



**STRENGTHENING CITIZENS ENGAGEMENT IN ELECTIONS (SCENE)**  
Citizens' Mini-audit of the 2021 General Elections: Restoring Citizen Trust in the Electoral  
Process (May – June 2021)  
**Synthesized Report**

---

## **A. INTRODUCTION**

As the country moves forward after the 2021 general elections, it is important to create spaces for citizens and stakeholders to process the outcomes of the elections and chart a way forward. As such, UNNGOF through Implementing Partners across the country, initiated community conversations to analyze citizen's experiences and feelings about the elections, assess the impact of the elections on the national governance systems, and refocus the country on building consensus around a common vision, values, and interests articulated in the Constitution. These conversations are building on previous processes such as the **Citizens Manifesto** and the **Citizens Compact on Free and Fair Elections in Uganda**. The Citizens Manifesto in particular outlines citizens' aspirations and demands, aspirations, and commitments to action on one hand, and an agenda for mutual accountability between citizens and political leaders on the other.

The community conversations were conducted across the 14 sub-regions of Uganda to facilitate the participatory citizens' assessment of the 2021 elections by citizens. The meetings were conducted using existing platforms such as the Topowa Forums and Fireplace (Ekyoto) meeting spaces under the Strengthening Citizens Engagement in Elections (SCENE) activity.

## **B. OBJECTIVE**

The overall objective of the citizen's mini-audit of the elections was to document citizens' experiences from the recently concluded elections and generate their input to inform the development of the post-election accountability framework. Ultimately, these conversations were used to mobilize citizens to play an active role in exerting political and social accountability in the immediate aftermath of the election.

## **C. METHODOLOGY & PARTICIPATION**

18 community meetings were organized in each of the 14 sub-regions. In total, 252 meetings were convened. These meetings were facilitated by civic mentors and Topowa conveners for Fireplace (Ekyoto) and Topowa forum settings respectively. The mini-audits took place between May and June 2021 with each community meeting having about 30 participants gathered from within the village. Each meeting took about 2 hours.

Meetings were attended by women, men, youth, PWDs, local leaders like the LCI Chairpersons, and SCENE focal person in the region. Across the various districts, the meetings attracted small-scale businessmen and women, brick makers, market vendors, peasants, bodaboda riders, religious leaders, opinion leaders, taxi drivers, teachers, the elderly, and youth.

Civic mentors and Topowa conveners used participatory tools such as simple interview guides, lectures, question and answer sessions as well as group discussions that stimulated

conversations on the process and outcomes of the recently concluded elections, performance of key election institutions, and effectiveness of the system and post-election accountability agenda.

#### **D. SUCCESS AREAS**

During the community meetings, citizens gave credit to the following;

- The Constitutional obligation that elections should be conducted after every five years was fulfilled.
- Citizens became aware that elections should be conducted in a peaceful environment that allows voters to make informed decisions about candidates of their choice.
- There is a change in mindset from the community towards women and youth joining elective positions courtesy of civic education from the SCENE project. Many women were able to contest and emerge victors.
- At the parliamentary level, the majority were happy and convinced by the election outcomes. However, citizens had a lot of reservations when it came to the presidential poll results.
- The campaign for the general election was highly competitive. Voters had a wide choice of candidates for the majority of seats at all levels.
- Although the election observation exercise was not fully allowed by the government of Uganda, grassroot CSOs deployed secretly both the long-term and short-term observers.
- Civil Society Organizations engaged robustly, conducting civic and voter education and peace-building efforts before the elections.
- The Electoral Commission successfully registered an unprecedented number of new voters and the majority of them cast ballots in the general election.
- Non-performing leaders were voted out and replaced by new ones. Accordingly, those that delivered services to the citizens as per their manifestoes were voted back.

#### **E. KEY ISSUES RAISED**

During the conversations, citizens (voters) gave their opinions about the 2021 general elections as they saw them. Below were the major observations;

- Women aspirants and candidates faced a hostile political environment, including propaganda, smear campaigns, and violence. Many lacked sufficient finances to run for office. Youth and people with disabilities also faced similar barriers to participation. Nomination fees were increased to discourage participation by these special-interest groups.
- The political environment was highly polarized and divisive throughout the 2020/2021 electoral period. Instances of violence occurred, beginning with the political party primaries and continuing through the post-election period.
- Voters and opposition candidates were intimidated and threatened by armed security operatives. *“We saw a lot of beating during campaigns, boda-bodas were always being confiscated, there were many soldiers, arrest of people especially youth during the campaigns increased, the opposition candidates were not given opportunity to conduct campaigns, banning of music produced by opposition candidates.”* narrated a male participant during a community meeting in Bwaziba village, Luwero sub-county, Luwero district.
- Inadequate voter education resulted in many invalid votes. The Electoral Commission has the mandate to carry out voters' education. However, in the concluded election this was not adequately done hence first-time voters like the youth and elderly cast their votes anyhow and as such causing a high number of invalid votes. According to the final presidential results, the January 2021 election registered 393,500 invalid votes.

- Late arrival of voting materials at polling stations. Many cases of voting materials arriving after 10:00 am were reported.
- The shifting of voters' names from one polling station to another by the Electoral Commission was one of the major reasons for the low voter turn up in the country. The change left many voters frustrated and reduced their interest to vote.
- Presidential candidates were not offered an equal opportunity to converse for votes across the country. In many instances, opposition candidates especially Patrick Amuria Oboi, the FDC flag bearer, and Robert Kyagulanyi Ssentamu, the NUP flag bearer were blocked from accessing pre-approved campaign destinations by the Police. *"When Bobi Wine came to Mbale to campaign, the police and military deployed heavily and denied him a chance to freely campaign in the district, but when it was President Museveni's turn, his campaigns were not disrupted,"* said Wambede Sulaiman, a resident of Nambale village, Bukonde sub-county in Bugisu region.
- There were elements of voter bribery with candidates offering salt, money, soap, sugar, among other items and others ferried to the polling station to vote for particular candidates.
- At many polling stations, there were challenges with the functioning of the Biometric Voter Verification Kits (BVVK) at different intervals which slowed the polling process. This was mainly attributed to either the electoral officer's incompetence to operate the machines or wrong codes for the kits given.
- The internet shutdown affected citizens who wanted to protect their votes. Critical incidents observed that called for immediate attention could not be brought to the attention of the different stakeholders for resolve.
- The accreditation of observers by the Electoral Commission was very bureaucratic and, in most cases, it was done at the last minute.
- Citizens argued that they only benefit from their leaders and candidates during campaign periods. After they have voted these leaders into office, the leaders disappear and never return to engage them. They also wonder why leaders are willing to give money during campaigns, but fail to deliver on citizens' priorities when they are in office. Several unfulfilled promises and pledges account for the high commercialization of elections in Uganda.
- The election was disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic. This was the first time citizens participated in an election where voters were required to wear a mask, and wash their hands before accessing a polling station. This condition by the Electoral Commission discouraged many voters from turning up to vote. The Police Constables who were deployed at each polling station denied some voters that came without masks access to the polling station.
- The majority of the elderly are still living under fear and trauma of the previous bloody campaign period where some lost their sons and daughters. These are not yet ready to engage in political-related engagement. The majority of these did not see the relevance for voting since reflecting on the bloody campaign period, they realized that "the government was not ready to lose" and therefore would go an extra mile to fight voters.
- Lining up behind candidates during NRM primary elections was very exposing and caused hatred in the community between supporters of different candidates. This hampered participation in the subsequent general elections.
- Citizens' perceptions about the effectiveness of the Electoral Commission depended on which candidate they supported. Citizens that identified with the ruling NRM party praised the Electoral Commission for delivering polling materials to all polling stations in good time. However, citizens who identified with opposition candidates despised the electoral body and accused it of being biased against opposition candidates.

## F. PROPOSED AREAS OF REFORM

For a free and fair election to be achieved, the citizens fronted the following reforms and recommendations;

- Parliament should review the current Electoral laws and amend for elections of Presidential, Parliamentary, and Local Council elections to take place on the same day. This will reduce the cost of conducting polls that have continued to rise.
- There is an urgent need for Parliament to review and amend the current electoral laws governing the transmission, declaration/announcement, and publishing of election results from polling stations/district tally centers to the national tally center.
- Ugandan citizens should be mobilized and supported to continue discussing, reflecting, and reviewing the electoral processes and related laws as a foundation for continuous engagement in building a strong democratic country.
- Citizens suggested that votes from each district should be announced separately so that people can be convinced of the outcome. The current arrangement of the announcement at the national tally center breeds a lot of mistrust.
- Parliament should enact a law where the sitting president resigns if he/she stands for the president to create leveled ground for competition and reduce the use of state funds to facilitate the incumbent's campaign expenditure.
- There is a popular desire to limit as much as possible, the role of security agencies in elections. The deep involvement of the security agencies in electoral processes contravenes provisions of the Constitution that require them to remain nonpartisan. For instance, the police should not interfere in the campaign activities of Presidential Candidates. The role of security organs should be to enforce law and order and ensure a conducive political environment for all Ugandans to freely participate in electoral processes.
- Citizens proposed that the Electoral Commission should conduct grassroots dialogues to educate voters about electoral processes at least one year ahead of every election. Some voters did not take seriously the process of updating their details in the National Voters Register. Some of them could not locate their names in the voters register on polling day. Others stayed away from elections because they thought that without a Voter Location Slip (VLS) they would not be allowed to participate in elections.
- Citizens would like government programs such as Operation Wealth Creation (OWC), Emyooga, Youth Livelihood Program (YLP), and Women's Fund to be implemented transparently. OWC is a good program, which, if implemented transparently could improve household incomes among beneficiaries.
- Citizens would like the ruling party, not to manipulate state institutions to benefit NRM at the expense of other political parties, or against the wishes of the people.
- The Constitution of Uganda must be respected, and not changed as and when President Museveni deems fit but rather democratic processes should be followed. In recent years, the Constitution has been amended, not to service the popular demands of the people of Uganda, but rather, to satisfy the private interest of President Museveni. A case in point is the amendment of Article 102 (b), in which both the lower and upper age limits were repealed to allow President Museveni to run repeatedly for Presidency even when the majority of Ugandans were against this move demonstrated in a popular protest campaign called "Togikwatako". In total disregard of citizens' concerns, the Government stormed the Parliament of Uganda using a combined force of the police and military and forced opposition Members of Parliament who were fervently against lifting the age limit.
- Ugandans demand the unconditional release of all political prisoners who are under detention or trial in military courts. Government should stop the political witch-hunt of its opponents and level the playing field, to allow for fair competition during

elections. Security agencies should not enforce the law selectively. All Ugandans should be treated equally before the law, and justice should be swift if any Ugandan is found to be culpable.

- Citizens should tolerate divergent views and respect the rights of others to belong to a different political party. There is a need to preach and sensitize locals about the importance of multi-party politics as a form of democracy that Uganda adopted following the referendum of 2005.
- There is a need to engage the Uganda Police to discuss community policing and share citizens' feedback on their conduct during and after the 2021 elections. This will help to clarify several issues that normally result in the escalation of violence during elections.
- Efforts are needed to increase awareness about women's political rights at the grassroots level, to open doors for them to actively participate in electoral and political processes beyond affirmative action positions. Women at the local level still feel that positions of Chairperson L.C.1, L.C.II, and L.C.III are best suited for men. With increased awareness, women shall be inspired at the local level to run for open seats in the 2026 elections.
- The NRM party should reconsider its position on voting by lining up. Citizens prefer a secret ballot.
- Parliament should enact laws against vote cheating/rigging and bribery, and evidence of this should be a basis for disqualifying the candidates.
- Change of polling stations should be done and communicated early to avoid confusing voters on the polling day. This also applies to big polling stations that get divided into A and B.
- The Electoral Commission should be appointed by Parliament and should be inclusive. Similarly, Parliament should appoint the Justices who handle presidential election petitions.
- In the months towards the election, various political confrontations threatened key democratic actors, including, civil society, journalists, and others. To change course, Uganda's political leaders must demonstrate the courage and foresight to prioritize actions that foster genuine dialogue and reconciliation and take concrete steps to advance Ugandans' collective interest in inclusive governance, foregoing narrow and short-term partisan interests.
- Election stakeholders should take action as quickly as possible to organize national stock-taking exercises and to develop and implement key electoral reforms well in advance of the 2026 general election. The process should be guided by principles of inclusion and shared values grounded in the country's Constitution.