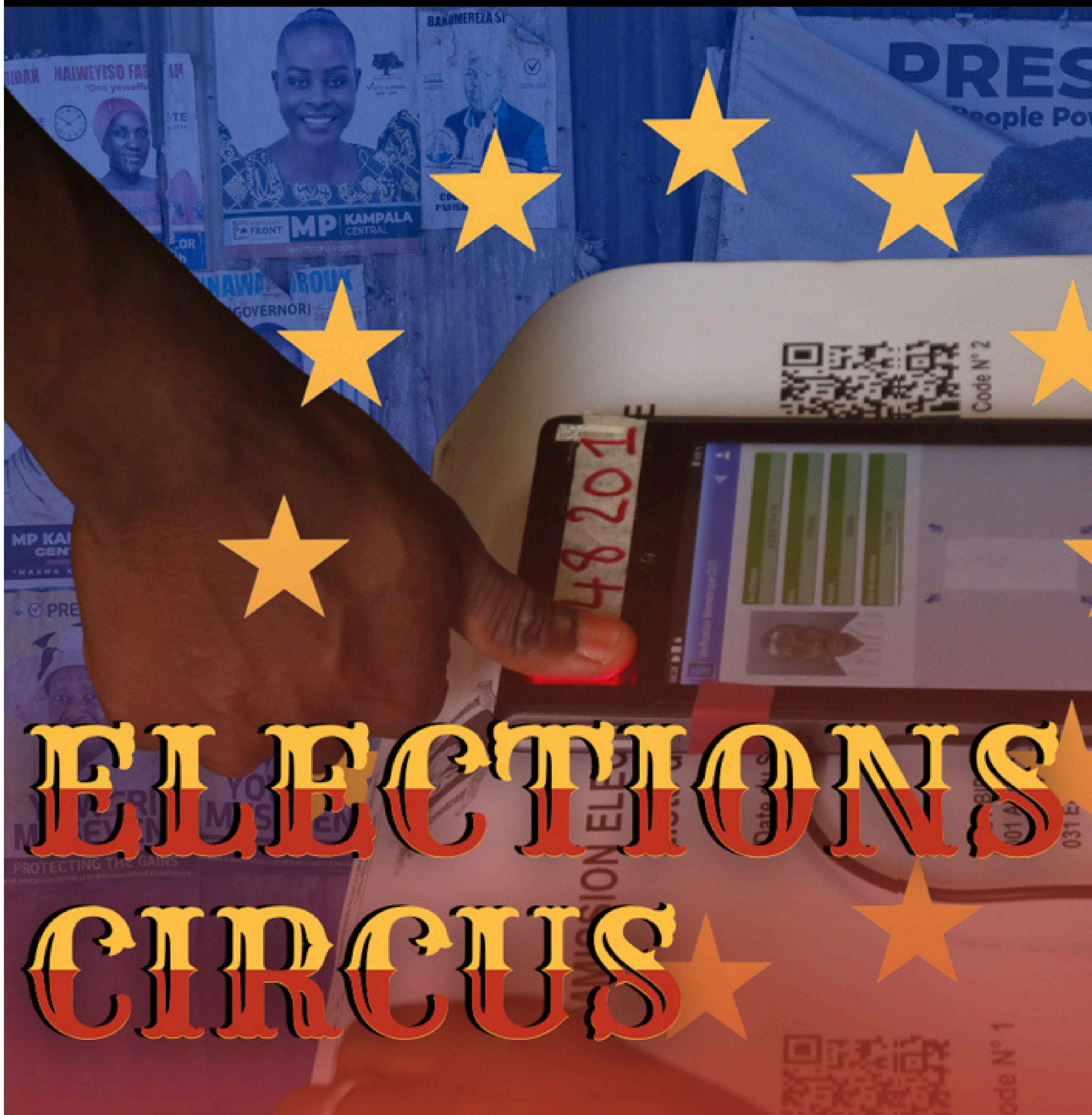




# Restraint and Fear



*By ZAM Reporter*

**Millions of EU money in “elections support” prop up bad African leaders**

An estimated hundred+ million euros of EU taxpayers’ money, intended to support democratic elections in five African countries, has instead strengthened autocratic and corrupt leaders in these countries over the past decade. Expensive training programmes and workshops for state officials, ruling parties and police have been funded with this money, while countless “voter education” programmes continue to prop up a façade of democracy in places where even the best-educated citizens are cheated out of their votes. EU observer missions have regularly pointed out failings, but change has not followed.

These findings result from a five-month-long investigation across five African countries: Kenya, Zambia, Ivory Coast, Nigeria, and Uganda. The project, conducted by investigative journalists in each of these countries, spans ten election cycles in total and traces the history of EU election funding across these cycles over the past decade.

Continues on page 2

# Elections Circus

From page 1

The total amount spent by Europe—though difficult to determine due to a lack of information from various EU offices in the countries concerned, and incomplete information from the EU in Brussels—over this period is estimated at at least €100 million.

## Counting Euros for African elections

Financial data on EU election support in the five countries, obtained through an appeal to EU Regulation 1049/200 which grants EU citizens the right of access to EU documents, was provided to ZAM in the form of an extensive Excel spreadsheet. As per our request, the sheet reflected amounts paid to state structures in the five countries, either directly or through intermediaries’ so-called basket funding, as well as amounts intended for civil society, often through European-based NGOs.

Following this money in the five countries, we discovered that the sheet was incomplete in some instances; we added the extra amounts we found. In other instances, we discarded amounts -like training projects for young entrepreneurs- that appeared unrelated to elections. The detail is in the country chapters; in the graph below we reflect only what we believe to be a fair representation of the totals.

Due to its size, we were unable to reproduce this sheet in a legible form with our story. A partial screenshot is placed below; the entire sheet can be made available upon request.

	A	B	C	D	E	F	G
	Domaine	Année contrat	Secteur	Titre du contrat	Contractant	Zone bénéficiaire de l'action	Montant prévu
1							
2	EOM	2020	Élections	ExM to Côte d'Ivoire 2020	INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATION FOR MIGRATION	Côte d'Ivoire	197,896.00
3	FED	2020	Élections	Projet d'Appui aux Élections en Côte d'Ivoire (PACE)	UNITED NATIONS DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME	Côte d'Ivoire	1,000,000.00
4	FED	2020	Élections	Contribution au "Projet d'Appui aux Élections en Côte d'Ivoire (PACE)"	UNITED NATIONS DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME	Côte d'Ivoire	1,000,000.00
5	NDICI HR INTPA	2022	Élections	"Contribution au Projet d'Appui aux Élections en Côte d'Ivoire (PACE II)"	UNITED NATIONS DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME	Côte d'Ivoire	400,000.00
6	NDICI HR INTPA	2024	Élections	Projet d'appui au respect des droits de l'homme dans les processus électoraux (PARDHE) de 2025-2027 en Côte d'Ivoire	DANISH INSTITUTE FOR HUMAN RIGHTS IDDH	Côte d'Ivoire	900,000.00
7	CSO-LA	2019	Participation démocratique et société civile	"Éthique pour la démocratie et la cohésion sociale à l'initiative des jeunes et des femmes en période électorale en Côte d'Ivoire"	KONRAD-ADENAUER-STIFTUNG EV	Côte d'Ivoire	748,706.56
8	NDICI CRISIS FPI	2022	Participation démocratique et société civile	Projet de prévention de la violence politique et renforcement de la cohésion sociale par le dialogue et la collaboration citoyenne en Côte d'Ivoire	INTERPEACE EUROPE AISBL	Côte d'Ivoire	1,909,935.00
9	EIDHR	2021	Élections	Safeguarding the Integrity of the 2022 Electoral processes Through Citizen Observation	CONSTITUTION AND REFORM EDUCATION CONSORTIUM	Kenya	450,000.00
10	FED	2021	Élections	Consolidating Democratic Dividends for Sustainable Transformation in Kenya	UNITED NATIONS DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME	Kenya	4,700,000.00
11	NDICI EOM FPI	2022	Élections	ExM Kenya 2022	INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATION FOR MIGRATION	Kenya	109,059.54
12	NDICI HR INTPA	2024	Élections	Promoting Inclusive Electoral Reforms in Kenya (PIER-K)	OSLOENTERET	Kenya	970,000.00
13	CSO-LA	2019	Organisations et mouvements de défense des droits des femmes et institutions gouvernementales	BEAWE: BE proactive actors for Women Empowerment and gender equality in Kenya	AMREF HEALTH AFRICA ETS	Kenya	699,991.61
14	NDICI CSO	2022	Participation démocratique et société civile	Strengthening the capacity of county-based and grassroots civil society groups for enhanced governance, accountability and protection of human rights of the people of Kenya	KANSALAIJARJESTOJEN IHIMISOKEUSSAATIO KIOS SR	Kenya	2,860,500.00
15	NDICI HR INTPA	2022	Participation démocratique et société civile	Democratisation, participation and inclusion in Kenya: Political empowerment through political parties	STICHTING NETHERLANDS INSTITUTE FOR MULTIPARTY DEMOCRACY	Kenya	900,000.00
16	FED	2020	Élections	EU Support to Democratic Governance in Nigeria (EU SDGN) Component 5F	YIAGA AFRICA INITIATIVE	Nigeria	970,173.10
17	FED	2020	Élections	EU Support to Democratic Governance in Nigeria (EU SDGN) Component 5G	PREMIUM TIMES CENTRE FOR INVESTIGATIVE JOURNALISM	Nigeria	255,047.49
18	NDICI AFRICA	2022	Élections	EU Support to Democratic Governance in Nigeria (EU-SDGN) Programme Phase II: Component 4 - Strengthening The Media For Fair, Ethical And Inclusive Coverage Of Electoral Processes In Nigeria.	INTERNATIONAL PRESS CENTRE	Nigeria	3,000,000.00
19	NDICI AFRICA	2022	Élections	EU Support to Democratic Governance in Nigeria (EU -SDGN) Programme Phase II - Component 2b: Support to National Assembly and Youth Political Participation	YIAGA AFRICA INITIATIVE	Nigeria	4,000,000.00
20	NDICI AFRICA	2022	Élections	Technical Assistance Contract for the implementation of the EU Support to Democratic Governance in Nigeria (EU-SDGN) Programme phase II	DAI GLOBAL BELGIUM	Nigeria	18,011,000.00
21	NDICI AFRICA	2022	Élections	EU Support to Democratic Governance in Nigeria (EU-SDGN) Programme Phase II Component 6a: Support to the National Peace Committee	KUKAH CENTRE FOR FAITH AND LEADERSHIP RESEARCH	Nigeria	1,000,000.00
22	NDICI AFRICA	2022	Élections	EU Support to Democratic Governance in Nigeria (EU-SDGN) Phase II Component 5a - Support to Women's Political Participation	NIGERIAN WOMEN TRUST FUND LTD GTE	Nigeria	3,000,000.00
23	NDICI AFRICA	2022	Élections	EU Support to Democratic Governance in Nigeria (EU-SDGN) Programme Phase II - Component 2a: Support to the National Assembly and the Judiciary	POLICY AND LEGAL ADVOCACY CENTRE	Nigeria	2,500,000.00
					INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATION FOR		

Country	Funding (€)	Sources
Nigeria	47 million	EU sheet
Cote d'Ivoire	13 million	EU sheet (6 million); separate project (7 million)
Zambia	31,5 million	Various, see country chapter
Kenya	15 million	EU sheet (10,5 million); separate project (3,5 million)
Uganda	2 million	EU sheet
Total	107.5 million	

## Discussions and torture

In Uganda, the EU has decreased electoral support due to the country’s dismal human rights record, but in 2024 it still paid €2 million into a project that organises “discussions” between political parties, including the ruling party and the opposition in that country, even though ruling party-linked security forces have been kidnapping, incarcerating, torturing and killing members of the opposition since at least 2020. Meanwhile, Europe continues funding flows to Ivory Coast,

Kenya and Nigeria, where national and state authorities have also killed, imprisoned and disappeared pro-democracy activists.

## “A printed script will say the elections were ‘free and fair’”

In Zambia, no killings or torture were reported, but there, too, election fatigue was observed because “the printed script will always say free and fair”, while “outcomes appear predetermined”, as a disillusioned voter said.

Among the findings of the transnational investigation are:

In Nigeria, €18 million for the 2023 and upcoming 2027 electoral cycles was paid to the Belgian AI company DAI Global. The contract entailed training thousands of electoral officers in handling top-of-the-range voting systems for the 2023 elections, but turned out to be a waste since technical “glitches”, widely seen as manipulated by those in power, still ensured a ruling party presidential win.

## Elections Circus cont...

- In contrast, poverty-stricken and suppressed independent media received very little support from the EU (less than 7% as opposed to 38% for DAI Global from the total EU Nigerian elections budget for the 2023-2027 period). The second-highest slice of EU Nigerian elections support money, over €7 million or 16%, was paid to the International Organisation for Migration (IOM), which assists refugees and returned migrants, including rejected asylum seekers from Europe. It was unclear what role the IOM was thought to play in Nigeria's elections.
- In Ivory Coast, an autocratically ruled country mostly known globally as the world's largest supplier of cocoa, €7 million of EU money was paid in 2025 into an election that saw opponents and critics incarcerated. In the same elections, 11 people died, including a police officer; 71 people were injured, and over 1600 people were arrested. Several hundred jailed civil society activists are still awaiting trial. While some NGOs also received EU support, activists said that "the EU money barely reaches those who fight for real change" and that the EU prefers "a government that keeps the cocoa exports flowing and the migrants out of Europe."
- In Kenya, an "endless cycle of workshops" on voter education, paid for by the EU, creates an impression of free public debate and participation, while one of two dominant parties, each representing the political elite, routinely win elections. Pro-democracy activists are increasingly met with police repression: in 2024 and 2025, protesters were shot in the streets. In the upcoming elections in 2027, a budget of €420 million worth of Kenyan taxpayers' money is to be spent by the Kenyan state on opaque contracts for election technology,

- while the persistent absence of a campaign finance law enables the richest candidate to run the most overpowering campaign. "The EU provides the software for all this", in the words of reporter Eric Mugendi of independent media house Africa Uncensored.

- In Zambia, a Public Order Law favours those in power, while most public broadcaster time is dedicated to propaganda for the ruling party. Issues like opaque campaign finance and misuse of state resources have been repeatedly flagged by EU observer missions, but no change has followed. Of at least €6.5 million for the 2021 election cycle, partly paid by the EU, 90% was destined for Zambia's state institutions, including training and conferences for the police and ruling party. In comparison, grassroots pro-democracy activists received little to no support at all. An independent candidate recently stepped back after authorities blocked his attempt to register the civil society movement he represents as a political party.

### EU observers routinely mention the failings

The investigative team perused scores of EU election observer mission reports, finding that most of these routinely mention failings such as untransparent expenditure by the state, police repression, campaign finance opacity, and corruption. Yet election support to such state structures has kept flowing, even after the same states repeatedly ignored the recommendations.

### An unfree context

Peter Hermes, a Dutch independent consultant on African democracy issues who has observed several election cycles in South Africa and Zimbabwe, says that the EU seems to believe that voter education will help combat the failings in states whose elections it supports. "The problem is not that citizens do not know how to vote — that is,

in fact, explained quite well at the voting stations. The problem is that the context for the citizens is unfree. Either they (the rulers) cheat, or government-linked individuals look over your shoulder."

### "Government-linked individuals look over your shoulder"

As part of (NGO- and not EU-linked) observer missions, Hermes has noted that, in autocratic countries, electoral commissions are weighted towards those in power and formal opposition is often fully aware it cannot win. "In Zimbabwe, the opposition participated anyway because some representatives would get into parliament, which comes with many perks. Meanwhile, ordinary people simply hoped for elections to pass as quickly as possible, because there was so much intimidation." Like the activists interviewed in this investigation, Hermes believes that grassroots pro-democracy forces should receive support. "Democracy starts at the base. Small local organisations often know very well what needs to be done. They need support to build a democratic movement from the ground up." On the statement made by one activist, that the EU appears to focus on stability, keeping exports flowing, and migrants out of Europe, Hermes says that "unfortunately, that seems indeed to be the case."

### Closed route

For this investigation, financial data on EU election support in the five countries was mostly obtained through an appeal by ZAM to EU Regulation 1049/200, which grants EU citizens the right of access to EU documents. While ZAM colleagues with EU citizenship could obtain the information in this way, this route was closed to the African investigative journalists trying to find out what the EU was doing in their countries.

An appeal for information to the EU delegation in Zambia was left without a response. A request for an interview with the EU in Ivory Coast was first granted and then cancelled at the last minute, while information on the Nigerian EU delegation website was incomplete and a request

for an interview was refused. The EU delegation in Kenya responded only months after emailed questions, requesting an in-person interview, but due to busy schedules on both sides the interview could not happen before our deadline; the delegation declined to make input in any other way. Uganda's EU ambassador, who was asked why the EU has stopped supporting pro-democracy activists in the extremely oppressive country while maintaining links with the state, responded that the EU office's "broader mandate is to maintain and develop the overall partnership between the European Union and Uganda across a wide range of areas — political dialogue, development cooperation, humanitarian support, trade and investment, governance, climate action and support to citizens," and that "the European Union is a longstanding and substantial supporter of civil society in Uganda."

Besides sending financial information to ZAM as requested on the basis of an EU regulation, the EU Commission office in Brussels did not respond to separately mailed questions.

In an emailed statement, a United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) spokesperson based in New York, did not engage with asked questions regarding financial opacity or repressive conditions in the countries where it distributes funding, explaining only that its funded activities include "support to governments, electoral commissions and also civil society organisations."

## Call to Action

**ZAM works towards a new equal relationship between Africa and Europe. Contribute to our mission by donating.**

# ZAMBIA | Restraint and Fear

From page 1

By Charles Mafa

For more than four decades, Caesar Masina (62), a resident of Lusaka, Zambia's capital, has participated in his country's elections, lining up at polling stations, casting his ballot, and watching governments change through the vote. This year, however, may be different. With elections approaching in August, he says his trust in the country's institutions has gradually eroded. "The forthcoming election is ridiculous. I may not vote."

"The Electoral Commission, and also Parliament and the judiciary, are so politicised," he adds. "The outcomes sometimes appear predetermined long before voters enter the polling booth. Governance institutions now decide for me, as if there is already a prepared script that will declare the elections 'free and fair'."

**"It is as if a script already says the elections were 'free and fair'"**

Masina's frustration reflects a broader and deepening public unease. Many election observers in the media and civil society have pointed to patterns that increasingly appear to define Zambia's recent electoral cycles, in which official narratives of "calm and order" often sit uneasily alongside reports of intimidation, structural bias, and contested institutional conduct.

## Pressure

In the recent Kasama mayoral by-election, held on 29 January 2026 in the capital of Zambia's Northern Province, authorities and official government observers described the vote as peaceful. However, accounts from voters interviewed on the ground suggest a more complex reality. "It was peaceful," one said, "but people were quiet. You could feel it."

He described how voters withdrew from open participation due to perceived pressure following visits by nearly ten cabinet ministers, including the Minister of Finance, as well as senior State House officials and several district commissioners

who travelled to Kasama during the campaign period.

"People were quiet. You could feel it."

In Kasama, where municipal by-elections are typically low-profile, this concentration of executive presence was striking. It also raised the spectre of the possible use of state resources in party campaigning. Opposition candidates complained of an uneven playing field. The ruling United Party for National Development (UPND) dismissed these concerns, describing the deployment as legitimate political mobilisation.

Still, interviews with voters and observers pointed to an environment marked by caution, restraint and, in some cases, fear. Most residents described hesitating to openly support certain candidates and deliberately avoiding visible political engagement. Some reported inducements, with ruling party officials allegedly offering cash to voters in exchange for their voting cards.

The UPND also rejected these allegations. Northern Province chairperson Nathan Ilunga told a local radio station that party officials were merely recording details from voters' cards in selected wards and cross-checking them against the voter register. The Electoral Commission later confirmed that it had received complaints about the collection of voter cards and urged complainants to report such cases to the police.

**The police said it had not received formal complaints**

However, police spokesperson Godfrey Chilabi later told the same radio station in Kasama that officers on the ground had not received any formal complaints, and maintained that the police had performed their duties effectively.

The ruling party won the election.

## The EU and the state

As Zambia heads toward the August 2026 general elections, tens of millions of euros have flowed into the country through donor-funded democracy

support programmes, election observation missions, and governance initiatives. According to the European Union, €7 million was invested by this body in electoral support for Zambia in 2021, funding programmes on governance, civic education, civil society monitoring, and legal reform.

**The EU repeats concerns, but keeps funding**

Every election cycle, these programmes purport to address serious concerns flagged by observers, including those from the EU, during earlier elections. These concerns are, however, rarely found to have been meaningfully addressed. For example, key issues identified by an EU mission monitoring the 2016 elections included opaque campaign financing, misuse of state resources, biased state media and covert political advertising, as well as the suppression of opposition activity through the Public Order Act (1).

According to this law, Zambians are required to notify the police before holding meetings, providing details of the purpose and expected attendance. Failure to comply can result in police intervention to halt such gatherings. During election periods, enforcement intensifies, and critics argue that it is disproportionately applied to the opposition.

The flagged concerns led to 33 recommendations aimed at addressing the identified problems. Yet in 2021, a new EU Election Observation Mission, one of the EU's largest ever in southern Africa, comprising 11 core team members and 32 long-term observers from 18 EU Member States and Norway, together with 29 locally recruited short-term observers, once again identified the same key concerns. These included the lack of regulation of political party financing, an uneven campaign environment, and the selective application of the Public Order Act.

According to the 2021 EU report, media bias remained a significant issue. The state-owned broadcaster ZNBC TVI

allocated 86 per cent of its news coverage to the president, the government, and the then ruling party, the report found, while the then opposition received just six per cent.

ZNBC did not respond to requests for comment at the time of publication.

When asked which EU-recommended reforms are currently being implemented ahead of the 2026 elections, Zambia's Electoral Commission did not respond.

## Financial shade

Among civil society, there is a growing perception that Zambia's elections, and the outcomes of victories by either of the two dominant parties, are shaped by those who finance the political process. In past elections, candidates who staged the largest events and secured the most airtime have tended to prevail.

For example, ahead of the 2021 elections, the opposition candidate and current president, Hakainde Hichilema, received substantial support from organisations such as the Tony Blair Institute for Global Change and the now-defunct Brenthurst Foundation. This support enabled a large-scale campaign, including the use of a helicopter to facilitate his appearance at events across the country.

Hichilema's candidacy in 2021 also benefited from a unified opposition alliance against a corrupt and increasingly oppressive previous president, Edgar Lungu. It could therefore be argued that outside support for him was indispensable, or that he might still have lost due to manipulation of results by the Lungu government.

**Two parties were using Western financing to compete**

However, Western support through multi-year, multi-donor electoral projects delivered by organisations like International IDEA, the International Foundation for Electoral Systems [Hichilema's candidacy in 2021 also benefited from a unified opposition alliance against a corrupt and increasingly oppressive previous president,

**ZAMBIA | Restraint and Fear cont....**

Edgar Lungu. It could therefore be argued that outside support for him was indispensable, or that he might still have lost due to manipulation of results by the Lungu government.], and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) was, at the same time, also enabling the Lungu-dominated state to hold the elections in the first place. In practice, this meant that two parties were effectively using mainly Western financing to compete against one another. A report by Transparency International Zambia showed that the abuse of state resources and private financing cast a shadow over the electoral process.

**Basket funds**

Itemised budgets for donor-supported election projects in Zambia are extremely difficult to find. This is largely because much of EU and other Western funding is channelled through international implementing partners, such as those mentioned above, which collaborate to establish so-called “basket funds” and joint programmes. Where funding amounts are disclosed—which is often not the case—these arrangements are ultimately accountable only to their respective head offices.

While these organisations all purport to work with “government and civil society” and hold press conferences announcing multi-year projects to “ensure free and fair elections”, a more in-depth look at the above shows that IDEA and IFES don’t focus on civil society but instead on strengthening electoral state agencies and observer projects. ECES, the European Centre for Electoral Support, in 2024 announced grants for “elections support for national institution and actors” under a new “Pro-DEM” project in the run-up to the 2026 elections, but didn’t say how much money the project involved and did not clarify what proportion of the funding would go to the Zambian state versus non-state actors.

**The lion’s share goes to the state**

The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), which has been running a partly EU-funded programme titled

Democracy Strengthening in Zambia, and its sequel, Deepening Democracy, geared towards the 2026 elections, has also not made its budgets available to the public.

**Prioritising**

An in-depth internet search on UNDP’s “Strengthening Democracy” expenditure eventually surfaced three Excel sheets focused on elections: for 2015, 2021, and 2025. The total budgets reflected in the sheets amounted to approximately US\$10 million for both 2015 and 2021; for 2025, the figure was US\$6.5 million. Roughly 90% of each budget was allocated to institutions such as the Electoral Commission, the Zambian Police, and other Zambian state structures, primarily for workshops, training, and conferences. Only 10% was allocated to grants for civil society organisations.

In 2021, UNDP announced at a press conference that it was channelling the equivalent of US\$800,000 to 18 civil society organisations for “voter education”, but omitted to state that the lion’s share of its then US\$9.7 million budget was again directed towards the state.

Asked to comment, the UNDP did not dispute our estimate of a 90–10 per cent division in favour of the Zambian state in its election expenditure, but said that “significant reductions in global development assistance” had “substantially constrained available resources”. It “therefore had to prioritise limited resources towards safeguarding the core functioning of elections, (including) the Electoral Commission of Zambia, which is constitutionally mandated to administer elections.”

**Counting Euros**

An internet search on donor contributions to UNDP “basket” funding revealed a consistent pattern of the EU being the largest donor. We were, however, unable to identify a specific proportion contributed by the EU to the basket. Based on Europe’s interest in the African continent—which is likely to be significantly greater than that of other donors such as the US and Japan—we estimated its share at around half.

This led to an estimated EU contribution of approximately €9 million to Zambia’s US\$16.5 million UNDP baskets covering both the 2021 and 2026 elections.

To arrive at an estimated total amount paid by the EU into Zambia’s 2021 and 2026 election cycles, we added the above €9 million to the two special EU projects mentioned above. Setting the EU’s 2024/2025 Pro-DEM project at the same level as the 2021 EU elections project (€7 million), we arrived at an estimate of €14 million for the two special projects. Adding €9 million and €14 million together then gives an estimated total of €23 million.

That sum, added to the €8.5 million reported by the EU in Brussels between 2020 and 2026—which excluded direct EU projects as well as the UNDP baskets—generated an estimate of total EU funding of €31.5 million for both elections.

We were unable to find total election funding amounts from entities such as International IDEA and the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES), to which the EU also contributes.

**Monitoring and observing**

Some NGOs have expressed satisfaction with the work they were enabled to do through grants such as those provided by the UNDP. Peter Mwanang’ombe, Programme Director for the Christian Churches Monitoring Group (CCMG), says that his organisation’s mission to “enhance acceptability of election results” in 2021, through the deployment of 330 long-term observers and over 1,500 short-term monitors, alongside a parallel vote tabulation, was “to a large extent achieved.” Grant funding also enabled NGOs such as the Chapter One Foundation and Transparency International Zambia to produce election observer reports.

However, all grants to NGOs that could be traced were allocated to objectives such as election observation and voter education, rather than to broader democratic activity, public debate, or grassroots activism within Zambia’s urban and rural communities.

“We hear about the funding, but it doesn’t reach us”

“We hear about the funding, but it doesn’t reach us,” said a Kasama-based community activist who asked to remain anonymous. “It goes to big organisations. At community level, we are left out.” Others echoed this sentiment, expressing doubt that the system itself can be trusted. They said international support would have a greater impact if it reached local communities directly, or if it strengthened credible watchdog organisations that are both capable and independent.

**Blocking a newcomer**

There has been at least one substantial effort to change the system during this election cycle. Early this year, a civil society platform called the Movement for National Restoration, led by constitutional lawyer John Sangwa, amassed one million signatures in support of its plan to contest the elections. Its goal, it said, was to form a government that would address “decades of waste, mismanagement, and missed opportunities.” To safeguard its independence from donors with vested interests, the MNR and Sangwa asked Zambian citizens to fund the campaign.

However, on 12 April 2026, Sangwa withdrew his candidacy, stating that the MNR’s application for registration as a political party had been rejected by the Zambian Registrar of Societies and that, moreover, the police had refused permission for the movement’s planned ‘consultations’ in towns across the country. Permission had been refused “on the sole ground that the movement was not yet registered as a political party,” Sangwa said in a press statement, adding that “this created a circular barrier to the Movement’s activities: the police declined to ‘clear’ the programme because the Movement was not registered, while the Registrar insisted on police clearance as a precondition for registration.”

In the same statement, Sangwa said that the MNR’s quest for citizen funding had also been unsuccessful, since “many individuals were reluctant to contribute through formal channels due to concerns about the

**ZAMBIA | Restraint and Fear cont....**

visibility and traceability of such contributions.” According to MNR sources, businesspeople in particular were wary that bank transfers could be traced by those in power, and that their businesses might suffer as a result

**The president did not respond**

Sangwa also said that he raised his concerns with the president in a letter, but did not receive a response. He ended his statement with an exhortation to “all citizens—particularly the younger generation—to uphold and advance the values of constitutionalism, accountability, and national discipline, and work towards a Zambia that serves all its people, not a few.”

**Shifting priorities**

During this investigation, several sources emphasised that genuinely Zambian-tailored reform is urgent because of shifting priorities on the side of donors who have historically extended aid to Zambia. The United States, in particular, has recently been observed moving away from funding civil society intermediaries towards more direct engagement with government. A US envoy told Zambian partners that “we are removing the middleman”. In contexts such as Zambia, such shifts risk further concentrating resources within already powerful state institutions.

A set of questions was sent to the EU Delegation

in Lusaka on 4 March 2026 regarding funding flows and measurable outcomes. Although a response was promised by 18 March, none had been received at the time of publication.

The Public Order Act is soon to be replaced by a new Public Gathering Bill that, according to government promises, will allow for freer public meetings.



# INDEPENDENT OR UNDER PRESSURE? Questions Mount Over ECZ Ahead of August 13 Polls

*By Gibson Zulu*

With just over 100 days before Zambia heads to the polls, questions about the independence of the Electoral Commission are no longer confined to political debate—they are now being raised by international observers and reflected in the country’s own electoral processes.

A high-level mission by the National Democratic Institute (NDI) has warned that the Electoral Commission of Zambia (ECZ) must move beyond assurances and demonstrate its independence through concrete actions. But a closer look at recent developments, from constituency delimitation to access to electoral information, suggests these concerns may already have a basis in practice.

**A question of trust**

The NDI delegation, led by Mohamed Ibn Chambas, found that while ECZ’S is widely viewed as technically competent, concerns persist around transparency, stakeholder engagement, and access to critical electoral data.

“To address longstanding perceptions of political bias, the ECZ commissioners should demonstrate their independence and impartiality not only through words, but also through their actions,” said Richard L. Klein, the Institute’s Global Director for Elections.

At the centre of the concern is a deeper issue of whether the structures governing Zambia’s electoral system allow the ECZ to operate free from political influence—or merely create the appearance of independence.

The process for appointing the ECZ chairperson, long criticised by stakeholders, remains unchanged. While the NDI stopped short of making formal recommendations, it acknowledged that the issue continues to raise questions about institutional autonomy.

**Delimitation and unequal representation**

One of the most significant electoral changes ahead of the 2026 elections is the creation of 70 new

constituencies, increasing the number of elected Members of Parliament from 156 to 226.

The ECZ has defended the exercise, citing population growth and the need to improve representation. But the process has drawn criticism over limited consultation and lack of transparency.

NDI described the reform as having “mixed implications”—bringing representation closer to citizens on one hand, while raising concerns about cost and fairness on the other.

“While it may bring representation closer to citizens, stakeholders expressed concern over the financial burden associated with expanding parliament,” Chambas said.

The delegation further warned that the current distribution of constituencies does not adequately address inequalities in voting power, potentially undermining the principle of equal representation.

A review of Zambia’s 2022 census data further complicates the picture. MakaanDay analysis shows significant disparities in the number of people represented per constituency across provinces—raising questions about whether the principle of equal representation has been fully achieved.

In some areas, constituencies carry far larger populations than others, effectively diluting the weight of individual votes.

**Timing and transparency**

Concerns are also mounting over delays in finalising amendments to the Electoral Process Act. Electoral reforms introduced too close to an election, experts warn, leave little time for implementation, voter education, and stakeholder adaptation.

“The electoral system must serve all parties and citizens,” Chambas said, warning that rushed reforms risk weakening confidence in the process.

Beyond legislation, stakeholders have raised concerns about delayed access to electoral information—an issue that directly affects the ability of political parties, civil society, and voters to prepare adequately.

**Political space and law enforcement**

The pre-election environment is another area under scrutiny. Stakeholders consulted by the NDI mission reported concerns over restrictions on political gatherings, citing the continued use of the Public Order Act and what some describe as uneven enforcement by the Zambia Police Service.

Lilian Mahiri-Zaja, a member of the delegation, said these concerns were consistently raised during consultations.

“All candidates and political parties should be able to freely hold political gatherings and campaign rallies across the country,” she said.

**INDEPENDENT OR UNDER PRESSURE? Questions Mount Over ECZ Ahead of August 13 Polls cont....**

Reports that opposition parties struggle to hold rallies outside by-election periods point to what observers describe as an uneven political playing field. Concerns have also been raised over the use of cyber-related laws and other legislation to restrict freedom of expression during the campaign period.

**The legal gap**

Another structural weakness identified by the delegation is the absence of a comprehensive legal framework governing political parties. Zambia currently relies on the Societies Act—a law not designed to regulate modern political party activity—which treats parties as “ordinary clubs” under the oversight of the Registrar of Societies in the Ministry of Home Affairs and Internal Security.

According to NDI, this gap has direct consequences, particularly in campaign financing, which remains largely unregulated. Although Article 60 of the 2016 Constitution provides for oversight of campaign funds, the absence of a political parties law means there is no framework to enforce it.

The report notes that this places Zambia behind international standards, including the United Nations Convention against Corruption, which calls for greater transparency in political financing. Stakeholders consulted by the Institute also raised concerns about the high cost of participating in politics, which disproportionately affects women, youth, and persons with disabilities.

Without clear rules, questions around transparency, accountability, and fairness in political competition remain unresolved.

**Who gets represented?**

Despite new provisions in the electoral system, underrepresentation of women, youth, and persons with disabilities remains a persistent issue. NDI urged political parties to move beyond symbolic inclusion and ensure broader participation across all levels of political leadership—not just through proportional representation seats.

**The church and neutrality**

The role of the church, long seen as a stabilising force in Zambia’s democracy, is also facing scrutiny. Cynthia Mbamalu acknowledged concerns that some religious institutions are increasingly perceived as partisan.

“The church must continue to provide civic and voter education in a neutral manner,” she said, emphasising the importance of maintaining public trust.

**A system under test**

The NDI mission was based on consultations with a wide range of stakeholders across Zambia’s political and civic landscape. It was not a formal investigation—but its findings align with concerns already emerging within the country.

The mission itself was supported by the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, although the Institute stressed that its conclusions are independent.

**Editorial**

**PLANTED IN HOPE, uprooted in progress**

Trees from the Greening Lusaka campaign cleared to make way for the expansion of Great East Road, raising questions about urban planning and the true cost of development.

In a candid admission, environmental advocate David Ngwenyama has apologised to supporters of the Greening Lusaka campaign after a tree-planting site along Great East Road was cleared for construction.

Hello

During the 2024/2025 growing season I came on various platforms and made personal appeals to individuals and organizations to participate in the Greening Lusaka campaign.

A lot of you participated in the various Lusaka for Trees activities that took place at the time and generously donated, trees, personal and instructional time, and financial support to what I personally made you believe was a commitment to greening Lusaka. I come before you today to apologize for the failure to keep the promise and commitment to greening Lusaka.

The area that we planted, the Great East Road island, has been bulldozed and turned into a construction site parking lot with the full support of the Lusaka City Council.

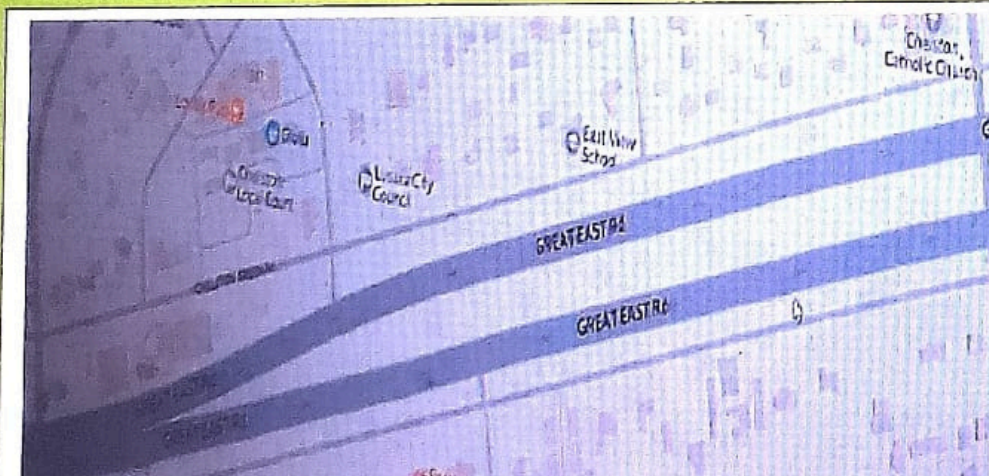

This failure is entirely my fault for not securing guaranteed site protection before planting and for believing that the Lusaka City Mayor’s participation in the tree planting constituted a commitment by the City of Lusaka. I apologize for bringing you, your organization and associates’ reputation into disrepute.

LUSAKA FOR TREES

**JOIN US FOR PHASE 2 OF OUR TREE PLANTING EVENT!**

When: Saturday 11<sup>th</sup> January, 2025  
09.00hrs. Parking at Chelston Catholic Church, Market Street.

Where: Great East Road Island  
Between Palm Drive (Chelston Water Tanks) and Market Street (Chelston Catholic Church).

**How to Get Involved: Donate Indigenous Trees (we will not be able to use any non-native species)**

-Come Prepared to plant on Saturday, 11<sup>th</sup>.

Start 2025 with a gift to mother earth

For more information please contact: Ms. Norah Masaninga (LCC) +260976682814; David Ngwenyama +260962875790



## Uganda | A humanitarian veneer

By ZAM Reporters

### Not supporting troublemakers

The European Union does not provide electoral support to the Ugandan state because of human rights abuses by its government, led by 81-year-old autocrat Yoweri Museveni. But it is also not supporting grassroots activists in their fight for democracy in the country. “We were told we should not support troublemakers.”

Ever since Uganda’s 2016 general election, already marred by fraud and violence, the European Union (EU) has significantly reduced its direct involvement in funding or observing elections in the country. Even specific funding for election-related programmes was phased out following the violent 2021 election, when scores of people were shot in the streets by security forces.

Recent elections were marked by mass arrests, killings and kidnappings

According to an account received from the EU, the only funding formally allocated to support democracy in Uganda in the run-up to the 2026 elections was €2 million in 2024, given to the Netherlands Institute for Multi-Party Democracy for “training, dialogue, and capacity building for political actors and youth”, through projects such as its “Democracy Academy”.

Recent elections in January 2026 were once again marked by mass arrests, killings, and kidnappings.

### The fund “undermined government authority”

The EU has not supported the human rights activists currently still searching prisons for confirmation of detentions, deaths, or torture. Civil society funding has dried up since 2021, when President Museveni closed a multi-donor fund called the Democratic Governance Facility, which had previously assisted pro-democracy activists and independent investigative journalism. The President closed the fund because, he said, it “undermined” government authority.

### Under increasing fire

Ever since, civil society and the opposition have come under increasing pressure in the country. On 15 January 2026,

election day, this culminated in the killing of at least 15 opposition supporters, eight of whom were reportedly killed by security police when they found them hiding in their MP’s house. MP Muwanga Kivumbi, the opposition National Unity Platform (NUP) deputy president for the Buganda region, was arrested and charged with terrorism, joining a list of hundreds currently incarcerated.

National leader of the NUP, Bobi Wine, and his family faced persecution in the aftermath of the January polls and fled into exile. Opposition doyen Kizza Besigye, who was abducted in Nairobi, Kenya, in December 2024 and renditioned to Uganda, remains detained in Luzira, Uganda’s largest prison on the outskirts of Kampala.

“I don’t think I slept more than three hours per night”

The human rights and accountability platform, the Agora Centre for Research, has documented hundreds of arrests during and after the January elections. Despite a nationwide internet shutdown, the team, in coordination with 30 journalists across the country, continued to receive constant reports of extrajudicial killings, enforced disappearances, arrests, and state brutality.

“I don’t think I slept for more than three hours a night between 13 January and early February,” says Agather Atuhaire, Agora’s team leader. “During the period the internet was cut off (by the government), I was continuously on the phone with our colleagues across the country. When the internet was restored, photos and videos to support the information came through. Months later, we are still receiving information about victims we had not known about.”

### A strong statement

On 12 February 2026, in a strong statement, the EU Parliament condemned “the conduct of the Ugandan elections on 15 January 2026, which were marred by abuses, widespread intimidation, fraud, violence, and a nationwide internet blackout”, and called for “independent and impartial investigations into crimes against humanity committed by political and military leaders.”

The seriousness of this declaration might, however, be questioned in light of another EU event which, amid far less publicity, was held in Uganda itself only one week later. On 19 February, during the anniversary marking 50 years of donor ties to Uganda, held at the residence of the Swedish head of the EU delegation to Uganda, Jan Sadek, the latter told gathered dignitaries that they were there to “celebrate a partnership that has lasted, adapted and delivered.”

The EU delegation head praised Uganda’s avocado and pineapple. In his speech, Sadek focused more on improving trade ties with the EU and praising Uganda’s tasty avocados and pineapples, announcing a cooling storage facility at the airport to accommodate perishable fruits and vegetables, than on recent events. Throughout his speech, he made no mention of the victims of enforced disappearances or extrajudicial killings.

Apparently still smarting from the EU statement, the Ugandan government sent only John Leonard Mugerwa, head of international legal and social affairs at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, instead of a minister.

### No ruffling feathers

The event, the speech, and the Ugandan snub fit a pattern in which expressed criticism by the EU appears to be immediately punished by a clear frost — and subsequent European backpedalling. EU sources who spoke to ZAM on condition of anonymity confirm that the Union has gradually become reluctant to ruffle the feathers of the Ugandan government. “We were told not to support troublemakers,” said one.

### They would be in trouble if the General found out

An example of this was the cancellation of an EU member state-sponsored annual human rights conference slated to take place in December 2025, a month before the elections. The prestigious event, which has honoured activists like Jimmy Spire Ssentongo and Praise Aloikin Apoloje, was cancelled because “EU member states were not comfortable with an event on human rights

at such a time”, in the words of another anonymous diplomat.

He added that “there was a view that they would be in trouble if (the Commander of the Defence Force, and also the president’s son), General Muhoozi Kainerugaba, found out about it. They said it was ‘best to reinstate funding after the elections because the election period was very sensitive.’” Interviewed activists, however, said they felt there is little hope of reinstatement, since the belligerent Kainerugaba “seems to be more than ever in charge” in Uganda.

### Persona non grata

The regime’s volleys against EU “meddling” had already started in July 2020, when Marco de Swart, an elections officer at the Europe-financed Democratic Governance Fund (DGF) that supported civil society in Uganda, was blocked from returning to the country after travelling and was declared persona non grata. Five months later, in December 2020, EU elections adviser Simon Osborn was briefly detained and deported.

After the 2021 elections, which saw scores of protesters shot in the streets, one of the first acts of the once-again elected president Museveni, upon returning to office in February 2021, was to launch an attack on the DGF fund. Alleging that the facility was financing “subversive activities” in Uganda, the president ordered the suspension of all DGF activities. Although it briefly became operational again after a presidential meeting with the Danish Minister for Development Cooperation on 22 June 2022, it shut down fully a year later. It marked the death knell for many civil society initiatives in the country.

### The government talks about “fighting the imperialists and colonialists”

The EU appeared increasingly browbeaten under Uganda’s onslaught, often expressed in terms of “fighting the imperialists and colonialists”. When, in 2024, Ugandan activists exposed the theft of millions of US dollars in taxpayer funds through a parliamentary swindle headed by the Speaker of Parliament and fervent

Museveni loyalist Anita Among — who was also accused of personally pinching iron sheets intended for roofing in poor communities in Uganda — the UK and US imposed personal sanctions. Among and two other Ugandan ministers implicated in the iron sheets theft were subjected to asset freezes and travel bans by these two countries. The EU, however, said nothing.

#### A brief stir

In May 2025, there was a brief stir when German ambassador Matthias Schauer publicly expressed concern about army commander and Museveni junior, General Muhoozi Kainerugaba's threats on X to "behead" opposition leader Bobi Wine, as well as his boasting on the same platform about the kidnapping and torture of one of Bobi Wine's bodyguards. But Schauer was immediately put back in his place by Kainerugaba, who announced the suspension of all military cooperation with Germany, while accusing Schauer of being involved in "subversive activities" and of being "wholly unqualified" to be in the East African state.

#### The German development head was accused of espionage

The Ugandan authorities now kept hammering at Germany. In October 2025, another German, head of that country's development cooperation programmes in Uganda, Tasillo von Droste, was accused by Ugandan "security sources" of being an "intelligence operative" assigned to run a "covert espionage mission in the country."

According to state sources, this accusation followed the creation of dossiers by the country's intelligence services, alleging that Germany's Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ), under Von Droste, was plotting "regime change" under the "pretext of offering financial support to civil society." The fact that GIZ was also funding several state agencies for development projects did little to assuage the government's anger: all government agencies were ordered to halt receiving funding from GIZ.

In the aftermath of the affair, several of the few remaining civil society projects in Uganda had to close down because of alleged links to Von Droste.

The same state sources quoted above said that Von Droste was deported from Uganda after the accusations, alongside the programme director of Germany's education projects arm, DW Akademie, Miriam Ohlsen. The sources added that this was kept quiet because the affected organisations, the German embassy, and EU member states in general did not want to further anger Uganda's army commander after the Schauer debacle.

#### Patching up

On 7 January 2026, Uganda announced that the two countries had patched up their differences and that military and other cooperation had resumed. State broadcaster UBC reported that: "General Muhoozi Kainerugaba today met Germany's Ambassador to Uganda, H.E. Matthias Schauer, reaffirming the long-standing bilateral relations between Uganda and Germany. Ambassador Schauer praised Uganda's role in regional affairs and reaffirmed Germany's commitment to continued collaboration, with both sides agreeing to address any differences through diplomatic dialogue."

#### Different forms of engagement

When asked about its silence on human rights issues, particularly in the aftermath of the EU's condemnation of Uganda's political and military leaders in Brussels, the EU office in Uganda responded: "The European Union's different institutions have different roles, mandates, and ways of expressing themselves, and it is neither unusual nor inappropriate that this is reflected in different forms of engagement and communication." The response also stated that there is "regular contact with a wide range of Ugandan stakeholders, including civil society," and that "much of this work is necessarily conducted in confidence through diplomatic channels. The fact that every exchange is not carried out in public should not be taken to mean that these issues are not being raised." It further noted that the EU office's "broader mandate is to maintain and develop the overall partnership between the European Union and Uganda across a wide range of areas — political dialogue, development cooperation, humanitarian support,

trade and investment, governance, climate action and support to citizens," and that "the European Union is a longstanding and substantial supporter of civil society in Uganda."

The EU now appears almost solely focused on its anti-poverty projects across northern Uganda. According to a list of 115 ongoing European Union-funded projects in Uganda, over €896 million has been invested in poverty alleviation projects, nutrition, provision of water, and the grading of dirt roads, among others. Within this broader development framework, only one portion is allocated to civil society. PACER, the Programme on Accountability, Civic Engagement and Rights, operates in the country's north to empower "women and youth to participate in decision-making processes and hold duty bearers to account".

#### "Humanitarian exhibitionism"

Political historian and analyst Yusuf Sserunkuma comments that such efforts mean little as long as a "thieving" government continues to receive EU support. "The EU backs its businesspeople in Uganda, who are miners in marble, oil, gold and who exploit communities in poverty-stricken areas. And these are part of our collective problem." Sserunkuma suspects that EU interests "in coffee, oil, debts, [and] land" require President Museveni, "a man who is ready to allow them unlimited access."

#### "The EU backs its businesspeople"

Sserunkuma also argues that support "for the poor" creates an environment in which the state is absent and therefore cannot be held accountable for a lack of public service delivery or corruption. Fellow analyst Nicholas Sengoba simply labels these EU poverty alleviation projects as "spaces for humanitarian exhibitionism, not actual reform."

According to the above, as well as other analysts, the main reason for the EU to pussyfoot around the Ugandan regime's abuses is the fact that its army is a crucial partner of the West in containing conflict in the Horn of Africa and across the Great Lakes region. The European Union has spent

over €2.5 billion between 2007 and 2024 to support the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM), now called the African Union Transition Mission in Somalia. The Ugandan contingent is the largest of several African countries' troop contributions in the country.

#### The Ugandan army is a crucial partner for the EU

The EU's stated interest is stability in Africa, with many strategies explicitly referencing the need to prevent and curb migratory flows to Europe. This "realpolitik" has already resulted in negotiations between Uganda and some EU governments to send rejected asylum seekers to Uganda. The Dutch government, for example, has been preparing to send rejected asylum seekers to Uganda as part of an agreement that resembles a deal secured by US President Donald Trump. The deal has been placed on hold by a newly incoming government in the Netherlands, but the EU strategy to send rejected migrants to "third countries", including in Africa, is expected to become law in June 2026.

#### Following Trump

Are the "humanitarian exhibitions", the Ugandan-allied peacekeeping in Somalia, and the silence on human rights and corruption all part of one agenda? Is it all about ensuring continued resource flows towards the West while African people are prevented from leaving their countries, even under oppressive conditions? Yes, says Sengoba. "The EU and the West are prioritising these. They are following US President Donald Trump's cue by investing more domestically to make their economies more competitive with China. A scramble for African resources such as rare-earth minerals is becoming the major focal point."

#### "It has always been jungle law"

While Sengoba sees a collapse of the old rules-based order in favour of aggression and quid pro quo dealings between Western and sub-Saharan governments targeting vital rare-earth minerals, Sserunkuma believes that this rules-based order has never existed. "It has always been jungle law, but (in the past there was) a little

sophistication, a veneer of talk of human rights.” That sophistication, he argues, is now gone.

Meanwhile, the Ugandan regime is seeking to restrict pro-democracy activists from receiving foreign funding. The draft “Protection of Sovereignty Bill” will, if passed into law, require organisations in Uganda to disclose foreign funding within 14 days of receipt, and grant the Minister of Internal Affairs powers to restrict financial support for activities considered “detrimental to national interests.”



## Civil Society Raises Alarm Over “Rushed” Law-Making Ahead of Parliament Dissolution

By Clara Chisenga | MakaanDay

A coalition of civil society organisations has raised concern over what it describes as a rushed legislative process in Parliament ahead of the dissolution of the National Assembly on May 15 2026, warning that the speed and volume of Bills being processed risk undermining democratic accountability, public participation and constitutional governance.

In a joint statement issued on May 6, civil society groups said more than 70 Bills had reportedly been introduced for consideration between January and now, with Standing Orders allegedly suspended to accelerate their passage through Parliament.

The organisations warned that while Parliament has authority to regulate its own procedures, the current pace of law-making raises “constitutional, democratic, and governance concerns.”

“Law-making is not a procedural formality,” the statement reads. “It is one of the core functions of Parliament and must be undertaken in a manner that allows for meaningful public participation, proper scrutiny, and informed deliberation.”

At the centre of the concern is Article 89 of the Constitution, which obliges the National Assembly to facilitate

public involvement in the legislative process. According to the statement, meaningful participation requires sufficient time for citizens, civil society organisations, professional bodies and affected stakeholders to access proposed laws, analyse their implications and submit informed recommendations.

The organisations argue that processing dozens of Bills within compressed timelines makes effective participation practically impossible, even where formal consultation mechanisms remain technically open.

The statement further warns that Parliament risks weakening its own constitutional role as a deliberative and oversight institution.

“Members of Parliament are not merely expected to approve Bills,” the statement says. “They are constitutionally expected to interrogate them, assess their consistency with the Constitution and Zambia’s democratic principles, evaluate their policy and financial implications, and consider their long-term impact on governance, rights, and public administration.”

Civil society groups say compressing consideration of more than 70 Bills into the final days before dissolution diminishes the quality of scrutiny and weakens Parliament’s ability to effectively

discharge its broader constitutional mandate.

The concerns are particularly significant because some of the Bills reportedly touch on constitutional rights, electoral processes, public accountability systems and democratic governance frameworks.

The statement warns that laws passed through rushed processes often result in poor drafting, constitutional inconsistencies, implementation challenges and avoidable litigation.

“In democratic constitutional systems, process is not separate from substance,” the organisations stated. “A flawed legislative process frequently produces flawed law.”

The coalition also questioned the suspension of Standing Orders to speed up passage of legislation, arguing that such measures should remain exceptional and reserved for genuine emergencies rather than becoming tools for bypassing scrutiny and public engagement.

At the same time, the organisations acknowledged that certain pieces of legislation linked to the administration of the forthcoming general elections may reasonably require prioritisation before Parliament dissolves. These include the Electoral Process Amendment Bill, the Public Gatherings Bill and aspects of the Local Government legislative framework.

However, they stressed that even election-related legislation must still comply with constitutional standards of transparency, meaningful participation and parliamentary scrutiny.

The statement further clarified that support previously expressed by some civil society organisations for certain Bills was conditional on amendments and recommendations submitted during stakeholder consultations being incorporated into the final legislation.

The organisations warned that such support should not be interpreted as unconditional endorsement of laws enacted without key safeguards and protections proposed during public consultations.

The coalition has since called on the National Assembly and the Executive to reconsider both the volume and pace of legislation currently being processed and to prioritise only laws considered strictly necessary before dissolution.

“Laws that will govern the Zambian people long after the dissolution of Parliament must not be enacted through processes that deny citizens a meaningful opportunity to participate in their making,” the statement reads.

The statement signed by Chapter One Foundation was backed by a broad coalition of civil society organisations, including Transparency International Zambia, Centre for Protection of Human Rights and Advancement of Democracy (CePHRAD Zambia), Hope Affirmation Network Zambia, Ubuntu Royal Homes, DSC Zambia, Zambia Centre for Transparency and Responsive Leadership. Others are Alliance for Community Action, ActionAid Zambia, People’s Action for Accountability and Good

Governance in Zambia (PAAG Zambia), The Freedom Foundation, Alliance for Accountable Governance Zambia, Governance Elections Advocacy Research Services (Gears Zambia), and Panos Institute Southern Africa, among others.

Clara Chisenga is a journalist from Radio Icengelo in Kitwe. She is currently undertaking a three-month internship at MakaanDay after earning third place in the 2025 MakaanDay Awards for Investigative Journalism.



This week in the Bulletin & Record

# Sweden shows press freedom can work

By Charles Mafa

Sweden is one country in which the press enjoys true freedom. The Swedish Press Ombudsman (PO), Mr Ola Sigvardsson, puts it succinctly: “The beauty about Sweden’s freedom of the press and freedom of utterance acts.... is that for a thing to be forbidden, it must be written down within the law, literally.”

Elaborating the point, Mr Sigvardsson said “within the law, there is a small list (of prohibitions)... for example, you may not defame. You may not commit hate crimes against minorities in the newspapers or in the magazine. And you may not stir up or try to get the audience to commit crimes”.

“So, everyday in our newspapers, in our radios or on our televisions, there are stories told that could not be told without these laws of transparency. I must say the system of openness has served us pretty well during the last 100 of years that we have had this system.”

Mr Sigvardsson was talking in Stockholm to this writer and nine journalists from Russia, Turkey, Ukraine, Palestine, Syria and Egypt. Sweden’s self-disciplinary system of the press, he said, is not based on legislation. It is entirely voluntary and wholly financed by four press organisations - the Newspaper Publishers’ Association, the Magazine Publishers’ Association, the Swedish Union of Journalists and the National Press club. These organisations are also responsible for drawing up the code of ethics for press.

For journalists coming from Zambia and those other countries this was like listening to a song from another planet. A journalist from Russia remarked later that “the media in his country are really independent because nothing depends on them”. The same could be said for Zambia, where journalism practice depends on the largesse, or lack of it, of the party in power.

So how is it that Sweden has such media freedoms? Some 200 years ago the kings of Sweden started to build a new democratic society based on three pillars - the executive, parliament and the judiciary. From the beginning, a decision was made to keep the political and the parliament systems isolated from the justice structure. Mr Sigvardsson said this was meant to create a balance of powers within society. The justice system plays an important role in protecting and preserving the first two pillars of society.

He said: “It is a bad sign for any country even today to see a mix where people in political power also have influence over what the courts decide. That is a very bad sign for democracy in that country.”

The justice system is also meant to counter corruption and abuse of power which threaten democracy. Thus the founders said the third pillar must be openness – transparency - as simple as that,” explained the Ombudsman. “We are not just saying we are a transparent society, we make it law.”

In addition, a freedom of information act gives the public lawful access to all official records, even down to public and media access to emails sent within government agencies. “.... you can go any day to the office of the Prime Minister of Sweden and say to the secretary, I would like to read all the emails Mr Lofven got today and she will say yes. She will give it to you, because the law says so.”

National security can be classified, and military secrets too,” but you will get official decisions and the things they do within the military.” he said. A clerk may say no, it is top secret, but the decision can be appealed.”

Sweden enacted the world’s first freedom of the press act in 1766, and it has proved to be a radical move towards achieving fairness and openness. The freedoms place considerable responsibility on individual newspapers and editors and the various media have drawn up their own ethical rules.

The Swedish Press Council, founded in 1916, is the oldest tribunal of its kind in the world. It has a judge, who acts as chairman, one representative from each of the press, radio, television and websites, and three representatives of the general public who must not have ties to press organisations.

The office of the PO currently held by Mr Ola Sigvardsson was established in 1969. A special committee consisting of the chief parliamentary ombudsman,

the chairpersons of the Swedish bar association and the national press club, appoints the holder.

Any aggrieved member of the public can lodge a complaint with the PO against media items they regard as a violation of good journalistic practice. But the person to whom the article relates must provide written consent if the complaint is to result in formal criticism. The PO’s task is to ascertain whether a complaint can be dealt with by a correction or a reply from the affected person.

If the matter cannot be settled in this way, the PO may undertake an inquiry if he suspects that the rules of good journalistic practice have been violated.

“The basic idea of this press ethical system is to show that part of media business has the ability to handle this freedom in a responsible way,” explained Mr Sigvardsson. “As a press ombudsman, I do not uphold the law. I work with the code of ethics. The code of ethics is much stronger than the law. The law allows the reports of what the code of ethics doesn’t.”

If the PO writes off a complaint, the complainant may appeal that decision directly to the Press Council or could take the matter to a regular court of law after review by the PO and the Press Council. Mr Sigvardsson says from experience, no court has ever ruled in favour of a person who takes the matter that far.

Around 500 complaints are registered annually. These often concern coverage of criminal

matters and invasion of privacy. The Press Council has reviewed few of them either on PO's demand or he has written off the case on appeal by the complainant. The large majority of complaints have been written off usually because the complaints were unproven or the newspaper printed a correction or a reply.

Mr Sigvardsson, who has been Sweden's PO for the past four years, worked as a journalist for 35 years, mostly as a reporter. He said his country's decision to have a free and open society is not for public show. He attributes Sweden's top ranking as one of the least corrupt countries to openness and freedom of the press.

**This story appeared in the May 2015 edition of the Bulletin & Record Magazine. Due to the passage of time, some of the individuals featured and the positions they held at the time may have changed.**



**MAKANDAY**  
 CENTRE FOR INVESTIGATING JOURNALISM ZAMBIA  
 +260 963 507 661  
 editor@makanday.org  
 CORRUPTION | INVESTIGATIONS | ENVIRONMENT | DATA & RESEARCH