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## Timothy Kalyegira Race to State House

# Final word on 2016 campaigns

**T**his week we examine the second of two reports looking back at the 2015-2016 general election campaign season.

If there was any proof needed for the fact of Uganda as still being a basic, simple society, it was this 2016 election campaign. Politics and elections in particular have become big business in Uganda.

There are not many jobs in Uganda that pay Shs20 million a month as that of Member of Parliament. It is a job for which the payee works an average of four days a week and in five years of being an MP, half the MPs never utter a single word on the floor of Parliament.

The election process brings out the self-seeking, competitive and desperate in many candidates and their teams and so is a good source of material by which to study the innovativeness of Ugandans.

By and large, it was a disappointing campaign season, just like all before it and points anyone to the evidence that no matter who is elected president, MP, mayor or local council chairman, Uganda will not change in any noticeable way after February 18.

### Same features

The election campaigns, from the presidential to the rural local council, had roughly the same features regardless of political party or camp.

A candidate announced his or her intention to seek a particular office. After consulting with family, party and friends, the interested person went to the office and picked up nomination forms.

Campaign managers and agents in the meantime prepared posters, banners and flyers.

After the candidate is successfully nominated, his or her campaign team hired a public address system and got idle youth in the locality to drive around the neighbourhood with loud music playing, accompanied by vans and motorcycles of cheering supporters.

Posters were pasted on walls, trees, cars and pillars, all of them featuring the candidate's formal portrait, a simple message and a party or other political symbol.

A few of the leading presidential and parliamentary candidates who could afford it also paid for neon billboards in Kampala as well as radio and television adverts, but posters were the most common campaign material.

On the new social platforms like WhatsApp and Facebook, some of these candidates also had profile and cover pages adorned with the same photos as on their print posters and banners, urging voters to select them "come February 18."

Social media as used by Uganda's candidates in 2016 was mainly an online extension of the traditional campaigning format mentioned

above.

There was little continuous interaction between the candidate and the public and many of their social media accounts are operated by aides or their children.

There certainly was none of the sophisticated use of algorithms and the data to target specific audiences as happens in Western campaigns.

The fact that 15 years into the 21st Century the basic format of general election campaigns is still much like it was in the 1970s and 1980s (despite the abundance of Internet and digital technology platforms and options) indicates what kind of political class and in a broader sense, what kind of society Uganda has and is.

Then there was the familiar thinness on the ground in terms of an effort to interest the public in voting.

Uganda is a small country and most of the central plateau is not difficult to reach, but even in fairly small localities, few mayoral, parliamentary or local council candidates or their campaign agents went door-to-door in search of support.

It is difficult to imagine how a parliamentary candidate who was unable to send campaign agents door-to-door in his or her constituency - when he or she had every incentive to wish to get every vote in every household - can be the same person when elected to fix roads, housing and help provide social services.

**"The election process brings out the self-seeking, competitive and desperate in many candidates and their teams and so is a good source of material by which to study the innovativeness of Ugandans."**

### COMMENT

When one thinks about the 30-year incumbency of the NRM presidential candidacy, the picture becomes even more disappointing. Yoweri Museveni virtually controls the Ugandan State single-handedly.

The NRM boasts of having "structures" down to the village in every part of Uganda which is why, they say, they keep winning.

Considering all these advantages, from a 30-year incumbency to the dominance of State financial and logistical resources, State security services and the structures down to the village, the NRM presidential election campaign was a lacklustre one at best.

Museveni was like the child from a wealthy home, given the best of everything, enrolled in the best schools, with teachers to coach him during the holidays and who has the best books but all he can manage in the national exams is a good second grade. That is not a gifted child.

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2016 general election season were Amama Mbabazi, who performed better on the campaign trail and in organisation than any first-time presidential candidate in Ugandan history.

Many would argue that Mbabazi had the benefit of years in the government and had built private political and security structures loyal to him.

In that case, then, the best-performing candidates were Dr Abed Bwanika and perhaps Maj Gen Benon Biraaro.

Bwanika's understanding of the socio-economic issues came through during the January 15 debate but as a campaign team, his presence was still thin and ineffective, which for a third-time bid was inexcusable.

Biraaro's first-time presidential bid and the lack of experience at this can be an excuse for him, although others would argue that an army officer at the rank of Maj Gen, with staff college training and experience can quickly turn that ability to organise men and materiel into an effective campaign machine.

### IT skills

Prof Venansius Baryamureeba from the computing profession should have made up for his lack of grassroots structures by applying his IT skills and knowledge but failed to.

To a degree (although he attracted the largest crowds of any candidate), FDC candidate Dr Kizza Besigye like Museveni at this stage of running for at least a fourth time is no longer a beginner and therefore should have had a better campaign system and structure.

Last year, I claimed that I was starting a party called the Digital Party. So far it still has only one member, that is the founder, so perhaps rather than point to the weaknesses in other presidential candidates, it is time I showed an alternative to Ugandans.

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