

HOW EC CUT EXPENSE ON BALLOT PAPERS BY SH12B

BY NELSON KIVA

The local procurement of about 14 million ballot papers saved the Electoral Commission (EC) about sh12b. The 2026 ballot paper was the most unique in Uganda's election history. Each ballot paper had a QR code for enhanced ballot integrity. This meant enhanced technological capacity to be able to print the ballot papers.

Despite very upgraded technological standards, for the first time in Uganda's electoral history, at least two of the local firms were allocated lots to print over 14 million ballot papers.

This was made possible by policy shifts in Public Procurement and Disposal of Public Assets in 2024, which provided for a preference for local printing firms in line with Buy Uganda Build Uganda policy.

For both Graphic Systems Uganda Limited and Picfare Industries Limited, who were allocated lots to print, it had taken them more than a decade of capacity enhancement and confidence building.

The two companies were to supply ballot papers, declaration forms and statements of ballot papers for municipality/city division chairpersons and councillors at a contract price of sh3.4b for Picfare and sh3.9b for Graphic Systems.

PRINTING PROCESS

On all the six companies which were contracted to print the ballot papers, it was the two local companies which had low pricing.

Al Ghurair Printing and Publishing LLC (Dubai, UAE) handled presidential and parliamentary ballots at contract price of sh11.2b. It also won the tender to print and supply ballot papers, declaration forms and statements of ballot papers for district women representatives to Parliament and district/city women councillors at contract price of sh12.2b.

It also printed and supplied ballot papers, declaration forms and statements of ballot papers for district/city chairpersons and district directly elected councillors at a contract of sh12.6b.

Uniprint Global was awarded the best bidder for the supply ballot papers, declaration forms and statements of ballot papers for sub-county, town, municipal, division chairpersons at a contract price of sh8.7b.

Inform Lykos (Hellas) South Africa was awarded the best bidder for the supply of ballot papers, declaration forms and statements of ballot papers for sub-county, town, municipal, division chairpersons at a contract price of sh8.7b.



The staff of Graphic Systems celebrate after successful printing of ballot papers for the first time. The firm emerged among the two successful bidders after presenting a complete roadmap

Africa was awarded the best bidder for the supply of ballot papers, declaration forms and statements of ballot papers for sub-county, town, municipal division directly elected councillors at sh9.3b.

Both the EC and the local companies involved in ballot printing approximate that printing the over 14 million ballot papers in the country, saved between \$3m (sh11.1b) and \$4m (sh14.8b) in foreign exchange.

Trushar Upadhyay, the Graphic Systems' business unit head, said it was not a walkover to convince the EC that local companies had developed the technological capacity to undertake such a sensitive task.

"The hardest part was convincing the EC that we could secure the ballot from manipulation. EC officials inspected several printers, checking equipment, raw materials and security protocols," he said.

Upadhyay said their firm emerged among the two successful bidders after presenting a complete roadmap covering security, integrity and delivery timelines.

"The work was the culmination of years of preparation and lobbying. In 2020, we bid but did not succeed. We evaluated the shortcomings and learned from them," Upadhyay said.

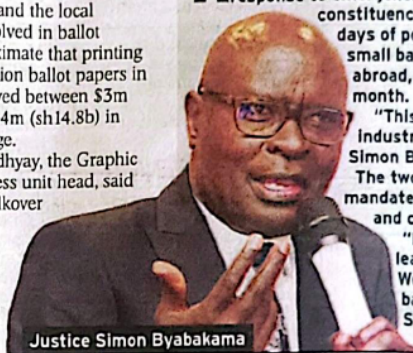
He added: "To meet the demanding standards, we cordoned off production areas, installed extra CCTV cameras,

ELECTORAL COMMISSION'S TAKE

According to the Electoral Commission (EC), local printing of ballot papers cut printing costs by 30% and shortened delivery timelines. This was on top of allowing faster response to emergencies, especially when a number of constituencies required re-elections within 10 days of polling, the companies reprinted the small batches locally instead of sending them abroad, a process that previously took a month.

"This is a milestone for Uganda's printing industry and our democracy," Justice Simon Byakama, the EC chairperson, said. The two companies, according to EC, were mandated with printing ballots for municipal and city divisions.

"Printing locally saves costs, reduces lead times and builds national capacity. We had to prove we could secure the ballot," Trushar Upadhyay, Graphic Systems' business unit head, said.



Justice Simon Byakama

restricted staff movement and deployed police and army personnel to watch the process. Information technology systems were rebuilt so that "nobody, even our own employees, could access anything."

Irfan Hajee, a director at Graphic Systems, said they spent more than \$500,000 (sh2b) on machinery and raw materials investment in the period of three years before the elections.

"We have a philosophy, every shilling earned is reinvested in the country. This ballot work is a new vertical for us and for Uganda," Hajee said.

He said some experts were hired to ensure that work is executed without errors and to required standards.

of printing ballot papers for over a decade to convince the EC that we have the ability. This time around we were very lucky and humbled to be selected to supply the ballot papers. This is well in line with the government policy of Buy Uganda Build Uganda," Hajee said.

He disclosed that trusting local companies to do such jobs strengthens them to become better suppliers to compete with foreign firms.

"For us as the company, there are things that we had never done in terms of managing such huge data, QR codes. We started understanding what they wanted and we had to hire Ugandans with expertise to ensure we executed this work perfectly," Hajee said.

Samir Khara, the plant head for Graphic Systems, said to ensure ballot integrity, even to receive data from EC, was with police and military escort.

"For receiving data, we decided that a person with police security will go to EC with a hard disc, with one IT person and one designer and another from marketing. They would collect the data on a hard disc, sign that they have collected the data and the data would come to Graphic Systems in presence of security and we acknowledge receiving it," Khara said.

He said all the computers that held the data had all their external accessories blocked basically with no USB cable, CD drive or flash access. Khara added that each and every ballot paper printed would be approved by the EC officials who camped at the company for almost two weeks.

"As our designers were designing, EC officials were approving every ballot paper before production. Then after having the approvals and everything, the data would be transferred to prepress to make the plates for printing," he said.

After printing with all the necessary approvals, wastage would be collected and put in a designated area and EC had to receive accountability.

EMPLOYMENT, STANDARDS

A senior management official at Picfare disclosed that the firm underwent six months of inspection to meet ISO standards, install biometric access and set up restricted printing zones. The two companies together created more than 100 direct jobs in design, security printing and logistics.

The EC spokesperson, Julius Mucunguzi, said the electoral body is currently preparing the full report to the minister and this will happen when all elections are over, including byelections.

Dr Swaib Kagwa Nserenko, a mass communication don at the Islamic University in Uganda, said to strengthen public confidence and ensure security amid widespread corruption scandals in 'our' case, election ballot papers should be handled with the same safeguards as currency notes.

"Regardless of cost, they should be produced in highly secure facilities potentially abroad by reputable firms that value their international image. The guiding priorities, therefore, must be trust and electoral integrity, not financial expense," Nserenko said.