

QUARTERLY DIALOGUE MEETING REPORT BETWEEN NGO LEADERS AND THE MINISTER OF INTERNAL AFFAIRS



The dialogue meeting held on 17th June 2025 brought together representatives from civil society organizations (CSOs), government agencies, the Electoral Commission, international partners, the media, and other stakeholders to discuss the critical role of civil society in Uganda's electoral processes. The forum aimed to unpack the challenges faced, identify emerging opportunities, and reflect on key legal and compliance concerns affecting civil society engagement in elections.

1. INTRODUCTION

Over the years, the Human Rights Centre Uganda in collaboration with the Uganda National NGO Forum and the National Bureau for NGOs, has convened quarterly dialogues between civil society leaders and the Minister of Internal Affairs. The primary objective of these dialogues is to establish a sustainable platform for reflecting on and addressing emerging issues affecting the operations of NGOs, while also improving the relationship between the Government of Uganda and civil society actors. Each dialogue is structured around a specific theme that is both contextually relevant and critically important at the time. Given that 2025 is an election year, this quarter's dialogue will focus on "The Role of Civil Society in Electoral Processes: Challenges and Opportunities.

The meeting attracted over 250 participants, including, Representatives from local and international CSOs, officials from the ministry of internal Affairs, NGO Bureau and Electoral Commission, Development partners and diplomatic missions, legal experts and compliance officers, Media practitioners, youth and women-led organizations

The moderator started by welcoming participants to the meeting and thanking them for keeping time and for honoring the invitations.

He further gave a preview of the meeting and the key participants to the meeting. He then invited Mr. Okello Stephen the secretary to the Ngo Bureau to give the conceptualization of the meeting.

Mr. Okello Stephen started by welcoming participants to the 4th quarter dialogue meeting for the FY 2024/25 and appreciated them for honoring the invitation. He emphasized on the purpose of the dialogue which is to enhance a sustainable relationship between NGOs and Government in providing a healthy and conducive operating environment in the country.

He further said it is against this background that the Ministry of Internal Affairs in collaboration with key MDAs like Uganda Electoral Commission through the NGO Bureau have thought it prudent to dedicate this dialogue meeting to “Strengthening NGO-Government Collaboration for Peaceful and Inclusive Elections”.



“Compliance is not a punishment it’s a safeguard to protect both the credibility of CSOs and the integrity of our elections.”

He continued by saying that this quarter’s dialogue will be held under the theme: **“The Role of Civil Society in Uganda’s Elections: Challenges and Opportunities.”** and it is also supposed to help CSOs and the regulators to come up with useful outcomes, solutions and ideas in response to the concerns raised. There must be willingness by all stakeholders present to have an open communication, mutual understanding and respect for each other.

He said that their work is to create a platform and an environment where all stakeholders feel comfortable enough to speak, share ideas and engage in a productive dialogue. It is also supposed to increase the level of awareness by the different stakeholders on their roles and responsibilities.

He added that the conversation comes at a critical moment in Uganda's democratic calendar. The 2026 elections are approaching, and as past cycles have taught us, this season brings with it both civic opportunity and institutional strain. He continued and said that the NGO Bureau operates at the intersection of law, public trust, and civic responsibility. In this role, the bureau is expected to enforce the legal framework, uphold sector integrity, and ensure that civic actors operate in ways that promote peace and public order without stifling legitimate civic expression.

From where we sit, it is clear that NGOs will continue to play a central role in this electoral season. And that is expected. Civic education, inclusive participation, human rights monitoring, and conflict mitigation are all well-established areas where civil society complements the work of state institutions.

We do not see this as a threat. On the contrary, we see it as an opportunity to build trust, demonstrate responsible leadership, and align our work with the broader national interest.

Allow me to share four reflections that will guide the NGO Bureau's work in this electoral context:

1. Recognizing NGO Expertise and Institutional Memory

Most NGOs engaged in election-related work today are not new players. They have supported multiple electoral cycles, and their contributions are widely acknowledged—by communities, observers, and even public institutions. Rather than policing their participation, our role as a Bureau is to ensure that their interventions are predictable, documented, and coordinated. We are not introducing new conditions—we are simply asking that activities be clearly communicated, that legal obligations under the NGO Act, Cap 109 are fulfilled, and that organizations work in harmony with district authorities and electoral institutions.

2. Reinforcing Sector Credibility through Professional Conduct

The credibility of the NGO sector is not undermined by external voices—it is shaped by our own conduct. The manner in which NGOs engage during this season how they communicate, how they respond to tension, how they interact with communities will either affirm or weaken public trust in civic work. We therefore urge NGOs to continue demonstrating high standards of professionalism, particularly in politically contested spaces. Avoiding inflammatory

messaging, verifying facts before public release, and respecting community dynamics are not legal requirements they are professional ethics.

3. Improving Coordination Across Levels of Government

One of the persistent challenges we observe is the gap in coordination between national-level NGOs and district-level leadership. We continue to receive reports where RDCs or DNMCs are unaware of programs being implemented in their jurisdictions.

We understand that many NGOs operate across districts and may not be required to seek daily approvals. However, sharing workplans, activity schedules, and partner contacts with relevant local authorities is both a courtesy and a safeguard. It helps reduce suspicion, prevent miscommunication, and protect your field staff from unnecessary interruptions.

The Bureau will intensify its engagement with district leadership in the coming months to clarify expectations and reduce friction during the electoral period.

4. Ensuring Compliance without Disrupting Impact

We know that elections are time-bound, and delays in compliance reviews can be frustrating. The Bureau is therefore streamlining its internal systems to ensure faster responses to queries, permit updates, and document verifications. We are also working closely with the Ministry and relevant agencies to ensure that law enforcement officials understand the scope and legal protection of registered NGO work.

We ask NGOs to support this process by keeping their documentation updated and accessible both for their own protection and to promote institutional accountability.

This is not the time to withdraw or work in isolation. It is a time to double down on collaboration, to Centre our actions on integrity, and to ensure that civil society remains a force for peace, inclusion, and democratic resilience.

The NGO Bureau will continue to serve as your partner in regulation not to limit your mandate, but to ensure that your impact is sustainable, lawful, and respected.

He concluded by thanking the participants for being commitment to Uganda, and I wishing everyone a constructive and forward-looking dialogue.

He thanked all the participants present in their different capacities, the organizers who include; the Ministry of internal Affairs, NGO Bureau, Uganda National NGO

Forum, Human Rights Centre Uganda and lastly the Irish embassy who are the funders of this event.

He invited **Lt Gen Joseph Musanyufu** the Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Internal Affairs to give his welcome remarks.

He started by extending a warm welcome to the participants present as they gather for the dialogue on “Strengthening NGO-Government Collaboration for Peaceful and Inclusive Elections”. He added that their presence underscores the importance of collaboration and engagement in addressing one of the most critical aspect surrounding the election period we are in.

He said that the dialogue is a fundamental tool for achieving a greater positive impact in the elections of this country where NGOs play a key role. As representatives of Government and NGOs, we each bring unique perspectives, expertise, and insights to the table. It is through dialogue and cooperation among all stakeholders that we can develop vibrant and accountable NGO responsive to the needs of our country.

He said that this quarter’s dialogue will be held under the theme: **“The Role of Civil Society in Uganda’s Elections: Challenges and Opportunities.”**

He emphasized that the meeting provides participants with an opportunity to engage in constructive dialogue, to share knowledge and experiences and how best they can work closely with the NGOs. Together, he said they can identify challenges, discuss solutions, and pave a course forward that promotes economic growth and fosters prosperity for all.

He urged each of the participants to actively participate in the discussions, to share their perspectives and ideas openly and honestly and approach deliberations with a spirit of collaboration, mutual respect, and a commitment to finding common ground.

He continued and said as we work together towards our shared goal of contributing to the development of our country, let us remember the importance of transparency,

accountability, and inclusivity in the formulation and implementation of our work. Let us also remain mindful of the impact of our decisions on the lives and livelihoods of all citizens.

There is need to foster a collaborative environment where NGOs can share best practices and learn from each other. I am confident that by working together, we can build a sustainable working environment that serves the interests of all members of society, promotes economic prosperity, and advances the collective well-being of our nation.

He said that the dialogue is timely. Uganda is entering an electoral period an inherently sensitive time that demands not only strong institutions, but also clear communication, responsible conduct, and a shared commitment to national stability.

The Ministry of Internal Affairs, through its Departments and Agencies, bears significant responsibility for ensuring law and order, internal security, and oversight of civic activities. My role, as Permanent Secretary, is to ensure that the systems we have in place function effectively, efficiently, and with integrity.

He highlighted four operational focus areas that will guide our engagement with NGOs during this electoral period:

1. Clarity of Mandate and Legal Status

The Ministry, through the NGO Bureau, is reviewing operational compliance among NGOs, particularly in relation to their declared areas of activity. We encourage each organization to take the necessary steps to ensure that their work during the election period is aligned with their approved scope as per the NGO Act, Cap 109. Organizations undertaking civic education, electoral observation, or peacebuilding must ensure these are explicitly provided for in their constitutions and operational permits. Where there is ambiguity, the Bureau remains available to guide accordingly.

2. Information Flow and Notification Procedures

In our experience, one of the most common sources of tension between NGOs and public officials—especially at the district level—is the failure to notify relevant authorities of planned engagements. Let me reiterate: notification is not interference; it is a measure to support coordination and avoid unnecessary suspicion. We urge

all NGOs—local and international—to adhere to the District Notification Protocol, particularly when operating in politically charged environments or border districts. Timely communication fosters collaboration and trust.

3. Financial Transparency and Due Diligence

NGOs must exercise due diligence regarding their funding flows, especially those linked to election-related activities. The NGO Bureau and the Financial Intelligence Authority will continue to collaborate in promoting transparency in program financing. We strongly encourage organizations to maintain updated financial records, open books for audit, and proactively declare funding partners especially for voter education and electoral mobilization programs.

4. Risk Identification and Mitigation

From an administrative perspective, we must plan for both progress and setbacks. Electoral periods can escalate tensions. It is therefore important that NGOs integrate risk assessments into their programming: map out districts with fragile cohesion, monitor trends of misinformation, and flag potential early warning signs. The Ministry welcomes proactive engagements by NGOs to share such intelligence through official channels. We are better served when we work as allies, not as adversaries.

This election period presents a test not only for political actors, but also for institutions like ours, and indeed for civil society. It is a test of how well we can communicate, manage risk, and stay true to our national values.

Let me categorically state that this Ministry does not seek to constrain lawful civic action. On the contrary, we want to see it flourish—within the law, and in service of peace, accountability, and good governance.

In that spirit, we encourage national umbrella bodies and district NGO networks to take an even more proactive role in guiding your members in helping them to understand their legal responsibilities, to document their activities, and to engage productively with public institutions.

I wish to affirm our continued commitment to structured engagement. My office remains open to receive, respond to, and resolve any administrative concerns you may face particularly during this crucial period.

He continued by urging participants to protect the civic space by exercising it responsibly. Let us uphold the law not just in form, but in spirit. And let us demonstrate that partnership between government and civil society is not only possible, but productive.

He concluded by thanking participation for their dedication, and commitment to the important dialogue. Said he looks forward to productive and fruitful discussions today and to the positive outcomes that will emerge from our collective efforts.

He invited the minister of internal affairs to give his opening remark.

Opening Remarks

Hon. Minister of Internal Affairs

Maj. Gen (RTD) Kahinda Otafiire in his keynote address, emphasized that civil society is a vital partner in promoting transparency and civic awareness during elections. He urged CSOs to operate lawfully, remain non-partisan, and ensure accurate public communication.



🗣️: *"We value the role civil society plays in shaping democratic participation, but it must be done within the law and with national interest at heart."*

Hon. Minister of Internal Affairs

2 Insights from the Electoral Commission

A representative of the Electoral Commission **Mr. Kugonza Enock** provided an overview of CSO accreditation processes, roles of election observers, and expectations for civic education partners. They emphasized timely coordination and the need to bridge information gaps to foster voter confidence and participation.



“We are open to working with civil society, but procedures must be respected to ensure fairness for all players.”

Electoral Commission Official

Key issues

1. Restrictive accreditation practices and undermining of CSO roles
2. State mistrust and politicization of Civil Society work
3. Violence, arbitrary arrests, militarization, and state intimidation
- a. 4. Restrictions on Civil Society Coalitions for Election Observation
- b. 5. Unheeded Calls for Electoral Reforms: A Persistent Governance Deficit

Emerging Opportunities

- Collaboration with security agencies for safer civic engagement.
- Regional partnerships to support compliance training.
- Expanding digital civic education among youth.
- Establishment of CSO-government communication desks at district level.

Recommendations

1. Establish a **permanent CSO-Government Dialogue Platform** for electoral matters.
2. Provide **compliance orientation and pre-election workshops** to CSOs across the country.
3. Develop **localized voter education content** in indigenous languages.
4. Streamline **observer accreditation processes** to avoid last-minute disruptions.
5. Promote **joint planning between CSOs and the Electoral Commission** on voter education timelines.



🗣️ *“We must build trust—between government, CSOs, and the people we serve. Elections are not about competition, they’re about voice.”*

Security concerns during election-related activities.

- Shrinking civic space and political interference.
- Mistrust between CSOs and state actors.
- Financial and capacity constraints for grassroots organizations.
- The role of technology in enhancing civic engagement.

Closing Remarks by madam Ssekajja Margaret Director Human Rights commission Uganda.

In her closing remarks she commended all participants for their contributions and reaffirmed their readiness to engage in constructive dialogue with Government. She called for mutual trust, proactive engagement, and continued compliance to ensure that CSOs contribute positively and lawfully to Uganda's democratic processes.



A group photo marking the end of the national dialogue on civil society and elections.