



# COST OF POLITICS IN UGANDA

BACKGROUND PAPER

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# INTRODUCTION

Politics in Uganda, especially at the higher end of the political system, has in recent years become increasingly the preserve of a small self-selecting elite, those who can raise the vast amounts of money needed to conduct successful campaigns for election to public office. Ever since the restoration of multi-party politics, competition for the rather limited elective offices has become highly intense. As with MPs in other multi-party systems, Uganda's parliamentarians dedicate large shares of their campaign funds to personalised networks. Those who end up winning parliamentary seats do so not on the basis of the attractiveness of their manifestos, but because they out-do their rivals in as far as "buying votes" is concerned. This has profound implications for the voters and the wider political system. For the voters, selling one's vote literally absolves the buyer of responsibility as a representative who goes to parliament to represent their views and interests. For the wider political system, it excludes otherwise capable, experienced and knowledgeable people who, owing to lack of resources, will refrain from standing for election and ultimately making a contribution. The inevitable question these observations raise is: what should be done about it? Care must be exercised not to look to technical solutions to problems that stem from the current political economy of campaign financing.

# METHODOLOGY

This paper is informed by three sources of information. They include: secondary sources, published and unpublished, academic and non-academic, including newspapers; conversations and interviews with political actors of different kinds at all levels of the political system over two decades; and interviews with candidates for the parliamentary elections of February 2016, some of whom won and entered parliament for the first time, others incumbents who retained their seats, and a few who lost theirs to newcomers or failed to dislodge entrenched incumbents. Altogether, 10 candidates campaigning under the banners of the National Resistance Movement (NRM), the Democratic Party (DP), the Forum for Democratic Change (FDC) and the Uganda Peoples Congress (UPC) were interviewed in-depth in February and March about their direct experiences, stories they had heard from and about fellow candidates, as well as their observations.

# I. Historical Context

## Political system

Uganda has been struggling with trying to make multiparty politics work after a long break with adversarial, competitive multi-party politics. To understand the struggle for multi-partyism it is essential to go back a little bit into history. Uganda gained independence in 1962 as a multiparty democracy. The 1962 elections were the first and last episode of inter-party competition until 1980. General elections scheduled for 1971 did not take place as a result of internal political tensions that led eventually to the 1971 coup d'état by General Idi Amin Dada. Amin went on to ban politics itself.<sup>2</sup>

The ban effectively ruled out any more inter-party competition and all possibilities of learning and practising the ins and outs of multi-party politics. If practice makes perfect as the old adage goes, for nearly two decades following independence Ugandans had no opportunity to practice multi-party competition, learn whatever lessons had to be learnt, and eventually make it work. It was after the overthrow of Idi Amin, nearly 20 years after independence, that the country made another acrimonious and highly divisive attempt at holding multi-party elections. The controversial 1980s elections, their aftermath that saw the beginning of a civil war, and the “multi-party” period that followed until 1986, during which members of opposition political parties were murdered, forced into exile or to live in fear, also allowed no space for normal party politics.

And then the NRM seized power in 1986. It immediately suspended political-party activity. The suspension stayed in force for two decades during which Uganda was governed under a no-party (Movement) system. Under the Movement, all contenders for elected political office had to contest for elections on their own “individual merit”, not on the basis of membership in or sponsorship by political organisations.<sup>3</sup> The suspension kept political parties in limbo and further

damaged prospects for multi-party political development for an extended period of time.

It took a combination of donor pressure and growing internal dissent, even within a hitherto united NRM itself, for political parties to be freed and for multi-party politics to resume. By that time, the NRM had had sufficient space, time and opportunity to organise itself into a reasonably strong political force. Meanwhile the political parties it had found in existence, the UPC, the DP and the Conservative Party were in total disarray. Many of their leaders had aged and retired from politics. Others had died. Moreover, they had had no chance to recruit new members. Such recruitment was prohibited during the 20-year period of no-party politics.

There is no indication that the use of cash and gifts to buy votes pre-dates the NRM. This is regardless of whether we are looking at the 1980 elections or those of 1962. There is broad agreement that this practice originated in the introduction of the individual merit principle in politics. Without the support of political organisations driven by competing ideas on the basis of which people could make up their minds who to vote for, candidates had to use stratagems that boosted their chances of getting elected. Consequently, they would promise to help build or repair schools, health units and roads and also pay fees for school-going children. Others took to giving out cash, sugar, soap and other items as enticements. While some would volunteer these gifts, others would come under pressure from members of the public who demanded that they be given “something” if candidates wanted their votes.

These demands for advance payment before votes could be cast were informed by a belief that, once elected, politicians benefitted a great deal from being in office, both financially and materially. To a certain extent this belief was informed by the visibly opulent lifestyles politicians led, and also the fact that members

of parliament have habitually set their own immensely generous terms of service as a priority. These entail the self-awarding of large salaries and allowances, including for the purchase of luxury vehicles for themselves. Voters grew to view this as a one-sided improvement in the personal circumstances of elected politicians and decided that, for them, it was prudent to ask for payment up front. This was because in some instances candidates who would have been elected on the basis of extravagant promises would rarely return to their constituencies to fulfil them.

However, even those who were otherwise diligent and returned often to confer with their constituencies and to respond to their needs were unable to cope with demands for cash contributions to this or that good cause, whether collective or individual. While their salaries and allowances were generous in general terms, they were hardly sufficient to satisfy the considerable needs of their constituents. Those whose personal problems were not attended to would feel they had “benefitted nothing” from voting for them. This simply reinforced the view that one was better off demanding for cash or “something” up front than waiting for elected candidates to fulfil the promises they had made during the campaigns. By the time Uganda returned to multi-party politics, these practices had become part and parcel of campaigning for office, and also of the “political practices” of both the electorate and seekers of public office.

### The party system

Uganda's is a dominant party system in which the ruling party, the National Resistance Movement, is by far better organised, better resourced, has far more support<sup>4</sup> and therefore farther reach than all of its rivals combined. Altogether, there are more than 20 registered political parties in Uganda. Many are “brief-case political parties”, boasting memberships of no more than their presidents and a few hangers-on. Only four parties are represented in parliament: the NRM, the DP, the UPC and FDC. With 295 members, more

than twice the number of all opposition-party MPs, the NRM has a crushing majority and is therefore in a position to push through parliament any legislation or reforms it wants.

A peculiarity of party politics in Uganda is that all the political parties regardless of size are unable to raise substantial amounts of money from people who claim to be their supporters or members. Political parties the world over derive ample resources from membership fees, the sale of party memorabilia and from donations by well-to-do members. In Uganda, political parties for the most part are forced to give out their memorabilia such as t-shirts and caps free of charge because only a few people are willing to pay for them. Membership cards are also given out free of charge for the same reasons. Donations usually materialise mostly for the purposes of funding election campaigns, and here the NRM takes the lion's share.<sup>5</sup>

The reason for the NRM's greater access to donations is that many potential donors to the opposition fear to be seen to associate with, let alone donate money to, opposition parties.<sup>6</sup> As we shall see shortly, this inability to mobilise financial resources means that political parties are largely incapable of sponsoring the election campaigns of their candidates. In addition, a lack of financial resources renders political parties incapable of reaching potential supporters outside the towns where some maintain offices and where they conduct most of their activities between elections. This lack of reach is compounded by their incapacity, the NRM included, to maintain offices and contact with the public up-country. The biggest advantage the NRM has, which enables it to overcome problems associated with its lack of constant contact with the masses<sup>7</sup>, is its access to state resources, which it uses freely when required. Numerous reports have emerged over the years about how monies are siphoned out of public finances to facilitate its political activities and those of President Yoweri Museveni.<sup>8</sup> Here then is one reason why the NRM is so dominant on Uganda's political landscape.

## II. Current drivers of the Cost of Parliamentary Politics

There are several drivers. They include: political parties lacking resources to make a significant contribution to the campaign funds of individual aspirants; parties lacking permanent and functioning structures to provide candidates with logistical and other backup; the absence of unifying ideologies to bind party members together and to their parties; the insistence by some voters on being paid for their support; the high earnings of members of parliament; the emergence of “professional” political brokers and campaign volunteers; and a lack of commitment by many members of the general population to supporting any particular party on the basis of solid considerations that go beyond personality and a strong dislike for, or ambivalence towards, their rivals.

### Lack of ideology

Even for a party as dominant as the NRM is, its dependence on paying or rewarding members of the public for their support instead of cultivating their loyalty through, say, its ideology is remarkably high. This happens in a number of ways. One is through President Museveni, its key fundraiser and dispenser of patronage, handing out cash – in envelopes and at least once, in a sack – to individuals and groups, mainly his and NRM’s supporters, wherever he goes across the country. The other is also through President Museveni. Here he uses cash and other enticements or rewards to co-opt former opponents, including those who would have opted to fight his government through insurgency. He co-opts them to join the government or the NRM. Almost invariably, those who are co-opted into the government end up becoming supporters of both the President and the party and, for some, parliamentary candidates under the NRM banner. The president’s allies eagerly imitate his use of cash and other enticements or rewards to buy or preserve support in their local constituencies across the country.

Unable to “fight” the NRM and President Museveni and his allies on purely ideological

grounds or on the basis of promises to do better than he and the NRM have done over the last three decades, opposition parties and politicians have had to imitate their practices as a matter of necessity. They too pursue office or seek to safeguard their positions as members of parliament or even as local leaders through the use of money and gifts. As a result, they too spend vast amounts of money on election campaigns. This does not happen only in contests in which they seek to dislodge NRM rivals or keep them at bay, but also when faced with competition from members of their own parties during party primaries<sup>9</sup>, and also against any independents who might wish to contest for their seats. And in the case of party primaries, contests within opposition parties are just as acrimonious, with a key factor being the money candidates would have expended and hoped to recoup if they won.

### Absence of party structures and overall organisational weakness

Of all the parties the NRM has by far the greatest reach. This is the outcome of the party having appropriated what were once state structures playing local governance roles and turned them into its own organs or co-opted them into playing party-political roles on its behalf. However, this does not mean that these structures are fully active and well facilitated at all times. Rather, the financial resources materialise during electoral seasons, during which times offices are rented and local agents given cash allowances and other incentives to do party work. Following elections, resources disappear, leaving local party agents to their own devices.

So for parliamentary campaigns candidates usually take complete charge of their own logistical arrangements. That includes recruiting volunteers or brokers to help with organising rallies, mobilising voters and performing a range of other functions. They do not work for free or expect candidates to believe that they are volunteers in the conventional sense. They

always ask for “facilitation” and for money to give to voters. Two experienced politicians have described the phenomenon of campaign volunteers and brokers in the following terms:

*They know how to position themselves. They position themselves in such a way that nobody who is interested in politics can miss them. They create some political visibility for themselves as king-makers. They are on the lookout to identify who is interested in becoming an MP. In some cases they even encourage people to stand for parliament with the intention of making easy money. They always start with asking about the budget. If you don't have money they discourage you from standing. If you don't have money, they tell you that politics is about money. They want to maximise their gains. They interpret everything in terms of money. They tell prospective candidates that they should raise a lot of money if they are to stand a chance of winning the election.<sup>10</sup>*

*If they realise that you have some financial stability, they identify another candidate and begin promoting him while bringing this information to you. They know the only way to suck you dry is for you to have a rival in the constituency. If you are defeated in the party primaries, they encourage you to contest as an independent. And when you win, they want you to spend money all the time, from the day you enter parliament. They have turned campaigning into a job.<sup>11</sup>*

So deeply embedded in politics and electoral competition are volunteers and brokers that, even if a candidate wanted to avoid associating with them, it is practically impossible to do so, as one MP pointed out:

*Before you go into actual campaigning, you need to build a task force. It is common knowledge that when you call someone to come to your planning meetings you must give them transport refund.<sup>12</sup> If you don't give it to them, next time you invite them, they will not come. So you have no alternative but to plan for facilitation. In my campaigns I found it to be a huge challenge. Initially I had imagined that party members being party members, if I called them to help without offering them money for transport it would be normal. However, if you don't, another politician will facilitate them. You are forced to do what everybody does.<sup>13</sup>*

Not all candidates for parliament rent offices in the constituencies they seek to win or retain and hire people to run them. For those who do, however, the financial weakness of the parties to which they belong or if they are independent the fact that they do not enjoy the support of any political party means that they personally have to foot the bills. For this,

money has to be found. The financial burden associated with this, however, forces those who are lucky to be elected to shut them down and maintain only agents on the ground.

### Lack of resources

Political parties usually depend on payment by members of membership subscription fees and on their purchase of party paraphernalia to raise money for their activities. From the late 1940s when parties were first founded to the late 1960s when they were proscribed, this was the case in Uganda as well. At the time people had strong reasons for choosing to be members of one or the other party. Religious and ethnic affiliation and in some cases ideology, influenced people's political outlook and therefore decisions about which political parties to support. Broadly, Protestants tended to support the Uganda National Congress (later Uganda Peoples Congress) whose founders were mainly Anglican Protestants. Meanwhile their great rivals, the Catholics, tended to support the Democratic Party whose founders were mainly Catholics and whose inspiration came from the Catholic Church which suspected the UNC/UPC of being Communist.

Commitment to promoting the interests of a particular party against those of its rivals inspired its adherents to pay membership subscription and buy party paraphernalia. And then political parties were banned for over a decade, resuscitated temporarily in the late 1970s, only to be demobilised again for two decades in the mid-1980s. One effect of this two-decade demobilisation was that political parties ceased to be important vehicles for political mobilisation, not least because of their calculated demonization by the NRM through media and political education through political boot camps, at the infamous National Leadership Institute (NALI) at Kyankwanzi.

The detachment between political parties and ordinary members of the public explains why even those who profess to be their members are not so keen on supporting them financially. If anything, the perception that politicians

benefit financially from their political activities has created a mentality where members of the public expect political parties and politicians to give them money, not the other way round. The view that political parties should be givers rather than receivers of gifts is evident in the reluctance by members of the public to even buy party paraphernalia such as t-shirts, so much so that in many cases they are given out free of charge.

Today no single party has stable sources of income. Donors provide assistance through initiatives designed to achieve specific objectives, such as capacity-building. Members of the business community also donate money, often for purposes of funding election campaigns.<sup>14</sup> In all cases, however, the only regular incomes are derived from the monthly contributions party representatives in parliament are required to contribute. This is a drop in the ocean considering the financial obligations parties face.<sup>15</sup> It has meant that individual politicians seeking to run for election to public office are left to their own devices to raise whatever money they can through whatever means and to spend it as they deem fit. The stiff competition then turns political campaigns into financial contests, as one MP explained:

*People put you in a fix to get money out of you. If you have been nominated as a candidate you must have money. You must show that you are serious. That means having money. You must create an impression. Pressure also comes from other candidates who provide meals, transport, bikes, cars, etc. For those who cannot provide them, word goes around that this one is not prepared. It will count against you. The message will be passed around that you are broke. There are people who have had to part with their property to find money.<sup>16</sup>*

And on what specific items do candidates spend money? There is a whole range of things on which candidates expend money. While probably not representative, two candidates' explanations provide insights into where the money goes:

*Fuel, vehicle hire, generators, public address systems, posters, facilitating agents to move around, buying gifts for churches, schools, contributing to funeral expenses. The environment*

*is such that if you have not sent "messages" of condolence to funerals, you have a problem. A budget of not less than 20 million goes on these. Also weddings and fundraising for churches towards the campaign season. The communities drive candidates to compete with each other in giving out money.<sup>17</sup>*

*There are basic requirements. You need fuel. You have to be able to move around throughout the constituency. What you spend on that depends on how big it is in terms of kilometres. So, for instance when I talk about fuel, it means you must budget for fuel from day one to the last day of the electoral process. Then you go into campaign materials, posters, for instance. You cannot get posters without using money. Then there are the personnel who will help you to go and pin up those posters. You must facilitate that process. Fuel comes in again. You will use motorcycles, sometimes vehicles. Then, as a leader, sometimes there are also activities within the area. For instance, you cannot be within your area and members of the community do not come to you with problems. What do you do as a leader? It is the responsibility of the government to repair boreholes. Now here you are, a community leader... People are poor. What do you do as a leader? Even there, money comes in.<sup>18</sup>*

### Willingness by voters to sell their support for money

The tendency that emerged under the no-party, individual merit system of candidates who did not have the backing of political organisations to use cash and gifts to boost their chances of winning elections has had a durable impact on the way large numbers of ordinary Ugandans conceive of politics and politicians and the latter's motivations for seeking election to public office. The view described above that politics is a sure avenue to riches, that people who seek to join politics are in pursuit of wealth and that indeed once they are in office they make lots of money, has outlived the era of no-party politics. Voters still see the act of voting for someone as opening the way for him or her to go and make money, or "eat".

It conjures up the idea of voting for someone amounting to doing him or her a favour, often leading to voters wanting "something" in exchange for their votes. That "something" can be money or some kind of reward in kind. Also, often one hears members of the public especially in rural areas complaining about how, after they have won elections, politicians never return to visit or do so rarely.

These complaints are then accompanied by the accusation that, as a result of not visiting on a regular basis, the elected officials “have done nothing for us”. Consequently, many vote knowing that they will not “benefit” from the act of voting. Which explains the tendency to ask aspiring MPs to “give me something if you want me to vote for you”, after all they suspect that once they have won, there may never be a chance to benefit in any other way. This “*quid pro quo*” mentality has led to a situation where voters literally demand to be given money by candidates, or else they will not vote for them. A veteran politician explains:

*There is a tendency to think that we are eating. There is also something else. When you get an opponent who has no money, you are even in a more difficult position. They use him. They say he should go and also eat. The aim is to squeeze as much money as possible from you. When I announced that (after being defeated in the primaries) I was not going to run for parliament as an independent candidate, many were frustrated. They wanted to support this friend of mine so that they put me under pressure and I spend. They believed that I still had a lot of money that I had not spent. It is so costly. People should know that MPs don't swim in money.<sup>19</sup>*

However, there are instances where voters do not explicitly ask for anything, but where candidates feel compelled to still dish out money on the basis of their own reading of situations. The argument they use for paying out regardless is that voters, even when not asking for money, send subtle signals indicating that they actually expect to be given “something”. One respondent illustrates:

*The pressure comes through information that your opponent gave out money. If you want to defeat that person, you have to give double what they are said to have given. When you hear that he gave out 20,000 shillings to everyone, you give 50,000 shillings. The issue is not about your ability. It is about how to defeat your opponent in terms of giving out money.<sup>20</sup>*

Sometimes the information about what one's opponent may have dished out comes from volunteers and brokers on the candidate's campaign task force:

*The people you call agents are the ones that come with all sorts of stories about how other candidates are giving out*

*money. They are the ones who come with ideas of how much you should give. The ordinary voter is manipulated. They may even tell you that if you don't give these voters, yet they got from the other candidates, it may cost you victory. These agents are very dangerous. The real voters do not ask. It is the agents that make a case for voters. In some cases, when you bypass the agents, you find that the voters do not put you under any pressure, that it is you to read the mood.<sup>21</sup>*

And the reason volunteers and brokers want candidates to dish out cash may be very specific to their own personal calculations. Some act as conduits through whom money is distributed to voters, as intimated by one respondent:

*Sometimes when people volunteer, they have other interests in mind. You may be lucky if an agent gives out the money you give them. They may just get money and cheat you out. So you find that your money does not get to the voters.<sup>22</sup>*

There are, however, also volunteers who volunteer out of feeling that they are working for a cause. This happens when the candidate they are supporting is seen as genuinely not short of financial resources, or if for some reason they are supporting him or her out of ideological or other commitment. A former journalist who spent modest amounts during his campaigns and won the seat he was interested in spent nothing on his volunteers, save for buying them food and paying their transport expenses. This may have had to do with the location of the constituency in Kampala where, as he intimated, people are more likely to be interested in the ideas and aspiration of the candidate and not in what money or gifts he gives them.<sup>23</sup>

### Pursuit of self-aggrandisement by the wealthy

There is a strong connection between wealth and politics in Uganda today. Besides politicians acquiring wealth while in office, there are wealthy people who join politics as some sort of source of prestige. After they have made money, they go into politics to achieve recognition as the “honourable member of parliament”. They leave no stone unturned to ensure they win, and usually they deploy vast financial resources for the purpose. In addition to handing out cash and goods, they make

extravagant promises of what “development” they will bring to the constituency once elected. During the campaigns they may demonstrate their capacity to cause “development” by, for example, sponsoring the construction of schools or clinics, or the repair of roads. For incumbents seeking to protect their seats from this kind of attack, every effort is made to find money to put up a reasonably good financial fight. The outcome is for politics to become an extremely expensive venture, sometimes compelling candidates to sell off family assets and acquire massive loans. According to one respondent:

*At times egos come in. They even sell houses and invest more in politics. Voters can get you into a mode of spending and fighting. Moneylenders are also stakeholders in this. They give you money at very high interest and make direct demands and claims on your salary. They are investing in the whole process.<sup>24</sup>*

Another respondent describes it in rather dramatic fashion:

*The problem with politics in Uganda is the entry of people who are not politicians. Someone comes from somewhere. He has stolen money and says: “I think I can become an MP”, even when he doesn’t have a programme to sell to people. So, instead of selling a programme, he gives out money. Money becomes his manifesto. In a country where many people are poor, they are happy to receive the money. So now whoever comes, even if he has the best programme, they say: “Give us the money. You have given us your programme, but shall we eat your programme?”<sup>25</sup>*

### Confusion about or distortion of the role of parliamentarians

It is difficult to trace how this originated, but in Uganda the role of members of parliament has been expanded from that of legislation to one that includes playing charitable and service delivery roles. The latter roles include: virtually obligatory attendance at funerals to commiserate with the bereaved; payment of medical bills for those in ill health and school-related costs for poor families with children of school-going age; and hosting constituents on their visits to Kampala. This might seem odd to observers who are accustomed to politics in contexts where MPs do not provide such personalised services to their constituents. In Uganda, however, legislators see this as

what leadership is about, as intimated by one respondent when he was asked whether he attended and paid for burials in his constituency:

*Of course as a leader I must do that. For me I don’t see it as a cost because I am serving my electorate. I am serving ... giving a service. I can’t consider that as a campaign cost. I am a leader and I am doing this as a service and as a leader. I have been doing that for the last 3.5 years. I have to serve the people.<sup>26</sup>*

Additionally, members of parliament are expected to engage directly in delivering services or in activities intended to lift the standards of living of their constituents. These include: ensuring that local roads are in good repair; that schools and health facilities are also in good repair and where none exist, that they are built. With well over 400 constituencies, the government could not possibly respond to these demands simultaneously. As a result MPs generally pay for all these things from their own resources or they must find ways of raising resources to pay for them. These heavy financial burdens explain why large numbers of MPs are struggling with financial difficulties. On a number of occasions MPs have run to the head of state to solicit financial assistance, and in that way compromise their role of holding the executive to account.

### Where do candidates get money from to finance their campaigns?

Although it is difficult to establish with certainty how much money people aspiring to become MPs or those who are seeking to retain their seats spend on electioneering, estimates by our respondents ranged from 150 million shillings (about US\$43,000) at a minimum to 500 million (US\$143,000). For some, this does not include money that they are required to pay into the coffers of the political parties under whose banners they seek to contest. To become the official flag bearer of some parties, one must go through party primaries in which he or she competes with other aspirants, so that the winner then becomes the official party candidate.

For the primaries preceding the 2016 parliamentary elections, the NRM required each aspirant to pay 3 million shillings<sup>27</sup> to the party's electoral commission, the body charged with conducting its usually controversial internal elections. Apparently it raised 4.5 billion shillings from this source.<sup>28</sup> The only other party to oblige parliamentary aspirants to pay nomination fees for party primaries was the Democratic Party. They charged a modest 300,000 shillings, just under US\$100. Other parties did not charge nomination fees.

The fees imposed by the Democratic Party may have been symbolic and intended only to test the seriousness of aspiring candidates in a context where politics is now looked at as a career and source of livelihood. The relatively hefty amount charged by the NRM had additional, more serious considerations behind it. With literally thousands of people lining up for nomination, far outstripping those seeking to run under the banners of all opposition parties combined, it was a "cheap" and effortless way to raise money for the party, while also preventing "riff raff, opportunists and self-seekers" from getting onto the ballot paper.<sup>29</sup> Be that as it may, this latter view disregards the barrier to entry into politics that such an amount constitutes for otherwise potentially good legislators without financial means.

By Ugandan standards, the monies required to get onto the ballot paper of a party that demands nomination fees from aspiring candidates and to run a campaign are exorbitant, especially considering that some of the aspiring MPs are new university graduates, the long-term unemployed, or low- to modest-income earners. As indicated earlier, borrowing and selling assets are two common approaches candidates facing expensive campaigns resort to in the search for the necessary money.

There are, however, political parties that make an effort to provide some financial support to their candidates. Although generally strapped for cash in the best of circumstances, political parties raise some money for candidates

contesting in their name. Both the FDC and DP paid the 3 million shillings<sup>30</sup> in official nomination fees that go to the National Electoral Commission, while NRM candidates received 25 million shillings<sup>31</sup> each to cover their campaign costs. For NRM candidates, however, the 25 million shillings was only the minimum official party contribution.

There are reports that some candidates received far more than that, the extra amounts coming from informal funding mechanisms managed discretely by some senior party figures. Some of the said figures are without formal positions in the party but wield far greater influence than those who hold formal positions high up in the hierarchy. The lucky recipients of the extra funding are "special candidates" said to belong the categories "friends", "relatives" and "in-laws" of the power brokers and their patrons. Others receive extra funding as a reward for their loyalty, which may not be necessarily to the party but to the leadership.<sup>32</sup>

For all candidates, however, fundraising is also common. It includes raising modest amounts from friends and supporters up to securing large donations from all sorts of supporters and sympathisers. Three broad approaches to fundraising emerged out of the interactions with respondents:

*We do it through emails, on your Facebook account, you make calls to your friends and let them know what you have raised so far, and any other person that you know is interested in your struggle. You find that there could be some organisations that support what you stand for. The human rights groups may say: "This guy is a human rights activist; let's support him". They want to have a voice in parliament. So, it also depends on how you package yourself. But then, it's not easy. Sometimes people promise you money, but up to the day of voting they keep saying: "I will give you money".<sup>33</sup>*

*I got all the money from friends. I have not sold any of my investments or assets at all. I wrote a list of my friends down and I contacted them. They gave me 10 million, 5 million. But the first time I had a list of 150 people. Out of the 150, I remember that most of the people contributed. The smallest amount was 3 million, but most of them were giving me 5 to 7 million. I came out with debts of 39 million.<sup>34</sup>*

*I am not a rich man. I have friends, very big and good friends with a heart, who were willing to help in appreciation of what I have been doing for them (as a journalist). I have friends abroad. When you have like 20 of them, and the 15 are successful, they are always willing to help. I have people in South Africa. Some are in Sweden, China, South Korea and a few in America. Those people can help you. If one sends you US\$300-500, that is a lot of money. After some three, four or five months, if he sends another US\$500, you can move. From abroad, I got something like US\$25,000. Not in one lump sum but in bits. Even here in Uganda, someone gives you 100,000 to 200,000 shillings, that is enough. I have about 250 people doing that. It is a lot of money. I have been on radio and TV. These media houses advertise you. For every programme I have presented, there has been a major sponsor. And I have made these sponsors my very good friends. When you reach out to these people they can send you something between 500,000 to 1 million. I got about 15 million from such sources.<sup>35</sup>*

And, of course, there are the wealthy people as discussed, whatever the source of their wealth, that use their own resources, usually supplemented by contributions from equally wealthy friends, including members of the business community.

### Implications for the political system

The centrality of money in politics in Uganda, and its importance in determining who gets elected and who does not, has several implications. First, the financial burden that aspiring candidates and elected MPs face constitutes a significant barrier to entry into politics by individuals who may possess the right skills, experience and knowledge to be effective MPs, but who cannot marshal the necessary resources to run a credible campaign and hope to win. As we have seen, money is important not only as a mechanism for buying support and rewarding voters, but also in as far as it enables members of parliament to perform duties which strictly speaking are not theirs, but which voters expect them to perform, such as delivering services and responding to their individual needs as and when they are brought to their attention.

This implies that the quality of Uganda's legislators depends on the capacity by aspirant MPs to buy their way into office, not their suitability as potential legislators and high-level

decision makers. The connection may not be so clear-cut; but it seems likely that the ease with which the executive is able to use cash as an inducement to manipulate parliamentarians into taking or abandoning certain positions is the product both of the rather poor quality of legislators and of the financial burdens associated with being MPs.<sup>36</sup>

Secondly, the exchange that takes place between voters and candidates, whereby one side dispenses cash and the other votes accordingly, undermines the electorate's capacity to hold their MPs to account and closes an important avenue for learning about what MPs are actually supposed to do on their behalf. If all that a candidate has to do to win is to dish out cash and make unrealistic promises about what services they will deliver, there is hardly room for them to engage the electorate in wider issues to do with the government's overall performance and how it – rather than individual members of parliament – should respond to their needs. Perhaps even more serious is the ability of the wealthy to buy their way to power and use it in pursuit of their own sectional interests rather than in the interest of the public at large.

Also, there is a sense in which the centrality of money in politics and the degree to which it influences voters to evaluate the suitability of a candidate undermines the standing of political parties and their importance as mechanisms for aggregating and articulating the interests of their constituents or those of the general public. It renders more difficult the prospects of building and strengthening political parties to enable them to play their rightful roles in the political system as ought to be the case in a democracy or a democracy in the making.

### III. Outlook

#### Trends in the cost of politics

Specific information regarding exactly how much people spend to get elected to parliament or public office is extremely difficult to come by, as indeed interviews with our respondents showed. All they could provide in terms of figures were rough estimates, as none of them had kept records of what they spent to get elected and what they have spent during their terms of office as members of parliament. However, there is a general view within the country and among politicians generally, also confirmed by our respondents, that the role of money in politics has grown and continues to grow in magnitude.

#### Options for restraining the role of money in politics

There is already legislation that prohibits the use of financial and material inducements or bribery to solicit support from voters and that ought to regulate how politicians and political parties conduct their affairs before, during and after elections.<sup>37</sup> In all instances they are not enforced. The only instance when those who violate them may face sanctions occurs when their opponents take them to court following disputed election outcomes. New legislation is therefore not the solution, as there is no certainty that it will be enforced either. The solution lies in getting politicians and their political parties to agree, via some kind of “elite consensus”, about what needs to be done and to abide by whatever understanding they arrive at. The ruling party, by far the largest and best resourced, would have to take the lead and inspire others to follow. Currently, the NRM leads the way in flouting the law, with the electoral commission unable to hold it to account. Its failure to rein in the NRM means it cannot rein in its rivals either.

The reason the NRM does not respect the law is because of the non-transparent and not always legal ways in which it mobilises resources for its political activities, including

election campaigns.<sup>38</sup> For it to respect the law, it would have to find transparent and legal as well as legitimate ways of raising money. There is no guarantee that this will happen in the short to medium term, if at all. And in the absence of party capacity to finance the election campaigns of their parliamentary candidates, there is no prospect of successfully preventing them from commercialising the campaigns as they fight it out with their rivals. And even if election spending were to be capped, the question of whether the relevant law would be enforced and what incentives would drive such enforcement remains unanswered. Such is the current political economy of campaign financing that technical solutions such as new laws would stand little chance of success.

Perhaps hope may lie in changing from the current constituency-based system to one based on closed party lists. Under the latter, individuals would no longer have to go out and campaign for constituency seats but would be selected by their parties. That could put an end to the role and influence of money in parliamentary campaigns.

# S U M M A R Y

Entry into the political arena for those who wish to become political actors in Uganda has become a very expensive undertaking, so much so that the only people who stand a chance are the wealthy or people with the capacity to raise funds, including by selling personal or family assets or taking heavy loans. It was not always like this, certainly not before the arrival on the scene of no-party politics as introduced by the National Resistance Movement after it seized power in 1986. During the short-lived multiparty episodes before the NRM took over, political parties had enjoyed the support of their members and sympathisers who played important roles in their fundraising efforts by buying party cards and other party paraphernalia and by donating money. Parties at the time were able to contribute significant amounts to the campaign funds of their candidates.

Candidates campaigned for office based on the ideology of the parties to which they belonged. However, with the arrival of no-party politics, election to office became a matter of individual merit. The NRM's suspension of political party activity meant that parties could no longer sponsor candidates or support them in any way. It opened the way to the use of cash as an enticement to potential voters. The end of the no-party era in 2005 with the return to multi-party politics did not reverse the commercialisation of politics. The 20-year suspension of multi-partism had weakened parties considerably, while the NRM did not use it to grow itself into a functioning political party. As a result, while Uganda has been a formal multi-party democracy again since 2005, political competition at the level of campaigns for parliament is still a matter of "individual merit", with candidates responsible for financing their own campaigns or for the necessary fundraising.

Meanwhile many potential voters also remain stuck in the individual merit mode, expecting candidates to give them "something" in return

for their votes because they do not expect to eat their programmes. Although expectations of being paid for votes is more of a rural phenomenon than an urban one, it pervades politics in the more deprived parts of cities and towns.

There are laws prohibiting the use of money and other inducements to bribe voters. These, however, are generally not enforced. This is mainly because although the ruling party is supposed to take the lead in ensuring enforcement it has not because of a vested interest in the *status quo*. Therefore, new laws would amount to no more than technical fixes whose usefulness at the end of the day is doubtful. Perhaps hope lies in pushing for the election of MPs via party lists and not directly through constituency-level contests. It may be the only feasible way to take money out of parliamentary election campaigns and reduce the influence of money on politics more generally.

## Endnotes

- 1 Uganda- and Rwanda-based independent researcher and analyst. I acknowledge Henry Kasacca's pivotal role in the fieldwork for this paper.
- 2 See, for example, Avirgan, T. and Honey, M. (1982). *War in Uganda: The Legacy of Idi Amin*. London: Zed Press.
- 3 Carbone, G. (2003). 'Political parties in a "no-party democracy": Hegemony and opposition under movement democracy in Uganda'. *Party Politics*, Vol. 9 (4), pp. 485-502.
- 4 According to the Minister of State for ICT and outgoing MP for Kassanda North, Nyombi Thembo, the NRM has over 10 million registered members (appearing on 'The Hot Seat' radio talk-show, Kfm Radio, 15 February 2016).
- 5 Kiiza, J. (2008). 'Party financing and its implications for democratic governance in Uganda'. In Kiiza, J. et al, eds. *Electoral democracy In Uganda: Understanding the institutional processes and outcomes of the 2006 multi-party elections*. Kampala: Fountain Publishers.
- 6 Nogara, M. (2009). *Role of media in curbing corruption: The case of Uganda under President Yoweri K. Museveni during the no-party system*. UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA), Working Paper No. 72, January. Also, Kobusingye, O. (2010). *The Correct Line? Uganda under Museveni*. Milton Keynes: AuthorHouse.
- 7 As with the other political parties, the NRM literally goes to sleep in between elections, re-activating its networks and activists only for the purposes of "managing" election campaigns, mainly for the presidency.
- 8 See, for example, Kalinaki, D. (2014). 'Mutebile lifts the lid on patronage and election financing in Uganda'. *The East African*, 15 November (<http://www.theeastafrican.co.ke/news/Mutebile-lifts-lid-on-patronage-electoral-financing-in-Uganda/-/2558/2523800/-/item/3/-/13gdk0h/-/index.html>, (Accessed: 12 May 2016); also Imaaka, I. and Otage, s. (2014). 'I was misled into funding 2011 polls, Mutebile'. *Daily Monitor*, 13 November (<http://www.monitor.co.ug/News/National/Mutebile--I-was-misled-into-funding-2011-polls/-/688334/2520350/-/xtgnra/-/index.html>, (Accessed: 12 May 2016).
- 9
- 10 Current MP. NRM (interview, March 2016).
- 11 Outgoing government minister and former (long-term) Member of Parliament (interview, March 2016).
- 12 This term means to reimburse their transport costs, even if they came from within walking distance. As a term, "transport refund" derives from a practice pioneered by the voluntary sector, especially foreign NGOs, during the 1980s of inviting people to meetings and then refunding whatever money they would have spent on travel. It subsequently became standard practice for people to be given money for attending meetings and for the money to be termed as a "transport refund".
- 13 Current MP. UPC (interview, March 2016)
- 14 Golooba-Mutebi, F. and Hickey, S. (2012). 'The politics of development in Uganda: From current trends to future scenarios'. *Horizon Scanning Report* for the UK Department for International Development-Uganda. May.
- 15 For a glimpse into the financial challenges parties face, see Wild and Golooba-Mutebi.
- 16 Current MP. UPC (interview, March 2016).
- 17 Current MP. NRM (interview, March 2016).
- 18 Current MP. NRM (interview, March 2016).
- 19 Former MP. NRM (interview, March 2016).
- 20 Current MP. UPC (interview, March 2016).
- 21 Parliamentary candidate. Justice Forum (interview, March 2016).
- 22 Current MP. NRM (interview, March 2016).

- 23 Current MP. DP (interview, March 2016).
- 24 Former MP. NRM (interview, March 2016).
- 25 Current MP. NRM (interview, March 2016).
- 26 Current MP. DP (interview, March 2016).
- 27 About US\$900.
- 28 Member of Parliament. NRM-leaning Independent (interview, June 2016).
- 29 Current MP. NRM (interview, June 2016).
- 30 Just under US\$1,000.
- 31 Just under US\$7,500.
- 32 Current MP. NRM (interview, June 2016).
- 33 Current MP. FDC (interview, March 2016).
- 34 Current MP. NRM (interview, March 2016). His rough estimate of the total cost of the campaign was 400 to 500 million shillings (roughly USD143,000).
- 35 First-time winner. DP (interview, March, 2016).
- 36 See, for example, “Broke MPs plead with Museveni. President says only 50 MPs can sustain themselves”. *The Observer*, 13 March 2013. Also, “Indebted ex-MP asks Museveni for Shs 400 million”. *The Observer*, 19 March 2013.
- 37 See, for example, Kiiza, J. (2008). ‘Party financing and its implications for democratic governance in Uganda’. In Kiiza, J. et al. eds. *Electoral democracy in Uganda: Understanding the institutional processes and outcomes of the 2006 multi-party elections*. Kampala: Fountain Publishers.
- 38 *Ibid.*