

February 4, 2021

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Bruce Gillmer
President of Music, Music Talent, Programming, and Events
Viacom CBS Media Networks

Via email

Dear Mr. Gillmer,

Your organization, CBS Viacom, is planning to host the MTV Africa Music Awards (MAMAs) in Kampala, Uganda — originally planned for February 20, 2021, but postponed on February 4 until further notice — in partnership with the Government of Uganda.

Partnering with the brutal dictatorship of Yoweri Museveni puts your organization in league with a murderous, repressive regime involved in gross human rights violations, including the jailing and censorship of artists.

I am writing to urgently inform you of the human rights crisis in Uganda, and that Museveni's regime is using the MAMAs merely to whitewash its most recent murderous repression, bolster its reputation, and regain credibility, both domestically and abroad. I welcome your recent decision to postpone this event but would like to respectfully request that, in line with your recent [statement](#) of commitment to “amplifying social change through music and culture,” you move this event to a democratic country and use your platform to galvanize further support for local artists and communities in their courageous struggle for a country free of dictatorship, censorship, and repression.

CBS Viacom [asserts](#) on its website that it recognizes its “responsibility—as a global content powerhouse—to...work toward making meaningful and lasting change.” There is a vast gulf between the values stated above and the reality on the ground in Uganda.

Yoweri Museveni has been Uganda's dictator since seizing power through guerilla warfare in January 1986. In January 2020, Uganda's subservient Electoral Commission declared Museveni the winner of presidential elections in which he was seeking a sixth term. Museveni [called](#) the election “the most cheating-free” since independence from Britain in 1962. In fact, the elections were unfree and unfair by any measure, as they were held amidst a brutal crackdown against civil society and political opponents, and marred by fraud allegations.

The presidential campaign registered the worst political violence in Uganda in decades. Museveni's regime particularly cracked down on the campaigning of leading opposition candidate, Member of Parliament, and popular musician Bobi Wine. Wine, his campaign team, and supporters suffered multiple forms of intimidation, including restrictions of movement, repeated arrests, and beatings, deadly shootings, and excessive force at the hands of security forces, which routinely used live bullets and stun grenades.

The worst spike in violence came in November, when security forces shot dead [more than 50 people](#) while dispersing protests against Wine's arrest. About 3,000 opposition activists, demonstrators, and Wine supporters are [reported](#) to have been arrested or abducted by state security agents since then. In December, Wine was forced to [suspend](#) his campaigning, while UN human rights experts [expressed](#) serious concerns about regime violence ahead of the polls. One week before the election, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights [condemned](#) the regime's discriminatory and opportunistic enforcement of COVID-19 restrictions to curtail opposition campaign activities.

Additionally, Museveni's regime did not allow international poll monitors to observe the elections, and on January 13 (election eve), the regime [ordered](#) the internet switched off, plunging the country into a complete internet and information blackout. On January 15, security forces surrounded Wine's residence, effectively placing the musician (whose real name is Robert Kyagulanyi) under [house arrest](#) for the next 11 days.

Unlike most artists in democracies, artists in Uganda do not enjoy freedom of expression or artistic freedom, and face pressure to only praise the regime. Museveni's regime has jailed, prosecuted, or censored several artists over the years for daring to use their talent to speak up about injustices in Uganda. Wine's music, for instance, is currently banned from TV and radio, and he is not allowed to perform concerts in the country. Musician Nubian Li, a close associate of Wine, is currently [in jail](#) on trumped-up charges for allegedly possessing four rounds of ammunition. The authorities failed to conduct any credible investigations into the July 2019 abduction, torture, and death of musician [Ziggy Wine](#), a friend of Bobi Wine and an outspoken supporter of the People Power resistance movement.

Furthermore, Museveni's regime has for several years now sought to impose strict censorship regulations on artists and performers. For example, the 2019 Stage Plays and Public Entertainment Rules required artists to seek a permit and submit the content of any public performance for vetting by the government's Uganda Communication Council. Penalty for non-compliance carried a fine and/or a 6-month jail term. Officials withdrew the regulation in August 2020, only after protests from local artists, as well as global music icons, including Bono, Seun Kuti, and Peter Gabriel.

CBS Viacom and MTV are iconic brands, and MTV has tremendous global influence in global youth culture. About 80 percent of Uganda's population is comprised of young people under the age of 30, who are yearning for meaningful change in the form of democracy and jobs, after decades of dictatorship under an aging ruler. Many of them are reeling from the most recent murderous repression and are increasingly dissatisfied with Museveni's regime. And so the Ugandan government counts on using and manipulating the MAMAs to distract from the demands of its youth, and to bolster its reputation.



Simply put, if you move forward with this event sponsored by Museveni's 35-year-old dictatorship, you will be in league with a regime that has a well-documented record of brutalizing, jailing, and murdering its citizens, particularly political opponents and peaceful protestors.

Considering the information above, HRF believes that your support for an event sponsored by a murderous, repressive regime involved in gross human rights violations — especially by the police — would be highly unfortunate and damaging to your brand.

Instead, we urge you to use your platform to promote human rights in Uganda and contribute to a mission of protecting freedom globally. Canceling the MAMAs in Kampala will prevent Museveni's regime from whitewashing its crimes with your unintentional support. Your organization's influence in Uganda gives you the opportunity to make a hugely influential condemnation of Museveni's regime, and to greatly enhance the cause of freedom in Uganda. You have the opportunity to call for the release of all arbitrarily detained citizens, an end to police brutality and regime violence, intimidation and censorship, and new free and fair elections.

We hope you will consider showing consistency in your support for human rights and peaceful, democratic protests against the authoritarian regime in Uganda, by using this opportunity for good. If you have any questions, you can contact me at (212) 246-8486 or by e-mail at info@hrf.org.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Thor Halvorsen'.

Thor Halvorsen
CEO and President
Human Rights Foundation

CC:

Monde Twala, Senior Vice President & General Manager at Viacom CBS Networks Africa
Craig Paterson, Senior Vice President & General Manager at Viacom CBS Networks Africa