simba framed elections within the lens of procedural democracy, emphasizing that while broader issues like human rights and governance influence elections, the Commission's primary role is to ensure that the technical processes of elections are managed transparently and efficiently. He outlined the following as core principles for credible elections:

- **Demarcation of Electoral Areas:** The EC emphasized the need for proper and transparent demarcation of electoral areas and constituencies. Electoral boundaries must ensure fairness in representation and reflect the population size as stipulated by law. Prof. Simba acknowledged that population growth and urbanization have placed pressure on the delimitation process, making the 2025/2026 elections particularly significant.
- **A 100% Accurate Voter Register:** A reliable and inclusive voter register remains a cornerstone of free and fair elections. Prof. Simba reiterated the Commission's commitment to achieving a voter register that is "99.99% accurate," acknowledging the practical challenges involved. He explained ongoing efforts to update the register, including collaboration with the National Identification and Registration Authority (NIRA), and the planned public displays of voter rolls for verification at Parish level.
- **Nomination and Campaign Processes:** The EC outlined plans to ensure that all qualified candidates have the opportunity to participate in elections without discrimination or undue restriction. The campaign process, according to Prof. Simba, must provide equal opportunities for candidates to reach their constituencies and should remain free of harassment, intimidation, or unfair advantages.

- **Voting, Results Counting, and Transmission:** On election day, Prof. Simba emphasized the importance of ensuring a secure and transparent voting environment. He highlighted plans for secure counting, accurate recording, and transparent transmission of results from polling stations to central tallying centers. The EC recognizes growing demands for electronic voting and result transmission but remains cautious about its feasibility given infrastructural and resource constraints. The EC highlighted the lack of an enabling law prescribing how Ugandans in the diaspora and prisoners may be enabled to exercise their franchise/voting rights, despite a recent court ruling to the effect.

## *ii. Electoral Commission's Preparedness*

Prof. Simba provided a **roadmap of activities** already underway and those planned as Uganda moves toward the 2025/2026 elections. Key milestones include:

- **Launch of the Electoral Roadmap** (2nd August 2023): This serves as the blueprint for the Commission's activities leading up to 2026 polls.
- **Demarcation of Electoral Areas:** Based on the 2014 Uganda National Population and Housing Census, the Commission has started revising electoral boundaries and reviewing polling stations.
- **Voter Register Updates and Display:** Ongoing voter registration and updates to the national register will support the public display of the voter register, demarcated areas, and polling stations. These displays are scheduled for early 2025.
- **Recruitment and Training of Election Officers:** The EC has commenced recruitment for Sub-County (Town Council, City & Municipal Divisions in urban areas) and Parish (Ward, in urban areas) Election Supervisors. Recruitment of polling assistants and presiding officers will follow in 2025. The recruitment process, the EC revealed, will be subjected to public scrutiny of the short-listed candidates to ensure non-partisanship.
- **Stakeholder Engagements:** The Commission has planned regular consultations with political parties, civil society organizations, and other stakeholders to ensure transparency and inclusiveness, and to address any concerns and information lacunae that may obtain within the Ugandan society.

### iii. Key Challenges Facing the Electoral Commission

The presentation highlighted significant challenges that the Electoral Commission anticipates as it manages for the 2025/2026 elections. These include:

- **Public Trust Deficit:** The EC acknowledged the challenge of low public trust in its ability to conduct free and fair elections. This trust deficit is exacerbated by allegations of bias, voter manipulation, and concerns about the Commission's independence. Prof. Simba stressed the importance of transparency, stakeholder engagement, and adherence to electoral laws to rebuild public trust in the Commission.
- **Commercialization of Elections:** Elections in Uganda are increasingly characterized by high levels of commercialization, where money plays a significant role in influencing electoral outcomes. Prof. Simba highlighted the difficulty of addressing this challenge, as most political spending occurs before formal nominations, making it difficult for the Commission to regulate.
- **Social Media Misinformation:** The spread of misinformation and disinformation on social media, particularly during election periods, poses a significant challenge. The EC anticipates an increase in false narratives, propaganda, and unverified reports as the polls approach. Prof. Simba called for collective efforts to counter misinformation and ensure accurate communication.
- **Legislative Gaps:** Several electoral reforms remain pending, limiting the EC's ability to address emerging issues. Prof. Simba cited examples such as:
  - The inability to conduct voting for **prisoners** and **diaspora populations** due to lack of enabling legal law(s).
  - Delays in implementing reforms necessary for electronic voting systems.
  - Potential delays in passing of new electoral laws, or reform of existing laws, leading to disruptions in the EC's programmatic and activity plans.
- **Institutional Coordination:** The EC relies on other institutions like the National Identification and Registration Authority and the Uganda Bureau of Statistics for voter data. Data reliability and inter-institutional coordination challenges affect the accuracy of the voter register and constituency or electoral-area demarcations.



## **5. PLENARY DISCUSSIONS**

The seminar provided a platform for participants to engage with the Electoral Commission and share reflections on Uganda's electoral preparedness. Key issues raised during the discussion included:

- 1. Independence of the Electoral Commission:** Several participants questioned the EC's independence, particularly in its appointment processes and perceived alignment with the ruling party. Prof. Simba emphasized that while the EC operates within constitutional mandates, its independence is guaranteed under **Article 62** of Uganda's Constitution.
- 2. Declining Voter Turnout:** Participants raised concerns about declining voter participation, particularly among the youth. Discussions explored whether this trend reflects voter apathy, disillusionment with electoral processes, or structural barriers to participation.
- 3. Role of Civil Society Organizations:** Concerns were expressed regarding the treatment of CSOs during the 2021 elections, including accreditation challenges and arrests of election observers. Prof. Simba assured participants of the EC's commitment to working collaboratively with CSOs and encouraged their participation in voter education and monitoring activities.
- 4. Inclusivity and Marginalized Groups:** The EC's recent efforts to identify and map persons with disabilities (PWDs) were commended, but participants questioned the effectiveness of the exercise given its short timeline. Calls were made for greater collaboration with CSOs and disability organizations to ensure meaningful inclusion.
- 5. Contextual Issues:** Participants highlighted the broader political environment as a significant determinant of electoral outcomes. The discussion underscored that free and fair elections require procedural integrity and a conducive political environment characterized by genuine competition and institutional fairness.

## 5.1. Emerging Critical Themes from the Seminar Discussions

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Some of the most pressing themes emerging from the second seminar include the issues around trust and legitimacy in Uganda's electoral processes. Participants repeatedly raised concerns about the confidence deficit among voters, political actors, and civil society regarding the Electoral Commission and the electoral process more broadly.

Below, we examine the issues raised as factors shaping these trust dynamics and their implications for Uganda's democratic trajectory, as discussed in the seminar.

### a. Public Trust in the Electoral Commission

A significant aspect of electoral legitimacy is the public's trust in the body mandated to oversee elections. While the Electoral Commission operates under **Articles 61-74 of Uganda's 1995 Constitution**, which guarantees its independence and stipulates its operational rules, questions remain regarding its perceived impartiality. Participants in the seminar highlighted the following challenges contributing to public skepticism:

- 1. Perceptions of Partisan Bias:** There is a widely held perception, particularly among opposition groups and segments of civil society, that the EC lacks neutrality and favors the ruling party. This perception is fuelled by the mode of appointment for Electoral Commission members, which the executive branch controls. The EC does not determine its own appointment but can act in ways that reduce perceptions of partisan bias.
- 2. Electoral Management Concerns:** Participants noted that electoral integrity goes beyond conducting the technical processes of voting and results counting. It requires managing elections in a manner that inspires public confidence, particularly in areas such as:
  - **Fairness, equity, and neutrality during recruitment** of EC's technical personnel, election supervisors, and polling-day officials
  - **Transparency in results transmission** and tallying.
  - **Credibility of the voter register** as the basis for inclusion.
  - **Handling of disputes and grievances** without undue influence.

While acknowledging these perceptions, Prof. Simba reiterated that the EC is constitutionally mandated to operate independently. He emphasized ongoing reforms within the Commission aimed at strengthening its capacity to manage elections transparently and accountably.

## b. Declining Voter Turnout and Political Legitimacy

A key issue highlighted during the seminar was the decline in voter participation across successive elections in Uganda. Participants explored the root causes of this trend, which include:

1. **Voter Apathy and Disillusionment:** Many Ugandans, particularly the youth, feel disillusioned with the electoral process, perceiving it as lacking fairness or the potential to bring about real change. This apathy is exacerbated by experiences of electoral irregularities, political repression, uncompromising rhetoric, violence during elections, and limited space for genuine competition.
2. **Commercialization of Politics:** The increasing monetization of elections has eroded political legitimacy. Voters often perceive elections as transactional rather than representative processes. Participants noted that candidates who “buy votes” or distribute money lose credibility as genuine leaders, undermining the principles of democracy.
3. **Structural Barriers:** Issues, such as limited civic education, voter identification challenges, and accessibility barriers for marginalized groups, contribute to voter disengagement. Prof. Simba emphasized the EC’s commitment to addressing these barriers through continuous voter education and targeted inclusion initiatives.

## c. The Role of Institutional Coordination

The seminar underscored that trust and legitimacy in elections are not the sole responsibility of the Electoral Commission but require a broader ecosystem of institutional accountability. Participants pointed to the following institutional dynamics:

1. **Reliance on Other Institutions:** As mentioned earlier, the EC depends on entities like the **NIRA** and the **UBOS** to provide accurate population and voter data. Institutional weaknesses within these bodies, such as delays in census results or inaccuracies in national identification records, directly impact the EC’s ability to produce a credible voters register.
2. **The Role of Security Forces:** Security agencies, specifically the military, police, and intelligence agencies, play a critical role in ensuring peaceful elections but have often been accused of bias and heavy-handedness. Participants highlighted the need for security forces to maintain neutrality and avoid actions that could undermine public confidence in the electoral process.
3. **Parliamentary Oversight and Reforms:** Delays in passing necessary electoral reforms were identified as a major challenge. The inability to legislate for diaspora voting, prisoner voting, and reforms in constituency demarcations, hampers the EC’s ability to deliver fully inclusive elections. Participants called on Parliament to prioritize electoral reforms to address these gaps, even though programmatic activities for the 2025/2026 elections are already ongoing.

#### d. Combining Procedural and Contextual Integrity

Participants emphasized that free and fair elections require the convergence of both procedural and contextual integrity. While the Electoral Commission is responsible for ensuring technical processes – such as voter registration, nominations, campaigns, polling-day casting of ballots, and vote tallying – are managed effectively, broader structural and political factors must also be addressed. These include:

- Ensuring a **conducive political environment** that allows for genuine competition.
- Promoting **institutional accountability and fairness** across all government and non-government bodies.
- Addressing the **structural causes of voter apathy**, particularly among the youth and marginalized groups.

Participants noted that elections do not occur in a vacuum. The broader political landscape – characterized by power imbalances, limited judicial independence, and commercialization of politics – shapes electoral outcomes and legitimacy.

#### e. Proposals to strengthen electoral trust and legitimacy

Based on the discussions, the seminar generated the following proposals to strengthen electoral trust and legitimacy:

- **Electoral Commission Reforms:** Increasing transparency in electoral processes, including clear procedures for results transmission and grievance handling, is essential. Promoting stakeholder engagement is also crucial to building trust, particularly with CSOs and marginalized groups.
- **Institutional Strengthening:** Enhancing coordination between the Electoral Commission, NIRA, and UBOS is necessary to ensure reliable data for voter registration and constituency demarcation.
- **Nonpartisan conduct of security agencies:** it is vital to ensure that security agencies operate with neutrality and professionalism during elections
- **Legislative Reforms:** Prioritizing electoral reforms is important to address gaps such as diaspora voting, prisoner voting, and constituency delimitation. These reforms will help create a more inclusive and fair electoral process.
- **Civic Education and Voter Engagement:** Continuous voter education is key to addressing apathy and misinformation. Engaging youth, women, and marginalized groups is essential to ensure increased and inclusive participation in the electoral process.

## 6. Key Takeaways and Recommendations of the Seminar

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Several key takeaways and recommendations that can inform the electoral processes, governance improvements, and institutional reforms were discussed. These include:

### 6.1. Key Takeaways

- **Support Electoral Commission Preparedness:** The Electoral Commission presented a clear roadmap for the 2026 general elections, including voter registration, constituency demarcation, and nomination processes. They emphasized their commitment to achieving procedural integrity through accurate voter registers, transparent nominations, and secure vote transmission. However, gaps in institutional coordination, particularly with UBOS and NIRA, present challenges to achieving full preparedness.
- **Address Issues of Declining Public Trust:** A recurring concern was the deficit of public trust in the Electoral Commission and the electoral process. Participants highlighted perceptions of partisan bias, inefficiencies in past elections, and voter apathy, as significant contributors to this trust deficit. Rebuilding confidence requires the EC to prioritize transparency, accountability, and continuous stakeholder engagement.
- **Mitigate the Commercialization of Elections:** The seminar underscored the growing commercialization of elections, where monetary incentives dominate voter behavior and undermine electoral integrity. This phenomenon, while difficult to regulate, has significant implications for the legitimacy of elected leaders and Uganda's democratic processes.
- **Support the Inclusion of Marginalized Groups:** While the EC has taken steps to address inclusivity—such as mapping persons with disabilities (PWDs)—participants questioned the effectiveness of these efforts. The short timelines for critical activities, coupled with limited stakeholder engagement, may hinder meaningful inclusion. Greater collaboration with CSOs and targeted outreach to marginalized groups are needed.
- **Address both Broader Political and Structural Issues:** Elections are deeply embedded in Uganda's broader political and structural landscape. Participants emphasized that procedural improvements alone are insufficient; a conducive political environment, genuine competition, and institutional fairness are equally critical. Structural barriers, including judicial weaknesses, security force overreach, and limited electoral reforms, remain major challenges.

## **7.0 . RECOMMENDATIONS**

- 1. Strengthen the Electoral Commission:** Enhance transparency and communication by ensuring continuous dialogue with stakeholders and developing clear guidelines for electoral processes.
- 2. Improve Institutional Coordination:** Coordinate with NIRA and UBOS to ensure accurate population and voter data, and introduce internal verification mechanisms for the voter register.
- 3. Implement Electoral Reforms:** Enable diaspora and prisoner voting, clarify the role of special interest groups, and address commercialization of elections and electronic voting systems through legislative amendments.
- 4. Promote Inclusivity and Participation:** Conduct targeted voter education campaigns and enhance accessibility for persons with disabilities to ensure broad participation in elections.
- 5. Counter Commercialization and Social Media Misinformation:** Develop a framework for monitoring and regulating campaign financing, and strengthen efforts to combat misinformation through media literacy campaigns.
- 6. Ensure a Conducive Political Environment:** Advocate for neutrality and professionalism among security agencies, and strengthen judicial mechanisms for resolving electoral disputes to maintain a fair political environment.

## 8. CONCLUSION

The second seminar in the *Navigating Uganda's Political Future* series provided a platform for dialogue on Uganda's preparedness for the 2026 general elections. It brought together diverse voices, including the Electoral Commission, CSOs, researchers, and academics, to discuss progress, challenges, and opportunities in Uganda's electoral processes. Key areas of progress included the Electoral Commission's comprehensive roadmap and commitment to improving procedural integrity. However, challenges such as public trust deficits, commercialization of elections, and institutional coordination gaps remain. Participants emphasized the need for collective action and accountability from multiple stakeholders, including transparency and inclusivity from the Electoral Commission, legislative reforms, proactive roles for CSOs, neutrality among security forces, and active citizen engagement. The seminar affirmed that elections are embedded within Uganda's broader socio-political fabric, requiring both procedural improvements and efforts to create a conducive political environment.

## About Centre for Basic Research

The Centre for Basic Research (CBR), established in 1987 as a member institute of the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA) in Dakar, Senegal, is an academic non-governmental organization dedicated to generating and disseminating knowledge through research on socially, economically, and politically relevant issues in Africa. CBR aims to influence policy, raise public awareness, and improve quality of life while nurturing researchers in Uganda, Africa, and beyond. Its mission is to conduct both basic and applied research on various social, economic, and political issues. Since its inception, CBR has advocated for Ugandan and African scholars to shape national agendas through locally generated knowledge, covering areas such as democracy, governance, constitutionalism, gender studies, decentralization, land tenure, social movements, labor studies, and cultural studies. CBR is also committed to building research capacity in East Africa, offering short courses that equip participants with research skills and foster independent thinkers. The organization's work is widely published as working papers, policy briefs, and books, and its library is one of Uganda's finest outside a university setting, holding the latest social science publications, government and grey literature, Uganda's largest newspaper clipping collection, and a wide range of journals. To date, CBR has published over 150 peer-reviewed books and working papers.

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