

UGANDA

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Countdown to the Ugandan Elections: The Big Questions

A few days remain to the general elections in Uganda scheduled for February 18th. This will be the second election held since multiparty democracy was reintroduced in the country in 2005. With eight candidates running for president – seven of them on party platforms – the campaign season has demonstrated that the stakes are high. The incumbent, Yoweri Museveni, is running for a fourth term as elected president. Being candidate for the ruling National Resistance Movement (NRM) he is facing his main challenger in the last two elections and former colleague, Dr. Kizza Besigye, the flag bearer for a coalition platform of four opposition parties – the Interparty Cooperation (IPC). Both local and international actors continue to pose the question as to whether the elections shall be free, fair and peaceful. With the elections around the corner, the following article focuses on the major questions that dominate the local and international debate on the electoral exercise: the political playing field, the major policy issues, the party landscape, party promises and their campaign strategies, the regional and international relevance of the Ugandan election, and the prospects of electoral violence.

What are the Main Policy Issues in the Election?

It was observed so far that the 2011 election campaigns in comparison to previous ones held in Uganda had a relatively stronger focus on policy issues. This is reflected on both the side of the electorate as

well as on that of the candidates from the national to the local level. At a broader national level, some eight issues can be noted as central in the campaign. These include: combating corruption, poverty reduction, employment creation, improved healthcare, better education service delivery, agricultural development, infrastructural advancement mainly in the road sector, as well as peace and security. Nonetheless in some parts of the country - mainly in the central region - the long existing demands for a federal system of government and in particular the position and roles of traditional leaders in that system dominated the campaign debate.

While personalities and trivialities dominated past Ugandan election campaigns, the part-shift to issues during this year's campaigns has to a large extent been a result of a relatively increased level of civic awareness by which the citizens are able to demand aspiring leaders to address development concerns. Thus, the focus on issues has been demand driven on the part of the politicians.

However, it also has to be noted that the campaigns have not been free from the usual personality matters, mutual accusations and defamations, and the focus on issues hardly led to a presentation of elaborate policy alternatives by the competing parties. It also remains to be analysed if the final decision by the voters shall be based on the prevailing policy issues in an environment where prominent personalities still dominate the political spectrum. In addition, practices of bribery and intimidation of voters that have been reported during the

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campaigns as well as the question of whether or not the voters trust the candidates on their promises cannot be ruled out as factors that could influence the final choice by the voters. While being interviewed for purposes of this paper, Mr. Crispy Kaheru, Coordinator for the Citizens Coalition for Electoral Democracy in Uganda (CCEDU) confirms that vote buying can easily affect the final choice by the voters especially in rural areas where he observes “a high level of honesty exists” in the sense that people would feel obliged to cast their vote in favour of the person from whom they received a bribe.

What are the Main Campaign Promises?

Each candidate in the election has been able to outline several promises to address the socioeconomic and political demands of the electorate. While on a general level the promises appear relatively similar, some segregated focus can be isolated for the different candidates. The incumbent Yoweri Museveni of the NRM is promising prosperity for all – referring to, as defined by the NRM, wealth creation at the household level. Another key promise in the NRM campaign is maintaining the transformation and stability gained during the last twenty five years since the NRM has been in power with Museveni as president. On the other hand, the main opposition candidate, Dr. Kizza Besigye and the IPC are promising change in all areas. Dr. Besigye promises among others to overhaul the education system, create jobs, combat corruption, improve healthcare, construct roads and transform agriculture.

Other candidates, notably the youthful Norbert Mao, leading Uganda's oldest party – the Democratic Party (DP) - promises a new beginning, where democracy and rule of law are upheld, jobs exist, the education system is revamped and where tolerance to corruption is zero. Dr. Olara Otunnu, a former UN diplomat and candidate for the Uganda People's Congress (UPC), has promised justice besides improvements in agriculture, education and economy. Betty Kanya, a lone

woman in the competition, is campaigning under the auspices of introducing a federal system of government as a mechanism through which socioeconomic development for Uganda shall be attained.

Jaberi Bindandi Ssali, the oldest of all the aspirants, is appealing to Ugandans to trust him as the only person who can bring about real change and who will build state institutions that work. Dr. Abed Bwanika of the People's Development Party (PDP) in his second attempt to gain the office of president has promised to cut the cost of public expenditure and stamp out corruption in order to save much needed funds for investing in agriculture, education and health. Independent candidate Samuel Lubega, although not very prominent in the debate, also promises reductions in public expenditure.

By and large, all the candidates have generally touched the minimum issues of interest to the electorate in their manifestos. The question therefore is who the voters shall trust as being able to govern effectively and deliver on their promises. This again is closely linked to the perception of personalities in the eyes of the public and the resulting trust in individual politicians.

What have been the Campaign Strategies for the NRM and the Opposition?

In terms of content, the incumbent party, the NRM, seems to be riding on experience and time-tested ability to govern. At the core of this strategy lies the awareness on the Uganda context which is characterised by a general acceptance among the electorate – as so is the case within the international community – that the last 25 years of NRM leadership have registered a certain level of praiseworthy transformation and stability for Uganda in spite of some downsides. NRM's argument that only it and for that matter Yoweri Museveni can safeguard and sustain this transformation seems to resonate well with party supporters. Thus, a key element of the NRM campaign strategy is to maintain within the electorate the be-

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lief that it is not yet time for change and that Museveni despite having been in power for 25 years is still needed in the country's top office. Therefore, NRM's statements to the opposition as weak, unorganised and unable to govern can be placed within this context.

On the other hand, the opposition while reservedly recognising the gains registered during NRM's initial years in power points out the current challenges of corruption and widespread unemployment as well as existing gaps in the service sectors as reasons why Museveni and the NRM can no longer be trusted with power. A key strategy of the opposition campaign has been to highlight gaps in existing national programmes and - without necessarily proposing real alternatives - present ways of dealing with such gaps. The main focus and also the persisting major challenge for the opposition is to ensure that the electorate can actually believe that another party and individual other than the NRM and Museveni can govern the country, and probably do so in a better way.

As a mechanism for delivering their message to the masses, all candidates are employing somewhat similar strategies - rallies and mass media. The difference in the extent of the use of these platforms is only reflected in the organisational and financial strength of the party campaigns. In this regard, the advantages of incumbency clearly benefit the NRM as compared to the opposition parties. In their campaign schedules, each presidential candidate has the ambitious plan to hold rallies in each of the 112 districts. De facto however, only the incumbent Yoweri Museveni is likely to be successful in this ambition, closely followed by IPC's Kizza Besigye, his main challenger.

In addition to the rallies, both Yoweri Museveni and Kizza Besigye have made a sizable investment in running campaign advertisements in the print and electronic media. In comparison, however, the media presence of Yoweri Museveni and the NRM is unmatched by that of Kizza Besigye combined with all the other candidates in the race. This inequality is mainly a result of the

fact that funding seems to be less a challenge for the NRM than it is for other parties. The NRM is thus unmatched in the ability to pay for several, often costly advertisements and supplements in both the print and electronic media and can therefore reach out to the wider citizenry more effectively

Another factor to explain the above imbalance is the fact that IPC's Kizza Besigye has reportedly on several occasions been denied (paid) airtime in both public and private (electronic) media to an extent that caused the Chairperson of the Broadcasting Council to issue warnings to private radio stations on the matter and Besigye himself to threaten legal action against the public broadcaster - the Uganda Broadcasting Corporation.

With regard to the overall strategy of the opposition to take over power through democratic elections it has to be noted that the opposition parties were not successful in creating a strong joint platform. With the DP and UPC not forming part of the IPC, the initial intention of uniting the opposition to be able to effectively compete with the NRM was significantly weakened.

To what extent does a level playing field exist?

Local and international analyses have stated that the political playing field was not level, also resonating with complaints expressed by opposition groups. Of concern to both the opposition and election observers is the fact that the NRM and President Museveni enjoy several privileges that go beyond the normally expected advantages of incumbency. Political analysts see the lines between the NRM as a political party and the state as generally blurred. This results in a scenario where some civil servants such as the Resident District Commissioners (RDCs) are accused of openly campaigning for the NRM and of using their (public) offices to support the ruling party's infrastructure. The local press reported cases in which Yoweri Museveni as incumbent president had made several (presidential) donations and granted district status to certain areas

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during the campaign phase. In most of these cases it was hard to differentiate whether he was doing so in fulfilment of his function as president or whether he was using it as leverage by a candidate seeking the support of the voters.

In how far has the civil society assumed its role in the elections process?

In the forefront of the 2011 elections, civic education activities have experienced a significant upgrade. While it is difficult at this stage to assess the impact on the wider population and their attitudes particularly in the rural areas, an increasingly vibrant civil society deserves to be credited for an improved performance in this area. In a context where state institutions such as the Electoral Commission were not able to adequately deliver on their mandate to provide nationwide civic education, mostly as a result of a lack of funding, civil society actors have stepped in. Their engagement went beyond teaching people how and when to vote as was predominantly the case with elections in the past. Civil Society Organisations' (CSOs') messages in the 2011 campaigns have been broad and aimed at ensuring that critical issues are brought to fore in the campaign as well as mobilising the citizens to make their choice based on those issues. The national NGO-Forum for example had already in 2010 launched a so-called "Citizen's Manifesto" in which they outline several issues of concern to the citizens. In addition, other interest groups, notably the youth and women, have respectively issued the youth manifesto and women's agenda. Such civil society inputs, although not legally binding within the election framework, have been well popularised. Mr. Kaheru of CCEDU notes that the population has been rallied to push the candidates towards responding to the concerns as raised in such citizens' manifestos as well as committing to certain positions articulated. However, with cases of voter bribery and other factors, it cannot be ascertained whether such issues will effectively influence the final choice of the voters.

In addition, some CSOs are active in election observation focussing also on the campaign season where trends in the campaign process such as bribery of voters have been brought to the public fore. In this regard, the civil society actors have put up some interactive platforms adapted to digital media through which citizens can share and report information about the electoral process.¹

Other areas where the civil society actors have been active include mobilising for peace and non-violence. They also have maintained a campaign against electoral malpractices such as giving or accepting bribes and encouraging citizens to generally turn out to vote.

Has the media been able to exercise its mandate fairly, freely and objectively?

Coverage of the campaigns in both the print and electronic media has been extensive and fairly in-depth. The local coverage in many aspects has shifted from plain storytelling – as the local press in Uganda had for long been criticised for – to include a good level of analysis. In this respect, the media is to be credited for actively taking up its role of reporting not just the campaign agenda but also in analysing the different manifestos of the parties and promises by the candidates. There are, however, concerns that a generally restrictive legal framework and some interfering actions by the state in the recent past limit critical reporting. In this regard, a certain level of self-censorship on the side of the journalists can be observed.

The public broadcaster - the Uganda Broadcasting Cooperation (UBC) has been accused of denying radio and TV airtime to the opposition in anticipatory loyalty to the NRM. In addition, several private media houses – mainly radio stations (radios have the highest reach among Ugandans) – are

¹ An interactive website dubbed Uganda Watch (www.ugandawatch2011.org) serves the example in this context.

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owned by politicians who belong to or are NRM leaning. They are accused to accord low coverage to the opposition as compared to the NRM.

Might violence affect the election exercise?

The campaign season has been generally peaceful compared to any other election held in Uganda before. Both local and international observers have commended this development. However, the prevailing rhetoric and the counter-violence preparedness on the part of the authorities allow a conclusion that the threat of election violence is still eminent. Related warnings by international agencies including the UN confirm this position. On the part of government, considerations focused on the threats of terrorism, a history of election violence and statements by (opposition) politicians indicating that they will challenge election results by what the state considers mobilising masses into (violent) demonstrations. As a result, the government has communicated and showcased a high level of security preparedness.

The opposition, while generally disagreeing with the security preparedness, has not explicitly indicated whether they expect the elections to turn violent at some stage or not. The related position communicated by the opposition in this regard is that they would no longer take electoral contests and complaints to the judicial courts but to the "court of public opinion" in which case the intention to mobilise people into demonstrations can be considered somehow implied. However, the opposition maintains that even if this were to happen, it would be peaceful protest. Moreover, as the campaigns draw to an end, the local press has carried reports of opposition politicians, notably Dr. Kizza Besigye, calling upon the electorate to exercise peace during the polls.

If there will be election violence, will most likely depend on whether or not the election results will be accepted by the side that

loses. One of the challenges is that the opposition has already contested the voters register and several polling procedures as communicated by the Electoral Commission, besides also contesting the credibility and impartiality of the commission itself. Given such a circumstance, it is likely that the opposition may not accept the election outcome in the event that Museveni emerges victor. And yet all the opinion polls conducted have given Museveni a clear lead over his competitors. Thus, if the opposition loses the elections and doubts their fairness and freeness, and where a court option as a way of challenging the results has been ruled out, some attempts to mobilise the public into demonstration cannot be ruled out. In this regard, also the uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt and the stalemate in Ivory Coast are mentioned by some to inspire similar trends in Uganda. The high unemployment rate among the youth in the country (according to a recent report of the newspaper *East African* it currently stands at 80%) could be an additional factor increasing the potential of young people being mobilised for protests.

However, given the country-specific political context, the social background, the fact that more than two thirds of the people live in rural areas, and the general appreciation of the peace and stability created under the NRM government among the population, as well as the openly displayed pre-emptive security measures, persistent mass-demonstrations may not become reality in Uganda. Sporadic incidents of violence cannot be ruled out but are rather expected to be short-lived and limited to certain so-called "hot spots".

What is the regional and international relevancy of the election?

Uganda under President Museveni has taken up some crucial roles within the region. The Ugandan government has been an effective and reliable partner in several regional initiatives including leading the African Union Mission in Somalia and in promoting the East African Community. The new state of

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Southern Sudan is also in many ways supported by the current regime in Uganda. Given this position, elections in Uganda are on different levels of interest to regional and international stakeholders. On the one hand, successful elections in Uganda are necessary to guarantee local stability which is a prerequisite for Uganda to be able to continue its assumed international obligations. On the other hand, Uganda's international partners would like to be sure that whoever governs Uganda would have the commitment to fulfil the international tasks Uganda is currently undertaking.

With the production of oil expected to start in the near future, Uganda by all means harbours significant regional and international interests in which case the programmes and policies of a ruling government are crucially important. In this regard, the Ugandan election is of high relevance to several international actors.