



COVID 19 PANDEMIC IN UGANDA

UGANDAN REPORT



CCRDA
Consortium of Christian Relief &
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The Paradox of Elections in COVID-19 Situation: **Youth civic engagement in the electoral process during COVID-19 in Uganda**

Introduction

The youth question in Uganda cannot be more pronounced than the recently concluded elections of 2021. 80 percent of the Ugandan population is 30 years and below (UBOS 2017). Also, 70 percent of the Uganda voting population is below 40 years (MGID 2021). This made the just concluded Ugandan elections a youth-centered election. All major political changes in Uganda have been fronted by the youth. Historically Youth in Uganda have taken part in political protests, riots, others held up arms to kill or get killed seeking change in the country (Alert 2014, Michael Mugisha, Donnas Ojok et al. 2016). The just-concluded elections in Uganda brought to light a lot of issues concerning the youths and the COVID-19, bringing a clear interface with issues of civic engagement and social accountability. Therefore, as a COYOQA project, there is a need to deeply engorge in some of the issues and draw lessons for proper youth civic engagement and social accountability for COVID-19.

During the election period, there was increased control of freedom of movement and assembly than never before. Uganda just like other states (CSPA 2020), the government through the Ministry of health imposed serious measures to try to level the curve of the virus. This report highlights the pandemic paradox in an election. The report tries to unlevel and problematizes measures of the COVID-19 situation in an election in a way to come up with learning possibilities of uplifting civic engagement of the youth and social accountability during COVID-19, a cardinal work for the COYOQA Project, in Uganda.

The youth factor

To start with as far as the youth factor is concerned, the Uganda elections seemed to be a revolutionary campaign, especially among youth, toward old people who they cite as a generational problem (Mpigi 2020, Su 2021). While the election activities were conducted under *scientific notions* of an election, this election turns out to be one of Uganda's most contested elections according to some observers (Brooks 2019, Su 2021), pitting the young against the old generation. The election period has also been the most violent, with dozens of fatal cases recorded since early November last year. One such incident is the riot of Nov. 18-19 where 54 people lost their lives as security forces dispersed protestors. However, some election observers (IGAD 2021) have referred to the election process as largely peaceful, with no major violent incidents, especially on election day.

Some politicians and civil society organizations started mobilizing youth to take part in the democratic process way back in 2016 (Brooks 2019, MGID 2021). Youth were advised, especially young people who had not voted in 2016 because they were not of age to get National Identity cards. The Identity Cards were considered then a tool to be used during elections but such plans were upset when the EC changed the rules saying that National Identity cards won't be needed for 2021 elections. According to the Uganda Bureau of Statistics (UBOS), in 2016 nearly 65 percent of Uganda's 39 million people is between 15 and 30 years. That translates to over 70 percent of eligible voters in 2021, making the young voters a target for any politician. Unlike the other elections, the Presidential and parliamentary elections were only given 60 to converse for votes in 146 districts to promote their parties' manifestos across the country to convince 17.5 million registered voters to elect them. To reach the youth, the greatest weapon for elections turned out to be social media where many young people were following and it turned out to be a greater used during the campaigns in which any efforts to hold mass gatherings will be crushed by security forces.

Even with all the restrictions imposed by the COVID-19 Pandemic, the youth turn up was big, as it turned out, the unknown or less popular youth in politics turned into overnight major political figures. For example, a 24-year-old graduate, John Katumba, contesting in the polls, while the only woman in the race is Nancy Kalembe, an independent candidate. Besides, was Kyagulanyi Robert Sentamu, 38, a pop star turned politician, became the new face of Uganda's opposition, viewed as a major threat to Museveni. He joined politics less than five years ago after he was elected to become a member of the parliament in a by-election for the Kyadondo East constituency. Few months to the nominations he formed a political party and became the party leader. He recruited all those who were crying for change with a promise of a new Uganda. He also promised to change the lives of youth, the downtrodden, and those living in slums. On the day of his nominations, Kyagulanyi promised to fix the economy, health services, and education. To the surprise of many, he was arrested by the police shortly after addressing the media and driven back to his home on the outskirts of Kampala where he was released. However, because the conventional way of doing politics during COVID-19 specifically campaigns changed. Some youth never even went to ask for votes but they won the elections. This was because of what was termed as the *NUP election vote weave* or *Vote the Umbrella weave*. As a result, seasoned politicians lost their seats in parliament among which are 26 ruling party ministers including the Vice President of Uganda.

However, Present Museveni the incumbent won the elections with the slogan, '*securing your future*'. His agents based his campaigns on the progress the country has made both economically and socially over the 35 years of NRM existence. Museveni's opponents however said his government is riddled with corrupt officials who have derailed the country's development for selfish gain. Kyagulanyi one of the opposition contest who through music he made a name for himself long before he turned to politics which he was using to rally support for social change. He had promised voters' *new Uganda*, with his song *Tuliyambala Engule* as a theme song for his campaign. His music appealed not

only to the urban youth but even to the rural youth. When he went around across the country during campaign rallies, he attracted many youths through what he called the 'people power' movement where he has been using his music to appeal to youths. Kyagulanyi sings about issues such as poverty, injustice, corruption, and human rights, which resonate with the young, unemployed, and disenchanting – all those who feel excluded from the economic progress that the country has registered in recent years.

The COVID-19 factor

COVID-19 placed extraordinary pressure on how states conduct elections amidst the pandemic (Bradbury-Jones and Isham 2020, CSPA 2020, Orlando 2020), resulting in controversial and paradoxical measures of handling an election (Spinelli 2020, Orlando 2020 , Siegle and Cook 2021). While the Ugandan Government had implemented a successful COVID-19 campaign in the early days of the outbreak, the success did go silent with increasing positive tests and deaths since national elections campaign were allowed to go ahead across the country. By the festival seasons in December 2020, the cumulative confirmed cases had reached 33,360, one of the highest in Africa then, with 245 deaths. The Ugandan Ministry of Health desperately urged Ugandans not to travel home for the festival season in a bid to prevent the spread of the virus. As this report is written, Uganda now has 39735 cases, 327 death, and 14310 recovered. However, what is not clear in the statistics is information on the demographic factors of the victims, in terms of their status, gender, and age. For some youth, COVID-19 is a disease for the high status but used by the government as a political tool to suppress the youth who support opposition candidates. As a result, youth are refusing to adhere to the guidelines set by the ministry of health.

The Paradox

To start with the is the paradox of *a scientific election* as coiled by the government meant that people avoid contact and unnecessary movements, yet the candidates and their agents were moving around to campaign. This is because elections mean are people interacting as they converse for votes. In a COVID-19 crisis, the instructions were to stay

at home, avoid unnecessary movements. Yet the candidates and their campaigning agents were moving around looking for votes.

Also, COVID-19 preventive measures seemed to be very restrictive and played out paradoxically among the youth and the citizen in general. Some people were voted without even interacting with the electorate. Intentionally the lockdown measures grated police and security forces to abuse human rights hence barring youth civic engagement (Brooks 2019, Siegle and Cook 2021). It was important to critically assess the challenge of balancing the COVID-19 measure with the civic engagement of the citizens during an election. The hardened restrictions had a heavy toll on the free and fair election, but also diverted the attention of the youth on the noble efforts of fighting the virus to fighting the security operatives who seemed to restrict the free movement of people. While the security forces had participated at all levels to protect citizens against COVID-19, the election period turned out to be the most violent. One such incident is the riot of Nov. 18-19 where 54 people lost their lives as security forces dispersed protestors. Therefore, COVID-19 scientific elections were interpreted by different parties differently. Different parties interpreted the implementation of the pandemic prevention measures depending on the political side they are on. Some opposition candidates argued that the police implement the measures selectively to foil opposition campaigns.

According to the election schedule by the electoral commission, Uganda was set to have presidential and parliamentary elections in 2021, with electoral activities set to start in 2020. However, following the outbreak of Coronavirus (COVID-19) the government in March 2020, announced measures to fight and contain the virus in the country. The measures included; closing of educational institutions, places of worship, banning of large political gatherings, cultural groups, large wedding ceremonies, and funerals among others. The lockdown led to the suspension of electoral related activities in the country

as had earlier scheduled by the Electoral Commission. However, the government relented and resumed electoral activities. The commission had to ensure that how the elections activities, campaigns inclusive, ought to be conducted in *a scientific way* with special guidelines given the COVID-19 pandemic. They issued guidelines aligned to the Ministry of Health Standard Operation Procedures (SOPs) aimed at preventing the spread of the virus.

The electoral commission further issued guidelines to all candidates and political parties on how to prevent the spread of COVID-19 during the campaign. According to the electoral commission processions and public mass, rallies were banned. Candidates were only allowed to organize or hold campaign meetings in a regulated manner, preferably outdoors with a limited attendance of a maximum of seventy (70) people. This was to enable the observance of the two meters social distancing rule for the persons attending the political meeting or gathering. Nevertheless, the maximum number of persons attending campaign meetings was later revised to 200.

Besides, candidates and the campaign agents were further advised to use non-contact means of communication to interact with the electorate. These would include flyers, leaflets, brochures, posters, billboards, and banners; radio and television programs and talk shows, short messaging services, voice messaging, and digital media platform and websites. Also, candidates were advised to use community-based public address systems (*Kizindaalo*). Therefore, the Uganda Electoral Commission also directed The Uganda Police Force to enforce the guidelines without fail.

It was one thing to set measures, it was another thing to implement the measure in a midst of elections excitement and campaigns. As measures were taken to prevent the

spreading of COVID-19 in the country, they impinged on youth civic engagement in the electro democracy. The government was torn between the need to preserve the health of the citizens vis-à-vis their constitutional and democratic right to elect leaders of their choice as guaranteed under the constitution. The electro choices are normally made after the candidates have presented their manifestos and campaign agendas usually through competitive open rallies that attract mass gatherings. But in the prevailing COVID-19 situation, all candidates are strongly warned to adhere to these changes, the SOPs and guidelines in general, and any defiant/non-compliant candidate stood the risk of a total ban of his or her campaigns.

As campaigns went on, candidates struggled to follow the guidelines for containing the coronavirus pandemic. While masses ignored the call for social distancing and facemask covering. Yet the electro commission assumed that the candidates were to take the lead in encouraging people to control the virus.

“Your first statement will be to the people ... ‘Please put on your masks. If you don’t put on your masks, I will not talk to you. Please social distance, can your social distance? Put on the distancing that is recommended,’” (*the electoral commission spokesperson said*)(Independent 2021).

But according to some observers (Siegle and Cook 2021), it appeared like security operatives specifically were targeting the opposition candidates in enforcing the COVID-19 measures. So many young people were bitterly beaten, teargassed and some got arrested by security operatives for trying to violate the ministry of health COVID-19 guidelines. The paradox was in the manner in which they were arrested and the places where they jailed them. Youth were arrested and placed in tight cells with a very small space without social distancing. Other candidates were arrested and charged with attempts to spread COVID-19. A case an equivalent with to capital offences of terrorism and murder. Throughout the whole campaign, security operatives were seen violently

dispersing crowds of youth supporting opposition parties, while it appears ruling party rallies are being held freely. The National Unity Platform (NUP) party led by Robert Kyagulanyi, better known as the singer Bobi Wine, and the Forum for Democratic Change has been cited as the defiant parties.

President Yoweri Museveni during the campaign he kept saying that candidates should hold rallies with social distancing, even as his rallies draw larger crowds. The NRM party directed police to disperse any processions being held by the party members across the country. This was a result of on several occasions, some party leaders, ministers in the ruling party including the minister of health were heavily criticism for holding processions with thousands of supporters.

“So, this bankruptcy of calling people together in such dangerous time is criminal. And we are going to deal with those people who are doing it,” (*President Yoweri Museveni said*)(Independent 2021)

However, as the campaign went on there was clear non-compliance by some candidates with the guidelines and the standard operating procedures while conducting electoral activities including campaigns. When it comes to an election in Uganda, supporters were used to opening rally campaigns with large crowds. While the electoral commission authorized 70 or even 200, it was like a joke to many Ugandans. There was no way a candidate would reach the electorate without attracting the masses. Except for candidates and political parties that have access to mass media and well-established political structures at the grassroots, new political entrants had one way to use social media which is very expensive with a social media tax on it. Besides, it is limited to urban youth dwellers. Consequently, despite large gatherings being barred, some candidates such as pop star and opposition figure Robert Kyagulanyi popularly known as Bobi Wine still attracted large crowds lined along streets whenever they arrived in place to

campaign. The NUP spokesperson, says it tough for the party to ensure all their supporters practice social distancing and wear face coverings.

"These people wait for us, on the roadsides, what do you do about them? These are Ugandans who are hungry for change. So, when they stand on the roadsides and wave and all of that, for starters, they also don't commit a crime," (*said the NUP spokesperson*)(EC 2020).

Measures of fighting COVID-19 shadowed the elections in the country. They greatly affected electoral activities in the country's history, in many ways. While the Ugandan constitution gives the power to the people to determine their leader through a fair and free election, the coronavirus limited the assessment of the candidate by the electorate. This made the elections less competitive on ideologies and policies as an unknown candidate could not present their manifesto to the voters.

Besides, the elections activities put the Uganda Ministry of health in a very paradoxical situation. The electro and post-election period have seen an increasing number of positive tests and death ever since the national elections campaign were allowed to go ahead across the country. The cumulative number as this report is written stands at 39,424 one of the highest in Africa with 318 death and 14,114 recovered.

In response to the increasing numbers, the Electoral Commission suspended campaigns in some parts of the country just 10 days to the polls (EC 2020). The electoral commission through Section 12 (1)(h) of the Electoral Commission Act; Section 21 (1) and (2) of the Presidential Elections Act, 2005; Section 20(1) of the Parliamentary Elections Act, 2005;

and Section 172 of the Local Governments Act, suspended election campaigns in 13 halted campaigns in 13 districts including the capital city even though the electorate were expected to vote. The health experts considered the selected district to have the transmissions of the COVID-19 to be exacerbated by mass gatherings. As a result, all campaign meetings in these areas were suspended and candidates were advised to use mass media and social media (EC 2020).

Paradoxically in the twist of the events, two days to the polls government through the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Ministry of ICT switched off social media and on the eve of the election day, the internet was completely shutdown (Madu 2021). While the electoral commission had dubbed the elections as *scientific elections* where many electoral activities were to be on social media and mass media. The Ministry of the internal affairs was concerned with the level of security threats youths were inciting using social media. The ministry of ICT was concerned about the misuse of social media platforms as well. As a response, the internet was completely shutdown. Nevertheless, shutting down of internet affected youth very much and the whole country. Citizens, election observers, political parties, and media could not function properly in a covid-19 situation without the internet. While elections thrive on information sharing, internet shutdown limited information flow and sharing.

Conclusion

Wayforward for the COYOQA project is to use election youth engagement in the elections as a stepping stone to further interrogate the possible peaceful civic engagement on COVID-19. Also, there is a need to document the youth experience in the just concluded elections to align it with social accountability a civic engagement of the youth in the country. More to that is to forge a way-out using the election experience as a platform to train youth leaders on the possible better ways of engaging the youth in social accountability and civic engagement during the COVID-19 period. Given the fact many inexperienced youths became elected leaders, there is a need to follow through with the

project to see how they can be supported by a government, but also how the youth can be part of the government programs on COVID-19. And lastly, now that elections are over, there is a need to focus youth back to the concerns of the ministry of health and again attention on the key areas of the COYOQA project especially COVID-19 funding, youth engagement, and social accountability.

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