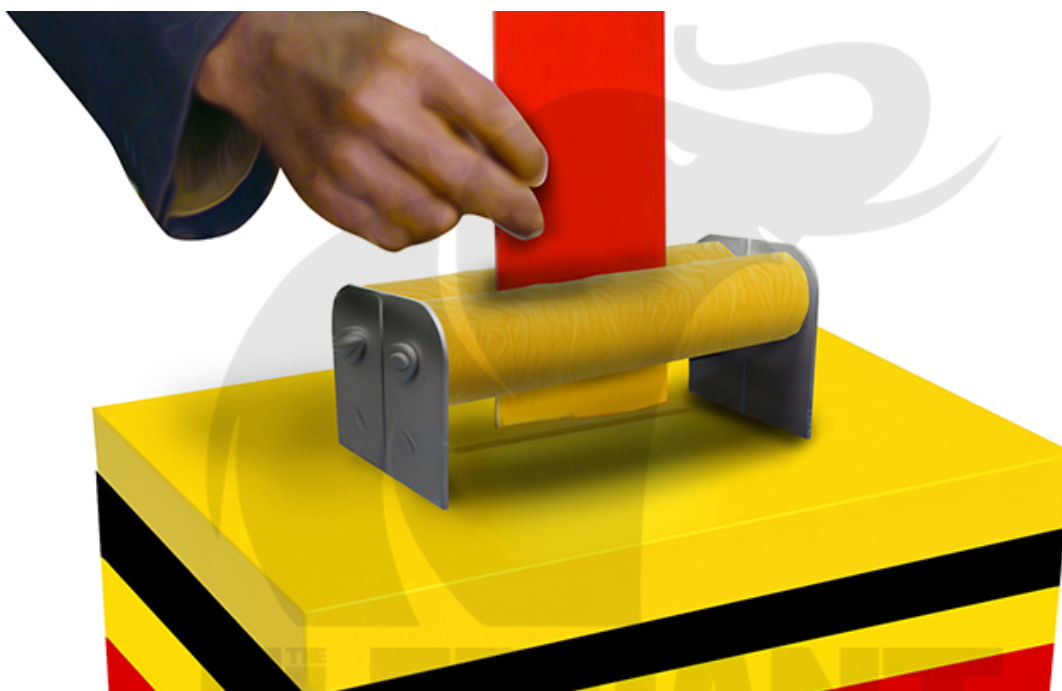




Elections at a Discount: Uganda's Political Imagination Under the Spell of Electoral Fundamentalism

By David N. Tshimba



The chairperson of Uganda's Electoral Commission, Justice Simon Mugenyi Byabakama has declared the National Resistance Movement (NRM) presidential flagbearer, fifth-time incumbent Yoweri Kaguta Tibuhaburwa Museveni, winner of the just concluded 2021 presidential polls. The emotive dust in the cyber-political atmosphere is yet to settle down. The country's electorate together with all those associated with Uganda diplomatically or otherwise are also yet to come to terms with the outcome of the 2021 elections. In the meantime, the debate about liberal democracy within the parameters of national sovereignty pitted against cyber-globality rages on.

The birth of electoral fundamentalism: the February 1962 polls

As British colonial rule in Uganda wound up, the 1949 Local Government Ordinance intentionally placed authority at sub-national levels (local government) in the monarchical set-up in all kingdom areas. This legal framework precipitated a double move: the minorisation of a great many social groups in those kingdom areas and the provincialisation of social groups in non-kingdom areas. The 1949 Ordinance here buttressed the process already underwritten by the 1900 (B)Uganda Agreement. The subsequent passing of the 1955 District Councils Ordinance, however, augured the

prospect for democratisation. The promulgation of the new ordinance drew the contours of an inaugural democratic dispensation in which the holding of universal adult suffrage became sacrosanct.

The first half of the 1950s in Uganda had seen two important developments on the political stage: the Uganda National Congress (UNC) and the Democratic Party (DP), respectively founded as political parties in 1952 and 1954. These parties appealed to different groups for political followership. Although nationalist in rhetoric, the UNC — first under the leadership of I.K. Musazi — was already [stunted](#) by the ethnic and religious bases of Ugandan politics.

So divisive along ethnic and religious lines were the politics articulated by the UNC that it eventually split into factions. The most prominent faction was Milton A. Obote's UNC, which subsequently metamorphosed into the Uganda Peoples' Congress (UPC) after a merger with the 1958-founded Uganda Peoples' Union. The formation of the DP in 1954, on the other hand, was [a response to the struggle for power](#) dating back to the 1890s from which the British colonists and their Protestant allies in Buganda had emerged victorious.

Taking advantage of democratisation reforms in motion in Buganda since the late 1940s, the Ganda Catholic élite made a bid to challenge the chiefly Protestant establishment at Mmengo. They thus fielded *Omulamuzi* Matayo Mugwanya for *Katikiroship* — a far more influential premiership position in Buganda Kingdom hitherto reserved for Protestants. The establishment closed ranks to ensure Mugwanya was not elected. Matayo Mugwanya then became first President-General of the DP, a party whose initial *raison d'être* was to challenge the Protestant establishment at Mmengo and elsewhere. With the formation of the UPC and the DP (soon after under the leadership of Benedicto Kiwanuka), political lines were more boldly drawn in the run-up to Uganda's accession to independence from British colonial rule. At stake, however, was a viable system of administration for independent Uganda: a political framework of federalism (ethnic or otherwise) was pitted against that of centralism (by premiership or otherwise).

The consequential national elections set in February 1962 framed the choice for a political framework for independent Uganda in stark contrast: federalism versus centralism. The report of a commission appointed by the folding colonial administration under the chairmanship of Lord Munster, published in 1961, had recommended that Uganda should be a single democratic state with a strong central government.

The Munster Commission Report, however, underscored that the relationship between the central government and Buganda should be federal in nature, while that with the other kingdom areas of Ankole, Bunyoro, Toro and the Territory of Busoga, should be semi-federal. So, then, were the 1962 polls, with late colonial British brinkmanship, cast in a deeply fundamentalist fashion. The coming together of Milton Obote's Uganda People's Congress with the Mmengo establishment under the auspices of the *Kabaka Yekka* party — characteristic of a political matrimony full of unholy romance — afforded an electoral victory to Obote as the new Prime Minister-elect. A fundamentalist belief in universal adult suffrage to secure rather than challenge a preferred political *status quo* was hence set in motion for would-be independent Uganda.

The coming of age of electoral fundamentalism: the December 1980 polls

Against the backdrop of the 1980 ballot was the firing bullet. On the morning of 30 October 1978 thousands of Idi Amin's troops crossed into northwest Tanzania and occupied the Kagera Salient, an area of 710 square miles. It took two months for the Tanzanians to marshal their army. In January 1979, they pushed through Kagera, crossed the border and invaded Uganda. In their company were militias composed of Ugandan exiles.

Amin's military put up a desultory defense. Tanzanian troops, alongside a cocktail of soldiering Ugandan exiles, made fast progress: on 11 April 1979 they [victoriously marched into Uganda's capital](#) and put an end to Idi Amin's government. In the wake of Amin's ousting, the de-facto Uganda National Liberation Front (UNLF) authority eventually called for national elections to choose the leaders who would form a new government. The electoral commission, it is reported, aimed to establish polling stations for every 1,000 voters.

Though the equipment was almost entirely absent — three months before the election day the then electoral commission asked foreign governments for 50 duplicating machines, 200 typewriters, 10,000 duplicating stencils, 15,000 ballot boxes, 15,000 padlocks, 250 calculators, 12,000 lanterns, and 100 Land Rovers to transport election materials — crowds of up to 2,000 people queued to vote in Kampala, and voters in Mbarara, for instance, walked as far as ten miles in order to reach their polling stations. In Gulu, it was reported, there were so many voters that by 11 a.m. election officials had run out of ballot papers.

[Marred by serious allegations of malpractice](#), the then electoral commission declared the outcome of the bitterly contested election in favour of Milton Obote, the man who Idi Amin had ousted in 1971. Even the diplomatically careful Commonwealth Observer Group that watched the December 1980 polls noted in their interim statement that “imperfections and deficiencies [of these 1980 elections] had caused deep unease”. The leaders of the Uganda Patriotic Movement — under the aegis of one of the former soldiering Uganda exiles named Yoweri Museveni — called the elections “one of the greatest farces in electoral history”.

More than the 1962 electoral experiment, the 1980 polls embodied a political imagination obsessed with securing the *status quo ante*. Universal adult suffrage was here a rubber-stamp. Its aftermath hence begot a cesspool of violence. Obote's 1980 inaugural speech painted a rosy picture of a regime which, from the onset, was set on the path to collapse. In February 1981, a militia — the National Resistance Army led by Yoweri Museveni — launched a guerilla war against Obote's government. In the words of the Ugandan historian Abdu K.B. Kasozi, what followed were “four and one-half years of brute violence”.

The electoral saga of 1980 thus ended up being an additional plot in the long-drawn out narrative of political violence in contemporary Uganda. That the end of the Cold War further suffocated an already paralysed political imagination obsessed with electioneering is an indisputable fact in much of independent Africa, the façade of multi-party dispensation notwithstanding.

Electoral fundamentalism writ large: Bobi Wine and the new generational wave

Late in the afternoon of Thursday 17 August 2017 Kampala was in an uproar: the then 35-year-old Ugandan musician-turned-politician Robert Kyagulanyi Sentamu, better known as Bobi Wine, took the parliamentary seat for Kyaddondo East with a landslide victory in a by-election. The seat fell vacant when the losing NRM candidate, Sitenda Sebalu, filed an electoral petition which eventually successfully overturned the victory of his opponent, Apollo Kantinti, of the Forum for Democratic Change (FDC) party. Bobi Wine put forth his candidacy when a by-election was called. His triumphant entry into elective politics set the national political stage for the countdown to the 2021 polls.

Bobi Wine's parliamentary representation of this no less important constituency of a great many urban poor on the outskirts of Kampala City came to symbolise an array of possibilities for a multitude of Ugandan youth to write themselves back into the country's political history. For Kampala's youthful and opposition-leaning electorate, as for the rest of the disenchanted youth across the country, Bobi Wine's parliamentary victory vividly invigorated the belief in universal adult

suffrage as the route *par excellence* to reclaim the country's political leadership from what they see as a "non-responsive gerontocracy". Never before in the course of the three-and-a-half decades of NRM rule have the batteries of electoral fundamentalism at both ends of the political spectrum been so charged.

One important lesson soon emerged: one person can make music and even make it very great, but one person cannot make politics. Politics, Bobi Wine and his immediate entourage quickly found out, does require mass mobilisation, association and alliances. The National Unity Platform (NUP) party thus came into being at the eleventh hour of the election clock. From the announcement of his parliamentary candidacy in May 2017 to [assuming the presidency of the NUP](#) party and subsequent presidential flagbearship in September 2020, Bobi Wine captured the country's political imagination with the changing dynamics of the electorate much in his demographic favour.

But the character and scope of this political imagination were by no means revolutionary in any substantive sense. For the NUP and its charged supporters, the 2021 ballot was the new silver bullet to end all the ills besieging both the Ugandan polity and society. So contagious indeed was this belief in electoral fundamentalism across the political divide that politics beyond the horizons of universal adult suffrage were rendered inconceivable. In fact, it would be no exaggeration to argue that the electoral fever by this new generational wave in today's Uganda seems to have brought to the fore a category of elites whom Jean-Germain Gros rightly labelled [opportunistic democratizers](#). To be sure, despite the fact that universal adult suffrage remains a prerequisite for broader democratic practices, electoral exercises and democratic political order are certainly not synonymous.

One of Uganda's bottlenecks beyond electoral fundamentalism: the land question

There is no longer doubt that land policies and land reforms in particular have moved to the very center of discussions about development in most of the global South and more particularly in sub-Saharan Africa. There seem to have emerged [two main positions](#) in the discussions about land reforms and economic development in Africa in particular, namely, the neo-liberal and the evolutionary.

The neo-liberal position argues that indigenous customary land tenure is static and a serious stumbling block on the road towards a functioning capitalism in sub-Saharan Africa. Hence, this should be replaced by individual land titles to fuel economic development. On the contrary, the evolutionary position argues that customary land tenure in sub-Saharan Africa is dynamic and gradually moving towards individual ownership and that actually, the titling programmes implemented by the state are doing more harm than good and simply not making capitalism work.

The case of Uganda demonstrates that there is no single answer to this debate. Some forces within the country advocate for large-scale mechanised agriculture, arguing that the land is underutilised. Other forces within the country want to maintain the *status quo*, and simply argue to be left alone to pursue the way of life they have known for generations. Within this debate, questions over access to resources, the role of government, rights and responsibilities of citizens, and the most appropriate drivers of development are not agreed upon. Yet they remain pertinent to resolve in order for Uganda to achieve its own assigned goals within the globalised world of the 21st century.

Within Kampala and along highways in Uganda are signposts with bold words painted on them: "This Land Is Not For Sale" or "Land For Sale" with a cellphone number to be found right below the words. The competing visions on the value and meaning of land are evidenced by these signposts as well as through discussions with different stakeholders. Even within the central government's own policies, there appear to be contradictory visions. For example, the current National Development

Plan (now in its third phase) asserts that agriculture needs to be modernised, causing fear in some regions, especially the north where land is communally held.

The [1995 Constitution](#) itself asserts that land belongs to the people and that those who are *bona fide* occupants of land can only be evicted for nonpayment of rent for two consecutive years, yet the government has [in some instances](#) promised plots of land to various investors without securing the agreement of the people. Ground rents, *Busulu*, are set by the government. In June 2012, for example, the government set the yearly rental fee for tenants in Kampala at 50,000 UGX (approximately US\$15) while in rural areas the fee was set at 5,000 UGX (approximately US\$1.5).

To further complicate the situation, there are four land tenure systems in Uganda, namely *mailo*, freehold, leasehold, and communal. Land cannot be owned by foreigners, but it can be leased for up to 99 years. The central government has also issued edicts that contradict some of the existing laws related to land. For example, in February 2013, President Museveni announced that the government was halting all evictions, whatever the reason. So, while on the one hand the central government is saying it wants to attract foreign investment — and there are reports that it is working on large-scale land deals — on the other hand, the same government is assuring the people that evictions will not take place. The lack of certificates of ownership of land for many “bona fide occupants” also confuses the picture, while attempts to issue certificates of occupancy have been resisted by many private landlords and customary landowners who fear that the process of issuing certificates will only make it easier for the government to take over their land.

The tension between locals who wish to remain insulated from many of the drivers of globalisation and those who advance embracing these forces as a way of modernising or developing the state is evident in many places where land deals are being discussed in today’s Uganda. One basic indicator of this tension is the characterisation of the phenomenon by different stakeholders: those in favour of modernisation of the agriculture sector, such as the government of Uganda or the World Bank, utilise terms such as “large-scale land lease” or “large-scale land investment” while those opposed to these types of deals utilise the term “land grabbing”. A neutral term that seems palatable to both sides does not exist. Each terminology for the phenomenon brings with it an implied ideological orientation and a competing vision of the way forward. The bottlenecks relating to the land question in Uganda today will certainly not be fixed by the mere holding of popular elections, however free and fair, as currently professed by the localised liberal democracy script.

In lieu of a conclusion

As an historically underprivileged student of Western liberal democracy, Uganda today—across the political divide—is gravely suffering from electoral fundamentalism in the same way macroeconomists from the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank not so long ago suffered collectively from market fundamentalism. In the words of the Belgian historian David Van Reybrouck, the latter too believe that meeting the formal requirements of a system is enough to [let a thousand flowers bloom in even the most barren desert](#). For a country that, since its founding moment in modern times, has been gripped by deep-seated antagonisms along religious, ethnic, class and political lines, the elitist organisation of general elections in the quest for a democratic political order ironically suffocates all opportunities for a “democracy-from-below”.

Those who, alongside Lanciné Sylla and Arthur Goldhammer, argue that period and popular elections provide [a rational solution to the problem of succession](#) would still have to remember that the early optimism about Africa’s democratic transition has met with new scepticism: political liberalisation under the dispensation of liberal democracy has shortened rather than aggrandised the time horizons of African heads of state at the expense of the development of institutions for the common good.

Moreover, the characteristic winner-takes-all kind of elections (as have been witnessed in the previous Ugandan electoral experiments) turn the pursuit of democracy into a matter of life and death, a zero-sum game whereby the elected government focuses on the systematic annihilation of the defeated party(ies), together with the constituencies (real or perceived) that support them.

Ironically, the script of liberal democracy now goes against the grain of a truly democratic order: the hunger for free and fair elections only ends up producing a power-hungry political elite characteristically hostile to the notion of democracy as once practised by the ancient Athenians. A political imagination thus undergirded by electoral fundamentalism ends up begetting a disenfranchised polity, with both the citizens and non-citizens within it deeply disenchanting.

The debate on the management of the electoral process in today's Uganda is still heavily laden with the assumption that the key institutional players in the process — most notably the political parties — do represent the aspirations of the electorate, and that the general elections merely come into play to arbitrate over which of the contesting parties is deemed by the voting majority as best at addressing their concerns. Yet, the prevalent context strongly suggests that the demands of loyalty supersede efficiency, inclusivity and even (social) justice. Dooming as this context portends, electoral violence remains likely not least because power is sought by any means necessary. After all, hasn't the predominant route to Uganda's state power in past instances been the orchestration of political violence, of which electoral violence was the harbinger?

The litany of predicaments of social existence in current Uganda — from the systemic impoverishment of society with the blessing of the neoliberal polity to political violence with remarkable impunity — are not simply incidental problems which the holding of periodic and popular elections can easily fix. Rather, these are structural pitfalls sustained by a kind of political imagination deeply entrenched in an ill-negotiated neoliberal mode of governance. Thus, unless another mode of political imagination is envisioned and then institutionalised in the always uneasy trilogy of state-market-society relations, a truly democratic political order in Uganda today will remain elusive.

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