

Ugandans to the rescue



1/26/2011

Free And Fair Election?



Posted By Musa

When the election campaign season started in 2010, there was much commentary in the local media at the surprising lack of violence. *Expect more this in days to come*

By violence, the media meant the army flogging opposition supporters at campaign rallies, burning vehicles ferrying opposition supporters, setting fire to radio stations in small upcountry towns that host opposition candidates, and so forth. Framing innocent people, un constitutional arrests. Torture and never seen before police and military brutality will continue!

This is what the 2001 and 2006 elections were all about. By definition, election violence (at least in Uganda) is the violence of the armed state forces against the opposition.

It would be hard to make the case that election violence in Uganda included opposition supporters beating up President Museveni's armed bodyguards or sealing off the ruling NRM's party headquarters.

Low-key start

In that usual sense of the term, the earlier stages of the campaign season were uncharacteristic. But of course, there was plenty of violence and threats of violence in 2010, except that this time it was, unusually, NRM vs. NRM violence.

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The media reported several instances of violence in July during the NRM district chairman elections, the most memorable of this coming in Sembabule district and involving the rivalry between Foreign Minister Sam Kutesa and Lwemiyaga MP Theodore Ssekikubo.

Ballot boxes were thrown to the ground, dust rose in the air and guns were drawn and pointed, shots were fired.

If the party in power did not use the army, police and Local Defence Unit forces to harass the opposition, it was mainly because they were engrossed in quelling the internal NRM fires.

If the meaning of Ugandan election violence is expanded to include not only that of the ruling party against opposition supporters and leaders but also violence against other members of the public, then there was plenty of it.

Several journalists were harassed during much of 2010. Cameras were seized and destroyed, two journalists, one in Mukono, the other in Masaka, were killed reportedly by boda boda cyclists but it was hard to not see the political angle to these deaths.

If the tearing or defacing of campaign posters can be vaguely grouped under the term violence or expression of anger, rudeness, malice and hostility to a candidate, then as with previous elections, there was no shortage of these instances, both incumbent President Museveni and the opposition challengers.

Radio stations in the smaller towns and townships often received payment by opposition parties to host their candidates, only for the booked shows to be cancelled at the last minute and the premises sealed off, the most recent case being at Nakasekke FM where FDC President and IPC candidate Dr Kizza Besigye had gone for a pre-paid talk show.

As 2010 drew to a close, it is becoming possible that the surprise at the relatively low level of violence has been premature. At Nakasekke, two taxis that had been hired to ferry FDC/IPC supporters were burnt.

By late December 2010, there were persistent reports of shadowy militias or unexplained armed groups being recruited around the country ostensibly to maintain security, but to many observers, to harass the opposition.

The police denied the existence of these militias, but credible Daily Monitor sources stand by their position that these militias exist. Early in 2010, there was talk of the Democratic Party starting some kind of vigilante group to counter the use of violence by the state.

In his Jan. 5, 2011 column in the Daily Monitor, Charles Onyango-Obbo wrote of feeling the political mood and talking to people who are vehemently anti-Museveni and who talk matter-of-factly about how the 2011 election is going to be rigged, and yet stating this with an odd calm, relaxed attitude that makes one wonder: what Plan B do these opposition people have up their sleeves?

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Rumours of violence

This then is the national mood. Being spoken quietly and anxiously in many parts of the country is one thought, though: the great outpouring of violence, if or when it does come, will erupt suddenly and without warning very close to or in the days just after the February 18 election date.

This calm-before-and-violent after situation is what happened in Kenya in December 2007 and in Tanzania in the October 2010 elections. More than two months after the election, the usually placid and somewhat docile Tanzanians are still engaged in on-and-off battles with the police, with supporters of the main opposition party Chadema, who are still adamant that the elections that returned President Jakaya Kikwete to power were massively rigged