

Research Article

Museveni and Politics of Homosexuality in Uganda: 'Preserving African Values' or Political Cover Up

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Abstract

This paper examines the politicization of homosexuality in Uganda under President Yoweri Museveni, interrogating whether the state's anti-homosexuality stance genuinely reflects an effort to preserve African cultural values or functions primarily as a political strategy for regime survival and legitimacy. Drawing upon historical, political, legal, and human rights perspectives, the study traces the evolution of Uganda's anti-homosexuality discourse from the colonial era to the enactment of the Anti-Homosexuality Act of 2023. The paper argues that while the Ugandan government frames homosexuality as a foreign threat to African morality, religion, and family structures, the politicization of sexuality has increasingly served as a mechanism for diverting public attention from governance failures, economic challenges, corruption, democratic decline, and growing political opposition. The study further demonstrates how Museveni's regime has strategically employed anti-LGBTQ+ rhetoric to consolidate conservative support, strengthen nationalist sentiments, and portray itself as a defender of African sovereignty against alleged Western cultural imperialism. At the same time, the paper reveals the paradoxical influence of foreign conservative evangelical groups, particularly from the United States, in shaping Uganda's contemporary anti-homosexuality campaigns. Through an analysis of constitutional provisions, penal laws, parliamentary debates, and international reactions, the paper highlights the intersection between sexuality, state power, religion, nationalism, and authoritarian governance in Uganda. The findings indicate that homosexuality has become a political scapegoat within Uganda's broader governance framework, enabling the state to manufacture moral panic while legitimizing repression and restricting civil liberties. The paper concludes that the politics of homosexuality in Uganda extends beyond cultural preservation and instead reflects a calculated political project aimed at maintaining regime authority and controlling public discourse. In doing so, the study contributes to broader debates on sexuality, post-colonial identity, human rights, and statecraft in contemporary Africa.

Keywords: Homosexuality, Uganda, Yoweri Museveni, African values, politics, authoritarianism, LGBTQ+, nationalism, human rights, governance.

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1. Introduction

Uganda gained independence from Britain in 1962. The subsequent period was marked by civil war, ethnic rivalry, and the brutal dictatorships of Milton Obote (1962-1971, 1980-1986) and Idi Amin (1971-1979), a turmoil that lasted until the mid-1980s. By the time President Yoweri Museveni's National Resistance Army (NRM, also known as the Movement) seized power in early 1986, the country's economy was in shambles, with inflation exceeding 240 percent. Once in power, President Museveni brought relative political and economic stability to Uganda.

After a long transitional period, Museveni was formally elected to a five-year term in 1996 through direct presidential elections held under what was then known (until 2005) as a "no-party" system. Museveni argued that multiparty politics could only be introduced once the no-party system had succeeded in eliminating the threat of a return to sectarian politics. In a 2000 national referendum on the matter,

90.7 percent of Ugandans voted to retain the no-party system. In the 2001 elections, President Museveni won 69 percent of the vote, while his former ally and personal physician, KizzaBesigye, received 27 percent.

In March 2003, President Museveni suggested lifting the ban on multi-party politics. In May 2005, parliament voted to approve a referendum to officially instate a multi-party system (Dagne, 2009: 2). During this same period, Museveni and his supporters fought a constitutional battle to lift the two-term limit for a president. In July 2005, parliament voted to remove this restriction. Consequently, in the first multi-party elections in 26 years held in 2006, President Museveni won again with 59 percent of the vote, while his main rival, KizzaBesigye, secured 37 percent. International election observers did not condemn the results but did not fully endorse the process, as the elections were marred by intimidation, counting irregularities, voter name deletions, and a show of force by the government.

President Museveni was re-elected to a fourth term in February 2011, with his long-time rival Dr. Besigye receiving only 25 percent of the vote. Museveni's NRM party also won 76 percent of the 384 parliamentary seats. With the ability to sway NRM rebel Members of Parliament (MPs), Museveni stood to gain an even bigger parliamentary majority, potentially allowing him to change the constitution again. Museveni won the 2011 elections using significant financial resources and smart tactics, yet the regime's attitude remained defensive throughout. According to The Africa Report (2011: 38), "Military and regular police roamed the streets both in the north and south of the country, geared up in anti-riot paraphernalia that had been imported just before the elections. For many Ugandans, it was a reminder of the bad old days." The immense military presence was officially justified by the July 2010 Al-Shabaab bombings, but the obvious reason was fear that popular uprisings, similar to those in North Africa, could trigger a Tahrir Square-style uprising in Kampala.

In the months following the election, violent outbreaks sporadically erupted across the city due to Museveni's treatment of his opponent, Dr. Besigye, who questioned the results and alleged foul play. Museveni reacted to these outbreaks with extreme aggression, stating that he would literally "eat" anyone who dared to cause havoc in his country. All of this unfolded even before his official inauguration.

Many observers have compared Museveni to Julius Nyerere and Nelson Mandela, but closer scrutiny places him farther down the line. Oloka-Onyango (2005: 36) provides good insight into the man, writing, "Museveni can be described as a conundrum of paradoxes: he is a dictator with some democratic tendencies, and a market-reformed Marxist. Each of these character traits vies for expression and supremacy." In fact, Museveni shares characteristics with his most hated enemies. Like Idi Amin, Museveni has an unflagging belief in the effectiveness of military action to solve virtually every problem and also maintained a close friendship with Muammar Gaddafi. His relationship with Obote is more complex; Obote was both a mentor and a nemesis, and many of Museveni's political maneuvers closely resemble Obote's. Like Obote, Museveni believes in the supremacy of his political organization and his own ability to manoeuvre the political elites.

Central to Museveni's worldview is the primacy of security over all other public goods. Defence spending has consequently grown to overshadow any other sector as a proportion of national expenditure, and even attempts by international donors to limit this spending have been unsuccessful. Nonetheless, during his 25 years in office, Museveni introduced numerous reforms to the Ugandan body politic, economy, civil

society, and state operations. These reforms included affirmative action for women, access to primary education, and a concerted effort against HIV/AIDS. Such reforms were in stark contrast to the policies of previous Ugandan leaders and led many to praise Museveni as a new breed of African leader.

This praise continued, even though an upsurge in armed conflict domestically and within the Great Lakes Region coincided with the rise of this "new leader." Recently, however, international acclaim for Museveni faded as people begin to question his intentions and leadership style especially on how he scapegoats on homosexuality for the political woes his country continues to face.

The State, the Scapegoat, and the Specter: Museveni and the Politics of Homosexuality in Uganda

In May 2023, President Yoweri Museveni of Uganda signed the Anti-Homosexuality Act into law, one of the most draconian pieces of anti-LGBTQ+ legislation in the world. The act, which prescribes the death penalty for "aggravated homosexuality" and lengthy prison sentences for simply identifying as LGBTQ+, was met with swift international condemnation. For Museveni, the nation's leader since 1986, this was not a sudden development but the climax of a meticulously choreographed political drama spanning decades. Officially, the legislation is framed as a righteous and necessary bulwark—a defense of Ugandan sovereignty, culture, and children from the corrosive influence of Western liberalism. The government and its allies consistently present their crusade as an act of "preserving African values." Yet, a critical examination of the historical and political context reveals a more cynical and calculated reality. While the narrative of cultural preservation resonates with powerful domestic constituencies, it functions primarily as a sophisticated political cover-up, a tool wielded by Museveni to distract from systemic governance failures, consolidate his waning political base, and maintain a delicate balancing act with international donors.

Although Uganda's Penal Code already criminalized same-sex intimacy under colonial-era provisions prohibiting acts "against the order of nature," the 2023 Act marks a qualitative escalation in state repression (Human Rights Watch 2023, 12). Unlike earlier statutes, the new law extends criminal liability beyond sexual conduct to include the "promotion of homosexuality," a term broadly defined to encompass advocacy, healthcare provision, housing assistance, and financial or legal support for LGBTQI+ individuals (International Commission of Jurists 2023, 9–10). These provisions effectively criminalize solidarity and humanitarian assistance, thereby denying sexual minorities access to essential services.

The Act's passage followed heightened moral panic within Uganda, amplified by allegations of sexual abuse at elite educational institutions and sustained lobbying by conservative religious actors, including U.S.-based evangelical movements (Human Rights Watch 2023, 18–19). Parliamentary debate reflected overwhelming political consensus: only two out of 389 Members of Parliament voted against the Bill, underscoring either entrenched homophobia within the legislature or intense political pressure to conform to party positions (Amnesty International 2023, 14). This legislation is not unprecedented. In 2014, a similar Anti-Homosexuality Act was passed but later annulled by Uganda's Constitutional Court due to procedural irregularities, specifically the lack of a parliamentary quorum (International Bar Association 2015, 22). The reintroduction of comparable legislation in 2023 suggests a persistent political willingness to instrumentalize sexuality as a site of moral governance and nationalist identity.

Since the Act's enactment, human rights organizations have documented a sharp increase in arrests, harassment, evictions, and violence against LGBTQI+ persons. Amnesty International reports that individuals accused under the Act face prolonged pre-trial detention, public outing, and denial of healthcare, with several cases already involving capital charges for "aggravated homosexuality" (Amnesty International 2023, 20–23). Human Rights Watch further notes that the law has emboldened non-state actors, contributing to mob violence and forced displacement (Human Rights Watch 2023, 27).

The revival of the death penalty under the Act carries deep historical resonance. Uganda has not carried out a civilian execution since 1999, yet capital punishment has repeatedly been invoked symbolically during periods of political instability (International Commission of Jurists 2023, 15). Scholars argue that the threat of execution functions less as a practical penal measure than as a display of sovereign power, intended to discipline both targeted minorities and the broader population. International responses to the Act were swift and punitive. The World Bank suspended new lending to Uganda, citing incompatibility with its core values of inclusion and non-discrimination, while several Western governments imposed visa restrictions and reduced development assistance (Human Rights Watch 2023, 31–32). These consequences mirrored reactions to the 2014 Act, reinforcing Uganda's international isolation while placing further strain on an economy heavily dependent on foreign aid.

The "Preservation of Values" Narrative: A Post-Colonial Shield

The official narrative is potent because it masterfully taps into a deep well of post-colonial sentiment and religious fervor. The government's rhetoric skillfully frames LGBTQ+ rights not as a universal human rights issue, but as a form of neo-colonial social engineering. President Museveni has repeatedly characterized the promotion of homosexuality as part of a broader "arrogant and disrespectful" Western agenda, stating that Western groups "are wrong to think they can dictate our morality" (Museveni, "State of the Nation Address"). This discourse finds eager and powerful allies among Uganda's religious leadership, particularly conservative evangelical Christians and Muslims, who see themselves as the moral guardians of the nation. By positioning himself as the chief defender of Ugandan culture and the Christian faith against foreign decadence, Museveni crafts an image of a strong, independent leader unafraid to stand up to the world's superpowers.

This "preservation of values" argument, however, relies on a selectively curated and monolithic view of "African values." It presents culture as static and immutable, ignoring the diverse and evolving social fabrics across the continent. As scholar Sylvia Tamale argues, this approach "commodifies culture, turning it into a weapon to be wielded against political enemies and marginalized groups, rather than a living, breathing social reality" (Tamale 121). The narrative conveniently ignores pre-colonial African societies that had different conceptions of gender and sexuality, instead championing a version of "morality" heavily influenced by Victorian-era colonial laws and contemporary Western evangelicalism. The claim, therefore, is not about preserving an authentic African past but about enforcing a specific, politically useful version of the present.

The Politics of Distraction: Scapegoating to Obscure Governance Failures

Beneath the veneer of cultural protection lies a more pragmatic and unsettling truth: the politicization of homosexuality is an effective tool for distraction and consolidation. For over three decades, Museveni's regime has been increasingly plagued by accusations of endemic corruption, soaring youth unemployment, and crumbling public services. Scandals involving the misappropriation of funds for health projects or infrastructure developments frequently dominate headlines, eroding public trust. The Anti-

Homosexuality Act provides a perfect "moral panic" to shift this public focus. As one report from Human Rights Watch noted, the government often amplifies social issues "when faced with mounting pressure over economic mismanagement and democratic backsliding, effectively creating a firestorm to distract from the state's own failures" (Human Rights Watch 34).

By creating a common enemy in a highly vulnerable and marginalized minority, the regime fosters a false sense of national unity under its leadership. This tactic, a classic populist strategy of scapegoating, allows a leader to channel public frustration and economic anxiety away from the government and onto an easily identifiable "other" (Tripp 112). Political opponents, too, can be tarred with the brush of being "pro-Western" or "sympathetic to the gay agenda," thereby neutralizing dissent before it can gain traction. In the lead-up to the 2021 general election, for instance, anti-LGBTQ+ rhetoric was noticeably amplified, a move analysts saw as a clear attempt to mobilize the conservative base and discredit opposition candidates who were painted as being soft on the issue (Nansubuga 55).

Politically, the timing of the Act is significant. With the 2026 presidential elections approaching, President Yoweri Museveni faces mounting pressure from a youthful population grappling with unemployment, inflation, and political disillusionment. The aggressive enforcement of the Anti-Homosexuality Act serves as a populist strategy designed to mobilize conservative sentiment and distract from socioeconomic grievances (International Bar Association 2015, 29).

The Anti-Homosexuality Act of 2023 illustrates the continued use of sexuality as a tool of authoritarian governance. By conflating consensual same-sex relationships with criminality and moral decay, the Ugandan state legitimizes discrimination while undermining constitutional protections and international human rights norms. For those prosecuted under the Act, the consequences are severe and enduring, rendering them not only victims of legal repression but also expendable instruments in an increasingly coercive political order.

The International Balancing Act: Donors, Defiance, and Diplomacy

The politics of homosexuality also serves as a key instrument in Museveni's complex diplomatic dance with the international community. Uganda remains heavily reliant on foreign aid from Western nations like the United States, the United Kingdom, and the World Bank. By publicly and defiantly championing anti-LGBTQ+ legislation, Museveni projects an image of strength and sovereignty to his domestic audience, bolstering his credentials as a leader who will not be pushed around by foreign powers. This "performative defiance" is a powerful political tool.

However, this is a carefully calibrated performance. The long and often drawn-out process of signing such bills—marked by presidential delays, requests for "scientific" reviews, and diplomatic meetings—reveals an attempt to mitigate the potential financial repercussions. After the passage of the initial Anti-Homosexuality Act in 2014, several Western countries, including the United States, suspended aid, and the World Bank delayed a \$90 million loan. Museveni's government learned from this. While he ultimately signs the laws to please his base, his administration immediately sends envoys to reassure donors, negotiate behind the scenes, and emphasize other areas of cooperation. This strategy allows him to have it both ways: a hero at home and a manageable, if problematic, partner abroad. Furthermore, the growing influence of non-Western donors like China, which explicitly ties its aid to economic rather than human

rights conditions, gives Museveni more leverage to defy Western pressure without catastrophic financial consequences.

The "Foreign" Influence: Unmasking the Role of American Evangelicals

Crucially, the narrative of a purely homegrown "African values" movement is fatally undermined by the significant role of external actors, particularly American evangelical conservatives. Since the early 2000s, a network of right-wing American pastors and activists has actively cultivated relationships with Ugandan religious and political leaders. Figures like Scott Lively held conferences in Kampala, presenting homosexuality as a predatory Western import that needed to be violently repelled. Journalist and researcher Kapyka Kaoma extensively documented this phenomenon, showing how "the export of a 'culture war' agenda from the United States found fertile ground in Uganda, where it was merged with local anxieties and ambitions to create a potent political force" (Kaoma 203).

The very first iteration of the bill, dubbed the "Kill the Gays" bill in 2009, was directly authored by a parliamentarian, David Bahati, who had close ties to these American groups. The ideological framework, the talking points about a "gay agenda," and the strategy of framing it as a defense of children were all imports. This involvement exposes the profound hypocrisy at the heart of the government's argument. Museveni's regime is not resisting Western influence; it is actively welcoming and embracing a specific, conservative brand of Western ideology that aligns perfectly with its domestic political goals.

The Human Cost: Beyond Political Maneuvering

While the political machinations are complex, the real cost of this cynical game is paid in human lives and suffering. The state-sanctioned animosity has created a toxic environment where violence against LGBTQ+ people is not only tolerated but encouraged. Following the passage of the 2023 law, there was a documented surge in arrests, evictions, and physical assaults. Many LGBTQ+ Ugandans have been forced into hiding, fleeing their homes and leaving their jobs to escape public outing and mob justice (Mugisha 90). The law has also had a devastating impact on public health. It has crippled HIV/AIDS prevention and treatment programs targeted at men who have sex with men, as providing such services could now be interpreted as "promoting" homosexuality. This not only violates the right to health but threatens to reverse decades of progress in combating the epidemic. The psychological toll is immeasurable, with mental health services reporting a sharp increase in cases of anxiety and depression among the LGBTQ+ community.

In conclusion, while President Museveni and his supporters insist that their aggressive stance on homosexuality is a noble defense of African culture, the evidence overwhelmingly suggests it is a multifaceted and deeply cynical political strategy. The rhetoric of cultural preservation is a convenient and emotionally resonant shield for a regime desperate to maintain its grip on power. By manufacturing a moral crisis, the government distracts from its profound governance failures, demonizes a minority to unify its fractious base, and manipulates its relationship with international donors. The real victims are the LGBTQ+ Ugandans whose lives, safety, and fundamental human rights are sacrificed on the altar of political expediency. Their plight exposes the ugly truth that for the Ugandan state, the politics of homosexuality has never truly been about preserving values, but about preserving power.

Contemporary trends

The current position of the law on homosexuality in Uganda is that Ugandan activists not only have to deal with the unnatural offences provisions of the Penal Code but also with the Constitution and a myriad of other laws. Article 31(2) (a) of the Constitution of Uganda provides that 'Marriage between persons of the same sex is prohibited'. It is interesting that at this point the Constitution takes on the nature of a penal statute and imposes a prohibition, a provision that was not originally part of the Constitution, but 'sneaked in' during the 2005 amendment of the Constitution which saw an omnibus amendment Bill, with many and varying provisions being introduced at once.

What most people focused on was the proposal to remove presidential term limits and thus this provision passed without much public or even parliamentary debate (Kabumba 112). Under section 145 of the Penal Code Act, unnatural offences are criminalised (Penal Code Act Cap. 120, Sec. 145). To avoid any confusion, the provision is reproduced here: "145. Unnatural offences. Any person who (a) has carnal knowledge of any person against the order of nature; (b) has carnal knowledge of an animal; or (c) permits a male person to have carnal knowledge of him or her against the order of nature, commits an offence and is liable to imprisonment for life. 146. Attempt to commit unnatural offences. Any person who attempts to commit any of the offences specified in section 145 commits a felony and is liable to imprisonment for seven years." Flowing from this, Section 15(6) (d) of the Equal Opportunities Commission Act 2007 prevents the Equal Opportunities

Commission from investigating matters which are regarded as immoral or unacceptable by the majority of the social and cultural groupings in Uganda. This Commission is established by statute to 'eliminate discrimination and inequalities against any individual or group of persons on the ground of sex, age, race, colour, ethnic origin, tribe, birth, creed, opinion or disability, and take affirmative action in favour of groups marginalized on the basis of gender, age, disability or any other reason created by history, tradition or custom for the purpose of redressing imbalances which exist against them' (Republic of Uganda 5).

The parliamentary Hansards show that this provision was inserted because 'the homosexuals and the like have managed to forge their way through in other countries by identifying with minorities. If it is not properly put in the clause, they can easily find their way through fighting discrimination. They can claim that since they are part of the minority, they can fight against marginalisation' (Uganda, Parliamentary Hansard 45).

To summarise the current legal situation, one cannot contract a legal gay marriage under Ugandan law. It is criminal to engage in same-sex sexual acts and homosexuals cannot seek remedies from the Equal Opportunities Commission, a commission set up to promote equality for all. The law as it now stands does not draw a distinction between consensual same-sex relations and non-consensual same-sex relations (Human Rights Watch 22). However, it does not criminalise being homosexual, although many of those that have suffered under these laws have been arrested merely on suspicion of being homosexual (SMUG 8). Evidently the struggle for decriminalisation requires different approaches from those employed elsewhere as perhaps more than any other country Uganda is legally and socially hostile to homosexuality.

2. Conclusion

The politics of homosexuality in Uganda under President Yoweri Museveni demonstrates the close relationship between state power, nationalism, religion, and political survival in post-colonial Africa. Although the Ugandan government presents its anti-homosexuality stance as a defense of African cultural values and morality, this paper has shown that

homosexuality has increasingly been used as a political tool to consolidate power, mobilize conservative support, and divert public attention from governance challenges such as corruption, economic hardship, unemployment, and democratic decline. The study further established that Uganda's anti-homosexuality laws are rooted in colonial legal frameworks inherited from British rule. Despite homosexuality being portrayed as "un-African," the criminalization of same-sex relations originates largely from colonial legislation. Through the Anti-Homosexuality Act of 2023 and related legal provisions, the Ugandan state has transformed sexuality into a mechanism for moral governance and political control.

The paper also revealed the role of religious institutions and foreign evangelical movements, particularly from the United States, in shaping Uganda's anti-LGBTQ+ campaigns. This undermines claims that the movement is purely an indigenous defense of African culture. At the same time, the legislation has intensified discrimination, violence, stigmatization, and human rights violations against LGBTQ+ individuals, while also damaging Uganda's international image and relations with development partners. The study concludes that the anti-homosexuality agenda in Uganda functions less as a genuine preservation of African values and more as a calculated political strategy aimed at preserving regime legitimacy and authority. By creating moral panic around homosexuality, the state redirects public frustrations away from structural governance failures while strengthening authoritarian control.

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