

Sovereignty Bill: What changed, what didn't

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KAMPALA — Uganda's controversial Sovereignty Bill has taken a decisive turn, with Attorney General Kiryowa Kiwanuka introducing sweeping amendments that narrow its scope while attempting to preserve its central aim: shielding the country's political decision-making from foreign influence.

"For avoidance of doubt, the Act applies to a person who acts as an agent of a foreigner and engages in political activities through any means, including digital platforms," Kiwanuka said as he presented the revised proposals.

The clarification, though technical on the surface, signals a major recalibration. The original bill, first tabled on April 15 by State Minister for Internal Affairs David Muhoozi, had sparked widespread concern across Parliament, civil society, the private sector and Uganda's international partners. Critics feared it cast too wide a net, potentially capturing ordinary business transactions, diaspora remittances and even religious or charitable activity.

At its core, the legislation is an attempt to define and control foreign influence in Uganda, a sensitive issue in an era where political messaging, funding and advocacy increasingly flow across borders, often through digital platforms.

President Yoweri Museveni, who intervened after the initial backlash, sought to draw a clear line between what the law should and should not do. Sovereignty, he argued, must be understood in practical terms: the ability of Ugandans to make their own policy decisions without external pressure.

"I have talked to Hamson Obua and the Chairpersons of the relevant Parliamentary Committees to make the Bill concentrate on the Sovereignty of policy decision making and not to meander in the areas of the freedom of private enterprise transfers or private money transfers or church donations," Museveni said.

"That is not the Bill I initiated," he added, distancing himself from provisions that critics said could disrupt investment and financial flows.

The Attorney General's amendments appear to follow that directive. Among the most significant changes is the removal of an expansive definition of "foreigner" that had alarmed many observers. In its earlier form, the bill could have classified Ugandans living abroad, international organisations and foreign-linked entities as "foreigners," effectively subjecting them to new restrictions.

The revised version narrows the focus to individuals who act on behalf of foreign interests, specifically within Uganda's political space. In practical



Kiryowa Kiwanuka

terms, this means the law targets those who organise, fund or influence political activity, such as lobbying, campaigning or mobilisation, under foreign direction.

Kiwanuka also sought to reassure stakeholders that legitimate economic activity would not be affected.

"This Act shall not be construed as prohibiting lawful foreign direct investment, diaspora remittances, trade finance, commercial loans, humanitarian assistance or development support," he said.

For many Ugandans, that distinction is crucial. Remittances from the diaspora form a significant part of household income, while foreign investment and development assistance underpin major sectors of the economy.

Yet even with the amendments, the bill remains far-reaching.

It defines "political activities" broadly as any actions intended to influence public policy, legislation or government decision-making. That could include campaigning, advocacy, fundraising or even organised civic engagement, areas where the line between legitimate participation and prohibited influence can be difficult to draw.

The bill also introduces stringent disclosure and enforcement measures. Individuals or entities receiving more than Shs400 million in foreign funding within a year would be required to declare those funds to the government. Failure to comply could trigger legal consequences.

More controversially, the legislation provides for severe penalties. Those found to be acting as foreign agents

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while spreading false information or engaging in activities deemed harmful to Uganda's economy could face charges of economic sabotage, a serious offence under Ugandan law.

Supporters argue that such provisions are necessary in a global environment where influence operations are increasingly sophisticated and difficult to detect.

But critics warn that the breadth of the definitions leaves room for interpretation and potential misuse.

Those concerns came into sharp focus during parliamentary committee deliberations, where tensions over the bill escalated into open confrontation.

At a weekend joint committee meeting held at Speke Resort Munyonyo, lawmakers clashed over whether to fast-track the amended bill without a detailed clause-by-clause review. What began as a procedural disagreement quickly deteriorated.

Accounts from those present describe a chaotic scene. Voices were raised, tempers flared, and at one point, the situation nearly turned physical, forcing security personnel to intervene.

Despite the disorder, the committee proceeded to adopt its report by a vote of 24 to 11.

For some legislators, the process itself has become a point of contention.

"There was a serious issue with the definition of a foreigner. In the original bill, any Ugandan living outside the country would be considered a foreigner. That is unacceptable," said Kilak South MP Gilbert Olanya.

"You cannot leave Uganda today, cross

to Kenya tomorrow and be labelled a foreigner," he added, underscoring concerns about how the law might affect ordinary citizens.

Olanya also questioned the speed and transparency of the process.

"It appears as if the report was prepared elsewhere. What we were doing in Munyonyo was simply rubber-stamping," he said, describing the atmosphere as "highly charged."

Other MPs echoed similar concerns, arguing that a bill of such national importance required more thorough scrutiny and broader consultation.

Dissenting legislators are now preparing a minority report, signaling that the debate is far from settled.

Government officials, however, have rejected claims that the process was flawed.

"That is completely false. All stakeholders were given an opportunity to present their views, and we also considered the President's guidance," said Kagoma North County MP Brandon Kintu, who also serves as spokesperson for the ruling National Resistance Movement caucus.

For the government, the bill is part of a broader effort to safeguard Uganda's autonomy in a rapidly changing world. As global influence becomes more diffuse, flowing through NGOs, media, digital platforms and financial networks, the challenge of distinguishing between cooperation and interference has grown more complex.

The Sovereignty Bill is an attempt to draw that line.

But doing so without constraining legitimate activity remains the central tension.

For businesses, the key question is whether the law will introduce uncertainty into investment flows. For civil society, it is whether advocacy and civic engagement could be curtailed. For ordinary citizens, particularly those in the diaspora, it is whether their financial contributions and connections to home could be affected.

And for Uganda's international partners, the bill raises broader questions about the country's openness and regulatory direction.

As it moves to the floor of Parliament, the legislation now carries not just legal implications, but political and economic weight.

Supporters see it as a necessary assertion of independence, a way to ensure that national decisions are made in Kampala, not influenced from abroad.

Critics see risk, that in trying to guard against external pressure, the country could inadvertently restrict internal freedoms and complicate its engagement with the world.

The amendments introduced by the Attorney General may have narrowed the bill's scope, but they have not resolved the underlying debate.

At its heart lies a question that many countries are now grappling with: how to protect sovereignty in an interconnected world where ideas, money and influence move faster than ever.

Uganda's answer, still taking shape in Parliament, will define not only the future of this law, but the balance it strikes between control and openness in the years ahead.