

2 January 2026

Statement condemning the continued detention of Dr. Sarah Bireete

AHEAD Africa strongly condemns the arbitrary arrest, continued detention, and remand to custody of Dr. Sarah Bireete until 21 January 2026, as well as the manifest lack of proportionality of the measures imposed, which will also prevent her from exercising her right to vote in Uganda's general elections scheduled for 15 January 2026.

Sarah Bireete is a human rights lawyer and activist, Executive Director of the Centre for Constitutional Governance (CCG), a Ugandan civil society watchdog organisation. She is also Chairperson of the East and Horn of Africa Election Observers Network (E-HORN) and the Global Network of Domestic Election Monitors (GNDEM), and Vice Chairperson of the African Election Observers Network (AfEONet).

Dr. Sarah Bireete was arrested on 30 December 2025 and detained without being formally charged, in violation of Article 23(3) of the Constitution of the Republic of Uganda, which guarantees prompt information on the reasons for arrest and the right to legal counsel. On 2 January 2026, **she was charged with alleged unlawful access to and disclosure of information** from the National Voters' Register, contrary to Sections 35(1) and (2) of the Data Protection and Privacy Act, despite the prosecution acknowledging that investigations were still ongoing. She was nevertheless **remanded to Luzira Prison until 21 January 2026**.

As a direct consequence of this remand, she will be not be able to vote in Uganda's general election, in violation of Article 59 of the Constitution.¹ The denial of this fundamental democratic right in the absence of any conviction raises grave constitutional and human rights concerns.

This case reflects a broader and deeply troubling pattern, including the **erosion of due process guarantees**, the **undermining of the presumption of innocence**, and the **misuse of pre-trial detention as a punitive measure**, contrary to national and international legal standards. It also raises serious concerns about the **misuse of criminal law to restrict civic space**. Dr. Sarah Bireete is a well-known human rights defender and non-partisan election observer who has consistently exercised her rights under Article 38 of the Constitution to participate in public affairs and promote constitutional governance. Her arrest and continued detention give rise to credible fears that legal instruments are being used to intimidate or silence independent civil society actors, **particularly in the sensitive period preceding national elections**, and have a chilling effect on citizen observers across Uganda, **discouraging independent observation and undermining confidence in the safety of civic engagement as well as the transparency of the electoral process**.

¹ Despite the Ugandan High Court ruling regarding Article 59 of the Constitution which held that the right to vote extends to prisoners, and that the Electoral Commission must facilitate their participation in elections, there has been no electoral reform in this sense. *Kalali Steven v Attorney General and the Electoral Commission*, decided on June 17, 2020.

AHEAD Africa, a project bringing together African citizen observers and democracy support organisations, is deeply concerned by the signal this case sends to civil society and election observers in Uganda and across the region. The ability of these actors to operate freely and without fear of arrest or retaliation is essential to credible elections and democratic governance. We therefore call for the **immediate release of Dr. Sarah Bireete**, and we urge the Ugandan authorities to uphold the rule of law, respect due process, and ensure that human rights defenders and election observers can carry out their legitimate work safely and independently.

AHEAD Africa stands in solidarity with Dr. Sarah Bireete and reaffirms its commitment to supporting citizen observers and civil society actors in the defence of democratic principles across the African continent.

Signatories

Africa Election Observers Network (AfEONET)

Africтивistes

Democracy Reporting International (DRI)

East and Horn of Africa Election Observers Network (E-HORN)

Electoral Support Network of Southern Africa (ESN-SA)

European Partnership for Democracy (EPD)

West Africa Election Observers Network (WAEON)