

COVID19 PANDEMIC RESPONSE
IMPLICATIONS AND OPPORTUNITY TO RETHINK UGANDA’S ELECTORAL DEMOCRACY
Issues Paper No1¹

Introduction

On April 8, 2020, Uganda’s President Yoweri Museveni addressed the country on the COVID19 pandemic, a disease caused by the Coronavirus. This was his 8th address since the country declared heightened surveillance by commencing mandatory passenger screening at Entebbe International Airport on January 20, 2020, and exactly 18 days after the first Coronavirus victim was declared in the country. Flanked by Prime Minister Ruhakana Rugunda, Health Minister Jane Ruth Acheng, State Minister Mary Karoro Okurut and a host of other government officials, President Museveni declared in his trademark style “we are in a war.”

Mr. Museveni has declared many wars in his more than 3 decades’ presidency since ascending to power in 1986. In June 2004, he declared war on the judiciary after the Constitutional Court² annulled the referendum and other provisions of the Act³ in what has gone down in the constitutional history of Uganda as his angriest speech ever. Later in 2011, in full military fatigue, a walking stick in his right hand and an AK47 strapped diagonally around his chest, Mr. Museveni declared war against landslides that had killed more than 100 people and displaced hundreds of others in the Eastern Uganda district of Bududa. This time around, dressed in his trademark white shirt and looking relaxed, Mr. Museveni was declaring war on an invisible and vicious adversary that was moving stealthily across borders infecting millions of people around the world. By the time of Museveni’s “declaration of war”, the virus had reportedly infected 54 Ugandans while a host of others and other nationals were either in hospitalization or in mandatory quarantine.

At its core, the COVID19 pandemic creates three inter-related policy challenges: (i) a public health crisis; (ii) an economic crisis; and (iii) a livelihood crisis. These challenges have been elucidated elsewhere by different scholars and analysts. In this briefing paper, we argue that the response by the Government of Uganda and the incumbent regime reflect major fault lines in our state apparatus and pose a major threat to our emerging and fragile democracy. On the flip side, the response to the pandemic presents an opportunity to rethink our elections architecture to ensure that in the future, citizens do not have to choose between death and life on the one hand and life and freedom on the other.

Coronavirus: The Invisible Enemy

The coronavirus is reported to have been first detected in the Chinese city of Wuhuan in Hubei province on November 17, 2019. The Coronavirus travels at the speed of a jetliner largely infecting unsuspecting people along with in its paths. As of April 30, 2020 (EAT),

¹ This Issues paper was prepared by the Great Lakes Institute for Strategic Studies in partnership with the Uganda National NGO Forum and the International Republic Institute. The paper is an outcome of a high-level experts’ scenario building discussion on the implications of the Covid-19 to Uganda

² The Attorney General V. Paul K. Ssemwogerere and Hon. Zachary Olum, Constitutional Appeal No.3 of 2004

³ Referendum (Political Systems Act 2000

<https://www.worldometers.info/> estimated that the virus had infected nearly 3,221,029 and killed approximately 228,252 people globally. The United States, the world's leading democracy was reported to be having more than 1,064,572 active cases and 61,669 deaths – the highest of any country in the world while leading European democracies particularly Italy and Spain were still struggling to flatten the curve.

In Africa, the World Health Organization (WHO) data for April 21, 2020, showed the total number of confirmed cases at 15,555 and 704 deaths. Algeria had the highest reported deaths at 384 followed by South Africa and Cameroon with 48 and 42 deaths respectively. Among the states of the East African Community (EA) Kenya and Tanzania had reported more infections while Burundi and South Sudan had reported the least number of infections or deaths. At the time of writing, Uganda had just reported a total of 81 infections, and no death reported.⁴

Uganda's Covid19 response

Highly contagious, no vaccine, and no known therapies against the coronavirus, the global response to the COVID-19 crisis takes a standard test-trace-social distance-quarantine framework. Once the virus has been detected in the country, the first tool in the containment arsenal is to ramp up testing in order to identify infected people so they are isolated from the public to limit transmission. The logical next step is to find everyone they interacted with through contact tracing. The idea then is to focus restrictions more narrowly on the infected people and their contacts so the rest of society doesn't have to stay in permanent lockdown. At its core, the response aims at i) limiting the transmission and spread of the virus; ii) flattening the curve in case of high infections, and iii) de-escalating the lockdowns and quarantine or shelter in place orders upon successfully disrupting and eventually breaking the chain of transmission.

Consistent with the standard approach, the Government of Uganda has confronted the Coronavirus with unprecedented aggressiveness. The country's health ministry has a well-established track record of handling public health crises and emergencies dating back to the fight against HIV/AIDs during the 1980s and 1990s. A study looking at emergency response across different sectors conducted in 2002 found that it was only the health sector that had a well-developed emergence response plan.⁵ Since then, the health sector has built up emergency response capabilities that have enabled it to contain a wide range of health emergencies including outbreaks of cholera, Ebola, and SARs. With Mr. Museveni in command, the Government of Uganda was able to achieve phenomenal success in containing the spread of the pandemic.

President Museveni, the “battlefield” commander of the Government Covid-19 response, is by all accounts a worrier president. He came to power after fighting a bush war 34 years ago in which more than 800,000 Ugandans were killed. Throughout his 34-year rule, he has successfully fought wars of different types and magnitude. From vicious insurgencies in Eastern and Northern Uganda, he confronted the HIV/AIDS with unpreceded leadership and commitment that helped bring the crisis under control. As he declared this new war against an invisible enemy, Mr. Museveni appeared relaxed, dressed in his new trademark white shirt camouflaged by the black, yellow, red Ugandan and the East Africa flags. Notwithstanding his

⁴ Uganda Ministry of Health; John Hopkins University & Medicine Coronavirus Resource Centre (accessed on April 30, 2020 at 11:04 hrs).

⁵ ACODE 2002

8 speeches that often appeared incoherent and sometimes lacking in precision, he projected a demeanor of absolute confidence and looked reassuring as a man in control.

The Uganda Government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic can be divided into 5 categories: the standard public health response focusing on testing, contact tracing, and quarantine; movement restrictions; social distancing; and a limited attempt to mitigate the impact of lockdown on a number of affected people.

Uganda's ministry of health leadership and health workers under the leadership of health minister Jane Ruth Acheng may be described as Uganda's infantry warriors in Museveni's war on the coronavirus. Drawing from many years of experience dealing with health emergencies they embarked on the "war" against the virus ensuring that the infrastructure for testing, contact tracing, and quarantine was in place. The health officials also kept the country abreast with the developments creating a sense of confidence in the population as regards their capacity to manage the pandemic.

The second set of measures involved limitations on international and local travel. Mandatory screening requirements were introduced for all international arrivals at Entebbe International Airport from January 20, 2020. Following the declaration of COVID-19 outbreak as a public health emergency by the World Health Organization (WHO) on January 30, 2020, a mandatory 14 days' quarantine requirement was introduced for citizens from high-risk countries including China, Italy, Spain, United States, and South Korea.⁶ A subsequent instrument introduced similar measures restricting entry into Uganda through other border points.⁷ By all measures, the restrictions on international travel succeeded in stopping the "importation" of the Coronavirus into Uganda as reported infections remained very low compared to other countries.

In addition to an international travel ban, additional restrictions were imposed on public transport and subsequently extended to private vehicles, and none essential business operations were halted for a period ranging from 14 to 32 days. These measures were complemented by the imposition of a curfew starting at 7:00 pm in the evening and 6:30 on the morning of the following day.

The third category of measures covers what has popularly come to be generally referred to as social distancing. These are measures aimed at stopping potential transmission of the virus through proximity and contact. The government sought to achieve social distancing objectives through limitations on public transport and more importantly the prohibition of gatherings of more than 5 people. Social, religious, and political gatherings including parties, communal weddings, religious services, political rallies, and related events were prohibited.⁸

The fourth set of measures focused on personal and community hygiene. The government encouraged the adoption of good hygiene practices including regular washing of hands, use of sanitizers, and personal discipline while sneezing in public. Mr. Museveni in his characteristic style as an "explainer in chief" used his regular addresses more like fire-place conversations educating Ugandans on the importance of personal hygiene in containing the looming crisis. For most of his addresses running into 9 of them in less than a month, Mr. Museveni could

⁶ See The Public Health (Prevention of COVID-19) (Requirements and Conditions of Entry into Uganda) Order, 2020 (SI No. 46 of 2020)

⁷ The Public Health (Prohibition of Entry into Uganda) Order, 2020 (SI No. 53 of 2020)

⁸ <https://www.pmldaily.com/news/2020/03/full-speech-museveni-announces-strict-measures.html>

pass as a community development officer (CDO) than a president expected to be efficient on time and dolling policy actions and directives. Government efforts were complemented by the usual players in Uganda’s political ball game. Kyandondo East MP Robert Kyagulanyi Sentamu fired the first shot with a song encouraging citizens to take personal hygiene seriously. The “People’s President” Kizza Besigye himself a celebrated medical doctor who was also Mr. Museveni bush war physician issued his guidance on personal hygiene and social distancing. And a host of other politicians and intending ones used the campaign to introduce themselves to the would-be voters.

The final set of measures is what may be termed as public mobilization to support the financing of the war against the coronavirus. In previous emergencies including outbreaks of hunger in some parts of the country, landslides in Bududa, etc., there were anecdotal efforts by citizens to offer support in terms of food and materials. In the case of the Coronavirus war effort, Mr. Museveni led the mobilization effort to call upon the public to donate “war materials” in terms of food and vehicles. In an unprecedented show of solidarity, individual Ugandans, small and big businesses responded to the effort donating a variety of items including 4X4 picks trucks, food, and cash.

If we use the containment of the virus as the sole measure of success, it is tenable to assert that the Government anti-coronavirus efforts have so far been a resounding success. The importation of the virus through Uganda was minimized by the Government early action. The chain of transmission was severely disrupted by a consistent testing effort, contact tracing, and strict quarantine measures, as well as vigilance by citizens through aggressive personal and community hygiene practices. At the time of writing this paper, Uganda has only 81 confirmed cases of COVID-19 infections from less than 10,000 tests. Even for consistent critics of Mr. Museveni’s regime survival politics, it would be disingenuous not to acknowledge the exemplary leadership that he has provided in this time of crisis. His fireside conversations with citizens that are supposed to pass as presidential addresses, his calm and reassuring demeanor, and his ability to translate abstract public health concepts into a package of vernacular terms are reassuring to ordinary people falling on hard times as a result of the measures imposed by Government.

However, the strength and weaknesses in the response to the COVID-19 pandemic provide important lessons for the future of electoral democracy in Uganda. In the next part of this paper, we examine whether we can build on the experiences and lessons the leadership exhibited by Mr. Museveni to build a more resilient and enduring electoral democracy as a country.

The COVID-19 Pandemic Response and Implications for Uganda’s Electoral Democracy

The official narrative of Uganda’s successful fight against the coronavirus can easily obscure us from acknowledging the impact of this battle on other dimensions of our public life and society. A lot has been written about the impact of the pandemic on the global and national economies, the public health infrastructure, and on poverty and livelihoods, among other things. This work is dedicated to examining the implications of the war against the Coronavirus on Uganda’s electoral system. It is argued that in the short-term, the war against the Coronavirus has disrupted our elections calendar, gave incumbent President Museveni an electoral advantage, and froze any ongoing attempts at electoral reforms. The paper concludes by looking at the range of structural reforms that may be necessary to ensure that such pandemics or other crises do not hold hostage in the future.

The war against Covid-19 and the remaking of Museveni

In many years, the COVID-19 response brought back a Museveni that was received from the bush and revered as a statesman. However, years of electioneering characterized by political acrimony, harassment of his political opponents and openly fraudulent maneuvers to change the constitution to overstay in power had battered Museveni's image and democratic credentials. The pre-coronavirus Museveni had become too partisan referring to politicians who sought to compete against him as enemies and attacking them with an unmitigated vengeance. He had increasingly taken to delivering partisan addresses and penning opinion articles struggling to strike a balance between public policy and dispensing of patronage that remains the lifeline of his 3 decades' rule. Prior to the outbreak of the virus, it had become increasingly difficult to draw a distinction between Museveni's three personalities: Museveni the president of Uganda expected to treat and protect every citizen equally; Museveni the chairman of the ruling National Resistance Movement; and Museveni the citizen of Uganda.

The coronavirus threatened to attack us and changed everything. The coronavirus version of Museveni appeared as a unifier. Quite strikingly, throughout his numerous fireplace conversations, Mr. Museveni rarely mentioned the year 1986 or NRM which are the standard references points in most of his recent addresses. His educative fireside chats with less partisan inkling made him look more presidential than an NRM party activist a –posture he has projected since being declared the winner in the hotly contested presidential elections in 2016. By sitting patiently in his live broadcast fireside chats reading donations from big business people and ordinary Ugandans making small but symbolically significant donations, Museveni projected the stature of a statesman. And by offering and delivering a tutorial on working out at home - although he knows that millions of his “bazukulu” born since he came to power may not have what passes for a home where you can do indoor exercises – won public admiration and international media coverage that should help shift his ratings in public opinion.

COVID-19 and the deployment of Museveni's election assets

It is not an exaggeration to suggest that beyond the public health emergency response that plays out on media platforms is a systematic effort by Mr. Museveni to capture and consolidate the political ground in preparation for the 2021 elections. By the time he declared war on the virus, he was confronted with a very uncertain and fragile political environment. The emergence of Bobi Wine's People Power Movement attracting largely young people into the political process had sent shockwaves into establishment politics. The violence unleashed on People Power Movement supporters by the military police (the military wing of the Uganda Police Force) was affecting the image of the Force. The Resident District Commissioners (RDCs) who the official representatives of the President in the districts became the face of the violence as they plucked politicians from radio stations and used the Local Defense Units (LDUs) militia groups to break up rallies and peaceful public protests and gatherings. The use of the Public Order Management Act (POMA) to suppress political decent was increasingly becoming untenable.

The battle against the Coronavirus allowed Mr. Museveni to remake everything about himself and the organization of his campaign machinery. It also gave him a unique opportunity to deploy his most strategic election assets: the military and money – in a manner that would be difficult to challenge. In the absence of a fully developed health work force, or the ability to mobilize such a force if it existed, Mr. Museveni turned to heart of his election campaign infrastructure – the Resident District Commissioners and, the military and its allied militia group – the LDUs – to lead the war against the virus – enforcing guidelines and quarantine

orders, and distributing food to citizens in distress. In a public health emergency battle such as the COVID-19 potential outbreak, the district medical officers should be the frontline commanders. On the contrary, Mr. Museveni put his Resident District Commissioners (RDCs) – a team of quasi-military cum political operatives only answerable to him– in charge of district health operations. Mr. Museveni’s and all the politicians understanding that the war against the Coronavirus was is not only a war against a public health enemy but also an opportunity to secure an electoral advantage in the months ahead, and for Mr. Museveni even in the years ahead. This reality was played out in the supplementary budget appropriations and its aftermath.⁹

The Museveni anti-Coronavirus war represents an escalation in the militarization of governmental operations and the process of de-institutionalization of Government. Over time, the security forces have taken over the running of critical arteries of governmental functioning. Traditionally, sub-sectors like wildlife and forestry where colonialists had vested interests were run through command and control approaches by paramilitary groups of wildlife and forestry rangers. As the current regime has increasingly become reliant on the military, there has been a systematic effort to deploy the Uganda Peoples Defense Forces personnel to control all the other segments of Government from the police to fisheries and agriculture, among others. The Coronavirus war opened up a window for injecting the security forces at the frontline of the public health effort. Since the introduction of electoral politics in 1996, the security forces have played both a covert and overt role in influencing the elections in favor of Mr. Museveni. The COVID-19 war effort may make the overt involvement of the security forces and their allied militias more acceptable than would be necessary for a properly functioning democracy.

The COVID-19 pandemic also presented an opportunity for a makeover by the Uganda Peoples Defense Forces. Since the massacres of civilians and royal guards at Mumberi’s palace in Kasese in 2016¹⁰ and the unprecedented violence in the Arua by-elections, the image of the UPDF was battered and faced increased accusations of partisanship and extreme violence against unarmed civilians. By placing the UPDF at the frontline of the war against the pandemic, the UPDF will be able to do a makeover and regain some credibility and trust among the citizens. This makeover is enhanced by the deployment of the Local Defense Unit force, a militia group aligned to the UPDF. From beating young people and women market vendors on the streets to distributing food rations in the slums of our Nation’s capital, the LDUs is a perfect alibi for future violence by the security forces. It is also not far-fetched to conclude that the ongoing socialization of LDUs through food distribution prepares them for a more enhanced role in future elections akin to the role played by the predecessor militia called crime preventers.

Hiding away from the virus

In spite of its resounding success on the public health dimension of containing the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, the coronavirus “war” effort has exposed the faultiness in our

⁹ <https://www.monitor.co.ug/News/National/Parliament-backlash-Shs10-billion-Covid19-cash-Kadaga/688334-5527126-ga7fdp/index.html>;
https://www.newvision.co.ug/new_vision/news/1517986/stop-debating-about-10bn-covid-19-funds-kadaga-tells-mps; <https://www.monitor.co.ug/News/National/17-000-petition-Shs10-billion-MPs-Museveni-Kadaga/688334-5530034-85lv3hz/index.html>

¹⁰ <https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/10/10/uganda-no-justice-2016-kasese-massacre-security-forces>.

national preparedness or lack of it while at the same time effectively engaging a reverse gear on our progress towards electoral democracy.

It was quite instructive that throughout his 9 televised fireplace conversations, Mr. Museveni made no mention of how many ICU beds the country has, how many ventilators, or the stock of our Personal Protective Equipment (PPE).¹¹ A president who donates cars to clergy leaders, kings and musicians paying allegiance to him found himself flatfooted with no cars to ensure monitoring the spread of the pandemic or implementing an effective contact tracing effort. With most Government activities shut down as a result of the lockdown, Mr. Museveni's government proved incapable of commandeering the fleets of vehicles scattered all over our governmental system. Uncollaborated reports indicated that, at the peak of the lockdown, the department of industry had 3 pickups and 4 drivers with a fuel budget to monitor industrial activity in the country. This could probably be said of many other government ministries, Departments, and agencies (MDAs) that were considered non-essential during the lockdown period. Here we were, the country in total or partial lockdown, and these vehicles could not be made available. Another source that follows regional trends highlighted of how Mr. Museveni overruled his technocrats and committed to supplying sugar to Tanzania at a subsidized price to the extent of sending one of his ministers and the most powerful permanent secretary in the country aboard a chartered flight to deliver the letter of commitment to Tanzanian President John Pombe Magufuli.

The response to the COVID-19 pandemic around the world suggests that once you have the capacity to do massive testing, quarantine, and treat infected persons and ensure contact tracing, it is possible to relax and finally end lockdown, shelter in place orders or stay-at-home directives. However, in the absence of these capabilities, the Government took the option of "hiding away" the citizens from the virus. With hindsight, we may ask ourselves, if we didn't know our capabilities: testing capacity, ICU bed capacity, the volume of PPEs, etc., what option did our "commander" have other than locking us down and hiding us away from the attacking enemy? In addition, neither Mr. Museveni nor his health minister, the indomitable Jane Achieng has clearly given us compelling data on the size of our health workforce. By comparison, while the South African Government deployed a 28,000 strong health workforce to do house to house testing, Uganda deployed UPDF officers and their allied LDU militia to enforce the quarantine and handle food distribution. These system deficiencies make it difficult to hazard an understanding of what a successful COVID-19 response for Uganda looks like. Is it containing the spread of the pandemic as is evidenced by the low infections, no death, and high recovery rate? Is it a successful lockdown where citizens remain compliant as long as Mr. Museveni tells us there is still danger out there? Is it building a robust health system infrastructure that can withstand potential pressures from a massive outbreak of the virus?

The Coronavirus froze the electoral reforms process

The totality of Mr. Museveni's anti-coronavirus "war effort" was to, in many different ways, freeze our electoral democracy. Following the declaration of war on opposition political parties during his swearing-in in May 2016, President Museveni has pursued a systematic effort to demobilize all forms of opposition against him. Internally within his ruling group – the National Resistance Movement Party – he neutralized any form of internal electoral contestation by amending the Constitution to remove age limit requirement for president and

¹¹ <https://www.monitor.co.ug/News/National/Non-Covid-19-doctors-buy-own-masks-says-government/688334-5512924-1n46jg/index.html>

secure his reserved position as the only candidate for his group. The attempts by his security forces to use the infamous Public Order Management Act (POMA) to stifle opposition activities were increasingly becoming problematic. The Act was annulled by a unanimous decision of the Constitutional Court on March 26, 2019,¹² two days before Museveni's 4th address to the country.¹³ COVID-19 handed Museveni a perfect opportunity to pursue his 2016 declaration of war against the political opposition without the street battles that have become the defining factor in his competition with political opposition and other dissenters. The extraordinary measures required to contain the spread of the virus effectively locked Mr. Museveni's potential competitors away from the political arena. He threatened every politician who engaged in distributing food with charges of attempted murder. These threats were enforced ruthlessly against politicians opposed to Mr. Museveni¹⁴ while his allies including one of his ministers were reported flouting the orders without any restraint.

Relatedly, before the escalation of the pandemic, Parliament had passed a series of electoral reform laws covering presidential elections, parliamentary elections, local government elections, and the electoral commission.¹⁵ At the time of writing this paper, a source confirmed that the bills with their covering letter were comfortably seated on the desk of the Clerk to Parliament awaiting transmission to the President for assent. The bills were enacted by parliament during the first week of March 2020. A private member's bill with profound political and constitutional implications for electoral democracy in the country remains before the House. It is therefore instructive to observe that Parliament has not expeditiously moved forward to complete the legislation process for electoral reforms in the light of the schedule for the general elections slated for early 2021.

Coronavirus claims its first victims but they are not human beings

Across the world, the victims of Coronavirus are natural human beings. In Uganda, the victims of the pandemic are key institutions of the state. For example, the institution of the Inspector General of Government (IGG) constitutionally charged with the mandate of fighting corruption has lost ground to an outpost called State House Anti-Corruption Unit. The unit commanded by one Edith Nakalema carried out its first arrests earlier on in the anti-coronavirus war.¹⁶ The highest-profile victim of the war against the coronavirus is Uganda's parliament of 452 members. For his war effort, Mr. Museveni through the minister of finance presented to parliament budget proposals for a supplementary budget of US\$932 billion. The budget included a proposed allocation for the health emergency response and over US\$400 billion for the Ministry of Defense for the purchase of classified equipment. The speaker of Parliament rammed the budget through parliament without debate. By the end of the appropriations process, the members of Parliament had siphoned off US\$10 billion entitling each member at

¹² <https://www.softpower.ug/constitutional-court-nullifies-section-8-of-the-contentious-public-order-management-law/>

¹³ <https://www.monitor.co.ug/News/National/Government-appeals-constitutional-court-ruling-POMA/688334-5525606-bchtyc/index.html>

¹⁴ <https://www.monitor.co.ug/News/National/Virus-lockdown-MP-Zaake-arrested-distributing-relief-food/688334-5529128-7ar8yy/index.html>; <https://www.softpower.ug/minister-kasolo-under-fire-for-distributing-food-in-kyotera-mps-want-him-arrested/>

¹⁵ <https://www.monitor.co.ug/News/National/electoral-reforms-special-interest-groups-General-Election/688334-5482138-bf4groz/index.html>; <http://parliamentwatch.ug/parliament-passes-electoral-reforms-ahead-of-the-2021-general-elections/>

¹⁶ <https://www.monitor.co.ug/News/National/OPM-officials-arrested-inflated-prices-for-COVID-19-relief-food/688334-5519020-rxgb2tz/index.html>; <https://www.voanews.com/science-health/coronavirus-outbreak/top-ugandan-officials-arrested-covid-19-purchasing-scandal>

least US\$ 20 million allegedly for facilitation in their coronavirus sensitization activities. The allocation caused outrage among the public and has dented the credibility of parliament as an institution that fends for the citizens. Upon application by two MPs, the court placed an injunction on the part of the disbursement or use of the money.

There is a consistent practice to suggest that the executive is increasingly using the budget as an instrument for official corruption sanctioned by parliament. In the run-up to the 2011 elections, a pay of Uganda Shillings 20 million was made out to each member of parliament under the pretext of supervising agricultural advisory services activities.¹⁷ In 2017, at least US\$29 million was paid to each member of parliament on the pretext of consulting their constituencies on the proposals to amend the constitution to remove the age limit to enable Mr. Museveni to be eligible to contest for the presidency in 2021. The population is increasingly looking at parliament as a predatory institution that is not concerned with the plight of the citizens. With its image battered, the parliament may have no goodwill left to demand accountability from the legislature or even discharge its legislative mandate to put into place an enabling legal framework that supports credible, free and fair elections.

We can reshape the future the way we want it

To zoom back on the positive side, Museveni's anti-coronavirus war teaches us that if we are serious about electoral democracy, we have to think out of the box and be daring enough to do things differently.

Strong nations and just societies are founded on the principles of rule of law. In such societies, citizens don't have to choose between being killed by hunger or a vicious enemy like the Coronavirus. This is why we need to reflect on how future elections may look like in the face of a public health crisis or any other crisis of the magnitude of the coronavirus.

There are at least three major structural reforms that ought to be undertaken to enable us to manage elections amidst a potential crisis that mirror the covid19 pandemic crisis in future: decentralize the election management infrastructure to the regions; take advantage of the rhetoric about e-governance to digitize our electoral system, and restructure the electoral commission to make it more independent and focus it on setting minimum standards for elections management at the regional level.

Decentralizing the elections management infrastructure

The response to the COVID-19 pandemic has taught us that in future crises, citizens may be affected by quarantines and stay-at-home orders to limit the spread of a disease or some other disaster. Like in the case of the coronavirus, most of the identified cases have been restricted around the Kampala area. We have therefore learned that there may be a global pandemic that not necessarily have to paralyze an entire country as long as appropriate guidelines and directives are in place. There is no reason why there can't be an election management body for Karamoja, Kigezi, Bunyoro, Acholi, or any of the other regions. Consequently, a national or regional election can proceed to honor the right of citizens to vote without exposing citizens or election officials to risk. In the case of COVID-19, there is no rationale why planning for elections would not proceed if there existed a regional infrastructure to plan and execute the

¹⁷ See Advocates Coalition for Development and Environment & 4 Ors V. Attorney General & Anor (Constitutional Petition No. 14 of 2011).1

plan. A national election commission would only serve the purpose of providing minimum standards for the conduct of elections and receiving results from the regions for final tally and announcement of the winner in case of the presidential elections. Parliamentary and local council elections would be conducted and results declared by the regional elections governing body. Decentralization of elections management would also create more demand for transparency and accountability on account of the process being closer to citizens and regions competing amongst themselves to deliver a free and fair election.

Digitization of the electoral system

The disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic have reignited the discourse on digitization and how technology is helping societies to cope. From the use of cell phones in monitoring social distancing requirements in Taiwan to using contactless drone delivery to transport COVID-19 test samples¹⁸ and efforts at virtual learning in Uganda, it is evident that technology will provide a pathway out of disruptive crises like the COVID-19 pandemic. Today, corporations, government departments, and parliament are taking up the technology to ensure the continuity of their businesses and work during the lockdown period. We should, therefore, develop an election digital system infrastructure that allows online voter registration and verification and electronic voting. The funding provided to political parties under current and future legislation should include targeted investment in member registration and electronic voting in party primaries. The digital voter registration and verification system, as well as the electronic voting system, should be primarily managed by the regional elections management infrastructure while the national electoral commission should receive and back the information.

Restore confidence in the national electoral commission

There is a fundamental distinction between democracies where citizens follow their leaders and act responsibly and authoritarian regimes where compliance to laws and public policy is secured through instilling fear. The experience from the COVID-19 pandemic response shows that countries' success and failure are not limited to either category of countries. China is one example of an authoritarian regime that was able to contain the spread of the coronavirus from the time it was detected in Wuhuan. In Hungary, the regime of Victor Orban has used the pandemic to concentrate power in the presidency through emergency legislation.¹⁹ However, there are more successful democratic countries that have pursued aggressive containment strategies by their heads of state offering presidential leadership while placing optimism over fear and hope over uncertainty. There are lessons to be learned from leaders such as Angela Merkel of Germany, Tsai Ing-wen of Taiwan, Sanna Marin of Finland, and Mette Frederiksen of Denmark.

The Uganda COVID-19 response was characterized by isolated cases of use of force and violence by security forces and their allied LDU militia. Attacks by uniformed and non-uniformed security officials on women market vendors the day following the announcement of the lockdown prompted the Nation's Chief of Defense Forces to meet with the affected women, apologize and mend fences with them.²⁰ Similar cases of violence by security forces against

¹⁸ https://time.com/5824914/drones-coronavirus-tests-ghana-zipline/?amp=true&_twitter_impression=true

¹⁹ <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2020/04/europe-hungary-viktor-orban-coronavirus-covid19-democracy/609313/>

²⁰ <https://www.monitor.co.ug/News/National/Battered-vendors-narrate-ordeal/688334-5508806-bnggnx/index.html>

unarmed citizens including political opponents are often explained away by both Mr. Museveni and those under his command. With muted voices of disapproval from the Commander-In-Chief, one can easily conclude that we will see elevated levels of security-driven violence in the 2021 elections and beyond.

Conclusion

The Coronavirus pandemic is a multidimensional public policy problem affecting our lives in many different forms: health, economic, social, and political. Judging our response using this multidimensional matrix, it is evident that the Government of Uganda achieved tremendous success in confronting the public health dimension of the problem. The flow of the virus into the country was disrupted early enough and there has been no COVID-19 death reported. By the time of publishing this paper, Uganda was on course to registering one hundred percent recovery of all cases under hospitalization. However, an official narrative of success based on the public health matrix tells only part of the picture. The Government did not develop and implement a shock and awe strategy needed to confront an enemy as vicious as the coronavirus. As such, there has been no clear strategy to mitigate the economic pain of the country or the livelihood crisis that is still unfolding. As we have shown, Mr. Museveni has seized a strategic opportunity to exert more control on the population, dominate and effectively used the public space to shore up his ratings as a crisis manager and achieved a remaking of the security forces and allied militia groups as part of a new normal in our policy discourse. With the electoral reforms process effectively frozen and the legislature infected with a 10-billion-shilling scandal, Uganda's electoral system stands in jeopardy. Yet, beyond this thick cloud is the silver lining where the country needs to look to create change in the structure of its electoral system to ensure that in future, Ugandans do not have to be in a position where the only choices are between hope and uncertainty or between life and freedom.