

Inter-Religious Council of Uganda



Religions for Peace

PRESS STATEMENT ON THE CONDUCT AND INTEGRITY OF THE 2026 GENERAL ELECTIONS

20TH JANUARY, 2026

IRCU SECRETARIAT BOARD ROOM

INTRODUCTION

Greetings from the Inter-Religious Council of Uganda (IRCU). We want to thank all Ugandans who participated in the recently concluded presidential and parliamentary elections. We were encouraged by the resilience exhibited by the political actors and voters, sometimes against many odds.

Now that the Electoral Commission has announced the outcome, we would like to congratulate His Excellency Yoweri Museveni on being elected to another term in office. We also extend our congratulations to all the other candidates who took part in the presidential and parliamentary elections.

To those who were successful, we urge you to celebrate responsibly and to serve all Ugandans regardless of their political affiliations and to those who were not successful, we encourage you to take heart, there is always another opportunity.

We also wish to commend the Electoral Commission, security agencies, and the election observers for completing the first phase of the elections.

As you may be aware, IRCU was one of the observers of this election. Today, we have invited you to share some of our findings and recommendations following the January 15, 2026 presidential and parliamentary elections. Our technical team is preparing a detailed election observation report, which will be shared with the public at a later date. In the meantime, allow us to highlight some of the key findings.

CONTEXT AND KEY INCIDENTS

The 2026 General Elections unfolded in an environment defined less by open contestation than by control, caution, and calculated restraint. While voting took place across the country, it occurred within a political atmosphere marked by fear of escalation, restricted communication, and the pervasive presence of state security.

1. Communication Blackout

In the evening of 13th January, two days before polling, the government-imposed internet shutdown significantly altered the electoral environment. By polling day, many communities across Uganda were operating with limited access to information beyond their immediate surroundings. In areas such as Kampala, Wakiso, Mukono, and parts of Luwero, voters and party agents reported uncertainty about developments outside their polling stations, including voting progress, incidents, or official updates.

The absence of social media and messaging platforms removed an important channel through which citizens, observers, and party agents normally share information and cross-check events. As a result, polling stations functioned in isolation rather than as part of a wider, visible national process. This reduced opportunities for real-time verification and public scrutiny.

The communication restrictions had implications on both electoral integrity and political participation. Limited access to communication constrained coordination among observers, party agents, and election officials thus weakening accountability mechanisms. In an environment where trust in the electoral process was already fragile, restricted information flows increased suspicion and allowed rumours to circulate without timely clarification and redress.

2. Operational Inconsistencies

Delayed Opening of Polling Stations and declaration of results

In parts of Kampala and Wakiso, several polling stations opened late due to delays in the delivery of election materials and failures of biometric voter verification kits. These delays disrupted voting schedules and resulted into long waiting time, particularly affecting elderly voters and women with young children. In some cases, voters left polling stations before casting their ballots.

Unclear Use of Manual Procedures

Where biometric systems failed, some polling officials resorted to manual voting procedures without providing clear explanations to voters. This lack of communication created confusion and frustration, as voters were unsure whether proper procedures were being followed.

Result Management Failures

Across several districts, including Alebtong, Kibanda, Ibanda, Rubaga South in Kampala, results management faced serious challenges that undermined confidence in the electoral process. Key problems included missing ballot boxes, discrepancies between polling stations, declaration forms and aggregated results, and vote counts exceeding the number of registered voters.

There have been reported disputes between polling officials and party agents over access, positioning, and visibility during counting. While counting proceeded, it often prioritized order over transparency, limiting the ability of stakeholders to verify the process. In Alebtong's Ajuri County, deficiencies in tallying and result integrity led the Electoral Commission to nullify results from 18 polling stations and schedule a fresh poll for 27 January 2026.

Operational inconsistencies across polling stations and districts resulted into unequal voting experiences and weakened confidence in the electoral process. When procedures are applied unevenly, communication is lacking, and results cannot be reconciled across levels, public trust is eroded. Even where corrective measures such as fresh polls are ordered, confidence is difficult to restore, particularly among communities directly affected.

3. Security Posture and Incidents

Across all regions, one pattern was consistent, that the election was managed as a security exercise as much as a civic one. While this

approach succeeded in preventing widespread disorder, it did so at the cost of openness, dialogue, and public confidence.

In central Uganda, including Kampala, Wakiso, Mukono, and Butambala, the presence of heavily armed security personnel was highly visible around polling stations, road junctions, and residential areas. While security forces did not consistently interfere directly with voting, their posture was unmistakably assertive. In Butambala District, this atmosphere tipped into violence, with reported clashes between civilians and security forces resulting in death. These incidents, widely reported in national and international media, cast a long shadow over polling in surrounding areas, heightening fear and limiting movement later in the day.

The heavy and sometimes intrusive presence of security forces around polling stations, particularly in urban and politically competitive areas, contributed to fear and withdrawal rather than reassurance. For some voters, the act of voting felt surveilled rather than protected. This had implications for turnout and for the freedom with which citizens and agents engaged in the process.

4. Low Voter Turn Out

Elsewhere, observers reported that the lowest voter turnout in recent decades was evident in urban and peri-urban areas, particularly in Kampala and Wakiso, a pattern likely linked both to the internet shutdown and to voter apathy amid procedural uncertainties. West Nile districts such as Arua and Nebbi experienced logistical challenges, including late openings and understaffed polling stations. Observers reported strong voter interest and turnout in the early hours, followed by a noticeable thinning of crowds as the day progressed and uncertainty about security increased.

A total of 11,366,201 voters cast ballots out of approximately 21,649,068 registered voters. This equates to a 52.50% turnout, marking a noticeable decline of about 6.85 percentage points from

the 59.35% recorded in the 2021 elections. This has been described as one of the lowest turnouts in recent multiparty election history (since 2006), attributed to factors like biometric verification kit failures causing delays, internet shutdowns, security concerns, and general voter apathy or disillusionment, particularly in urban areas like Kampala and Wakiso, where participation was notably lower compared to rural regions.

5. Youth participation and limited civic and voter education

Youth participation in the 2026 general elections remained uneven, with noticeably lower turnout among those aged 18–35 in urban centers such as Kampala (including Kawempe, Makindye, and Nakawa divisions). This contributed to the low national voter turnout, as many young people cited the limited perceived impact of electoral outcomes as reasons for disengagement or apathy despite high registration rates among first-time voters.

In areas around Kampala divisions, groups of predominantly youth gathered in response to delayed or tampered result announcements, leading to confrontations with security forces that included the use of tear gas, arrests, and reports of injuries. While Election Day itself proceeded relatively calmly in most locations, these incidents illustrated how dissatisfaction with the process can rapidly escalate into unrest when peaceful channels for expression are constrained.

The pattern highlights the pressing need for more comprehensive civic education tailored to youth. Sustained programs delivered through religious institutions, schools, community spaces, and digital platforms are essential to build understanding of electoral rights, mechanisms for peaceful participation, conflict de-escalation, and the broader value of constructive civic engagement. Expanding such efforts, combined with measures to address underlying issues like unemployment, would help redirect youthful energy toward positive contributions to democratic stability and inclusion.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on observations made by accredited IRCU observers across multiple districts, the Inter-Religious Council of Uganda issues the following preliminary recommendations in the interest of electoral integrity, social cohesion, and public trust.

1. Electoral Commission

The Electoral Commission should strengthen consistency and transparency in the management of polling and results. Where elections are annulled or fresh polls ordered, clear public explanations should be issued promptly, detailing the specific failures and corrective measures taken. This is essential to restoring confidence, particularly in districts such as Alebtong and Ibanda, where unresolved discrepancies directly affected voter trust. The Commission should also review polling-day logistics and preparedness to reduce delays, reliance on improvised procedures, and unequal voting conditions.

2. Results Management and Tallying

Greater safeguards are required at the counting, transmission, and tallying stages. Discrepancies between polling station declarations and aggregated results undermine the legitimacy of outcomes even where legal remedies exist. The returning officers who are found guilty of tampering/altering results should be held accountable and dismissed from public office in public interest. Transparent reconciliation mechanisms should be visible to party agents, observers, and the public in real time.

3. Security Agencies

Security deployments during elections should be guided by proportionality, neutrality, and restraint. While the prevention of violence is critical, heavy or intrusive presence around polling stations risks suppressing participation and creating fear among

voters. Security agencies should prioritize voter protection over deterrence optics.

4. Civic and Digital Space

The restriction of internet access during the electoral period limited transparency, coordination, and independent verification. IRCU urges the Government to review the use of blanket communication restrictions during elections and to pursue approaches that protect national security without undermining civic trust and electoral accountability.

5. Political Actors

Political parties and candidates should recommit to peaceful participation in the electoral process, including respect for electoral procedures and lawful dispute resolution mechanisms. At the same time, they bear responsibility to refrain from actions that heighten tensions at polling stations or during tallying.

6. Role of Faith Leaders and Communities

Faith leaders have a critical role in truth-telling without incitement. Religious institutions should continue to promote peaceful engagement while also speaking clearly against injustice, manipulation, and exclusion. Silence in the face of credible integrity concerns risks normalizing them.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the preliminary findings highlight both the progress achieved and the challenges that remain in deepening our electoral democracy. As the Bible teaches us, “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called children of God” (Matthew 5:9), and also the Quran reminds us, “Cooperate in righteousness and piety, but do not cooperate in sin and aggression” (Surah Al-Ma’idah, 5:2).

Guided by these principles, the Inter-Religious Council of Uganda remains committed to fostering dialogue, understanding, and accountability among all stakeholders.

Thank you, and may God bless us all.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Kaziimba".

The Most Rev. Dr. Stephen Samuel Kaziimba Mugalu
Archbishop of the Province of the Church of Uganda
Chairperson, Council of Presidents
FOR AND ON BEHALF OF THE INTER-RELIGIOUS COUNCIL OF
UGANDA