


Nicholas Sengoba Plainly Speaking

Dividends that await NRM in case of violence

Violence before, during and after the February 18 election has been the most intriguing issue as we enter the home stretch. People are taking precautions and making contingency plans just in case.

Ironically, this campaign has been relatively calm compared to the last four elections Uganda had - 1996, 2001, 2006 and 2011. It has been without the usual violent interventions by security agents and other overzealous supporters of candidates. We had the clash in Ntungamo between the supporters of Go Forward and NRM. There was the incident in Jinja in which the police pounced on Go Forward's Christopher Aine, the head of Mr Amama Mbabazi's security. He later disappeared under mysterious circumstances.

Then, of course, the one in Kapchorwa where FDC supporters were injured when the police fired to disperse them as they attempted to visit a displaced people's camp. It is notable that most of the aggressive occurrences have involved security agents restraining the Opposition.

It is observed that the often exaggerated talk envisaging violence is mainly from cadres of the ruling NRM party like secretary general Kasule Lumumba who warned that those who protest rigged elections shall be

shot. Also the heads of the police and the army, Generals Kale Kayihura and Katumba Wamala, who have strongly warned and promised to crush those 'intending to disrupt the prevailing peace and stability' (ushered in by the incumbent, of course.)

NRM has been in power for 30 years. It is encountering the pressures visited on regimes that have been around for too long, that many feel a sense of stagnation and intransigence with them in charge - even if the reality may be different. Judging from the huge passionate crowds at Opposition candidates' rallies, it is presumed that NRM is facing a stiff challenge from FDC's Kizza Besigye and Go Forward's Amama Mbabazi.

So NRM has decided to draw from its major strength. NRM is a party whose foundation is built on the military. I say this as a compliment - for you rarely find such an act lasting for 30 years, like NRM!

The party president, Yoweri Museveni, is a confessed military man. The hard methods work for him. It is said that if you have a hammer, all you see are nails. The talk of violence is to shift the conversation into the realm of aggression. NRM has the upper hand. It has considerable control over the coercive arms of the State, the army and the police - plus the

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latest addition of crime preventers.

There has been a great effort to convert the FDC's claim that their campaign is one of 'defiance' into a sounding of war drums. For this, NRM is ready to respond with force. The Opposition's efforts to organise their members into groups to protect their votes, is being interpreted by NRM as 'formation of groups bent on rebelling and causing trouble'. For this again, NRM is preparing for a fight.

Now the debate has successfully been shifted from the failures and successes of the current regime and whether there should be change or mere reform of the present.

It has created a cloud of fear that warrants and makes involvement of security agents in the election 'understandable'. With this come detention without charge beyond the mandatory 48 hours. Also, the deployment of armed

personnel which may intimidate many to either stay away or vote for the status quo.

Yet on the ground, it is difficult to see violence, especially fomented by the Opposition. This is majorly because those who are leading in the Opposition, Besigye and Mbabazi, are offshoots of the NRM and like most of those who have been high up in the set-up, they have invested heavily in this country and stability serves them well.

The most Opposition supporters can do is to create short-lived minor skirmishes and a bit of chaos then go back to work to sustain themselves in their hand-to-mouth existence.

It is a sitting government such as NRM that would benefit from violence. In case the election goes against such a government, it is possible to use violence as an excuse to usurp the people's power and change their decision for the 'sake of peace, order and stability.'

The case of Kenya after the 2007 election attests to this. When a sitting government wants to secure a stolen election, it pre-empts violence so as to have an opportunity to come down hard on their opponent. It is a chance to finish off and give a fearful example to the rest of what awaits them if they contest the outcome.

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