



CASTLE THINK PIECE

COVID-19: OPPORTUNITY TO THRIVE:

POLITICAL PARTIES

Presented by

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

Political parties play an essential role in the functioning of democracies. They are key actors in democratic systems since they organize and articulate different interests and ensure political participation and competition, which are major features of a modern democracy. They represent political constituencies and interests, recruit and socialize new candidates for office, set policy-making agendas, integrate disparate groups and individuals into the democratic process and form the basis of stable political coalitions and hence governments (*Reilly, Nordlund 2008*)

Generally, parties are notable for mobilizing and socializing the public for political purposes. They operate as vehicles for articulation and aggregation of diverse social interests in society; recruit political elites by nominating and selecting candidates for public offices, influence government agenda, policies, and public actions; cause governments to act more transparently and accountably for their actions; and propose alternative policy agenda¹. Other advantages accorded to political parties are that they strengthen accountability institutions such as Parliament, where in the case of Uganda, they leverage their positions for heightened scrutiny in accountability committees and shadow ministerial roles.

Not all writers however think political parties are a good idea. There is a quote attributed to President George Washington, one of America's founding fathers.

“Let me now... warn you in the most solemn manner against the baneful effects of the spirit of party generally... It serves always to distract public councils and enfeeble the public administration. It agitates the community with ill-founded jealousies and false alarms; [it] kindles the animosity of one part against another”²

Other more recent writers, such as Robert Michels, argue that political parties nurture oligarchies rather than popular democracy.³ Similar opinions have been expressed about political parties in Uganda and were one of the grounds why political party activities were banned in 1986 with legal notice No.1 of 1986 with the coming of the National Resistance Movement and the establishment of the movement system of government.

¹ Makara, S. *The Challenge of Building Strong Political Parties for Democratic Governance in Uganda: Does multiparty politics have a future?*
<https://journals.openedition.org/eastafrica/580>

² Quoted in Schick & Pfister (1975): 69

³ Michels (1962) :15



2.0 BACKGROUND

2.1 POLITICAL PARTY SYSTEMS

Political Parties cannot be divorced from the systems in which they operate. As one explores the effectiveness and utility of parties, it is important to explore the system in which they exist. **Political party system has been defined as “the set of patterned interactions in the competition among parties”**⁴ Implicit in this are the quality of interactions among parties, the rules of the game, and whether there is a fair opportunity that the views of a particular party will engage with the citizenry and influence policy.

Sartori (1976) described seven different types of party systems⁵.

- (1) One party,
- (2) Hegemonic party,
- (3) Predominant party,
- (4) Two-party,
- (5) Limited/ moderate pluralism (three to five parties),
- (6) Extreme pluralism (more than five parties), and
- (7) Atomised.

2.2 POLITICAL PARTY HISTORY IN UGANDA

The **Uganda National Congress (U.N.C)** founded in **1952** by **I. K. Musazi** was the first “National Party” in Uganda. Barely a year after its formation the founders faced a choice of whether to remain focused on the national cause or the “tribal cause” of the deportation of the Kabaka of Buganda in 1953. It drew strength from its links with a variety of popular social movements: the peasant-based Uganda Africa Farmers Union, ethnically based movements like *Bana ba Kintu*, a range of trade unions, and even religious groups like the African Hellenic Church⁶.

The Democratic Party (DP) was founded in 1954 by **Matayo Mugwanya** and **Benedicto Kiwanuka**. At inception and for a long time after, it was predominately for Roman Catholics and apparently formed to counter protestant dominance at the time, citing discrimination in public office appointments.

The Uganda Peoples' Union (UPU) was founded in **1958** with membership from diverse social groups and regions unlike others at the time. It was led by **W.W Rwetsiba** as its first president.

⁴ Mainwaring and Scully (1995: 4)

⁵ Sartori, G. (1976), *Parties and Party Systems. A Framework for Analysis*. London: Cambridge University Press Pg. 125 also quoted in “Reality Check, The State of Multiparty Democracy in Uganda”. Pg. 14.)

⁶ Mahmood Mamdani, Pluralism and the right of Association



Uganda Peoples Congress (UPC) was formed on 9th March 1960 comprised of Dr. Milton Obote's splinter group from UNC and UPU under Rwesitba. It remained the dominant party until the overthrow of Milton Obote in 1971.

The Kabaka Yekka (KY) was a movement by the Baganda leadership formed overnight for purposes of defeating the DP. KY was announced shortly after the Constitutional conference as a vehicle by which they were going to contest the Lukiiko elections. A marriage of convenience was arranged with UPC to this end. It achieved the immediate goals but only lasted till February 1966 when then Prime Minister Milton Obote, who had been the head of the UPC, suspended the constitution, deposed the president and vice president, and declared Uganda a republic.

Uganda was subsequently declared a one-party state in 1969, with the UPC remaining as the only legal party. After the military overthrow of the Obote government on 25 January 1971, Maj. Gen. Amin outlawed all political parties and the country was governed by military rule.

After the overthrow of Amin, four political parties took part in the parliamentary elections held in December 1980: Uganda People's Congress, Democratic Party, Uganda Patriotic Movement and the Conservative Party. Uganda People's Congress won a disputed election that led to a civil war.

The coming into power of the NRM under General Yoweri Museveni in 1986 marked another milestone for political parties in Uganda. Parties were considered sectarian and once again suspended with Legal Notice No. 1 of 1986, which included restrictions on meeting, fundraising, developing grassroots structures etc. Article 269 further extended this legal restriction for the 1995 Constitution, which prohibited the seeking of support from a political party, opening branches and the use of party slogans and colours.

In June 2000, the no-party system was subjected to a national referendum and Ugandans approved it. In May 2003, the National Executive Committee submitted the subject to another national referendum in 2004, which then allowed to freely operate. A new chapter emerged in the Politics of Uganda with the traditional parties relegated to the back seats and new formations taking center stage. The erstwhile non-aligned NRM became a Political Party under the leadership of Gen Yoweri Museveni and has managed to hold on to power till now.

In 2002, differences in opinion in the NRM led to the birth of a pressure group – **Reform Agenda** that later, in 2004 metamorphosed into **Forum for Democratic Change** under the leadership of Rtd. Col Kiiza Besigye. FDC remained the face of opposition but in 2019 a splinter group formed the Alliance for **National Transformation (ANT)** under the leadership of Rtd General Mugisha Muntu. This year 2020, the most recent pressure group on the political scene (**People Power**) metamorphosed into another political party the **National Unity Platform (NUP)**. The Electoral Commission website indicates that there currently 26 registered political parties in Uganda.

It can thus be said that the freedom to organize, fundraise, develop structures, nurture membership and internal processes has been significantly hampered over



the 58 years of Uganda's independence and needless to state, political party institutions have remained nascent and fragile with weak internal systems and fluid membership.

Despite restrictions a growing feature in the political space was the use of strategic litigation to expand the political space. For example, earlier this year, the constitutional court nullified S.8 of the Public Order and Management Act that granted the police powers to interrupt assemblies and demonstrations.

In **Ssemwogerere and Others vs. Attorney General, Constitutional Appeal 4/2002**, the Secretary General of the Democratic Party, petitioned Court challenging the constitutionality of the Movement system of government. They argued that it was a political party, a position upheld by the Constitutional Court.

The opposition parties have therefore used this strategy and the Judiciary to challenge the ruling party and the executive and to obtain spaces and liberties where these were curtailed either in law or in practice.

One of the key criticisms of Uganda's first political parties was they were drawn along tribal and religious lines. The Democratic Party founded in 1954 was largely founded and supported by a Catholic base, and was referred to as "*Dini ya Papa*" The religion of the Pope. The Progressive Party was largely the Protestant elites from Buganda⁷. The UPC was also seen a Protestant party from outside Buganda.

*"The return of parties in 2005, to some degree, marked a new beginning for party politics. It is difficult today to brand any particular party as a faith-based party. This is not to say that religious values are not manipulated opportunistically by political parties"*⁸

Religion is still a significant feature of Uganda's political landscape.

2.3 CURRENT STATUS

2.3.1 National Character

Some legal provisions were made to force national leadership aspirants to get a national character in their followership. For example, in order to be nominated to contest for the office of President of Uganda, one must acquire at least 100 signatures each from at two thirds of the districts in Uganda. This works well to force such candidates to canvass for support all across the country.

2.3.2 Leadership of Parliamentary Accountability Committees

It is noteworthy that the rules of the Parliament of Uganda reserve leadership of the Accountability committees of Parliament to the Opposition. These Committees are the Committee of Public Accounts (Central Government) The Committee of Public Accounts (Local Government) The Committee of Public Accounts

⁷ Makara, S., (2010) in "*Reality Check: The State of Multiparty Democracy in Uganda*, Pg. 33

⁸ Ibid Pg. 43.



(Committee of Commissions, Statutory Authorities and State Agencies) and the Committee on Government Assurances and Implementation.

2.3.3 Access to Resources

A reform that was enabled by the **Political Party and Organizations Act** was the commencement of financing for political parties that have representation in Parliament from the Government funds. In this case, FDC, NRM, JEEMA, UPC and DP are entitled to these funds. However, this in no way compares to the access the National Resistance Movement has to state resources and infrastructure through the human resource infrastructure that runs up to the sub-county level, as well as financing opportunities through managing existing programs and budgets.

2.3.4 Violent episodes and crackdowns

Political Parties have been subject to violent arrests and crackdowns. Presidential candidate Kizza Besigye of the FDC was arrested multiple times in violent episodes and released without charge. In addition, the police utilized the Public Order and Management Act against political assemblies and to stop processions. This has been aggravated in COVID-19 guidelines whose adherence has been a challenge to all parties.

More recently Presidential Candidate, Robert Kyagulanyi was forcefully arrested and detained after his nomination and has this week again been arrested and detained in Nalufenya Prison.

2.3.5 Fluid membership among particularly opposition parties

Another feature of the political parties in general is the fluid nature of their membership. Many party leaders migrate across party lines especially in the run up to an election cycle. In this current cycle there has been significant exodus from the FDC to the newer National Unity Party.

A Democratic Party Candidate, and Leader in the Democratic Party, Hon. Mbidde, told his electorate a few days ago in Masaka, that although he was DP flag Bearer, he would support Hon. Robert Kyagulanyi for the Presidential bid.

After the 2016 election in Parliament, there were more independent Members of Parliament, (66 members), than the *combined* representation from all opposition party members of Parliament.

3.0 IMPACT OF COVID-19

3.1 DELAYED FINANCING OF POLITICAL PARTIES BY THE GOVERNMENT

The Political Parties and Organizations Act (PPOA), provides that Government will provide funding to Political Parties in Parliament: NRM, UPC, FDC, JEEMA and DP. It is reported that Government has been committing about 10 BN every year for political parties for FY2014/2015⁹

⁹ <https://www.independent.co.ug/partys-want-more-money-from-govt/2/>



Two sections in the PPOA provide for funding during elections: section 14b states that in respect to elections, government shall fund parties on equal basis, while section 14c states that in respect to normal day to day activities, funding shall be based on the numerical strength of the parties in Parliament.

In spite of these provisions, Government of Uganda claimed that due to the slow down and added expenditure that was occasioned by COVID-19, they were unable to release funds to political parties.

The FDC, JEEMA and UPC indicated that their party preparations for the 2021 elections had been hampered by the delayed release of funding from Central Government.

3.2 LIMITATION ON GATHERINGS AND PROCESSIONS

Initially with the enforcement of lockdown in March this year, no gatherings at all were permitted. Eventually gatherings were limited to 70 people and now 200 people to align with COVID-19 SOPs. Restrictions on these traditional methods for canvassing for votes meant that new entrants faced a greater challenge in becoming visible. In addition, candidates would now have to use electronic and print media to pass on their messages.

This has added additional barriers particularly where the media stations that have the greatest reach are private stations, which bar certain candidates from accessing their platforms, or where candidates cannot afford airtime on radio stations to communicate their messages.

3.3 COVID-19 SOPS

The COVID-19 SOPs made valid political processes such as delegates conferences and party primaries difficult to achieve. For example, the presidential candidate of the DP gave this as a reason for late actions during nominations period. The NRM party primaries also demonstrated the unwillingness or inability to adhere to SOPs. The NUP was criticized by some for not being clear on what transpired in their delegates' conference.

3.4 LOGISTICAL CHALLENGES.

Curfews starting at 9.00p.m meant that candidates, especially Presidential candidates faced difficulty covering ground. Further, Logistical mobilization was also impacted by the COVID-19 related economic slowdown that affected businesses and individuals. Given that Uganda's electorate expects handouts from candidates seeking office, the campaign trail has been all the more difficult.

4.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

Some recommendations for consideration are:

1. A return to the standard of meritocracy (called individual merit under the NRM no party system) in choosing leaders, given that distinction between the political parties is becoming increasingly obscure.



2. Regulations to enforce internal democracy and strict discipline among party members and prevent “party hopping” and independent candidacy when already registered with a political party especially now that tax payer money is funding political party activity.
3. A requirement that every political party demonstrates national presence before being registered and allowed to operate.
4. Increased interparty dialogue to promote civility between the leadership and membership of the different parties.
5. We need to find ways to reduce the monetization of our politics. The monetization of our politics at the election stage and the disproportionately high salaries that parliamentarians receive above the rest of the population are a risk to our democracy. This is especially so bearing in mind that some of the players do not have anything else they can do outside political office. The focus has increasingly become monetary rather than service, with individuals doing whatever it takes to get into and stay in office.

5.0 CONCLUSION

Political parties are formed by people with shared values, core beliefs, and a shared understanding about government that citizens can identify with. They organize themselves and seek power through elections to political offices so that they can lead the nation at various levels. Political parties help to watch each other and the government in power. Opposition parties are supposed to help the development of the political process by presenting an opposing view to that of the ruling party and keep citizens informed on both sides of a particular issue.

Uganda still a way to go to achieve these ideals. Perhaps the challenges posed by COVID-19 can help us make a quicker stride to that destination.



ABOUT CASTLE

The Centre for Advanced Strategic Leadership (CASTLE) is a non-profit think tank that has been established to provide research and consultancy towards approaches for addressing challenges to Africa's advancement. CASTLE is a product of the Institute for National Transformation (INT), a leadership training institution in Africa, which has since 2005 been developing transformational leaders who are serving society in a variety of sectors. INT is headquartered in Nigeria and operates in Uganda, Kenya, South Africa and Cote d'Ivoire. INT also has training centres in the United Kingdom and the United States of America for reaching out to the African diaspora. CASTLE complements INT by providing a practical platform to offer tailored interventions to specific issues that will be identified across the African continent.

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We exist to promote the application of critical thought leadership to the governance of Africa's key sectors for national transformation. We believe that while the African continent is endowed with a wealth of natural resources, a qualified and experienced workforce, and abundant opportunities, the desirable impacts of these combined attributes are often curtailed by challenges of thought leadership, governance and execution. CASTLE seeks to help bridge the gap between knowledge and practice among stakeholders in Africa's transformation, and do so in a manner that furthers national interests in all respects.

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