

Uganda's most controversial parliament finally closes

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KAMPALA — When Uganda's Eleventh Parliament first convened in 2021, it entered office carrying the weight of enormous expectations. The country was emerging from a bruising election cycle marked by political tension, heavy security deployment and growing public frustration over unemployment, corruption and service delivery.

Many Ugandans hoped the new House would become a stronger check on executive power and a more responsive platform for public concerns.

Five years later, the Parliament has formally dissolved, leaving behind a record that is both undeniably productive and deeply polarising.

Measured by numbers alone, the Eleventh Parliament was one of the busiest in Uganda's recent history. Over its tenure, MPs held more than 450 sittings and passed at least 166 bills. The House processed legislation at remarkable speed, often under intense timelines, reinforcing the image of a Parliament determined to move government business quickly.

But speed came with consequences.

Again and again, Parliament found itself accused of sacrificing scrutiny for efficiency, public participation for urgency, and institutional independence for political alignment. By the time the House bowed out this week at the end of its constitutional mandate, its legacy had become a complicated mixture of legislative activism, public controversy and growing distrust.

At the centre of that contradiction was a fundamental question: was the Eleventh Parliament truly exercising independent legislative authority, or merely accelerating executive priorities?

The answer depends heavily on who is asked.

Government supporters point to a House that aggressively pursued legal reforms and maintained legislative momentum at a time when Uganda was grappling with economic pressure, institutional restructuring and regional instability. Major laws were passed rapidly, ministries were funded, and government programmes moved forward with little procedural paralysis.

WEAKENING OVERSIGHT ROLE

Yet critics argue that this productivity masked something deeper, the gradual weakening of Parliament's oversight role. Some of the House's most defining moments came not through consensus, but conflict.

The National Coffee Amendment Bill became one such flashpoint. The government defended the law as part of a broader rationalisation programme intended to merge agencies and reduce public expenditure. Critics, however, viewed it differently. Coffee remains Uganda's most important export crop and a lifeline for millions of households. For opponents, the restructuring appeared



Parliament in session

less like efficiency reform and more like an attempt to centralise state control over a critical sector.

The debate eventually exploded into physical confrontation inside Parliament itself. Kilak North MP Anthony Akol and Mityana Municipality MP Francis Zaake clashed violently on the parliamentary floor as proceedings descended into chaos.

The scenes carried symbolic weight far beyond the fight itself.

Parliament is designed to embody structured democratic disagreement, a place where national tensions are debated through procedure, argument and negotiation. When MPs exchange blows in the chamber, it reflects something larger: the rising intensity of Uganda's political divisions and the shrinking space for consensus politics.

Speaker Anita Among responded forcefully, suspending several opposition MPs, including Zaake, Shamim Malende, Asinansi Nyakato and others. Supporters of the suspensions argued discipline had to be restored. Critics warned that punitive measures were increasingly being used to suppress dissenting voices within the House itself.

That same tension resurfaced repeatedly throughout the Parliament's tenure.

Perhaps no legislation attracted more international attention than the Anti-Homosexuality Act of 2023. The law triggered condemnation from Western governments, human rights organisations and international advocacy groups, many of whom argued it violated fundamental rights protections.

Inside Uganda, however, the political picture was more complicated.

The law received strong support from sections of the public, especially among conservative religious communities who viewed it as a defence of cultural and moral values. The divide exposed a recurring

pattern in Ugandan politics: legislation condemned abroad can simultaneously generate domestic political approval at home.

Parliament understood this dynamic clearly.

For many MPs, backing the law aligned not only with ideology, but also with local political survival. Opposition to the bill risked being portrayed as opposition to cultural identity itself.

LEGACY OF SCANDALS AND CASHOUTS

But while Parliament projected strength on social issues, its own institutional image steadily weakened under corruption allegations and financial scandals.

One of the most damaging controversies involved the allocation of Shs1.7 billion in service awards to parliamentary commissioners, including a Shs500 million payment to then-Leader of Opposition Mathias Mpuuga. Public outrage was immediate and intense.

The timing proved politically disastrous.

At a moment when many hospitals, schools and local governments were struggling with underfunding, the payments appeared disconnected from the economic realities facing ordinary Ugandans. The fallout fractured opposition politics, triggered calls for accountability and reinforced growing public perceptions of political elites as insulated from national hardship.

Meanwhile, corruption cases involving legislators further eroded trust.

In 2024, several MPs, including Igara East's Michael Mawanda, Elgon County's Ignatius Mudimi and Busiki County's Paul Akamba, were remanded on allegations linked to the misappropriation of war loss compensation funds intended for Buyaka Growers Cooperative Society

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Limited. Although some cases were later discontinued, the reputational damage lingered.

For many Ugandans, the scandals reinforced a painful contradiction.

Parliament routinely debated accountability and anti-corruption measures while simultaneously battling accusations of impropriety within its own ranks.

Outside Parliament, frustration deepened.

Bob Kirenga, Executive Director of the National Coalition of Human Rights Defenders, argued the House increasingly failed to prioritise citizens' immediate concerns.

"It kept passing supplementary budgets that were clearly meant to defraud the country, as opposed to critical concerns like ensuring medical interns are fully funded," he said.

He accused Parliament of weakening its own constitutional authority through laws such as the Protection of Sovereignty Bill, arguing legislators had drifted too close to executive interests.

"Their first loyalty should be to the citizens and the progressive Constitution, not the executive," Kirenga said.

Kira Municipality MP-elect George Musisi argued Parliament increasingly ignored procedural safeguards and, at times, even court rulings. "It was, in most cases, driven by emotional legislation," he said.

Yet despite the criticism, the Eleventh Parliament also reflected broader structural realities within Uganda's political system.

ALL EYES ON 12TH PARLIAMENT

Uganda's Parliament operates inside a highly centralised political environment where executive influence remains dominant. Fast-tracking government business is often rewarded institutionally and politically, while resistance can carry consequences for both ruling-party and opposition legislators.

This means many of Parliament's tensions were not simply personal or procedural. They reflected deeper questions about the separation of powers, democratic culture and the actual limits of legislative independence in Uganda's governance structure.

Now attention shifts to the Twelfth Parliament.

The immediate battle, as Musisi noted, centres around the Speaker's office, a position that shapes not only parliamentary procedure, but the tone and authority of the institution itself.

Behind that contest lies a larger national question.

Can Uganda's next Parliament restore public trust while remaining productive? Can it strengthen oversight without paralysing governance? And can it balance political discipline with democratic openness at a time when public frustration toward institutions is steadily growing?

The Eleventh Parliament leaves behind no simple verdict.

It was energetic, aggressive and historically productive. But it was also combative, controversial and increasingly mistrusted. And perhaps that contradiction says as much about Uganda's wider political condition as it does about Parliament itself.