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Money and Power in Uganda's 1996 Elections

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Abstract

Though Uganda's 1996 election appeared satisfactory, this was only in form; the intriguing influence of money, material considerations, and deliberate use of the power of incumbency to influence the outcome of the elections corrupted the electoral process and distorted its outcome. This phenomenon which I have called 'monetisation of elections', debased the principles of liberal democracy, and condoned corruption as a political virtue. This development could easily subvert the democratisation process and create grounds for a legitimacy crisis.

Introduction

In an interview with the London-based *AFRICA EVENTS MAGAZINE* in October 1990, President Yoweri Museveni declared that the use of money during elections was not democratic. Contrary to this declaration, the 1996 presidential and parliamentary elections were characterized by the massive use of money and other material inducements. In this essay, I analyse this phenomenon, which I have called *monetisation of elections*, and its likely implications on governance and legitimacy in the specific case of Uganda. The monetization of elections was a remarkable and unique phenomenon that influenced Uganda's electoral outcome; it affected the 1996 presidential and parliamentary elections which marked a major stage in the transition to democracy under the NRM government. Voter choices were heavily influenced either by money, material contributions or the promise of material benefits. I argue that the massive use of money, gifts, promises of future material benefits as well as other inducements during the elections compromised the citizens' freedom and right of choice contrary to the pre-requisites for building a democratic system of government. Admittedly, the use of money and other material inducements to influence the outcome of elections prevails in countries

the world over. But its use in the recent Uganda elections reached unprecedented proportions and was less salubrious to the process.

I define monetisation of elections as the practice whereby money and other material incentives are employed to influence the electoral choices which citizens would make during voting. The practice of fixing the cost of contesting an election so high as to exclude potential candidates, also amounts to monetisation of the electoral process. The use of money or promise of material benefits was often facilitated by the power of the political office a candidate holds. In the Uganda elections, those holding formal political office, especially the president, his ministers and some members of the constitutional assembly, achieved far greater success in their attempt to monetise the elections. These practices transformed the citizens' democratic right to choose their government into a cheap commodity. In the process the sovereign electorate became expendable.

The recent transition to democracy in Uganda was initiated by Museveni's National Resistance Movement (NRM) when it took power in 1986. Prior to this period the country had experienced long spells of authoritarian rule. A democratic government was briefly experienced between 1962 and 1966. This period was succeeded by a one-party system and later by a military dictatorship. Attempts to re-introduce democratic rule in 1980 was frustrated by Obote's Uganda Peoples Congress (UPC) when it rigged the general election of that year. (Bwengye, 1985:6) That action contributed to the outbreak of the five year guerilla war against Obote's government which finally ended with the victory of Museveni and his NRM.

The period from 1986 marked a new chapter in Uganda's political transformation. The NRM, a broad-based movement, introduced new policies. It introduced grassroots democracy through Resistance Councils and Committees (RCs) — later renamed Local Councils (LCs). The local council structures were alleged to be participatory and "all embracing", and the framework for ensuring accountability.¹ The establishment of local councils was followed by more democratic changes. These included the inauguration of a Constitutional Commission in 1988 to solicit views from the public; the establishment of the office of the Ombudsman; the institution of a machinery to promote women's rights; and the establishment of a Human Rights Commission. These democratic developments were followed by the local council elections of 1989 and 1992 which were conducted on no-party basis.

However, the crucial step towards Uganda's transition to democracy was taken in 1994 when an election was held for the Constituent Assembly (CA) which was mandated to debate, write and promulgate a new constitution. The 1994 CA elections marked the beginning of the monetisation of Ugandan elections: there were many cases of bribery and outright manipulation. Nonetheless, the work of the CA paved the way for the general elections of 1996. The elections were held

in two stages — the presidential election on May 9, followed by the parliamentary election on June 27.

Elections

Elections are a crucial requirement in any democratic process. The general theoretical assumption about elections in a democratic society is that it is an exercise in which choice is made freely and fairly by the electorate. Elections can be by secret ballot; the show of hands; or by voters lining up behind the candidate of their preference. Voting by secret ballot has been endorsed as the most conventional method while the show of hands is limited to small groups. In Uganda the latter method was introduced by the NRM government and has been widely used in local council elections. It is extremely popular with the peasant majority though it is prone to shortcomings like the violation of the principle of secrecy. This is probably why it has often been branded primitive by those who are opposed to it.

Elections *per se* are not good indicators of the democratisation process. Despite the claim that elections in Africa have been generally free and fair, several of them have at the same time provoked a great deal of controversy. Such elections have not just been rigged at polling stations. Indeed election rigging is a long and tricky process that precedes the actual election. Recent (1990s) cases in Africa where the process has been manipulated include Zimbabwe, Zambia, Kenya and Gambia to mention a few. The controversy about such African elections range from intimidation and legal obstacles to bribery. Uganda's 1996 general elections were not free from such abuses.

The contestants

The general elections were contested by three major political forces: those who supported the *Movement*; the *Multi-partists*; and the *Federalists*. The Movement was sponsored by the NRM government led by President Museveni (52 years old), who had been in power since 1986. The Movement campaigned on a platform of being a broad based organisation which had brought peace and stability to the country, in addition to rapid economic growth; maintained a good human rights record; pursued an affirmative action policy for women; and implemented a grass-roots based democratisation programme, among many others. It was therefore popular in most parts of Uganda. On the other hand, the leaders of a multi-party democracy included some members of the Democratic Party (DP) together with politicians who were associated with previous regimes, more especially the UPC. Others were those who had either failed to materially benefit or had fallen out with the NRM regime. These leaders formed a united front which was initially called the Inter-Party Cooperation (IPC). But the Interim Electoral Commission (IEC) objected to it on grounds that political parties were still banned. This prompted a change of name to Inter-Political Forces Cooperation (IPFC).

The presidential aspirant fronting for this group was Paul Kawanga Ssemogerere (65 years old). He had loyally served the NRM government from 1986 until 13 June 1995 when he resigned. Ssemogerere had held influential positions in the NRM government ranging from a cabinet minister for internal affairs, foreign affairs, and public service as well as a second deputy Prime Minister. This candidate was disadvantaged by many factors right from the beginning. He was supported by personalities who were associated in popular minds with the previous regimes that had mismanaged the affairs of the country for the last 23 years. Moreover, he was suspected of being an opportunist because of his association with almost all of Uganda's past governments. He for instance, had agreed to head the opposition forces from 1980 to 1985 despite the fact that Milton Obote's Uganda Peoples Congress (UPC) is believed to have rigged the 1980 elections and robbed his Democratic Party (DP) of victory (Bwengye 1985 : 6). Again he had publicly talked about the "Black Book" which was purported to contain a detailed record of the heinous crimes committed against the people of Uganda by the UPC regime between 1980 and 1985.² Ssemogerere also had served the 1985 military junta as a minister of internal affairs at the time when the regime was carrying out massacres in his home region, Buganda. Because of this record many people doubted his credibility and integrity as a leader.

The multi-partists allied themselves with a *Third Force*, namely, the federalists. The federalists wanted a "Federo" system of government and were predominantly from Buganda which used to be one of Uganda's ancient kingdoms until it was desecrated in 1966 by the Milton Obote government. The Baganda continued to demand the restoration of their monarch, a demand popularly referred to as "Ebyaffe" which literally means "our things". In his desire to appease these demands, President Museveni had reinstated traditional institutions through a statute passed by the National Resistance Council (NRC), which was the previous National Assembly, in 1993. However, the powers and functions of chieftaincy were restricted to cultural and developmental matters. Because of such restrictions many Baganda traditionalists were dissatisfied and branded the restoration of the Buganda monarchy as a "Byoya Byanswa" (meaning "an empty promise"). Ssemogerere intended to exploit such sentiments, and so promised to implement a federal constitution if elected president. Hence the alliance of his IFPC with the federalists.

Though these were the major forces that participated in the 1996 general elections, one other candidate, Mohammed Kibirige Mayanja (46 years old), a Moslem and Muganda also contested. He was unknown; a new comer on Uganda's political scene, and was never taken seriously by the electorate. It was first rumoured that he had been sponsored by the NRM government to divide the Moslem and Baganda vote to the disadvantage of candidate Ssemogerere, a fellow Muganda. Later, it was alleged that Mayanja had been sponsored by certain

fundamentalist Islamic governments of the Middle East and Northern Africa to champion Islamic interests in the country. Up to now the truth behind these allegations have not been established.

Presidential Politics

Apart from the open use of money, the elections were an opportunity for politicians, especially the president and his ministers, to demonstrate the efficacy of state power within the framework of existing institutions.

Prior to the 1996 elections, a new electoral law had been promulgated apparently to favour the NRM by providing for separate presidential and parliamentary elections, with the presidential preceding the parliamentary. The multi-partists disagreed with this arrangement, and pressed for simultaneous elections. Their argument was that the proposed electoral arrangement would benefit the candidates of the Movement: that it would enable them to ride to victory on Museveni's popularity. This is because Museveni as an individual was popular with the "peasant" electorate who had been given a taste of political power through the grassroots-based decentralisation programme which led to the establishment of local councils. The government's stated reason for staggering the elections was that it would prevent anarchy that could arise from a transition period in which there was no government.³

The electoral law further provided for the establishment of an Interim Electoral Commission (IEC) to organise and conduct the elections. President Yoweri Museveni again edged out his competitors by hand-picking the seven commissioners. The suspicion of unfairness was evidenced by the re-appointment of Stephen Besweri Akabway (formerly the CA Commissioner) as the new chairman of IEC. The neutrality of Akabway was questioned by the opposition because of his partisan role in the CA elections.

The Interim Electoral Commission's requirements for the contending presidential candidates also introduced a rather strange factor in Uganda's electoral politics. Under the new rules all aspiring presidential candidates were required to deposit a non-refundable fee of 8 million shillings (US\$8,000) with the IEC. Such a colossal financial requirement immediately eliminated from participating in the elections those candidates who could not mobilise the required resources. A case in point was the presidential aspirant, Herman Ssemuju, who dropped out of the presidential race allegedly because he could not raise the 8 million shillings deposit required by IEC. Clearly, such an exorbitant financial requirement undermined the democratic principle of freedom and fairness for those wanting to compete for political offices. It is conceivable that this provision was designed to limit the number of competitors, more especially from the opposition. But it may also be argued that by restricting competition for such an important office as president of

the nation to the wealthy, this provision deprived the poor majority of their potential political influence.

The presidential election was preceded by an aggressive electoral campaign which was dominated by intimidation, vote buying, bribery and promises of material benefits. These methods were employed by both the opposition and the incumbent government during the 39 days which were allowed for presidential campaigns. It would seem that the aggressiveness of the campaign was dictated to some extent by the limited time allowed for each candidate to cover all of the country's 39 districts, which meant that candidates were allowed one day of campaigning in each district. Again, this arrangement favoured the incumbent, President Museveni who had been in power for 10 years and was therefore well known to the electorate, compared to his challengers. Moreover, the electoral law allowed him the continued use of his presidential privileges which made the 39 campaign days less problematic.

Furthermore, the Museveni government had immediately before the election established a credit scheme that was bound to indirectly influence the electorate in the choices they would make in the elections. In 1965 the NRM government introduced the "Entandikwa Credit Scheme" as one of its poverty alleviation measures. Under the scheme, the government set up a revolving fund of 6.8 billion shillings (US\$6.8 million) from which soft loans were to be given out on application. Contrary to normal banking practice the scheme was administered through the NRM political establishment. Applicants were required to apply for consideration through their local councils. Thus the "Entandikwa Credit Scheme" became an indirect method of bribing the electorate. The timing of the scheme and the manner by which it was administered exposed the political intentions behind it.⁴

Closely related to this was the poverty eradication campaign which was launched in early 1996. During this campaign President Museveni embarked on a programme of visiting every county supposedly to educate the masses on how to "Kulembeka".⁵ Once more the timing of the poverty eradication crusade gave the incumbent the opportunity to use government resources to further his bid to get re-elected.

The opposition groups also engaged in electoral activities which were calculated to bring them political advantage even though theirs carried much less political weight compared to the advantages realised by the government officials. Before the elections there were many reported cases in which leaders of the opposition multi-partists carried out illegal campaigns in the guise of attending burials, fund-raising meetings, final funeral rites, and church services. There were also night meetings. The opposition members who were privileged to have been CA delegates also used the pretext of explaining the new constitution to their constituents to engage in indirect campaign activities.

The most unorthodox and unhealthy campaign strategy carried out by both the opposition and the incumbent was the "Kakuyege". This was a clandestine door to door canvassing for votes which was characterized by monetary hand-outs and other material inducements. There were many press reports about the distribution of money, scarce consumer goods, as well as promises to reward groups and counties if candidate "A" or "B" won the election. Such blatant attempts to influence the electorate was not dictated solely by the politicians' greed for power. It was also driven by two factors from society at large. On the one hand, the high incidence of abject poverty among the people, especially in rural areas, has rendered the masses of the people vulnerable to such patronising and manipulative political practices. On the other hand, it was the result of the cynicism borne of past experiences that voting for politicians would not produce any improvements in their condition of life.

Foreign interests and the private sector also contributed to the monetisation of the election. Such interests invested heavily to ensure a favourable electoral outcome.⁶ For example, the chairman of the Indian community in Uganda (estimated at 4000), Mr S.P. Jagpal told journalists that the community had pledged to support Museveni's bid for power.⁷ Similarly, the Uganda Young Democrats (UYD), a DP youth organisation, was reported to have secured funding equivalent to 330 million shillings (US\$330,000) when it sent a delegation on tour of Europe shortly before elections.⁸

On other occasions, the power of incumbency was employed in a rather Machiavellian way. For instance, the President frequently invited leading members of the opposition; leaders of women's, youth, and religious groups as well as other opinion leaders to his up-country residence at Rwakitura. These visits invariably turned into a sort of pilgrimage; and quite often the privileged visitors would reciprocate the President's hospitality by renouncing their existing political affiliation and declaring their loyalty to the President.

Museveni's decision to carry out a mini cabinet reshuffle before the presidential and parliamentary elections also had a calculated political effect. The reshuffle brought into his government new faces and promoted others. For instance, Moses Ali and Eric Adriko formerly cabinet ministers, who were promoted to second and third deputy prime minister were from the politically marginalised North-Western region of Uganda. In Uganda the region or province that is fortunate to be represented in the president's government automatically gains favoured access to state power and its concomitants of material benefits. The appointment and or elevation of people like Ali and Adriko was therefore bound to be regarded by both the president and the electorate as a vote-hunting exercise. In the light of all these manoeuvres by the incumbent, the outcome of the presidential election was predictable. As in many other Africa countries the incumbent, President Museveni, won with a landslide margin of 4,428,119 votes (75.5%), while Ssemogerere

secured just 1,416,139 (22.9%) and Mayanja 123,290 (2.1%) out of 8,492,154 registered voters.

The Parliamentary Election

The parliamentary election campaigns were also characterised by excessive use of money. There were many cases where parliamentary candidates demonstrated their affluence by hiring aeroplanes to display their campaign symbols, and distribute their campaign posters and banners. The electoral contest was mostly between one pro-Movement candidate and another; because most opposition candidates withdrew from the elections after their candidate lost the presidential election. Despite this the use of money and other material inducements was equally widespread. In general, contesting cabinet ministers made liberal use of state resources, and made generous donations at public functions. Building materials like roofing-sheets, and cement (and in some cases cash) were donated for schools and other community projects by the ministers as if they were personal donations. There were also many accusations of parliamentary candidates spending millions of shillings to buy off their challengers. And some were alleged to have given the false impression that once elected they would get a ministerial appointment; because they had already been earmarked for one. Activities and claims such as these had a tremendous influence on the electorate, especially where a province yearned for representation in the president's government. On the whole, the money factor together with the power of incumbency had a tremendous impact. For example, among the 13 candidates who were nominated unopposed, nine of them had been cabinet ministers.

The final outcome of the parliamentary election was very much influenced by the presidential election results to the extent that people tended to vote for movement candidates. Opposition candidates were disadvantaged especially after the re-elected president, Museveni, publicly urged people to vote for Movement candidates. And in particular, his widely publicised statement that he was not going to share the "political cake" with those who did not vote for him appears to have made a deep impression on the electorate.⁹ These two statements of his contradicted an earlier pledge that he was not going to back any candidate in the parliamentary election.¹⁰ This contradiction suggests a deliberate and hidden intention to influence the outcome of the election.

Other Factors

We have argued so far that money and power were a major factor in the Ugandan elections of 1996. We must quickly add that other factors, however insignificant, also affected the results of the elections. Among these are intimidation, vote rigging and manipulation of the entire electoral process. An important target for election manipulation and vote rigging, for example, was the voters register. The

voters' register for the 1996 elections were in some cases inflated with new names; some people voted more than once while others got to polling stations only to discover that their names were not on the register. There were reports of massive rigging by parliamentary candidates. In other cases, voter cards were bought freely from voters. Malpractices such as these were rampant in areas like Isingiro South constituency where the election results had to be nullified and a fresh election held leading to a reversal of the earlier results.

We contended earlier on that the elections were reduced to a contest between those who have wealth and those who have not; and that the entire process was flawed. Evidence confirming this assertion is now trickling in. For example, victorious members of parliament have been celebrating their success by throwing expensive parties at which bulls were slaughtered for the enjoyment of their supporters. Some are reported to have incurred huge debts while others are alleged to have mortgaged their assets to raise money for their election. And more significantly, many cases alleging electoral malpractices were filed in the courts of law soon after the parliamentary election. Significantly, all such court cases were dismissed on a variety of grounds: either that they were wrongly filed; or that they were filed in the wrong court; or that they were filed by unqualified or unregistered attorneys. Such developments raise important questions about the independence and impartiality of the judiciary.

Implications of Monetisation

The massive use of money and other material inducements and promises is likely to adversely affect the development of a democratic society. The impression that the representatives of the Ugandan people were freely and consciously elected is false. As we have tried to show in the preceding sections the election results were affected by manipulation, intimidation, rigging and, above all, by outright use of money and power. The danger here is that where such extraneous factors are used to influence the way people vote, those who do not have either power or wealth, or both are excluded from what otherwise should be a transparent, free, fair and just contest among political equals; democracy is then likely to become an exclusive club of women and men of privilege.

The monetisation of a major democratic institution such as election may corrupt the entire political process and pave the way for the rise of an authoritarian regime. For instance, candidates who win an election through massive spending will definitely endeavour to recover such costs which easily encourages corruption where the victorious candidates are appointed to influential positions. Alternatively, the expectation that one should secure a lucrative political appointment to enable him or her to recoup election campaign costs is the road to psychophancy which is another source of danger to institutionalisation of a democratic regime, or democratic renewal of any kind. It can engender a situation in which dictatorial

policies and tendencies are accorded democratic legitimacy thereby subverting the fragile process of democratic renewal.

An equally potent danger that could arise from monetisation and abuse of the electoral process is mass alienation, especially where an unpopular candidate wins an election on the strength of his or her money and power. Recently there have been incidents where certain MPs have been stoned in their constituencies by the very electorate that voted them to office. This has prompted several MPs to acquire armed escorts. The prospect for political renewal in terms of policy and personality changes in a regime could also be aborted. That is why during the 1996 elections some Ugandans expressed misgivings about the slogan — “No Change” — used by Museveni and his Movement. A system which is unable to renew itself periodically eventually becomes a breeding ground for discontent, and civil strife. Recent reports which circulated soon after the elections indicate that such a situation is slowly but systematically developing. For example, about 6 months after the elections there were many press reports of corruption and civil insurgency in the country. One explanation for such developments is that certain groups of people who expected positive change from the elections were disappointed and demoralized by the return of the status quo. It is still early for any sensible prediction about how the elected government will behave in the next four years before the referendum; but it appears that the NRM has already started to quietly influence the electorate to vote for it in the coming referendum. The next four years will be crucial in dispelling the negative effects of monetisation and the abuse of political power in Uganda's politics, and especially in the transition to democracy.

Conclusion

The 1996 presidential and parliamentary elections were a culmination of a long period of arbitrary and bloody rule. The fact that the elections were held at all was dictated by both the internal contradictions and external influences; but especially the former. For a country like Uganda which had experienced many years of turmoil and political hopelessness, the 1996 elections were a remarkable step in the transition to democracy. Nonetheless, the monetisation of the process and the conscious use of the power of incumbency pose a grave threat to the process of political renewal, especially the building of a democratic order. This process could either be corrupted or derailed for good. If the former should happen to the process and its key institutions the equally damaging impression could be instilled that legitimacy can be purchased, and that its value would be determined by the prevailing market forces. Where popular consent becomes a commodity as it is likely to be in such circumstances, democracy could only have a short and brutish life.

Notes

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1. Report of the Commission of Inquiry into the Local Government System in Uganda, 1987.
 2. The fact is that the "Black Book" did not exist; the notion of it was at best a hoax.
 3. The arguments advanced by the two political adversaries were self-serving at best. The holding of the presidential and parliamentary elections on the same day would have been cheaper for an economically beleaguered country like Uganda. The evidence about the staggering cost of the elections spurned both arguments. The two elections cost the state 5 billion shillings or US\$5 million. See *The New Vision*. Thursday August 3 1995.
 4. On the eve of the establishment of the scheme, it was announced at a political rally in Luwero district that this new scheme would not be administered through the normal banking institutions.
 5. "Kulembeka" literally means "tapping wealth to improve on the peasant income and eradicate poverty."
 6. It was for instance alleged that one presidential candidate received funds equivalent to 600 million shillings (US\$600,000) from certain foreign organisations while on a pre-election visit to Europe; and that another candidate had been funded certain Islamic countries. Similar insinuations were hurled against President Museveni who was alleged to have got financial contributions from the Indian community in Uganda and other foreign companies. Refer to *The People*, May 22-29, 1996.
 7. *The New Vision*, Thursday, February 8, 1996.
 8. *The Monitor*, January 10-12, 1996.
 9. *The Monitor*, Wednesday, May 29-31, 1996.
 10. *The New Vision*, Wednesday, May 22, 1996.

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