

Will 2016 become new benchmark of failed elections?

Presidential poll. What the violence, the clashes between the police and FDC supporters and the arrest of Besigye have all done is make it so much easier for the Opposition to reject the results of the election. It will be difficult both for the foreign media and foreign diplomats to disagree with the Opposition on this, writes **Timothy Kalyegira.**

For 35 years, the December 1980 general election has been the benchmark for measuring a botched poll in Uganda.

It was the election that gave formal moral justification to at least three armed guerrilla groups - FEDEMU, UFM, NRA and the West Nile Bank Front - to wage war against the second Milton Obote UPC government.

That was until February 2016 and the general election.

Even the European Union Observer mission, in their press conference at the Sheraton Kampala Hotel on Saturday February 20, could only manage to mumble vaguely and evasively about the conduct of the election.

By the time the politically-correct Europeans cannot bring themselves to announce the familiar, generic claim that "the election reflected the broad will of the people of Uganda" as is their tendency, then it really was a botched election.

The former Nigerian president, Gen Olusegun Obasanjo, at the same press conference read out a blunter statement at the total disorganisation that marred the 2016 election.

By Saturday morning February 20, security forces had surrounded the homes of the presidential candidates Kizza Besigye of the FDC and Amama Mbabazi, running independently under the "Go Forward" banner.

The progression to increasingly chaotic elections began with the NRM party primaries in August 2010, reached what we thought was a new level of chaos and disorganisation with the NRM primaries in September 2015 (complete with NRM supporters burning down their own party offices in Isingiro and Sembabule) and then that chaos finally engulfing the general election of February 18.

It is not enough to claim that the police and military police were deployed to control Opposition supporters. One of the NRM's claims to

historical legitimacy was in having restored Ugandans' faith in government, have restored public security and in having restored the institutions of government.

For the situation on polling day to degenerate to the extent that anti-riot police had to be used that day and the following day, demonstrates a breakdown of cohesion in the government, the security forces or the public's trust in the government; what is beyond dispute is that it is indicative of a breakdown in something crucial.

It indicates, if the government is right, that the Opposition had reached such strength or determination that with the right organisation, this large population of angry people can be turned into a mass movement.

What the violence, the clashes between the police and FDC supporters and the arrest of Besigye have all done, of course, is make it so much easier for the Opposition to reject the results of the election. It will be difficult both for the foreign media and foreign diplomats to disagree with the Opposition on this.

If the Opposition started the April 2011 "walk-to-work" protest action as they way of rejecting the outcome of that general election, a subsequent walk-to-work action could have tacit foreign political support this time.

Worst-case scenario

If we are to attempt a projection of the post-election period, the Opposition will switch from campaigning and to a protest phase. If the actions of the government in the week leading up to the polls are any indication, the security forces will be deployed to clamp down hard on Opposition leaders and their supporters.

There will continue to be ugly scenes on TV and on the front pages of the newspapers, of clouds of teargas, armed policemen and soldiers and fleeing or arrested protesters.

One can only feel for the people in the Ugandan tourism industry whose job it is to present Uganda as attractive and stable for tourism and how hard it must be to sell the country after all the images of the police and army clashing with voters in almost every region of the country and of Besigye being arrested thrice in a week, the week of voting.

The unfortunate thing in all this is that just a few days earlier, the second presidential debate had been attended by all eight candidates, had gone fairly well and had created a sense of optimism that the cordiality and respectful mood witnessed by millions of Ugandans on TV

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COMMENT

A polling officer takes a nap in Makindye, a Kampala suburb, at a station where voting materials took long to arrive.

PHOTO BY DOMINIC BUKENYA

would influence the election itself. It was not to be.

Voting patterns

It was always going to be that Besigye would perform well in the main urban centres. It has been that was for him since 2001 and was unlikely to be different in 2016.

There had always been a perception that Besigye was most popular in urban areas while Museveni enjoyed most support in rural areas.

However, in the 2015-2016 campaigns we witnessed the most consistently intense engagement and turnout by crowds in the smaller towns, townships and villages at Besigye rallies.

As such, even the storyline about the dichotomy between urban-supporting Besigye and rural-supporting Museveni blurred in 2016 in trying to understand how the public voted.

Certain results from western Uganda seemed hard to believe, for example instances in which the presidential candidate Maureen Kyalya got more votes than Mbabazi at certain polling stations.

Mbabazi is a Mukiga and Kigezi is the home area of Bakiga. In addition, thousands of Bakiga over the decades have migrated from their densely-populated home to parts of Ankole, Toro and Bunyoro.

Knowing the attachment to ethnicity that is still a feature of life in Africa, it is difficult to believe that Kyalya, a Musoga from Jinja, can resonate with Bakiga in western Uganda and Mbabazi, whose sizeable crowds were witnessed on TV, can get zero votes in some areas of this western Ugandan with large Bakiga communities.

In Acholi, many in the Ugandan media noted that the Deputy Speaker of Parliament, Jacob Oulanyah, was declared the winner of his constituency without any results being produced to show his polling numbers.

Therefore, beyond the matter of the late start to the voting in the parts of Uganda that, by coincidence, were Opposition strongholds there is also the question of rigging or suspected rigging.

The main reason most independent candidates gave for defying their



THE BACKGROUND

The Electoral Commission Chairman yesterday announced President Yoweri Kaguta Museveni as the winner of the 2016 presidential elections with 5,617,503 votes, a percentage of 60.7.

Out of 15,277,198 voters in a political contest smudged by unprecedented delays, pockets of violence and reports of ballot stuffing in some parts of the country, 10 million turned up. A total of 5,575,461 voters either chose to stay home or were disenfranchised as a result of the delays that marred the elections.

Dr Kizza Besigye, a four-time presidential contender and the FDC candidate garnered 3,270,290 votes, representing 35.37 per cent of the total votes cast. This result is however, an improvement from 26 per cent Dr Besigye scored during the 2011 general elections.

own parties was rigging. Rigging as a theme is difficult to avoid in any critique of the 2016 general election.

In summary, the 2016 general election - played out as it was on live television, on social media after Ugandans found a way to get around the suspended Facebook and Twitter pages and in the print and online newspapers - has replaced the 1980 election as the new benchmark of a botched election.

It remains to be seen what immediate and medium-term effects come from this bizarre poll.