

Statement on the arbitrary detention of Dr. Sarah Bireete

Date: 14 January 2026

The European Platform for Democratic Elections (EPDE) strongly condemns the arbitrary detention of Dr. Sarah Bireete and the escalating crackdown on civil society in Uganda ahead of the 15 January 2026 elections. EPDE calls on the Ugandan authorities to immediately and unconditionally release her. EPDE further urges the authorities to guarantee Dr. Bireete's safety, to fully protect her human rights as an election observer, in line with international obligations and commitments, and to end the widening repression against independent civil society actors.

Dr. Sarah Bireete is an internationally acclaimed and respected lawyer and election observer, serving as the Executive Director of the Ugandan watchdog organization Centre for Constitutional Governance (CCG), as the Chairperson of the East and Horn of Africa Election Observers Network (E-HORN), as the Chair of the Board of the Global Network of Domestic Election Monitors (GNDEM), as the Vice Chairperson of the African Election Observers Network (AfEONet), and as the President of the East African Civil Society Organizations Forum (EACSOF).

Dr. Bireete was arrested on 30 December 2025 and remanded to Luzira Prison until 21 January 2026 on charges related to allegedly obtaining and disclosing personal data relating to voter information without the consent of the Electoral Commission. This is despite the fact that the same data is publicly available under the authority of the Electoral Commission which routinely provides such information to all political parties and presidential candidates.

This detention, occurring just days before Uganda's general elections on 15 January 2026, will effectively prevent Dr. Bireete from exercising her right as a citizen to participate in her own country's elections as a voter, observer, analyst, and public commentator. The decision to remand her for twenty days solely to allow the prosecution more time to prepare a bail response represents a disproportionate and punitive deprivation of liberty, contradicting basic principles of justice and the presumption of innocence. We regard her incarceration as an act of political persecution fueled by the regime's heightened anxiety ahead of the presidential and parliamentary elections.

In the same critical pre-electoral period, the Ugandan government has moved to suspend the operations of multiple prominent civil society organisations, including election monitoring and human rights groups, citing "national security" concerns, and has instructed the freezing of bank accounts belonging to some of these organisations.

EPDE has **for years witnessed how autocratic European states like the Russian Federation, Belarus, or Azerbaijan systematically target and detain election observers ahead of elections** as part of a **broader strategy to restrict political space** and eliminate independent scrutiny. By suppressing credible and independent oversight, authoritarian governments aim to prevent exposure of electoral fraud and weaken mechanisms that could support genuine democratic participation. It is deeply troubling to see similar tactics being employed in Uganda.

The United Nations, the Venice Commission of the Council of Europe, and the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) of the Organization of American States (OAS) have recognized election observers as human rights defenders who are entitled to special protection in accordance with international law. EPDE encourages the African Union to join these declarations and would highly appreciate concrete steps across its member states to safeguard those citizens who work to ensure transparent and credible elections on the African continent.

EPDE therefore calls on:

The Ugandan judiciary to expeditiously hear and determine Dr. Bireete's bail application, respecting her constitutional right to liberty and the presumption of innocence in accordance with Uganda's Constitution and its international obligations under the Treaty for the Establishment of the East African Community and the African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance, which require states to respect human rights, the rule of law, and political freedoms.

Ugandan authorities to provide clear guidance on the interpretation and application of the Data Protection and Privacy Act, and to ensure that its enforcement does not unfairly penalize or inhibit lawful civil society activities, including election observation, voter education, and public interest data verification, as protected under regional and continental human rights frameworks.

The international community, including the European Union, EU member states and the United Nations, to closely monitor the case of Dr. Bireete and to engage with Ugandan authorities to ensure respect for due process, the rule of law, and the protection of human rights defenders and election observers.

The African Union to recognize election observers as human rights defenders deserving special protection, and to promote concrete measures to safeguard civic space and denounce the misuse of legal or procedural measures that unduly restrict civil society activity.

Further reading:

 [Statement by the Center for Constitutional Governance \(CCG\)](#)

 [Statement by AHEAD Africa](#)

 [Statement on the Remand of the EACSOF President by the East African Civil Society Organizations Forum \(EACSOF\)](#)

 [Statement by the Global Network of Domestic Election Monitors \(GNDEM\)](#)

 [GNDEM Condemns Further Repression of Civil Society in Uganda Ahead of Elections](#)

For questions, please contact our Secretariat at info@epde.org