

Voting began in neighboring Uganda on Thursday in a tightly controlled environment, marked by a nationwide internet shutdown, heightened security, and reported delays at polling stations in several parts of the country.

The general election follows a directive from a government regulatory body instructing mobile network operators to block public internet access starting Tuesday evening. The decision has drawn criticism from opposition groups and international observers. The UN Human Rights Office has previously emphasized that open access to communication and information is a key condition for free and credible elections.

Polling stations were expected to open at 7am, but delays were reported in multiple locations. Observers said voting began shortly after the official opening time in parts of Kampala, while police and military personnel were visibly deployed in eastern towns including Mbale, Jinja, and Kamuli.

Opposition figures raised concerns about how the process was being handled, pointing to what they described as widespread delays in opening polling stations. David Lewis Rubongoya, secretary general of the National Unity Platform (NUP), accused authorities of deliberately undermining the vote.

“What we are seeing is not accidental; it appears to be deliberate,”

At several polling centres, voters expressed frustration as they waited for voting to begin. In Kampala, Umaru Mutyaba, a polling agent for a parliamentary candidate, said the delays risked discouraging voters.

“People are standing around for hours just to vote, as though they have nothing else to attend to,” he added.

Uganda has more than 21.6 million registered voters. With around 70 percent of the population under the age of 35, unemployment remains a major issue, particularly for young and first-time voters.

The country, home to roughly 45 million people, is expected to close polling stations at 4pm, according to the electoral commission. By law, final results must be announced within 48 hours.

The government communications agency said the internet shutdown was intended to curb misinformation, electoral fraud, and incitement to violence. However, the

outage has disrupted public communication and affected some essential services, including banking.

Security has been visibly increased ahead of the vote, with police and military units deployed in major urban centres. Fears of unrest have also been reflected in local media coverage, including guidance published by the Daily Monitor advising residents on personal safety during the election period.

President Yoweri Museveni, 81, who has been in power since 1986, is seeking another term in office. He faces seven challengers, including Robert Kyagulanyi; popularly known as Bobi Wine; a musician-turned-politician and leader of the opposition NUP.

Ahead of the vote, Museveni urged citizens to turn out in large numbers, while warning against any attempts to interfere with the electoral process.

Electoral commission chairperson Simon Byabakama also appealed for calm and tolerance as voting continued.

“Let us preserve the peace we have,” he said on Wednesday. “I urge everyone to remain civil and tolerant, and to allow every citizen the chance to exercise their constitutional right.”

Human rights organisations have voiced concerns over restrictions on civic space during the campaign period. Amnesty International accused security forces of using excessive force at opposition rallies, including a November incident in eastern Uganda in which one person was killed.

Several civic organisations were also suspended during the campaign. A media watchdog known as That Group closed its offices on Wednesday after the interior ministry alleged it had engaged in activities considered contrary to national security laws.

Veteran opposition figure Kizza Besigye remains in custody after being charged with treason in February 2025.

As voting continues, attention remains focused on voter turnout, the counting process, and whether the election will meet both domestic and international expectations.