

CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS ELECTION OBSERVERS' STATEMENT ON THE EVE OF POLLING DAY FOR THE 2021 PRESIDENTIAL AND PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS IN UGANDA

For immediate release

January 13, 2021

Ugandans will go to the polls to elect a President and Members of Parliament on January 14, 2021. While the election campaigns have been marred by-election violence, deaths, arrests amidst COVID19, and the kidnap of mainly opposition agents and supporters, we hope polling day will be peaceful and that all female and male voters will be allowed to exercise their right to vote free from fear, intimidation, and threats. Today's statement is informed by observations by CSOs in different parts of Uganda and credible media reports.

As part of the international community, Uganda is expected to adhere to international principles and standards for holding free and fair elections. These principles and standards guide the development and implementation of election systems, laws, policies, and procedures concerning democratic election processes. Article 21, Section 3 of the United Nations (UN) Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) enshrines this cornerstone precept:

“The will of the people shall be the basis of the authority of government; this will shall be expressed in periodic and genuine elections which shall be by universal and equal suffrage and shall be held by secret vote or by equivalent free voting procedures.”

Based on the principles and standards for holding genuine, free and fair elections, CSOs in Uganda have observed the pre-election process and issued statements on voter registration, political party candidate selection processes, nominations of candidates at various levels, and the campaign process.

A few days to polling, some candidates scaled up the publicity of their candidature and campaign messages through outdoor and media advertising. We commend this since it allows citizens to know their candidates and make informed decisions especially for districts where campaign meetings were banned. We note however that it is only a few candidates who have been able to afford media publicity for their campaigns which puts them at an advantage over their counterparts and creates an unlevelled playing field.

As Ugandans prepare for polling day, social media platforms have been shut down and citizens are witnessing disruptions in their internet access. This has affected communication between different actors in the electoral process more especially the citizens and hampered the potential of citizens to observe the polling process through citizens' journalism. This action by the state has also inadvertently affected Ugandans who use social media for economic purposes.

Whereas we acknowledge the importance of security in elections, the heavy deployment of the military and quasi-military units witnessed across major cities in Uganda has created fear and anxiety among some citizens. It should be remembered that an election is an opportunity for citizens to choose their leaders whom they will entrust with authority to manage their affairs and

public resources. This deployment takes away the standard which requires an electorate to be free and believe that it is free to make political choices without intimidation, undue influence or fear of retribution for their vote.

In preparation for polling day, the CSOs which were accredited by the Electoral Commission to observe the election process will deploy 2,184 stationery observers based at the sub-county level and 270 roving observers in all the 146 districts.

These observers will assess the level of inclusiveness, transparency, and accountability in the polling process. They will look out for the following:

Inclusiveness: *Right and opportunity to vote regardless of gender, race, age, literacy, disability, access to polling stations to all voters without fear of intimidation or violence from partners, security agencies, the gender of the polling officials and candidate agents; Right of candidates to exercise their right to vote free from intimidation, threats, restrictions on the right to movement.*

Transparency: *Access by observers and candidate agents to polling stations and tally centers; transparency in the transmission of results to tally centers and tallying of results; access to election results at the polling stations to all voters by adherence to the legal requirement for presiding officers to post a copy of the declaration of results form at a conspicuous place at the polling station*

Accountability: *Electoral accountability includes the need to provide effective remedies to citizens for violations of electoral rights, the need to hold electoral authorities responsible for administration, and hold liable those who conduct acts that affect electoral rights. Observers will look at: Effective redress for election rights violations at the polling station and tally centers and accountability of electoral authorities to their mandate as enshrined in the electoral laws at the polling station and tally centers.*

Observers will also look at: *Effective redress for election rights violations at the polling station and tally centers and accountability of electoral authorities to their mandate as enshrined in the electoral laws at the polling station and tally centers.*

Finally, we encourage all eligible citizens to turn up at their polling stations and vote for their preferred candidates.

MY VOTE, MY CHOICE, MY VOICE