Scholars Condemn the Shutdown of Ugandan Organization Sexual Minorities Uganda (SMUG), Call for Authorities to Reverse the Decision Immediately

August 12, 2022 - The undersigned scholars strongly condemn the decision to shut down the operations of Sexual Minorities Uganda (SMUG), a leading non-governmental organization committed to protecting and advancing the human rights of LGBTQI+ individuals in Uganda. We call on the Ugandan government to reverse this decision, and to bring an end to the longstanding persecution of Uganda’s vibrant LGBTQI+ community.

On August 3, the National Bureau for Non-Government Organizations (NGO Bureau), the Ugandan government body that regulates NGOs in the country, halted SMUG’s operations for failing to register with the NGO Bureau. However, SMUG applied for registration with the Bureau in 2012. In a 2016 letter, the Uganda Registration Services Bureau (URSB) rejected its application to reserve the name “Sexual Minorities Uganda” on the basis that the name was “undesirable and unregistrable that the proposed company to be incorporated to advocate for the rights and wellbeing of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer persons, which persons are engaged in activities labeled criminal acts under sect. 145 of the Penal Code Act.”

This latest attack highlights the prevalence of discrimination, homophobia, and transphobia in Uganda and the readiness of Ugandan Government authorities to repress the country’s LGBTQI+ population. This decision to shut down SMUG’s operations discriminates against LGBTQI+ people and is in direct contravention of Uganda’s international legal obligations to treat all persons as equal before the law and to respect their right to freedom of association.

Previous state efforts to suppress the rights of sexual and gender minorities have led to an increase in attacks and violence against the community. The community experienced a rise in attacks in 2019, following comments by a minister proposing to bring back a law that would impose the death penalty for gay sex. The decision also is part of a worrying trend to close the space for civil society in Uganda. In August 2021, 54 civil society groups were suspended indefinitely by the NGO bureau. The groups ordered to close included Chapter Four, a leading civil liberties organization that has conducted work in support of the LGBTQI+ community. In May 2022, the high court in Uganda declared the suspension unlawful, and re-allowed Chapter Four to reopen. This week’s decision to close SMUG represents an escalation in attacks on Ugandan civil society, especially groups working to support the rights of LGBTQI+ persons.

We join SMUG to ask that:

1. The Ugandan government comply with its obligations to protect the LGBTQI+ community under international human rights law.
2. Ugandan law enforcement not use this recent pronouncement as a means to attack members of SMUG or the broader LGBTQI+ community.
3. Bilateral partners continue to urge the Government of Uganda to uphold basic human rights and freedoms within their borders.
And we call on the international community to protest this decision at the highest levels before the situation deteriorates any further.

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