

Youth Participation in Political Processes in Uganda: Exploring Opportunities and Constraints

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Abstract

This paper problematises the paradox of ineffective youth participation in Uganda despite their demographic electoral dominance. The paper argues that ineffective youth participation in political and development processes results from high levels of underemployment, which has fuelled youth poverty and subsequently entrenched clientelistic political systems. The discussion in this paper reinforces the salience of the old debate that links economic democracy to political democracy. Key findings in this paper point to the need to place the unemployment problem at the centre of civil society future advocacy work.

1. Introduction

The cornerstone of democratic governance is inclusive participation in political processes.¹⁸⁰ It determines the dynamics of the structure and distribution of political power and the consequent nature of political and economic institutions that shape the political and economic trajectory of the society. Thus participation can take many forms, ranging from participating in elections through voting or vying for leadership positions. Under party politics, it can be seen in terms of attending public meetings, drafting policies and effectively mobilising and advocating their implementation, attending campaigns, campaigning for preferred candidates etc.

Specific conditions must exist to incentivise inclusive participation in political processes. Some authors¹⁸¹ have argued that constitutional instruments must exist to structure political power

in a depersonalised way that legally create spaces for participation. Drawing on this argument, other analysts have thus suggested that authoritarian regimes in which no practical constraints exist on the exercise of political power often undermines the ability of citizens to engage in the politics of allocating authority to guide the allocation of scarce resources in society.¹⁸²

But having institutional instruments is not enough. Organisations – whether political, civic or otherwise – must emerge to actualise the constitutional instruments for participation, as well as institutionalise the political spaces and provide the platform for citizens to organise around specific interests, as well as use organisational networks to champion their interests in the legally provided forums such as parliament and the judiciary. This kind of political system is designed to ensure that the majority group at any particular time will always shape the institutional arrangement to serve their interests; and it is inherently flexible to ensure that no single majority group dominates politics over a long period of time.¹⁸³

Analysis of Uganda's fledging multiparty democratic process points to the existence of the institutional and organisational structures that foster the participation of all groups within the population. The constitution, for instance, grants the right to all political groups to compete for the acquisition of

180Acemoglu, D., & Robinson, J. A. (2005). *Economic origins of dictatorship and democracy*. Cambridge University Press.

181Przeworski, A., & Maravall, J. M. (2003). *Democracy and the rule of law* (Vol. 5). Cambridge University Press.

182Przeworski, A. (2000). *Democracy and development: Political institutions and well-being in the world, 1950-1990* (Vol. 3). Cambridge University Press.

183Katusiimeh, M. W. (2004). Civil society organisations and democratic consolidation in Uganda. *African Journal of International Affairs*, 7(1-2).

political power.¹⁸⁴ Moreover, in terms of representation, the constitution is sensitive to the inclusion of potentially marginalised groups such as persons with disabilities, women and the youth and indeed provides for their representation by gazetting a certain number of seats in parliament for these groups.¹⁸⁵

Therefore, in terms of the foundational prerequisites for competitive politics in a fair and transparent manner, Uganda appears to have them in place. And yet, youth participation has not translated into policy influence to respond to youth issues such as un- and underemployment despite the fact that nearly 60 per cent of Uganda's total electoral vote¹⁸⁶ comprises the youth. A naïve analysis of events might suggest that youth participation is underlined mainly by the profusion of many youth groups such as 'No More Campaign', 'Jobless Brotherhood', 'Poor Youth', to mention but only a few, that have been formed in the wake of the impending 2016 general elections. More often than not, however, youth demographic dominance is used to champion the interests of particular dominant elites with no or little response to youth issues.¹⁸⁷

This paper attempts to examine why youth representation in Uganda's political processes remains less influential in terms of policy response despite the existence of institutional and organisational instruments that have made spaces available

for participation as well as the youth demographic electoral dominance that you would expect the youth to use to shape policies and institutions in a way that responds to their interests.

The central argument of the paper is that youth organisations lack the required capacity to organise effectively; they are predominantly urban-biased with weak or no penetration at the grass roots. As a result, the civic culture in Uganda has remained significantly weak, characterised by low awareness of citizens' rights, particularly about the existence of spaces for championing their interests, and weak human resource capacity within youth organisations – which is explained by several factors, including an over-the-years weakened education system that has suffered from the unintended effects of structural adjustment policies (SAPs). Particularly, the overall effects of SAPs on employment and poverty have further compounded the attenuation of organisational capabilities within political and civic organisations, fuelling clientelism and organisational capture, and thus weakening the ability of different groups to organise effectively so that they are able to elect leaders and subsequently hold them accountable.

The rest of the paper is organised as follows. We begin by revisiting the theoretical underpinnings of inclusive and progressive competitive political processes. Then we trace the historical and contemporary understanding of Uganda's democratic processes, highlighting the opportunities and constraints for participation. This section also problematises the paradox of less-influential youth engagement in Uganda's political and governance processes despite their demographic dominance. The last section concludes with a discussion of policy suggestions for revitalising youth participation in Uganda's political processes with a view to deepening democratic practice.

184 DGF-UYONET.(Forthcoming). 'Evaluation of 2013-2017 Development Strategy.

185 The constitutional court however recently ruled that all youth, workers, and the military are in parliament illegally and should thus be scrapped. (Source: <http://www.parliament.go.ug/new/index.php/about-parliament/parliamentary-news/707-court-did-not-kick-out-army-youth-workers-mps-from-parliament>)

186 Electoral Commission estimates Uganda's total electoral vote at 13.5 million.

187 DGF-UYONET.(Forthcoming). 'Evaluation of 2013-2017 Development Strategy.

2. Theoretical construct for inclusive and progressive democratic practice

Theoretical literature suggests that inclusive democratic practice is characterised by the existence of institutional provisions that permit different groups of people in society to freely organise around a set of interests and be able to pursue them unencumbered.¹⁸⁸ Therefore, interests must be defined and distinguished as the basis for mobilisation to acquire political power. Some authors, such as Mary Douglas, have suggested that this is not, however, enough. Certain dispositions or values of democratic practice must have taken root in a society. For example, those who lose in competitive political processes must non-violently accept loss and those who win and thus acquire political power must serve everyone, including those who did not vote for them.¹⁸⁹

Thus, although institutions ensure that legal provisions exist to create spaces for participation, what truly catalyses participation is the nature of organisations, particularly the internal relationships among members within these organisations, their formal and informal rules as well as the societal-cultural dispositions, whether they support or hinder democratic practice.

Organisations exist, first, to actualise the institutions that create legal spaces for political participation,¹⁹⁰ and second, as platforms for developing the capacity to organise, mobilise and advocate particular policies (see Figure 1). Therefore, the interests around which organisations form are crucial in this case; also crucial are the kinds of rules that are designed to develop the

structure for managing organisational activities and functions as well as to manage relationships among members within these organisations. This determines the nature and quality of internal accountability within the organisation,¹⁹¹ the organisational capacity for growth and the ability to develop networks with other organisations in order to advance mutual cooperation around a set of interests.

Speaking in practical terms, political parties exist to distinguish the interests of different groups of people in society and to provide the platform for organising and mobilising to acquire political power in order to advance those interests.¹⁹² This process depends on a strong civil society characterised by an independent media to facilitate the flow of information about politicians' and citizens' interests to effectively foster an unencumbered citizen choice of political allegiance as well as cultivating the civil capital within society in order to engender an informed and politically conscious society.¹⁹³ The linkages between different groups within the civic and political spectrum will often determine the effectiveness and robustness of political participation and subsequently the evolution of the country's institutional process.

In the next section, we shall analyse the historical process of Uganda's nascent democratic political process to illustrate this more clearly.

191 Bovens, M. (1998). *The quest for responsibility: Accountability and citizenship in complex organisations*. Cambridge University Press.

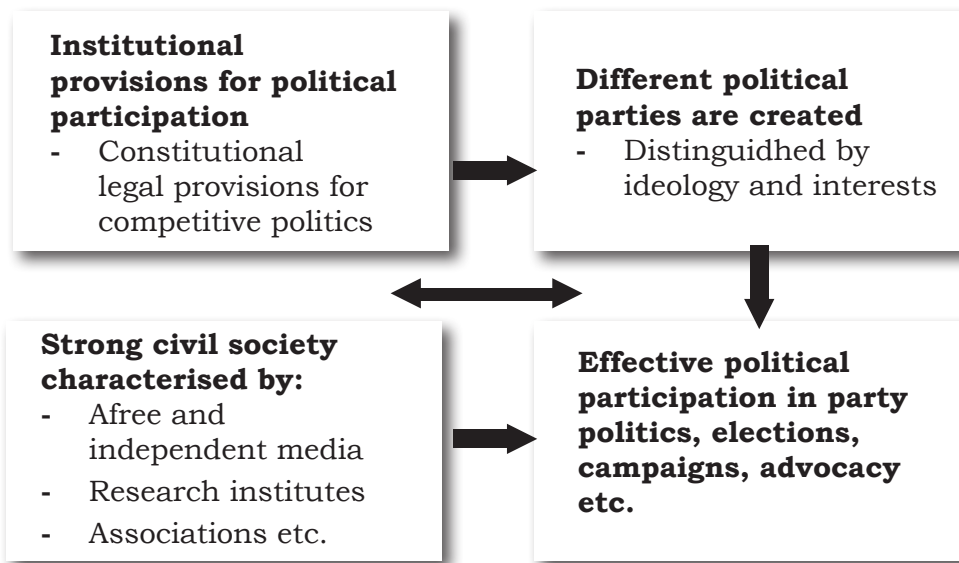
192 Morales, L. (2009). *Joining political organisations: Institutions, mobilisation and participation in western democracies*. ECPR Press.

193 Bueno de Mesquita, B., & Downs, G. W. (2005). In their paper, *Development and democracy*. *Foreign Aff.*, 84, 77, they call this 'strategic coordination activities.'

188 Przeworski, A. (2000). *Democracy and development: Political institutions and well-being in the world, 1950-1990 (Vol. 3)*. Cambridge University Press.

189 Douglas, M. (1986). *How institutions think*. Syracuse University Press.

190 North, D. C., Wallis, J. J., & Weingast, B. R. (2009). *Violence and social orders: A conceptual framework for interpreting recorded human history*. Cambridge University Press.

Figure 1: Conceptualising determinants of political participation**Author's conceptualisation****3. Tracing the evolution of Uganda's political process: Constraints and opportunities for youth participation**

In 1986, after the end of the civil war, Uganda was ruled by a military junta under President Museveni, the leader of the National Resistance Army (NRA), a rebel movement that had been formed in protest against the alleged rigged 1980 elections that helped to return President Milton Obote to power. Uganda was ruled by an undemocratically elected president from 1986 until 1996, when the country held its first democratic elections. One year prior to the 1996 general elections, the constituent assembly that had been formed in the 1990 had delivered the first consultative people's constitution that provided the space for democratic political participation.

However, the constitution did not provide for multiparty democracy and arguments had been made that proceeding in this direction would potentially ethnicise Uganda's political processes and thus rekindle the sectarian tendencies that had characterised the previous regimes.

Consolidating political stability, they further argued, was contingent on effectively neutralising sectarian tendencies and thus multiparty political processes were inimical to Uganda's political stability, at least at the time.¹⁹⁴ However, complaints about the dictatorial tendencies of some leaders within the one-party state strengthened demands for the multiparty democratic political process. The pressure had built up to the point where it had triggered the first exit of dissenting politicians from the movement system under the Reform Agenda that were led by presidential aspirant, Dr Kiiza Besigye, in the run-up to the 2001 general elections.

Although President Museveni went on to win the presidential election, the clamour for the multiparty political process did not relent. This, combined with donor pressure, eventually compelled the incumbent government to accept institutional reform that ushered in the multiparty

194 Museveni, Y. K. (1997). *Sowing the mustard seed: The struggle for freedom and democracy in Uganda* (Vol. 195). E. Kanyogonya, & K. Shillington (Eds.). London: Macmillan.

political dispensation and, in 2006, Uganda held its first ever multiparty general elections since 1980. Under the multiparty democratic framework, Uganda has so far held only two general elections, and it is expected that the third will be held less than three months from now.

So an obvious question is: How do Uganda's historical political system and its dynamics explain the current dynamics to youth political participation? As earlier mentioned, effective political organisation is underpinned by the distinction of political ideology, particularly party ideology, which, nonetheless, must be consistent with the national ideology. From 1986 up until 2004, there was only one party ideology, i.e. the movement system ideology rationalised around the famous ten-point programme. Although this effectively provided the basis for a grass-roots movement within the movement system, it significantly stymied providing for diverse views on Uganda's governance and development processes, subsequently weakening the capacity for pluralistic participation. In fact the alternative policy propositions that emerged from the rank of dissenting politicians within the movement system was the clamour for opening up the spaces for divergent political views, voices that had remained obstructed for nearly a decade from 1996. During the period of one-party rule, any vestiges of civil society were forcefully and inevitably compelled to serve partisan interests, limiting the diversity of ideas and their capacity for growth.

Economically, this era was profoundly characterised by the implementation of the SAPs whose unintended effects have been eloquently argued by Mkandawire and Soludo (1999) in their classic

text, *Our Continent, Our Future*.¹⁹⁵ SAPs destroyed the existing social protection systems by conspicuously cutting funding to the education and health sectors. This contributed to the diminishing of human capital development and subsequently the weakening of the ability of political and civic organisations to build capacity for democratic practice.

In fact, financial liberalisation and the privatisation of the economy undid the development of local capitalism and fuelled the intrusion of foreign firms as the main producers within the economy. The interest of such firms in the progression of local politics is limited to protection of their interests and less on the cultivation of democratic practice. This significantly weakened the strong and organic linkage between economic and political democracy. In fact, the sheer absence of an emerging civil society at the advent of the multiparty political framework compelled donors to increase funding in this sector. Although this has contributed to the development of civil society in Uganda characterised by increased emergence of non-governmental organisations (NGOs), civic associations and media organisations doing advocacy, the misaligned incentives that characterise donor aid and recipient organisations have ensured the creation of a civil society, to paraphrase Mkandawire, that is 'socially rootless'. Such a civil society mainly responds to donor interests rather than citizen interests.¹⁹⁶

Unexamined financial liberalisation and privatisation of the economy have inhibited the capacity of employment-led economic growth,

¹⁹⁵ See Mkandawire, P. T., & Soludo, C. C. (1999). *Our continent, our future: African perspectives on structural adjustment*. Idrc.

¹⁹⁶ Mkandawire, T. (2010). Aid, accountability, and democracy in Africa. *Social Research*, 1149-1182.

limiting the ability of Uganda's economy to absorb its rapidly increasing labour force estimated at 700,000 new entrants each year.¹⁹⁷ This has created a state of jobless growth, resulting in increased un- and underemployment, stagnated poverty reduction and increased economic vulnerability.¹⁹⁸ The political consequences of this state of economic affairs have manifested most in increased clientelism and patronage politics as survival becomes most critical. This has increased corruption and institutional decay, and impeded institutional transition in Uganda as the allocation of power is mainly driven by 'who has the deepest pockets'. Although political processes maintain a democratic face value, its political commercialisation has significantly undermined democratic practice and specifically the ability of young men and women to effectively take advantage of the existing spaces for participation to shape the institutional structure of Uganda to respond to their interests.

4. Conclusion

The above analysis has highlighted how Uganda's past political and economic processes have come to shape the current predicament of ineffective youth participation in the governance and development processes. Specifically, the analysis has shown that the quasi-authoritarian rule, particularly between 1986 and 2004, prior to opening up the space for multiparty political rule, significantly diminished the opportunities for building capacity for pluralistic political participation. Many opposition parties or prospective opposition politicians were prevented from organising and mobilising along a set of interests which gave

the incumbent party advantage to dominate politics in the latter years to the detriment of Uganda's institutional transition.

In addition, the implementation of SAPs, although initially intended to expand the capacity for economic participation which, in the long run, was expected to catalyse political participation¹⁹⁹ by creating an accountability relationship between the capitalist and political classes, because Uganda's initial conditions were ignored, it has instead reversed the process of democratic accountability. It has significantly destroyed social protection systems thus weakening the development of human capital, necessary for strengthening organisational capacity. Furthermore, financial liberalisation and privatisation has weakened the capacity of Uganda's economy to guarantee and sustain employment growth, leading to the stagnation of poverty reduction, and fuelling un- and underemployment, particularly youth unemployment. This has fuelled patron-client-based politics, resulting in increased corruption and institutional stagnation, all of which are obstacles to democratisation.

A policy response aimed at arresting this democracy-constraining terrain demands addressing the structural constraints on youth participation in the governance and development processes. Although it may seem unclear how exactly to engineer this change, particularly because it depends on institutional reform which, in turn, depends on participation, public discussion on a set of easily relatable issues might be the best way to initiate a reawakening

197 Ministry of Finance, Planning and Economic Development. (2014). 'Uganda's Unemployment Challenge'.

198 See Uganda's 2014 Poverty Status Report.

199 Following Martin Lipset's argument on the linkage between economic growth and democracy. See Lipset, S. M. (1959). Some social requisites of democracy: Economic development and political legitimacy. *American Political Science Review*, 53(01), 69-105, for details.

of the civil consciousness of the young people who at the moment seem to be the main targets of clientelism and political patronage, but who at the same time hold the key to potentially altering Uganda's governance trajectory. Unless some ways can be devised to usher in institutional reform, addressing the structural constraints on inclusive and sustainable democratic practice in Uganda might appear all too improbable but not insurmountable.